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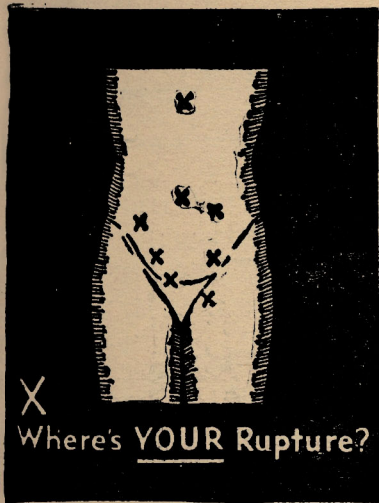
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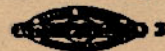
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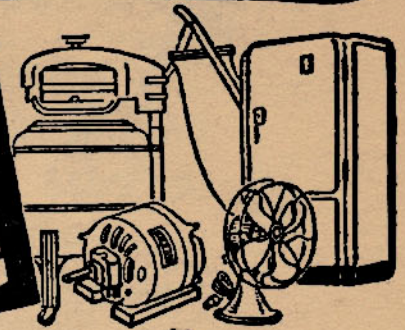
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Bereave It or Not

By Thorne Lee

The most thankless task of Detective Daventry's career was the case of the mystified murderer. For because his victim was unknown and unmourned, the only gratitude due to Daventry would be a pat on the back from the Grim Reaper.

THE piece of cane was about two feet in length, splintered at one end. Blood had soaked into the whitish, ragged edge of wood; it reminded Daventry of a broken bone protruding through raw flesh.

"The sum of the evidence, Jim. That and a key ring. Five keys in all. From the corpse." Daventry tossed the keys and the stub of cane on the polished walnut desk.

Inspector Eldred poked at the evidence with a short, fat finger. "Well, as I see it, he beat the poor devil in the face until the cane finally broke in half. Then he got scared and ran off with the top half, leaving this for us, the dumb bunny!"

Daventry lowered his tall frame into a chair and hooked his heels on the desk. "Nice deduction, Jim. Who told you?"

"I did." The voice came from a corner back of Daventry. A big man filled the corner. His hair was thick, dusty brown. There was a kind of mongrel warmth in the blue eyes. The friendly shrug of his shoulders was like the wag of a dog's tail.

"Hi, Brown," Daventry said. "Find anything?"

"Naw. The trail ended at a lamp post about fifty feet from that little house which stands off by itself. You might say the prints were ob-literated."

A grin creased the hard brown of Daventry's cheeks. "You might say it, but you never could spell it, Tod. Did the prints vanish into that little house?"

"Just a minute, Phil!" Inspector Eldred snapped. He was a small, severe, ordinary man who did not like too much independence in subordinates. "About this key ring. How come the keys were left on the body and nothing else? And get your ugly feet off my desk!"

Daventry didn't move. "Just practicing for when I get your job, Jim. And the keys were overlooked because the guy kept 'em in a funny place. Up here at the top of his pants in this little watch pocket under the belt. If you were going

through a man's pockets, you'd never think of that spot—"

"D'you think he went through his pockets? Was it robbery, Phil?"

"Robbery!" Daventry had trouble with the corners of his mouth. "Is it necessary to beat a man's face to a pulp to rob him? No, I think that the murderer did not want his victim to be recognized or identified in any way."

"Why?"

Daventry spread his hands. "What d'you expect at my salary, Sherlock Holmes?"

Eldred didn't laugh. "Aren't you men moving a little slow? The murder was committed Saturday night. All you have on Monday morning is a key ring and a hunk of cane!"

"Sunday is my day off, Jim."

Eldred bit the end off a cigar as if it were Daventry's head. "When you work for me you clean up murders quick!"

A buzzer sounded at Eldred's elbow. He flipped a metal switch. The secretary's voice came through, soprano and nasal:

"A man to see you, Inspector."

"Tell him to—"

"He says he killed a man, and he wants to—"

"Killed a man?" Eldred snorted. "Haven't I told you to send those manslaughter cases to Dooley?"

"It's not like manslaughter, Inspector. Captain Wade sent him over. He says he killed a man with a cane!"

"A cane!" The cigar tumbled out of Eldred's mouth. "Well for—what are you waiting for? Shoot him in here!"

Eldred's black eyes blinked at his men. "Did I say we clean up murders quick?"

Daventry scowled. "Don't count on it, Jim. Murder is a long, long business."

ENTERING, the newcomer was tall and gaunt with a stooped question-mark of a body. The natural position of the chin was just inches short of the hollow chest. He was like a man who had leaned over a fence for years, staring



I struck him down in
some kind of super-
human, subconscious
frenzy.

Startling Mystery Novelet

at the ground. His black hair was thin, grey at the temples.

He wore an oxford grey suit, frayed slightly at the cuffs and elbows. His long white fingers clutched a stump of brown cane, clotted with red and knobbed with a cylinder of gold. An icy glaze sealed the horror in his eyes. Here was a man, thought Daventry, who had looked on fear, had fought it, and had not escaped. He edged forward with little shuffling jerks as though his next move might be either to throw himself helplessly on his knees or to bolt wildly from the room.

"My name—is—William Fitzjames." The voice was a hoarse rattle in his throat. A uniformed sergeant moved in behind him and closed the door.

"Sit down, Fitzjames," Eldred said smoothly. "This is Lieutenant Daventry, Lieutenant Brown."

Daventry glided out of his chair, swung

it neatly behind the visitor, and scooped him toward the desk.

The inspector accepted the extended piece of cane from the visitor. He fitted the ragged points neatly with the broken stub on his desk. "Talk about making ends meet!" he gloated, but his pleasure ended suddenly in a tight snarl of the lips. "Why did you do it, Fitzjames?"

"I killed a man," the visitor breathed.

"We are aware of that. Why did you do it?"

The expression was glassy. "I don't know."

"Really?" The inspector nodded at his lieutenants as if to say, "Well, here comes a new song-and-dance!"

"I don't know how to tell it. The whole thing sounds so fantastic—"

"Mmmhhh." Eldred could evoke a sneer without moving his lips.

"It started on the street car."

"Indeed. What street car?"

The man seemed to grope backward into his mind.

"I think he could do better without your help, Jim," Daventry drawled.

Eldred frowned and huddled deep into his chair. "I'm waiting!" he snapped.

The story came in fragments at first, wrung out of the lips and out of something deeper than the lips. Then it seemed to disentangle itself from the emotions and to tumble forth faster and faster until at last it fairly emptied out of him, as though he hoped by the violence of his outburst to eject the total substance of terror:

"I always ride the same car. . . . Same seat. . . . The 'G' car on Brewster. At Seventh Street. Five-forty every night. . . . I'm like that. I mean—I always do the same things . . . at the same times. What people call 'being in a rut.' I'm like that. . . .

"It started with the eyes. . . . I mean there was a man who always rides—always rode the same car. I hardly noticed him, except that he was a short man with black hair and a black mustache. He always wore the same black hat and top-coat, and the coat had a kind of silk lapel. . . . You don't see coats like that any more . . . very often. . . .

"One day—I don't know what day exactly—it was different. I mean there was *something* different. I thought it was the eyes. The way they looked at me. I *felt* them first. I really mean I *felt* them. That's what I mean the thing *sounds* fantastic. How can you *feel* a man's eyes?"

"I did feel them, though. Anyway, I turned one day and there they were way back in the end of the car. They were looking right at me, and at nothing else. Nothing else whatsoever. . . .

"Now, ordinarily you wouldn't think about a thing like that, but he had never done it before that I ever noticed. I did get to thinking about it. I thought about it so much that I caught him doing it the next night. How can I tell you how strange it was? A man has a right to stare at anybody if he wants to, hasn't he? But I tell you his eyes never once let go of me on that long, long ride to Glenarm. Never, never once did they let go of me!

"The eyes were not all. He began creeping up on me. Oh, not really creeping. This was more horrible because he wasn't really doing anything he shouldn't. He just kept moving closer on the street car. I mean each night he would be one seat closer, or two seats, or three. Always closer. . . .

"Now, I had known for a long time

that this man got on the car at the same corner I did, because when you have to stand and wait you tend to notice the people around you. But it wasn't until this—this queer sensation started that I noticed he *got off* at my corner too. . . . That wasn't a change of his habits, though, because when I got to thinking about it, I remembered that he always had gotten off at my corner.

"**H**OW can I tell you that I was afraid of him? How can I tell you that I never did anything about it, because there was nothing to do? Could I walk back and tell him to stop staring at me? Is it against the law to stare? Could I ask the conductor why that man kept moving forward in the street car? I tried to do that. It was like spitting dry leaves out of my mouth. Even the taste of the idea was bad.

"Could I change my own seat and get behind him and stare at him? I could have, but that would have been giving in to the idea. They say you shouldn't pamper a *fixation* in your mind. If you have a phobia, you should squelch it, stamp it down. . . . I stamped it, but it wouldn't go out. It was a burning light!

"And the street car was nothing compared to walking home, because he was creeping up on me on the sidewalk too. Each night I could hear his footsteps a little louder behind me. It was worse because the evenings were getting dark early. There was just the ghost of twilight with us on that lonely walk. Not a house, but that long row two blocks north of us and the tiny light from my own place six blocks ahead.

"I don't really know when the thought of murder came to me. I think it was the night before the—before the last. It started with the beat of his footsteps behind me. I got to analyzing them, trying to study the temper of the man by the—by the tempo of his footbeats. . . . Is that crazy? Am I really—

"I mean, people stamp when they're angry, don't they? They dance when they're happy, don't they? Well, couldn't there be something in every footbeat that echoes the rhythm of a man's heart? If a man had murder in his soul, couldn't it sound through his very bones and drum its suppressed fury on the earth?"

"Oh, I'm talking wild! I'm talking like I was thinking that last night. Because he was close to me, closer than he had ever been, so close that the sound of his steps was merged into the pattern of my own. He was like a shadow attached to my heels growing, growing into a monster.

"You see, he had always turned aside, toward those houses at the north, when he was two blocks from my house. I made up my mind that if he ever went past that turning-off place, it was going to be the end. . . . The end of what? . . . Oh, I had it all worked out. It was going to be murder, and it was going to be me!

"Now, what can you do when your logic goes to pieces? To whom can you confide a thing like that? Why would anyone want to murder me? I'm not wealthy. I never carry over twenty dollars on my person. I've been a bookkeeper all my life. Bookkeepers just aren't wealthy. They don't even look wealthy! But on the other hand why would anybody want to dog my footsteps like that?

"There was something so—so *systematic* about it. I tell you it couldn't have been just chance, because chance doesn't run so perfect. Chance isn't a steel monster wound up to take bigger and bigger and bigger steps until it runs you down!

"And he did run me down! *I say he did run me down!* That last night he was so close—he was not five yards behind me. He didn't turn at his corner. *I tell you he didn't turn aside!* I know, because I walked past the corner—I was almost running—and my ears listened for the sound that I was afraid to hear. And there were no steps, but his foot kicked a stone and it came jumping and skipping along past my feet.

"I whirled around, because I knew this was the end of it. I tried to say, 'Stand back there! What do you want of me?' But I couldn't get anything out. My tongue was dead.

"I did feel my cane go up above my head. Yes, I did feel it. I remember. But I didn't feel it come down! On his face! I tell you I didn't feel it come down! How can you believe I didn't feel anything but the blood and the mess and the broken cane? I couldn't see it. I couldn't see a thing. I felt it first, and then I had to strike a match to see. Night had come over me on the outside just like it did inside.

"When the light flared up there was murder just as I had seen it in my mind. But it hadn't come down on me, it had come out of me. I must have gone panicky, crazy, and lost my head. *I lost my head completely! I thought a man was going to kill me and I killed him instead!*"

CHAPTER II

WILLIAM FITZJAMES stared down at the white flesh on his palms. His long jaws worked savagely to keep from chattering. "The thing itself is a total

blank to me. I swear I struck him down in some kind of superhuman, subconscious frenzy!

Eldred's face was hard, unfriendly. "'Subhuman' is the word, I'd say. A sub-human frenzy!"

Fitzjames wrung his slender hands. "I know. It was awful! I swear I don't know what came over me. I'm not a killer. I hate death. I hate the sight of blood. I'm not a killer, believe me!"

"That," Eldred intoned, "will be for a jury to decide."

The inspector threw a glance at his lieutenants. "There's one little thing about your—ah—confession that puzzles me, Mr. Fitzjames. Daventry and Brown here tell me that they had already traced the murder trail to your home a few hours before you presented yourself at headquarters. Now! The murder was committed on Saturday night. Today is Monday. What happened to Sunday, Fitzjames?"

Eldred's fat palm slammed on his desk. Fitzjames jumped in his chair. His mouth hung open. A trickle of saliva oozed from one corner and ran down his cheek. His thin chest deflated, heaving wind from the lungs.

"I was bewildered, I tell you! I couldn't believe it of myself. How can a man bring himself to confess a murder when he has no murder in his heart? Inspector, it took the longest day and the two longest nights of my life to get me here!"

"I think you have some more long nights ahead of you, Fitzjames! Lock him up, Sergeant. We'll talk some more later, Fitzjames."

The uniformed sergeant snapped out of his corner. William Fitzjames stood up. His frail body sagged at the knees. The sergeant caught him beneath the armpits and ushered him to a door. Fitzjames went out with a low animal whimper in his throat.

Eldred swivelled toward his lieutenants, black eyes gleaming. "There's a rabbit for you! Get him cornered and he jumps right into your lap! What d'you think of him, boys?"

Tod Brown shifted his solid bulk uneasily, foot to foot. The round blue eyes blinked. "I think he's too good to be true."

Daventry wrestled a chair between his legs. His lean face was uncertain. "I want to know who the body is, Jim. Does it make sense to you that a man goes around with nothing in his pockets but a set of keys? If Fitzjames beat him like that, where's the dead man's identification?"

Eldred guffawed. "Are you kidding?"

Fitzjames got rid of the identification when he killed the guy of course. You talk like you believe that yarn of his!"

Daventry stabbed a pipe stem between his set teeth. "I do believe it."

The inspector stared. "You're nuts!"

Daventry shrugged. "I'm nuts."

Eldred swore. "Why of all the—if I ever saw a fake attempt to plead temporary insanity, this is it! Fitzjames could see our men all day yesterday right from his front window. This morning he saw Brown trace the murder trail almost to his house. He knew his goose was on the fire. He figured out this 'everything went blank' business in order to slide out of a first degree murder charge—"

"Did you say fake, Eldred? Do you call that performance we just saw a fake? Look, the man is a bookkeeper. A man can be a bookkeeper or he can be an actor, but he can't be both—not in my book. Not that fine an actor. If that confession was a fake, it was good enough to win an Academy award!"

"We have only his own word that he's a bookkeeper—"

"We can check that quick enough. Also, I want to know who is the body."

"You're going to find that out, kiddo, as soon as I have the boys work on this Fitzjames a little."

Daventry scowled. "Count me out on this round. I'll be at Danny's across the street."

An hour later Tod Brown aroused Daventry from a mug of beer. "Eldred's sending me over to Fitzjames' office, Phil. He wants you to take the lady in the case."

Daventry's dark brows shot up. "Lady?"

"Yeah. There's a dame. A Mrs. Mildred Fitzjames, Eldred says. Go out and get her story, he says. On the double!"

"Tell Eldred I'll go on the double when he pays me time-and-a-half!"

MRS. FITZJAMES was a surprise. Daventry gulped down his amazement, eyeing her from trim toes to soft, white throat. This was something altogether too young, too swell for a withered old galoot like that guy down at headquarters. He'd looked for someone about fifty, turning grey. This woman couldn't possibly be over thirty-five—black-haired, bright-eyed, trim figure in black satin—

She had been crying. She was defiant now. "Have a chair, Lieutenant. I suppose you've come about—about *him*," she said.

Daventry sat awkwardly on the tiny rocking-chair. "You know all about it,

don't you? I suppose he told you everything?"

The brown eyes flashed. "I know only one thing, Lieutenant. I know he did not commit cold-blooded murder. That's impossible! If you knew him—"

Daventry smiled, trying to work the hardness out of his face. "I think I do know him. I think I'm on his side. But first thing we've got to find the identity of the dead man. You can help us there. Can you think of any enemies—"

"He had no enemies."

Daventry nodded. "Okay. I'll take your word for that. Friends, then? Business associates. We need a list of them."

"He had no friends."

Daventry pulled out his pipe and rapped it on his palm. "That's odd."

"I'm afraid we're not very sociable people right now, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Daventry. Phil Daventry. Call me Phil if you like. I'm on your side."

"Thank you." Her smile was wonderful.

Daventry threw up his hands, grinning. "He must have known a few people."

"Only the men in his office, and they were few enough. I don't know them myself. I'm sure they can tell you more—"

"We have a man on that," Daventry interrupted, musing. "Let's try another angle. Did he ever speak to you about this man who followed him?"

"Oh yes. Several times."

She went into detail. Daventry noted that her story tabbed perfectly with the one told by Fitzjames.

"And he had never known that man anywhere except on the street car?" Daventry concluded.

"Definitely not. I'm sure."

Daventry sucked the dead pipe. "This is going to be a tough nut until we can pin a name on the—the other man. Motive counts in a murder case. Sane men just don't go around beating each other up without reason. I'm giving you our viewpoint, of course."

"You speak of 'sane men,' Mr.—Lieutenant—"

"Call me Phil. That'll help."

"Phil." She seemed to like the name. "You heard his story. Do you think he was—insane?"

"If his story is true, he certainly had some kind of mental lapse. I suppose the shock of killing a man could cause a temporary amnesia. Whether a jury would accept abnormal fear as insanity, I can't tell you. Had he ever displayed any signs—I mean, has he—well, you know what I mean!"

"Signs of insanity? Mr. Fitzjames? Never!"

"Anything in the family?"

"Oh, absolutely not."

"That won't help his case any," Daventry admitted. He stood up, wandered toward the door. "I don't want to pester you. There's just one more thing I have to ask."

Her eyes followed him. "Yes?"

"What do you really believe?"

The eyes flamed. She leaped up and ran to him across the room. She gripped his lapels and her breath was hot against his lips. "I don't believe he ever killed a man or ever will. Not on purpose. Oh, we need someone to help us! Who can we get to help us?"

"I'll help you if I can," he said. His voice was oddly hoarse.

She searched his dark eyes. "I believe you will. Thank you—Phil."

"Yeah," he grunted, flushing.

Outside Daventry pulled himself up with a shudder. "Sister, you do something to me!" he confessed silently.

ON HIS way to the inspector's office, Daventry stopped in at Fitzjames' cell. The man was in a state of near collapse, hunched, brooding over his long hands.

"I've been out to your house," Daventry said.

"Mildred!" The sunken face was an ugly sight. "How is she taking it?"

"She's okay, that lady!" Daventry breathed fervently. "Don't worry about her. She couldn't help much, though. Maybe you can do better."

"I'd do anything to straighten this out! To straighten myself out!" The hands pawing at the face again.

Suddenly the head came up. "There's one thing I forgot to tell the inspector. I wore a topcoat that night. It had the streaks of my bloody fingers on it, so I hid it inside an old tire casing in my garage."

Daventry frowned. "That was acting like a criminal, Fitzjames. Your story was not the story of a criminal."

"I know. But a man doesn't think straight when he finds the blood of murder on his hands—"

"Let's clear up one thing: You're ready to swear you never saw that man except on that street car?"

"I'll swear it! He was just a face to me until—until the day I felt him looking at me. Those eyes—"

"Yeah. Those eyes," Daventry muttered. "I've had eyes hit me in the back of the head, myself. The question is what he wanted of you, to stare like that. Let

me ask you something, Fitzjames. The weak spot in your whole story is the killing itself. Think back on it a minute. Don't you remember anything after you lifted the cane?"

"That's right. That is the weak spot, isn't it? I went blank with fright, I guess. I've been sitting here trying, trying to remember that moment. I thought once I'd got hold of something, but I can't seem to hang on to it—"

Hesitation. Fitzjames inhaled deeply. "Well, let's have it!" the detective snapped.

"Well, I remember lifting the cane. I remember saying, 'What do you want of me?' Well, at first I couldn't remember that he answered me at all. He just kept coming. But now it seems to me that he did say something. I've tried to get hold of his words. Something like this, 'There is nothing wrong. You're not afraid of me, are you? There is nothing wrong. You're not afraid—' I seem to get those words over and over. That's why it doesn't make sense. My mind operates like a broken record, repeating and repeating. Mostly I remember that face, that black hair, those dark brown eyes, coming closer and closer!"

Fitzjames shut out the sight with his hands. Daventry studied him, chewing his pipe. Suddenly the detective's jaw dropped. He leaped across the cell, caught the prisoner by the shoulders, shook him:

"Say that over again! Tell it to me again! Will you say that over again, man?"

Fitzjames raised his head, blinked. He slowly repeated his statement, almost word for word. At the end Daventry released the thin shoulders, spun on his heel. In the doorway he barked, "Hang on, brother! I'm going places!"

CHAPTER III

DAVENTRY poked his head through the private door of Inspector Eldred. "Jim, I think I've got a new angle on that Fitzjames business—"

"Come in, Phil." Eldred swung away from his desk, folded his hands across the sag of his waist. "I've just been talking to your pal, Brown, here. Fitzjames is in the bag. I've got bigger meat for you two—"

"I don't want bigger meat. I want Fitzjames!" Daventry strolled in, nodded at Brown, and perched on the desk.

Eldred beamed. "We don't always get what we want around here."

"I get what I want!"

"Look, Phil, you're the best man I've got but you're not that good."

"I'm good enough that you can't railroad a man to the chair over my reclining body! You're just trying to chalk up another conviction. You're just selling this Fitzjames short, Eldred, and you're not going to get away with it!"

"Phil, you've blown your top!" Eldred roared. "A guy like you falling for a yarn like that! Don't make me get tough, Phil."

"When I'm sold a bill of goods, you can get as tough as you like, Eldred. I've got my bill of goods. Do I work for you or for myself?"

"You don't work for me on the Fitzjames case."

Daventry shrugged. His right hand slid under his lapel and came out with a badge. He flipped it into Eldred's lap. "See if you can find a better 4-F than me!"

Tod Brown caught up with Daventry in the sandwich grill across the street. "You don't think twice, do you, Phil?" he remarked, easing his bulk onto a stool.

Daventry gulped a hamburger. "Once is enough this time."

"What have you got on Fitzjames that's so hot?"

"A pair of brown eyes."

Brown whistled. "Oh, ho! So you fell for that dame too?"

Daventry frowned for a moment, then grinned. "Have you seen her?"

"Yeah. Little special detail. I was there right behind you. Now I'm way ahead of you!"

"I suppose you've got a date with her tonight?"

"No, but I plan to work on it."

"Work fast then, Brownie. I'm on my way there now."

"Just mention my name at the door." Brown grinned and dropped a big hand on his friend's shoulder. "Anything I can help you with, Phil? I won't be too busy tomorrow."

Daventry stood up and tossed a quarter on the counter. "Yeah. One thing. Get me that key ring from the corpse. See you tomorrow."

AT FIVE-FORTY Daventry leaned against a store window watching a huddle of persons move from the curb and wedge itself into a street car. He moved suddenly, like a released catapult, and hit the platform on the heels of the last passenger.

The conductor was a sullen individual with little information to offer. He recalled Fitzjames' cane and a man with a black mustache but that was all.

Daventry worked from passenger to passenger, asking questions, as the car clattered on its way to the suburbs. He reached the last seat without result. Morosely he lighted his pipe. Perhaps his word descriptions of Fitzjames and the dead man were not accurate enough.

He pulled out a card and sketched a likeness of William Fitzjames, tall, stooped, leaning heavily on the cane. Then he flipped a page and did the same for the dead man. The topcoat and hat he had seen; the face had to be drawn from Fitzjames' brief description. There had been nothing left but the eyes on the face of that battered corpse. Even the mustache was mangled into the flesh.

He was touching up the shiny coat lapels when a long finger shot over his wrist and touched the sheet. "I remember that!" a voice whispered. "I remember those funny lapels."

Daventry eyed the blond boy in the seat beside him. Skinny. About high school age. He had boarded the car a few stations after Daventry. "What about the lapels?" he snapped.

"I should have remembered when you were asking me," the youth apologized. "I remember now. The lapels were all shiny, like silk. You don't see coats like that much anymore."

"Remember anything else?"

"Yeah." The blue eyes squinted. "I should remember that guy! He gave me an awful scare once."

Daventry pounced on that, "Gave you a scare?"

"Yeah. It was just a week or so ago. I work after school and I usually catch this car home. But two or three nights I had to work late and I caught the next car after this one. Well, by golly, for about a week or so no matter which car I took, this guy with the lapels was always on the same car! It was really scary, by golly!"

Daventry's voice dropped to a hiss, "What time is the next car after this one?"

"They run fifteen minutes apart."

"And this man rode both cars?"

"I don't say he rode both cars. That wouldn't hardly be possible. I say that he always rode the same car I did, no matter which car it was. First I thought he was following me, but that couldn't have been, because he was already on the car when I got on!"

Daventry felt like shouting. Instead he asked the boy's name and noted it in his book. "I'm a detective, son." The blue eyes bulged. "You may have helped to save a man's life. Anyway you've saved me a lot of grey hairs. Thanks."

The car was almost empty when Daventry got off at Glenarm Avenue. He noted the rapidly rising darkness. It crept like a low smudge over the rooftops.

In imitation of William Fitzjames he marched into the gloom toward that rendezvous with murder. He could almost sense those stalking footsteps behind him.

He counted off blocks as he went. Seven, six, five, four, three. His feet struck little obstacles—stones, cans, bits of glass. He strode on past the murder corner, listened for the beat of footsteps, imagined the scuffle of a stone at his feet. He turned, raised his arm.

"What do you want of me?" Daventry said. For an instant he paused, then he swung down his arm as though to strike a man's face. He swung again. He dropped on his knees on hard cement and struck again and again at the nothing that lay there, in a weird mockery of murder.

DAVENTRY had to get off his knees. The cement was hurting them. He wondered how a man could squat there for long painful moments and yet not remember the ache in his knees.

He sat down, recalling Fitzjames' story. There was something wrong with the scene, he felt, something that did not quite fit. He went through the motions anyway, felt of a bloody, imaginary body with his hands. He fumbled in his pocket for a match.

A match! But why did he need a match? It was not yet dark. He could still see objects as far as twenty feet away. *It was not yet dark!*

The detective leaped to his feet. This was the doggondest crime he had ever tackled! The deeper a man got the more fantastic became the facts.

Daventry glanced at his wrist watch. Six-thirty. He hesitated and then continued toward the Fitzjames home.

There was a light in the Fitzjames kitchen. He slipped along the hedge to the garage. To his surprise the garage door was wide open. He stepped in. A thin beam from his pencil flashlight pierced the darkness. At his feet lay the casing of a tire. The red tube was pulled halfway out of the tire. It reminded him of a huge, exposed red vein.

Daventry closed the garage, stepped up on the back porch, and peered into the kitchen. Mildred Fitzjames was on hands and knees on the floor. Beyond her lay the guilty topcoat. It was an ordinary dark coat, except for a thin black band around the upper left arm. Across its surface were two long dull streaks, five-fingered, the marks of two bloody hands.

Daventry rapped sharply. The door quickly creaked open. The woman peered at him through the screen before unlatching it.

"It's you!" she murmured. "I'm so glad it's you! Come here! I want to show you something!"

She seized his hand with warm fingers, pulled him into the kitchen. She pointed dramatically at the topcoat. "Look! Look, Lieutenant! He said he wiped his fingers on his coat. There are the marks of the fingers, but where are the spots? Where are the splashes, Lieutenant? Could you beat a man to a bloody pulp without getting a single splash of blood upon yourself? Could you possibly do that, Lieutenant?"

Daventry stared. His eyes glinted. His fingers raced up the woman's arms to her shoulders, squeezed the soft white flesh. His words didn't quite fit the situation. "Have you had dinner?" he demanded.

"I couldn't eat," she said simply.

"You can eat with me! We're going out—to celebrate!"

CHAPTER IV

THAT night was the longest in Detective Lieutenant Phil Daventry's life. The first half of it went fast enough—too fast. Just a matter of gulping food, murmuring a few words, and staring at a lovely vision. But that last half, when he was home in bed, tossing—

He couldn't decide what it was about Mildred Fitzjames, the crinkly eyes, or the way her long black hair was shaped to the delicate contours of her face, or the smile that lurked on her lips even when she was hurt or angry. Whatever it was, it kept hitting Daventry like a solid blow in the chest, and he couldn't hit back. Daventry, Phil Daventry, the social lone wolf losing his head. Yes, losing his head. Fitzjames wasn't the only man who had lost his head.

