

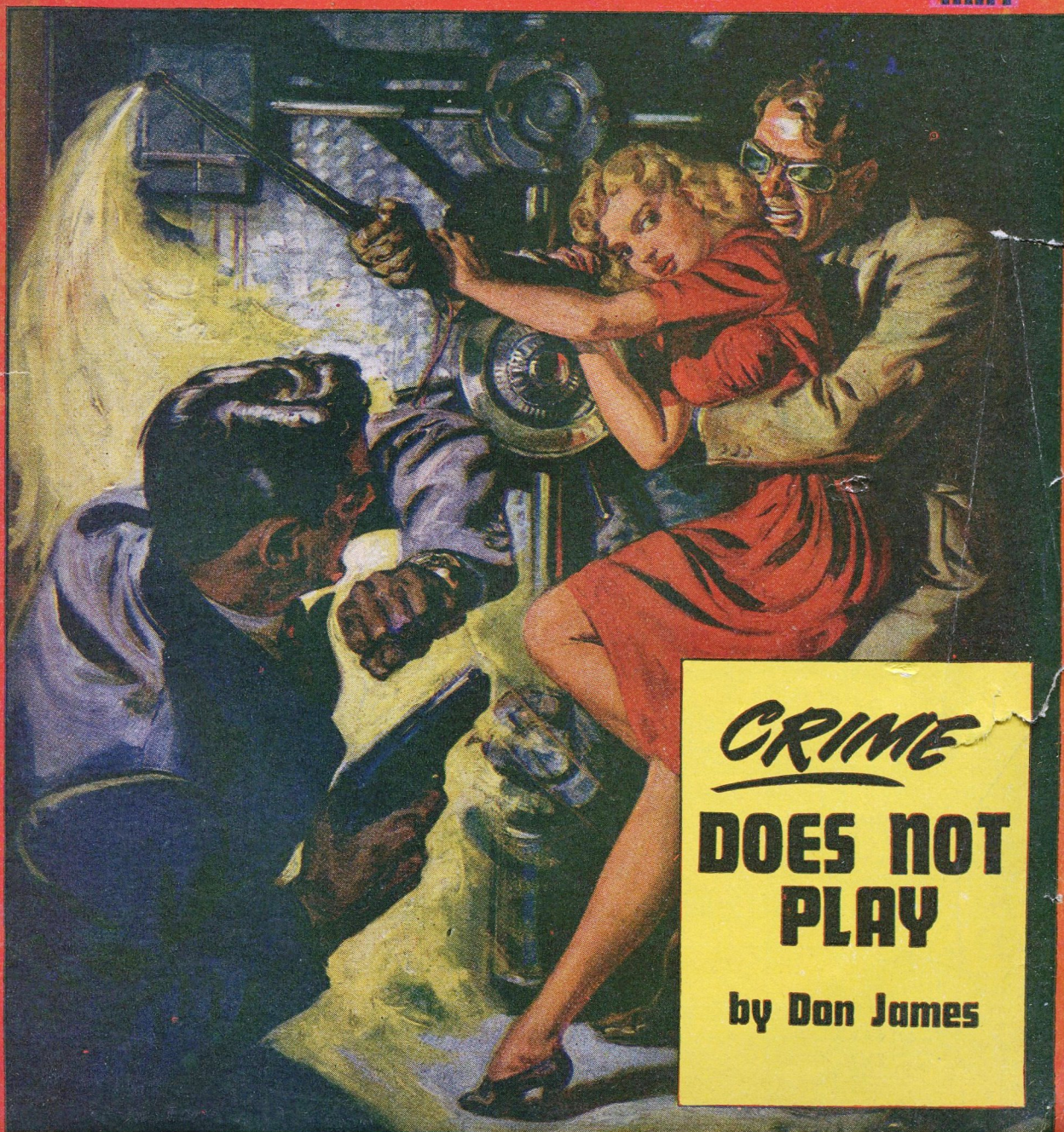
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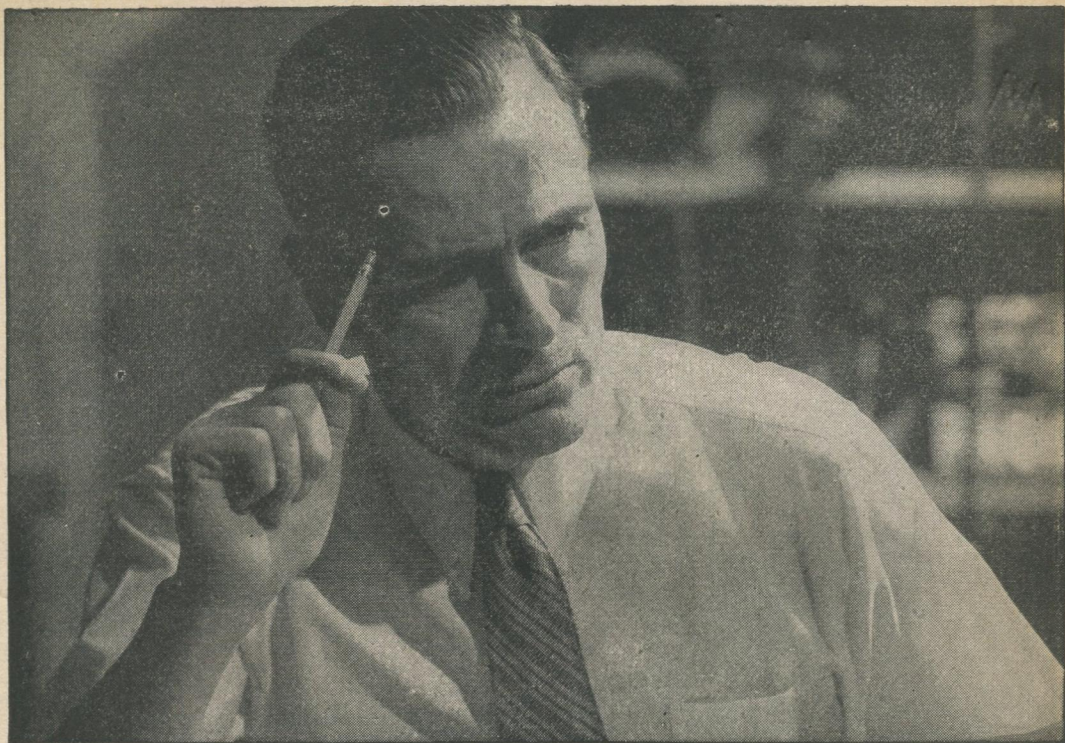
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by Don James



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TEN DETECTIVE ACES



May, 1948

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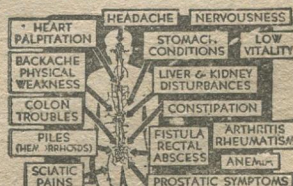
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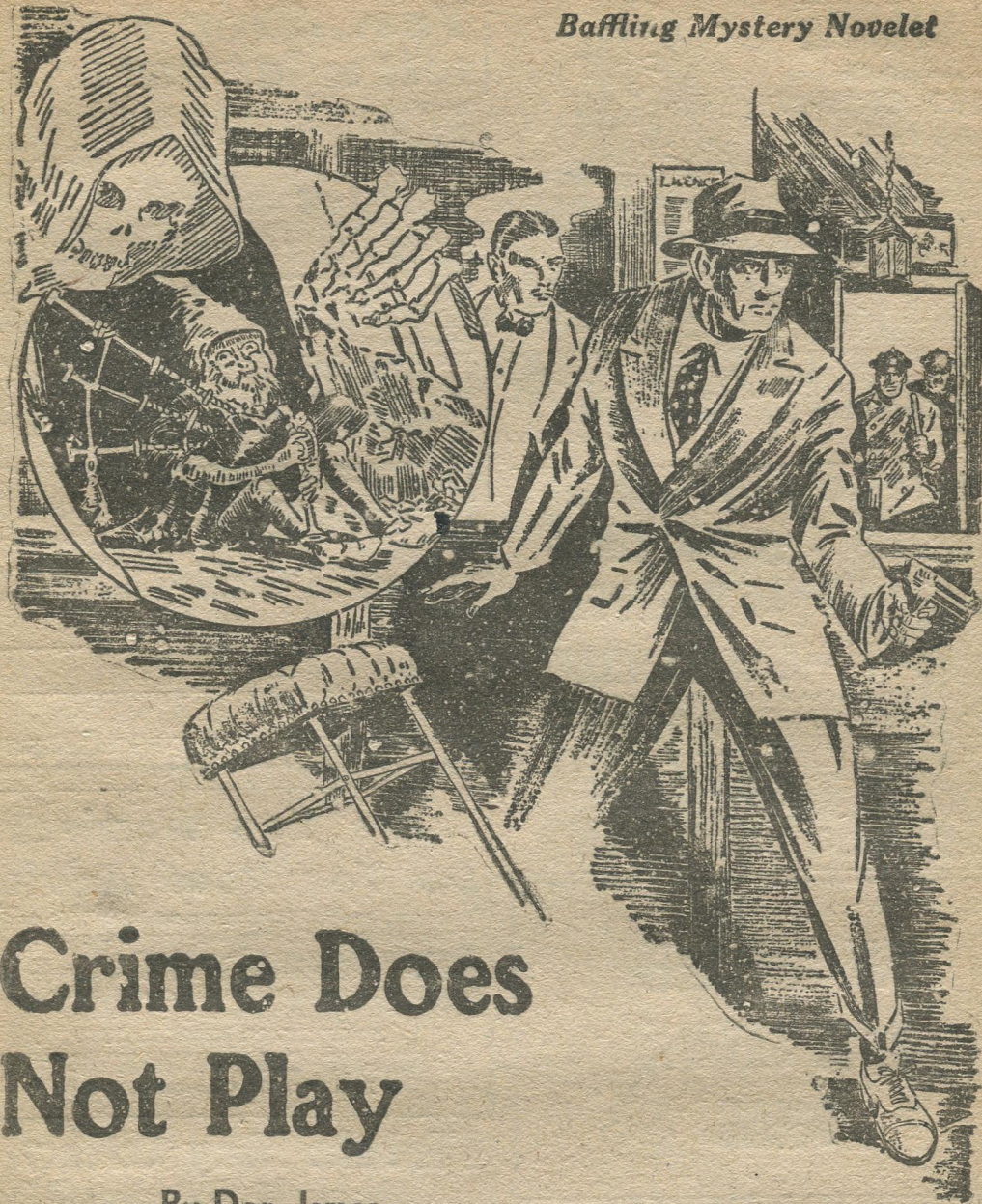
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Crime Does Not Play

By Don James

CHAPTER I

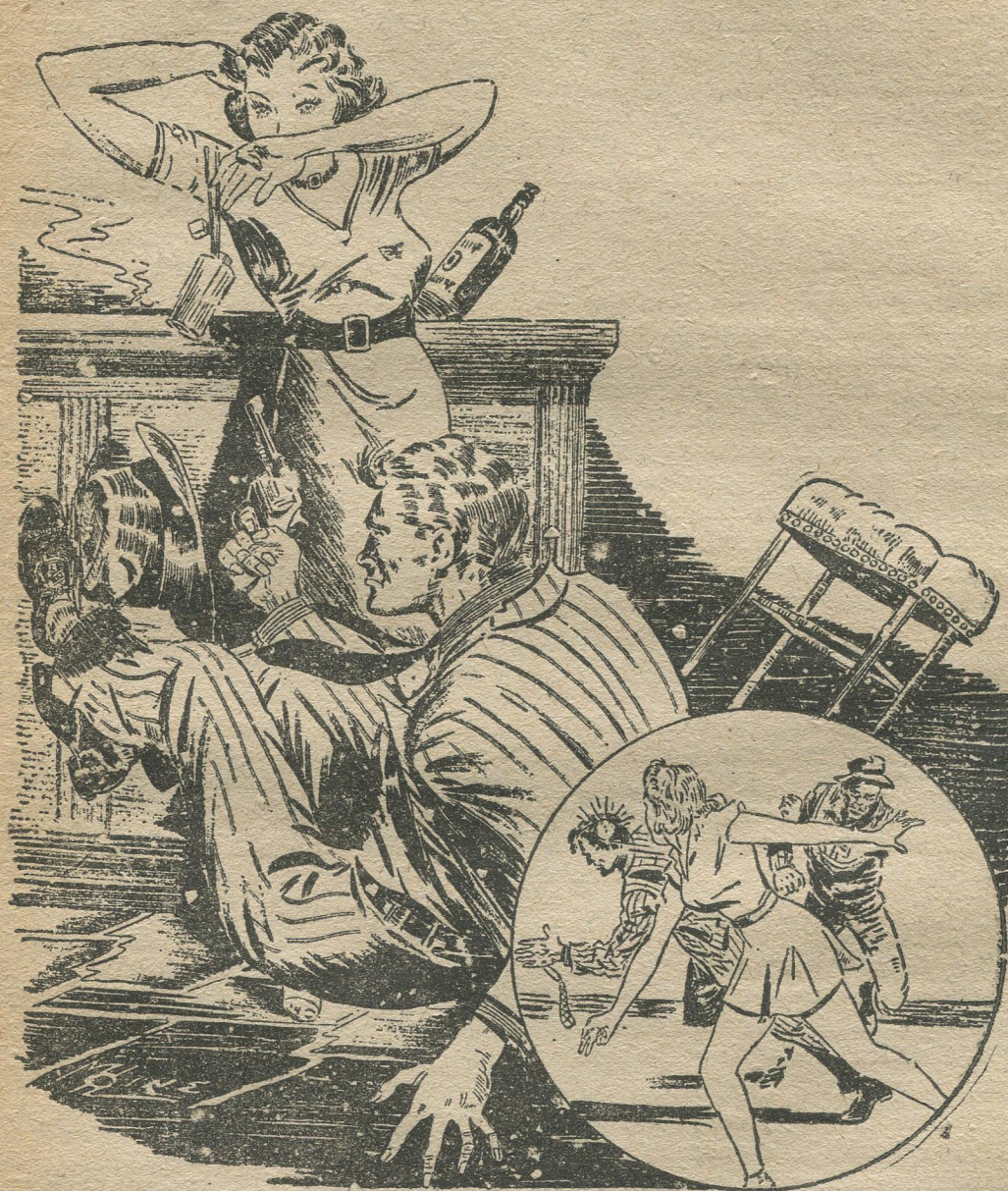
THE house was surrounded by several acres of land out in West Hills and was a one-story, rambling, expensive place with a broad expanse of lawn and a half-moon driveway. It was typical of what the highest priced architects in the Pacific Northwest were doing.

The windows were lighted so I

knew that MacLeod was home. I knew it, anyhow. To some people it might have been outlandish, agonizing, or stridently weird. To me it wasn't. My name is Duncan Ian Bruce. My great-grandfather came from Scotland and I have enough of his blood in me to like bagpipes. MacLeod's playing was music in my ears.

I parked my car in the driveway and marched to the house in time

The way the case began, it seemed to Private Detective Duncan Bruce more of a holiday than a homicide setup. But though things started with bagpipes playing, they wound up with bullets whistling.



with "Cock O' The North." I could even imagine the gathering of the clan in a moonlit Scottish glen.

I rang the doorbell and waited. The bagpipe skirl didn't diminish a single decibel. After a moment the door

opened and a babe wearing a man's sweatshirt and her own shorts smiled at me. It was a first-class smile from white teeth. She had blue eyes, a nice nose, and hair that would have gone well with light maple furniture.

Some of her hair had fallen over one eye and she pushed it back with a left hand that displayed a wedding ring.

For some reason I hadn't expected to find anyone young and lovely in the house. Or maybe she was MacLeod's daughter. I'd never met him. I didn't know if he was young or old.

"Is this the MacLeod residence?" I asked.

"You're Duncan Bruce," she said. "Come in. Jock's practicing on his bagpipe."

SHE took me into a spacious beamed living room. A fireplace took up most of one end. There was plenty of knotty pine and rugged furniture. In front of the fireplace a tall, young man with sandy hair marched back and forth with the bagpipe. He too wore shorts, but was shirtless. He was barefooted. Sweat glistened on his forehead and muscled shoulders. The music was simply terrific.

He saw us and his piping stopped with a mournful howl. Suddenly it was so quiet I felt as if I'd just committed a *faux pas* at a Ladies' Aid meeting. Then the girl spoke.

"Jock, here's your private detective." She glanced at me and smiled again. "Or is it 'private eye'?" she asked.

"Op," I said.

The tall young man got rid of the bagpipe and came toward me with a smile that broke into friendliness like a St. Bernard welcoming his master in the morning.

"You've already met my wife, Nelly," he said in a reverse-English introduction. He gave me a paw of a hand and put an arm around his wife. "She's been in the basement pitching."

"Oh?" I said politely, smothering a double-take.

"She always wanted to be a big-league pitcher," he explained. "Wrong sex. No dice. She's got a deal fixed up in the basement and pitches a few

innings every day. Sometimes we go out on the lawn and I catch. She has a good slider and control. Her fast ball is amazing for a biddy."

Jock MacLeod released my hand to let circulation revive. "How about a drink?" he asked. "Scotch, of course. That's why I picked your name in the classified section of the phone book, Scotch. I didn't know you'd be quite so young, or maybe you aren't. Thirty?"

"Thirty-four," I admitted. "Six feet two, one ninety pounds, grey eyes, red hair, unmarried, licensed detective." They seemed to expect that kind of an answer.

They exchanged significant glances and nodded in unison. "In keeping," Nelly MacLeod said. She looked up at me. "We only like people in keeping with the way we are. You're in keeping."

"Thank you."

MacLeod had gone to a cabinet and was pouring Scotch. He waved us to chairs and distributed the drinks. It was very good whiskey with a scarcity of soda. Nelly MacLeod shut her eyes and tasted it with pleasure. MacLeod drank half of his and thoughtfully gazed at his bare feet. He wiggled his toes and finished his drink.

"I had an uncle named Rory MacLeod," he said. "He died last year and left me a couple of million bucks. I was an engineer for a construction outfit in South America. Nelly and I used to talk about what we'd do if we had plenty of money, and now we're doing it. I always wanted to play the pipes."

"That's only one of the things," Nelly said.

Jock grinned. "We've been having a hell of a good time. Nelly made a parachute jump last week."

"Jock worked a month as a bouncer in a nightclub," she said. "That's where he met Noel Gerski. Noel was playing piano there. We made him live with us a couple of weeks, but he wouldn't stay. He didn't like Jock's piping."

Jock got up, filled our glasses and sat down again.

"Noel disappeared last week," he said. "We're afraid something has happened to him. Want the job?"

"You mean finding him, or what happened to him?"

They both nodded.

"I charge twenty-five a day and expenses. A hundred-dollar retainer on a deal like this."

"Trivia!" Jock snorted. "Five hundred retainer, fifty a day, and expenses."

"It isn't necessary."

NELLY opened her eyes and blinked. "He's ethical!" she said. "Tell him he can stay here until he finishes the case. That way we'll be the base of operations and know what makes."

Her husband said, "We have four unused bedrooms, swimming pool, horses, tennis court, and maid service. Nelly's right. If you take the job, you stay here."

"What can I lose?" I asked.

"Nothing, except maybe your life," Jock said. "Noel had some lousy acquaintances."

"Had? You're fairly certain something has happened to him?"

A cloud crossed his expression and was reflected by his wife.

"We hope not, and we're trying to think not, but we're plenty worried."

We drank up and Jock collected the glasses again for refills.

"Why did you work as a bouncer?" I asked.

He grinned sheepishly. "I like brawls. Things were getting dull. Do you want me to brief you on Noel now, or wait until morning?"

"Now."

He wiggled his toes some more in thought and said, "Noel came out of the White Russian colony in San Francisco. He's in his forties. Came over from Siberia in the first World War. He's a good pianist—not good enough for concert, but too good for run-of-the-mill stuff. He ended up

playing around at night clubs. He does pretty well giving long hair stuff a modern haircut. He was working for Bill Rettes in the Brimstone Club when I went to work there. We became friends."

I nodded. "Describe him."

Jock went to a desk and returned with a snapshot. The man in the picture stood beside Nelly. He was two inches shorter than she, and he looked as if he didn't weigh much. He had dark, wavy hair. His face was aesthetically thin with a narrow, long nose and a mouth that looked sensitive. His eyes obviously were dark and they were as gentle as a doe's. He held a cigarette in one hand and it played up long, graceful fingers. He was smiling a nice smile that made you like him.

"You'd better keep the picture," Jock said.

"How do you know he's disappeared?"

"This is Wednesday. Last Thursday he called up and said he'd spend Sunday with us. He didn't show. We thought he might be in, so I went to his apartment at the Parkrose. He wasn't there and hadn't been around since Thursday."

"I checked with Bill Rettes. Bill says that Noel simply didn't come to work—no call, no explanation. He was a little worried, too. Between us we got in touch with some of Noel's friends and discovered that some of them were as concerned as we were."

Nelly said, "Late this afternoon we decided to find a private detective and put him on Noel's trail. Another drink, please, Jock."

It was getting to be a ritual the way he got up, filled the glasses, sat down, and wiggled his toes. This time he was at the toe-wiggling stage when we heard a car in the driveway. Jock and Nelly looked at each other and Nelly shrugged. The doorbell rang and Nelly said she'd get it.

"Maid's night off," Jock explained as Nelly went out.

We heard the door open and voices

and then Nelly called, "Jock—you and Mr. Bruce come here." Her voice sounded a little shaky.

We went to the door and looked at two men. They were dressed in neat, dark suits and they looked as pleasant and solicitous as two salesmen selling girdles in an old ladies' home. The taller one spoke softly and sympathetically.

"We're from More, Batson, Hale and O'Dowd, morticians, in response to your call about the deceased."

Jock stared at them with wide eyes.

"What deceased?"

THE tall, pleasant man suddenly looked worried. He consulted a slip of paper. "Why, the body of Noel Gerski. We received a call less than an hour ago to come after the body of Noel Gerski at the home of Jock MacLeod at this address. You are Mr. MacLeod, aren't you?"

"Yes, but someone's ribbing us. We didn't call."

The tall young man looked angry. "Poor taste," he snapped. "About twice a year someone pulls this gag. We apologize, Mr. MacLeod."

"That's all right," Jock said. "Sorry it happened. But there's nobody here."

We watched them retreat to their ominous funeral coach, then Jock shut the door. Nelly looked as if she had put too much powder on her face and her eyes were frightened. Jock put his arm around her and took a deep breath.

"I'm going to sock somebody on the jaw," he said.

Nelly said, "I'm scared."

We returned to the living room and the Scotch. Jock hardly had poured the drinks when a telephone rang. It was on a table near the door. He started toward it and I stopped him.

"Where's an extension?" I asked.

"I've got a hunch and I want to listen in. I'll hang up if I'm wrong."

Jock didn't argue. He nodded to Nelly who took me across the hallway into a den. I waited until I heard Jock

answer in the other room and then I lifted the receiver. Nelly had her ear next to mine.

A voice that sounded as if it might be muffled through a handkerchief spoke.

"MacLeod, is it worth fifty grand to you if they don't have to come back and pick up Noel Gerski's body from your lawn?"

Jock was cagey. "He isn't anything to me."

"That's right. Just a friend. But if you don't kick through, you'll know that you killed him. That isn't a nice thing to live with the rest of your life. Knowing you could have saved his life by paying some dough you don't need."

"Pay whom?"

"You give the dough to your wife—five hundred century notes and they've got to be old and not in sequence. We'll check them for markings before we turn Noel loose. Any tricks and you get his body like you don't want it."

"Then what?"

"Have your wife get a big enough bag to lug the dough wherever she goes. Tell her to go shopping every day. Alone. In big crowds. Carry the dough. We'll do the rest."

The telephone clicked in our ears. Nelly and I returned to the living room and Jock had replaced the telephone and was looking thoughtfully at the dead instrument.

"Psychology," he said.

"Sure," I nodded. "He knows you're a soft touch. You'll kick in fifty grand to save Noel's life. The kidnaper sent those undertakers out here. He's smart."

"Any ideas?" Jock asked.

"Tell me about some of the lousy acquaintances Noel has."

"I don't know where to start."

Nelly spoke. "I do. That woman he's been chasing."

Jock looked at her. "Mae Soma?"

She nodded vigorously. "I never did trust her."

"Feminine prejudice," Jock grunt-

ed. He looked at me. "Mae runs a beer joint. Nelly doesn't like her."

"Not for Noel," she said primly.

"It's a place to start," I suggested. "Want me to stick our necks out?"

"If you can do it without tipping anyone that we've hired you. Somehow I don't trust that guy who phoned. I'm afraid we might pay the dough and still get Noel's body on the lawn."

They told me where to find Mae Soma's beer joint and I drove back to town. It was after midnight when I parked near the place and went in.

CHAPTER II

IT WAS no ordinary beer joint. The Neon sign flashed *Red Coach Tavern*. The tavern was fixed up to resemble some one's idea of what an old English tap room or tavern should resemble. The tables were solid and heavy; the ceiling had rough-hewn beams; and there was a display of hunt scenes on the walls. There even was a game of darts and the barmaids wore laced bodices.

I went to the bar and sat on an ancient-looking stool. A beefy, ruddy bartender took my order for beer and I looked around at the good crowd they had.

He brought the beer and rang up my money. When he brought change I shoved it to him and asked, "Is Mae here?"

He nodded toward a wide door and I noticed, for the first time, the adjacent room that carried out the interior decoration motif, and had a massive brick barbecue fireplace and booths. A tired-looking man was stroking slices of rare beef from a huge roast.

"She's eating," the bartender said. "Last booth on the right."

I thanked him, finished my beer, and went in search of Mae Soma.

She was eating a sandwich and had a bottle of ale beside her plate. She wore a tweed suit that hadn't come from a bargain basement, and

she looked small and well-curved and pretty.

I stopped beside her and looked down at smoothly combed black hair. She glanced up and I saw very fine wrinkles about her eyes. They indicated the thirties instead of the twenties, but they were the only indications. She smiled and in a throaty voice said, "Yes?"

"You're Mae Soma?"

She nodded and put her sandwich down. I asked permission to sit opposite her and she nodded again.

"I'm looking for Noel Gerski," I said. "Some friends at Rettes' place told me that you see him often. I thought maybe you could tell me where to find him."

"Oh?" She continued to smile at me without a change in expression. Then she picked up her sandwich and took a neat bite with small, even teeth. "Is it important?"

Before I could answer, a thick, heavy-set man wearing a grey suit and snap brim hat over small eyes came to the booth. He gave me a hard look and then addressed Mae Soma.

"No dice," he said.

"All right," she told him. "I'll talk with you later."

He looked at me again and walked back toward the tap room.

"Now about Noel," she said. "Is it important?"

My answer had to be as far away from the MacLeods as I could make it, so I said, "I'm from an advertising agency. We have a client interested in using him on a radio spot. It's a thirteen-week contract at good money, but we have to know if we can get him by tomorrow."

"What agency?" she asked.

"That isn't important."

"It's just that I could tell him to get in touch with you if I see him," she smiled. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

I admitted that it was.

"Then what agency?"

I took a chance. "Dunbar and Eagan. But if you know where I can

reach him, it will be better. I have to close this tonight."

"Just a moment," she said.

SHE got up and left me. I smoked a cigarette and began to get nervous. The man in the grey suit came in and ordered a sandwich. He took it to a booth where he could watch me. His eyes weren't friendly.

Mae Soma returned, sat down, took another bite and a sip of ale.

"I just checked the telephone directory," she said. "There is no Dunbar and Eagan listed. I called a friend who's been in the business twenty years. He's never heard of the firm—and he'd know. You ought to check those things."

I shrugged.

She drank more ale and put the glass down. "Are you a cop?" she asked.

"Why?"

"Noel's disappeared. I'm looking for him, too." Her eyes hardened and she lit a cigarette with precise, angry motions. "I may as well start spreading the news. Maybe you can help. Noel disappeared with three diamond rings. They're mine and they're worth about ten thousand dollars, but I haven't reported it yet. I'm a sucker, but I've been fond of Noel. Now—who are you?"

I thought about that. "I'm an investigator. Sometimes I handle bad credit accounts. Gerski owes a client of mine some money. I'm trying to collect it. My name is Duncan Bruce."

"That's better," she said and looked at the man in the grey suit. He stood up and came over. "Mike Ballin," she said to me. "Duncan Bruce," she repeated my name to him. "He's looking for Noel, Mike. Tell him what we've learned."

Mike Ballin gave her a troubled glance. "Level with him?"

"Why not? Maybe he can help."

Ballin sighed and directed his eyes toward me again.

"You know Yuma Fleg?" he asked.

"Nothing good," I said flatly.

"Policy games, the protection racket, anything that can turn a fast dollar for him."

"Gerski went to a party at Fleg's apartment Thursday night. A dame we know saw him there. She hasn't seen him since. I talked with her again tonight."

"That's all?"

"Yes."

"The girl doesn't know what happened to him?"

"No."

"Any objections if I talk with her?"

Ballin looked at Mae Soma. She shrugged permission. He said, "Her name is Flo Hartzell. She's a cigarette girl at Bill Rettes' club. Lives at the Marmot."

One of the laced-bodiced waitresses came to the table and said, "Is a Mr. Bruce here?"

I said he was.

"Phone," she said.

I took the call in a booth. It was Jock MacLeod. "Do you know someone tailed you from here?" he asked.

"How do you know?"

"We watched you drive away and came inside. Then I thought maybe you'd like a pint with you and went out to call you, but you'd left. Just then a car started down the road, snapped on lights and went after you."

"Someone probably sat there to check if the undertakers made the call, saw my car and got curious. Thanks."

"Don't forget you're sleeping here," he said. "We'll leave the back door unlocked. Just walk in. See you then." He hung up.

I returned to the booth, but Mae Soma and her helper had gone. I found Mae in the tap room. She gave me a smile and said, "Let me know if you find Noel. I want my diamonds."

I looked around the place and wondered if someone was watching me. "Sure," I told her. "I'll keep in touch with you."

I walked out of the place feeling eyes on my back. I got in my sedan and reached for the starter. A trip hammer hit me on the back of the head and a Roman candle exploded in front of my eyes. I guess it was dark after that. I don't know. . . .

IT WAS very cold and I was uncomfortable. I opened my eyes and blinked into the grey of false dawn. The odor of heavy dew on green shrubbery closed over me and the windshield was misted from my breathing.

Very carefully I straightened up behind the wheel and ran an exploring hand to the back of my head. It was a good-sized lump and an ache pounded behind my eyes. I looked outside the car. I was parked off a country road in heavy brush.

Someone must have been in the back of the car when I got in after leaving Mae Soma's place. Someone with a blackjack. I wondered who had tailed me from MacLeod's.

I suppressed an involuntary shudder and took a quick look over my shoulder. Then I shuddered again and forgot the ache behind my eyes.

A young blond girl was on the back seat. Her blouse was torn, her hair was mussed, her skirt was awry. There was a scratch on her cheek and a mark on her forehead. There also was a neat set of finger marks at her throat and her face was unpleasant to see. She had been strangled.

A small warning sign began to flash in my mind. "Circumstantial evidence!" If I called the cops out there, they had only two things to believe. The truth, and the sordid theory that I'd brought the girl out there, had ideas, probably was drunk, and—the circumstantial evidence was all there. They could fit a motive to it. Any of several. I didn't think they would believe the truth. I shook my head and tried to clear it, but a dull grogginess persisted.

She was stretched out on the seat, her nice, rounded legs trailing over

the edge. I decided that no one would notice her from a passing car.

Turning my eyes away, I looked for the key in the ignition lock. It was there. I turned it and started the car. I drove along the deserted road five minutes before I oriented myself. I was about two miles from MacLeod's place. I headed there and drove to the back of the house. The door was open and I went into a hallway and shouted, "Wake up!"

In a few moments they came out of another hallway looking sleepy and tousled. They had dressed in shorts again and this time Nelly wore a sweater. The sweatshirt hadn't done her justice, I thought.

"Breakfast ready?" Jock asked.

"You put some coffee on," I told his wife, discovering that my voice was husky. "Jock, you come with me."

"We'll both go with you," Nelly said.

"No. Jock first. If he wants you then, that's up to him. You're his wife."

"That's what the man said," Jock told her and pushed her toward the kitchen.

I led Jock to the car and showed him the girl. He stared at her for a half moment and then gave me a hard look.

"What's the idea?" he snapped.

"I didn't do it," I snapped back. Briefly I told him what had happened and displayed the bump on my head. He seemed to be satisfied and looked at the girl again.

"She was a good kid," he said.

"You know her?" I asked, surprised.

"She's Flo Hartzell. One of Bill Rettes' cigarette girls."

We both stared at her and didn't hear Nelly approach us until she spoke.

"That's the most awful thing I ever saw in my life," she said tightly. "It's that girl from Rettes' place, isn't it, Jock?"

"I thought you were getting cof-

fee," I said, sorry she had to see it.

"I was, but Bill Rettes is here to see Jock. He looks awfully worried about something."

"You'd better stall him until we can—" I was too late. The back door opened and Bill Rettes' stocky body stood there.

CHAPTER III

RETTEs looked at us solemnly from limpid brown eyes and absent-mindedly ran a hand over his bald head. If you looked at his eyes, you wouldn't think he could be very tough. If you looked at his thick body and his hands, you changed your mind.

He walked to us and without saying a word he looked into the car. The brown eyes narrowed and he slowly turned and faced us. The eyes swung to Nelly, to Jock, to me.

"I don't know you," he said.

"Duncan Bruce," I told him. "Private detective." It was no time for evasions.

"You bump Flo?" he asked in a clipped, dangerous voice.

"No."

"Your car?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to call the cops."

"Like hell you are," I said. "Not until I've had time to think."

"That's right," Jock supported me. "There's more to this than you—"

"I've seen enough," Rettes said and put his hand into a pocket, bringing out a gun. He pointed it at us and stepped back a few feet. "I don't know what this is all about, but one of my girls has been bumped in that car and I'm calling the cops."

Nelly sighed and said, "Now, Bill!" in a tired voice and took a step toward him. "Be sensible, Bill. You've got to listen to them."

Suddenly she was between Rettes and us and he started to sidestep so that he could get the gun on us again.

Nelly moved with lightning speed. Something happened in a brief scuffle

and confusion of bodies, then Rettes was flat on his back and yelping with pain. Nelly had the gun.

"It worked!" she said exultantly to Jock. "It worked, Jock!"

He looked a little frightened and took a deep breath. "She's been taking lessons in judo for three months," he explained to me. "This is the first chance she's had to really use it."

He took the gun from her and, having no pocket, he handed it to me. He went over and helped Rettes up. "Without a gun you haven't a chance, Bill," he said in a friendly voice. "Relax. Why did you come out here?"

Rettes ignored him and stared at Nelly. "Where did you learn to do that?" he demanded.

"A veteran who helped train Rangers," she said. "He runs a gym and health center down town. I know how to paralyze you, too."

"Never mind," Rettes said hurriedly. "You people say you want to talk. Well, talk. I liked Flo. She was a good girl. I'm going to tell this part to the cops, too."

"Why did you come here?" Jock asked again.

Rettes hesitated, glancing at the car again, scowled, and finally said, "I've got to find Noel."

Jock nodded sagely. "So do I. That's why Bruce is helping me. Why do *you* have to find him?"

"Because someone is putting the slug on me. Says he'll bump Noel and leave him at the club door if I don't cough up ten grand."

Jock stared at him. "Why should you care if he's bumped?" he asked in a puzzled voice.

Suddenly Bill Rettes looked deflated. He got out a handkerchief and wiped his bald head.

"Because he's my wife's cousin—that's why!"

Jock looked at me and I nodded. "We might as well spread it out to everyone involved."

"They want *fifty* grand from me," Jock said. "I hired Bruce. I guess he'd better tell us what he's learned."

Quickly and in detail I told them what had happened. Rettes scowled when I mentioned Yuma Fleg. "That rat!" he said. "Maybe we got something there."

"In the meantime," I reminded them, "we have to decide what to do about Flo Hartzell. I'm in a spot. The cops won't believe me."

I WAS beginning to wish that I'd gone after the cops just after I came to. I must have been groggy from the rap I'd taken to drive away with her. As bad as it looked, the truth was better than trumping up a phony deal with the body. But it was too late to think about that now. I hadn't called the cops.

"If we get the cops and tell them the whole story, Noel's going to end up in that undertaker's wagon," I said. "On the other hand, I don't intend to ride in one myself until it's from natural causes. If you've any ideas how I can give this kid to the cops and keep Noel, as well as myself, out of it, I'll listen."

No one spoke and I thought about it hard. My head was getting clearer. I began to use common sense.

I didn't like what I was going to do, but it had to be done. I opened the back door to the car and took the girl's arm and tried to lift it. The muscles were stiff. I reached for one of the nylon-slick legs and lifted. It was stiff too.

I turned back to the small group that watched me. Nelly's eyes were wide again and she looked pale about the mouth. Jock's mouth was set. Rettes looked unhappy.

"Rigor mortis," I explained. "The legs are rigid—that indicates it's practically complete and means eight to twelve hours since she was killed. Maybe longer. The body usually is enveloped in about eighteen hours. It's seven-ten now. I left Mae Soma's place at one o'clock. Several people saw me leave there."

"Then you have an alibi for the time she was killed?" Jock asked.

"Maybe. But I have to explain how she got in my car without tipping the cops about Noel in the explanation."

Jock looked at Rettes. "Listen, you're in this with us. You'll play ball?"

Rettes finally nodded.

Jock said, "You and I test the body for rigidity to verify what Dunc found. Then if there's trouble, we can be his witnesses."

"What are you getting at?" Rettes asked.

"I know the road where they parked Dunc. I'll drive his car there. You follow in your car and bring me back. Dunc calls the cops and reports that his car has been stolen. Let them find it and guess what's happened."

"I think we ought to get the cops here," Rettes objected.

"And have Noel bumped off?" Nelly asked. "What would your wife say?"

"Okay, okay!" he barked nervously. "I'll do it."

Jock led him to the car and they verified my findings about the condition of the body. Jock got in the car and wheeled it toward the highway. Rettes went to his car in the front and drove after him. Nelly and I watched them drive away.

When they were out of sight we went to the kitchen and she poured black coffee and set out rum for lacing purposes.

"Why didn't you come out and say it?" I asked.

She stopped pouring rum into her cup and gave me a startled glance. "Say what?" she asked.

"That you think Noel may have killed that girl."

She just stared at me, but she bit nervously at a lip.

I continued, "You think Noel is at the bottom of the whole thing. That he may have killed Flo Hartzell and has kidnapped himself."

"Then you noticed them, too?" she asked breathlessly.

CHAPTER IV

"Certainly. When I moved her arm. Three diamond rings on that hand. You're guessing and so am I that they're Mae Soma's diamonds, but it's probably a good guess. Too many things tie in to indicate anything else. You think Noel gave them to her and then for some reason killed her?"

She made her coffee a little stronger with the rum.

"But you're wrong." I said. "You're not thinking clearly. It was a shock to you and you're jumping at conclusions. If Noel copped Mae's diamonds and gave them to Flo, he wouldn't leave them on her fingers after he killed her. It doesn't make sense. First, because he'd know it would tag him to the murder. Second, if he stole the diamonds, he wouldn't be so careless as to let them get away from him that way. No thief would."

She sighed and sat back in her chair. "I didn't think Noel could do that," she admitted. "But it still doesn't explain the diamonds."

"Robbery certainly wasn't the motive for her murder. My guess is that she knew something. Because she was dumped in my car, it looks as if it was something about Noel. According to Mike Ballin, Mae's little helper, Flo Hartzell saw Noel at Yuma Fleg's apartment. And don't forget that someone tailed me in from here. A lot of people know me by sight and know what I do. If the girl was dead, planting her in my car would be a neat way of blocking me out of an investigation. I'd be in too much trouble with the cops."

Nelly swallowed spiked coffee and shook her head. "You're deducting and it confuses me. What are you going to do?"

"See Yuma Fleg."

There was no point in waiting for MacLeod and Rettes to return. I told her I'd call them from town before I made my "stolen car" report to the cops. In the meantime, I was a little confused, too.

CALLING on Yuma Fleg at eight in the morning was inviting a tongue-lashing, if not physical castigation. Fleg obviously had been in bed only a short time when he came to the door of his ultra-expensive apartment.

He wore silk pajamas that clung to a frame built for a football line. His short, brown hair was mussed and his eyes were suspiciously red. His breath smelled like twelve hours in a Skid Road saloon.

"What d'ya want?" he snapped.

"I'm Duncan Bruce, a private dick. I want to talk with you."

He started to close the door and my foot stopped it. I shouldered into the room and he slammed a hard right at me.

I took his fist on my shoulder. I remembered Rettes' gun and got it out. I didn't have my own.

A door at the end of the living room opened and a gorilla I knew as Slice Mullay came in. He had pulled on a pair of pants. His bare chest was matted an inch thick with black hair.

"What's the matter, boss?" he growled.

"You can see, can't you?" Yuma Fleg snapped at him. "He's got a rod in his hand."

Another door opened and a girl with blond hair stuck her head into the room. Evidently Fleg made quite a community center of his oversized apartment. The blonde gazed at us in alarm, squealed and ducked back. The door closed.

"All I want is Noel Gerski," I said.

"Then why the hell come here?" Fleg demanded.

"Because the last time anyone saw him, it was here."

"You nuts? We don't know anything about him."

"You can quit stalling or I'm going to do some pistol whipping," I said. I could have cut my tongue out. Threatening Yuma Fleg was like

sticking your head in an alligator's mouth for the experience.

"You're a very tough boy," Fleg said. "You shoot your yap off like that and you're going to be a very soft boy. Soft like hammered steak."

"Gerski was here at a party last Thursday night. What happened to him?"

Fleg shook his head. "So he was here. A lot of jerks crash in here when I'm throwing a brawl. They did last night. Some of them don't go home. So maybe Gerski was here last Thursday. I don't know what happened to him."

A telephone rang and Fleg stood motionless.

"Answer it," I said. "No wise cracks about my being here."

He crossed to a table and picked up the telephone. He muttered a greeting and listened. He didn't speak again until he grunted and dropped the telephone in its cradle.

He eyed me with narrowed eyes and suddenly he wasn't a tough, big-shot racketeer with a lousy hangover and a tough line of talk that could be corny. He was a large, dangerous man with something on his mind. It made me uneasy.

"I got a pipeline into the cops," he said briefly. "That was it. The cops just picked up a guy named Jock MacLeod driving your car with a dead dame on the back seat. The dame was a good friend of mine. In fact, she was here a little while last night. I've been waiting for her to come back."

Mullay spoke again. "You don't mean Flo—"

"Shut up," Fleg barked at him. It was angry reflex. He didn't care what Mullay had said. He was simply angry and spoiling to take it out on someone.

I recognized all of that, and then it really began to sink in. They had Jock. He was in a spot. I was in a spot. Noel Gerski was in a spot. I wondered what had happened to Bill Rettes.

I remembered something. "You knew her pretty well," I said. "Do you know where she got the three diamond rings she wore?"

"Yeah. I know," he said ominously. "How do you know she wore 'em? I gave them to her last night."

"Where did you get them, Fleg?"

"Never mind that. How do you know that?"

"Were they stolen from Mae Soma?" I interrupted.

For a second something gleamed in his eyes and he shot a glance at Mullay. The squat gorilla looked nervous. "Boss, I bought those rings from Ike Lorenz. He didn't say they was hot. I was in there getting some junk out of hock and saw them rings and asked what he wanted for them and he gave me a price and I knew you were looking for something to give Flo, so I took a chance you might like them and—"

"You bought them and sold them to me," Fleg finished. "I figured you'd make a take on it. That was okay. But you sold me hot rocks. I ought to beat your ears off."

"Boss! I don't know—"

"Shut up."

Fleg swung his eyes at me. Suddenly he started to walk toward me.

"You won't use the heater," he said grimly. "You pull that trigger and you'll have half a dozen people in here. Slice and that dame have seen you already."

I backed toward the door. He was calling my bluff.

"Don't be too sure, Fleg. Don't make a mistake and—"

He came at me low with arms outstretched. He had nerve. He also had common sense. He knew I wouldn't shoot.

His body hit me and his arms wrapped around my legs. I fell backwards. My gun hand came down in a vicious arc. The gun cracked against the top of his skull. His arms became limp and I crashed backwards into the door.

Mullay was rushing me. I stiff-

armed him with the hand that held the gun. He stopped, groaned and doubled up, holding his face in his hands. Blood dripped between his fingers.

I slipped into the hallway and sprinted for the stairs. I ran down them all the way and walked quickly into the street.

IKE LORENZ'S pawn shop was four blocks away in a dirty, two-story building. The door was locked and there was no sign of anyone inside. Pasted to the inside of the door window was a faded typed slip saying that in case of emergency Ike Lorenz should be notified in his apartment upstairs.

Stairs led up from an adjoining doorway. I went up quietly and pushed the buzzer button beside his door. I wondered if he was married and if his wife would come to the door.

No one came to the door. I tried it. It was locked. I looked down at the floor and saw the dark stain that had etched a design on the hallway floor. The design was sliced by the bottom of the door.

The prickly heat of apprehension came over me. I kicked the thought around and decided to make certain. The door had a snap lock that yielded to a piece of thin spring steel. I pushed the door. It opened a foot and a half and hit something on the other side. I looked into the room.

Ike wouldn't have any more use for his pawn shop, nor the apartment, nor anything else but a satin-lined coffin. The slug that entered his forehead must have been heavy because the back of Ike's head was blown away where the bullet had come out. The bloodstain edged across the cheap carpet to his body.

I left there fast. There was no point in waiting. Ike could never tell me who had sold him the hot rings.

At a corner drug store I found a telephone booth and called the cops. I told them there was a dead man at

Ike's address. The desk sergeant was trying to get my name as I hung up.

There was a lunch counter there. I ordered breakfast and tried to make plans while I ate, but there didn't seem many to make.

If Jock used his head, he'd level with the cops and there probably was a pick-up order out for me. Rettes and Nelly could clear Jock, but I was in a bad spot. They could nail me for failing to report the crime, suspicion of murder, and a few other odds and ends.

If I convinced them of my innocence, that still wouldn't save my license. Unless I did something, and did it fast, I might as well try to get in the teamster's union or apply for a job selling books. I was through as a private op.