How had a gal like that Mildred gotten hooked up with an old gent like Fitzjames? He hadn't dared to ask her. What business was it of Phil Daventry? Don't be a fool, Daventry! You can't put your heart into saving a man from a murder charge when you've gone overboard for that man's wife!

Not until dawn began to settle like dust against the bedroom windows had Daventry settled the matter in his mind. He would be a fool, but he would still be Daventry. He rolled over and went to sleep.

Tod Brown joined his friend for breakfast next morning in a tiny two-passen-

ger booth. "Coffee and doughnuts," he ordered.

"Make that ham and eggs," Daventry corrected. "On me. We have a lot to do today if you can break those dismal chains that bind you—"

Brown winked a round, mild eye. "Don't worry about Eldred. He thinks I'm working on the Frazier stabbing—"

"Great!" Daventry sank firm white teeth into a thick slab of ham. He chewed with a swift, silent motion of the jaw muscles—the easy way he did everything. "Did you get those keys from the dead man?"

"Can do!" Brown boasted. "Swiped 'em from Eldred's desk long enough to get 'doops' made."

Daventry looked them over and then scribbled three names on a white card. "These are the kinds of locks we'll be looking for, Tod. The others are not door keys."

AT EIGHT-THIRTY Daventry was ushering Brown toward a street car. "Get off at Glenarm and walk six blocks west. Turn north there for two blocks and work the whole area. It should go fast. The only stops will be houses with the right kind of locks. If the guy went that way every night, he must have lived somewhere in that section."

Leaving Brown, Daventry made some rapid calculations. There would be certain limitations to his own search. A man taking the Brewster car at Seventh must work in a certain very restricted area of the business district. His office must be on or within half a block of Seventh Street itself. Workingmen consistently take the short cuts. If he worked nearer Eighth Street he would take the car at Eighth, etcetra. That narrowed the hunt to a block-wide swathe running west from Brewster.

East of Brewster was the factory district. Men wearing silk-lapelled topcoats did not *walk* in and out of that area.

The swathe would not run over six or seven blocks west, because twelve blocks west was the Lakeshore car which went to Glenarm as directly and quickly as the Brewster car. Anyone on the far side of Main would take the Lakeshore line.

All Daventry had to search, then, was an area one block wide, six blocks long, and averaging twelve stories high!

The detective moved with amazing speed, working his long, tough legs to their limit. Some buildings he could check with a brief glance, because it was obvious that every door in the building had the same kind of lock. In three hours he had covered the entire campaign, floor by

floor, building by building. The result was a list of twenty door locks each of which corresponded by name to one of three keys in Daventry's coat pocket.

Each item on the list included a room number and an address, and in some cases a name taken from the lettering on a door. The names were the most helpful.

At twelve-five o'clock Daventry closed in. Most of the offices would be empty or semi-empty during the lunch hour. Rasping keys and twisting door handles might not be noticed.

Luck seemed to be playing with him. He found the lock on the fifth try at exactly twelve-fifteen o'clock. He slid in the key noiselessly at the instant that his right hand turned the doorknob. The lock slowly gave with the twist of the key.

He poked in his head, swept the room in a glance, stepped in and locked the door behind him. This was it! The name on the door was *Bloom Detective Agency*.

DAVENTRY was sometimes known to his detective friends as "The Phantom of the File Room." The way he could go through a file of papers was nothing short of supernatural. In exactly one half-hour he had torn the Bloom Agency completely apart and put it back together again. At twelve forty-five he picked up the agency telephone and dialed a number listed on Bloom's phone pad under the initials, E.S.

A faint voice that might have been man's or woman's answered the call.

"Hello. Who is this?" Daventry clipped.

A snicker at the other end grew to a tremendous guffaw. "For crying out loud!" a male voice exploded. "That sounds like you, Phil!"

"Brown! Is that you, Tod? . . . Well, I'll be damned! Talk about making ends meet! . . . What have you got down there?"

"The works," Brown reported. "Guy by the name of Ernest Stein. Has a little upstairs apartment on Harvard Street. Hasn't been around since the day of the murder. Had already given the landlady a month's paid notice; so she wasn't surprised about his absence. I gave her a little word picture of the corpse—dimensions, weight, coat, silk lapels, black hair, blue eyes, black hat—you know! I threw in Fitzjames' description of the face and that clinched it. I'm sure Stein is the dead man, Phil!"

"Great!" Daventry snapped. "Now I want you to pick up Mildred Fitzjames and meet me at the Town House Bar at four o'clock sharp. I've got some angles to clean up meanwhile. Oh, one other thing, Tod. Ask the landlady if anyone

phoned there Monday inquiring for Stein."

Daventry kept his date on the dot. He found Brown and Mildred in a dark rear booth. A drink was already waiting for him. He sat down by Mildred, facing Brown. Enthusiasm twinkled in the corners of his dark eyes and hard mouth. The effect was contagious. Mildred's tightly drawn face brightened.

"This one's cracking faster than I figured. I have a half-hour to explain and then we go to work," Daventry said. He squeezed Mildred's arm. "Listen carefully, Mildred. I have a job for you. A key from the dead man's pocket fits the office of one K. Bloom, Detective. I've turned that office inside out, and here are the facts I've found:

"First, Bloom's secretary was named Ernest Stein. According to the newspapers a man resembling Stein was murdered by William Fitzjames last Saturday night. Bloom either did not recognize the description of his secretary, or did recognize it but failed to report to the police.

"In Bloom's correspondence I found a letter addressed to an employment agency, dated Monday, stating that his secretary had carried out a threat to quit and requesting a new secretary. If the letter is not a fake, then Bloom made up his mind in a single working day that his secretary had walked out on him. Did he call Stein's home on Monday, Brown?"

"Somebody called, the landlady said."

"That checks well for Bloom. Almost too well. Now, here's another thing. I couldn't find any incriminating facts in Bloom's office, but I noted that his files only went back to 1941. So I looked up Hogan, who used to be in the private detective business. He remembered Bloom. But Hogan insisted that Bloom had been in the business for years.

"Question, then why did Bloom's files only go back to 1941? I asked Hogan, and he admitted he hadn't seen Bloom since the winter of 1940. At that time Bloom was working on a blackmail case in Capitol City. I asked for names. Hogan finally came up with one—Dr. Runecker! Does that strike a note, Tod?"

Brown licked thick lips. "Runecker? Runecker? Wasn't he a homicide case over at Capitol City?"

Daventry's black eyes glowed. "Not homicide, Tod. Suicide. That was the coroner's final report. I checked it with the *Daily Post* library.

"But here's the thing, Tod. I remember a little about the case. Runecker was found smashed-up in his car at the bottom of a cliff. There were rumors that

Runecker had been a first-class blackmailer, but some big money stopped the blackmail investigation cold. Probably a lot of nice people wanted to keep their names out of the mess. Anyway, they settled for suicide. Dr. Runecker's secretary identified the body. The secretary's name was—*Enoch Steen*. Do you get it, Tod?"

Brown blinked, then snapped his fingers. "Maybe I do. Enoch Steen—Ernest Stein?"

Daventry chuckled. "It's possible. That similarity of initials seems to be a human weakness—"

"But if K. Bloom's secretary was the same guy as Dr. Runecker's secretary, then K. Bloom himself might be—"

"That's right! K. Bloom might be! I've found out that Bloom was always a man of very few personal connections, and previous to 1941 he had no secretary! Now, those are the facts. Here's where you come in, Mildred—"

The woman seized on Daventry's excitement with burning eyes. "Yes, I want to help you!"

Daventry patted her shoulder. "I'm sending you to this Bloom Detective Agency, Mildred. A real detective would scare him too much. I want you to tell Bloom that you have undertaken an investigation on your own and have discovered the identity of the man William Fitzjames struck down last Saturday night. Tell Bloom that you know the dead man was his secretary. Act just a little suspicious of Bloom, but don't overdo it. Tell him you're trying to find some connection between the dead man and William Fitzjames. Don't tell him how you got your facts.

"Watch him, Mildred. That's all. Just record in your mind everything he says and does. Bring that back to me here along with a description of the man himself."

Daventry stood up and pulled Mildred to her feet. Her lips trembled. "I—I—"

"You can handle it. We depend on you."

She looked away from his piercing eyes, at her hands, her feet. "Yes—yes, I can handle it."

He handed her a slip of paper. "Here's the address."

The two detectives watched her to the door of the bar. She faltered once, turned, waved, and vanished.

"All by herself, Phil?" Brown queried.

"You'll be three minutes behind her, Tod. Get close enough to Bloom's door to overhear any funny business. Duck out of sight when Mildred comes out. Then tag Bloom and find out where he lives. A

private detective will be sharp, Tod. Be on your toes!"

DAVENTRY spent the time slowly drinking beer and thinking. The case was beginning to take shape now. Facts grooved together. There was only one odd piece to the puzzle, William Fitzjames.

The detective's long body sulked deeper and deeper into the cushions of the booth. He felt stupid. He knew he was looking the truth right in the eyes and still could not recognize it.

A hand finally came out of the mist and touched his shoulder. He started, spilling beer on his shirt. He expected to see the sweet smile of Mildred Fitzjames. Instead a wrinkled scowl in the person of Tod Brown hovered close to his face. Brown slid into the booth, riding his elbows on the table.

"You're supposed to be tagging Bloom!" Daventry snapped.

Brown reddened. "He lost me, Phil. Pulled a beautiful fake with a taxi into a black sedan parked across the street. I spotted the license, though. I made sure he didn't really know he was tailed. The fake was just a precaution on his part."

"Okay. Forget it. Where's Mildred?"

Brown wiped fat cheeks with his palms. "Pretty sold on that dame, aren't you, Phil?"

Daventry's eyes tightened. "What about it?"

Brown pinched his nose, looked away. "She's in on the game, Phil."

"What!"

"I know how you feel, boy. It hit me the same way. I'm telling you she walked out of that office arm in arm with K. Bloom himself and lookin' up at him like he was the only guy in the world!"

Daventry slumped almost out of sight behind the table. If there was any emotion, it was lost behind the thin slits of his eyes and mouth. His hand wrapped around the point of his chin. "I don't get it," he breathed.

"You'd have got it if you'd been there, seein' the way she looked up into his eyes. If ever a dame—"

The hand wiped away from Daventry's jaw, slammed savagely on the table. An empty glass rolled on its side. "I do get it!" Daventry roared. Stools swiveled. Faces peered at him. He crouched in his seat like a coiled cat. "I got to know, Tod. How can I know for sure?"

"Are you crazy?" Brown exploded.

"Crazy! Yes, that's what it would be!" Daventry ground the words through his teeth. "What'll I do? How'll I find out, Tod, right now?" he begged.

He answered himself, leaping up. "Come on! I know where to go!"

"I know where you oughta go," Brown muttered, tossing a bill on the table as Daventry dragged him for the door.

CHAPTER V

THERE was a phone booth in the drug store on the corner. Daventry dived into it. Brown wedged in behind him, a nickel materializing on his palm. "Phil, I wish you would explain what this is—"

"Shut up!"

Daventry dialed with stiffening, knotted fingers. His teeth were clenched, the lips white. "Hello! *Daily Post*? . . . Give me the morgue . . . The morgue. The filing room! Pete Wils—Hello!—Hello, Pete? . . . Pete, this is Phil Daventry of Homicide . . . Yeah. Pete, I want you to do something for me—fast! Now get these facts straight: I want you to look up the Dr. Runecker suicide story from Capitol City. Sometime in 1940 . . . That's right, Dr. Runecker. Just one thing I want to know, Pete. What kind of a doctor was Runecker? . . . Got it? What kind . . . Right!"

Daventry waited, mopping his cheeks with a sweaty palm. Panic was drumming in his ears, torturing his throat. Damn the Fitzjames family! He had never had a case do this to him before. Brown blinked at him, not understanding.

It seemed to take the man hours. The early dark was already seeping in from the street.

"Hello! Pete, did you get it? . . . Yeah? . . . Yeah. A psychiatrist? . . . You're sure of that? A psychiatrist? . . . Yeah. That's all. Thanks, Pete."

Daventry's voice dwindled away to a whisper. His shoulders sagged. He hung the receiver with a groping, uncertain motion. "I'm sick," he muttered. "Now I know."

"What do you know, Phil?"

"I can't think, Tod. Where could we find them? Where would they go from his office? Where would he take her? I've got to think and I can't!"

"If you'd tell me what's eating you, Phil—"

Daventry's eyes came up to Brown's, pleading. He licked his lips. "If you wanted to be alone with her—all alone, Tod—where would you take her?"

"Not to my place," Brown grumbled. "My landlady wouldn't like it!"

"No, not to his place. That would be too dangerous."

"Shucks, I'd take her home and start from there. The old man being in jail—"

"Brown! That's it! Of course he'd go to her place—way out, no houses around—Oh, Brownie, come on!" Daventry shot out of the booth in a crouch like a sprinter leaving his blocks.

His instructions to the taxi driver were hoarse, voiceless words out of a dead throat. The cab slammed them against the cushions, shrieking away on slick rubber. They shot through a yellow light in first gear.

"What's up?" Brown demanded.

"Murder maybe. Or worse!" Daventry groaned.

Daventry wasn't thinking ahead; he was only able to think up to each successive green light. Green was the light of life, and red was for blood. The red must not come down on them or it would flood the world. Yellow, yellow, yellow. The cab seemed to punch a button every time it hit the mid-stripe of a block and then came a half-block of screaming, sliding, treacherous speed, racing with the yellow, whistling under the red, and reaching out for another green.

Time sat with him like a phantom, pointing out each delay with a long black finger, chuckling, poking his ribs. Daventry felt himself growing old by seconds that were as long as years. How could one woman do this to a man?

IT WAS a long ride to Glenarm. Darkness was settling fast. Brown had to bark the directions. Daventry couldn't loosen the stiff tongue wedged against his teeth.

At last the lights slowly dwindled like scattered sparks of a dying fire. "How close we want to get to the house?" Brown muttered.

"Block away!" Daventry managed to get out. "Mustn't warn him. Got to catch him in the act, damn it!"

"Turn here!" Brown hissed suddenly. The cab braked, swerved. Tires shrilled. A lamppost and black trees sprang toward them. With a fearsome wail the tires gripped pavement. The cab lurched wildly, then pulled away to the left. A single clutching branch of tree slapped viciously against the glass.

"Whose gonna be the corpses in this case?" Brown growled.

Right side of the cab was a pit of blackness pierced by a single pinpoint of light.

"Stop here!"

A final drunken lurch and wheels churned into gravel. A hand jarred Daventry's shoulder. "Okay, Phil."

That was the release. Daventry stiffened, clawed at the door handle, leaped outward into soft sand. He ran, floun-

dering in the stuff, leaping the black gnome shrubs that crouched to tackle him. He remembered to call over his shoulder, "Take the back door, Tod! Let me go first!"

Twice he sprawled flat, burying up to his wrists in sand. Once his mouth ground into the stuff, gagging him, but he was up again like a springing cat, spitting. A muddy clot formed at his panting lips and drooled down his chin. Heaving breath sucked bits of it into his throat. He choked, coughed, sputtered, but ran on faster.

He tried to get hold of himself, focus his mind on the action to come. He must see the scene as it was laid and yet give no warning.

The house loomed up now. He slowed his pace, coming down softly and lithely with each long step, skirting the house in a wide circle. He shut his lips and let the wind pound inside of him, sob in his throat.

The pinpoint of light was a mere slit in a curtain. Shades were drawn. Other gleaming slits showed at the edges of them. Doors would be locked of course.

He couldn't attempt to peer into those slits. He couldn't pause to break in a door. The entrance would have to be accomplished in a single, startling attack.

He recalled the front room of the house, the arrangement of the furniture. The large parlor window was not a single glass but a framework of six separate glass panels. The frame was frail enough. A man's weight would smash through it easily. Beyond the window was a blank space of carpet six feet deep—no furniture to shatter a man's bones.

He could hear Brown's heavy steps thudding behind the house. That was the signal.

The porch was low, unrailed. He made a rounded, frontal approach to it, measuring with his eyes, trotting across the grass. Ten feet from the porch his toes dug into sod, shooting his body forward. The third step caught the edge of the porch, the fourth lifted his body into the air, knees doubled against the chest, twisting. Flying through space he noticed strange, incongruous things—ragged seams in the curtain, a crack in one of the glass panels, a tiny flag with a single star in a corner of the frame—

He hit the window backwards with feet and hips. Glass and wood exploded deafeningly around him.

He landed in a skidding backslide on toes and hands, collapsing heavily. The splintered window showered down on top of him. His hands flung his body up at the waist, crouching, spinning on the

toes. His eyes took in the whole room in a single gulp:

The body on the couch was stiff, trance-like. The face was a blank white mask.

Above the woman on the couch bent the figure of a man, short, dark-eyed. His black hair hung in a long, sweaty mat down one cheek. His breath formed little bubbles of foam at the lips.

The two men joined in the middle of the room, crashed heavily, rolled on the crackling glass. The glass powdered under their combined weight. Bits of it wormed through their clothing, needling the flesh.

Daventry ignored the slivers biting into wrists and knees. He engulfed the body beneath him in a tight body lock. A savage face thrust up close to his, deep eyes searched into his own.

"Go ahead!" Daventry snarled. "Roll those big brown eyes, Doctor Runecker. You're finished!"

DAVENTRY—Inspector Daventry it would be, in a few weeks—thought he could get away from the Fitzjames case, at the little Pacific resort, but it followed him. His first night down for dinner in the Cliffview dining room he spotted the face of William Fitzjames at a table over by the big plate glass window. Only the back of Mildred's head was visible, but that was a cold shock. He tried to duck, but Fitzjames was on his feet, beckoning.

A waiter found a third chair for Daventry. He sat facing out upon blue ocean.

Mildred's face was the way he wanted to remember it, not that ghastly thing he had seen lying on that couch.

"What coincidence can this be?" Daventry muttered in greeting.

Mildred's hand was crawling across the tablecloth toward his own. His fingers trembled. "Why did you run off so soon?" she demanded. "We had so much to thank you for, Phil."

"That's my business, to straighten people out—or to hang them," he said.

William Fitzjames gripped Phil's shoulder. He was changed, no longer a trembling jelly of a man. He seemed to have grown in stature, expanded. "You might straighten me out on a few more things, Mr. Daventry," he said. "I've never quite understood the connection between Dr. Runecker and the Bloom Detective Agency."

"Oh, that," Daventry said. "That part was simple enough. It started three years ago. Dr. Runecker used his little psychiatry practice as a front for the sweetest blackmail racket I've ever heard of. People who came to him were the kind of

people who make big fools of themselves. After delving into their secret lives the doctor turned the facts against them. His so-called secretary, Enoch Steen, actually handled the blackmail.

"Finally one of the doctor's clients became suspicious and hired the Bloom Detective Agency to investigate. Bloom probably made the mistake of confronting Runecker with enough facts to ruin him. Bloom was nailed for murder on the spot. He was overpowered by Runecker, driven over a cliff in Runecker's car, and identified by Runecker's secretary as the doctor himself.

"That little trick gave Runecker a chance to slip out of a spot that was fast becoming too hot for him and to assume a new identity. He simply moved to this city and became K. Bloom, Detective, after discovering that Bloom had no close contacts or relatives. He moved the Bloom offices and actually operated a bona-fide detective bureau, working the blackmail as a sideline. He was smooth and smart and expert, that Runecker.

"And the doctor's secretary then became the detective's secretary?" Mildred put in.

"Yes, after the Runecker suicide had died down. Enoch Steen became Ernest Stein. He was never a 'front' man though; he worked behind the scenes, handling the dirty work as well as the book work. But Stein finally made the same mistake that Detective Bloom had made; he began to put the pressure on a dangerous man. He probably blackmailed Runecker for a higher percentage and that was simply asking for murder."

Daventry studied the long, mild face of William Fitzjames, the quick, nervous movements of the man. "Stein was a lot like you, Mr. Fitzjames. That's why he was so good at the blackmail angle. No one could possibly suspect him. He was a man of very neat, punctual habits. Always rode the same street car and that sort of thing.

"As soon as Bloom—that is, Runecker—had his murder plot in mind he began to study Stein's routine, probably followed him home a few times. He soon spotted you, Mr. Fitzjames, as the man on whom to perpetrate his plot. Your habits were as exact as Stein's.

"When the time came, Runecker got Stein to change his work schedule by a few minutes so that he would have to take a later street car home. *Then Runecker took Stein's place on your street car.* From the first day that you felt those eyes working on your scalp, the man with the black mustache was not Stein but Runecker himself disguised as

Stein! He must have been a wizard of disguise as he was of many things.

"It was Runecker who followed on your heels that Saturday night. It was Runecker whose eyes met yours when you raised your cane. You vaguely recalled some words that he spoke to you. That part of your memory was right enough. 'There is nothing wrong,' he said. 'Nothing to be afraid of.' Over and over he said it.

"That's where your part of the murder ended, Fitzjames. That's where Runecker calmed your mind and took over. He overpowered you, dragged you into the bushes, and waited for the real Stein to come along. He beat Stein to death with your cane, then led you back to the body, placed the cane in your hand and released you.

"It was a clever plot. Runecker had used his power once before for a murder. Successful murderers grow overconfident. They think they can repeat. Runecker was too sure of himself all along the line. He didn't figure how fast a good detective can work!"

WILLIAM FITZJAMES raised a thin, protesting hand. "Too fast! Just a little too fast for me, Mr. Daventry. You say that Bloom—Dr. Runecker—overpowered me that night. How do you mean, 'overpowered'?"

Daventry blinked. "Huh? Didn't the Inspector—didn't that fool Eldred tell you about Runecker?"

Fitzjames flushed. "I guess he did. I was so excited about being released that I only heard half of it."

"Why, that was the whole thing—that power of Runecker's. That's how he searched the secret minds of his clients for blackmail. That's how he blotted out your mind for an instant—an instant that was really a full fifteen minutes! That's how he undertook to explore Mildred's mind, to find out if she really knew anything about his part in the murder.

"You must have frightened him, Mildred, when you went to his office. You must not have played your part exactly right—"

Mildred laughed. "I suppose not. I'm not an actress."

"I was scared to death when I finally hit on the truth. I thought Runecker meant to kill you somehow with his strange powers—or possibly even to drive you crazy. I almost turned grey in those last few minutes."

"Really?" The woman's eyes widened. "Did it really mean that much?"

Daventry ignored her extended, trembling hand and scowled at William Fitz-

james. "There is much potential good in the science of psychiatry, Fitzjames, and a lot of psychiatrists can do amazing things with hypnotism. But there is also much potential evil in hypnotism when it gets into the hands of clever charlatans and criminals. *Hypnotism, Fitzjames.* Dr. Runecker did wonders with it—vicious, inhuman wonders!

"You lost your head all right, Fitzjames, but not the way you thought. Runecker took possession of your head for a while that night. As soon as his soft words had soothed your fear, his eyes really went to work on you, took control of you. Runecker could not make you murder Ernest Stein though. Even in the subconscious a man's moral standards are intact. But he could keep you in a blank hypnotic trance while he murdered Stein himself!

"When it was done, he ordered you to wait a few minutes for his getaway, then to kneel down beside the body of Stein and break the cane upon the ground. The crack of the cane was your release. He had already planted the thought of murder in your mind through those long days of psychological torture. From that thought it was only a tiny step to belief in your own guilt!

"It would have worked, Fitzjames. I swear it would have worked, but for those keys that Runecker overlooked in his hurry and a tiny clue that was supplied by you."

"By me?" Fitzjames was tense, staring, as if Daventry himself had woven an hypnotic spell.

Daventry grinned, breaking the spell. "Sure. You said the guy you attacked with your cane had big brown eyes. Runecker's eyes were brown. *But I already knew that the eyes of the corpse were blue, Mr. Fitzjames, pale blue!*"

THE dinner party broke up with a kind of embarrassed lingering, a limp, uncertain shaking of hands. Daventry wondered why they had come all the way down here for this.

"We can't possibly thank you for what you've done," Mildred Fitzjames was saying. Her round, wet eyes seemed for an instant to tell of a way she would like to thank him.

Daventry wiped the thought from his mind, gingerly, as he might have wiped mud from his shoes. He ended up gruffly, "Let's forget it, shall we?" and turned his back.

He went into a trance of his own then, walking away. No case had ever left a dull taste in his mouth like this one. It

was a full five minutes, out on the hotel terrace, before Mildred's last words seeped through to him:

"We're all through with the city, packed up. We're going on a long vacation, Phil. Good-by!" she had said, and then, "Come along, Father."

Father? . . . Father?

Daventry suddenly bolted into the hotel, raced through the lobby in long, boyish leaps. The last time he ran like this he was going to a circus. He split an elderly couple in half, spinning the old gentleman on his cane. He sent an ash-stand rocking wildly, spilling into a lady's lap. He dodged a bellboy, caught his sleeve on a thorn, and scattered one dozen roses into a riot of red.

Father? Blast that Brown! Brown had just called her "Mrs. Mildred Fitzjames."

Facts—fragments that he had not

bothered to consider—slid miraculously into place now:

That black armband on Fitzjames' bloody topcoat. That was the emblem of mourning. Those black dresses that Mildred always wore. Mourning dresses. That little flag in the front window with a star in the middle. *A gold star!* Mildred Fitzjames was not the old man's wife. She was his daughter-in-law! A widow! That gold star would be for Mildred's husband, Fitzjames' son, killed in the war!

Daventry dived through a revolving door and catapulted a girl headfirst into the lobby. Fitzjames and daughter were two blocks away, stepping into a cab.

He almost lost the race then, but Mildred couldn't resist the pull of his straining eyes. She looked over her shoulder. She saw him and she was waiting.



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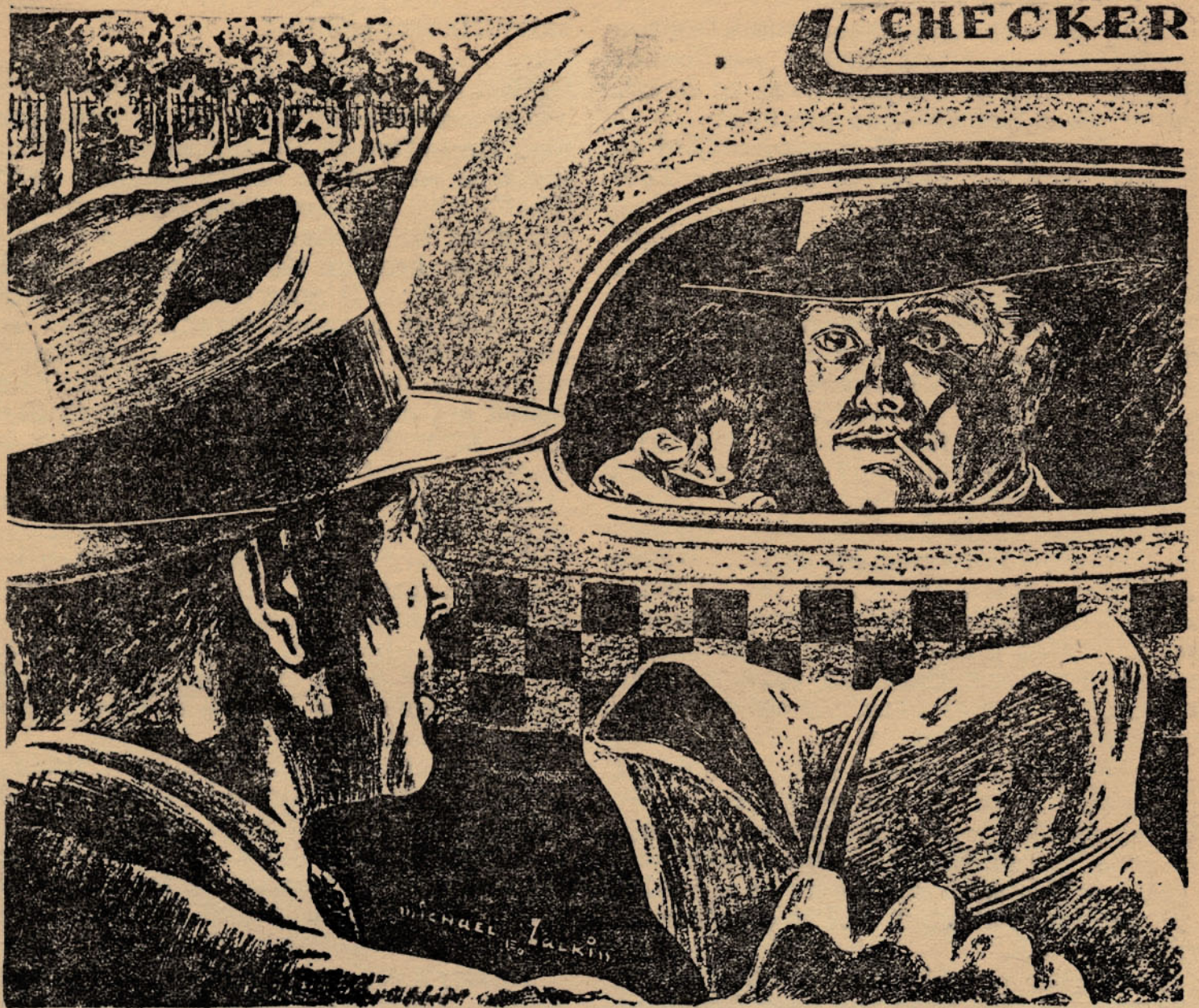
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Murder in Small Packages

By William Rough



Good-hearted Benny Kerr only wanted to hand that mislaid meat parcel back to its loser. But when it turned out that the package contained an axe-maniac's tidbit, it was the murder-mad chopper that wanted to make Benny the red-handed receiver.