I added everything I had and it didn't bring me much. Not as much as the ninety-cent check the girl behind the counter gave me. I paid it and returned to the booth to call Nelly.

She didn't answer. She probably was at police headquarters trying to do something about Jock. I tried Rettes and was lucky.

"It was just a tough break," he explained. "He was driving a half mile ahead of me. When he hit that through highway to cross it he just slowed to five miles or so instead of stopping. I don't know where those cops were, but they went after him for running the stop. That was it. They saw the body. I didn't stop."

"You haven't heard what's happened at headquarters?"

"No. I've got a man there. He'll call me when he gets something. What about you?"

"I'm working," I said, and hung up.

Out in the street a prowler car drove by slowly. I waited in the booth trying to think out a new lead. There was only one thing I hadn't tried. Maybe I'd overlooked it too long.

The prowler car was out of sight when I left the store. Down the block a taxi stand had a taxi waiting. The

driver looked bored when I got in and gave him the address Jock had given me.

NOEL GERSKI'S apartment was on the fourth floor of the Park-rose. The building hadn't been painted for too many years and the brick had the grime of old age. There was a telephone at the entrance; the front door had a buzzer lock. I waited until a brunette came out with a shopping bag and caught the door.

I decided to walk. The first floor smelled of stale cooking. The second floor was radio noisy with early morning soap operas. Someone was playing a piano on the third. It was very quiet on the fourth.

Noel Gerski didn't answer his doorbell. For the second time that morning I used the spring steel and got into an apartment. The smell was as stale as the first-floor odor, but it wasn't of cooking. It was of dust and confined air.

His bed hadn't been slept in. Nothing appeared to be disarranged. In a desk drawer I found a pile of overdue bills and some sheets of music. His closets were in order with clothes neatly hung up. The bathroom was clean, but it was the only place where I found anything—or rather, where I didn't find something that should have been there. There was no razor nor toothbrush.

A man who is going to be kidnaped doesn't take his razor and toothbrush with him unless he knows about the kidnaping beforehand!

I went back to the living room and lit a cigarette. Below me the piano sounded clear and well played. It was Grieg's Concerto with a skilled touch. Suddenly the playing drifted into a sparkling variation with a definite modern touch.

Jock had said, "He does pretty well giving long hair stuff a modern haircut."

It took me two minutes to get down to the next floor and find the apartment. I knocked and the music

stopped. There was a careful silence and then a woman's cautious voice said, "Yes? Who is it?"

"Fire Department Inspector, I have to check some wiring in the apartment."

"Well—just a minute." She went away and when she came back she wore heels that clicked. Evidently she hadn't been fully dressed. She opened the door and I walked in.

"Just routine," I smiled. "For your own protection."

I looked around the room. There was a battered upright piano against one wall and a man sat at it playing softly, indifferent to me after a brief glance.

Carefully I checked details against my memory and finally pulled a notebook from a pocket. Noel Gerski's picture was slipped between pages. I took a quick look.

The woman brushed her hair up with a smooth hand and smiled. She was middle-aged and had a good figure under a housecoat. She was dark and pretty in a Eurasian way.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

I got out a pencil. "This is apartment three-seventeen?"

"That's right."

"Your name, please?"

"Sonia Biskov—you spell it with a 'v'."

I wrote it down and then put away the notebook and pencil. I looked at the man and said, "A lot of people are looking for you, Noel!"

The soft playing stopped. His shoulders stiffened. Slowly he turned and faced me. His eyes were almost defiant.

"I don't understand," he said. "You are mistaken."

From a pocket I took the shield I sometimes use and flashed it. "It all depends upon Jock MacLeod and Rettes from now on. You had a nice scheme, but it didn't work."

He was motionless for seconds, then he shrugged slightly, his lips quirked in a twisted smile. "They

won't press charges," he said. "It just didn't work out. Maybe I'm not so smart, yes?"

"No."

He shrugged again and got up and went to the woman. He put an arm about her.

"Do not include Sonia, if you please," he said. "She was just along for, let us say, the ride?"

"That's still up to MacLeod and Rettles, but I have another slice to talk about. How much did Ike Lorenz give you for Mae Soma's diamonds?"

"Diamonds?"

"The rings you stole from her."

A sudden change came over him. I wouldn't have thought it possible for such a small, frail man to have so much anger.

"I beg your pardon," he said, his voice chill as an ice cube. "I am not a common thief. I may see a way to make some money through the weaknesses of my friends and relatives, but that is a psychological thing. To steal rings—no! You insult me!"

A BETTER script might have been written for him, but no one could have acted it as he did unless he spoke the truth. There was no doubt in my mind.

"Okay," I sighed. "Calm down. You kidnap yourself to raise sixty grand, but you wouldn't cop three rocks from a dame. I believe you. You're unscrupulous as hell, but you're not a common thief. So I guess you didn't bump Lorenz in his hock shop to keep him quiet."

"Certainly not!" he said indignantly.

"You play good piano," I said. "You have strong fingers."

"Yes. What do you mean?"

"Someone with strong fingers strangled Flo Hartzell."

The ice cracked up and began to thaw. The doelike eyes became soft and misty and an expression of tragic concern came over his face. All the anger was replaced by shock.

"She was a nice girl," he said simply. "I wouldn't kill her. I wouldn't kill anyone. Especially I wouldn't kill Flo."

Sonia Biskov had been following our conversation with eyes flicking from mouth to mouth. Now she eyed Noel Gerski with suspicion.

"Who is this girl?" she demanded.

Noel made an impatient gesture. "Of no concern to you, my dear. A girl at the club. A friend."

"How well did Mae Soma know Flo?" I asked.

"Flo ate at Mae's place. They talked together."

"Mike Ballin says Flo saw you at Yuma Fleg's last Thursday night. You went under cover that night. Mike's hunting you for Mae."

"I am glad he did not find me," Noel said precisely. "He would have beaten me and asked questions afterwards."

"Did you fake that undertaker deal with Jock?"

He allowed himself a thin smile. "Certainly. I thought it a dramatic touch. I had the most trouble impersonating the talk of a gangster when I called Jock afterwards."

"You did all right," I commented. "Did you send Sonia out to see what happened? Did she tail me back to town?"

He shrugged, but his eyes admitted that I was right.

"How did you intend to get the money from Nelly?" I asked.

"She would have been followed through crowds to make certain no one was with her. Then a simple holdup by a masked man when she came home. There's a little used road she takes as a short cut to town. She's driven me over it."

I shook my head. "She'd recognize your build."

He answered with his shrug and I thought that he probably intended to use Sonia masqueraded as a man. The plan probably would have worked.

"Okay, Noel. I believe you. Where's the phone?"

He hesitated and nodded toward an adjoining room. I went in, carefully leaving the door open so that I could watch them. The telephone was on a table beside a bed. I found the book beneath it and hunted up Fleg's number. I dialed and recognized Yuma Fleg's voice.

"This is Duncan Bruce," I said. "Save your threats. I want to talk with you."

"You tell me where you are, shamus, and I'll talk with you personally. A talk you'll never forget."

"I know. You shouldn't rush a guy who holds a gun. I'm trying to learn who killed your girl friend. You said she was at your apartment and left. Tell me about it."

"I ought to bend a gun over your head. I will as soon as I catch up with you."

"Save it. You want the guy that killed her nailed, don't you?"

After a few seconds he grunted an affirmative.

"Then give," I said.

"She left for the club. That's all I know. She was coming back when she finished work. She was working a part shift. I talked with a pal who says he saw her get into a car with some guy. It was too dark to see the guy very well. I don't know who it might have been. A lot of people came and went last night."

"That's all?"

"That's all over the phone. Slice and I have something else to give you. Something that will buy you a hospital bed."

"You're not so tough," I said. He was muttering when I broke the connection.

The couple in the room watched me with apprehension. Noel said, "Something is wrong?"

I shook my head. "I'm reconstructing a crime. I think I have the answer."

"It was not Noel!" Sonia Biskov said.

"No, it wasn't Noel," I agreed quietly. I found Bill Rettes' telephone number and got him again to tell him where Noel was and what had happened.

"Let me talk to that—that—"

I held the phone away from my ear and told Noel to take it. He accepted it nervously and put it to his ear. He said hello in a chastened voice. I could hear Bill Rettes' voice rasping angrily as I left the apartment. Noel was listening with tears in his eyes.

"What a character!" I thought.

CHAPTER V

I WAS lucky finding a taxi again and sat back after giving the address. I was worried. I couldn't prove a thing unless I ran into some luck.

It wasn't a brilliant deduction. It was a process of elimination and building backward. It centered to one plausible answer when I considered the persons involved and their individual characteristics, abilities and potentialities.

There wasn't much time and I had to gamble what little there was on the deduction. Probably every cop in town was looking for me. Jock would have no choice but to tell the truth.

If he tried to be heroic, Nelly wouldn't. Fun might be fun with her, but not when her husband was behind bars. She'd get him out if she had to go to the governor or the militia. It would be much more simple than that. All she had to do was tell the truth and the cops would be combing the city for Duncan Bruce, and he, in turn might as well look for a new vocation—if not an out from a death cell.

I lit a cigarette and tried to relax. I looked through the car window to see where we were and stared directly into the face of Lieutenant Carl Karstead of the detective bureau. He knew me well and unpleasantly. His car was headed in the opposite di-

rection, but he saw me and his mouth shaped a startled command to his driver.

I wasn't having any of it. It would take a month to convince Karstead that my deduction was important enough to investigate. It had to be now.

The gun seemed unusually heavy in my hand and I hated to press it against the driver's neck. He appeared to be too nice a guy to scare that much.

"The cops are after me," I said. "Get going."

He shot a startled glance into the mirror, saw and felt the gun, turned pale and stepped on the gas.

A siren shrieked behind us. "Faster!" I snapped.

He could drive. When he was frightened, he was a miracle worker at a car wheel. We scraped paint in narrow holes, took corners on two wheels, stopped traffic.

The siren continued to shriek, but it was farther behind us. Sweat dampened the driver's forehead.

"The address I gave you," I growled. "Get me there." And as I said it I sent up a special shamus prayer that the person I wanted would be there.

We skidded through an alley, around a corner, and screeched to a stop.

I jammed a twenty-dollar bill into the driver's hand and darted across the sidewalk.

Inside the Red Coach Tavern, I took a fast look. The man I wanted was at the bar standing beside Mae Soma.

Mike Ballin didn't see me until I stepped to his side. I didn't waste words.

"Let me see that gun you're packing," I snapped. I had Bill Rettes' gun jammed into his side.

He stared at me, and Mae Soma let out a small scream. Everyone in the place looked at us.

"The gun!" I said. I made a pass

at the shoulder holster that bulged beneath his coat.

He was fast. His elbow jabbed my ribs. He pulled the gun.

Cops piled into the place and he sent a frightened look at them and broke for the entrance to the eating room. I went after him.

Customers dived beneath tables. Women screamed. There was no door leading to the sidewalk, but there was a back window to an alley. Ballin headed for it.

He turned and levelled the gun at me.

"I want that gun," I gritted. "It killed Ike Lorenz."

He swept the gun back into the window. Glass shattered. His eyes were wild, panic-stricken. The gun pointed at me again and I went down. A slug tore into the wall above my head.

I lifted Rettes' gun and pulled the trigger. The gun clicked emptily. I tried again. Another click. The gun wasn't loaded!

Ballin was halfway through the window. I stood and steadied myself a second before I threw the gun. It caught him on the back of the head.

Then, just before the cops clamped hands on me, I wished—perversely—that Nelly MacLeod could have seen that throw. I wasn't so bad at pitching, either!

IT WAS hot in the small room at headquarters and the place smelled of strong disinfectant.

It took a lot of talking. Karstead lost his temper. I lost mine. A deputy district attorney told us both to shut up and adjusted his eyeglasses for the fiftieth time.

A lab expert came into the room and nodded at Karstead.

"It checks," he said. "That gun fired the bullet that killed Lorenz."

It had taken a lot of talking to persuade Karstead to test Ballin's gun. Now I sat back in my chair and wiped sweat from my forehead.

"Satisfied?" I barked at Karstead.

He glowered at me. "You still haven't explained that dead girl in your car."

"You've got Ballin for killing Lorenz. Pour the heat on him. He'll confess."

"Confess what, Mr. Bruce?" the D.A.'s assistant asked sarcastically. He hadn't been there to hear all that I'd told Karstead. He'd been in session with Jock McLeod, Bill Rettes, and Noel.

They had decided not to prosecute. Jock's influence and money along with Rettes' political affluence—under pressure of his wife—had worked wonders. They swore that it was an elaborate gag on Noel's part. Just a practical joke. The D.A. had to take it.

Jock had managed to see me long enough to tell me all that.

"Confess what, Mr. Bruce?" the attorney asked again.

"Noel's deal and the diamond theft were separate things," I said. "What connected them at first was Noel's disappearance and Mae Soma's natural suspicion that he had taken the rings."

"Actually, Mike Ballin stole them and sold them to Lorenz. When he learned that Mae blamed Noel, that was fine with him. But a bad thing happened. Since Mullay bought the rocks and sold them to Yuma Fleg, who gave them to Flo Hartzell—the girl who told Mae she had seen Noel at the Thursday party."

I paused to light a cigarette and continued:

"Last night Fleg had another brawl. Ballin was there early and saw Flo—which he admitted to me. She was wearing the diamonds and he recognized them. He knew he was in a jam. The first time she wore them into Mae's place, Mae would see them and spill the news to Flo that they were stolen diamonds. Flo would tell Yuma Fleg. Fleg would jump Slicer. Slicer Mullay would go to Lorenz who would tell him who

had sold him the rings. Curtains for Mike Ballin."

"Complicated, but plausible," the attorney said. "What happened when he saw the rings on Miss Hartzell's fingers?"

"He offered to drive her to work, but took her to some isolated spot and killed her. He didn't get a chance to get rid of her body, or didn't have a plan. Maybe some neckers parked near him."

"Anyhow, he drove back to town with her. He went to the tavern and met me. He saw a chance to plant the body in my car and involve Noel some more at the same time. He laid for me in the back of my car, knocked me cold, put her body in the car and drove out to the hills. He probably walked back. It's only a couple of miles."

"And he killed Ike Lorenz later to silence him?"

"That's right."

The attorney adjusted his glasses again and stroked his thin jaw with a lean hand.

"There's only one thing, Mr. Bruce," he said. "If you are correct, why didn't Ballin take the rings again after he killed the girl?"

I smiled at him. "Because he knew that Mae was ready to report the theft to the cops—she was getting impatient about Noel, as much as she liked him. That would make those rings hot at any legitimate jeweler's or hock shop. More than that—he knew that Fleg would be sore about the theft. Fleg would pass out word to every fence to watch for them. He has influence in those circles. On one hand Ballin had the cops, on the other, Fleg. So Ballin wanted no more of those rocks. He left them on her fingers and Mae Soma and the cops could think what they liked."

The attorney glanced at Karstead who finally nodded begrudgingly. "We can try," he said. He glared at me. "You wait here."

It took them an hour, but when

they came back the attorney was smiling.

"You were quite right, Mr. Bruce. Ballin confessed when I convinced him that as long as he was sure to be convicted for Lorenz's murder, he might as well make a clean breast of it."

Karstead gave him a sour look that he transferred to me.

"Scram!" he said. "You're lucky we don't pick up your license."

JOCK and Nelly MacLeod were playing catch on their lawn when I arrived. The afternoon was hot, and the pitches that Nelly was putting across a makeshift plate were hot. I admired her as I walked toward them.

"Sit down," she called. "I'm just getting warmed up. We can talk later."

A car stopped in the driveway behind mine and Yuma Fleg got out, followed by Slicer Mullay. They walked toward me with menace in every step.

"We're going to beat hell out of you," Fleg said.

From the corner of my eyes I saw Jock coming the few yards toward us with a grin as he slipped off the catcher's mitt.

"Fight?" he asked pleasantly.

"Keep out of this, bud," Fleg told him. "It's private."

He pulled a blackjack from a hip pocket. I threw an arm up to fend off the blow.

Something white flashed before my eyes and a baseball bounced off Fleg's head. He staggered and went down.

"But good!" Nelly MacLeod cried. "That's control!"

Slicer Mullay rushed me and met Jock's big fist. He went down beside Fleg.

After a while we lugged them to the house. They were breathing comfortably, but they were out.

Jock and Nelly made me tell them what had happened while Jock poured Scotch and paused once to make out a check for me.

"Wonderful!" he finally said. "It calls for some piping!"

He had just swung into "The Campbells Are Coming" when Slicer Mullay opened his eyes and sat up. Nelly smiled at him and pressed a drink into his hand. He accepted it in a daze, his eyes upon the marching man with the bagpipe.

"Boy!" he said in awe. "Ain't that beautiful!"

Nelly and I exchanged startled glances and a voice in the doorway said, "It's terrible!"

We looked at Noel Gerski and Sonia Biskov. Noel was unwrapping a bottle of vodka. On a couch Yuma Fleg snored.

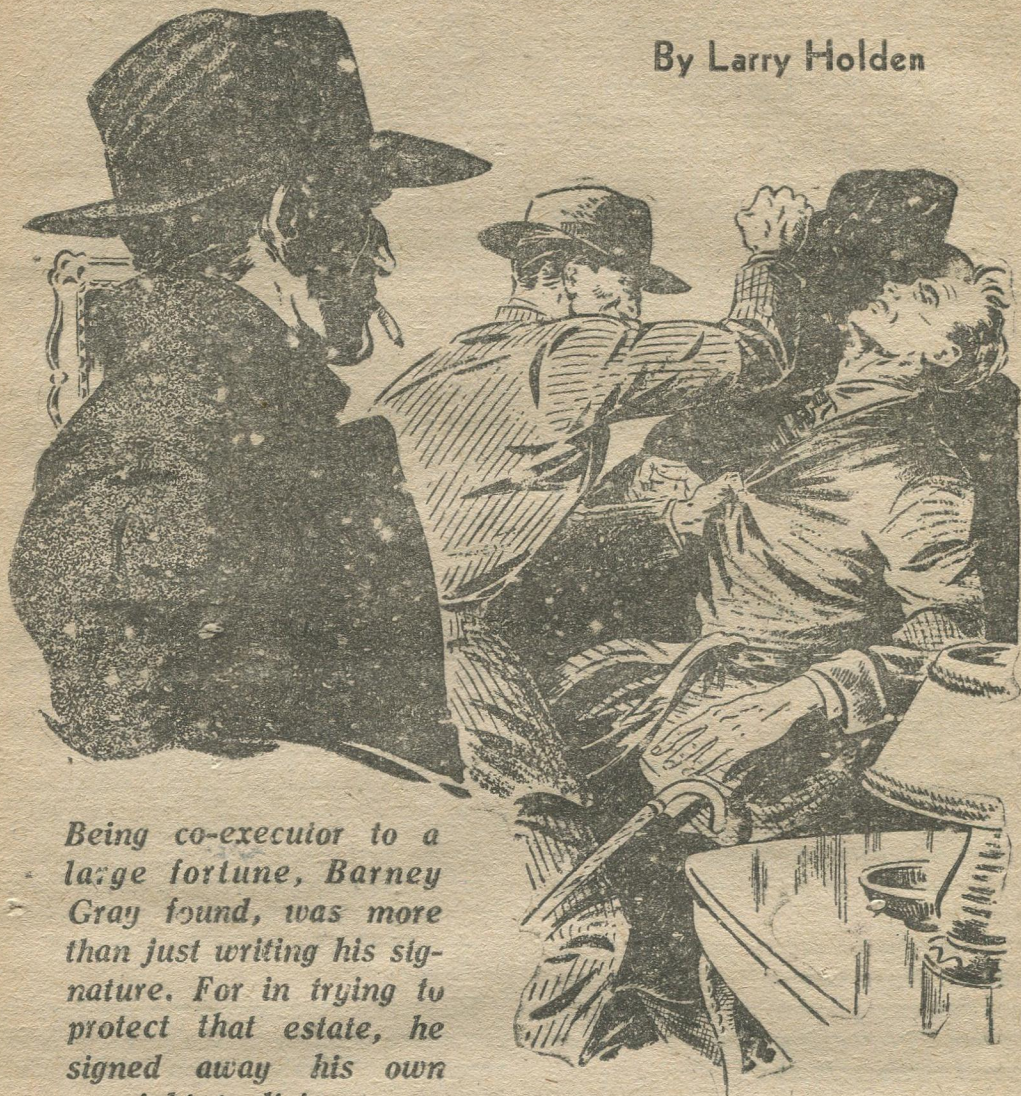
Nelly laughed happily and said, "This is wonderful. It's all in keeping."

I don't remember what day I got home.



Written in Blood

By Larry Holden



Being co-executor to a large fortune, Barney Gray found, was more than just writing his signature. For in trying to protect that estate, he signed away his own right to living.

I LOWERED myself carefully into the chair he indicated, leaned my cane against the desk, and looked into his waiting, noncommittal face. His name was Sears.

"Somebody," I said bluntly, "is trying to kill my cousin, and I want you to find out who it is."

He pushed out his lip, and his eyes became cautious and thoughtful. He didn't look much like a detective. He looked like the man who tried to sell me a second-hand Ford last week. He

was small and tidy, more conservatively dressed than I was in my baggy tweeds, and had a kind of prim, careful air usually found on bank tellers. I found out how wrong I was.

He leaned back and interlaced his fingers across his chest. "Have you notified the police, Mr. Gray?" he asked curiously.

I said, "No-o."

"Why not?"

"For personal reasons," I snapped. He raised his eyebrows and I went on,

"And I don't want to make a newspaper frolic out of it."

"A newspaper frolic?" his eyes spread. "Just who is your cousin, Mr. Gray?"

"Gerald Leslie." I grinned into his sharpened glance. "That makes a difference, doesn't it? A two-million-dollar difference. He hasn't got it yet, but he will on his twenty-fifth birthday. I'm one of the co-executors of the will. Prentice Fearing is the other. When we turn over the estate—and if both it and the heir are in good shape—we get, in addition to our usual fees, a bonus of ten thousand dollars."

"I'm telling you this," I said with irony, "to explain my otherwise inexplicable concern for my cousin's health and welfare." Then I added, "I'm paying for this investigation personally. Purely, of course, to safeguard my ten-thousand-dollar bonus."

He said, "Naturally," and grinned. He rolled forward in his chair. "Now tell me, who gets the dough if this guy is knocked off?"

"An aunt in Canada, who is seventy, and another in Paris, who is seventy-three. That one hasn't been heard of since the German occupation. They're a little too old to go around shooting people."

"Nobody's too old to pull a trigger. Give me their names." Then, as my eyebrows came down, he said sharply, "Either I'm running this my way or I'm not running it at all."

I gave him the names, meekly. Mathilde Leslie was the Canada aunt, Constance Leslie the Paris one. He wrote them down.

"Now," he said, "what makes you so sure somebody's trying to bump this Gerald Leslie?"

"Two things," I said promptly. "Last week a man tried to break into Gerald's room from the outside. My room is next to his—I'm living with him for the moment. I looked out the window and he took a shot at me. Missed by inches. I jumped back into the room to get my own gun, but of course he was gone by that time."

He grunted, "Could have been a burglar."

"Could be, but I don't think so."

His features were expressionless. "What was the other thing?"