WHEN the newspaper truck pulled up and the late afternoon editions thudded on the pavement beside Gimpy's stand, Benny Kerr got up from his park bench and started over. He'd read the latest on the torso murders, get a bowl of chili, and take in the double feature at the Bijou.

Benny admired Gimpy's quickness, as the lame little newsdealer slashed the ropes on the bundle of papers and whisked headlines into view. During the past couple months, since the tool factory recon-

verted and he'd been laid off, Benny had come to the park every day and watched Gimpy work. Benny had seen the steady business Gimpy did in papers and magazines. He'd got to thinking that when there were plenty of cigarettes, gum, and candy again, Gimpy would be needing a helper. Benny meant to get that job. It might not pay as much, buck for buck, as working in the stockroom at the factory, but there'd be no layoffs.

Benny fished for a nickel, saw a big shot grab a paper from Gimpy, sit down,

and turn to the stock market page. Benny eyed the black-eyed, black-mustached man cannily. Chances were the guy would be finished with the paper in a second.

Benny waited, bright hazel eyes studying the headlines: *Second Paper-wrapped Torso Found in Warehouse!*

They were the same headlines as in the earlier editions, but Benny swallowed. Because when it happens close to home, that's what you do—you swallow.

Smaller type said, *Victim identified as Teresa Famette, employe of Acme Tool Co.*

Benny shivered. Because when it happens to someone you know, you do that too—you shiver.

Tessie Famette, the second victim, had worked in the offices at the tool company and had often brought inter-department memos to the stockroom to give Benny. So had Rosa Scalise, the girl whose dismembered body had turned up first, about ten days ago.

The papers said the killer was a maniac who prowled the tenement district where Tessie and Rosa had lived. Yet he must be an inconspicuous man, for no one had actually seen him drop one of the paper-wrapped parcels that had turned up in sewers, in refuse cans, in subway stations and movie houses.

Benny Kerr blew his nose, winced at the swift pain in his nasal passages. Benny sniffled just as much now, in August, as in midwinter. Doc Kunz was treating him with some sort of medicine the doc had patented, but it didn't seem to help much.

As Benny put his handkerchief away, his eyes drifted over the park bench up on the knoll, fascinated. One of the paper-wrapped packages had been found right there, a leg. Matt Hurley, the park cop, had sworn no suspicious strangers had been in the park that day.

Benny leaned forward. The big shot had tossed his paper on the bench and was hailing a cab. Benny swooped and grabbed the paper. He saw the package underneath it, snatched it up, and turned to give it back to the man. But the man was already in the cab. It moved away. Benny yelled, and stood there waving the package foolishly.

That was when he got the impact of the big shot's glittering black eyes for the first time. The man was looking through the rear window of the taxi, the skin on his cheekbones drawn tight, his lips a white slash. His black eyes were like chips of hard coal behind which a fire blazed.

Benny couldn't pull his gaze away from those hypnotic eyes until the man whipped around to the taxicab driver.

Benny saw the driver shake his head and gestured at the streams of traffic on both sides. He couldn't stop.

The eyes came back to Benny, burned through the window, burned into Benny's scrawny little form, cataloguing every detail. Benny grabbed for his handkerchief. He was sniffing.

THE cab was lost in traffic, then. Benny was left clutching the oblong package. He hefted it, licking his lips. There must be something pretty valuable in it. That's why the black-eyed man had studied him; he wanted his package back.

It was heavier than it looked, pliable yet resistant. It was the size and shape of a roll of bologna. Benny couldn't resist looking. He intended to stay right where he was, sure that the big shot would get out of the cab and hurry back here first chance. Just the same he couldn't resist looking.

Benny pulled the string off one end, parted the paper. Then he stiffened and felt the hard seat of the park bench behind him catch his thighs, as his knees gave out. Every muscle in Benny's skinny frame became a tight, twanging string. His hazel eyes glazed. His one look had told him he was holding one of those packages!

It was the bull voice of Matt Hurley, the park cop, that brought Benny awake. "Benny! Hey, you forgot your package!"

Benny skidded, shook his head, stopped. He saw that he was thirty feet from the bench where he'd found it. He'd been fleeing instinctively.

Hurley's red-faced bulk plodded toward Benny. One massive, freckled paw shoved the package back into Benny's hand. The other held the newspaper Hurley had picked up. He glared at the headlines.

"If I could just get my mitts on that guy!" Hurley burst out. "They say he's a nut, but I say different. He's a guy we probably know, somebody right down in our neighborhood, somebody who hangs around the park, too. He could be anybody at all. He might even be you, Benny. He left one of those packages right here under my nose. I'd just like to see him leave another one! What's the matter, Benny? Sick?"

"Y-yeah!" Benny gurgled, his thin cheeks like ashes.

Hurley slapped Benny's shoulder. "Better tell Doc Kunz to give you regular medicine, not any of that stuff he makes up himself. See you tomorrow, kid."

Benny watched Hurley's blue-coated back move off. He scuttled to a refuse can, caught himself. No! If the package were found here, Hurley surely would remember Benny had had one. For a sec-

ond, Benny tried to get enough moisture into his mouth to yell after Hurley. Then he recalled Hurley's words, *He could be anybody, anybody at all. He might even be you, Benny.*

Benny's paper-thin soles slapped the sidewalk. He had to run. Hide. Get rid of it.

Yet he couldn't get rid of it. He couldn't drop it, throw it, not in this neighborhood. It was a magnet, sticking to him, sending its clammy coldness through the paper to paralyze his fingers. Benny fled to the only cover he could think of—his room.

He'd forgotten the black-eyed, black-mustached man. Suddenly he thought of him again, glanced back over his shoulder like a scrawny hound dog might glance at a can tied to his tail. Benny didn't see the man. He decided the man wouldn't be coming back after all. Why would anybody come back after *this*, if he'd once got rid of it?

But Benny was wrong. If he'd looked again, he'd have seen those black eyes hard on him, craftily waiting.

Benny took his usual route home. Six blocks from the park, he turned right, five blocks more, right again. Down an alley, past the warehouse—

That's where Benny's teeth chattered harder. Here, in this gloomy old building, was where Tessie's torso had been found. There was a crowd around, though the homicide squad was gone.

"Hello, Benny," said Doc Kunz. Benny jerked. The gaunt black shoestring of a doctor was at his elbow, slightly bleared blue eyes studying him professionally.

"What's wrong, Benny?" Kunz asked. "Excitement too much for you?"

Benny's lips worked. He almost blurted it out. He was reaching the point where he had to tell someone. "N-no! I'm okay, doc!" Benny blurted and ducked toward the sanctuary of his room.

"I'll stop in and have a look at you after I see Mrs. Grady," Kunz said.

"No! Don't come near. I mean, okay, doc!"

BENNY ducked into the doorway of the tenement where he lived. He went up the first two flights fast, but on the third his chest began to hurt. He stopped, leaned against the narrow banister, breathing jerkily at the musty, thick-hot air.

The black-eyed man was breathing rapidly, too. This sound was what sent Benny's eyes skittering behind him.

A shriek tore at his vocal chords, never sounded. Benny couldn't get it out. Then the black-eyed man was upon him, hand

clamped over Benny's mouth. The steel-strong fingers ground the bones of Benny's jaw together, bruised Benny's lips.

"Be quiet! Take me to your room. I'll make you rich if you hold your tongue."

The man shook Benny a little, eyes glowing even in the shadows of the stairway. He took his hands away tentatively, grabbed Benny again. Benny would have melted onto the steps without support. The only thing with strength was his heart, thumping, thumping. He even dropped the package.

The black-eyed man scooped up the package, pushed Benny ahead. There was no sound from him. He might have slipped away, Benny thought, as he reeled up the last steps to his room, only he hadn't. Benny could feel the man, back there. He could feel his eyes. Benny turned the knob of his door, tried to dive in and slam it.

The man was ready for him. He shoved Benny into the room, slammed the door himself, snicked the lock. Benny backed away from him, still unable to make more than little, squeaking sounds. He backed into the bed, fell on it.

Death reached for his throat. Benny saw the slender, strong fingers stretch and start for him. He saw the burning black eyes, the slashed lips under the black mustache. He scrounged back on the bed, hit the wall. He could go no farther. He felt his mouth opening, his tongue protruding, his eyes bulging even before the fingers touched him. He was choking himself, practically.

He felt his head get thick. Blackness swirled around him. Then those hands were on him. But they weren't choking him. They were shaking him, jarring him back to consciousness. And the black-eyed man's low voice was warning, "Quiet."

Benny saw why now. He heard the knocking on his door. He heard Doc Kunz's voice insisting, "Let me in, Benny. I want to look at you."

The black-eyed man caught Benny's chin in his hand, turned Benny's eyes up into his own. The whole strength of the man's personality was in the onyx stare he centered on Benny. That stare held Benny transfixed, sucked the little strength out of him, bored in under his hide.

"Meet me in the park tonight at nine o'clock," the man commanded softly. "I'll be on the bench I sat on today. I'll have money for you, a thousand dollars. That will be only the first payment. I'll make you rich, understand?"

"Benny, let me in!" Doc Kunz roared. "Will you be there?" the black-eyed man hissed. "Do you want money?"

Benny heard a voice not at all like his own pant, "Yeah! Yeah, I'll be there! Yeah, I want money! Yeah, yeah, yeah!"

He realized vaguely that something stronger than himself had taken over, instinct. He was saying anything at all to gain respite, anything to get this black-eyed monster away.

The man hesitated, trying, it seemed, to peel back Benny's skull and look inside it. Suddenly he grated his teeth like a man risking all on a long shot. "I'll give you five thousand for the first payment!" he said harshly. "Nine o'clock. The park. Be there. No harm will come to you."

The man looked about the room for another means of exit, scorned the fire escape window, strode to the door, unlocked it and pushed past Doc Kunz brazenly.

Kunz fell back in surprise. "I'll be damned!" He turned to Benny as the man disappeared down the stairs. "How did you ever get *him* interested in your case, Benny?" Kunz demanded.

Benny croaked, "Him? Is he a d-d-doctor?"

"Why, he's famous!" Kunz said. "Dr. Haswell Falik. He's a psychiatrist. He—"

But Benny was blacking out now. The strain was over. The reaction set in. . .

WHEN Benny came to, there was a pleasant stupor in his limbs. He was in bed. Doc Kunz was bending over him. The doctor's words came slowly, as from a great distance. He was questioning Benny. Benny answered with no trouble at all. He didn't realize that the morphine Kunz had given him was responsible for his sense of ease and well being. He knew only that he was safe and sleepy. He told his story from beginning to end.

Benny heard Doc exclaim occasionally. He heard him mutter, too. But Benny didn't pay much attention. Once, he looked up at Doc's gaunt, cadaverous face, the lines of dissipation running from Doc's nostrils to his lax lips, and thought vaguely that the doctor looked like a man who was smoking marijuana. The doc's blue eyes weren't a bit bleary now. The parchmentlike skin on his high cheekbones showed spots of color. His long arms flapped about him, the fingers twitching.

Benny heard the doc muttering, "Falik? The great Haswell Falik! The mind doctor gone the way of his patients. He'll plead insanity, of course. The fool!"

Benny saw the doc's hollow eyes glow. Suddenly they were almost like those black eyes that could pin his heart to his ribs with just a look.

"He was going to take advantage of

me!" Doc Kunz mumbled. Then he laughed loudly and long. He didn't laugh at anything funny, though. He cackled. He took a bottle from his bag and drank deeply. Then he tramped from the room.

Benny let blissful drowsiness overcome him. He went to sleep, troubled only by the sudden wonder at how Dr. Falik could possibly have been going to take advantage of Doc Kunz. Kunz was a seedy slum doctor. Falik was a big-shot psychiatrist. Doc Kunz had recognized Falik, because Falik was famous. But Falik hadn't even noticed Doc Kunz. So why or how could he take advantage of him?

When Benny awoke, Doc Kunz was beside him again. "Listen, Benny, I know everything. Everything, understand? You told it all while you were half-conscious. Don't be afraid, Benny. You've got to help me catch Falik."

Doc Kunz cackled at that and repeated, "Catch Falik! Ah, that's good!"

Benny felt prickles between his shoulder blades. He shook his head groggily. The doc didn't look like himself at all, didn't sound like himself. Benny sat up, pulling the sheet around his thin chest.

"Look, Benny!" Doc Kunz shoved a newspaper onto Benny's knees. "The arm you found in that package didn't belong to Tessie Famette at all. It belonged to somebody else, another torso victim, Benny. Falik's victim!"

Benny gazed at the newspaper, at a paragraph on an inside page which said, "Mr. and Mrs. Jason Devers today told the police that their daughter Jennifer, 22, has not been home for two days. Mr. Devers admitted that his daughter had been under the care of Dr. Haswell Falik, eminent psychiatrist. Dr. Falik insisted the girl was quite normal when she left his office, two days ago, but no trace of her can be found."

Doc Kunz cackled, "Of course no trace of her was found. Falik killed her. Dissected her body, and started to get rid of it just like—Never mind, that was the Devers' girl's arm you found, Benny, not Tessie Famette's. Now tonight, Benny I want you to meet—"

"Falik?" Benny cried. "No! I won't! I can't! Doc, I'm too scared of him! He'll get me, too!"

"No, he won't Benny!" Doc said sharply. "Don't worry. You'll help catch him, that's all."

Benny shrank against his pillow. "No! I'm afraid. I'm going to tell the cops. I'm going to get Matt Hurley and—"

The doc chuckled, "I've already talked to Hurley, Benny! He'll be right on hand, don't think he won't. He's going to be in the park. When Falik tries to—"

"Tries to kill me!" Benny burst. "Is that it? You're going to use me as bait!"

"Easy, now, Benny," Doc soothed. "You don't have anything to be afraid of. Hurley won't let anything happen. He'll be right there. He'll catch Falik red-handed. That's what we want, don't we? Benny, you want Falik caught, don't you?"

Benny sniffled. "I don't care! I'm scared! Once I look at his eyes, Doc, I—"

"Pshaw! Don't look at them, then. You're afraid Falik will hypnotize you? Nonsense!" Doc Kunz snorted. "I'm a doctor, too, Benny. Falik uses hypnotism, sure, but no one can hypnotize you if you resist them. They can't do it with one look, either. Don't be afraid of that, Benny. Hurley and I will be close. All you have to do is go with Falik, do what he wants you to do. He'll lead us to the rest of the Devers girl's body."

"But, doc—"

"Now, Benny," Doc Kunz frowned. "You want to co-operate with the cops, don't you? You don't want Matt Hurley to think you're protecting Falik?"

"No!"

"Good! That's the stuff. Now, look. It's only eight o'clock. Get your clothes on, but don't leave here for about forty minutes. About a quarter to nine or a little earlier, go over to the park. Meet Falik and do everything he tells you. Got that?"

Benny peered at Doc's burning eyes, his gaunt, lined face. The doctor looked like a buzzard, like a leering old buzzard getting ready to pounce.

BENNY forced himself to nod. He understood all too well. He was bait. Doc said he and Matt Hurley would be nearby, but Benny chewed his lips and sniffled. Benny wouldn't let tears come to his eyes while Doc was there, but when the black, stringy man left the room Benny hugged the sheet around himself tightly.

He fumbled with his clothing. It was hot and muggy, but he went to the closet and put on a blue turtleneck sweater that was slack around his toothpick neck.

He told himself he was okay. Hurley and Doc Kunz were on his side. He was already cleared so far as having had that package in his possession, because Doc had told Hurley how it had happened. Hurley believed Doc. But would the big cop continue to believe Doc if Benny didn't play his part tonight?

Benny trembled. He had to go through with it. If he didn't show up, Hurley would figure Doc had been drunk and had spun a crazy story. Just the same, the cop

would come back at Benny, drag him down to headquarters.

The minutes ticked away with maddening slowness, yet with haste, too. Benny couldn't understand it; his old alarm clock dragged and hurried at the same time. Twenty minutes whispered by. Another twenty.

"Suppose Falik comes here!" The words blurted out of Benny's white lips, hung in the hot air in his tiny room, echoed off the walls. For two full minutes afterwards Benny was incapable of motion. The paroxysms of trembling shot down into his legs. He scampered for the door. He stopped, fingers on the knob, ears actually moving.

Someone was coming up the stairs. Benny's nostrils quivered, but he couldn't breathe. He couldn't even sniffle.

The almost inaudible scrape of feet on the staircase were so light a mouse might be causing them. Only Benny knew it was no mouse. It was a human being, coming closer, coming toward the door, stopping outside, leaning his ear against the flimsy wood.

Benny Kerr moved again as he had done when he'd fled from the park bench that afternoon, instinctively, without conscious volition. He ducked out the window and clambered down the fire escape. It wasn't until he was in the alley behind the tenement building that he became conscious of his surroundings. It was black down there, a fearsome place to be caught.

Benny looked up, saw a shadow on the fire escape. He ran as he never had run before. At long last, the nervous energy found some place to spend itself. Benny's thin legs turned into driving pistons. The hard slap-slap of his feet was a tattoo on the cobbled alley. It was a sweet sound in Benny's ears. For as energy surged through his limbs, he knew he was running as a champion sprinter. Nothing on two legs would catch him if he kept this up.

There was another thing, too. If Falik was chasing him, then Falik wasn't in the park. Benny could run there and yell for Hurley and Doc. They'd jump out and pounce on Falik then, with no more laying traps. They'd grab the black-eyed man quick. Benny would see them with his own two eyes. He knew he'd never have nerve enough to enter his room again unless he did see Falik captured.

Benny passed the warehouse like a wraith. He went down an alley. Turn left. Left again.

Benny slackened a little, approached the park warily. Hurley and Doc Kunz would be hiding somewhere, probably near the bench where Benny was sup-

posed to meet Falik. Benny's eyes darted toward that bench. His senses reeled. Falik was there!

Benny couldn't believe it, yet it was so. Falik was alone on the bench, waiting. Benny shook his head. Falik must have grabbed a taxi when he'd failed to catch Benny and hurried to the park. Benny wanted to cry. Now he'd have to go through with it after all.

He glanced fitfully about. If he could get just one glimpse of Matt Hurley's bulk, he'd feel better. But Hurley was nowhere in sight. There were a couple of old men scattered about on the benches, some kids, but no Hurley.

"IT'S okay, Benny." The voice came from nowhere. Benny jumped. It came again. "Don't worry, Benny. I'm behind this tree."

Benny saw who it was, now—Doc Kunz. His long, cadaverous frame blended into the shadow behind a tree. He waved Benny toward the bench where Falik sat.

Benny stumbled forward, walked up to Falik. "H-here I am," he stuttered.

The black eyes impaled him. In the night they seemed deeper, darker, yet more fiery, too.

Falik's lips and mustache didn't move, but his words were clear. "Go across the street to the Grayson Hotel. Room 317. The door is open. Don't talk to anybody. I'll follow you. I've got the money," Falik added quickly.

Benny didn't bother to nod. He made a beeline for the hotel, a third-rate place with a shabby, deserted lobby. The desk clerk glanced carelessly at Benny, then away. Benny skittered toward the stairs. He didn't know why he avoided the elevator, but had he seen the pleased light in the black eyes behind him when the desk clerk paid him no attention, he would have stopped dead.

Benny climbed to the third floor. Room 317 was unlocked, as Falik had said it would be. Benny went in, switched on the lights. In a second, Falik came in. He looked Benny coldly up and down, then he looked away. For once, those black eyes stopped boring into Benny's soul.

Benny held his breath. What was Falik waiting for? Why didn't he say something, do something?

Benny got his answer when the door opened again and Doc Kunz came in.

Doc Kunz came in!

Doc nodded to Falik. Doc took a little phial from his pocket. Doc said, "Ready, Falik?"

That was when the blinding truth flooded through Benny Kerr. Not all the truth, just the most important part for him.

Doc wasn't on his side, he was on Falik's side!

Benny charged for the door. Falik caught him from behind. Doc's long stringy arms shot out in front. Falik dragged Benny back to the bed, forced him down on it, pinned him with a knee, used those steel fingers again on Benny's mouth.

But this time to force Benny's mouth open, not shut. For Doc Kunz had uncorked the phial and was ready to force the contents down Benny's throat.

He did it. He jammed the neck of the phial between Benny's lips as Falik's fingers forced open Benny's mouth. Benny felt bitter liquid trickling over his tongue, down his throat.

He knew it was poison. He knew Falik and Doc Kunz were murdering him. He felt the poison hit his stomach. He felt himself grow weak. He thought, *They'll cut me up and wrap me in packages.*

Falik's knee came off Benny's chest. Benny tried to rise, couldn't. A heavy lethargy was upon him. He could see dimly, hear vaguely, but he couldn't speak or move.

As in a dream, he saw Falik go to the closet, pull out paper-wrapped packages. There was the package Benny had discovered, he could never mistake that. There was another package like it. There were two more like those, only larger. Then there was a fifth package, larger. But Falik handled it easily. Jennifer Devers hadn't been heavy.

"You don't have to drag them out," Doc Kunz said thickly. "Don't you think the cops will search the place?"

"Do you think they'll believe it's suicide?" Falik asked uncertainly.

Doc Kunz cackled. "What else? Don't worry about that. I've already talked to a cop, suggested that Benny was a little nutty. I talked to Matt Hurley about ten minutes before Benny was due to leave for the park. Hurley went over to question him, so he's looking for him right now."

Falik nodded. Benny saw him only as a blur. Benny was realizing that he had fled from Hurley, not Falik. If only he hadn't, he thought. If only he hadn't.

It was too late, though, and dying wasn't so hard after all. It was pleasant, really. Like going to sleep, positive that you will sleep sound, without dreaming.

Falik's words drifted to him dimly. "You fool! Do you think I'm going to let you live to blackmail me?"

Benny heard a faint little popping somewhere. It didn't sound loud enough to be a gun. But a second later, there was the *bam* of a Police Positive. Benny knew that was a gun all right. The first

one must have had a silencer on it, he thought. He drifted off. . . .

CLEARLY it was much harder getting awake than it had been going to sleep. Sleeping had been peaceful. Getting awake again brought with it pain and nausea. The thick, rubbery thing in his mouth, Benny learned later, was a stomach pump.

"You're tougher than you look, Benny boy," said a voice.

Benny saw Matt Hurley's red face beaming at him. "How did you—"

"Take it easy, kid," Hurley said. "You're a good little runner, but I'm not so bad myself. I chased after you to the park, caught up just in time to see you go across to that hotel. Falik followed you, and Doc Kunz followed Falik. I strung along and listened outside the hotel room door. I didn't know they were going to feed you poison and leave you there with the Devers girl's body. But when Falik took a shot at Doc Kunz, I jumped in and took a shot at him. Doc Kunz is dead but he talked. I only winged Falik; he'll go to the chair."

Benny gagged a little. "They were going to kill me, leave me there with Jennifer Devers' body so you'd think I was the maniac killer."

Hurley nodded. "But there was no maniac after all. Doc Kunz cut up the first two bodies to cover himself. What happened, Benny, was that Doc gave Rosa Scalise, the first girl to be found, some of his home-made medicine and it killed her. To cover himself, he cut her up like that, figuring the public would think a maniac was loose. Tessie Famette, the second victim, was Rosa Scalise's friend who knew Rosa had been going to Doc Kunz. She

got suspicious so Doc killed her too."

Benny burst, "And when Falik killed the third girl, Jennifer Devers, he tried to take advantage—" Benny stopped, recalling Doc Kunz's mutterings that afternoon. "That's what Doc Kunz meant when he said Falik was trying to take advantage of him!"

"Right," Hurley agreed. "Falik got the story of a secret marriage out of Jennifer Devers when he was treating her. He blackmailed her for months. Then she said she was going to the cops, and Falik killed her. He figured if he cut her up and planted packages around the neighborhood where two other torso murders had already been done, the same man would be blamed for everything."

"Only I caught him planting the very first package," Benny shuddered.

"Well, you're always hanging around the park," Hurley shrugged. "It wasn't so funny that it was you who saw him. The thing was you should have told me right away instead of Doc Kunz. The minute Kunz knew you'd found *another* package, he knew somebody else had committed murder. Even if he hadn't seen Falik in your room, he could easily have searched the paper for missing people and figured out who had killed who. He saw a chance to frame it all on the dumb bunny who had blundered into it—you, Benny; so he went to Falik. They worked together until they thought everything was set."

Hurley shook his head reprovably. "You should've told me, Benny. You should've told me right off. Why didn't you?"

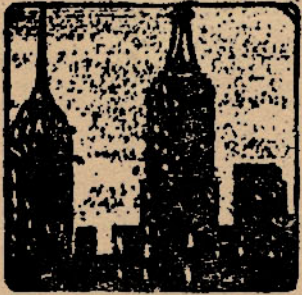
Benny shivered all over. "Because you said it—might even be me!"



A Snitch in Time

By E. C. Marshall

Locked in a windowless room, in a secret building, this kidnaped magnate still found a dead sure way to trap his unknown captor.



MOUNTAINS pressed on his head. He could feel them distinctly. For awhile he had not even been able to feel. There had been only a great instant of utter fright and alarm as

something black, short, and straight descended toward his eyes until it seemed like a plummet of doom growing frightfully in size. The plummet had blotted out everything. Consciousness was extinguished.

But there had been light. Flashes, like fitful bursts of lightning seen through murky fog. Flashes outlined against crushing masses of rock, thick, impenetrable, massive. Perhaps the mountains that closed him in were made of rock. Only rock could be that heavy.

A thin gleam of light split the blackness. Only this time it was not a visiting gleam. The light stayed. No matter how he strained his eyeballs behind their lids the light remained constant, steady, unwavering. Eternal as the weight on his head.

Could he move? A part of him was in motion. He was not dead. His heart was beating. Experimentally he tried to wriggle his toes. They crisped up and down, cramped by the shoes he wore. But they had moved.

His body? It was not easy. The mountains imprisoning his head seemed to have rooted themselves about his middle. Where were his arms? He could not feel them. Had they been cut off, removed as the climax of some surgical operation?

A wave of hideous fear swept him, as the implication of the phrase "surgical operation" burst on his brain like a bombshell. Trembling he tried to sit up.

His head and shoulders came up in a swift, forward motion as, caught in the grip of panic, he suddenly exerted every muscle, every nerve. The split second of action seemed a hundred years.

The mountains, weight and all, vanished as his arms and hands which had

been covering his eyes fell with a thud to the floor. His eyes came open.

He rose to his feet in a small, brightly lit room, took a step forward, stumbled, fell full length. In an instant he was again on his feet, violently shaking the man over whose prone body he had fallen.

The other came awake slowly, eyes opening with a sort of puzzled horror, then rapidly taking in his surroundings.

"Where are we?" The first man poked a finger at the walls.

"Blessed if I know, Martin." The other rose to his feet, brushed himself, took a quick look at the room.

"Whoever it was got us in the car must have hidden in the back seat." Martin rubbed the back of his head. "The last thing I can remember is turning into Market Street. Then..."

"Yeah, I got it too." His companion was rubbing his head.

"Bryant!" Martin grasped his right arm violently. "The conference! It's tomorrow! We've got to sign the contract. Or"—he paused—"maybe today is 'tomorrow'." He looked at his wrist watch. It was still running. Ten minutes past two. They'd started out from their office at noon. How long...

Bryant looked at his own watch. He shook his head. "No telling how long. Might be twelve hours, either way."

Martin took a step toward him. "But we've got to—"

"We'll get out," the other asserted grimly. "Let's look around."