"Yesterday. I was fooling around on the lawn behind the house with a slingshot—"

"With a *what*?"

"A slingshot, dammit! I was trying to get rid of some of the squirrels that have been raising hell. There's an ordinance against guns. Anyway, I heard a shot, something whizzed past my ear and I dropped down behind a rhododendron bush. And don't tell me what a shot sounds like. It was a shot. And it just so happened that I was wearing one of Jerry's plaid sports jackets at the time. We're about the same build, and it was dusk."

He clicked his teeth together several times and made some marks on the pad before him. He wasn't writing. He was just making doodle marks.

"Uh, what does your cousin think about all this?" he asked finally.

"He thinks," I said sourly, "that I'm seeing things. He didn't say it right out. He just laughed. I talked to Mr. Fearing about it, and he was very kind and very disbelieving and I *could* have kicked him right in the seat of the pants."

He smiled mechanically and traced a few more doodles on the pad. He said abruptly, "You've been sick, Mr. Gray?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"Tropical fever. But what the hell has that got to do—"

"Nothing probably. I was just wondering how you came to be visiting your cousin. This climate—"

"There's nothing wrong with Jersey climate this time of year. Prentice Fearing, the other executor, asked me to come East to talk over some business, and Jerry put me up at his place, otherwise I'd have had to go to a hotel. Does that satisfy you?"

"Don't get yourself excited, Mr.

Gray. I'm going to look into it. Now, just what do you want me to do when I find this—uh—would-be killer?"

"Just tell me his name," I said grimly. "That's all."

MY WALLET was a hundred dollars lighter when I left, but so was my mind. I walked slowly in the sunshine, leaning heavily on my cane, and it took me about a half hour to cover the five blocks to Fearing's office on Broad Street. The elevator made me a little dizzy.

His reception clerk, an eager girl with a lot of leg and the figure to go with it, had standing orders to show me right into Fearing's office whenever I turned up, and she took it literally. She did everything but carry me in on her back, but she was a nice girl and she meant well, so I didn't snap at her. I just gave her a sour glance and walked in by myself after I got away from her hand at my elbow.

Fearing rose from behind his desk and said heartily, "Come in, Barney. How are you feeling, fella?" He was a big, pink man, with not enough hair and too many chins.

He put out his plump, moist hand, and I shook it briefly and gave it back to him to dry off. I sank into the deep chair beside his desk, grateful for the support. I put my cane between my knees.

"I went to see a detective today," I said without preamble. "A fellow named Sears. The bank recommended him."

He got red in the face, put a cigar in the middle of it and hid momentarily behind the flame of his match, then behind the smoke.

"I wish you hadn't done that without consulting me, Barney," he growled.

"I did consult you. You laughed."

"I'm still laughing," he mumbled. "I only hope the newspapers don't get hold of it."

"They won't. Sears can keep his mouth shut."

"I think you're being very foolish, Barney."

"I don't give a damn what you think!"

He persisted in the same hangdog mumble, "Who'd want to kill Jerry?"

"I suppose I'm just making it up as I go along. Is that the idea?"

He made feeble conciliatory flaps with his hand, like a seal begging for a fish, and said, "Let's not fight, Barney. If it's done, it's done. We've got other business to take care of."

He took a folder from the top drawer of his desk and opened it in front of him. He put on a pair of heavy-rimmed glasses. "This is that project I was talking to you about. It only needs your signature to go ahead."

I said shortly, "No!" I was still simmering, but I would have said no anyway, though probably not so brusquely.

He wanted to take about a half million of Jerry's money out of utilities and bonds and sink it into a real estate development, a speculative co-operative apartment house. A gamble, as far as I was concerned. He liked to gamble. I didn't.

He slapped his hand on the desk. "Dammit, Gray," he said angrily, "has it ever occurred to you that an estate can be as much mismanaged by inaction as by reckless investments? Not," he added hastily, "that this is a reckless investment. On the contrary, it's a very sound proposition." He tapped the folder with his forefinger and said significantly, "In two years, Barney, we could double Jerry's capital."

"In two years people might be living in caves, but they'll still need gas and electricity. Utilities might not pay much, but they're safe."

WE WRANGLLED for about an hour and a half. He had a half dozen other little folders that he kept pulling out of his desk as if they were rabbits, and each one a little more moth-eaten than the one before. I wondered just how much of his cus-

tomers' money—he was an investment broker—he had lost on investments just like these.

After a while Fearing lost his temper completely and yelled, "You're a conservative toadstool, Gray. Now's the time to make investments, not two years from now."

All this scrapping and yapping and strain had taken the juice out of me. I still tired pretty easily. I leaned on my cane and slowly pushed myself to my feet.

"I'll talk to Jerry about it," I said, more to shut him up than anything else.

That ended it. For the time being, anyway. He said grudgingly, "Have a drink before you go?" Then, remembering his role as the jolly investment broker, he said more heartily, "Do you good. Do both of us good."

I had one. He had five. He was a little drunk when I left.

I took a cab back to Jerry's place. It was a nice little six-room house with a lot of ground around it—one of those deceptive jobs that looks cozy and costs twenty thousand. It was modern and flattish, done in dazzling stucco and glazed tile, and a lot more roomy than it looked.

Jerry and a gang of other kids were raising juvenile hell in the living room, but he came out grinning with a glass in his hand as I hung up my hat and coat in the hall. He was a thoughtful kid. He always greeted me after one of my excursions.

"I made a drink for you, Barney," he said. He had curly hair, something like mine but more of it, reckless eyes, and a big, easy grin.

"No, thanks, Jerry," I said. "I've had my drink for the day. I've just come from a debauch—with Prentice Fearing," I added. "I told him I'd talk to you about something, but it doesn't have to be now."

"Why not?" he grinned. "If it's from Prentice Fearing it's something foolish, and I'm in a foolish mood. Let's sit down and have our laugh."

We sat on the third step of the

angular stairway that led to the gallery on the second floor. He took a sip from the glass and put it down between his feet. He lit a cigarette.

"What's the old lush up to now?" he asked curiously.

I told him, added what I thought, then said, "However, if you're in favor of it, I'll consider it more carefully."

He looked at me solemnly, then exploded with a peal of laughter. "Holy smoke," he said, "what do I want with an apartment house. You know, Barney, that guy's not an investment broker. He's a *devestment* broker. During the past year I happen to know that he's made more bum guesses than a fortune-teller. I wouldn't trust him with a dime to buy a Sunday paper."

I had one of my fits of momentary generosity. I wanted to be fair to Fearing. "You know," I said, "your allowance is based on a percentage of the earnings of your capital. If he does make money for you, you'll have more to spend."

"And how I love to spend money!" But he shook his head. "Barney, I haven't heard of anybody yet who was able to spend any of Fearing's if-money." He laughed contemptuously. "No thanks. But say, Barney, now that we've had our laugh, how's about coming in and joining the party. There's a little redhead in there with a low boiling point—"

"Sure. That's all I'd need. Uh-uh. I'm going to my room and lie down for a while. I'm just going to read and take it easy. You ought to try it one of these nights yourself."

"I will," he said earnestly, "I will. The next time I have pneumonia." He grinned and sauntered back into the living room with a wave of his hand.

Well, I thought, you're only young once—but it lasts about fifteen years, so what's the hurry?

THEY left around nine, the whole gang of them, in a hooting procession of eight cars—and at the very

end, taking it easy, came a nondescript black coupé. I turned from the window with grinning relief. Sears was on the job.

The doorbell rang at nine-thirty and kept ringing until I remembered that Harris, the houseman, had gone to the movies, so I went down to answer it myself. There were two men there. Not big men, but heavy. One had a crumpled ear that seemed to stand off at right angles from his head. The other one needed a shave. Behind them, in the driveway, their car was standing with the motor running.

The one with the thick ear said hoarsely, "This is the monkey," and put his hand against my chest and shoved me back into the hall.

He took two quick steps and grasped my lapels, glancing back over his shoulder at the other man, who had closed the door and was leaning against it.

"What are you waiting for?" demanded the man at the door, "A referee?"

I was beating feebly at the thick, hairy wrists. He turned, slapped my hands aside and hit me heavily on the side of the face. I don't remember going down. All I remember was that the hall suddenly turned on end. He jerked me to my feet and hit me again.

Dimly I heard the man at the door say, "Take it easy. This ain't a workout. It's just a reminder. Let's scram."

The hand that clutched the front of my robe let go, and I collapsed gently to the floor. I floated down. I heard something hit the step beside my ear and I recall thinking lazily, "That's my head." It didn't seem to mean much, one way or the other. I went to sleep.

I woke up after a while, how long I don't know. My head felt like the inside of a bass drum. My legs were pretty fluid, but I managed to drag myself to the bathroom. I looked in the mirror and it sneered back with a doughy eye, a bloody cheek and a puffy lip.

So that's a reminder, I thought painfully. I splashed weakly at it with a washcloth. To be reminded like that, you have to have done some pretty fancy forgetting. You have to make a career of it, and there's no future in that. I kept thinking in wise cracks, which isn't thinking at all. That's backfiring.

I splashed some more water on my face and staggered into Jerry's room and found a bottle of Scotch. I filled the glass beside the carafe on the night table and drank it off standing up. I had been warned by the doctor not to drink, and I found out why. I went out into the hall, and all at once it started to stretch like an elastic, but in all directions.

I lifted my legs very high and very carefully, then suddenly there wasn't anything under them and I went rolling and gamboling down a rocky slope and all I could think of was a bitter, "Now you're a goat, a lousy mountain goat."

THE sun was a smear of yellow marmalade across the brown toast of the blanket, the fold of the sheet was whipped cream. It made me sick to look at it. Jerry was slouched in the chair beside my bed, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. His nose was puffy and there was a cut on his cheekbone. I looked at him and he looked back, neither of us smiling.

He said uncomfortably, "That was quite a brannigan you tied on last night, Barney. You damn near broke your neck going down the stairs. Harris found you and put you to bed. You scared the pants off him." Harris was the movie-loving houseman. Jerry's glance had an odd, questioning slant. "Feeling okay?"

I said, "Fine, just fine." I pushed myself upright, swayed dizzily and leaned back against the headboard and closed my eyes.

A glass was pushed into my hand and he said, "Try a slug of this. It'll taste like formaldehyde, but try to get it down."

It was brandy. I drank very little of it, but it put sinews in me. I gave him a furry grin, handed him back the glass and shook my head at the rest of it. He shrugged and drank it off.

He looked embarrassed for a moment, then blurted, "Dammit, Barney, what the hell have you been up to, anyway?"

I said, "Huh?" and stared at him.

"That damn detective you went out and bought. What's the idea?"

"I bought a detective? Why should I do that? Was he a bargain?" That was a pretty crummy evasion, but it was the best I had in stock.

He exploded, "Ah, hell!" and went striding down the room. He prowled back and stood at the foot of the bed with his hands thrust deep in his pants pockets, his shoulders hunched truculently.

"Listen, Barney," he said heavily, "I'm an easy-going guy and I don't often get sore. That little airedale following me around all last night made me sore. For Pete's sake, nobody's trying to kill me. Get that idea out of your head, will you? People think you're a little off your circuit."

I said angrily, "Did Sears talk to you?"

"Talk to me? Hell, no. Every time I looked around he was ducking behind a tree or a hat check girl."

"Then who did tell you?"

"Nobody had to tell me. I know a detective when I see one, especially a Boy Scout like that one. What was he trying to do, earn a merit badge for stalking? He was pointed out a dozen times to me last night by guys who knew him. Now do me a favor, will you, Barney? Call him off. Tell him to crawl back into the cheese. He embarrasses me. I don't need a body-guard."

I said nastily, "No? Bring me a mirror."

He gave me a hard glance, then turned and walked out of the room, muttering. I heard him say, "Absolutely nuts!" I waited grimly till he came back with a hand mirror, then

held it up and looked critically at my face. There was a new cut on my chin, and a bump on my forehead, but the rest of the debris was the "reminder."

"See this eye and this lip?" I demanded. "Well, they're supposed to be yours. Two men came in last night, said, 'This is the monkey,' and let me have it. Or was I dreaming that, too?"

He looked a little green. His eyes narrowed and his face turned ugly. "What did they look like?" he asked, tight-lipped.

"Like a pair of bouncers from a saloon. But they weren't after me. They were after you, Jerry. I never saw them before."

His green look sprouted a grin. He said, "Well..." and let it hang. I don't think he believed me. He said good-naturedly, "Want Harris to bring you up some breakfast? Lunch?" he corrected himself, glancing at the clock. It was after twelve.

I said grumpily, "I'll get up. And what happened to *your* face, by the way? Your nose looks like a radish."

"That? Oh, that was just a little innocent merriment." He laughed happily. "You don't mind if I run along, do you, Barney? I'm going to take the body beautiful down to the tennis court and give it some exercise. And, uh—" he stopped at the door—"be a good guy and put your watchdog back in the doghouse. People..." He didn't finish it. He fumbled with a grin and left.

I sat staring at the empty doorway. This was the second time in two days, and I didn't like it—the second time that someone had intimated that I was a little loopy. Sears the day before when he asked me in that odd tone if I'd been sick. And now Jerry. And those vague "people" of his.

I thought bitterly, maybe I am. I crawled stiffly out of bed and slowly dressed, finding more bruises on my elbows, knees and hip. I must have been a pretty sight, sprawled soused on the steps when Harris walked in.

Harris probably thought me a nut, too, and a dipso to boot.

HE WAS dressing a chicken in the kitchen when I walked in to make my lunch. He would have made it for me, but I didn't like to ask him.

He said politely, "Good morning, Mr. Gray." He had an old air of constraint and watched me from the corners of his eyes as I fussed over the gas range with my ham and eggs. He jumped when I turned suddenly and faced him.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked irritably.

"Nothing. Nothing at all, sir."

"You think I'm a little touched, is that the idea?"

"Oh no, sir. Indeed I don't!" he said hurriedly as if he had once been told you have to humor lunatics. He kept his head down and snipped furiously at the innard of the chicken.

I stared at him for a moment, then turned back to my frying pan and said, "The hell you don't." My hands were shaking as I reached for the spatula. I took my plate into the dining room. He seemed relieved when I left, or maybe I was imagining that, too. The hell with him, I thought angrily, the hell with all of them.

In the middle of the afternoon I got a phone call from Fearing. He had been drinking again. He was too noisily jovial. "Hiya, Barney, how's the fella today?" he shouted, "How's—"

"Did you shoot your mouth off to Jerry about Sears?" I interrupted.

"Shooting off my wha-what?"

"Yes, your big mouth. Did you tell Jerry?"

He stammered a denial, then suddenly became huffy and said defiantly, "Suppose I did. He had a right to know."

"And who else did you blab to?"

"See here, Gray, I don't have to take that kind of talk," he blustered. There was something uneasy in his voice, something I couldn't put my finger on. I knew, too, that I wasn't going to get any more from him, now

that he had barricaded himself behind his self-righteous indignation.

Mildly I said, "While you were talking to Jerry, did you mention that proposition of yours?"

"No. I thought it would be better if it came from you. I have no influence over him, none at all. Somebody"—he said it viciously—"has poisoned his mind against me. I don't suppose you tried to convince him."

"Convince him? No. But I told him about it."

"What did he say?"

"He laughed."

Fearing said, "Oh," in a small, humiliated voice. He tried to force back the hearty timbre, but all he achieved was a brassy bray. "Well, another time, Barney, another time. I'll keep looking around. It's a shame, but—uh—well, so long."

I hung up slowly. It had been a very funny conversation. I shook myself angrily. Too many things had looked funny to me recently. On my way to my room, I stopped and looked into the mirror that hung on the wall at the head of the stairs. My face was a little gaunt and my mouth was swollen petulantly, but there was a wild look in my eye. It was too open and staring.

No wonder, I thought uneasily, I've only got one to look out of, it's working overtime.

A little later, for reassurance, I called Sears at his office, but he was out and the girl couldn't say when he'd be back. She asked if I wanted him to call me, but I said never mind and hung up.

I was feeling a little low when Jerry came in just before dinner, noisy as a puppy at a mousehole, joyfully sunburned. His vitality was spilling over as if the afternoon of tennis had pumped too much of it into him. I felt like a licked-out lollipop in comparison.

Harris served dinner, keeping a watchful eye on me, and when he was finished he said urgently to Jerry,

"May I go now, Mr. Leslie? I just have time to catch my train."

Jerry waved him off with a grin, but the grin faded when he looked across the table where I sat with my sour face hanging over my stewed peaches.

"Down in the dumps, Barney?" he asked solicitously. "Why not come out with me tonight? You don't have to dissipate, but it might cheer you up to have people around instead of sitting here alone."

There was a little too much of the clucking mother hen in his voice and it made me peevish. "I don't have to be looked after," I snapped. "And I don't like night clubs. I think it's the dreariest form of entertainment since vaudeville. I'm staying home."

His eyes spread with astonishment, but he merely shook his head and smiled. "Sure thing Barney," he said cheerfully. "In fact, I'm thinking of doing it myself one of these nights. I've got a mess of records I want to listen to—Offenbach, Ibert, Prokofieff and"—he grinned—"Duke Ellington. Try them out for me tonight."

IT SEEMED like a good idea. I'd been sitting too much in lonely silence. Convalescence is a gloomy, suicidal dusk. After he left I went to the living room. Jerry had a beautiful Capehart and a collection of records I couldn't have listened to in a month if I'd had a dozen ears.

I liked Brahms and put on an album of his Songs, but tonight it was all wrong. The music was too damp and somber, like a mouldy cellar, and finally I had to get up and shut it off before I fell into mumbling melancholy. You can't suddenly shut off noise like that and expect no reaction. The silence fell heavily into my lap and lay there like a wet dog.

I hobbled around the room and turned on all the lights, but it was too glaring and I went around and turned them all off again. I ended up at the front window and was standing there staring moodily out at the dark street

when the reaching headlights of a long black car swung around, passed briefly across the window and swept up the drive.

I felt a surge of prickling, unreasonable fear.

As quickly as I could I lurched up the stairs to my room, jerked open the drawers of my dresser, panting as I pawed among the neatly stacked clothes for my gun. I pulled it out and found comfort in the heavy, hand-filling butt. The doorbell rang. I slipped the gun into my pocket and with controlled calm slowly descended the stairs to answer it. I opened the door and stepped back quickly, keeping my hand on the gun.

There was only one man there. A tall, cold man in a narrow overcoat, a black derby and dark gloves.

"May I come in, Mr. Gray?" he asked in a quiet voice. His eye fell to the bulge of my hand and gun in my pocket. His smile barely lifted his mouth. "I am unarmed." There was no amusement in his voice. He was a man without humor, a secretive man.

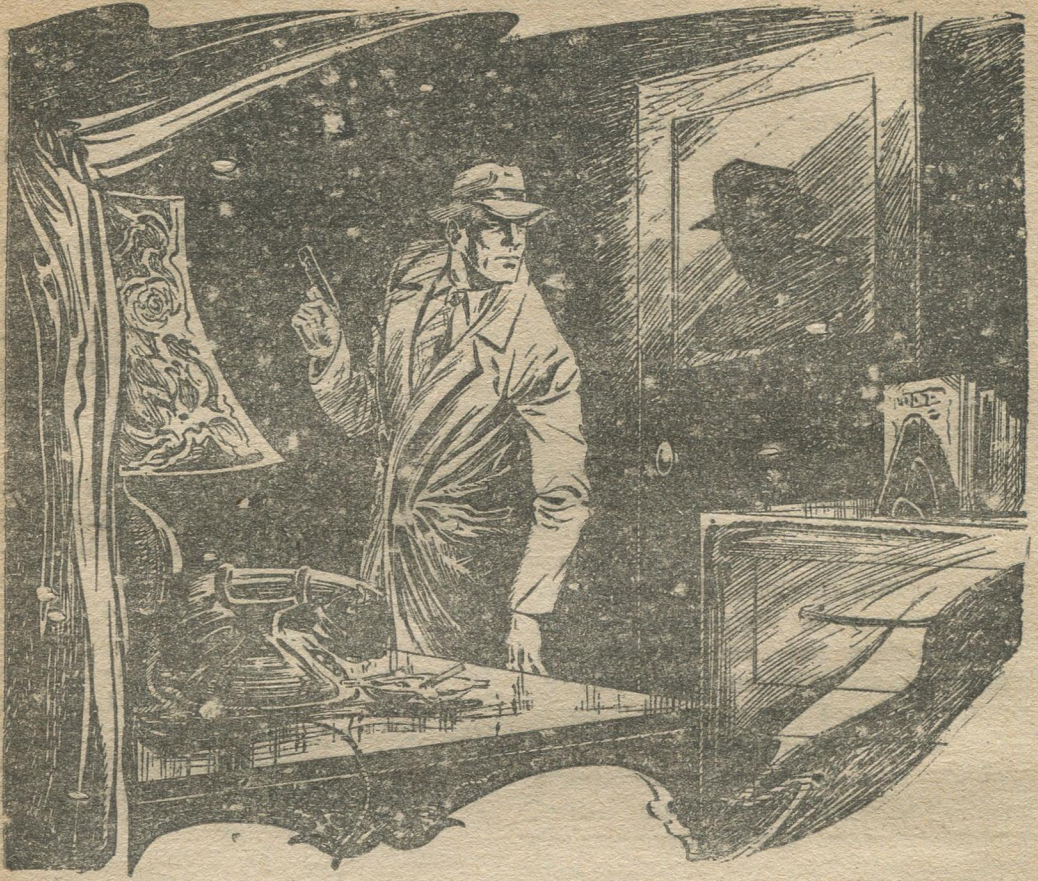
I followed him into the living room and turned on the table lamp by the sofa. I sat across the room from him in the wing chair at the window. His eyes appraised me for a heavy minute as he pulled off his gloves, finger by finger."

"My name is Maline," he said, "Earl Maline. I run the Cockatoo Club. It's a gambling house. I'm not trying to kill your cousin."

I took this without blinking. Nothing seemed strange, coming from him. He had a pale thin face and shadowed eyes, a narrow mouth with no highlights.

He waited for me to say something, and when I didn't, he went on. "Those two men who came here last night came from the Cockatoo Club. I didn't send them. My partner did. It was a—
—a misunderstanding."

"There was nothing to misunderstand about it. There's something pretty obvious about a poke in the jaw."



He seemed on the verge of saying more, and I leaned forward expectantly, my heart thudding a little, but instead he reached into an inner pocket and took out an envelope. He crossed the room and gave it to me, stood frowning beside my chair as I opened it. He kept slapping his gloves into the palm of his hand.

It was a sheaf of I.O.U.'s signed by Jerry. I started through them slowly, but his hand shot out suddenly and he plucked one from the stack. But not before I had seen it. That one had not been signed by Jerry. It had been signed by Prentice Fearing and it was for twelve thousand dollars.

I looked sharply at Maline and he murmured, "That one shouldn't have been there."

He said it in such a way that I knew he was lying, and furthermore, he wanted me to know he was lying. Again I felt that he was on the brink of telling me something, but he hid

behind his secretive half-smile. It irritated me. I don't like devious people.

Because I was sore, I said bluntly, "You'll never collect from Fearing. He doesn't have that kind of money. I thought you people were smart about that sort of thing."

"I'm not worried about it. Sometimes," he said significantly, "we have to take a loss as a matter of policy. Fearing was Jerry's guest." There was more to it than that, but he didn't tell me what it was.

"And this"—I tapped Jerry's I.O.U.'s—"is that a policy loss, too? It's for twenty-one thousand dollars. He won't be able to pay that for two years. Or are you willing to wait?"

He shrugged. "I was hoping to persuade you to pay them for him," he said carelessly.

HE DIDN'T hope any such thing. It was another transparency. He went on earnestly. "My partner sent

those pugs last night. He's old-fashioned and he thinks it's bad for business if people welsh on a bet. Sometimes it isn't. Jerry's a young punk—a young man with expensive tastes that are getting more expensive by the minute. When he comes into his money, twenty thousand will be peanuts. That's the day I'm looking forward to. But"—his voice roughened—"I don't like killings. They're bad for business. Get what I mean?"

"You're not trying to kill Jerry," I said waspishly. "Right?"

He compressed his lips. "Somebody's trying to kill *you*, Mr. Gray," he said sharply, as if irritated that he had to come right out and say something in plain English. "For instance, everybody knows you're supposed to be touched in the head—people you don't know and who don't give a damn about you. Somebody spread the word—but why tell everybody?"

"Then there's another word that's been spread, and this one I don't like! All of a sudden everybody knows a couple of boys from my club beat you up last night. See how it's beginning to shape? Maybe tomorrow you're found with the back of your head beaten in. Who had a grudge against you? Maline. Once a rumor like that starts, even the cops get to hear it after a while."

"Of course, I could handle this another way. I could get rough. But rumors scare me, Mr. Gray. If I got rough, you can be damn sure there'd be another rumor—telling people to stay away from the Cockatoo Club. It's a roughhouse. And that would be bad for business. So I'm taking this way. Go back to Arizona, stay there for two years and maybe you'll stay alive. Back there, at least, you'd be out of my hair, and your playmate would have to think of another set-up."

He scowled and jerked on his gloves, irritated with me for making him speak so plainly.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't

think of anything to say. I didn't believe him, yet I felt sick. He plucked the I.O.U.'s from my hand and walked up the room. He stopped at the door.

"Needless to say, I don't think you're crazy, either."

I said dully, "Thanks."

He left and I heard the front door close.

I didn't believe him. How can you believe a thing like that? It's too fantastic. Other people get murdered, not you. My hands trembled, but it was good logic. I could point out examples.

Then the lights went out. Literally—not inside my head. The house was plunged in darkness—and with terrifying clarity I saw how right Maline was. But he had only seen part of it. He had not seen that the plan was already working when he stepped in the front door. He had not seen that this was the very minute toward which the murderer had been working, that a score of people probably knew, or had been told, that Maline had visited me.

And there I was, a semi-invalid in the dark. A half-grown boy could handle me with ease. I clenched my teeth and took my gun from my pocket. The darkness could not disguise my chattering teeth. I could hear them.

The footsteps mounted the cellar steps, crossed the kitchen, came the length of the hall. The French doors at the other end of the living room opened softly. I crouched back in the chair, terrified.

"I have a gun," I stammered, "I have a gun in my hand. Go back!"

There was a soft chuckle and the footsteps came quickly. I suddenly remembered I was silhouetted against the window. I threw myself sideways, to the left, tripped over the tongs by the fireplace and sprawled on the hearth, making a dreadful racket. The chuckle sounded again, closer.

A hand touched my knee, came swiftly up my leg, felt for my head. I fired into the bulk that loomed over me. He grunted in pain and surprise, straightened up convulsively, went

backward with a crash over the coffee table. He hadn't believed in my gun.

I lay listening to his hoarse breathing, then cautiously stood, scraped a match and lit the candles on the mantel over the fireplace.

It was Jerry. He lay propped against the sofa, his legs tangled in the overturned coffee table, his left arm curled against his chest, his right outflung. The gun lay beside his gloved hand. His eyes were large and very dark. They flickered toward me.

"Greedy," he said. "Couldn't wait." He coughed.

I knelt quickly and pushed his coat open. A .45 at close range is a gruesome weapon. Aside from a new chest, there was nothing to be done.

"Two years," he whispered. "Too long. I couldn't wait."

I hadn't heard them come in, but suddenly there they were at my elbow—Sears and two cops. Sears' face was white.

He said tersely, "Is he still alive, the dirty rat?" He looked at the cops. "See what you can get out of him?"

THEY got it. Not much, but enough. When the police doctor came, he spent more time on me than he did on Jerry. I, at least, was alive. He gave me a sedative and had them put me to bed. Sears came up with a beaker of brandy. He sat glumly beside the bed.

"I should have been here before him," he growled. "But me, I was too smart for him. I knew all the answers. I saw him talking to Maline, then I saw Maline leave the club and saw Jerry sneak up to Maline's office and lift Maline's gun from the desk. I knew the score and I was all set. Down I went to my car—and the little squirt had taken out the distributor head! I'll give you a refund for that bobble."

I said weakly, "Maline saw it coming."

"Did he? Well, he only saw part of it. From what the kid told us, it was supposed to look like suicide. If that

backfired, he still had it that Maline was here, and Maline's gun would be found beside you. But after his build-up about your being crazy, it would have been suicide and no questions. And Maline wouldn't have opened his mouth. He's a business man."

"But why?" I mumbled, "that's the part—"

"Money," Sears said contemptuously. "He was getting a thousand a month to buy lollipops, and it wasn't enough. After you were out of the way, he could put the squeeze on Fearing and get his hands on that two million. He had Fearing over a barrel. It seems one night he took Fearing out to the Cockatoo Club and Fearing dropped twelve G's on the chuck-a-luck. That guy'd gamble on anything. I think he's feeble-minded."

"Fearing couldn't pay and gave an I.O.U. That was where the squeeze came in. If Fearing didn't stay in line, Jerry could throw him into Chancery and claim he was irresponsible. Maline would have been only too glad to show that I.O.U. as evidence. And Fearing would have to kiss all his fat fees and that ten-G bonus good-bye."

"But you were in the way. You were a pain in the neck. You were honest. Jerry wouldn't be able to play with that two million until you were worm food."

"Now, the way I figure it, Jerry faked the burglar and that other shot at you to get you in an uproar, then he spread the word that you were seeing things under beds and behind bushes. Fearing would have testified, and maybe I would, too. You sounded screwy enough. See how it was to work. You commit suicide and nobody's surprised. Only a nut would do the Dutch; everybody knows that. Nice guy to have for a cousin."

He looked down at his hands as if he had picked up something repulsive. He said shortly, "That's all," and walked out of the room, nodding at me as he went through the doorway. I kept seeing his head nodding, nodding, fading as the sedative took hold.

Everybody, including the victim, had been warned about Lunk O'Slaughtery's slaying. But nobody would believe in . . .

Murder by Magic

By Julian Daggett



THIS morning when I saw big Lunk O'Slaughtery lying dead in Morgan's melon field, I wasn't surprised. Nor could I honestly say I was

sorry. After all, I'd warned him.

People who say "I told you so" annoy me, so generally I keep my mouth shut when I know something that others won't find out until later. But murder is different. I knew Lunk was going to be murdered, and how I knew is because I dreamed it. I dreamed he lay dead in Jarrad Morgan's melon field. So I told Lunk about it. I told his daughter, Emily O'Slaughtery. I even warned Sheriff Noonan. They all laughed in my face.

When Sheriff Noonan yanked me out of bed this morning in my little apartment up over the electrical shop I own, I could see by the worried expression on his broad fat face that it had happened.

"O'Slaughtery's dead," he said.

"I expected it."

He shot a quizzical, suspicious glance at me. "That's why I'm here. After what you told me yesterday, you'll have a lot of explainin' to do, Nat!"

I shrugged and climbed out of bed to dress while Noonan let his great fat hulk sink into my best easy chair. His worried eyes roved curiously over my shelves of books. I am very proud of my library, which consists of a fine collection of tomes on occult research,

theosophy and Oriental mysticism.

"Quite a bookworm, hey," commented Sheriff Noonan. "That where you get all your crazy ideas, Nat?" He grinned.

"You only reveal abysmal ignorance," I said loftily, "by terming 'crazy' all ideas you can't comprehend!" It pleased me to see that draw a scowl from him.

Within fifteen minutes we were in his car and roaring out into the country. Wisps of fog clung over the fields.

The air was like a damp cold rag against my face. I shivered. A sun was not yet visible.

At Jarrad Morgan's lane we turned in. Bad news travels fast. Already a half dozen or so cars belonging to neighboring farmers had arrived. We got out and trudged across a field to where a small group of men stood silently looking down at Lunk O'Slaughtery's body.

He lay flat on his back, arms outstretched, wide-open eyes staring heavenward and an expression of utter surprise on his face. Dew had settled in shining little droplets amid the whiskered stubble of his purplish cheeks. He looked cold.

THE coroner had already arrived and grunted a greeting at Noonan. He was a little man with a face like a dried, irritated prune. He took off a pair of heavy-lensed spectacles and polished off the haze of fog.

"Don't know what to make of it, sheriff. Frankly, I'm stymied. The man's been electrocuted."

Sheriff Noonan's mouth sagged



open. He scratched his fleshy chin with a pudgy finger, trying to look like he was thinking. We stared down at the strange sight. One whole side of Lunk's body had been burned, the clothes partially charred. Blue-black burns extended up under one bare arm.

After some deep thought, Sheriff Noonan said, "Looks like a bolt of lightning struck him." Unconsciously his eyes went up and examined the clear morning sky. The idea was ridiculous, but nobody laughed.

The clothes on the body appeared to have been torn, I noted. Then I saw why. A few feet behind the corpse was a barbed wire fence. It was obvious that Lunk had climbed over and got hung up on the barbs long enough to rip his clothing. I tapped the coroner on the arm and asked:

"How long has he been dead?"

"I estimate between eleven and midnight last night. Probably not later than midnight."

Then Jarrad Morgan, who owned the land we were on, shook his long horseface wonderingly and made a remark: "In all my born days I never seen the like of it!"

A high, nasal voice shot right back with, "I s'pect you could tell us a sight more'n you let on, Brother Morgan!" The speaker was Henry Pell, a neighboring farmer. Pell was a tall and fairly prosperous young bachelor. I didn't like him. Mainly, I concede, because he is sweet on Emily O'Slaughter. I happen to be in love with Emily. . . .

Morgan clenched a red, knobby fist. His little pale blue eyes narrowed and his thin mouth drew back into a knife-edged scowl. Morgan is a mean number. He looks mean enough even when dozing in church, but when he really sets himself out to look mean, a rattlesnake by comparison looks like a charming baby's pet.

"Are you insinuating I had a hand in Lunk's death?"

Pell's grin oozed sarcasm. "You ain't forgettin' you threatened poor

Lunk with a shotgun if he didn't stay out of your melon patch? Witnesses a-plenty overheard you in town the other day."

It was true. I'd heard Morgan and Lunk squabbling many times. Only yesterday, I heard Morgan accuse Lunk of swiping his melons. No doubt with plenty of reason. It is generally known that Lunk was the town no-good. He never worked, always getting by in ways that wouldn't bear investigating.

I suspect he would have been in jail far more often than he was if the sheriff and everyone else weren't so sorry for Emily, Lunk's daughter. Everyone thought it a pity that Lunk had to be the father of one of the sweetest and prettiest young girls in town.

"You're durned tootin' I told Lunk that!" fumed Morgan. "I told him I'd fill him with a shotgun load of rock salt if he came near my melons! But I didn't kill Lunk an' I don't know nothin' about it!"

ANYONE knowing Lunk would know that Morgan's threat would be a challenge to the big man now dead. After that squabble with Morgan, Lunk would have gone out of his way to swipe the melons.

"Who else had any reason to kill Morgan?" taunted Pell. "Only you!"

"I'll tell you who else would want to kill Lunk!" raged Morgan. "You—that's who!"

Sheriff Noonan raised his hands wearily. "Boys, boys! It ain't nice to argue over poor Lunk's dead body!"

But Morgan had to have his say out. "Pell, whyn't you tell the sheriff about the time Lunk kicked you off his front porch when you came courtin' Emily?"

Henry Pell flushed as red as the village fire truck. The Adam's apple bobbed in his scrawny neck as he swallowed. "I'll thank you to keep my private life out of this!" he snapped.

"You two shut up!" ordered Sheriff Noonan. "I'll ask the questions

around here." The other two went silent and Noonan turned shrewd, frosty-blue eyes toward me. "Let's begin with you, Nat. Don't mind sayin' your far-fetched yarn has got me worried. I don't take much stock in dreams. How did you know so much about Lunk's death before it happened?"

Patiently, I tried to explain. "The phenomenon is a common one to all students of the occult. I could cite numerous examples of even more spectacular premonitions. The psychic mind—"

Someone snickered, and I got hot under the collar. I am only too well aware that most folks consider me a crackpot. Sheriff Noonan waved a pudgy paw in annoyance. "Let him talk!" And to me, "How do you explain your crazy dream in a way that common folks like me can understand?"

"I often have dreams and premonitions," I said. "Time, after all, is only another dimension. The psychic mind can travel the time dimension forward and backward, and even sideways—"

"Never mind trying explanations," rudely cut in the sheriff. "Just answer simple questions. In your dream, now, you claimed you knew when and where Lunk would die. Facts prove you was right. Do you likewise know how and who?"

"That part of the dream is vague," I said. "I'm trying to remember . . ."

"You called it murder the other night," Noonan continued. "Is that the way it looked in your dream?"

"Well," I began reluctantly, "all I remember is the distinct and horrible feeling that I was watching a murder."

"Hmnm!" The sheriff cleared his throat and began more cautiously.

"Nat, I've knowed you a long time and I've knowed you've always been kinda funny. I mean your ideas was funny," he added hastily. "You've always spouted wild talk about dreams an' visions and what-not. Now none of that holds water with me. All I want

is straight facts. So just for the records, I'd kinda like to know your whereabouts for last night?"

I asked with cold bluntness, "You suspect me of murder?"

He wore an apologetic air. "It's just for the records," he repeated. "I got to know the whereabouts of everybody who knew Lunk."

"Very well," I said coldly. "I was with Emily O'Slaughtery all evening—'til one o'clock at least. We went to a movie and a drive in the country afterward."

"And before you saw Emily?"

"As you should recall," I pointed out with sarcasm, "I went to your office right after closing my shop at six o'clock and told you about my dream. I warned you to put Lunk under surveillance. You laughed quite heartily."

SHERIFF NOONAN grinned nervously, flushed. "Anyone'll admit that a dream like that would be hard to take serious."

"After leaving your office, I looked for Lunk. I found him in Mike's Beer Tavern and warned him in the presence of others along the bar."

There was a murmur of agreement from a couple of the listening farmers who had heard me.

"Everyone laughed," I said. "So I went on out to Lunk's farm and told Emily. Well, she laughed too, so we went to a movie and forgot about it."

"Anything else you got to say that might have some bearing on the case?"

I hesitated. "I suppose I ought to mention that Henry Pell was just pulling out of O'Slaughtery's lane when I arrived. He'd asked for a date from Emily and got turned down."

All eyes went to Pell. He flushed angrily but did not refute my statement.

"Well, s'pose you try hard," encouraged Noonan, "an' try to remember more of your dream."

I pondered. The dream had been vivid at the time, but upon awakening, parts of it had grown elusive. "I

think if I walk around a bit I may see some details that will bring it back to me," I said.

"Go right ahead," said the sheriff.

I started out along the fence, straining my memory and noting every detail of the landscape. The sheriff and others followed, curious, silent, as if expecting a miracle to happen.

It all looked vaguely familiar. There was the barbed wire fence, and on the other side railroad tracks that cut through Morgan's land. Overhead was the faint hum of a high tension wire, and in the distance the melancholy hoot of mourning doves repeated again and again. And in the damp morning air was something else quite typical of our part of the country—the smell of skunk musk. Our county is overrun with the night prowlers. On almost any night one gets a whiff of the nauseating odor when driving through the country.

The smell was getting stronger as I followed the fence.

"W h e w!" said Noonan. "Some damn fool killed a skunk!"

I was getting excited. The smell was somehow connected with my dream. Another detail dropped into place in my memory. I quickened my steps. And there, about fifty feet ahead, was the dead body of the black little animal with the broad white stripe down its back. The skunk was very dead, and very pungent. I did not venture closer. It was entangled in the fence.

The humming drone was louder. I looked up, saw the county high-tension power line cut across the field at this point. One more detail of the dream fitted into place. I turned and started walking confidently across the field in the direction of Morgan's farmhouse.

"Find something, Nat?" Noonan asked anxiously.

"Think so. But something's missing. If I can find it, I'll have the answer. I believe we'll find it in Morgan's barnyard."

"Young feller!" snarled Morgan.

"Don't go tryin' to pin anything on me!"

I turned and asked him coolly, "You nave a dog, do you not?"

"Course I do! Everybody knows that!"

"And you keep the poor brute chained?" I asked this with all the contempt I could muster. I love dogs and despise people who mistreat them. Moreover, I am convinced, from my studies in the occult, that dogs are but the reincarnated souls of men in a past life, and will no doubt be reincarnated back into the form of men in their next life if they are good dogs.

"It's my own dog and my own business!" snapped Morgan.

THAT'S what I meant about Morgan being mean. I kept silent and continued on to the back of the barn. There, confined by a long light chain was Morgan's dog, Tar, a black animal of unknown pedigree. Tar knew me and came running up with loud, joyous barks. The long chain brought him to a halt with a sharp yelp. I went up, patted the black animal, and unhooked the chain from his collar. Tar rushed off in frenzied joy at his freedom.

"Hey!" yelled Morgan. "Whaddya mean lettin' Tar loose!"

I stopped his protests cold with my next remark. I held up one end of the chain. "This is the chain that murdered Lunk O'Slaughtery."

Some of the slow-witted farmers gasped, not seeing what I meant. Even Sheriff Noonan was puzzled. "What d'you mean, Nat?"

I scowled in the direction of Jarrad Morgan. "Someone wired one end of this chain to the barbed wire fence and threw the other end up over the high-tension wire—probably with a rope and weight tied to the end. That clever little stunt had the effect of charging Morgan's fence with about three thousand volts of electricity so that when Lunk climbed over he got electrocuted!"

Morgan gave away his guilt by

shouting, "You're plumb crazy! I didn't do no such thing!" Nobody had accused him yet. He sputtered on, making himself sound guiltier with each word.

Sheriff Noonan looked doubtful. He eyed Jarrad. "I might have to hold you, Morgan—just for the time being, of course, while further investigation is bein' made."

I paid no attention to Morgan's loud denials. My dream was coming back more and more clearly. I must confess that never had I known a more remarkable dream, demonstrating beyond doubt the power of the psychic mind. Guided by intuition, I started walking toward the barn entrance. And suddenly I smelled the musk of a skunk.

Others who had followed me smelled it too. Even above the odor of manure the skunk smell was too strong to be mistaken. Sheriff Noonan came in after us, and he was the first to find the old pair of overalls and the blue workshirt hanging on a nail. He pounced on them triumphantly, wrinkling his nose in disgust at the odor that came from them.

"The murderer wore these clothes!" he announced with considerable pride in his deduction. "Way I figger it, the

murderer scared up the skunk while throwin' the chain over the power line, and the skunk got electrocuted—but not before smelling up the murderer!" He narrowed his eyes at Jarrad Morgan. "I presume you won't deny these are your duds, Jarrad?"

Morgan's face was gray. Then he clamped his mouth shut tight like a vise. He was so furious, so doggoned guilty he couldn't speak.

"I'm arrestin' you for the murder of Lunk O'Slaughtery," said Sheriff Noonan.

Well, I'd like to end the story here only there was still something missing from my dream. That last detail came back to me when I saw Tar excitedly digging in the barnyard. Everything suddenly clicked into place and I knew that Jarrad Morgan was innocent. The murderer had only smelled up Morgan's clothes to implicate the farmer.

I guess that after Lunk swore I was a nut and that he'd never let his daughter marry me while he was alive, I got too upset to tell dreams from reality.

So I sat still and watched Tar approach, wagging his tail happily and dragging my clothes that I'd buried last night.

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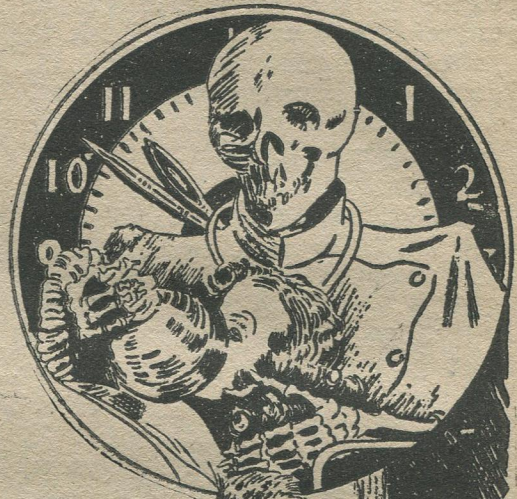
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The Crimson Letter

By Norman A. Daniels

Suppose the man who ruined you was at your mercy—and you could kill him and get away with it. Dr. Mitchell had that chance, but fate intercepted by delivering a letter from the grave.



THE lung beside the operating table was pulsating in and out evenly with its odd rasping noise like a leaky auto tire. The chief surgeon was intent upon his task. Nurses stood by, slapping instruments into his hand as he called for them in staccato accents.

The operating theatre was tense, as it always was during a serious

operation. But the most tense man there was seated on a stool at the head of the table. His hands were steady at the controls of the anesthesia. Now and then he felt the pulse and watched the respiration. A stethoscope came into play frequently for the failure of the heart was a serious possibility.

Dr. Dan Mitchell, behind his robe and mask, was thirty-odd years old and handsome in a craggy sort of way. Right now his own heart was beating almost as fast as the patient's. Dr. Dan Mitchell was faced with the gravest problem of his life.

A slight turn of the oxygen control, his brain said. Just one slight twist. The patient would get too much ether. In the middle of this ordeal his heart would give out for lack of oxygen. But who could ever say so? Those things happen in the best operating theatres with the best surgeons and anestheticians.

Dr. Dan Mitchell was seized with the impulse to kill Dean Arling. A powerful force within him said to kill . . . kill . . . *kill!*

But another force—his conscience and something so fixed in his brain as to become part of it—stayed his hand. That something was the Hippocratic Oath. A doctor is more of a scientist than a human being at times like this. He must exert every fiber to the utmost so the patient, whoever he might be, should live.

Mitchell paused to signal a nurse who quickly wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead. He affixed the stethoscope a little better and listened intently. The heart beat was thready but not bad considering the circumstances. Dr. Mitchell sent a little more oxygen and ether hissing into the mask.

THE operation took an hour and Mitchell was on the verge of exhaustion when it was over. He made his last check and gave the final signal that the patient could be removed.

He watched as the stretcher was wheeled out of the theatre.

The sweat broke out on him again as he thought of what he had almost done. Some men would have never hesitated, for the patient had all but ruined Mitchell's career and reputation. And with no other reason except his bull-headedness, Mitchell didn't like to think of the details. He shrugged and went out to rescrub, don fresh gown and mask and be ready for the next patient.