There wasn't much to look at. The room was small, possibly ten feet wide by fifteen long, windowless. Its ceiling was low, no more than eight feet from the floor. The only break in the concrete walls was a metal door at one end of the room's length. One look at the door convinced both men of the futility of trying to break through it without tools. Solid, of the regulation fire-door type, its fastenings were on the other side. There was no handle or knob visible.

The light in the ceiling burned on. They were grateful for it. Without it, both knew they might have gone mad.

Time passed slowly, heavily. Hunger began to grow on them. A panic took hold of Bryant. At first cool, almost assured, he began to fidget, stir, mutter to himself.

Only his voice broke the silence. There was no other noise. As time passed, something else in the room started to oppress Martin. He did not know what it was or even imagine what it could be. He only knew that at length his mouth was parched, his stomach screaming for food, and his body trembling from head to foot.

AS the hands on both their watches touched five o'clock, the lights went out. There was an instant of complete silence, while neither of them breathed. Then a slit of light appeared in the far wall as the door began to swing back. Just a slit which vanished as the light behind it went out.

Martin tensed himself for a spring, strained through the darkness for the vanished gleam. He leaped forward, collided with a heavy body, flung his arms outward in wild slashes. Behind him came Bryant, fighting desperately forward.

The pair pressed ahead for a moment or two, while great, muscled arms tried to restrain them. With a grunting heave they were flung back, while the beam of a flashlight flared momentarily. Martin heard a ponderous step advancing toward him, shrunk back against the nearest wall, side by side with his companion.

Again the black rod of doom loomed from behind the light, came up at him like a thundercloud, swerved and smashed into the back of his head.

Rough hands woke him next. He wearily opened the eyes in his aching head to find the room again ablaze with light. The figure that had been shaking him rose, stepped back, leveled a gun. Martin glanced at it through bleared eyes. It was nothing extraordinary. Just a man in a blue serge business suit—masked and armed. Painfully, Martin got to his feet, stood swaying. The only thing he could think to do was to look at his watch.

Its hands showed six o'clock.

"Do you know where you are?" The words came thickly through the mask, tones muffled by layers of cloth. As it spoke the figure with the gun moved backward slightly, toward the fire door.

Martin fell against the wall, remained there breathing with difficulty. He looked up, grimaced.

"Maybe you'd like to tell me," he grated.

The figure chuckled. The muzzle of the gun moved into line with Martin's middle.

"Why not? No harm in telling you now. Too late for you to do anything

about it." The figure paused. "You're twenty stories above ground, in a concrete storeroom. In precisely what building is none of your business. The walls of this room are two feet thick. Beyond it are others—and other men. Escape is impossible. No one can hear you. There is no one who knows you are here."

Martin cocked his head. That strange impression again, in the absolute silence. Was it sound, smell—or what? He couldn't think.

"What are you going to do with me?" he asked slowly.

"For the present, nothing. You'll be fed, of course. Later—another blow on the head, possibly fatal this time. . ."

Martin leaped. Every ounce of power in his not-inconsiderable body was behind it. He was weak, nauseous, but in that leap was the strength of desperation.

The gun fired, once, twice. Both bullets went wild. A third hit the light bulb. Then Martin's fists were smashing against the figure's chin. An instant later he had flung open the door, closed and locked it behind him, whirled to the left and dashed down a long passageway. At its end was an ordinary door. Trembling he laid his hand on the knob, pulled it toward him.

The soft glow of evening fell past the flight of steps that led from the basement in which he had been imprisoned and bathed his upturned face. Then swiftly and rubbing his head, Martin walked up the steps, emerged onto a well-known and busy street corner in a residential neighborhood and hailed a taxi. Noting the time by a clock in a store window he was hurried downtown to make an appointment he had almost missed.

THAT evening at his and Bryant's club, Martin surveyed the circle of men who sat about the large table in one of the establishment's famous private chambers.

They were his partners now, he reflected, for better or worse, in a giant enterprise created just in time to save him from utter ruin. All partners. Jackson, the city's greatest banker; Hopkins, wealthy industrialist; Bryant, his own business partner who had separately managed to escape from an adjoining cell shortly after Martin trapped their captor in the original cell; Goldwater eminent research chemist; Schroeder, affluent philanthropist; and Fownes, least known of the group, mysterious, supplied with money no one knew from where.

Martin lit a cigarette, flicked an ash from his lapel. For some moments now the assembled company had been waiting for him to speak. They were expectant,

wondering why this additional meeting had been called after the conference earlier in the evening.

Schroeder poured himself a glass of water from the carafe on the table, turned quizzical eyes on Martin. "Well?" he demanded, abruptly.

"Someone in this room is a criminal, a kidnaper." Martin's eyes shifted purposely about the circle of faces. "Bryant and I were removed to keep us from signing that contract. It has to be one of us, for only in this group could exist the necessary motives."

Goldwater giggled nervously, then fell silent, chewing the ends of his mustache.

The others looked at Martin with apprehension. A tension began rising in the room, charged and supercharged with fear. And Martin talked:

"It's very simple, really. Bryant and I were slugged from the back seat of my car. We woke up in the place we told you about. It was a very silent place. The man who kidnaped us told me that the room was twenty stories above the ground. That was merely a lie. The walls were damp, not wet, but damp enough to have to be located underground. Although nothing could be heard, the vibration of passing trucks shook the walls. Not noticeably, not obviously. That's why I knew that beyond the fire door lay a street and people, not more concrete and then empty air.

"And your kidnaper?" Fownes' voice was pointed. His flat, spatulate finger coiled and uncoiled. The atmosphere thickened.

"He had a motive—a good one. Delaying the conference for many days by keeping me a prisoner, making it necessary at last to go on without my signature would have ruined me, without ruining him. A lot of money was involved. Millions, as you all know.

"There is of course only one such man. He was in that room with me and he hadn't been there more than two minutes before I knew who he was, knew because something about him identified him immediately. His confederate had brought me there. It was he who opened the door

after Bryant and I first awakened."

Schroeder thoughtfully knocked ashes from his cigar. "You knew your kidnaper?"

Martin smiled grimly. "Let's say rather that I knew the man who paid him to do his work—the second man in the room, the man with the mask. He was the real criminal. Dressed in a nondescript suit, muffled, absolutely disguised beyond recognition, except for one thing, his watch."

Across the table nonchalant hands poured a glass of water, dropped a pellet within the glass, unobserved. Martin's voice went on, inexorably:

"The room was silent. But there were sounds. My breathing. His. The tick of that watch sounded loudest of all. And I knew what it was when I'd heard it the second time—a big, old-fashioned dollar watch, the kind one of us uses from eccentricity.

"A watch worn in the vest pocket of a man who had been with me in that room once before. A man who was an hour and a half late for the conference, because I locked him in the concrete room. He couldn't get out until his hireling had come and enabled him to change back to the clothes he wore when he'd stretched himself out beside me feigning unconsciousness. He'd had a gun too, a .38."

Martin plucked a lead slug from a vest pocket and threw it down on the table.

"His third shot, the one that shattered the light bulb fell into my coat pocket after it had hit the ceiling. You all know who uses the watch I've described, but only I know who owns a .38 pistol on a permit. It should be fairly easy to check the markings on the slug if he'll surrender the gun—now. As for the watch, you can hear it ticking right now, even in this room, if you listen hard enough."

Bryant's head fell forward. His eyes, bulging with the poison he'd drunk, stared hideously in the glare of death. Then the body slipped sidewise and dropped like a sack of wet flour. As it hit the floor a shiny object spun from a vest pocket and shattered.

A dollar watch.



Satan Hogs the Camera

By
Emil Petaja



Jack Kelley doubled for the hero in Hollywood film fights. But when he undertook to stand in for the star in a real life-and-death scene, Kelley needed more than acting talent. For instead of cold celluloid, that outside drama was being shot in hot lead.

★ ★ ★

WHILE Carl Connor, K-T's best director, was putting the finishing touches on the next take, my eyes wandered over the Hollywood studio lot. Over to the left were the red-tiled office buildings blistering and peeling under the torrid August sun. Lazy-looking employees wandered indifferently across the shaggy lawns. In fact, King-Tanger Studios seemed to have gone to the dogs in the three years I was away. Why, when Uncle King was alive—

"Well, Mister Kelley!" Connor snapped at me sarcastically. "Anytime you're ready!"

"Okay," I grinned. "Shoot."

His sharp eyes, owlish under heavy glasses, pinned me down. "I hope you know what's going on!"

"Sure," I said blithely. "Good old B-7 Western! Just as Kirk Tanger steps out, I jump in and take his place for the scrap. Then I leap on my—rather his—faithful nag and ride away down the set with bullets nipping at my ears."

It was an outdoor set, the old saloon front, and dusty cowtown street that I remembered so vividly from the old days. Like everything I'd seen on the lot in the three days I had been back from overseas, it looked on its last legs.

Kirk Tanger, who had been co-owner with my Uncle King of K-T—and who now owned it all—was the star. He didn't seem to like my coming back at all, though he hid his dislike under that famous back-slapping personality. But under Kitty Riley's persuasion, he offered me a job doubling for him in the horse-opera. He knew I could handle my dukes with the best of them, and that years on my uncle's ranch had made the feel of a pony under me the most natural thing in the world.

I decided to take him up on it, mostly so I'd be near Kitty. I didn't like the way they acted in the clinches. Kirk Tanger was ten years older than I. But we did have about the same build. He's six foot one, rangy and slim, with wide shoulders and narrow hips. He's got curly brown hair and a self-important swagger.

The director grunted. I watched Tanger ham it up with his favorite heavy, Lank Rennagan.

"You've run this cowtown long enough, Jake Carson!" Tanger cried.

Rennagan, big, dirty-faced, ugly, mugged and taunted him while the cameras rolled. "Why, you lily-livered pup. I'll—"

Tanger, ye hero, started circling him. I waited for my cue. It came when Tanger backed up and enveloped the camera eye for a split-second. I darted in swiftly and made with the fists.

Fast and furious action followed. I popped about his ears while his haymakers whizzed around mine. I was careful to pull my punches. The sound effects would help the illusion along, plus additional speeding up, and spliced-in close-ups of Tanger's pretty puss, so the movie-goers would think it was him all the time.

We played it up hot and heavy, like the freckle-faced kids in the front row like it, then I flattened the "bad guy," leaped on Tanger's pinto, and raised dust down the fake cowtown street.

The cameras ground on. This was a cheap quickie. Tanger wasn't wasting any film. Guns roared behind me. I thought I felt something zing past my ear. The thought made me grin. As if anybody would be using real bullets! But

when I ambled back for a retake, Kitty, who was the femme lead, stared at me with wide hazel eyes.

"Jack!" she cried. "You're bleeding!"

My ear did sting, so I put my hand up to it. It came back red. "Must of nicked it in the scrap," I smiled casually. After three years as tail gunner a little scratch like that doesn't seem anything to get excited about.

Tanger walked up just then. He looked pale under his bottled sun-tan. I noticed a blood vessel in his temple hopping.

"Come on over to the dispensary, pal," he said. "I'll touch it up for you."

I FOLLOWED him into the little studio dispensary, wondering what was up. Why was Tanger calling me pal, all of a sudden, when everybody on the lot knew Kitty had tossed him over for me?

We looked a little like brothers, dressed alike in the same flashy Western breeches and boots. Mine were a little roughed up after a hard day's shooting, and my face didn't need fake tan. It was browned permanently by South Pacific trade winds. The lines around my eyes and mouth didn't get there from cutting up around Hollywood spots.

"Listen, Kelley," Tanger said, booting the door shut behind us, "you didn't nick yourself fighting. A live bullet did that!"

I examined it critically in the mirror. Could be. "What makes you think so?" I asked.

"I saw the puff of smoke from the harness shop window. I ran around fast as I could, behind. I got just a glimpse of the man who shot you."

"What'd he look like?"

"Couldn't see his face because he wore a black mask."

"Mask?"

"Yeah. Don't you get it, Kelley? Both you and I—and Rennagan too, when he's pulling a trick—wear a 'masked rider' get-up in the picture. Another masked rider floating around the lot wouldn't excite any comment!"

I winced as he painted up my scratch and taped it. "Smart guy," I whistled. "Now, who do you suppose wants me out of the way?"

Tanger shook his head.

"Not you. Me!"

"You?" I asked innocently. Offhand I could think of half a dozen reasons, all of them blonde.

Tanger's pretty face writhed. "I can't tell you what it's all about, Kelley, but believe me. I know. The man who's out to get me doesn't know I use a double. He doesn't know you. Now, here's what I want you to do . . ."

I saw it coming. I knew all along Tan-

ger had something up his sleeve when he brought me in here. I shrugged non-committally.

"You've got to do it, pal!" he insisted desperately. "It's important to the whole studio. Without me this picture will never be finished. If it isn't, no more K-T. He's out to get me. He's a cold-blooded killer. Will stop at nothing! You've just got to help me, pal!"

I sighed, facing him. "Just what do you want me to do about it?"

He slapped my shoulder, his face glowing with relief. "I knew you'd do it, pal!"

I winced. This pal stuff didn't set well with me. It was a lot different from the way Tanger acted when I first got back. Oh, well. That was because of Kitty. Tanger had been trying to convince her she ought to marry him ever since I left. From the way she, herself, had been acting, I wasn't sure he hadn't succeeded.

"Easy on the orchids," I murmured. "I haven't said I'd do anything yet."

The sore look that flashed in his eyes vanished quick-like. He put on a bland ingratiating tone.

"Nothing to it, Kelley. All I want is for you to pretend to be me for the next few days, until the picture's wrapped up. Live at my place in Beverly Hills. Go to the premiere tonight. Use my car and chauffeur. Why, it's a breeze!"

"I didn't much care for the breeze that bullet made fanning my ear," I reminded him.

"There's five grand in it," he said.

Funny how the mention of a nice round sum like five thousand dollars can change a guy's mind. Kitty and I could get married. I could buy in with Old Karpis at his movie horse-trainer ranch out in the Valley, as I'd always wanted. As Tanger said, three years of it had made me rather immune to the smell of danger.

I said, "Yes."

THE night was typical Hollywood. The heat of the day had cooled down considerably. The sky had shaded down to a deep rich cobalt. I sat back luxuriously in Tanger's smooth limousine, wearing his best tux and smoking one of his best cigars, while Jim, his chauffeur, sent the hack spinning down the Sunset Strip out of Beverly Hills, then veering onto Hollywood Boulevard toward the nest of fanning arc-lights that stabbed their way prettily toward the stars.

Hollywood was doing itself proud at this big-time premiere. As top-kick of K-T, it was Tanger's duty to put in an

appearance. Tonight, with my face deftly made up, I was Tanger. He himself would come, slip in with the general public.

Jim braked the car smoothly in front of the mobbed entrance canopy, which was flanked on either side by bleacher seats that had been rigged up for the occasion. With hundreds of movie fans' eyes drilling me as they babbled their criticisms, I stepped down the brightly lit carpeting.

Then I saw Kitty. She was breathtaking in a knockout of a blue evening dress with silver sequins. I forgot I was putting on an act and hurried up to her.

"Hello."

"Why, Kirk!" I took her arm, then noticed her staring at the neat square of tape on my ear.

"Why, you're not—"

I shushed her quickly, and we went in. During the show I spent my time trying to dope out this deal. I hadn't had a good chance to talk to Kitty since I got back, with Tanger monopolizing her, and had hoped to later. Somehow, in the mob, I lost track of her. Then a couple reporters buttonholed me. I had to lam out before one of them found out I wasn't really Tanger.

I went back to the car. It was parked around the corner on a shady little side-street, as I had instructed. That's one thing about Hollywood. Two blocks off the main drag and you might be in some quiet little hamlet.

"Okay, Jim," I said, hopping in. "Let's go."

The chauffeur's cap ahead of me nodded, and we were off, suddenly. I happened to glance in the mirror over the chauffeur's head. "Hey, you're not Jim!" I yelled. "Who—"

He flashed a pistol, managing to keep his eyes on the road and on me in the little mirror as we swerved around a corner on two wheels and started east up into the Hollywoodland hills.

"Sit still, Tanger!" he snapped roughly. "This is where you get took!"

I DIDN'T bother to disabuse him of the idea that I was Tanger. I was worried about his driving. It was as if he had suddenly gone nuts. He took those hair-pin turns on two wheels. All I could see were his eyes and a rough pan of make-up. He was a bad actor, all right.

I lit a cigarette and sat back. The long car hurtled upward through the brilliant night, then suddenly braked at the brink of a five-hundred-foot drop. It was a lonely scrubby stretch, with the city spread out below like a jewelled pattern. He leaped out, flung open my door, showing his gun in my face. "All right, this-

eler," he snapped. "This is the end of the line." He might be a ham-actor, as I decided, but he wasn't acting now. This was the real McCoy.

I grinned back at him impishly. "Take it slow," I soothed. Then I jumped.

The impact of my sudden lunge sent him reeling back a step, with a grunt of surprise. His gun flung lead between my crooked elbow and my midriff. I could feel death tickle my ribs with the end of his scythe. I put everything I got into a swift uppercut. His head snapped back. My other fist cracked down on his gun-hand, sent the roscoe flying off into all those spangled lights, into oblivion.

With a snarl he was out of his spin and on me. His fingers reached for my throat. Then we were waltzing dreamily on the graveled edge of that cliff. I had his wrists and was trying to pin them back. He shook loose and started slugging and gouging. He was no mean shakes. He knew a thing or two, must have learned it from the Japs, it was that dirty.

He faked, as if I'd hit him too low. I fell for it. In the second I relaxed his fist came up. Everything swam around me. Or maybe it was me who was swimming, going around and round on the black wall of the hell-deep whirlpool. Above me hung an ugly paint-smear puss.

I grabbed out at him feebly, yanked. He moved back, but I caught his shirt. Buttons scattered. Then I went down into that whirlpool, with a faint faraway sound like a siren screaming—or maybe a girl.

But there was one shred left of my shattered consciousness. One chunk of knowledge that stayed with me through the aeons of bad dreams that followed. It was the sight of the slugger's swirling black chest—and of a triangular red mole on his throat, on the lower part of his left breastbone.

THE feel of soft hands on my forehead helped me out of it. It was nice. Pain shot through me in seven directions, but those cool hands helped a lot. When I opened my peepers, relief rolled over me in a tidal wave. I wasn't in some nasty old Jap prison camp; I was in Kitty Riley's apartment. She was looking down at me with sorry, anxious eyes.

"What gives?" I wondered, with a low groan.

"Easy, soldier," she soothed me, in that low husky voice of hers. "You've had quite a time for yourself."

I remembered everything. I sat up quickly. "What happened?" I demanded, feasting my eyes on her soft taffy ringlets and wide kissable lips.

"We were at the premiere, remember?"

"Sure. I lost you in the mob. Go on."

"Well, I bumped into Kirk. He yanked me out of a side door with him." Her voice was like dripping honey. "I had my coupé. Kirk offered to drive me home, and on the way I noticed your car. The driver seemed to be hopped up, so I insisted that we follow you. Of course my jalopy can't keep up to Kirk's limousine, which you were in, so we lagged behind, making those hills the best we could. We reached you just as you went into your tailspin."

"What about the pug?"

"Got away. Jumped in the car and beat it. As I said," she smiled, "my little coupé is no match for that big bus."

"What happened to Jim?"

"Kirk called me a few minutes ago to see if you had come out of it yet. It seems Jim got a message, ostensibly from his boss, telling him to leave the car and hurry home."

I nodded, scowling. "So Jim went, and my would-be killer took his place. Did you notify the cops?"

Kitty shook her shiny curls. "Kirk said no. He looked you over. Said you would be okay, and wanted it hushed up. It all has to do with whoever he's afraid of."

"Got any ideas about that?" I asked casually, lighting a cigarette.

"No-o." She looked thoughtful. "Wait. Yes, I have. You know Mocardai?"

"The gambling house king? I've heard of him. He's a nice character to cross."

"Kirk owes him money. A lot of money."

I tried my legs and found I could stand up, if a little shakily. "Jack," Kitty said, in a low different voice, "why don't you go away?"

"What for?"

"I—I don't know what this is all about, exactly, but why stick your neck out?"

I eyed her carefully. She looked sincere enough, but then, Kitty's quite an actress. On a hunch I asked, "What's about the studio?"

"In a pretty bad way, Jack," she wagged her blonde head. "Seems as if nobody will take a chance on Kirk Tanger, since your Uncle King died. It's all rather odd." She put her soft hand on my arm.

"Jack, I've always thought you got a raw deal. King meant to leave his half of K-T to you."

I smiled crookedly. "That was before I enlisted. King's doctor could have kept me out, he thought. I couldn't see it that way at all. You know King. As long as you did things his way everything was fine. The minute you crossed him he dropped you like a hot grenade. Tanger

stayed. I didn't. That's the whole story in a nutshell."

Kitty looked so genuinely sorry about it that I planted a kiss square on her wide lips. It tasted wonderful, but I still wasn't sure. "Good-bye," I told her and scrambled.

FOUR hours I slept, then went out to the studio. It was a good half hour before shooting time. Contrary to propaganda, a star's day starts real early and lasts real late sometimes. With a quickie Western like this one, it was even tougher. Tanger was shooting it on a shoe-string, and a frayed one at that.

I found out from the gateman that Tanger's office was vacant, so I slipped in the back way. I used one of my uncle's keys which I had found among his personal effects. I left the blinds down while I went over the joint. Since Tanger wasn't going to let me in on his little secret I was going to probe it out for myself. If I was going to continue dodging bullets, I was going to know why. Furthermore, as Kitty hinted, there was something mighty funny going on at K-T.

I saw that one of the desks had been taken out. A single big mahogany affair filled the center of Tanger's private office. I tried the drawers first. Nothing unusual. Then I turned my attention to the metal wall cabinets. At first I found nothing there, either, until I found a green strongbox tucked way down in at the bottom. It was heavy so I set it down on the floor. The lock was a good one, but I remembered King's key ring and tried them, one by one.

On my knees by it, I flung the cover back and combed through its contents. I whistled when I found it. The envelope was marked, *Last Will and Testament. Herbert J. King.*

My uncle. It was dated July 8th, just three days before he died. I broke the seal and started reading it.

"I, Herbert J. King, being of sound mind and—"

I heard the back door snap shut softly behind me. I whirled in time to catch just a glimpse of a black shadow wearing a mask. Before I could get to my feet he lunged, pounced on me like a panther. My head hit a corner of the cabinet. For a few seconds all I saw were stars. When I came out of it he had vanished out of the back door, the envelope and will along with him.

I sprang after him, muttering a few choice words I had picked up in New Guinea. I flung open the door in time to see Kirk Tanger striding bare-headed toward the office, dressed in cowboy togs, his spurs jingling.

He looked surprised to see me coming out of the back door of his private office, but only smiled amiably. "Waiting to see me, Kelley?" he asked.

"Yeah." I watched him narrowly. "I want some information."

He smiled that famous smile. "I get it, Kelley. Since tangling with a gunman last night, you figure it's time I let you in on what it's all about. Eh, pal?"

I just nodded.

"Well, pal, I was on my way to find you. It's like this. I ran up a sizable gambling debt with Mocardai, and he doesn't like waiting."

"And he decided to take it out of your hide?"

"That's it," Tanger nodded. "Last night I got him to call off his hounds. I convinced him that I can settle up as soon as this picture is finished, which will be in a few days. He's willing to wait."

All nice and smooth, but it didn't set well in my craw. It matched what Kitty had told me last night, but that just put her in the shade alongside Tanger. Well, maybe you couldn't blame a girl for changing her mind about a guy, once she found out he was not going to inherit half a movie studio. Just suppose, for instance, that Kitty hadn't just "happened" to follow me last night. Suppose Tanger wasn't with her at all. Suppose that he—

That did it. The rising tide of anger inside me swept up into my brain. I made a quick grab at Tanger's silk collar.

"What goes on?" he grinned, good-naturedly.

"Nothing," I mumbled. "Nothing at all."

I walked away fast, stiff-legged. I was wrong. Dead wrong. There was no triangular red mole on Tanger's chest. No mole of any kind.

TODAY'S takes were to be some of the last big scenes. All the location shots were completed, processed and ready for cutting in the lab, having been filmed the week before up in the Sherwood Lake country.

There was the usual barroom free-for-all, with the usual collapsing chairs and bottles busted over heads. It played havoc with the flimsy set, making it unlikely that it would stand up under another such brawl or even a retake.

Then Connor, the director, barked out orders for the final to-the-death battle between Lank Rennagan, the heavy lead, and the hero. In the eyes of the public, Kirk Tanger. Actually me. Tanger wouldn't dream of risking that pretty face of his before the cameras, any more

than he would risk it in real life. Or would he, I wondered, if the stakes were high enough. A couple of telephone calls had told me a lot that I hadn't known before, and was never intended to know.

Connor's heavy voice bawled instructions. Mopping his bald dome that glinted under the heavy lights, he finished, "Ad-lib it. But make it good! We don't want to have any retakes! Can't afford it! Make it real!"

Rennagan grinned at me wolfishly. There was an odd gleam in his eyes, but it didn't really register until a little later.

The cameras rolled. Rennagan came at me, mugging ferociously. I slipped under his lunge and landed a make-believe punch on his jaw. His head went back and he sprawled on the floor. Then he was up again and at me. We clinched.

Some of his slugs landed hard, but it can't be entirely faked. I thought nothing of it until his hairy arm grabbed me suddenly and yanked me down behind the bar.

It happened fast. His left hand seized my throat and forced me flat against the floor. Then he grabbed a half-smashed bottle, a real one.

I got a glimpse of his hairy chest. There was a red mole on it. A triangular red mole. So now I knew! Rennagan was the one I had tangled with last night. He was going to finish the job now!

Studio accidents do happen. He'd purposely got me behind the bar, out of camera range, so he could make it look like that. "This time you'll stay out!" he whispered. I saw the ragged edge of glass swing down at me.

Sweating blood, I yanked to one side in time, swung a roundhouse into his solar plexus. He gave a howl of anguish and let the bottle drop. My boot went out into his belt, and sent him flying into the open.

I leaped after him. Fury was upon me. I forgot all about cameras and movies. All I knew was that Rennagan had tried to kill me, at least twice. I plastered my fists all over his greasy pan. I hit him over and over again, until I was out of wind. Then, as he sagged, I cracked out once more, with all my weight behind it. He dropped without a sound.

"Bravo!" Connor applauded behind me as the cameras stopped. "Best scrap I've directed in fifteen years!"

I SWAYED there a moment, getting back my wind. Ignoring Connor's orchids, I walked up to Kirk Tanger, who was standing off to one side with Kitty.

"He meant to kill you!" Kitty cried tremulously. "I saw it in his eyes!"

"Yeah," I said, stroking my cut knuckles. My eyes were on Tanger. He was pale. The smile on his pan looked lopsided.

"Nonsense!" he said, trying to laugh it off. "Why Rannagan's the best heavy on the lot!"

"That why you picked him to get rid of me last night?" I demanded.

"W-What—"

"Don't you think it's about time you quit play-acting? You're not that good!"

He drew himself up. "I don't know what you mean, Kelley." He started to stalk away, insulted. I stuck out my arm and twirled him around so I could look him square in the face.

"You milked your way into Uncle King's favors ever since he picked you up on the street and brought you to K-T. When you became a star, you bought in. When I enlisted, and you yellow-bellied your way into a 4-F classification, you put on the pressure. You all but kissed his boots.

"You knew he had a bad heart. So when he told you about the new will he made, in my favor, you decided both he and I had to die. In his case it was easy. A drop of something in his heart medicine would do the trick.

"You hid the new will. You didn't dare destroy it, because there was a witness, King's valet. So you paid him off and got him to leave town. When I got back, you faked up this gag about somebody who was after you, and offered me five grand to take your place in order to make my death look completely accidental. You hired Rannagan to do your dirty work. But he bungled the job last night, so you told him to finish it today.

"You knew I found that will in your office, because *you* were the masked character who stepped in on me. You knocked me down and ran out, tucked the will under your shirt and pulled off your mask, then came back, pretending you had just got there!"

Tanger's lips twitched. "You can't prove any of this!" he retorted.

"No? I checked the time you really came in the lot gate with the gateman. It matched. I found out from King's valet's mother where he had gone. I called him long distance. When I told him what I suspected, he came clean, told me all he knew about the new will, dispossessing you and making me controlling owner of K-T. Now, hand it over!"

"I—I haven't got it!" Tanger cried. "I burned it! I mean—"

"Oh, no, you didn't!" Kitty told him, her eyes blazing with disgust. "I met

(Continued on page 55)

The Ironclad Alibi

By Gunnison Steele

Nick Ryan could prove he wasn't the murderer being sought for—prove it with the finality of the grave.