At seven-thirty that night he was off duty and dozing in his cubbyhole of a room at the doctors' dormitories. The phone rang and he cursed softly because it always meant an emergency case. One he wouldn't have time to really study and his anesthesia would have to be delivered without proper preparation.

But it wasn't Emergency. It seemed that Dean Arling wanted to see Dr. Mitchell at once. Mitchell donned his white coat, walked out and across the expanse of lawn to the hospital proper. In a few moments he entered the private room of the patient he had almost murdered.

Arling was fifty-eight, overweight, pompous and a bad man to cross. At the moment he was feeling weak and looked it, but a hard smile fashioned itself on his lips.

"Sit down, Mitchell," he invited in a rasping whisper. "Go on, be comfortable."

Mitchell carried a chair over and sat down. Arling turned his head slightly. The smile grew broader. His eyes looked directly into Mitchell's.

He said, "Why didn't you kill me, doctor—when I was so completely at your mercy on the operating table?"

Mitchell pushed his chair back and arose. "Good night, Mr. Arling," he said.

"No, wait," Arling pleaded. "That was a nasty crack and I take it back. But I don't mind telling you I was mighty nervous when I discovered you were to be the anesthetician."

"Why should you be?" Mitchell de-

manded. "To me you were just another patient whose life rested in my hands for a moment. Despite your conviction to the contrary, Mr. Arling, I'm not in the habit of killing my patients. What or how I feel toward them notwithstanding."

"I'm sorry, then, for my suspicions," Arling said. "But, doctor, if you had given me an extra whiff of ether or whatever that vile gas was—the whole world would have known about it tomorrow morning."

Mitchell was puzzled and looked it. "I wrote a letter stating that if I died during the operation, your work was to be closely studied because, in my opinion, you would be my murderer. In fact, I stated that if I died while I was in this hospital, for any cause, you were to be considered as my probable murderer. This letter is in a sealed envelope to be opened only in the event of my death and it's locked in my safe deposit vault."

Mitchell shrugged. "It's true I could have killed you. It's even true I thought of it, but I'm a doctor, Mr. Arling, and I have a code of ethics. Something you might not comprehend, but it exists. If that's all you want—good night."

Arling grinned feebly. "I just thought you'd like to know," he said.

Mitchell glanced at the patient's chart. Everything was coming along very well indeed. He glanced at the patient again, walked out and closed the door. He nodded at the floor supervisor, greeted one of the staff surgeons and went back to his own room.

HALF an hour later the word came. Mitchell rushed back to the hospital. He entered Arling's room and his eyes opened very wide. Arling was dead. Not as a result of the operation. At least not the one in the surgical amphitheatre. The final operation had been done with a scalpel plunged into Arling's heart. It was still there, silvery handle shining dully in the overhead light.

Then someone shouted and, like all

the others, Mitchell turned quickly. A thin-faced, blond young man was standing in the doorway, pointing a shaking finger straight at Dr. Mitchell.

The blond young man screamed two words. "That's him!"

Dr. Parker, chief surgeon, walked over to Mitchell. "What on earth does he mean—and who the devil is he anyway?"

Mitchell said, "His name is Andrew Carson and he's a nephew of the dead man. Doctor, I'll be in my room when the police wish to question me."

Nobody tried to stop Mitchell though Andrew Carson swung slowly around to follow Mitchell's exit with his pointing finger. Mitchell went back to his room, sat on the edge of the bed and his mind went back over a period of a year and a half. So it had come at last. The thing he dreaded.

Then he jumped to his feet with a gasp of horror. Of course Andy Carson would accuse him of the murder, but that didn't mean much. He wasn't a witness. But in the safe deposit vault of the dead man rested a sealed envelope baldly stating that Arling accused Dr. Dan Mitchell of his murder. That letter might be enough to convict, combined with the other evidence police could find very readily.

Mitchell began to perspire. He mopped his face and took a drink of water. He paced the floor. Something had to be done. Something drastic. When that letter was opened, he wouldn't stand a chance. A dead man's accusation usually stuck.

There was absolutely no way of getting the letter and in the morning Arling's attorneys were bound to open the safe deposit box. The letter would be right on top, marked to be opened in the event of Arling's death and it would be opened at once. Mitchell could feel the cold steel of handcuffs closing around his wrists.

The hard rap on the door, though he expected it, startled him. He

croaked a "Come in," in a tense voice.

The man who entered was lean, efficient-looking and could have passed for one of the staff doctors except that doctors rarely carry guns that almost peep from a shoulder holster. The visitor unsnapped a leather case and showed a badge that read Detective Lieutenant.

"My name is Sheehan." He sat down on the edge of the bed. "Homicide Detail. Want to talk about it, doc?"

"Yes." Mitchell reached for a cigarette as he sat down. His hands shook and he cursed himself for lighting up. The detective was bound to note his nervousness.

Sheehan grinned and lit one of his own cigarettes. "Go ahead, doc. I'm all ears."

Mitchell puffed deeply, tilted his head back and blew a cloud of smoke at the ceiling. He said, "Lieutenant, I probably had as good a reason to murder Arling as any man. Perhaps better. Two and a half years ago I got out of the Navy Medical Corps. I'd never practiced, just went into service right from my residence days at a New York hospital. But I wanted to practice, so I looked for a likely spot and found the town of Vernon—about eighteen miles north of here."

"Seems I've heard of it," Sheehan admitted. "Arling lived there, didn't he?"

"He not only lived there—he owned the place. And ran it according to his own wishes. He was the power behind the throne and anyone who bucked him got bounced up and down until he was dizzy. Well, I opened an office there because only one doctor was in practice and he was old. A month later I was going along fine. Then Arling called me in to take care of his wife who had pneumonia."

Sheehan nodded. "She's dead so her death had something to do with this, eh?"

"Everything," Mitchell went on. "She was very ill, but quite strong

and I thought all she required was oxygen. I intended to use sulphur drugs, but she had a decided allergy toward them. Of course, if she didn't improve, I would have used them anyway. But she responded well to the oxygen tent. The other local doctor insisted on sulphur drugs, but I refused to agree. Arling went along with me. That night Arling's wife died."

"It's a straight story," Sheehan said. "Of course you know Arling's nephew told it to me, along with the final result. How Arling blamed you for his wife's death and managed to get you kicked out of town."

Mitchell nodded. "I almost left on a fence rail, that's how bad Arling made things for me. I knew that wherever I went he'd find me and undermine any confidence a patient could have in me. And, to be frank, I wasn't even sure of myself. So I took this resident physician job here."

Sheehan slowly broke off a long bit of ash from his cigarette. Without looking up, he said, "Did you kill him, doc?"

Mitchell spoke in a low voice. "No. Do you think I did?"

Sheehan chuckled. "It's a fair question, doc. No, I don't think you bumped him off. Why? Because a few hours before he died, you could have killed him and gotten away with it. The one and only way a murder can be committed and we cops could just stand there and twiddle our thumbs. He was right at your mercy on the operating table. So if you didn't knock him off then, when everything was in your favor, why should you have done a clumsy job later on?"

Mitchell exhaled slowly. "Thanks, lieutenant. I hoped somebody would understand."

Sheehan got up. "Realize this, doc—what I just told you is my personal opinion. Killers do nutty things sometimes. Maybe you were too much the doctor to bump him on the operating

table so you waited until later. However, if nothing more than this story of what happened in Vernon comes to light, I won't make any trouble for you."

Mitchell shook hands with the man and studied him for a moment. Lieutenant Sheehan had the coldest eyes Mitchell had ever seen. He was an honest cop, a good one, but if he ever read that letter which Arling had written, he'd come back and he wouldn't leave alone.

Mitchell smoked half a dozen cigarettes, lighting each from the other. When his mouth burned almost as much as the tip of the cigarettes, he gave up. He had to find the murderer. Unless he did—before the safe deposit vault was opened—he'd go into a cell and then he'd be able to do nothing to help himself.

There was a time limit. Short, definite and with disastrous possibilities.

Mitchell changed into a suit, called the office and reported himself off duty and went to the garage for his cheap coupé. He pushed to one side the medical bag he always carried in the car, and drove to the front of the hospital. He went in and talked to the receptionist.

She was a dizzy redhead with a crush on Mitchell and she was more than willing to co-operate with him. From her he learned that two people came to visit Arling. First there was Roy Bishop, who had been Arling's confidential secretary. Then the nephew, Andy Carson, had arrived. Both had sworn that Arling was alive when they left his room.

Roy Bishop had driven back to Vernon, but Andy Carson was just leaving the hospital when the alarm was given and he'd gone back. Mitchell was grateful for one thing—he only had two suspects to contend with. The possibility of a murderer sneaking through the hospital to Arling's room was remote. The floor super would have noticed anyone, and there were nurses, orderlies and internes swarming all over the place.

Mitchell went back to his car and started driving to Vernon. Somehow he had to prove one of his two suspects was guilty. Somehow—and very soon. There was only the rest of the night left. Morning would bring disaster.

VERNON was sleeping quietly, even at ten-thirty at night. Arling's house was fully lighted up however. Mitchell parked in front of it and sat there, trying to figure it all out. He was no detective but he was educated sufficiently to know how a detective might work. First, there had to be a motive. That was all-important, and very often a motive pointed straight to the criminal.

He recollected the unnatural speed with which Andy Carson had accused him of the murder. Would a man make such an accusation so swiftly unless he had something to base it on? Did Andy Carson know about the letter his uncle had written?

Certainly the other suspect, Roy Bishop, knew of it. For very likely Bishop had typed it. Arling rarely wrote anything by hand. But what was Bishop's motive? Had he been left a substantial sum? Perhaps, but if the estate was the motive, Andy Carson was the most logical, for he was due to inherit the works. And that meant something around a million dollars besides valuable holdings. Motive enough.

A hospital, with its doctors, nurses and attendants, is not the safest place in the world to commit murder, which cries for darkness and secrecy. Mitchell decided that the killer dared to strike there because he knew Mitchell was present, that he had an excellent motive and stood a good chance of being convicted after Arling's letter of accusation would be revealed.

Mitchell didn't dare trust his own judgment of these two men. He drove to the drug store of Angus McNab, a dour Scot who had worked closely with him when he was in practice here.

When Mitchell walked into the store, McNab adjusted his steel-rimmed glasses and suddenly found it necessary to rearrange some stock that was already neatly in line.

Mitchell said, "Hello, Angus."

McNab didn't turr around. "If you want something, say so. I'm a busy man, doctor."

Mitchell leaned against the counter. "Angus, I want to know about young Carson and Roy Bishop. I think they had something—"

McNab wheeled around quickly. "Doctor," he said stonily, "you're wasting my time and years. I got nothing to say. Not to you. This is a matter for the police and why they haven't taken firm action already is more than I can figure out."

"So it's like that," Mitchell said. "Arling convinced all of you I was the cause of his wife's death. Maybe I was. Men are entitled to one mistake—all men except doctors. But I didn't kill Arling, do you understand? I'm trying to find out who did before they electrocute me for the crime."

"Good night to you," McNab said coldly. "I'm closing up for the night."

Mitchell walked out, seething with rage. Arling's power in this town was such that his word was law and whatever he said was accepted as gospel. There wouldn't be a soul who hadn't already in his heart convicted Mitchell.

He went back to Arling's house and rang the bell. A dour-faced housekeeper, already garbed in mourning black, peered at him through myopic eyes. But she recognized him and barred his way.

"What do you want?" she demanded. "Coming here—after what has happened to the master. The nerve of some men!"

"I want to see Roy Bishop and Andy Carson," Mitchell said. "What's more, I intend to see them. Now do I get in peacefully or shall we have trouble?"

"Neither is here. Now get out, you

—you murderer!" she blazed at him.

The name stung. So far it had only been implied, but this hurt. Mitchell turned away. There wasn't a thing he could do. Not one blessed thing except wait until the bank opened and the letter was read. He cursed bitterly, reversed his steps and walked around to the back of the house. Arling kept a chauffeur, a bullet-headed man named Nearing. Nearing wasn't too intelligent but Mitchell had always thought Nearing was on his side. He found the chauffeur unhappily packing his belongings.

Nearing indicated a chair in his quarters above the garage. "Hi-ya, doc. Glad to see you."

"Are you really?" Mitchell asked.

NEARING sighed. "Ain't a soul in this lousy town don't believe you knocked off Arling. Even if you did, the damn fools who live here ought to realize you did 'em a favor. How does it add up, doc? You in trouble?"

Mitchell relaxed for the first time since he'd seen Arling dead. "If you call being on a straight road to the execution chamber under the name of trouble, I've got it."

"Look." Nearing stopped packing his bags. "I know you didn't knock him off. You want me to smuggle you to a safe place? I got friends. And you won't need dough, doc."

"Thanks." Mitchell allowed himself a short laugh. "I'm not playing it that way. The fact is, Arling thought I might kill him and wrote a letter—"

"Roy Bishop was telling the reporters about that letter a little while ago. He typed it. Doc, you'd better let me take you away."

"So Bishop knew," Mitchell mused. "Did Andy Carson know too?"

Nearing shook his head. "Carson came back from the city, took the red roadster and drove away. He was going to Arling's lake house at Falling Brook. You know where it is."

"Now isn't that a peculiar thing to

do?" Mitchell mused. "So soon after his uncle had been murdered?"

"Don't go by what Andy does, doc. He's plain nuts. Funny thing though—Roy Bishop came barging into the garage a little while ago and asked me where Andy had gone. I told him and he took the sedan. I guess he was going after him."

Mitchell arose quickly. "And I'm going after both of them. Thanks—for your faith in me and the information too. I won't forget it."

During the long drive to Falling Brook, Mitchell felt more and more certain that he was on the track of something. It had to be either Carson or Bishop. Carson had left so quickly there must be something behind it; and because Bishop followed him so eagerly, he was probably involved too.

Mitchell parked the car behind the black sedan which Bishop had driven here. Carson's red roadster was squarely in front of the sprawling lakeside lodge. Mitchell saw no reason to sneak up on them. He'd hear nothing incriminating through closed doors and tight windows anyway. Whatever he'd decide to do must be done in front of both.

He felt grateful his thinking was still lucid. The terror had left him for the most part and his brain was clear. Clear enough to think back and realize that if Mrs. Arling hadn't died, she would now be the heir and Andy Carson would be dependent upon her. Furthermore, Mrs. Arling had hated her husband's nephew. As the heir to her husband's estate, she would have made certain that Andy got nothing.

Besides that, everyone connected with the household knew that Arling himself was due for a serious operation and might not come out of it. Mitchell wondered if there was anything to this chain of reasoning.

Andy Carson was his suspect. He stood to gain the most. All that Roy Bishop would get was the nod to find himself another job. Perhaps Arling had left him some token in his will,

but it wouldn't be much. Arling had never been known as a liberal soul.

Mitchell got out of the car, walked straight to the lodge and beat the brass knocker against the door. Roy Bishop let him in and his jaw sagged at sight of Mitchell.

"What—in the world do you want?" he asked.

"A little talk. With you and Carson. I know he's here."

"Why—sure, doctor. Step right in. We've nothing to hide, but from what Andy told me, I thought you were already behind bars."

Mitchell let that pass, walked in and found Andy Carson at work mixing a pair of highballs. Carson glanced over his shoulder and slowly put down the bottle of Scotch.

He said, "Roy, watch him. I accused him tonight and he's here to kill me. I know he is."

Mitchell threw his hat on a chair. "Killing you, Andy, would be a pleasure. But if I do, it will be the legal way. I wasn't arrested. It seemed the detective in charge had a little sense."

"Had sense?" Roy Bishop came around to face Mitchell. "Doc, the guy must be crazy. I told them about the letter in Arling's safe deposit box. You knew it existed. Arling said he'd informed you of that fact."

"Yes." Mitchell sat down slowly. "Arling told me, but I guess you informed the police after I'd left the hospital."

ANDY came forward holding two glasses. He handed one to Roy Bishop and then looked down at Mitchell. "Want a drink, killer?" he asked.

"No, thanks," Mitchell said. "Now which of you two saw Arling last?"

Andy Carson took a long pull at his highball. Then he glanced at Bishop and winked. "The murderer turns detective, Roy. That's a new slant."

Mitchell didn't move and the expression on his face didn't change.

He said, "You two can talk this out with me or—I'll beat the truth out of you. One of you killed Arling and did it with an easy mind because you knew about the letter he'd left accusing me. Shall we talk—or shall I start operating?"

Carson gulped down more liquor. He walked over to a chair, dropped into it and scowled. Then he said, "Doc, we could take you easy and we will if you make any trouble. However, I know how desperate you must be. So go ahead and ask your questions."

"I asked one already. Who saw Arling last?"

"I did." Roy Bishop came forward and sat down. "Only one visitor at a time was allowed so Andy went in first. Arling was fine when I saw him and when I left him."

Andy Carson smiled bitterly. "He wasn't okay when you left him a little later on, eh, doc? He was good and dead."

Mitchell leaned back slowly. "You saw him first, Andy. Roy Bishop waited until you came out of the room. Now, did both of you go directly to Arling's room after passing the receptionist?"

"Naturally," Bishop replied. "I waited in the hall. When Andy came out, I went in."

"I see," Mitchell declared enigmatically and wondered what he did see. This was getting him nowhere, yet he couldn't stop. There was nothing else to do but try and trip these men up in some way.

Then it hit him. Why he had asked that question. If they'd both gone directly to the room and Roy Bishop waited in the corridor—then Bishop was the killer. Because Andy hadn't seen Arling afterwards and only the man who had waited in the corridor could have secured the scalpel with which the murder was committed.

It had been a hospital scalpel. Of that, Mitchell was certain. And there was a small workshop near Arling's room, where surgical instruments

were stored and cleaned and sharpened. Sometimes the door was left open for ventilation. Bishop could have slipped in, taken a scalpel and performed his bloody murder later. Certainly Andy hadn't obtained that scalpel.

Not unless these two men were working together. If they were, Mitchell felt all hope was gone. They'd back each other up and nothing could break their stories. Mitchell glanced at Roy Bishop, who had finished his drink. Bishop had both eyes tightly closed.

Mitchell said, "Bishop, what's the matter with you?"

The eyes opened slowly. "I—don't know," Bishop groaned. "It hurts—here." He put a hand against his lower right side. "It—hurts like hell."

Mitchell went over to him, wary of a trap, but he soon saw that Bishop really was ill. His skin was turning white, his eyes were wincing in pain, and fine beads of sweat popped out all over his forehead. Mitchell helped the man over to a leather divan, had him stretch out and began an examination.

He went out to get his instrument bag, returned and took Bishop's temperature. It was high but not alarming. His heart wasn't steady and respiration seemed to be off. Mitchell grasped Bishop's right ankle and raised his leg. He doubled it and pushed it down hard against his abdomen.

Bishop let out an unearthly groan and Mitchell quickly let go of the leg. He stepped back. "Bishop," he said, "you've got a bad appendix. So bad I think it's ready to burst, though I can't be absolutely sure without a blood count. Is there a phone here?"

"No," Carson broke in. "My uncle refused to have one here."

Mitchell peeled off his coat. "Carson," he said, "arrange the kitchen table directly beneath the light. And bring floor lamps into the kitchen and hook them up. Put some water

on to boil and find a clean basin. Hurry!"

"Now listen," Carson snapped, "I'm not taking orders from any killer."

"Never mind what you think about me," Mitchell shouted. "Bishop will die if I don't operate. Get going!"

CARSON obeyed without further protest. When he was gone, Mitchell knelt beside his patient. Bishop was slowly losing consciousness. Mitchell opened his mouth and studied the lips and throat with a flashlight. Then he hastily prepared a half glass of brownish medicine and forced this down Bishop's throat.

Carson returned then to report everything ready. They carried Bishop into the kitchen and placed him on the table. Mitchell removed the patient's clothing and covered him with a clean sheet. He snipped a slit in the sheet above the site of the proposed operation. Instruments were being boiled on the stove.

Mitchell opened a can of ether, prepared the mask and placed it over Bishop's face. He held the can of ether high and let it drop slowly onto the mask. Carson watched all this with very wide eyes. Mitchell was already scrubbed and stripped to his undershirt. He placed a stethoscope over Bishop's chest, listened a moment and then resumed administering the ether. Once he glanced at Carson.

"You know," he said, "sometimes ether makes a man talk. Maybe I'll get the answers to my questions without asking them. I didn't kill your uncle and I know one of you two did. If Bishop is guilty he may talk, so stick around and be a witness."

Carson shuddered. "I—I can't stand the sight of blood. It makes me woozy. Doc, I'll stay 'way over here, if you don't mind."

"I'd rather. You'd be in the way. Well—this is it. I'm making the initial incision. Bishop is completely under anesthesia now."

For five minutes Mitchell worked furiously. Then he reached for a clamp and in doing so, turned half around. Carson was still over against the sink, but there was a gun now in his hand.

He said, "Doc, let him die."

Mitchell froze. "Are you crazy? I can't stop in the middle of an operation. Put that gun down."

"Let him die, doc. That's what I intended all along. I want Bishop to die."

"But why?" Mitchell protested.

"Because he killed my uncle. I know he did. That's why I came out here. To be alone so I could think this over. He followed me. He was afraid I might talk."

Mitchell rotated the clamp between rubber-gloved fingers. "Now look, Andy, I know how you feel about your uncle's murder. I'm glad too, that your statement exonerates me, but why let Bishop die?"

"Because I said so. Make one move toward him, doc, and I'll shoot."

Mitchell didn't move. "Talk sense," he argued. "When he comes out of the ether, he may talk. If there's anything important on his mind—or a bad sense of guilt, I'm sure he'll talk. We'll learn all we want to know and turn him over to the police. Why kill him?"

"That's what decided me," Carson grunted. "The fact that he might talk. So you just step aside and let him pass out, doc. It'll be easy. Very easy, but if there is any trouble, I'll say you did it purposely."

Mitchell drew a long breath. "So I'm going to take the rap anyway. Is that it?"

"Not unless you refuse to co-operate. I'll prove Bishop killed my uncle. It happens there's some blood on the shirt he wore when he stabbed him and I know where the shirt is. He dies and you'll swear he died during the operation. I'll kack you up and we can make it stick. I'll testify that Bishop confessed when

he knew he was in danger of dying. How about it, doc?"

MITCHELL slowly laid down the clamp. "I suppose it's as good a way out of this mess as any. Is there a good reason why Bishop killed your uncle?"

"He was stealing money. I can prove that too. Lift your hands, doc. I don't trust you."

"Now wait," Mitchell said. "We've got to handle this so it won't backfire. Bishop's appendix hadn't burst. There's no reason why the surgery shouldn't have been a success. But if I gave him a little too much ether, he'd die of ether pneumonia. Lots of patients do."

"Then give it to him. The whole can," Carson instructed. "And no tricks, doc. No tricks at all because if you try any, I'll change my story and say Bishop shot you after the operation started. That he came out of the ether and shot you while you were standing by waiting for him to die."

"No tricks," Mitchell said.

He walked over to the table and arranged the sheet to cover the site of the operation. He seized the can of ether, adjusted the mask and allowed a little to fall on the mask. Then he brought the can very close to the mask and pretended to pour it on. This done, he sighed, carried the can over to the sink and placed it on the gas stove. He pushed aside the steaming basin of water and shut off the fire beneath it first.

"Well," he said, "that's that. In about three or four minutes he'll be gone. Andy, give me a cigarette."