NICK RYAN tossed aside the magazine he'd been reading by the dingy light of a bulb overhead. But he didn't get up from the cot, as Sheriff Capehart came along the shadowy corridor that led back to the cell block. Nick was a

slim, dark young man with sly features. He was openly contemptuous of everybody in his home town of Piney Point.

Sheriff Capehart, a heavy, middle-aged man with phlegmatic grey eyes, came up close to the bars and stood looking at Nick.

Grinning slyly, Nick asked, "You come to turn me loose, sheriff?"

"No, I didn't," grunted the sheriff. "I came to ask if you want to confess killin' my brother Sam before I go to bed."

"Surely you don't think I'd kill anybody!"

"I sure do! You hid in Sam's hardware and jewelry store until after he'd closed and was working on his books. You made him open his safe, cleaned out from it all the watches and rings and money and suchlike, then you killed him. You killed him, because he knew who you were."

Nick looked grieved. "Sheriff, you make me feel bad. Here I am, a hometown boy who went off to the big city and made good. Then, when I come back to visit my poor old father, you throw me in the clink and accuse me of murder. Why, you knew me when I was a kid—"

"That's just it—a thievin', window-breaking alley rat! And I've heard a lot of worse things about you since you went off to Pittsfield. Mixed up with Sledge Mangrum's bunch up there, ain't you? And you didn't come home on a visit—you come to rob somebody!"

"What makes you think I killed Sam Capehart?"

"Because you'd been hangin' about his store for the last couple of days. You were seen to go into the store just a

little while before he closed the day he was killed."

"I went out again by the back door. I could prove that by your brother Sam, if he wasn't dead." There was open mockery in Nick's laugh. "Anyway, I've got an air-tight alibi. The night Sam Capehart was killed and robbed; I was at home all night. That's a pretty hot alibi, ain't it? My own father's word?"

The sheriff growled, "Tebe Ryan's a lazy, booze-swillin' thief and always was! He'd sooner lie than tell the truth."

"But it'd carry weight in court. Maybe I killed Sam Capehart, Sheriff, but you've got no proof and you know it. That lawyer I brought down from Pittsfield is pretty slick. He says that if you don't produce some evidence, you can't hold me any longer than tomorrow."

The sheriff sighed. "Looks like he's right. I know you killed poor Sam, but I can't prove it. Reckon I'll—"

"You'll stay still, if you want to live!" a cold voice said.

Sheriff Capehart turned and looked surprisedly at the two men who had stepped from the shadowy corridor behind him. One was chunky and dark, the other tall, with pale eyes and a hooked nose. They had wicked-looking automatics in their hands.

The sheriff said belligerently, "What's this? What're you two doin' here? Don't you know I'm the sheriff?"

"Sure, we know it," snapped the tall man. He shoved the sheriff back into the corridor. "Get up front, Fatty!"

Nick Ryan got up from the cot. He could see the two shoving Sheriff Capehart along the corridor. He heard the sheriff protest shrilly, "Hold on here! I'm the law—you can't—" He saw the automatic in the tall man's hand rise and fall, saw the sheriff wilt down to the floor and lie there still.

The two came back to the cell block. The tall man said, "Get the keys, Blackie." The dark man took a ring holding several keys from a nail on the wall. He opened Nick's cell door.

"All right, Nick," the pale-eyed man said coldly. "Get your hat."

Nick was puzzled. He didn't know these two. He backed to the cot and sat down.

"I'll sit this one out," he said. "That dumb sheriff's got nothin' on me. I've got a hot alibi. I'd be a sap to break out of here, when I'll be out legally in twenty-four hours anyway. I'm not goin' anywhere."

"That's what you think, smart aleck!" The tall man slapped Nick, hard, caught him by the shoulder and flung him toward the cell door. "Step out, fast!"

Nick didn't argue any more. He didn't know yet what cooked, but he knew that these two weren't here as friends, as he had at first thought. The men with the guns were close behind him as he went along the corridor, stepped over the sheriff's still form, went through the sheriff's office at the front of the one-story brick building and onto the street. The street was deserted, for it was after midnight and only dimly lighted.

A DARK sedan was drawn up at the curb half a block away. Blackie slid under the wheel, the tall man got in the back seat with Nick. The automatic was still in his hand. Blackie started the engine.

"Which way, Jake?" he asked.

"Straight for Pittsfield," Jake said. "We're safe."

The sedan moved out of town and at a moderate speed northward along the highway. Nobody spoke for a couple of miles.

Then Nick said angrily, "Would you mind telling me what the hell this is all about?"

"Sledge wants to see you," Jake said briefly. "He heard you were in that hick jail. He sent us to get you."

"Sledge Mangrum? What's he want to see me about?"

"You know what about. It was a crazy thing, Nick, killing Sledge's kid brother Joe."

"Somebody's crazy, all right! But if somebody killed Joe Mangrum, it wasn't me."

"Sledge thinks different. He knows you and Joe had some trouble over a chick, knows you threatened to kill the kid. So when Joe was found in a back room of Marty's place with a blade in his gullet—with Marty swearing you and Joe had come in together—Sledge started looking for you. It gave me the creeps, hearing some of the things Sledge swore he'd do to you."

Nick was quiet a moment, feeling cold and leaden in his stomach. He wasn't really on the inside of Sledge Mangrum's gang, only on the fringe, because Sledge had turned thumbs down on him. He

knew little about Big Sledge, but he'd heard things that made his insides curl up, about what Sledge did to those he didn't like. He knew Sledge's kid brother Joe, a wicked, strutting little rat. They'd fought over a girl one night.

He'd heard that Sledge Mangrum loved only one thing on earth—that vicious, swaggering kid brother of his.

"Look," Nick said. "When did Joe get it?"

"Last Monday night, about midnight."

"Then I can prove I didn't do it. I was here, in Piney Point, last Monday midnight!"

"Maybe. In a jail cell?"

"No, that wasn't till Tuesday. I was—"

Nick stopped. At midnight Monday he had been in Sam Capehart's store. It was just about then that he'd killed a man.

The tires whined on the pavement. The pines on each side of the highway were dark and still.

Blackie said over his shoulder, "Remember what Sledge done to Mack Parker the time Mack double-crossed him? Mack's mind never was right after that. They had to put him away."

Nick blurted, "Damn it, didn't I say I didn't kill Joe?"

"Tell that to Sledge," Jake murmured. "But it'll take more than just your word, or your old man's, to make him believe it."

"What if I could prove I was two hundred miles from Pittsfield at midnight Monday?"

"That'd be fine for you, but I don't think you can."

"Sure, I can," Nick said eagerly. "You know why I was in the can?"

"We know all about it. So what?"

"You know what time Sam Capehart was killed and robbed?"

"About midnight, they claim, on Monday—"

"It was me that pulled that job! I couldn't have done that, and killed Joe Mangrum in Pittsfield at the same time, could I?"

Blackie laughed. "No soap, Nick. We know that dumb sheriff just picked you up on suspicion. You didn't croak old Capehart."

"I did, I tell you! If I showed you the loot—the watches and rings and stuff—that would prove it, wouldn't it?"

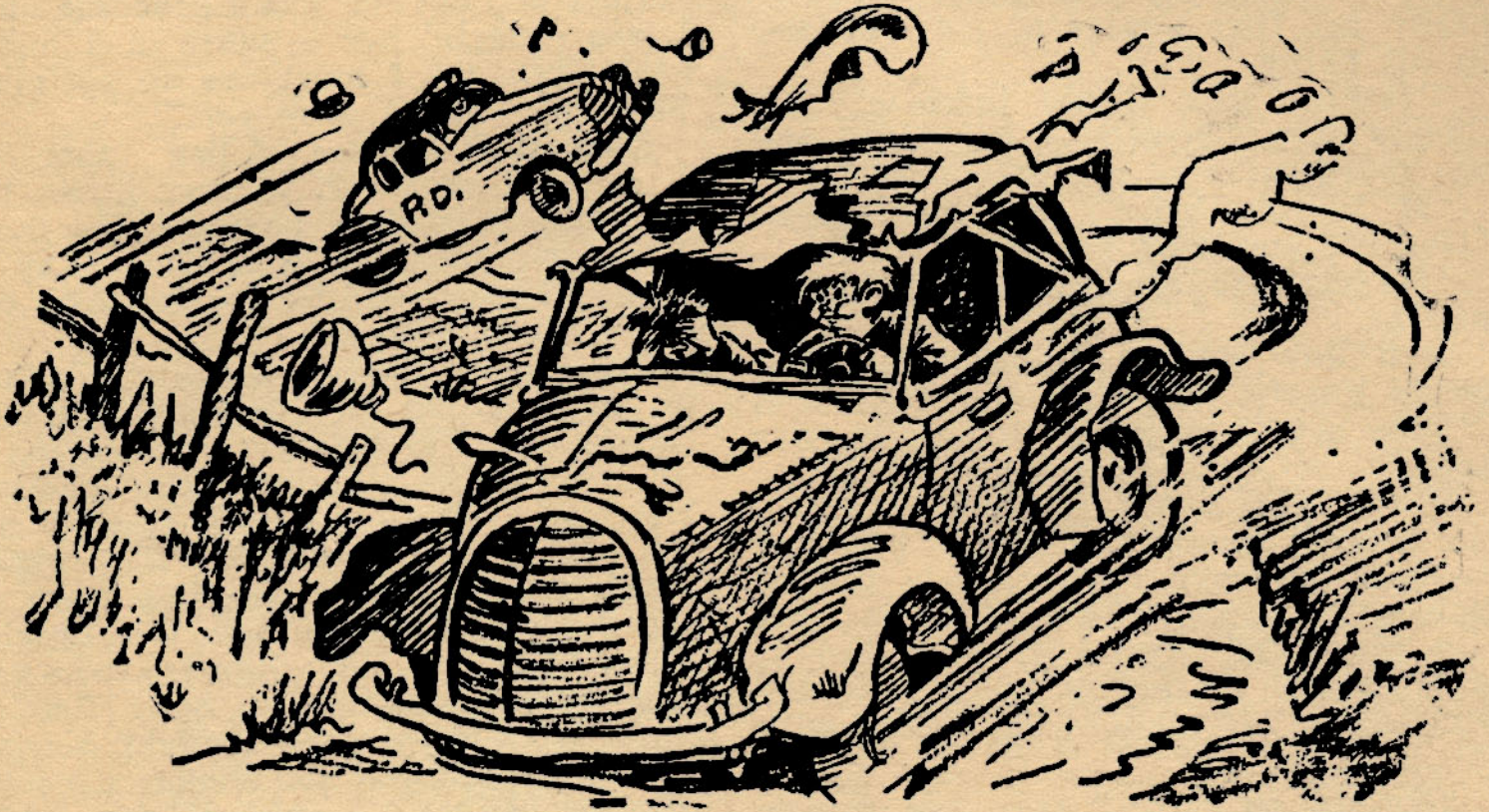
Jake said slowly, "Nick, you're a sneaky, blood-thirsty little rat. But you show me that and I'll tell Sledge you didn't kill Joe."

Nick took a deep breath of relief. "A couple of miles ahead a gravel road turns off to the left into the woods. Follow it,

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The Con Is Green

"Dizzy Duo" Yarn



By Joe Archibald

Though Snooty Piper, the Beantown crimehound, usually spots the hot-seat evidence first, this time he's only got spots before his eyes. Yet that wacky reporter can even find a way to line up those visual aberrations to put a killer on the spot.

FOR many moons the Boston cops have wondered why Snooty Piper finds out about murders the same time they do. If you know the crackpot, there is nothing mysterious about it. It seems that Snooty has something on most newspaper reporters—little things like two-timing the little woman or playing poker when they should have been to a lodge. So it is not surprising to me that Snooty gets the news that a character named Bosco the Blimp gets knocked off hardly before the remains begin to cool.

The Blimp left quite a record behind him as he was mixed up in more rackets than a tennis player. The gendarmes suspected him of being engaged in the business of retailing hot auto tires only a few minutes before a rough person laid him away for keeps.

We are in the Greek's when the word of the assassination reaches Snooty Pi-

per. He rushes out of the phone booth and yelps that he knows where there is a murder. Ten minutes later we are in an alley not far from the North Station, watching the appraiser of the violently departed brief the shell of Bosco the Blimp. Someone has bashed Bosco with something more than a swizzle stick. Rigor mortis is not far away.

"It was nice of you to phone me," Snooty says to a rather lumpy character.

"Oh, yeah?" the citizen replies. "Some-day something will happen to you, fish-face, even worst than what you see here."

"That I hope to see," I snap. The irate one is a cop. He was on his way home and was taking a shortcut via an alley when he fell over the stiff. "If you throw the party and charge two bucks admission you will clean up five grand, Snooty is that popular."

"What goes on here?" a voice booms

out. It is Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy, who puts down he is a detective on questionnaires. We are all quite sure in Boston that Iron Jaw's forebears, and not so far back, used to pick up peanuts with their trunks. One of his shoes would make a nice cowboy saddle, and you could easily get four quarts of fish chowder in his derby.

"Nothing that should interest you," Snooty says. "Somebody got killed and the murderer was absent-minded."

"It is you, hah?" Iron Jaw snaps. "How did you know he was?"

"He forget to leave you a clue," Snooty needles.

Iron Jaw whips off his derby and bangs Snooty just over the right eye.

"You should keep your tongue in your head," I says without much sympathy.

"Then who would lick my stamps?" the halfwit counters. I ignore him and go back to looking at what is left of Bosco the Blimp. The cops do not find any pieces of crystal from a broken watch and no footprints. It looks like the killer-diller had planned the rubout with much mental toil.

"Nothin' to go on," Iron Jaw gripes. "I wish for oncet I could have a murder like in the movies. Piper, have you spotted anythin', huh? You tell me, or I will tear off your arm and wrap it around your tonsils."

"If I give you the murderer's fingerprint, you would find that there was another character in the world with the same Bertillon smudges, you are that far back of the eight ball," Snooty opines.

"Leave him alone, Snooty," I says. "You would torment a moose caught in a cranberry bog. I do not see as we can be of much help here. Bosco goes to the city icebox. The John Laws will promise an arrest within twenty-four hours, and Iron Jaw will pinch somebody who was eighty miles away at the time. This is like a movie where I came in."

Even Snooty Piper does not pick up a clue, so the M.D. orders Bosco to be filed away in the stiff warehouse.

"Let's go to the Greek's," Snooty says.

WHEN we get to our favorite tavern and order two beers. Snooty shows me a slip of paper. "I been learnin' sleight-of-hand out of a book, nights, Scoop," he explains, blinking like an owl caught suddenly in a night-club spotlight.

"I have been noticing of late," I remark, "that you are having a little trouble with your glimmers, Snooty. You should see a mortician."

"I must admit the old peepers are not up to snuff," Snooty says. "There are

spots in front of them and not ten spots. Maybe I need tri-focals."

"It is from ogling every dame until she is out of sight," I tell him.

"I am a little scared," he says. "I whistled to one last night, Scoop, and did not find out she was a grandma until I was orderin' her a snort in a bistro near Tremont. I must see an optimist. But read what I gave you."

I do. It is a piece of paper torn out of a ruled notebook. It says Bosco the Blimp acknowledges payment for three dozen doughnuts. It looks quite fishy to me as whoever paid forty-seven fifty per for a dozen sinkers?

"It is quite evident Bosco was mixed up in that hot tire business, Scoop," Snooty says. "Wouldn't it be a caution if we could break up that black market? We would also know who cleaned out the warehouse in Chelsea that night, which is more than the cops know at the moment. Some gee who was in with Bosco found out the rough boy was getting more than his cut, huh? Remind me to buy some eyewash tonight, Scoop."

"I would suggest you change the color of your clothes," I sniff. "These awful bilious green suits are murdering your eyesight. They would give a hawk astigmatism."

"I'll thank you to keep your opinions to yourself, Scoop Binney," he says in quite a huff. "I know taste in clothes."

"You must always have the taste of limes in your mouth, then," I says.

We are still in the Greek's listening to a corny radio comic, when a fellow traveler, who works on the *Boston Morning Call*, arrives. This legman says Iron Jaw has arrested a citizen known as Sniggy Welp for the unlawful extermination of Bosco the Blimp and has a witness to help send Sniggy off to the state rotisserie.

"Well, you guys will have to admit the big slob had a break comin'," the legman says, thanking us for a beer we didn't order for him. "It seems O'Shaughnessy found this character, Dinsmore Smooch, sitting on the steps of the precinct house on Columbus not more than an hour ago. He tells the gland case that he was sleeping off a nifty hangover in that alley, when he wakes up and sees Sniggy conk Bosco with a tire iron. He gets a gander at the character just as he passes by a lighted window in the alley. He takes a look at the cadaver, gets scared and runs home. Then he comes back to tell the police."

"It is amazing detecting on the big beast's part, isn't it, Scoop?" Snooty snorts. "I have an idea Sniggy has pals. Iron Jaw better call out some vet-

erans of Saipan and Okinawa to escort this Smooch person about the Hub."

"The D.A. knows about such things," I sniff. "Let's go to the clink and listen to the big mental deficit crew."

Iron Jaw is in the back room passing out nickel cigars when we arrive. "Sure, boys," O'Shaughnessy says. "You stick aroun' this police work as long as me, an' you'll git so's you can smell a murderer out in five minutes. Nothin' but elemental is all an'—"

"Congratulations," Snooty says to the massive citizen. "It is a good thing we have stewpots in Boston, huh? Supposin' Smooch had decided to lick the D. T.'s on the Common instead? If you ever arrested somebody by just usin' your own brain, then the Nazis took Stalingrad and are putting dynamite under the Charles River Bridge."

We find out that Bosco the Blimp was about to go straight when Sniggy removed him from the voting list. For who comes in while we are there but a doll who looks more than vaguely familiar to us. Sure enough, she identifies herself as Mamie Slognecker, alias Maggie the Claw. Mamie's title as champion shop-lifter of the Hub has never been challenged. There are cops that say Mamie once stole an electric icebox out of Graymond's in broad daylight. She is very weepy over Bosco's departure.

"We was both goin' to reform, yeah," Mamie sniffles. "Bosco tol' Sniggy an' the other punks about it. Me an' Bosco fell in love bad an' was gittin' ready to lam out an' start legit in some other town. Anyways we was goin' to give it a try. Jus' let me git me hooks on that Sniggy. He'll look like he spent a night in a eagle's nest where the eagle just had young."

"Cripes, jus' when I wanted to git to be a honest dame. The only break I'll ever git will be in my clavicle. Yeah, Bosco was in the tire-snitchin' business, but he never told me who was in with him. Bosco was a honorable gee an' had scruples. He said after we was married an' was far away, he would give me the lowdown on the racket. I ain't talkin'."

"An' the Marines ain't fightin'," Snooty says. "Let me guess, Babe. Sniggy did not want Bosco to go legit, knowin' as much as he did. He figured Bosco would whisper things in your ears, hah?"

"Who is this funny mug?" Mamie asks. "I never seen a worse thing while I was spiffed."

"Very funny," Snooty says. "The cops had better furnish this Dinsmore Smooch with a Sherman tank and eight squad cars if we want to see justice done. Is there some boric acid in the joint? My

eyes feel like there was hives on them. Let's go to a drug store, Scoop."

IT IS all in the papers the next day about Iron Jaw producing a star witness for the state. Snooty is very nettled, and not just in the eyes. He washes his peepers out with some sort of pale green liquid he bought in a drugstore. It is a safe bet that if he ever wore a diamond, it would be green. I am very startled, to say the least, when he suddenly takes out a pair of cheaters and adjusts them. They are a dirty yellow color.

"That does not make sense, any more than if I'd just seen a big bull lie down and purr at the sight of a suit of red flannels," I says, aghast.

"The optimist says it must be from my looking at green so much, Scoop. He says if my eyes ain't cured to try an' wear mustard-colored suits. I will die first."

"Let's go down and see if we are still employed," I suggest. "We work at the *Evening Star*, remember?"

"I guess we must," Snooty sighs. "You know, Scoop, if Dogface ever gave blood they used it to marinate herrings. Oh, I forgot to tell you. I stopped by at the office and learned that we was fired. Oh, boy, now we can go back to bed. It is lucky I remembered, huh?"

Three days later we run into Dinsmore Smooch making some purchases in Graymond's. There is a very bulky plain-clothes man with him. We recognize him as Gumshoe Gratz, a very solid citizen who makes a living convoying citizens who are needed by the law.

"How does it feel to be famous, Mr. Smooch?" Snooty asks.

"Scram, you goon," Gratz snaps. "I ain't lettin' even me own mother git within ten feet of this baby. He's hot as a ten-cent pistol that nobody knew was loaded."

"Yep, I feel pretty important," Smooch says, and bites the end off a cigar. "I might git out my memoirs after."

"Stick with Gratz," I cuts in. "Or a memory won't do you no good."

"Yep, boys, my bodyguard calls for me every mornin' an' I lock myself in when he leaves me at night an'—"

"I don't never leave him," Gratz snaps. "I sleep right under his winder. That Sniggy ain't goin' to beat this rap."

"Well," Snooty says, and that is all he says. There are two disagreeable sounds like slapping a leather glove against a riding boot. The derby on Gratz's noggin spins around. Something whisks a cigarette right out of my kisser, just as if rationing was not bad enough.

Gratz starts shooting. Me and Snooty dive into the back of a moving van which is at the curb. As we ride away, we see that Gumshoe is sitting on Dinsmore and emptying his Roscoe.

"Going places with you," I snap at Snooty, "is very healthy, like bathing in a leper's pool. If a shooting star should fall tonight, I hope you are two miles away from me. Let's go into a subway where it is safe."

It happens two days later. We get the tip-off that Dinsmore Smooch is in an empty lot in Natick, Mass., near a heap of defunct pre-war jalopies. Gumshoe Gratz is taken to the healing hacienda with a lump on his pate as big as Iron Jaw's fist.

We hurry over to the mortuary where the mortal remains of Smooch will repose until the final rites. Some characters have put two lead slugs into Smooch's vital organs. It looks very much as if Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy has got to go back and prove things against Sniggy from scratch.

"Everything happens to that big lout," Snooty says. "I catch myself feeling so sorry for him at times. Shall we go over and console him?"

"No thanks," I says flatly. "I would rather go over to the Franklin Park Zoo and ask a keeper could I help feed the cobras this aft. Well, well, we have two assassinations and hardly a smidge of evidence. You are slippin', Snooty. It is your peepers failing you."

"I'll get back on the beam," Snooty says.

We find out later how they got to Dinsmore Smooch. It seems that Sniggy has some very astute pals. They waylaid Gumshoe Gratz on his way to pick up Dinsmore. They slugged Gumshoe, took his clothes and draped them over a rough boy who looked a lot like the bodyguard. This gee picked up Dinsmore on schedule and took him for a ride.

"You shouldn't trust nobody nowadays," Snooty says. "It is too bad Smooch was a little nearsighted or he might still be a mortal the same as you and me, Scoop. I hope these specks cure my trouble as anything could happen to me."

Well, it is like lightning striking in the same place twice, as what happens? There is also a witness to the rubout of Dinsmore Smooch. This citizen immediately gets in touch with the cops.

"Yeah," the witness says at headquarters with me and Snooty Piper taking notes. "I didn't git a look at the baby who picked him up, but he was drivin' a green sedan, the dirtiest lookin' green I ever saw. I bet it was a hot car and was sprayed. No auto painter ever

thought up such a color. I saw Smooch git in an' then draw back like he wasn't sure. The guy yanked him in and belted him over the pate. I run to help, but it was too late. I ain't geared up to a six-cylinder job."

"Ahh nuts!" Iron Jaw says and slams down his derby so the windows rattle. "I have a conviction in my pocket, and that lemonhead, Gratz, loses the works. Is it no wonder I can't git to amount to nothin'?"

"You practice a lot on bein' able to go nowhere," Snooty says. Iron Jaw is about to paste the heckler when I intervene. "Don't forget, Iron Jaw," I admonish, "there is quite a stiff fine for belting a citizen with blinders on."

Iron Jaw pulls his punch. Snooty is quite pleased. "I think I'll wear them all the time," he says.

"Send out the alarm," Iron Jaw trumpets. "Start the teletypes goin'. Call all gas stations an' everythin'. Look for a green car—the worst lookin' one anybody ever saw. Git busy, you dumb crumbs. Before the criminal sprays it over ag'in."

"There is no use of us botherin', Scoop," Snooty says. "If that car is of a peculiar shade of green, I'll spot it quick when I see it."

QUITE early the next A.M. I am walking along Washington Street and pick up a copy of the *Morning Post Mail*. It carries a story on the third page, about five sticks, about an arrest made by Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy. Iron Jaw has picked up a green sedan on Commonwealth Avenue and plucked the driver from the same. Iron Jaw has locked the citizen up as a suspect in the Smooch rubout. I run to a drug store and call Snooty Piper. Twenty minutes elapse before I wake up the zany.

"Look," I says. "Git your rompers on. Iron Jaw has pinched a citizen named Humbert Prawn who admits knowing Smooch and having threatened the deceased in front of witnesses. It seems this Prawn found out Smooch was smooching with his wife while he was in the Army. Hurry, Snooty!"

"Stay where you are. I'll be right over!" The crackpot hangs up before I can tell him where I am. I finally have to run to the Greek's where he can really find me. When we meet, we decide to take a chance Iron Jaw has not heard we have been cut loose from the *Evening Star*. We crash headquarters and are told Iron Jaw has Prawn on the grill.

"We will wait," Snooty says. "I bet Iron Jaw will lose the most gravy in the argument. He has never made nobody confess yet."

Iron Jaw emerges in due time. He looks like he has taken a shower without bothering to remove his clothes. He is saying things that stevedores would blush at.

"That punk!" the big lunkhead snaps. "I'll make his talk yet. Innercent, he says! He claims he was with his wife at breakfast when Smooch was snuffed. I called his ball and chain. She said he wasn't and anyway a wife couldn't testify against a husband an' to go jump in a millpond. Why do they make laws to help criminals an' murderers?"

"Also detectives," Snooty says. "You generally manage to put crime detection farther back than Adam. Look, the citizen threatened Smooch. He drove a green car, and he ain't got an alibi. What more you want to go on? There was traces of gore in the murder buggy?"

"Why—er—" Iron Jaw says. "I didn't figure—I mean any smart criminal would think of that an'—I better look."

"Oh, Scoop," Snooty sighs. "He is employed, while the likes of me is thawed out of a job that should be frozen in these times. Let's sit here and wait. This is more fun."

Soon Iron Jaw comes running in. "I got bloodstains!" he yelps quite triumphantly. "Now, I got him. Let me at that smart Alex! I told him I'd fix his wagon!"

Again Iron Jaw emerges. He is chewing his derby. "He had a nose bleed," he says. "Well, I'll prick him, git some blood an' prove it ain't his. Does that always work?"

"No," Snooty says. "Suppose two citizens have the same blood type like Smooch and Prawn?"

"That's right," Iron Jaw groans and bites off a thumbnail. "I wish scientific detective stories was real. Now, I am back where I started."

"Start swinging from your tail, then," Snooty quips. "Scoop, I can't stand no more of this."

"Neither can I," I says doubtfully. "Weren't you wrong about them blood types or were you? I would not put it past you to impede the course of justice just to spite Iron Jaw. I'll look it up an'—"

"If Iron Jaw arrested Prawn, Prawn didn't do it. That is logic. But I must rush and see my optimist, Scoop. I think my cheaters are doin' the trick all right. I wish I could git a lead on one or more of these slayings. All we know is Bosco was selling black market latex at quite a profit, a very disgraceful practice that Mr. Guppy would give his upper plate to know about. It is our only way to get employed again, Scoop, to apprise him of the facts in the case."

IT IS a rare feeling walking along the streets of Boston later with Snooty and not having somebody throw a shiv or a bullet where it will do a body the most good.

"Peaceful, ain't it, Snooty?" I remarks casually as we saunter down Huntington Ave. "Hear the birds sing, and see the babes wheeling the little squirts for a breath of air. It is good to be alive, huh?"

"Scoop! Look!" Snooty grabs me by the arm and points. I see only a jalopy pulling away from in front of a hotel. It is a very ducky shade of blue bordering on violet.

"So what?" I query. "I have heard that a few heaps are still in running order despite the war an'—what ails you?"

"Come on, Scoop!"

Before I can stop the crackpot and have a chance to make up my own mind, he is legging it for a coupé that stands in front of a nifty beanery. I jump inside the jalopy. Snooty yelps, "What a break, Scoop! The owner left the keys in it. I'll drive."