Andy Carson, his gun still pointed at Mitchell, handed him the pack. Mitchell stuck one between Carson's lips, took another and lit them both. He puffed deeply and then walked back toward the table. He bent over the patient, every nerve and muscle tensed.

Carson, smoking furiously, was leaning against the sink. At his side

the can of ether was almost boiling. The burners of the stove had been very hot when Mitchell put the can there. The ether must be vaporising at a tremendous rate.

Carson passed a hand across his face. He looked around, spotted the can and touched it. Then he screamed his hatred and snapped the cigarette against the wall behind the stove. The sparks flew in all directions and then the heavily laden air exploded.

Mitchell was ready for it. Carson was not. Involuntarily, Carson squeezed the trigger of his gun, but the bullet went high and wild. Mitchell flung himself at the man, brought him down and wrested the gun out of his grasp. There was no resultant fire from the ether. Just that single flash and it was over.

Mitchell ripped adhesive from a big roll he carried in his bag and bound Carson's wrists behind his back. Then he led him over to the table where Bishop lay—with his eyes wide open.

Mitchell said, "You heard it all, Roy. Every word. I gave you just enough ether to paralyze your muscles, but you could still hear. You never had appendicitis. Carson had poisoned you, but when he left the room I gave you an antidote. And when I gave you that knee test for appendicitis I manipulated your leg in such a manner as to get a groan of pain out of you, because I knew you didn't have appendicitis. You're still in pain from the poison, of course, but the ether numbed your senses and you lay quietly. He intended to let me open you up and then stand by while you died. Then he'd have shot me. And I know why, Bishop."

Bishop's lips parted. "He . . . killed . . . Arling's wife. Turned off the oxygen . . . long enough so she . . . died."

Mitchell nodded "I guessed that. You knew what he'd done. You knew why he did it—to insure the fact that Mrs. Arling would be dead before

Arling himself underwent that dangerous operation."

CARSON, so far sullenly silent, burst out in a series of curses. These over with, he screamed, "You idiot. Putting me in the chair like that. Well, I won't go alone. You knocked off my uncle at the hospital because I couldn't pay you blackmail when I didn't have any money. But if my uncle died, I'd be rich and I could pay off. You stabbed him with a scalpel you swiped while I was in the room. Your shirt sleeve was bloody. I saw you hide the shirt in the furnace. You didn't have time to set it on fire. Now go ahead and talk. Talk yourself into the chair too."

Mitchell hefted the gun he'd taken from Carson and tried to make up his mind how to get them back to the city. He wasn't in the clear yet. In the time it would take for the trip, they might decide to stick together and deny these stories told in a passion of rage.

He heard steps outside and suddenly realized there'd been a decided draft for the last few minutes. Then someone entered the lodge. It was Lieutenant Sheehan. He held a service pistol in his hand, but sized up the situation and slipped it back into the holster.

"Doc," he said, "you came as close

to death that time as you ever will until you really do go out. I was listening by the window and I thought you really meant to knock off Bishop and side with Carson. I was just about to come in and make you finish the operation. I didn't know then they were both guilty."

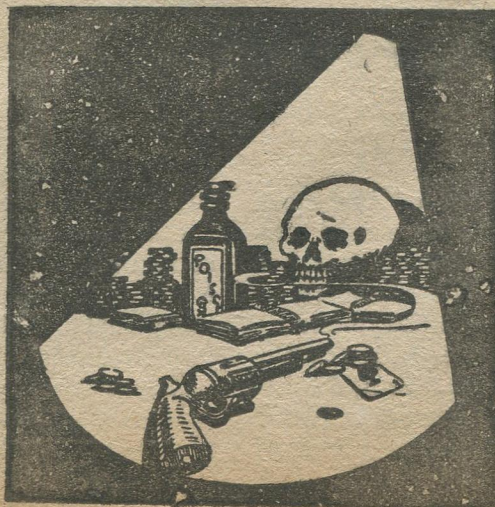
Mitchell sat down weakly. "I don't know how you got here, lieutenant, but I was never happier to see anyone."

Sheehan chuckled. "I came hunting you, doc. I heard about the letter and figured you'd be safest in a cell. Shows how wrong a man can be. Well, let's get these two into my car. We'll pick up the blood-stained shirt and then have a stenographer—Hey, doc, did you really open up this guy, Bishop?"

"No—I only pretended to," Mitchell said. "When I discovered he'd been poisoned, I knew Carson was responsible and I thought I had the answers, but I had to let Carson take the lead."

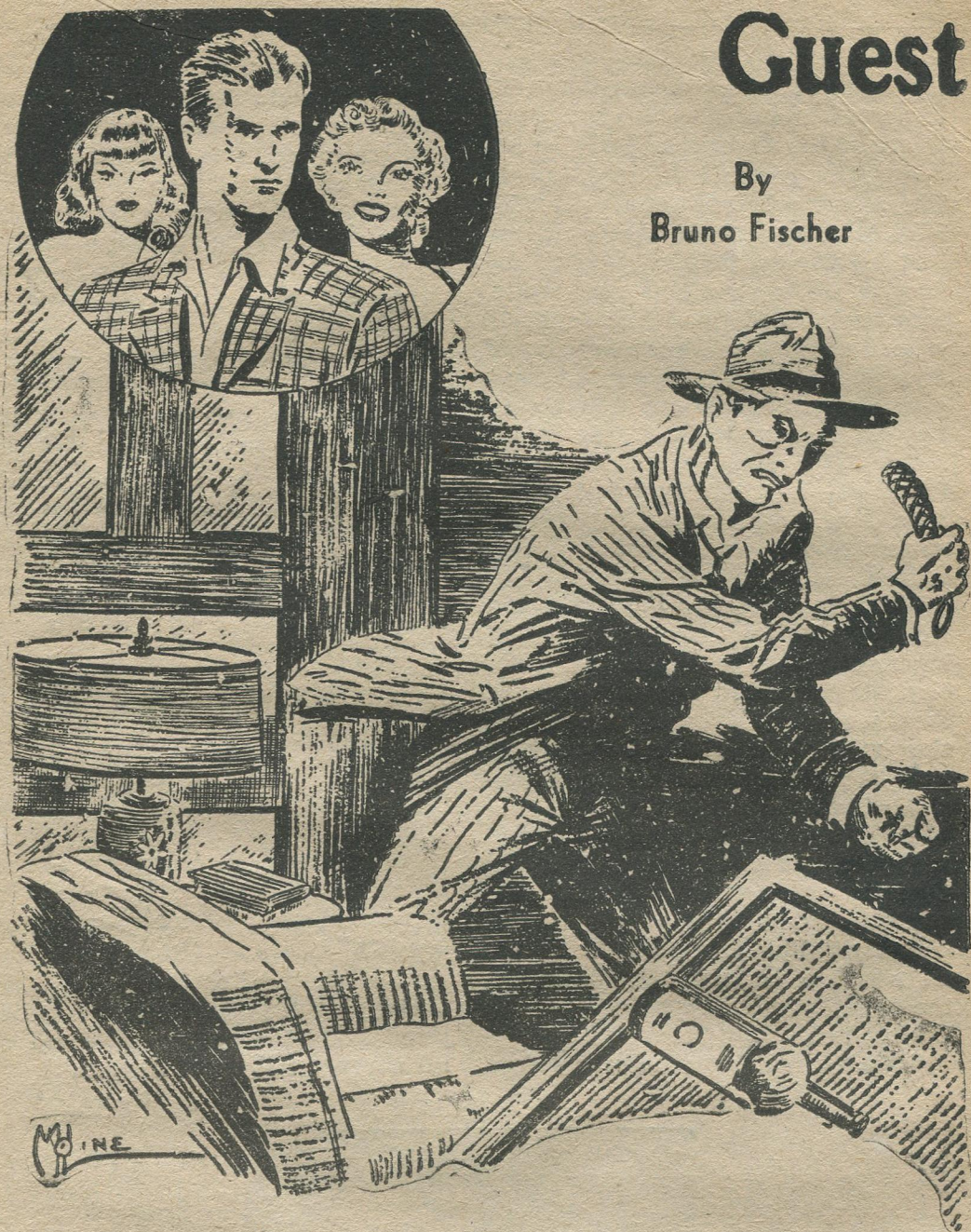
"Okay, doc. This clears you of that old charge too. Maybe people in Vernon will show you some respect from now on."

"Not me," Mitchell laughed. "I'm sticking at the hospital for another year. To get enough experience so I'll never doubt myself again."



Guest

By
Bruno Fischer



THE radium dial of the clock on the bedside table said seven minutes to two. It was five hours too early for the alarm to be ringing, so it had to be the phone.

Lou Chandler came fully awake and said aloud without heat, "I bet it's that crazy kid." Because a phone call in the middle of the night most

likely meant his kid brother Eddie at the other end of the wire. Eddie in the corner bar asking if he could come up and borrow five bucks, or at a party and anxious to tell a funny story that couldn't wait till morning, or in trouble, or merely drunk.

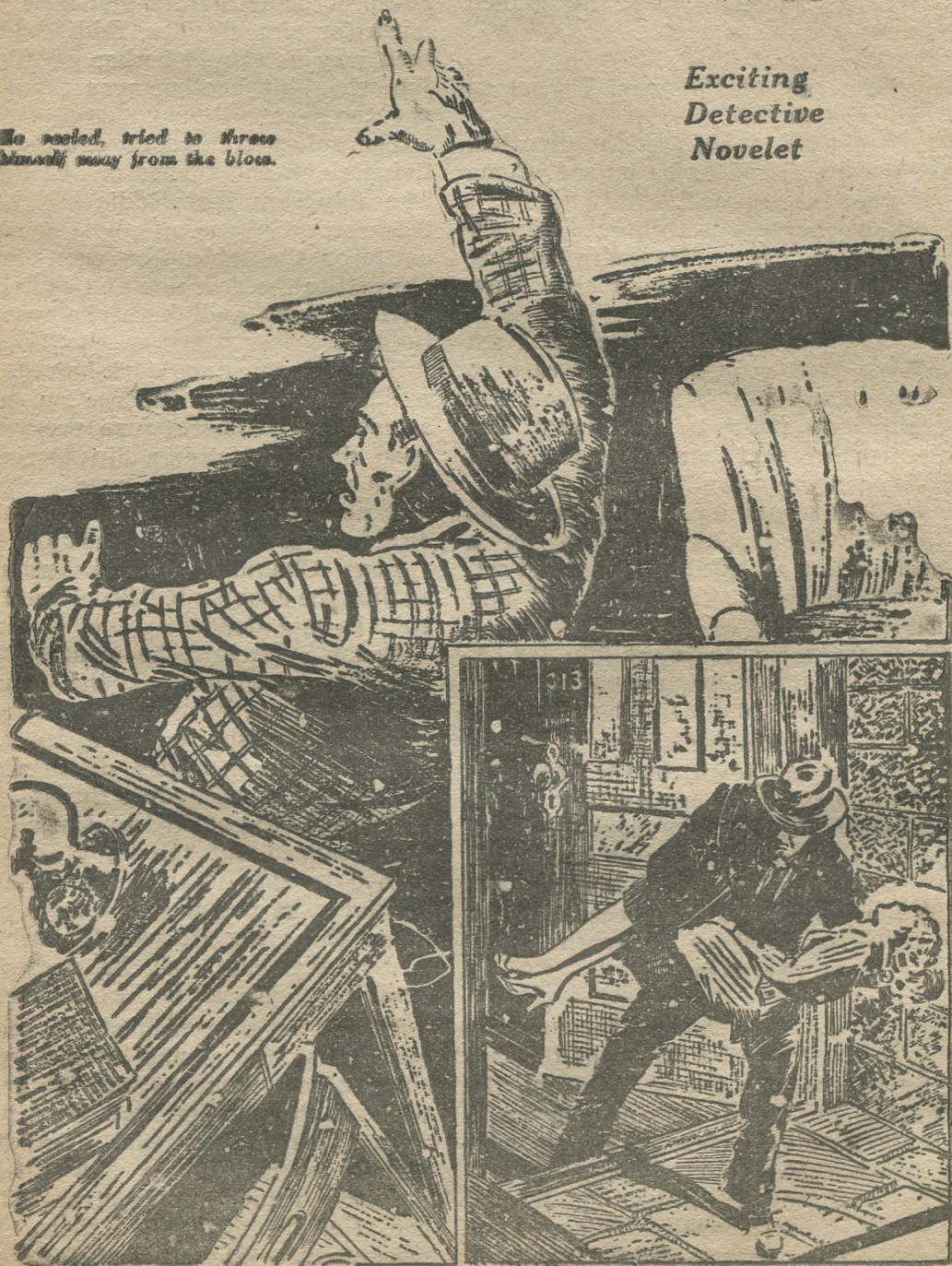
Lou slipped out of bed, stumbled across the room and picked up the phone.

from the Grave

A mysterious summons brought Detective Sergeant Chandler on a strange nocturnal visit. But when he arrived at that cryptlike rendezvous, an unknown guest had already preceded him. A guest that was lovely to look at—but holding a graveyard invitation.

Exciting
Detective
Novelet

He recoiled, tried to throw himself away from the blow.



"Lou," Eddie said in that lazy, half-mocking voice of his, "there's a woman in my bed."

"Congratulations," Lou said dryly.

"I wouldn't particularly mind," Eddie said, "if she were alive."

Lou yawned into the mouthpiece. "Okay, Eddie, what's the punch line?"

"The what?"

"The rest of the joke. I want to get back to bed."

"If it's a joke," Eddie drawled, "this one seems to be on me. Come and see for yourself."

Lou's big hands tightened fiercely on the hand-set. "If you're kidding about this, I'll break your neck. How did she die?"

"You know how squeamish I am about dead people. I didn't care to make an examination. Instead I'm calling the police in the form of Detective Sergeant Louis Chandler. How soon can you make it, Lou?"

Eddie would have used the same tone inviting somebody over for a drink. Lou scowled at the hand-set, snapped into it, "Ten minutes," and hung up.

It was closer to fifteen minutes before he got there because at that hour he had trouble finding a cab.

Eddie Chandler lived a dozen blocks across town, in the basement apartment of a brownstone house. The three rooms were more than half underground and even at high noon light trickled in only dimly, but Eddie preferred the place because it had a private entrance under the stoop and the rent was low.

NO LIGHT showed through the the Venetian blinds of the two living room windows fronting the street, and there was no answer to Lou Chandler's ring. He kept punching the bell button. Though he had never struck his kid brother, he had wanted to occasionally. This was one of the occasions. Eddie probably thought it very funny to drag him out

of bed at night with a cock-and-bull story.

Furiously he turned from the door, then hesitated. A key to this apartment was in his key ring. He'd lived here with Eddie for a couple of months to cut down expenses for both of them, but Eddie's parties and all-night poker games had been too much for him. Besides, Eddie hadn't seen why he should bother getting a job when his brother was there to pay the rent.

Lou unlocked the door, entered the living room and turned on the light. The only sign that Eddie had been there recently was an empty whisky bottle on the table. Lou went down the hall to the bedroom and switched on that light, and there she was in the bed.

She was young and dark-haired. He couldn't tell now if her face had been attractive, but her figure was very good. She was clad in a slip; her gray dress was hung neatly over a chair, and her open-toed shoes stood side by side on the floor. She was dead.

Lou Chandler leaned wearily against the doorjamb. "The damn fool kid," he said aloud.

Rousing himself, he went to the bed. The staring eyes, the gaping mouth, the partly protruding tongue told him how she had died. He bent over her. Bruises were distinguishable on the smooth white throat.

She had been choked to death.

He sapped out the light and returned to the living room. Bleakly he stared at the empty whisky bottle on the table. He wasn't much of a drinking man, but he needed a drink now. Instead he lit a cigarette.

His bitter gaze roamed the room, stopped at the phone sitting on a small table against the wall. He knew what he had to do. Call Homicide. Say: This is Sergeant Chandler. There's a murder at 313 Cherry Street. A young woman strangled in bed. No, she didn't live there. Not permanently, anyway, as far as I know. It's the apartment of a man

named Edward Chandler. A relative of mine? Yes, he's my—

He didn't move toward the phone. He drew smoke deep into his lungs. Where was Eddie? He had handed this mess to his big brother and then run out. There was no need for Eddie to face it. His brother would take care of it the way he did of everything else.

But this was too big. What in heaven's name did Eddie expect from him?

The doorbell rang. No doubt that was Eddie coming back. And Eddie would expect him to be grateful because he had changed his mind about running out.

But it wasn't Eddie. A tall, thin man who needed a shave stepped through the door when Lou opened it. His eyes were bloodshot and they rested suspiciously on Lou.

"Where's Eddie?" he demanded.

"Is he expecting you?" Lou asked cautiously.

"Could be."

"At this hour?"

The bloodshot eyes stared past Lou into the living room. "Who're you?"

"I'm—" Lou drew on his cigarette. "I'm a friend of Eddie's, bunking with him tonight."

"Yeah?" The man moved farther into the room. When he reached the table, he stopped. "How long you been here tonight?"

"I got in a couple of minutes ago," Lou said.

"With Eddie?"

"No. I guess Eddie's asleep."

The bloodshot eyes stared into the dark hall which led to the rest of the basement apartment. "How about waking him?"

"The kid needs sleep."

The man turned. "You don't want to wake him?"

"No."

"Okay." The tall man sank both hands into his pockets and started toward the door. "I'll be back tomorrow."

WATCHING him, Lou couldn't make up his mind what to do. Flash his badge and hold him? But that would be breaking the murder wide open. Was he ready for that before he at least had a chance to speak to Eddie?

"What did you say your name is?" Lou asked.

"I didn't say."

The tall man was passing close to Lou. Abruptly he turned and pulled his right hand out of his pocket. Lou glimpsed a rubber sap in the air. He tried to throw himself away from the blow, but the surprise of the attack delayed him. The sap caught him on the side of the head.

He staggered. He started to go for his gun, but the tall man was too close. Besides, there was no time. He shoved against the other's chest to put a little distance between them so that he could use a first. The tall man gave way a step and leaned forward and swung the sap again.

It caught Lou behind the ear. He blacked out before he hit the floor. . . .

He opened his eyes in total darkness. For a moment he thought he was home in bed, then he felt the hardness of the floor and remembered. Groggily he rose to his feet. He stumbled against a heavy armchair. There was only one in the room, which meant that the light switch would be some five feet to the left. He groped and found it.

The light stung his eyes. He shut them and felt his head throb. His stomach heaved. The ticking of a clock was the only sound anywhere. He looked at his own watch and saw that he had been out for not more than ten minutes, maybe less.

The tall man must have recognized him, and he must have known about the murdered woman in the bedroom. Nobody liked to hang around where there had been murder, but only somebody who had reason to be scared would sap a cop.

He went toward the bathroom. On the way down the hall he passed

the bedroom door. He hesitated, then opened the door and snapped on the room light.

There was no dead girl in Eddie's bed, nothing to show that she'd even been there. The bedspread was neatly in place. It looked as if nobody had been in that bed tonight, dead or alive.

Lou Chandler wished that his head would stop hurting. He went into the bathroom and soaked it in cold water. That helped a little, but it didn't make his thoughts any clearer.

He was standing in front of the basin, drinking water and fingering the lump behind his ear, when he heard somebody walk across the living room. He put down the glass and took out his gun and looked into the hall.

Eddie was standing in front of the bedroom, staring through the open door.

Lou put up his gun and stepped out into the hall. "She's no longer there," he said softly.

Eddie turned. "Hi, Lou," he said cheerfully.

EDDIE was nothing like his big, rugged-faced, stolid brother. He was slim, graceful, pretty as a girl. Women went crazy over him and most men liked him. He looked like a bored and sophisticated college boy in light-blue slacks and an open-collar blue shirt and a two-toned gray jacket.

Bleakly Lou said, "Who's a guy an inch or two over six feet, weighing about one-sixty, between thirty-five and forty years old?"

"I've no idea. Why?"

"He was here. He knocked me out cold with a sap and stole your girl friend."

"That was no girl friend," Eddie drawled. "That was a lady I'd never seen before until I came home and found her occupying my bed."

"Dead?"

"Obviously. I don't go around choking girls."

The throbbing in Lou's head became a kind of madness. He gripped Eddie's shoulder, shook him. "Over the phone you said you didn't know how she died."

"I took another look at her after I hung up."

"Listen!" Lou said. "After you phoned me, you realized you'd made a mistake. You realized that you would've been better off getting the body out of here. But it was too late because I was on the way, so you got a pal of yours to sap me and then both of you removed the body."

Eddie rolled his shoulder under his brother's grip, but he didn't try to break away. "Use your head, Lou. I would have thought of that before I phoned you to come here." He lowered his head and added reflectively, "Maybe I should have."

"There's no beating murder, Eddie."

Eddie's mouth twisted with disgust. "I told you I didn't kill her!"

"Why did she come here and get into your bed? Who choked her?"

"You're the detective. That's why I phoned you."

Wearily Lou said, "When did you find the body?"

"A couple of minutes before I phoned you."

"You'd just come home?"

"As a matter of fact, I'd been home an hour. I'd been reading in the living room. Then when I decided to go to bed, at two o'clock, I found it already occupied."

"Where did you go after you phoned me?"

"I needed a drink after what I saw in the bed. There wasn't a drop left in the house, so I went around the corner to Steve's for a couple of quick ones."

"While that murdered girl lay in the apartment?"

"There wasn't a chance that she'd run away," Eddie said blandly.

Lou's hand dropped from Eddie's shoulder. "I'll be right back," he said, and left the apartment.

Steve was removing his white jacket when Lou entered the beer joint.

"Hi, Sarg," Steve said. "I'm closing up, but I can serve you."

"Was Eddie here tonight?"

"Left only a few minutes ago."

"Anybody with him? A tall, thin guy."

"Far as I know, he was alone."

"How long did Eddie stay?"

"Ten-twenty minutes," Steve said.

"There were other customers, so I wouldn't remember exactly."

Lou Chandler returned to the basement apartment.

Eddie sat with one leg draped over the arm of a chair. Languidly he blew smoke through his nostrils.

"Okay, you were drinking at Steve's." Lou thrust his clenched hands into his pockets. "It surprised me a little. I thought that even you, Eddie, would get disturbed over the worst jam you were ever in. At least that you wouldn't walk out and let me handle it alone."

"I came back, didn't I?" Eddie drawled.

Lou's gaze was drawn to the phone. He knew what he ought to do—call Homicide. And then what? Go out of his way to involve his kid brother in a murder when there was no longer even a sign of it?

"What about the tall guy?" Lou asked.

"If it makes you feel any better to dream him up, why should I argue?"

It took a long moment for Lou to get it. The pain in his head turned to fire. Slowly he said, "So your idea is that I made up the tall guy to cover the fact that I disposed of the body for you?"

"I'm not bothering to have ideas."

"Damn you!" Lou took an angry step toward his brother and stopped. "What gives you that brainstorm?"

Eddie shrugged. "If you want me to put it into words, okay. You're an honest cop. You have pride. You wouldn't want even me to watch you cover anything like that. I'm grateful."

Lou took his fists out of his pockets, then thrust them back again. Eddie's theory, he knew, was one that his fellow cops would like too. He was in as deep as his kid brother. Maybe deeper.

He said tightly, "I've gotten you out of a lot of messes, but I won't cover murder for you."