"Look, flathead, this is not your car. I will not sit here an' let you commit—"

"What did you say, Scoop?" Snooty yips as we turn a corner with shoes squealing like banshees with impacted wisdom teeth. "Somethin' about not sittin' there? You are at liberty to leave anytime you—"

"I can change my mind, huh?" I screech. "What are you chasin' that boiler for? It is not green!"

"What ails your eyes?" Snooty counters. "Of course it is green!"

"It is blue," I yelp.

"You are bein' silly as usual," Snooty tosses at me, then manages to miss a beverage truck only by the width of a drug store sandwich. "I wish people wouldn't hog the road, Scoop. There is no pep in this jalopy. It runs like—"

"Only seventy-two you are goin'," I says. "You have stolen an auto, and are bustin' speed records with it. If you dast to cross a state line which I know you will, the Feds will get you."

"You always was a pessimist, Scoop. I have a badge to prove I am enforcin' the law. I commanded the car which happens to lots of citizens as ask one who owns one. I'm catchin' up with that criminal car, Scoop!"

"Listen to me, Snooty! It is a blue car! It might be driven by a minister or maybe by the mayor," I howl. "What has got into you?"

"Ask me where I got the badge, Scoop?" Snooty asks as he goes over the brow of a hill without letting the wheels touch for at least five hundred yards. "That crook must be burnin' high octane."

If he was innocent, would he be trying to get away?"

"Iron Jaw will not find his badge when he gets home tonight," I answer. "Now for the second question— Look out!"

"I will not bother to take the curve," Snooty says. "I will cut across this lawn."

He sure does. We wash out a summer house, tear up a garden, and leave a fender and headlight near a big stone bird bath. We remove ten feet of very pretty privet hedge. When we are on a thoroughfare again, Snooty is very enthusiastic. "We gained half a block on the fiend, Scoop," he howls, and removes a bit of a rose trellis from his collar.

"It is a blue auto, you lemonhead!" I says. "I still can't understand why—"

Bang! Zi-i-ing!

"That was no tire blowout, or we'd be whistlin' at an angel right now, Scoop. That hole in the windshield was not made by a moth. Who is wrong now? You should have your eyes examined. Look, we will sideswipe him and push him off the road."

"You wouldn't, Snooty! No! Y-yeah, you would—oh, if I can just live through this, I guarantee you won't—"

THERE are more shots. A slug burns my right ear. Then we are abreast of the blue boiler. Snooty Piper swings the wheel to the right. I shut my eyes and think up what I will say to the bony character who has the ferrying concession on the Styx. There comes a terrible weird sound. Both jalopies lock horns and slide down an embankment into a swamp.

By a miracle nobody is hurt bad enough not to start a fight. I see a very compactly built gee throw a Betsy at Snooty, then climb out of the wreck armed with a very ugly looking tire iron. Snooty is up to his knees in water. His puppies are firmly set in gooey mud. Of course I will not stand by and see him killed in cold blood, although the temptation to do so is quite overwhelming.

"Help, Scoop! I am in quicksand!"

"Give me time," I says, my noggin spinning from quite an argument with the dashboard. "First, I must find a weapon."

I pick up a headlight and heave it, but miss. The rough boy climbs Snooty. He is quite a Judo expert and is making progress in breaking Snooty's neck just as I tickle him in the shortribs. The ugly boy yelps and laughs like a hyena and begs me to stop. I make a mistake and do so, then the three of us are locked in mortal combat. When it is over, Snooty has a different coat on. The criminal person has his head in the swamp like an ostrich ducking a process server.

I look at the wreck of the rough character's car and yelp, "I must apologize, Snooty. It is a green car!"

"You are delirious, Scoop. It is blue," Snooty says. "What are you doin' with my cheaters on?"

It is just what happened. "What do you know?" I remarked, and take them off. "Snooty, now the boiler is a blue one."

"Not now it ain't, Scoop," he says, getting his peepers back on. "Quick, ask me what day this is?"

"I am quite puzzled," I says. "Let's pull the bum out of the mud before he suffocates. After, we'll sit down an' figure this one out."

When we get the rough boy to dry land and sit on him, Snooty suddenly snaps his fingers. "Scoop, I got it. It is amazing to say the least. Why, it wouldn't happen ag'in in a million years. What color is made out of yellow and blue?"

"Green," I says, then stare at Snooty Piper. "Them dirty yellow glasses! You chase a blue car which looked green. Now, I have seen everythin'! What couldn't happen to you, outside of giving birth to triplets, huh?"

"Let's take him in, Scoop."

About an hour later a native comes along in a car. We flag him. Snooty flashes a badge, says he is an F.B.I., and orders the character to drive us to Boston. Which he does. There we find out that the dishonest person is a gorilla and ex-con by the name of Half Ton Tripeski, a very bad boy from South Boston, who has more than a couple of times been suspected of having removed various individuals from circulation.

Half Ton is still wearing Gumshoe Gratz's duds. Of course there is nothing left for him to do but take down his hair. He confesses all in the presence of the D.A., three assistant D.A.'s, Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy, and many policemen.

"Yeah," Half Ton admits, "I knocked off Smooch. Sniggy bumped Bosco The Blimp as he had five hundred more tires stashed in the warehouse. Sniggy wasn't takin' no chances Bosco would soften up as a married man. I still don't see how this funny lookin' haddock-puss figured I'd sprayed the green car blue. Aw, please tell me, huh?"

"Ask an optimist," Snooty says.

Half Ton gives the crackpot fifty, as he says what good is a bankroll where he is going. Snooty explains. Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy gets up and walks out like he has poured three quarts of Six Roses into his big fat stomach. Half Ton is mumbling like a hermit. The D.A. says he thinks he will lock up early and go on home as he feels a stroke coming on.

"Let's go to the Greek's," I sigh. "Then we will call at the *Evening Star*."

Homicide at the 5 @ 10

By Stewart Toland



The cost of Terry Grey's Japanese dagger had come high in battlefield blood. But though Terry brought it back to a hometown dime store, the second fee that sinister souvenir demanded was equally deadly dear.

TERRY GREY counted the new gold bars on his sleeve once again, four of them nestling close above his left wrist. Clean and shiny they were, and each one a passport to six months of hell. Two years overseas, and now he was back. He took the curved Japanese dagger out of its wrappings, laid it, bright and terrible across his knees. This was the blade that had been meant for him. Yet he'd lived to bring it home to Saucy Fields, because his own knife had been quicker.

He closed his eyes. He wouldn't think about that now, he would think of red-haired Saucy Fields, with her dimples

and her twinkling eyes and her red, red lips that promised to marry him when the world was sane again.

The taxi stopped. Terry slung a bill at the driver and jumped out without even looking. That's how he happened to be left alone in front of the jagged chimney and the black, broken lumber that had once been a home. Terry ran up the weed-crowded walk where two years ago flowers had grown. But there was no use stopping and staring and letting this new fear freeze him cold.

He raced across the memory of a lawn to the house next door, a neat little white house where the Keslins used to live. It

was Mrs. Keslin who answered the pounding.

"Why, Terry Grey, you're back!"

"Tell me about the fire, tell me about Saucy. Is she all right?"

Mrs. Keslin frowned. "You mean Saucy didn't write you? But perhaps it's no wonder. She was in the hospital a month, and about out of her mind with grief ever since. Her father died in the fire. She's an orphan now and a pauper at that. Mr. Fields didn't believe in banks you know, everything he had burned up."

"Saucy was in the hospital. Why?"

"Because she was burned, too. Her hand was the worst. They thought at first she'd lose her left hand, but they say it'll be all right in time. Won't you come in and sit down, you look terribly tired? How was it in the Pacific?"

"Where is Saucy now, where does she live?"

"At the Y, I believe. She works in the five and ten. It's about the only job she could get with her hand still bandaged and all. She couldn't type or model or be a nurse, but she can hand out rouge and lipstick and make change. They're so hard up for help. Terry!" Mrs. Keslin screamed after the flying figure. "Terry Grey, you haven't told me one word about the Pacific!"

THE five and dime was crowded. Women seethed through the swinging doors, stood six deep around the candy counter, and about as thick at the cosmetics. And there was a woman screaming here, too. Almost as loudly as Mrs. Keslin had screamed, only the words weren't the same. They were quick and wild with hysteria:

"I laid it down for just a minute! It was in a brown box. It's worth three hundred dollars!"

"I'm sorry, madam, we can't be responsible for lost articles."

"Lost? It was stolen! That girl stole it!"

There wasn't a sound in all the store. No one asked for candy, no one went out the doors. They just stood like lumps of putty staring at the accusing finger, at the red-haired girl it pointed to. The breath whooshed out of Terry Grey's lungs. He had come home to Saucy Fields, the one he loved, and to the man standing beside her, Pat Munsen, the one he hated.

Munsen was tall and thin, so thin the bones stuck out on his cheeks like the twin crossbars to giant T's. There were sunken, dark circles under his eyes, and he looked like death. None of it was necessary. He'd gone on a hunger strike

when the draft was first announced. He hadn't had a square meal since, just enough to keep him alive. He'd been quite proud about it, boasting to all the boys they could go out and march and crawl and die, but he'd stay home and live.

And he had. He was a walking skeleton, but he was home and alive. A lot of Terry Grey's friends weren't. Pat Munsen smiled and patted the lady customer on the shoulder. He had on yellow suede gloves. There was a brown coat over his arm and a brown fedora.

"Now, madam, I'm sure there's some mistake. I'm assistant manager, perhaps you'd explain it to me. Just what was it that was lost?"

"Stolen. It was stolen, young man! My family heirloom teapot, three hundred dollars it's worth. I was taking it down to the antique show. I stopped in to buy some lipstick, and laid the box on the counter. This girl just a minute after took a lot of boxes from here and went through that door. When I turned around my teapot box was gone. She took it, I tell you! She took it and ran away with it!"

"But I didn't run away, I came back!" Saucy was so white, so very white. There were tears in her eyes.

Pat Munsen frowned. "Where were you going with the boxes, Miss Fields?"

"Up to the stockroom. I'd just brought them down and they were the wrong kind. They were all lipstick when we needed rouge. So I took them back up and got the rouge. I never once touched her old teapot or even saw it!"

The lady customer bounced, as though she had been a rubber ball she bounced. The two red spots in her cheeks grew redder. "I want the police, I want my teapot!" She grabbed at the counter, started throwing things. A bottle of perfume crashed on the floor. Another hit the edge of the counter, splashed on Pat Munsen's neatly turned vest, left a dark, wet stain.

"See here! Lady, stop that!" The man who pushed through the crowd was short and fat, and had two eyes bright as parrots. "I'm Mr. Lighman, manager of the store. Madam, if you will just be quiet a minute!" She was, as quiet as a woman can be crying into her handkerchief. Mr. Lighman frowned.

"What is this, Munsen?"

"The lady has lost a silver teapot. She thinks Miss Fields took it upstairs with some boxes of stock."

"Did you?"

"No, sir." Saucy was very sure, very defiant.

"Go bring the boxes back, let the lady look for himself."

Saucy Fields left the counter, her chin high, her eyes black with anger. The crowd parted to let her through. Terry could see the door she was heading toward. It was closed. There was no admittance on it, and a fire axe shackled to the wall beside it. Saucy was almost there. Once on the other side of that door she would be alone. Terry had waited two years to be alone with Saucy; he wasn't going to wait any longer. He slid quietly along the edge of the crowd, closer and closer to the door swinging shut behind Saucy Fields.

Then that mad, fool woman was screaming again. "Go after her! Don't let her go alone! She'll hide my teapot, and we'll never see it!"

For a minute all eyes had turned back to the hysterical customer. No one saw Terry Grey grab the door and pull it open. But the woman did. Oh, she couldn't miss that, the door opening, and Terry Grey sneaking through with the Japanese dagger still cold and bright and forgotten in his hand.

"Merciful heavens, look at that knife!"

Look they did. A whole store full of people, to make it quite plain to the police afterwards that a young soldier, a sergeant with brown hair and a white scar across the back of his neck, went inside the No Admittance door carrying a dagger. The same dagger found by the bodies not five minutes later.

The stair well was dark. Dark, narrow, very steep, and filled with smells, cabbage and onions and boiling soup. A thousand nauseous whiffs of a thousand ancient meals hung there in that locked passage. Terry took the stairs three at a time. Still there was no sign of Saucy. On the top landing there were four black doors and a white-faced time clock. For just a moment Terry hesitated, which way?

SUDDENLY there were feet on the stairs below. Mr. Lighman's old, high voice, "Snap the bolt on that door, Munsen, and stay on guard. I'll go to the safe and get my gun. We'll stop that soldier doing any harm with that knife of his. The idea of the Army letting a boy wander around loose with a weapon like that! I don't know what the world is coming to!"

The world was falling, at least Terry Grey's was. He had turned quickly toward the nearest door. He didn't see the pencil lying on the floor. It rolled under his foot, sent him flying back down those dark, steep stairs. It was strange how he wasn't frightened; it was all too quick, too unreal. He remembered noticing the time, five of two. He remembered how

Mr. Lighman screamed. And that was all.

It was the pain in his head that bothered him most when he awoke. The pain in his heart and the aching in his arms. Then it was his heart. The way it wouldn't beat, the way he couldn't breathe. For he was looking at Mr. Lighman crumpled by the door at the foot of the stairs. They were all three there, at least their bodies were, for Mr. Lighman was dead.

He had to be dead. There was blood all over him, and on the walls and floor. And Pat Munsen was lying in the blood, with the Japanese dagger still sticking into his side.

Terry Grey crawled up the stairs. He couldn't stand upright, not with the nausea, and he couldn't stay back there. Not with the screeching on the other side of the door.

"Look at the blood! Look at the blood seeping over the sill!" As though it were an exclamation point, the fire axe bit a piece out of the center panel, then another and another. Finally Terry reached the top landing with its three doors and the clock. It was just then one minute to two.

Only four minutes had passed. Four minutes to bathe his hands in red. The screaming was louder and the pounding. It had to be murder, there were too many blows for an accident. He could see the blood on his hands.

The door beside him opened. Saucy Fields was standing there with her boxes and with the wonder of a smile just dawning on her lips. The distant pounding of the axe stopped. A man's voice cut through the silence:

"Shut the store and call the police! That crazy soldier has killed Mr. Lighman and Mr. Munsen!"

The smile twisted into agony. "No! No, Terry! No!" When she fainted, Saucy Fields' eyes were on Terry Grey's red-streaked hands.

The soldier darted into the stockroom, he ran now with fleet, cunning feet. There wasn't time to stop and think, he had to get away. He had to hide before those feet pounding on the stairs caught up with him.

The stockroom was cold, and as poorly lighted as the stairs. It was a huge cavern laced with a maze of narrow passages between boxlike shelves on either side, hundreds and hundreds of shelves higher than a man's head, filled with china and toys and nameless cartons. There was yet another smell in here, like a clear, sharp cloud, the odor of mothballs.

Terry Grey ran to the very back of the room, to a red exit sign. He was

clear out on the fire escape when he saw the police below. So he didn't go down and he didn't go up. He went back, back into the dismal shadows and the cold, tart smell of mothballs.

There were people in the stockroom now, stealthy, whispering people coming closer and closer. He climbed one of the sets of shelves, carefully, slowly, past dozens and dozens of china cups. One or two rattled. It was like thunder in his ear. But he reached the top and slid in that small, dark space between the ceiling and the shelves.

FOR an hour men searched. They threw caution away and cursed. They brought flashlights and looked into every corner. One even suggested they hunt on top of the shelf cabinets as well as in them.

"In that little crack? No man could squeeze in there."

So they left it alone. They didn't know what a man could learn on a battlefield. They didn't know what a man could do with another's blood on his hands.

It was worse after the searchers left. Much worse. Because then he could think, he could remember, all those loud, vengeful voices:

"That girl called him Terry. Find out what soldier she knows by the name of Terry, and plaster his pictures in all the papers. We'll find him, someone will turn him in."

"The Munsen guy's going to live. The doc says the knife just grazed his ribs, so it's only one murder we've got against this Terry."

"You can hang as high for one as you can for two."

"What ever made the dope do it?"

"There was something about a silver teapot being stolen."

"Hell, no, that damn fool woman found it where she left it, on the Notions counter."

Words. Beating through the silence. Pounding on a man's brain. Words tumbling in a kaleidoscope of horror, and always coming back the same, "You can hang a man as high for one, as two."

Terry Grey lay there, hour after hour, until it was night. He saw the windows at the far end of the stockroom grow grey, then black and white again when the movie across the street lighted its twinkling sign.

That's where he ought to be, out there at the movies with Saucy. Only he was in here, going crazy, wondering why he had killed a man he didn't know, and only tried to kill the man he hated. Perhaps hate wasn't the word, perhaps contempt would be better. Contempt and fear

that somehow Pat might get Saucy away from him. Two years was a long time to remember a guy you didn't see.

Only she had seen him, with blood on his hands.

Terry Grey buried his face in his arms. And he kept rubbing his hands on the ball of excelsior he'd picked off the floor. The blood was gone from his fingers long ago, but he could still feel it.

Pretty soon he'd have to surrender to the police. It was the only thing he could do. He'd thought it all over here alone with himself in the dark. There would be no more peace for him, not ever again. Not with Mr. Lighman's scream growing louder and louder in his ears.

Terry wondered which scream it was, this one echoing over and over. Was it that first scream when Terry began falling, or was it another scream when Mr. Lighman died? That was the odd part. Terry couldn't remember, he couldn't remember using the knife and he thought he ought to. It wasn't easy pushing a knife in and out of a human body. He knew. That was how he got the damn dagger in the beginning, only that was war and this was murder.

If only he could prove he hadn't done it! He didn't care about the rest of the world. He just wanted to prove it to himself, and to Saucy Fields.

Terry Grey climbed down from his high roost; soft as a cat he hunted for the stockroom door. He'd have to be careful, there'd be a watchman, somewhere about there'd be an old man with a flashlight and keys and a gun. That was a chance Terry had to take. He had to get to the hall again and look at those stairs. He wanted to see what a man could do in four minutes of time.

Terry had a couple of books of matches in his pockets. They helped find the door, they also showed him the place where the candles were stored, long ones and short ones, altar candles and table candles and birthday candles. He chose an altar candle in a red glass jar, because that way there'd be no drip. There also was very little light. Just a halo about his hand, and all that dark, silent store crowding down about him.

The clock said twenty after eleven. Terry looked at it close to be sure, then ran down the stairs as fast, as softly as he could. He stood there in the dark at the bottom and lit the candle again. The blood was brown now. The jagged holes in the door black.

He cut at the air, over and over he slashed with the knife that wasn't in his hand. Then he ran back up the stairs, careful to keep on the soft, padded part of them. He held the candle close to the

white-faced clock, twenty-three minutes past eleven. So there *had* been time. Someone could have come down, killed, and gone back up again. It would have been possible, but it would have been so close. Too close.

How could anyone on the spur of the moment discover that dagger and use it to such advantage! It couldn't be. Minds didn't work that fast. Besides there was no motive. It had to be Terry Grey. He leaned low over the candle and his shadow was a giant touching him on the shoulder. The first cut had been an accident, slicing into Mr. Lighman as Terry fell, and the rest madness. Terry had drawn blood. With the smell of it in his nostrils he had gone crazy, like a wild animal in the jungle. That was the way it must have been. There was nothing left except to say good-by to Saucy Fields.

He tried all the doors. The first was the girls' cloak room, the second the kitchens, and the third was the office, a large windowless room with several desks in it, a wired cage, and an old-fashioned safe. There was a telephone on the desk beside the safe, and a telephone book.

THE voice at the Y was young, impersonal until he asked for Miss Fields. It hesitated for just a minute. "Who's calling?"

Terry knew there was danger here. He could feel it coming over the wire, the guarded way the girl spoke, that long moment when she hadn't spoken at all. "I said, who's calling?"

"Tell her it's an old friend of her father's. A Mr. Beanie." Beanie was a dog Terry had owned once in the long ago when he was a little boy and Saucy a little girl. Saucy would remember, she had cried as hard as Terry the day old Beanie died.

"Hello, Mr. Beanie?" She was breathless. Her voice was so soft and warm, it was something a man could dream of, as he had dreamed of it for two years.

"Hello, Saucy, I want to say good-by."

"But you can't! You've only just come."

"I know. It's terrible, because things will never again be the same."

That was when she forgot herself. "No, Terry! They say you killed him, but I know you didn't. You couldn't have!"

"I don't know, Saucy. I don't know!"

"But I do. You see, I love you."

For a moment he thought they'd been cut off, then he knew she was waiting. He could hear little sounds, tiny, moaning sounds like maybe she was crying.

"Thank you, honey, but love isn't enough. You saw the blood on my hands. It was my knife."

"But you didn't take the money. It couldn't be that there were two separate deliveries going on there that day. That would be stretching coincidence too far. The murder must have been because of the robbery. Pat had his back to the landing while he fastened the bolt on the door. Mr. Lighman was the only one who really saw the robber. He was killed and Pat only stunned.

"The police have it all figured out, only they say it's you who took the ten thousand dollars. How could you? You'd never been there before. You couldn't have known that the safe was open and no one was in the office. You wouldn't even have known where the office was."

"Wait a minute, Saucy! Wait a minute!" He was whispering now. He could hear his heart beating in the earphone. "Tell that to me again. What ten thousand are you talking of?"

"Why the ten thousand dollars that was in the safe at noon today and wasn't at two o'clock."

Terry whistled. There was no sound but there were the puckered lips and the air swishing. It blew the candle out. Terry swore. He had used up one book of matches. Where in hell was the other? He found it in his left hip pocket, dumped it, along with a handful of papers, on the desk. The match burned down to his fingers. He lit another and another. Still he stared.

Those papers he had taken out of his pocket. They were brown, little, slim circular bands with numbers on the top of each. \$1000.00. He picked them up, one by one. Close over the desk like he was, he could smell them. Perfume.

They were the sweetest sight, this was the sweetest smell in all the world to him. This smell of murder.

There was just the slightest of sounds, a whoosh and an infinitesimal squeek. Terry whirled to see the door groove shut. There was a little man in front of it, a little man with a very big gun.

"Saucy!" Terry shouted, because there was so little time, and no more need for silence. "Were you near the door in the stockroom? Could you see, did anyone come in just before you went out and met me on the landing?"

"No, Terry, no one came in and no one went in the locker room. There was a whole bunch of girls in there waiting for the two o'clock bell. No one went in the kitchen. No one went into the office or they would have been there still, because there's only one way out of the office, back onto the landing and

down the stairs with the people watching through the holes the fire axe cut. Don't you see, that's why the police are so sure it's you, that's why you must hide!"

"Listen, Saucy, listen and don't ever forget. If I should die in the next few minutes," he looked at that gun coming closer and closer, "if I should never see you again, you can know I didn't kill Mr. Lighman. I wasn't sure before, I thought I might have done it when I was out of my head, because you see I've been trained to kill. The government has spent months, day after day it has been pounded into my soul. Kill or be killed.

"Yes, I've been taught to kill. But I've never been trained to steal. Conscious or unconscious, I wouldn't steal. Yet there are money bands in my pocket, empty money bands. I've been framed, Saucy, and it's wonderful. I know now I didn't kill Mr. Lighman. That ten thousands dollars has given me back my honor. The fright is gone, Saucy, and the fight is just beginning."

Terry Grey grabbed hold of the telephone cord, swung the earphone in a sudden, vicious arc and conked the little gent on the top of his head. It was sudden. It caught the watchman quite unprepared, quite before he could press his finger down on that shiny trigger. He dropped his gun, his lantern, and the keys and crumpled up on top of them. Terry hid the unconscious old gent behind one of the desks, then sat down in a swivel chair facing the door.

The police would be there any minute, because of course they had been listening on the phone. They wouldn't be so dumb as not to tap Saucy's wire. They'd trace the call to the dime store.

The cops came noisily. First there were the sirens loud enough to make a deaf man scream. Then there was the efficiency, orders here, orders there. At the last, two cops coming up the stairs toward the light. They had guns, and so had Terry Grey.

"Hello." He smiled. "You took rather longer to get here than I thought."

"What's the idea, Grey? Who do you think you are? Put that toy pistol down before you get hurt."

"It isn't a toy, and I won't be the only one to get hurt. If you look, you'll see a sharpshooter's medal on my chest."

"So what? We're two and you're one. The store's lousy with cops."

"All looking for ten thousand dollars. Suppose I tell you where it probably is?"

"Probably!" It was a sneer. "As if you didn't know!"

"I don't, I'm only guessing now." He

held out his left sleeve, showed those four cushioned bars. "Look, that's two years overseas. Don't you think it ought to give me a chance to be heard?"

The police chief hesitated. He leaned close and looked deep into Terry Grey's steady eyes. There was no blinking, no wavering and no fear. The captain holstered his gun, sat on the edge of the desk.

"O. K. We'll listen."

"Perhaps first you'd better smell." Terry took out the brown paper bands with their printing, with their faint, sweet trace of perfume.

The store opened at nine as usual. Only instead of early business being slow, women thronged the store, buying this and that, but mostly passing the door with its jagged holes. They could even see the blood under the edge of it. It was something to savor and go home and talk about. And to read the morning paper again, where it showed Terry Grey being taken into custody by the police.

There was a picture of Saucy, and a picture of the woman of the teapot, and a picture of poor Mr. Lighman. There was also a picture of the ten paper bands from the money that was stolen. The money hadn't been found yet, but the paper said it would be. The police know sure enough how to make a man talk.

The clerks in the store were pretty much upset. First there was Saucy who hadn't stayed away like she ought, but came to brazen it out. Then there was Mr. Munsen looking weaker and thinner than ever and walking extra slow. Whenever anyone spoke to him he smiled:

"Well, the show must go on. Mr. Lighman would want it that way."

But mostly Mr. Munsen sat in Mr. Lighman's chair. You could see he didn't feel too good. It was five after four when he closed the safe in the office and said good-by to the girls over their books.

"I guess I'll call it quits. This wound in my side bothers me more than I thought it would."

He walked out the door slowly. The girls shook their heads as they heard him go miserably down the stairs. Twice on the way down he stopped and turned. When he got to the bottom he stopped again. Only now he didn't look so tired, and there was a screwdriver in his hand.

Quickly he peered through the jagged door, he looked up at the empty landing. Then he flicked the screwdriver under the edge of the carpeting on the first step. It came up quite easily. Un-

derneath were a lot of pretty green bills. He gathered them quickly, stuffed them into his coat pocket. When the last came up, there was some fresh sawdust under it. A small square of the bare wood step fell out. It wasn't such a big hole, yet there was room enough for the gun poking through and a pair of black, remorseless eyes.

"O. K., Munsen, you can put your hands up now."

Pat Munsen whirled out the door just as a police whistle shrilled. Just as the janitor's supply closet door under the stairs opened, and out stepped the police captain and Terry Grey.

Munsen tried to run, but there was no place to go. Plainclothes men materialized out of the crowd, hemming him in, a thick black circle of men with guns.

Terry shook his head. "You had already stolen it, hadn't you, Pat? You were on your way out with your hat and your gloves and your coat. Only that woman made a fuss about her teapot, and I came along with my knife, and Mr. Lighman said he was going to the safe for his gun. You couldn't have him go to the safe, could you? Not with all that money still on you. Not with me there so handy to take the blame. So you killed him."

Terry laughed, bitterly, sadly. "That

could have been enough, only you had to be so sure to blame it on me so you planted the money bands in my pocket. If you hadn't, even I wouldn't have known whether I killed him or not. Those bands were in your pocket when the teapot lady threw perfume all over your vest. Remember? It was the perfume smell that persuaded the police to give me a break. They pretended to arrest me, to give you your chance. All day we've waited for you to come for your money."

"But how could you know? I hammered the nails back so well with the handle of the dagger. No one could know!"

"How could we help but know? There had only been four minutes. One of those minutes I had been falling downstairs. One of those minutes I had been crawling upstairs. The two in between were too busy for you to go anywhere. It takes time to kill a man, then lie down in his blood and stick the knife in your own side. The last took courage. It's too bad you didn't have the judgment to use it in better fields.

"We knew you had no time. We knew the hospital attaches found no money on you, so we looked for a hiding place close at hand. What better thing for your purpose than the cushioned stair treads? The first step on your way to the chair."

The Ironclad Alibi

By Gunnison Steele

(Continued from page 36)

and I'll show you where the stuff is."

Five minutes later the sedan was bumping along a crooked, forest-hemmed side road. At a word from Nick, Blackie stopped the car at a narrow concrete bridge. Nick got out, followed by Jake with the gun, and went down into the dry creek bed.

The black satchel was cunningly hidden.

Back on the road, in the glare from the car lights, Jake opened the satchel. It was crammed with glittering jewelry and money. Some of the price tags carried the name of Sam Capehart.

"That satisfy you?" Nick asked.

"It sure does," Jake said. But he didn't put away his gun.

The headlights of a car approached swiftly along the old gravel road. The

car stopped and a heavy figure got out.

"All right, boys?" Sheriff Capehart asked.

"Okay, sheriff," Jake said. "He's your meat, well-done!"

That coldness was in Nick Ryan's stomach again. He knew suddenly that he'd been a sucker. He said furiously, "You double-crossin' snakes! Joe Mangrum's not dead! You two don't belong to Sledge Mangrum's gang!"

"Did they tell you that?" The sheriff snapped a pair of handcuffs on Nick's wrists. "Why, they're just a couple of boys from over at Rockport that I got to help me. They wouldn't hurt a grasshopper. It was a real hot alibi you had to prove you never killed my brother Sam, Nick. But not hot as the chair you'll soon be settin' in!"

The Criminal Had Crust

By D. A. Hoover

Murder in a bakery certainly takes crust, particularly when the price is a state-supervised frying.



IT STARTED and ended with the garden hose, but there was a murder coiled up in the middle. Dad Wells was sprinkling his flowering petunias, his bare feet comfortably tickled by the lush carpet of green grass between the rock-bordered beds. His pointed goatee matched the whiteness of the cumulus clouds boiling up this hot June forenoon. His eyes held the blue of the sky they invaded.

The fragrance of nut-brown baking loaves wafted across his neatly trimmed hedge from the bakery and gave him visions of yellow butter and red strawberry jam. But these tantalizing notions were abruptly cut off by a terrible, gurgling scream that rang out on the morning air from the shipping department of the bakery across the alley.

Dad dropped the hose and seized his wide suspenders with shock. Goose pimples sandpapered his legs, though the thermometer on the side of his little white bungalow stood at ninety degrees. That cry was paced to the terror of sudden death.

He was running now. Across the gritty alley and in on the cool concrete where the orange and black trucks hauled away the fresh loaves. He heard a scrape in the shipping clerk's office, the clatter of something falling, then a deathly silence.

His throat felt tight, but he forced himself to go on in and have a look. The back of his neck crawled. Old Jonathan Bibb lay on his back in a crimson welter of blood. A twelve-inch mechanic's adjustable wrench had crushed one side of his bald skull into an awful, unliving shape. The killer had slipped out through the back door of the office which stood a few inches ajar.

Jonathan's big green cash box stood open. Dad knew it should be full of bills and silver from the drivers' collections and on its way to the main office upstairs. He kicked it out of the way under the desk and stooped to feel Jonathan's pulse.

The throb of life had been stilled forever.

Someone gasped behind him, and Dad turned mechanically. Red Zylar, the long-armed mechanic of the bakery fleet, stood with his big mouth open. He stood looking at Dad, his eyes accusing until he could stop his wide yellow teeth rattling enough to blurt out:

"You—you killed him."

Dad moistened his lips. "I wouldn't hurt Jonathan. He was my friend." Shaking, he picked his way around the sprawled corpse to the phone and asked the operator to call headquarters, there'd been a murder. When he looked up again, a slim fellow in white duck slacks was standing in the open door gulping and backing away, pointing at the dead man. His black eyes were sprung wide by terror. His thin shoulders shook under an open-necked, silk sports shirt.

"He's dead, ain't he?" he demanded. "I'm after the money. What'll I do when I have to go back up to the cashier without the money?" He turned and ran, shouting out a general alarm.

Dad tugged desperately at his white goatee. He wanted to form a mental picture of the room before the others came stampeding in and mused it all up. Jonathan had been a fanatic on good housekeeping. The inside of his office was varnished perfection. It shone, except for his own blood. Someone must have nicked his gleaming paint somewhere, Dad thought. His repair kit is turned over. That patching plaster is all mixed up among his nails, screwdriver, and other tools. Wouldn't his neat soul suffer if he could see such confusion as that?

THE wide garage floor filled as if by magic with clacking-tongued bakers and office help. The superintendent of the bakery tried vainly to control them, but it was no use. They ignored him. When Captain Carson walked in a few minutes later he had to beat his way through them to the door where Dad was trying to keep the murder room free of stampede.

Carson cleared the track efficiently and let the doctor and coroner inside. He looked over the dead man and his tomb

a few minutes, then started jabbing Dad with saw-edged questions which brought a bead of nervous moisture to Dad's upper lip.

Dad told his story simply and directly, mentioning how Red and the clerk from upstairs were the first to arrive. How fifty others working in the building at the time had just as much chance at the dead man as they had.

Carson scratched his facts down in a ragged notebook. "Red, where were you when this happened?"

"Under that truck over there. Had the pan down. Someone crossed the floor. The scream came a minute after that. By the time I could get loose and crawl out, Dad Wells was leaning over Jonathan and he was dead."

Carson grunted and pointed his cedar pencil at the slack-clad office clerk. "Marty, where were you?"

"I'd been in the office all the time, until I came down after the drivers' money and found Dad Wells and Red here. That's all. I beat it."

Dad edged around where he could stoop and get a quick look under the bread truck Red said he was working on. The engine crank pan was not down as the mechanic had said. It was covered evenly with a coat of road dirt and grease. Why had he lied about it? The wrench that did the job belonged to him. He had a big family of freckled youngsters to feed, too. That took a lot of money.

Dad listened hopefully. But Carson couldn't get another one of the employees to admit they'd heard the scream or knew a thing about it, until after Marty had stormed the length of the building popping off his big, loose mouth.

Carson elbowed his way through the wide garage doors where two trucks could drive abreast and across the alley to the hedge which skirted Dad's little domain. "Look here." He pointed back through the open doors to Jonathan's office in the shipping room. "Dad, you could see pretty well what went on all the time in there." It was a statement of fact.

"Why, yes. I was interested in the business. Nice bunch of folks over there. They all waved and said, 'Hi, Dad' and 'Hello, Granpa' and the like."

"What does a man of your age live on?" Carson demanded suddenly.

"I saved some when I was younger. It's enough."

Carson jerked a thumb. Two uniformed men started working in around Dad's flower beds, his green shrubs and fruit trees. Carson himself walked slowly along the broomlike stiffness of the privet hedge, his red neck arched, looking down. Then he snapped forward.

"Here it is, boys. What kind of flower do you call this?"

Dad started, his old knees shaking inside his checkered poplin pants. Wedged back under the drooping branches of the hedge was the green till from the cash box. It was significantly empty.

"I didn't do it," Dad said lamely. "There wouldn't have been time to come back here before Red showed up. Besides, I didn't leave him."

Red shifted his long arms. "I reckon you could have made it. It took me some time to get loose from what I was doing and get out. You could have run back here to the hedge, easy."

"This looks bad for you, old fellow," Carson said. "You're too old to hold a job, starving along on the skimpy interests of your savings. You saw Jonathan handle that money day after day. Finally it got to be too much. Want to tell us about it?"

Dad felt his heart swell as if it would pop his chest. This stupid cop. Didn't he have any sense at all? How could he associate murder with my philosophy of life? My love of the beautiful. To Carson all people were as much alike as paving bricks.

"I won't speak further without counsel. Am I to consider myself arrested?"

"Well, practically. Maybe you had better come along."

Dad looked around the white cottage with its border of green shrubs and his heart died within him. He'd never dreamed of leaving it as a common criminal.

"Wait a minute, all of you," Dad said. "I forgot to shut off my hose a while ago. And I'd like a last look at my double petunias before I leave them forever."

They followed him through the gate to the flower bed he had been watering when he heard the death scream. The brass lawn nozzle lay sizzling in the grass, a fine silvery spray of cold water catching a miniature rainbow from the sun. He stooped to retrieve it and swung it on them in a slow arc. The dashing spray sounded like a rainstorm on a canvas tent as it swept across their trouser legs.

It he wasn't in such danger he could have cackled with glee the way they sprang back as if the clean water were a flame thrower. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "I'm not so chipper as I used to be."

DAD slowly followed the cop to the bakery. In the alley he turned to take his farewell of his little home. "Captain, some person in this group wants an old man to give up the last years of his life to pay for a crime he didn't commit. If

you'll let me line this crowd up along the side of this bakery in the hot sun, I'll have the truth in less than hour."

Carson permitted himself a sour grin. "Go ahead. It'll take nearly that long for the coroner and fingerprint men to finish in there."

There was some muttering at this. Dad heard remarks like "sunstruck" and "crazy with the heat." He was sorry for the innocent, but he was on trial for his life. Unless this experiment worked, well—the chair has no respect for gray hair. Strangely, he thought, how sweet life is to the old. Those with the shortest time to live hang on with the fiercest grip.

Dad pattered up and down the line of scowling, sweating, and cursing people. Girls held up their purses to keep the hot glare out of their eyes, and the men assumed various attitudes. Some were as stoic as Spartans, others as fretful as children. Hot tar dripped out of a spout, and the asphalt shingles on the alley sheds curled in the blistering breath of the sun.

He waited for about fifteen minutes, and knew he couldn't go on. He couldn't bear to have people suffer like that. He stopped in front of Red. If he couldn't bluff the truth out of the killer now, he might have to pay for his failure with his life. He gulped:

"Red, why did you lie about the grease pan on that truck? You didn't even touch it."

Red looked around as if he'd like to dart away. "I got rattled, I guess. I was hiding out under there, resting a little on my creeper. Had a party last night."

"So you heard me walk in and then heard the scream?"

"Yes, I distinctly heard somebody go by. I had my head down against the concrete. The heels cracked hard and fast on the cement."

Dad laughed and pointed down. "And me bare-footed? I didn't make as much noise as a mouse when I went in there. You're lying again. You—"

Red cringed. "I didn't kill him, I tell you. I swear I heard someone walk through there."

Dad glanced down at Red's wrinkled pants legs where the water he had sprayed there was dried up now by the sun. It was now or never. He plunged to his knees, but it was the cuff of Marty's duck slacks he seized with urgent hands.

"Look here," he cried to Carson. "It's setting hard already. This patching plaster. He upset Jonathan's repair kit. Some of the plaster fell down his leg and lodged in the cuff of his pants."

Marty cursed and jabbed suddenly at Dad's twinkling eyes with braced thumbs, but Carson grabbed him roughly by the arm. "Cut it, Brother."

Dad raised his eyes in thankfulness and looked across to his flowering little home. "If you'll look up in the bakery office where Marty works, you'll find a till missing where he hooked it from another cash box. He planted it in my hedge before the murder. He looked through the garage and couldn't see Red under the truck, so he thought the place was empty. He'd heard him when he came through."

Carson jerked Marty toward his prowl car. "But, Dad, how did you know it was him? Why not some of the others?"

"Because I'd kicked Jonathan's cash box out of sight under the desk to get it out of the way. When Marty comes in buggin' his eyes, what does he say? 'What are they going to do to me when I go up without the money?'" How did he know any money was gone unless he was the one who killed old Jonathan and took it for himself?"



Dying for smokes, that desperate gang would go to any extreme to get them, including . . .

Coffin Nail Piracy

By Neil Moran



TRY THIS store." said Butch. He stopped the car and Dugan got out. He went into the store, looked at the sign, but that didn't stop him.

"Any cigarettes?" he asked.

"No cigarettes," said the man behind the store counter,

shaking his head.

Dugan went out and reported to Butch. "They keep them for their friends," Butch growled. "For people they know."

"Not always," said Dugan. "Sometimes they haven't got them."

Butch roared, "Here, I've been going two hours without a smoke! We've been going through one town after another. What do these guys tell us? No cigarettes. All right. I'm going to stage a holdup!"

Dugan looked at him, so did the three men in the back. Of course, they got it. Butch's idea was to walk into a store and demand cigarettes at the point of a gun.

"Don't do it, Butch," said Frenchy. "It's screwy. It ain't worth it."

"Don't do what?"

"Walk into one of these hick stores and ask the guy to come across with a pack of cigarettes with a gun pointing at him."

"Who said anything about a hick store?" said Butch. "And who said anything about a pack? You guys don't get it. I ain't runnin' no chances of sticking up a hick store. And I ain't after only one pack. Look, you bums." He turned and scowled at them. "A half mile from here we're out on the open road. A bus comes along. The bus is filled with passengers."

"You mean to hold up a bus!" said Dugan.

"That's exactly what I mean," said Butch. "Plenty of people and we'll go by the law of averages. Some will have cig-

arettes and some won't. But those that have we take."

The men in the back leaned back and stared at him. Dugan kept his mouth open. He knew that Butch had all kinds of ideas but this was a little different. This was so different that he let out a laugh suddenly. Butch kicked him.

"Don't laugh," he said. "Ain't it practical? Ain't it all in the kind of work we do?"

"But holding up a bus," said Dugan, "to get—Suppose we're caught?"

"How can we be caught? A lonely road. I know this place. A bus comes along. The driver slows down when he sees us. Thinks we're passengers. We board the bus. 'Stick 'em up,' we say. 'All we want are cigarettes.' Ain't it a break for the passengers?"

By now, Dugan was holding his sides to keep from laughing. Of course, he could see what Butch meant. But he still didn't like it. Something told him that no good would come of it, and here they had started on their way to Fairview to crack a safe. An inside job with another man to help them.

"Can't you do without a smoke?" Dugan said. "Until we get there? Maybe this guy will have some—"

"All right. Say, that Rogan has a pack. A half pack. How long will that last? With six men dipping their fingers. And on the way back, what do we do? Go in and look at those signs? And have those guys tell us—"

By now, the other men were working up a little enthusiasm. After all, they liked a smoke, too. It was something novel so far as they knew, and should be easy to accomplish. They passed through the town and soon were on the open road. Dugan began to feel better about the idea.

"Sure," Butch said, "what could we get for holding up a bus and robbing the passengers of cigarettes? Have you thought of that, Dugan?"

"We'd get plenty with our records."

"Not if guys who sat on the jury tried to get cigarettes and couldn't," said

Butch. He let out a guffaw, and even Dugan laughed with the others.

The car sped along, rolling smoothly over the road. Butch looked at the sky and nodded. "I was just thinkin'," he said. "We'd better bandage our eyes with our handkerchiefs. We'll park the car on the side of the road, of course. Then after we clean up, we'll get it. It'll take us another hour to get to Fairview, but we don't want any hick cops stopping the car and looking for guys fitting our descriptions."

"Some of the passengers might drop dead," said Dugan.

"From fright?" said Butch.

"No, when we only take cigarettes."

"Say, as long as it's a holdup," said one of the men, "why not make a clean sweep of it?"

"No, only cigarettes," said Butch. "A quick getaway and leave the passengers laughing. You know, I like this idea more and more," he went on, as he leaned back and steadied his hand on the wheel. "It'll be something to tell the other boys about. I'll go down in history. A gang leader who staged a cigarette holdup and wouldn't even take a dime from a passenger."

DISTANT lights of a bus showed, put an end to talk. Butch, alert, realizing that the moment had come, slowed down the car and gave the order, "All out. Get over on that corner. There's a bus stop there. He'll see you. Quick, now!"

Out they sprang. Butch drove the car to the side of the road. He jumped out and rejoined the men, just as the bus came lumbering along within a short distance. The driver saw them and stopped.

The men had put on their handkerchiefs. The driver stared at them. He saw guns flashing, and was about to start the bus, but Dugan and one of the other men were already on with Butch and the others following.

"Holdup?" gasped the driver.

"Yeah, how are you fixed for cigarettes?" Butch asked.

"Oh, I—I got cigarettes," said the driver, his teeth chattering. "But—"

"Hand them over."

"You want only my cigarettes?"

"That's all. Nickels and dimes don't interest me."

The passengers, some gasping, others frantic—two women began tittering hysterically—were told by Dugan and two of the other men, not to worry, that they could keep their shirts, their jewelry, and even their money, but they had to come across with their cigarettes.

"Do you mean that's all you want?" said a man, his pupils dilating.

"That's what I mean," said Butch, striding through the bus. "Now everybody be calm. This must be unusual to you, but all we want are your cigarettes."

Some of the passengers started laughing, for despite the seriousness of the situation, they saw an amusing side. All of them were relieved to know that all that Butch and his men wanted, were cigarettes. They kept staring at Butch, as if they couldn't make him out.

"The guy is screwy," whispered the driver to a passenger near him. "Nuts."

"I don't know," said the passenger. "Not that I approve of what he's doing. But when you get desperate for a smoke—"

Cigarettes, a couple unopened packs, a few half-filled packs were dropping into hats. Dugan and the other men were going through the bus. Butch kept his eye on the driver, twirling his gun in his fingers.

For a moment, he wanted to laugh himself. It was an extraordinary adventure. It was what only he, Butch, would think of and execute. A cigarette holdup and getting results.

A little man in the rear of the bus looked up furtively. He was the last person to be reached. Dugan stood looking at him and worked his fingers.

"Come across, Pop," he said. "Got any cigarettes?"

"No cigarettes," said the man.

"Yeah, well, suppose I find out."

"All right," said the man. He put his hand into his pocket, and reluctantly handed over a cheap tin cigarette case.

Dugan opened it and saw that it was filled. He slipped the case into his pocket.

THE holdup had been completed. Butch and his men left as quickly as they had come. Laughing, with laughter following them, for the incident had created an air of hilarity, they jumped off the bus, hurried to the car and sprang into it.

"Well, wasn't it easy?" said Butch.

"Too easy," said Dugan. "I still say—"

"All right. You say the robbery will be reported. It'll take that driver some time to get to a phone. It'll take the road birds time to pick up the call. And we're breezing along. Like this." Butch gave the car the gas and it lunged forward. "So we're stopped. What do we say? We don't know nothin'."

"But all these cigarettes!" said Dugan.

"All right. Can't we have cigarettes? How many packs have we got, anyway?"

"About fifteen," said Dugan.

"Most of them not full packs. Now, you guys be smart and start filling up the spaces. Throw away the empty wrappers."

Then see how many full packs you have. About seven."

The men began filling up the partly filled packs with cigarettes from other wrappers. Dugan, still dubious, took out the tin cigarette case. "That old guy," he said, "thought he was foxy. I wonder what kind of butts these are. They look imported. Well, it doesn't matter. Have a coffin nail?" He turned to Butch.

"O. K," Butch said, "this one I got don't taste so good. I never did like those Zebras. What brand you got there?"

Dugan tried to read the brand but the car lurched. Some of the cigarettes spilled on the floor.

"Here, only a few spilled," said Dugan. "Let them lie. Have one, Frenchy?" He turned. "How do you like it?" Dugan asked, as Frenchy began puffing.

"Swell! Let Butch try one."

"So it's good," said Butch. "O. K., shove it into my mouth." Dugan did and gave Butch a light. He gave the other men some of "Pop's" cigarettes.

"When I think of that old guy—" said Dugan.

Butch had taken a few puffs, smiled, and the car began to swerve.

"Hey, steady it," said Frenchy.

"The trouble with you guys," said Butch, talking out of the side of his mouth, "is that you don't wear diamond shirts. I'm fed up with bums that only go in for high hats."

"Who ain't got a diamond shirt?" said Frenchy. "Hey, listen, Dugan—"

"You listen to me," said Dugan. "You think this guy is Butch. He's the District Attorney."

"Hey, what the hell is this?" said one of the other men. "Is this car on fire?"

"Who said anything about a fire?" said Butch. "I'm cold. We're passing over a mountain."

Butch suddenly stopped the car and sprang out. He began reeling. He did a little shadow boxing, and fell right on his face.

At the count of nine, which he counted himself, he got up. He swung at Frenchy. Dugan didn't like a pal being treated this way, and he swung at Butch. He missed him, spun around like a top and met Frenchy, who was going around the other side of Butch. The other men were reeling deliriously.

Then a police car drew up. A half dozen detectives in it looked at the brawling holdup men in amazement.

"What is it?" said one. "Are those guys drunk? Or are they—"

Butch turned. He walked over to the detective and shoved out his hand. "My pal!" he said.

"Your pal?" said one of the detectives. "What is—"

"Have a cigarette?" said Dugan, walking over. "Boy, oh, boy! One puff and—"

"Marijuana!" shouted one of the detectives. "These must be the guys who—the driver said that a little old guy had got off the bus saying that he'd fix them. These guys are smoking marijuana cigarettes!"

"Would you like to waltz?" said Butch, reeling over. "Who put that piece of tripe in the piano?"

"You'll waltz," said the detective. "All of you. I was just thinking, men, that there certainly was a joker in the pack!"

Satan Hogs the Camera

By Emil Petaja

(Continued from page 34)

Jack just after he left you. He told me to keep my eyes on you every second!"

Grinning, I grabbed his pretty silk shirt and ripped it open. There was the will, tucked partway under his wide belt. I tossed it to Kitty, then grabbed Tanger by the belt and studied his pretty pan speculatively, as if wondering where I was going to begin.

He cowered back. "No! No!" he whimpered, having seen what his pal Rennagan got.

"Don't hit him!" Kitty cried. "Please don't!"

"Why not?" I demanded, scowling.

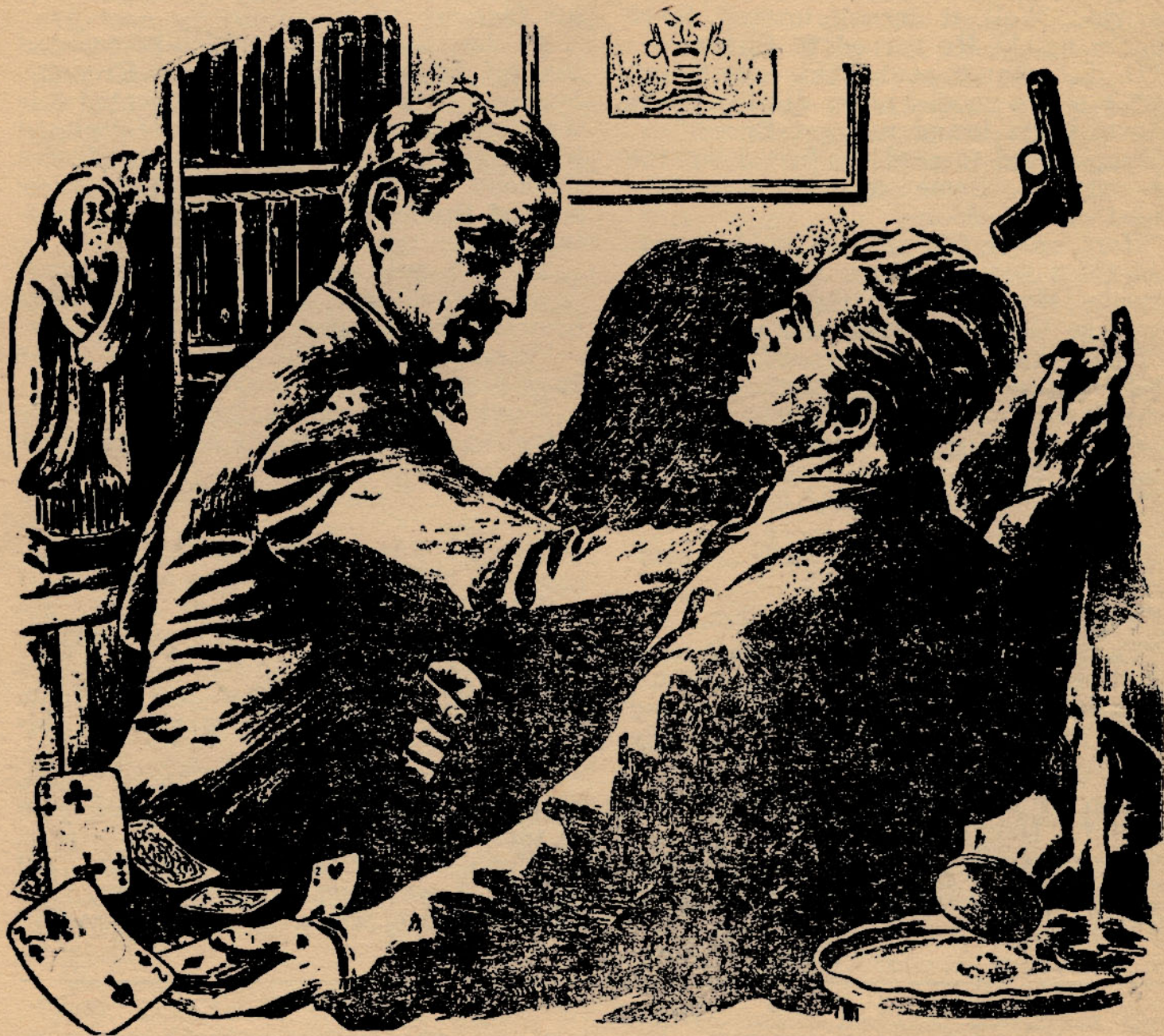
"Remember, dear," she said sweetly, "This picture isn't quite finished yet, and he is the star. We'll need his slimy puss for some closeups, as is. As wife-to-be of the controlling owner of K-T I say we've got to be prudent! Mangle him later, dear!"

I pushed Tanger away and drew Kitty close to me, grinning.

"Anyhow," I said. "Here's one fade-out clinch where the double takes over!" I signaled to Connor. "Let 'em roll, professor!"

Deuces Dealt for Death

By Glenn Low



★ ★ ★

Slitting the throat of the fourth of Clinsey's quartet quarry should be as easy as falling off a log, that vengeance slayer figured. But Clinsey should have known that when success goes to a killer's head, it may be even easier for him to fall from a gallows first.

SO old Joe Marmaduke was blind? Clinsey smiled grimly. Ten years he'd waited for Marmaduke to die, but this was better. Now the old man would soon know the black knife had struck again.

Clinsey eased his foot off the gas, letting the red coupé drift to a stop in front of the Lake City post office. He slipped his lithe body from under the wheel, stretched, smoothed the wrinkles from his clothing, looked around.

Here he was again, for the fourth and final time, to strike the last blow for Happy Charley. He, whom they called the Black Butcher, three times a killer in their midst, the phantom who had faded away leaving three black knives in three white throats, back again!

He could not forego a twinge of apprehension as he recalled his last visit here, when he had struck down the gambler, Simon LeFrage. They had nearly trapped him then. One of them had seen his face—old Joe Marmaduke. But now he was safe, for the old man—the only person in the world who could identify him as the Black Butcher—was blind.

With Marmaduke blind Clinsey could operate freely, safe to wait a right opportunity for leaving black knife number four in Saul Dickson's throat.

"I'm living at the local hotel," Clinsey told the postmaster, "but I'd like to rent a private postbox."

The postmaster produced a postbox rental contract, asked Clinsey his name.

"Percy Clinsey. Occupation, engineer. I'm employed by the Browne Construction Company who is doing the highway resurfacing just north of town."

Clinsey was telling the truth. He was an engineer, though he hadn't followed the profession for years. He was employed by the Browne Construction Company on the highway project. He'd entered the company's employment that morning, and was to begin active work a week hence when the regular engineer was to enter military service.

The postmaster said, "First class outfit, the Browne Company. Saul Dickson knows how to manage an outfit like that, but he's been at it for twenty years. Long enough to learn the ropes, eh?"

"I met Mr. Dickson only yesterday," said Clinsey, "but he impressed me as being an able construction man."

"None better in this man's country," complimented the postmaster. "Everybody thought he went a little too far when he accused Happy Charley Tage of murdering Henry Browne, but it turned out Dickson knew what he was doing. Happy Charley was guilty, all right enough." He assigned Clinsey a box number, handing him a slip of paper containing the box combination.

"I'm a stranger to this state," lied Clinsey. "I never heard of Happy Charley Tage and Henry Browne. Did this murder occur recently?"

"Nope," said the postmaster. "It happened ten years ago. The story's too old for telling."

"Not if it's a good one," said Clinsey, his tone slightly urgent.

"A good one? Well, I guess it's a good one, if you mean by that, is it interesting? The three leading citizens of this town had their throats cut in the space of three nights, because they had testified in court against Happy Charley Tage. Judge Henry Brebaker, Ralph Kuttering, a wealthy merchant, and Simon LeFrage,

a broker, all murdered in their homes in the dead of night. Dickson was to be the fourth victim, but I guess marrying Lona Tage, Happy Charley's widow, saved him. But Lona died last month. Now there's nothing to stand in the way of the Black Butcher, and—"

"The who?" questioned Clinsey.

"The Black Butcher," said the postmaster, his eyes widening in surprise that Clinsey should ask such a question. "But, of course, you're a stranger here. . ." He shook his head gravely. "We called him the Black Butcher because he used a black butcherknife in each of his murders. Nobody ever learned his true name. But old Joe Marmaduke saw his face."

His eyes, troubled and tinged with fear, held Clinsey's a moment. "They say the Black Butcher will return for Dickson, now that Lona is dead and Joe Marmaduke is blind and can't identify him."

Clinsey laughed lightly. "Nonsense," he said. "The Black Butcher, as you call him, is probably dead or in prison by now."

The postmaster shook his head doubtfully. "I guess he's still alive and loose, all right," he said. "He wouldn't return as long as Lona lived and Marmaduke could see, because he isn't truly a killer. An ordinary killer would have returned long ago, killed the man who could identify him, ignoring the woman who had been the wife of his dead friend, then waited his chance to cut Dickson's throat. But the Black Butcher wants only the blood of four men—Brebaker's, Kuttering's, LeFrage's, and Dickson's. And he'll have Dickson's yet. You mark it well, he'll slit Dickson's throat from ear to ear, like the other three."

"I hope it doesn't happen soon," Clinsey said lightly. "I'm to go to work for Dickson, you know. He promises to be a mighty swell boss."

CLINSEY was in his room at the hotel sitting at a desk writing letters when somebody rapped. "Come in," he said, watching the door.

The man who entered was one of the most comical looking persons Clinsey had ever seen. He was small, thinnish, duck-legged, skinny-necked, with a large head that was completely bald. He was smiling a smile that split his face wide open. It was a merry smile, warm and clean.

"Hello," he said. "My name is Baldy Clark." He suddenly produced a package of gum from his coat pocket and held it toward Clinsey. "Have some," he said easily, abandoning his entire face to the smile. He winked at Clinsey. "The stuff's tough to get now. It ought to be. The guy

that does the scrapping ought to have first right to do the chewing."

Clinsey took a stick of gum, bent it into a perfect roll and put it in his mouth. "Thank you," he said amiably. "May I be of some service to you, Mr. Clark? Won't you sit down?"

"No time for sitting down now," said Clark. He continued to smile. Besides being one of the most comical persons he'd ever seen, Clinsey thought him the most friendly. "I just dropped in to welcome you to Lake City," Clark went on. "You see, I'm chief of police around here, and for years it's been customary for me to welcome newcomers. The town council chose me as a—a welcoming committee of one, sort of."

Clark's smile narrowed as he became a little self-conscious. "I was at the post office awhile ago and heard you talking with the postmaster. I—well, I hope you give the Browne Construction Company all you've got in the way of engineering ability, and find it pleasant and convenient to remain with us for a long, long time to come." Clark showed relief at having delivered his little speech. It was evident that he smiled better than he talked.

"Well, thank you!" said Clinsey. "You mean you make it a practice to welcome all strangers in this manner?"

"I don't give them all gum," said Clark. "Some I give cigars. I give handkerchiefs and candy to the ladies. I gave you the gum because the hotel clerk said you used it."

"I'm very fond of gum," admitted Clinsey, smiling lightly, showing interest and amusement.

"Glad to give you some then." Clark was still embarrassed from the effects of what to him had been a long speech and showed signs of wanting to get away. "Well, make yourself at home in Lake City, Mr.—what was the name?" His smile quit suddenly; and it was as if he lifted a false face. Minus the smile his face was solid and a bit bleak, his eyes steady and sad. The smile was absent only a moment, but in that moment Clinsey saw many things. One of them was danger.

"My name is Percy Clinsey," he said coolly.

"Well, welcome to our metropolis," said Clark. The smile was working full time again, the eyes as roguish as an Irish barber's. "Now I'll be letting you alone with your correspondence, Mr. Clinsey," he said. "Good night."

"Cute fellow," Clinsey told himself, making an effort to return to his letter writing. But it was no use. In a minute he gave it up, rose and began pacing the floor. "That fellow Clark is too smart,"

he muttered. After about ten minutes he put on his coat and hat and went out.

He passed Clark in the lobby, nodding to him. Clark said, "Finished with your letter writing so soon, Mr. Clinsey? Making them short but sweet, eh? Well, that's a good method. Many a man has been hanged for writing too much."

Clark, Clinsey decided, was going to prove troublesome. As he walked through the town, enjoying the coolness of the night after what had been a remarkably hot day for early summer, Clinsey decided to make quick work of Dickson and get out of town.

When Baldy Clark wasn't smiling there was something annoyingly familiar about his face.

SOMEBODY had moved Clinsey's letters. He knew how he'd left them because he always left them precisely the same way, stacked neatly, edges even, with the four corners pointing north, south, east and west. It was an old method of his, and now the letters on his desk were out of position. He shrugged lightly. Oh, well, nothing there, nothing anywhere. He didn't leave clues. But he must be on his guard. For some reason, and it worried him not to know why, he was under suspicion.

Before going to sleep Clinsey repledged himself to the destruction of Saul Dickson. "A little longer wait, then you can rest in peace, Charley," Clinsey said. "I'm back now, near Dickson. The last knife is still sharp."

That night Clinsey dreamed that he was cornered, trapped, and that a number of men, swinging clubs, was closing in on him. Leading them was old Joe Marmaduke, not blind at all, pointing a gnarled finger at him, saying, "His is the face! He is the Black Butcher!"

The next day Clinsey spent in his room reading. He went out for lunch and called at the post office for his mail. Renting a box and calling for mail was a sham. He had used it before to create amongst townspeople the feeling that he considered himself a permanent resident.

To his surprise there was a letter in his post box. He worked the combination quickly, without consulting the slip of paper the postmaster had given him with directions for working the box lock. The letter was from the postmaster, telling him when his box rent would be due, stating the fee for a year's rental.

He met Baldy Clark as he left the post office. The chief of police was smiling, his eyes merry. Clinsey had the thought that if Clark was taller and a little more stoutish he'd make a first rate department store Santa Claus come Christmas.

"Hello, Mr. Clinsey," Clark said. "Did you have a good night's rest?"

"Very good," said Clinsey stiffly.

"Glad to hear it," said Clark. "There's an old superstition, you know, concerning first night in a strange bed. All dreams are supposed to come true. I hope you had nice dreams, Mr. Clinsey." He laughed gaily and passed inside the post office.

Clinsey's heart missed a beat as he recalled his dream of the past night. He, in a corner . . . old Joe Marmaduke putting the finger on him . . . naming him the Black Butcher . . .

That evening after a light meal Clinsey took a short walk, directing his steps toward the little house where Joe Marmaduke lived alone. He slowed down as he walked past the unshuttered windows. He could see into the room. There, beneath a reading lamp, a book opened on his knees, sat Marmaduke. Clinsey stood staring into the room for a long minute before he noticed how Marmaduke was tracing the pages with his finger.

"Braille!" whispered Clinsey, relieved. For a minute he'd believed the newspaper account of Marmaduke's blindness was faked, a lie told in public print for the eyes of the Black Butcher, bait to bring the murderer to the hook.

But Marmaduke was certainly blind. His fingers moving back and forth across the Braille proved it. Clinsey walked on, easier in his mind. Two blocks away Baldy Clark suddenly stepped out of a dark alley in front of him.

"Nice evening, isn't it, Mr. Clinsey?" he said, smiling broadly.

"Yes, so it is," agreed Clinsey, hiding as best he could his surprise at seeing Clark.

Clark walked back to the hotel with him. As they parted in the lobby Clinsey was convinced of one thing. He was beginning to be afraid of Clark. This living replica of something out of a comic valentine was smart and dangerous. There was a smug sureness about him that fought to undermine one's self-confidence.

FOR over an hour Clinsey sat in his room without turning on the lights, trying to recall his every act since his arrival in Lake City. Had he made a slip somewhere? Had any of his actions been such as to arouse suspicion? Since Joe Marmaduke's blindness and Lona Dickson's death the town was Black Butcher conscious. Everyone was talking about the ten year old murders, speculating on the possibility of the killer's return.

Clinsey didn't like the prevailing atmosphere. Still, if he worked wisely, it

was the very atmosphere to be desired. The people were expecting an attempt to be made on Dickson's life. All right, give them what they expected at the time they expected it, and it would come as a complete surprise. He'd always had most success when he applied the principles of this reasoning, besides he couldn't afford to stay idle too long. Nerves would stand only so much, even the nerves of the Black Butcher.

He paced back and forth in the dark, his pulse quickening as he traced every step in his plan for cutting Saul Dickson's throat. Somewhere in the outside stillness he heard a clock strike midnight. He stopped pacing, broke open a fresh pack of gum, bent a stick of it into a roll and put it between his teeth. While he massaged it, letting its delicate sweetness flood his mouth, his hand drew the black butcherknife from the sheath at his armpit. He let his thumb move lightly down its blade, sensing the razorlike keenness of the cutting edge, examining the needlelike sharpness of the point.

"Tomorrow night, then," he whispered as if speaking to somebody. "Dickson, I'll get you this time!"

Standing in the darkness his thoughts went back to those last few minutes in the death cell during his last visit with Happy Charley. His words were strong in his memory. "I'll never rest, Charley, until I get the last one of them—Brebaker, Kuttering, LeFrage, and Dickson. Four for one, Charley, and you worth a million of them!"

Happy Charley's words came back to him, "Get them for me, fellow. The dirty rats! Cut their virtuous throats for them. While you're doing it, I'll be with you, in spirit. I'll never let you down."

Clinsey smiled grimly. Well, the blood hunt was about over. Just one of them left, Saul Dickson, businesslike, matter-of-fact, so deeply engrossed in constructing a turnpike that he would not be thinking of death, not until the black knife was at his throat.

The postmaster had said that Charley Tage was guilty. And so they all said, and so he had been. But Brebaker, Kuttering, LeFrage, and Dickson had been equally guilty. They'd all bargained to cut the cards. If any other of them had cut low and gone out and shot down their common enemy, the man who was set to expose their criminal work in doctored concrete, would the others have squealed? Not by a long shot they wouldn't have. The deal had been fixed; the deck had been a deck of deuces.

He knew, didn't he? Happy Charley had stayed free long enough to get possession of the deck. He'd broken into



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Judge Brebaker's house and taken it from Brebaker's desk. If they'd been smart they'd have destroyed that deck. But they'd felt safe, thinking that Happy Charley was alone, a man without friends. Well, so far, three of them knew better than that. Clinsey turned on the light and took the deck of deuces from a secret pocket inside his coat. He rifled the deck, ran out the cards one by one, letting them fall on the writing desk. Three of the deuces were marked with the three names, Brebaker, Kuttering, LeFrage.

He was returning the deck to his coat when somebody rapped on his door. He gritted his teeth, glancing at the clock. It was after midnight. Who?

"Come in," he said lightly.

Baldy Clark entered, smiling cheerily. "Hello, Mr. Clinsey," he said. "I saw your light come on and thought maybe you were lonesome. Thought maybe you'd like a little game of cards?"

"Do you ever sleep?" asked Clinsey.

"Yes, when things are noisy. When things are quiet I stay awake. Noise is safe; silence is dangerous." He stopped smiling for a moment, his face going solid. His merry eyes hardened, and a haggard look stuck in them.

Clark's face without its smile was amazingly familiar to Clinsey. He'd known a face like it somewhere.

"Well," said Clark, "how about the little game? Will it be casino or rummy?"

"Casino," said Clinsey.

They sat down at the writing desk. Clark produced a deck from his coat pocket, handed it to Clinsey for the deal. Clinsey shuffled the cards quickly, began flicking them off the deck with his thumbnail. It was not an economical way to deal, because after so long it scarred the cards, his thumbnail cutting little ridges in the end edges.

They played for three hours, winning an even number of games. Finally Clark took his leave, saying that traffic was beginning to move in the streets again, which cured his insomnia. Clinsey invited him back for another game sometime.

Clinsey slept until noon the next day. When he awoke it was raining. A grim satisfaction welled within him. The nights the other three had died it was raining.

After breakfast he went to the post office for his mail. There was no mail for him, but he met Saul Dickson outside the post office.

Dickson greeted him warmly. "There are some details concerning the work you are to do that need discussing, Mr. Clinsey," he said. "The engineer is leaving day after tomorrow. We three should

get together and talk things over before that time."

Clinsey nodded, "How about tonight? I'm free anytime."

"Tonight will do nicely," said Dickson. "Suppose you come to my apartment at nine. Willets, the engineer, will be there. We'll cover all aspects of your work. Willets will give you all the necessary information."

"Very well. Expect me at nine," Clinsey said.

AT a few minutes of seven, after eating a light meal, Clinsey went to the garage and drove out the red coupé. The suitcases he'd taken to his hotel room were fakes, packed with bundles of waste paper. His clothing had never been removed from the turtleback trunk of his car. He drove into the country a short distance, driving slowly to conserve gasoline and pass the time. He was ringing Dickson's doorbell at nine sharp.

Two and a half hours were taken up with Willets explaining details of the work, then the engineer took his leave. Dickson and Clinsey were alone in the apartment. Dickson brought out a bottle of old wine and two glasses. He poured Clinsey a drink, then himself one. Outside the little town grew quiet as its citizens went off to bed. At midnight Clinsey rose as if to take his leave. Dickson went with him as far as the reception hall.

"I'm alone here most of the time, Mr. Clinsey," Dickson said. "Any evening you feel like stopping in for a visit, do so."

"Thank you," said Clinsey. He was thinking of Baldy Clark then, glad that it was raining. The wet weather would probably keep Clark off the prowl. He reached for the doorknob, then turned quickly to face Dickson. A snub-nosed automatic was in his hand, its snout leveled at Dickson's face.


Dickson paled, his mouth sagged. "Why, Mr. Clinsey, I—"

Clinsey's face was changing to an evil thing. Sight of its transformation clogged the words in Dickson's throat. "We're going to have a little game of cards, Dickson," Clinsey said. The deck of deuces was in his left hand. "You're to have the honor of first cut, low man loses. Loses his life, Dickson!"

Dickson stared at the cards, his face paper white. He made no effort to speak.

"You stood the expense of arranging this deck, Dickson," Clinsey said. "You bought thirteen packs to get fifty-two deuces, because you and your slimy friends couldn't take a chance on anybody else having to kill Henry Browne, president of the Browne Construction

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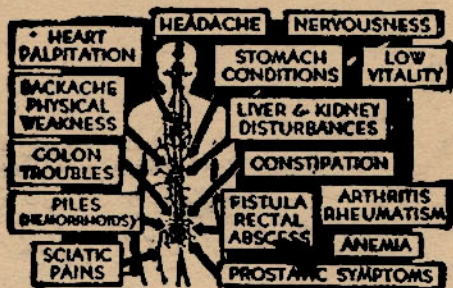
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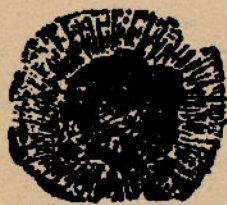
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Company, except Happy Charley Tage."

Dickson said nothing, but his lips began trembling as if he wanted to speak. He looked Clinsey straight in the eyes, stark fear filling his own.

"Browne found out about the rotten concrete you and the directors, Brebaker, Kuttering, and LeFrage, meant to put into the university job. He knew it was loaded with sand. He knew if it went into the university stadium that someday it would crumble, mash out maybe thousands of lives. So you brought in your greenhorn engineer, a boy named Charley Tage, who wasn't too nice to turn a crooked dollar, and who had more guts than brains. You five cut cards, low man to kill President Browne."

Clinsey paused to lick his drying lips. He was smiling grimly. "So you fixed a deck of deuces. LeFrage thought of it. You prepared the deck. Then you four rats extended Happy Charley the honor of first cut. After he turned up a deuce, what need was there for anybody else to cut for a lower card? Then when Happy Charley killed Browne you four double-crossers thought him too dangerous to your safety to be left alive. So you framed him, and the state hanged him."

Clinsey drew a quick breath, licked his lips again. He was holding out the deck of deuces toward Dickson, inching them closer and closer. "But you slipped up twice, you four wise men! Once when you didn't destroy this deck. Again when you figured Happy Charley to be a man without friends. Because I was Happy Charley's friend. We went to the same engineering school together. We were like brothers." For a moment Clinsey's eyes clouded over, then a fiendish expression struck in them.

"Cut, you coward!" he said. "Cut a deuce, you dog! And take what has been coming to you for ten years. Your pretty lies won Happy Charley's widow for you, but you don't have her to shield you now. Cut, Dickson, and lose your life!"

Words came from Dickson at last. He whispered, "You are the Black Butcher. I thought Clark was—"

Clinsey pushed the cards close, touching Dickson's chest with them. "Cut, Dickson!" he hissed.

But Dickson didn't touch them. He went into lightning action, smashing out with his right fist.

He missed Clinsey's chin, but crashed his shoulder. The gun flew from the Black Butcher's hand. The cards went scattering. Dickson smashed out again and missed. Clinsey caught him with a well-aimed right, his knuckles crunching the jawbone. Dickson's eyes blanked.

In a flash Clinsey was on him, the black butcher knife in his hand.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Clinsey!" said Baldy Clark from the hall door. "Wait! Drop that knife or I'll have to blow your brains out!" He was smiling his cherubic smile, his eyes sparkling merrily.

CLINSEY dropped the knife and stood up from Dickson's prone body, glancing at the police positive in Clark's right hand—a hand that was solid and businesslike. "You do get around, don't you, Mr. Clark?" he said.

"Everything was too quiet. I couldn't sleep," said Clark.

Clinsey was tense, alert, as he said, "For the fool you look, you're quite an efficient policeman."

"Not so efficient as you might think," said Clark. "I've been almost nine years working to find out what you just told me in a couple of minutes. I knew all along Charley Tage didn't work solo in the Browne killing, but I couldn't prove a thing. Now with what you just told me the county prosecuting attorney and I will hang Dickson."

"Hang—Dickson?" Clinsey wasn't believing what he heard. He stared his doubt at Clark.

"That's what I said. What do you think I came to this town for—my health? Listen, Clinsey, I've got the sweetest little private sleuthing business built up in Kansas City you ever heard of. I came here and worked like sixty to get to be a policeman just for one reason. Happy Charley Tage was my brother." The smile left Clark's face. For a minute it was sad and a little tired.

"You — Happy Charley's brother!" Clinsey was surprised, but he knew now—that something familiar about Clark's face when he wasn't smiling.

"I knew you were the Black Butcher the minute I saw you at the post office opening your box so easily," said Clark, the smile returning to lighten his face.

"How?" Then he had slipped up . . . then there had been direction behind Clark's annoying interferences. . .

"The postmaster rented you Mr. Kuttering's old box. He didn't notice doing it, but I took account of it. The first time you worked its combination, you did it without a hitch, just like you'd worked it a hundred times. And you had, remember? When you were over here before, collecting the dope on Dickson and his friends, you used to rifle Kuttering's post box? It was in the records that you did, anyway."

Clinsey nodded. Yes, he had learned the combination of Kuttering's box ten years ago. But—

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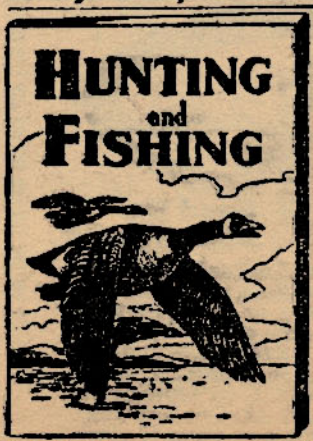
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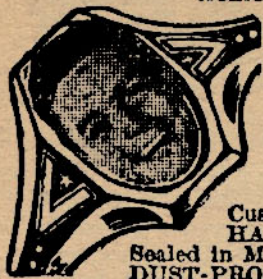
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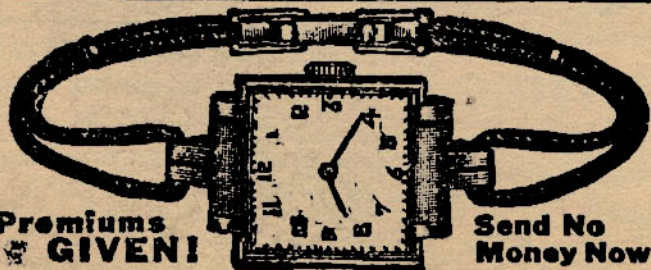
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Clark answered his puzzled frown. "They've made some changes in the furniture down at the post office. The tiers of boxes have been moved. That's why you didn't recognize the box as the one Kuttering used to rent." Clark's smile broadened as he continued, "Then the way you roll your gum before chewing it. A roll of gum like that was found near Brebaker's corpse. It's in the records."

"That's why you gave me gum as a token of welcome?" asked Clinsey.

"Yes. I wanted to see what you'd do with it. I let you ruin a deck of cards for me for the same reason."

"Ruin a deck of cards for you?"

"Yes. You have an ugly way of scarring the ends of cards when you deal. You've no doubt noticed yourself doing it. You do it with your thumbnail—like the Black Butcher did with the deck the night he played cards with Simon Le-Frage before killing him."

"You're smart, Clark," admitted Clinsey. "But having the same blood in your veins as Happy Charley you'd have to be. So, I hate to—" He flung himself at Clark, ducking under the gun, butting his head into the police chief's chest. Clark went down.

Clinsey was on him like a tiger, tearing the gun from his hand. "I can't kill you—not Happy Charley's brother, but—" He picked up the black butcher-knife, keeping Clark covered with the police positive. "You can see a demonstration of how I—"

Suddenly Dickson rolled over, snatched a gun from his coat pocket, and shot Clinsey in the back of the head. It was evident by his ability to act so quickly and accurately that he had been playing 'possum. He swung the snout of the gun, still smoking, in line with Clark's heart. "I'm going to kill you, you little meddler," he said hoarsely.

Clinsey used the last of his ebbing strength to kick the gun from Dickson's hand just as it went off. In the next instant Clark leaped forward and his fist crashed Dickson's face. The construction boss went out for the second time.

Clark used the telephone on the hall stand to summon a doctor, but Clinsey died before the medico arrived. He died in the arms of Happy Charley's brother, Clark "Baldy" Tage, Kansas City detective.

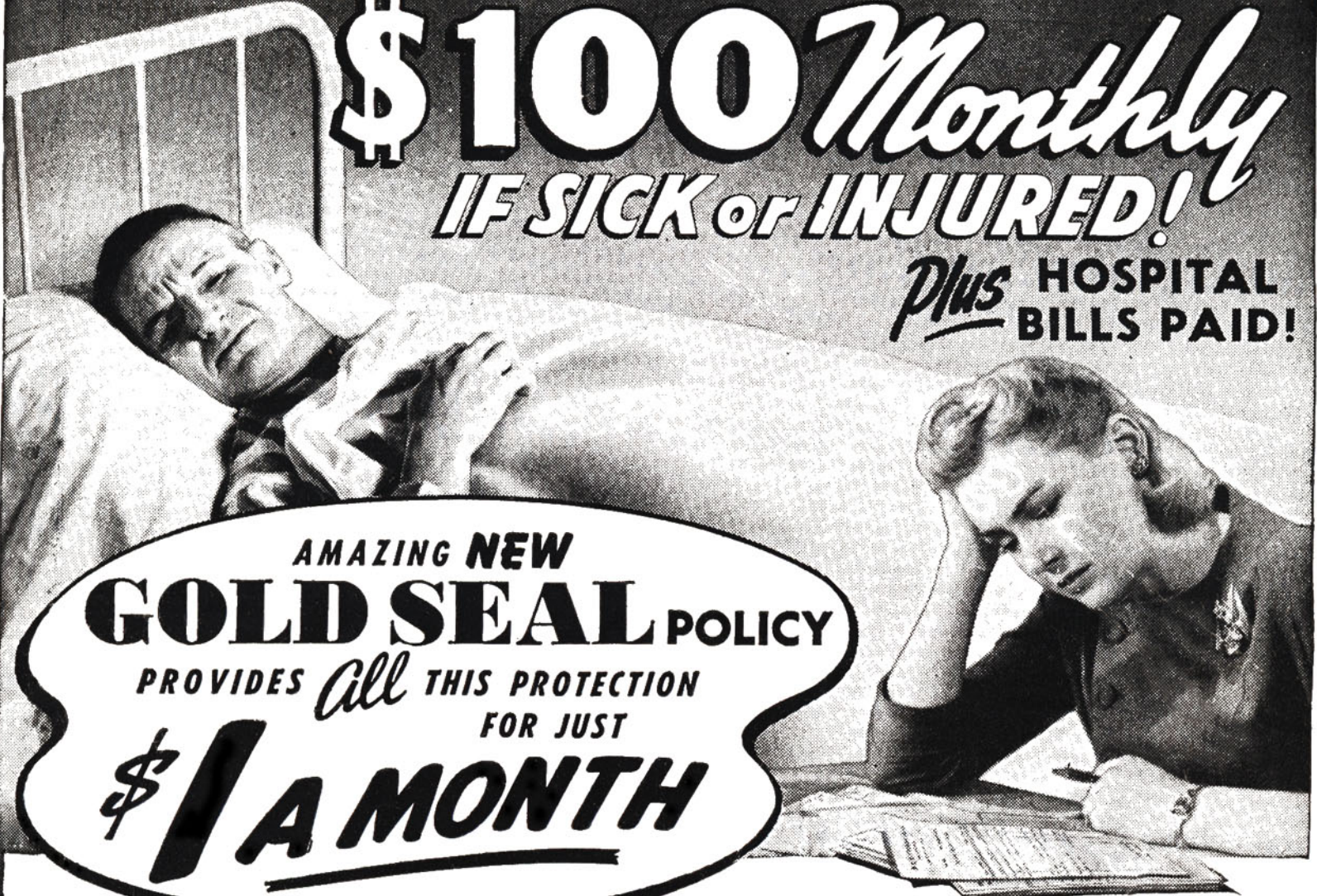
His last words were said with a smile, "You've got plenty of evidence to hang Saul Dickson, Clark, and I know you will."

Then, weakly, "You're smart, Baldy. But not as smart as your brother, Happy Charley. The difference is you're honest-smart, and that's not being just smart. That's being truly wise."

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The SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE CO.
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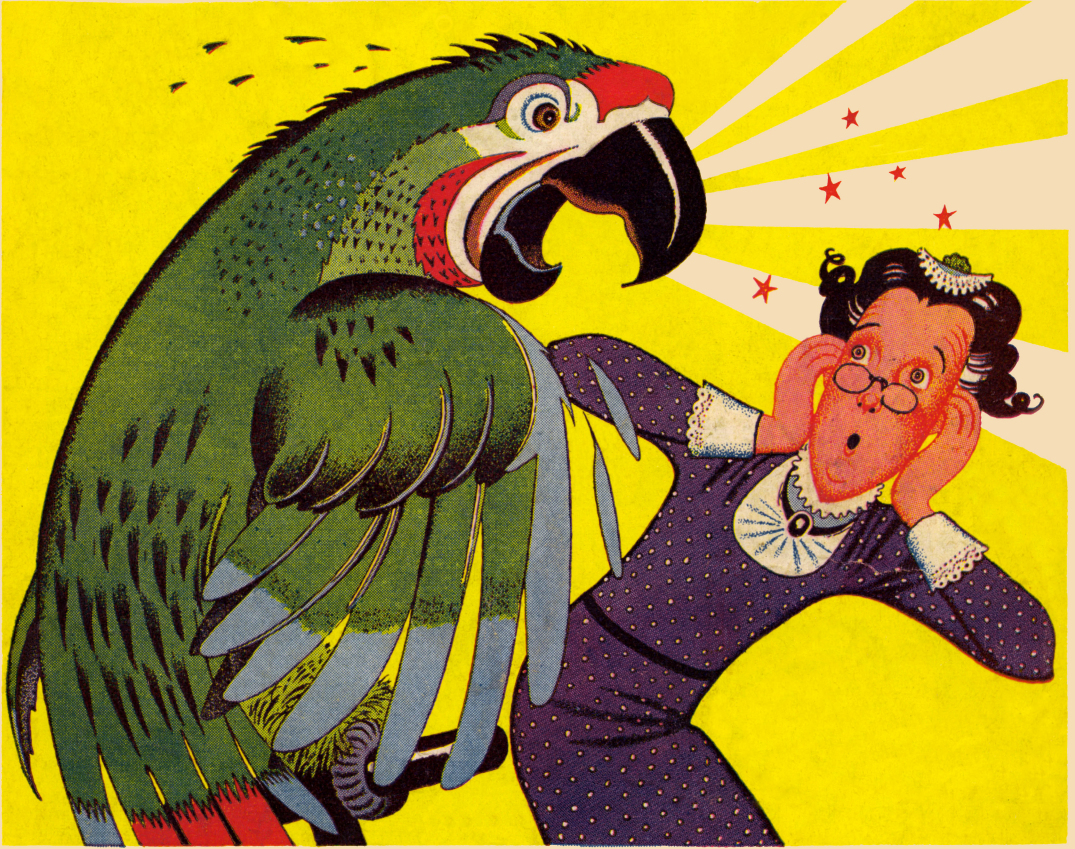
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