Eddie leaned sideways to crush out his cigarette in an ash tray. When he straightened up, his handsome face was solemn. "I don't know what it's all about, Lou, but I know that the body is no longer in this apartment, and that's all that counts."

"Is it?" Lou said bleakly.

Abruptly he turned to the door and left.

II

THE girl lay behind a hydrangea shrub. A stockingless leg extended out from the shrub and showed slim and white against the fieldstone foundation of the house. An open-toed shoe dangled from the toes of the foot. Her gray dress, as well as her shoes, had been put on her since she had been in Eddie's bed last night.

Shortly after dawn somebody had passed along the sidewalk and had seen that leg and had phoned the police.

Sergeant Lou Chandler sucked smoke into his lungs and turned away. Tendrils of early morning mist hung over the street and trailed along Leslie Parker's ivory-and-green house. It was an expensive house in an expensive street that would ordinarily be outraged by a loud voice. Now it had been taken over by hard-faced cops, probing reporters, gawking spectators.

Lou flicked away his cigarette and went up a flagstone terrace and through a French door. The room was pine-panelled, a study of bleached oak and leather and hundreds of books in built-in bookshelves. It looked like the home of a man of refinement and culture, and it belonged to a mugg named Leslie Parker who

made his money on slot machines.

Parker sat deep in a leather chair and nervously passed a silk handkerchief over his brow. His face didn't go with the street, the house, the study. It had been battered in ancient street fights—a mugg's face. He was saying heavily, "You got nothing on me."

At that moment Lieutenant Tom Alden was snapping a lighter for his cigar. The other men in the room—an assistant district attorney, a police stenographer, a couple of second-grade detectives—merely stood about.

"I've got a job for you," Alden said when he had a light. "Go to the Club Royale on Mill Road and find out all you can about Dot Jewell."

"Dot Jewell?" Lou echoed. "Is she the dead girl?"

"That's right," Alden said. "Parker identified her right off. Mr. Johnson knew her too."

"Not as well as I would've like to," Johnson, the smooth young Assistant D.A., said, grinning. "Dot was the best looker on the Club Royale chorus line. It was no secret that she was Leslie Parker's girl friend."

Parker's head snapped up. "Dot was just a dame I knew. She didn't mean a thing to me."

"Is that why you strangled her?" Alden asked.

"Listen!" Parker said. "Call me anything you want, but don't call me a dope. Would I knock her off and then dump her right outside my house?"

Lou Chandler clamped his teeth together, as if to prevent words coming past his lips. He knew how the body had got there and who had phoned the police, but he couldn't say anything without involving his kid brother.

"I was framed, I tell you," Parker was protesting. "I didn't know a thing till you cops came barging in here this morning and dragged me out of bed. I went to sleep at twelve last night."

"Prove it," Alden said.

"Is it my fault I got servants who don't sleep in?" Parker thrust out. "Anyway, I don't have to prove anything. You can't prove I did it."

Parker had something there, Lou knew. Lieutenant Alden knew it too. He scowled at Parker for a long minute, then turned his head.

"We're wasting time, Lou. Get the dope on Dot Jewell."

Lou was glad to get away from that house, away from that dead girl behind the hydrangea. Every minute he was keeping his mouth shut he got himself in deeper as an accessory.

MARGE MARTIN was a tall girl with conspicuous curves and fine legs which she kicked in the faces of nightclub patrons. At the Club Royale Lou Chandler had been told that she had been Dot Jewell's closest friend. Though it was noon, he had had to rouse her out of bed.

He sat now in an overstuffed armchair and watched her pace the room in agitation. The sleazy robe she wore wasn't intended to hide her prominent charms.

"That's awful," she was saying. "Dot dead. She was the sweetest kid I ever knew. She had one rotten break five years ago marrying that—" She whirled suddenly. "That's who killed her—that crazy husband of hers!"

"Husband?" Lou prompted.

"Her ex-husband, I mean. A heel named George Darb. She married him when she was only a kid and didn't know better. She found out soon that he was a crook. Six months after their marriage the cops caught up with him and sent him away for four years. She divorced him while he was still in jail and tried to forget she'd ever known him. Then a couple of months ago he got out and wanted her to come back to him."

"What did he look like?"

Marge Martin paused to light a cigarette. "Dot said he wasn't so bad looking when she married him, but jail must've done something to him."

A tall, thin guy who never knew enough to shave. His eyes were scary. Streaked with veins and sort of red."

"Bloodshot," Lou said. He now had a name and identity for the man who had knocked him out last night in Eddie's apartment.

"This George Darb would hang around outside the Club Royale," she went on. "Never touched her. Hardly ever spoke to her. Just hung around for hours and hours for a chance to look at Dot with his hungry eyes. He gave me the willies, and Dot was scared sick of him. He's who killed her all right."

Lou nodded. It was working out a little better. That could explain how the corpse took a walk. A mad ex-husband killing his wife and lugging her body from place to place. But why in and then out of Eddie's apartment?

"How much did Leslie Parker mean to Dot?" he asked.

Marge Martin shrugged. "A rich guy and quick with a dollar. But there was a kid she really carried the torch for. A sweet handsome boy named Eddie Chandler."

Lou felt his stomach muscles tighten. Murder had made a full turn and returned to where it had started. To Eddie, who last night had told him that he didn't know the dead girl.

"Dot really went overboard for Eddie," she said. "Then the other day he told her he wasn't going to share her attentions with Leslie Parker or anybody else. He said she'd either marry him right off or else he was through with her. Dot couldn't make up her mind. The trouble was Eddie didn't have a cent to his name. She told him she'd meet him after the show last night and give him her answer."

"Do you know what she decided?"

"We always told each other everything. She told me last night before the show that she was going to marry Eddie, poor as he was. On weekdays the show ends at eleven-thirty, and Dot could hardly wait to get her

clothes on and leave because she knew that Eddie would be waiting outside the stage door for her. That's the last I ever saw of her."

She started to sniffle.

"And Eddie met her a few minutes after eleven-thirty," he muttered as if to himself.

"I guess he did. They were supposed to meet. They—" Her mouth hung open. "Say, you don't think Eddie killed her?"

Lou stood up. "Thanks for your cooperation."

As he moved to the door, he tried to form a picture in his mind. Eddie met Dot Jewell, and Darb, lurking in the shadows, overheard her tell Eddie that she had decided to marry him. And Darb waited until he could get her alone and then strangle her.

Marge Martin accompanied him to the door. "Why would Eddie want to kill her if she was going to marry him? It was that George Darb."

"Sure," he said.

Darb or Eddie, he thought, so it had to be Darb.

AT HEADQUARTERS Lou Chandler learned that the squad had returned from Parker's house a couple of hours ago and that thirty minutes ago it had rolled again. The address was at the opposite end of the district, in the slum section.

When Lou got there, he found the usual harness bulls keeping back the usual crowd which gathered at homicides. He mounted two flights of dark, narrow stairs in a particularly messy tenement house. One of the small second-floor apartments was crowded with precinct and Homicide men, but they left plenty of room about the man on the floor.

He lay not far inside the room—a tall, thin man with staring eyes still bloodshot, but now they were dead eyes.

Darb or Eddie, he thought dully, and now Darb had been murdered too.

He entered a bedroom hardly large enough for a bed, a chair, and a dress-

er. Lieutenant Tom Alden was searching the dresser.

"Glad you got here, Lou," he said. "About an hour ago somebody slipped a knife into that lad out there. In the back. Nobody in the house heard anything or saw anybody. In his hurry to leave, the killer didn't shut the door tight. A woman who lives next door saw the body through the partly open door as she was coming up the hall. That's all we've got so far except his name. George Darb.

Lou said, "He was Dot Jewell's ex-husband."

"Holy cats!" Alden whirled from the dresser. "You know him?"

Lou avoided a direct answer by saying, "I learned a while ago that she used to be married to an ex-con named George Darb." And he reported his interview with Marge Martin.

But he made no mention of Dot's boy friend, the kid named Eddie Chandler. He couldn't keep Eddie out of it much longer, but he needed time to get his thoughts straight, to grab at straws.

"So the two killings are tied together," Alden was saying. "The same killer, likely. I can see Darb killing Dot and then Parker for playing around with her, but how does it figure the other way around?"

"Where is Parker now?" Lou asked.

"Free as a bird. Nothing to hold him on. That murdered girl outside wasn't enough. Anybody could have killed her there or dumped her body there. And when Dr. Marcus said she was dead since about midnight, what case there was against Parker blew up. Hell, he wouldn't murder the girl and then leave her lying outside his house for eight hours."

"You said Darb was killed an hour ago?"

"Just about, according to Dr. Marcus."

Lou stared out at the activity in the other room. "So Parker had a chance to do it."

"Sure he had a chance. So did

thousands of other guys. If it was the same killer—and we can't see Parker as the killer of Dot—where does that leave us? Of course I'll grill Parker, but a lot of good I expect from that." Alden scratched his nose reflectively. "Maybe Dot had another boy friend. He killed Dot and then Darb because Darb found out about it. Something like that. Did you hear of another boy friend, Lou?"

Lou again avoided a direct answer. "I'm working on that angle."

"Then keep plugging," Alden said.

Lou walked out of the bedroom and past the dead man and out of the building. His legs had trouble carrying him.

III

EDDIE rose from a chair when Lou entered the basement apartment. "Hi," Eddie said breezily. "I see by the papers that the girl who occupied my bed last night eventually got located behind the shrubbery of a racketeer named Leslie Parker."

Wearily Lou leaned against the doorjamb. "You're old enough, Eddie, not to be such a damn fool."

"What did I do this time?"

"Didn't it occur to you that the police would find out who Dot Jewell's boy friends were?"

"Oh," Eddie grinned as sheepishly as a child discovered in a minor falsehood.

"Why didn't you tell me last night?" Lou demanded.

"I didn't want to complicate matters."

Lou clenched his hands as if to keep them from shaking.

"Listen!" he raged. "You're not the only idiot in the family. I covered you last night and I've been covering you up all day. When this comes out, I'm through—finished as a cop. But that's not the worst. I've made myself an accessory."

Eddie's grin was gone. "Gosh, Lou, I'm sorry."

"Like hell you are! Did you murder George Darb?"

"Darb?" Eddie blinked at him.

"He was stabbed to death early this afternoon. Maybe you didn't kill Dot Jewell. Maybe Darb did when he found her in your apartment last night and you went out for some reason. Then he came back for her body. I don't know why; he was probably cracked. But you knew who he was when I described him last night, and a couple of hours ago you went up to his place and put a knife in him because he'd killed the woman you loved."

"No, Lou."

Lou's big hands opened and closed convulsively. "Time's running out for both of us. You'll tell me everything now."

"I told you everything last night except that I knew Dot."

"Damn you, spill it!" Lou said.

"There's nothing else."

Lou hit Eddie in the face with his fist. Eddie's head snapped back. A look of utter astonishment came into his eyes. Lou hit him again. Eddie slammed against the wall and sagged against it.

"Spill it!"

Groggily Eddie lifted his head. Blood trickled from the right corner of his mouth.

"I—I don't know anything," he said thickly.

Lou hit him again. Eddie went down and lay twitching on the floor.

Slowly Lou opened his fists. He stared at them as if he had never before been aware of them. His panting breath was harsh in his ears.

"Why did you make me do it, Eddie?" he said in a voice that sounded unlike his own.

Eddie's head stirred. His eyes were closed, and he moaned through the gash of his mouth.

Stiff-legged, Lou went into the bathroom and returned with a wet towel and a glass of water. He slipped an arm under Eddie's head, tenderly washed the blood off his mouth. Ed-

die's eyes opened. There was nothing in them but dull pain. Lou lifted him to a sitting position and placed the rim of the glass to his swollen lips. Eddie took a sip or two and shook his head.

"I'm all right," he said and tried to rise.

LOU helped him up to his feet and then eased him down into the armchair. He lit two cigarettes at once and handed one to Eddie, who puffed greedily.

"You made me hit you," Lou said. His rage was now directed more at himself than at his kid brother. "You've been a wise guy all your life. Even when you told me over the phone last night that there was a dead girl in your bed, you couldn't be serious about it. Murder is a joke to you."

"No," Eddie said without removing the cigarette. "Haven't you learned yet that when things are bad I cover them up with wisecracks? I loved Dot, and there she was dead. And besides, I was scared sick."

"You sent for me and then blocked me off by not telling me what you knew."

"Because you won't be satisfied with what you know."

"Let me decide," Lou said. "I know already that George Darb got out of jail recently and wanted her to come back to him. I know that she was playing around with Leslie Parker. I know that you'd asked her to marry you and that she was going to give you your answer after the show last night."

Eddie sat deeper in the chair, slouching on his spine. "I got there late. You know me, Lou—I'm never on time for anything, not even when I expect a girl to tell me whether or not she'll marry me. She didn't come out. After a while I went through the stage door and a man told me he'd seen Dot leave a while ago. I walked to her apartment and she wasn't there. I hung around quite a while

for her to show up. It seemed incredible that she'd stand me up at such a time, even though I'd come late. After a while I went home."

"What time did you get home?"

"About one o'clock. I sat in this chair brooding. At two I decided to go to bed. And there in the bedroom was Dot. Can I have another cigarette?"

Lou lit it for him, then stood frowning down at him. "What about George Darb?"

"I've seen him a couple of times, hanging around outside the Club Royale. He never said anything, only stared at her. Dot told me about him and said he frightened her, though he'd never tried to as much as touch her."

"So last night, when I described the man who knocked me out and stole the body, you knew it was Darb?"

Eddie nodded gravely. "When I found Dot murdered in my bed, I realized how bad it looked for me. I didn't see how I could prove I hadn't done it. I did what I always do when I'm in trouble—I called you and tried to cover up how scared I was with wisecracks. Then I felt I'd die if I didn't have a drink and went out, and when I came back, you were there and the body was gone and you said Darb had taken it."

"I couldn't understand it; it seemed crazy. But the fact remained that the evidence against me, Dot's body, was gone. I had a notion that I could best get out of it by sitting tight, playing dumb. That's why I didn't tell you I knew Dot and George Darb."

"And you thought it would end there?"

"It was possible, if Darb hid the body where it would never be found. I should have had more faith in you, Lou. I certainly messed things up."

"You certainly did." Lou walked as far as the windows and then back to Eddie's chair. "Marge Martin told

me that Dot had made up her mind to marry you."

"Oh." Suddenly Eddie found his cigarette distasteful. He tossed it half-smoked into an ash tray.

"Eddie, you've got to tell me. Did you murder the man who murdered the girl you loved?"

"You don't believe that," Eddie said quietly.

For a long minute the two brothers looked at each other. Then Lou closed his eyes and ran a palm across his mouth.

"All right, Eddie," he said. "If it wasn't that way, only one other way makes sense. I've done all I can for you. Now you've got to chip in and help."

"Anything you say, Lou."

Lou's big hand dropped to his kid brother's shoulder—a protective, understanding gesture.

LESLIE PARKER sat behind the bleached oak desk in his study. He was tired. Lieutenant Alden had returned late in the afternoon and had questioned him for a solid hour about a second murder, then had left without doing anything about it. Parker sat relaxing, a tight smile on the corners of his mouth.

There was a knock on the French door leading out to the terrace. Through the glass he saw the vague outline of a man's shape in the gathering darkness.

"Hinky?" he said irritably. "Why don't you come in?"

The door opened. Eddie Chandler stepped into the study.

Parker rose halfway from the desk chair and then slowly sank down again. His hand moved toward a drawer, stopped. He seemed to reconsider.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

Eddie grinned. His swollen mouth put his boyish, handsome face slightly out of focus. He sat down in one of the leather chairs and crossed his legs, completely at ease.

"Nervous, Parker?" he drawled. "I wonder what the blood pressure is of a man who's murdered two people in less than twenty-four hours?"

Parker brought his right hand back into view. It was empty. He said thickly, "What're you talking about?"

"Dot Jewell, for a starter."

"Go on," Parker said quietly.

"Glad to. You didn't much like the idea of Dot spending some of her time with me, but there wasn't much you could do about it. Dot was a high-spirited lass with a mind of her own, and you were afraid you'd lose her completely if you threw your weight around. But some time yesterday she must have told you that she was going to marry me. That was too much. Leslie Parker, the slot machine king, the tough guy who made even cops shake in their boots, wouldn't take being thrown over.

"You picked Dot up as she left the Club Royale last night. You knew that she wouldn't come willingly with you because she was through with you, so a gun persuaded her to slip through the back yard to the other side of the block. That's why nobody saw her go with you." Eddie grinned. "How'm I doing?"

"I'm interested." Parker's eyes narrowed.

"You should be," Eddie said. "I think that at first you intended only to take her where she had to listen to your pleas. If that didn't work, beat her up. That would be your way. But murder her in cold blood—well, I don't know."

"She said I disgusted her!" Parker burst out. He was standing, shaking with the violence of his emotions. His face had turned color, his eyes had a strange look as if he was reliving former feelings, a former scene. "Said I was a mug and she was going to be the wife of a decent kid. I grabbed her. I shook her. I—I—"

Parker's voice trickled off. He dropped into his chair, yanked open the desk drawer, pulled out a gun.

The back of his left hand wiped sweat from his brow.

"You see," he said, his voice still a little shaken with hysteria. "I'm not scared of admitting it to you. Know why?"

"Because I know already that you're the killer?" Eddie did not seem to be disturbed by the gun pointed at him.

"You're guessing. But go on, I like to hear you."

"You grabbed her by the throat and shook her," Eddie said. "And you strangled her without intending to. So there she was, dead on your hands. You could have disposed of the body, but you had what you thought was a better idea. You hated my guts. I was the lad who had taken her away from you. Why not frame me for it? There's a private entrance to my apartment. The door was locked, but locks can be picked. You removed her shoes and dress and left her body in my bed. But imagine your surprise when the police arrived next morning and told you that the body was outside your own house. Murder coming home to roost."

"You're not funny," Parker said in chill tones.

EDDIE suddenly became grave. "No, murder never is. And Dot's murder—" He paused for a moment. "But there was a witness from the moment Dot left the club. Her ex-husband. George Darb lurking in the shadows the way he often did for a hungry look at Dot. He saw you force her to go with you. He hadn't a car to follow you with, so he walked or took a bus. By the time he got here and looked through a window, Dot was dead. Then he followed you again as you took the body to my apartment."

Eddie paused. From a nearby house, radio music drifted in from the night. He listened to it for a moment before he continued.

"George Darb brooded over what to do. Go to the police? He was an

ex-con, scared of cops, and it would be only his word against yours. Yet he couldn't let you get away with murdering the girl he loved. He spent a couple of hours making up his mind and then decided to get me to cooperate. He and I would return the body to you, fix it so that the framer would be framed.

"But when he reached my house, he found my brother there alone. A stranger to him. Darb evidently decided to go it by himself. He knocked my brother out and found Dot's body in my bed. How he got it here I don't know."

Parker shifted his gun to line it directly with Eddie's heart. "Darb stole a car."

"So you discussed it with him later?" Eddie nodded. "Blackmail, I suppose. Maybe he'd intended blackmail all along. I'm too poor to be blackmailed, but you're rich. He left the body outside your house instead of inside so the case against you wouldn't be too strong unless he stepped forward with his eye-witness account. After the police left here today, he phoned you and made his demand. You told him you'd bring the money right over. Instead you brought a knife and murdered him."

"He had it coming," Parker said.

Eddie smiled pleasantly at the gun. "And I suppose I have a bullet coming to me?"

"What do you think?"

"I expected that when you admitted murdering Dot," Eddie told him conversationally. "You made up your mind to kill me when I came here. You hate me and besides I'm dangerous." He uncrossed his legs. "But won't a third body complicate matters?"

"There won't be a third body," Parker said. "Not one that'll be found. The cops will learn soon enough that you were going around with Dot. When you don't show up, it'll be proof that you were the killer and got scared and took a powder. And then I—"

He stopped. Outside on the terrace low voices sounded. Eddie yawned and reached into a pocket for cigarettes.

"Hinky?" Parker called thinly.

"I'm coming," a voice replied. "And we got company."

The cigarette froze halfway to Eddie's mouth. He turned his head to the French door and stared.

The door opened. Lou Chandler came in. His hands were held stiffly at his sides. He didn't look at Eddie.

BEHIND him was the hulking form of Hinky Witt. Eddie had seen him at the Club Royale with Parker—Parker's right-hand man in the slot machine racket. A gun was in each of Hinky's hands. Eddie knew that one of them had been removed from Lou's shoulder holster.

"I came up the driveway and seen a shadow on the terrace," Hinky explained to Parker. "Looked like it was a man. I sneaked up and put my gat on him. He's a copper, boss."

"I know." Parker came around to the front of the desk. "Sergeant Lou Chandler. Dot once told me that Eddie had a brother who was a cop, and Eddie's name is Chandler. I knew you were Eddie's brother, Sarg, when you were here this morning."

Lou said, "You're through, Parker. I was sent to pick you up."

"Is that the way you make an arrest, by hanging around outside?" Parker sneered. "Maybe I'm a dope. I let this kid get me to talking too much. That was your idea—you listening outside while I spilled everything because I figured the kid would never live to use it."

"Well, it worked, didn't it?" Eddie drawled. "You confessed. Lou and I both heard you."

Parker frowned at Eddie in bewilderment. He was worried because the kid was still smiling, because even now his eyes mocked him.

"A lot of good it'll do where you two are going," Parker said.

"We're not going," Eddie told him.

Lou moved his arms a little, as if to loosen them. He glanced around at Hinky and his two guns, then turned his head back to Parker.

"Hinky and me have the guns," Parker pointed out dryly, "and we know how to use 'em."

"So what?" Eddie shrugged, dismissing the guns. "The threat of death is effective only if there is an alternative. Your plan is to take us away from this house and then kill us somewhere in peace and quiet and bury our bodies. You're giving us no alternative. Either way we die."

Lou opened his mouth and closed it without a word. Eddie was doing all right—as well as could be expected under the circumstances.

Behind him Hinky growled, "I think there's been too much talk already, boss."

Eddie turned his smile to Hinky. "Listen to that radio music."

They all listened. It came clearly from a nearby house.

"What about it?" Parker said. Sweat appeared on his brow.

"So long as you're going to kill me anyway," Eddie said pleasantly, "I'm going to make you shoot me right here. On this swank residential street where nobody talks above a whisper, shots will be heard in every house in the block. People will come running. You'll be caught red-handed. As long as you're going to kill us anyway, we prefer that you kill us here and with a lot of noise."

And he sauntered toward Parker.

Parker drew back along the side of the desk. "Stay where you are! I'll shoot!"

"That's exactly what I want you to do," Eddie said.

"Clip him, boss!" Hinky yelled.

LOU glimpsed Parker raise his gun. That was all Lou saw because he was whirling, crouching, knowing that behind him Hinky was closing the distance between them. Hinky came up fast, the right gun

raised to smash down on Lou's skull. Lou left his feet in a flying tackle. As his arms wound around Hinky's thighs, the gun swooped down, but Hinky was already falling and it glanced off Lou's left shoulder. Then they were both on the floor.

In a moment, Lou knew, Hinky would be forced to risk the consequences of a shot being heard. Lou, low on Hinky's body, butted his head into the other's groin. Hinky moaned, writhed beneath him, abruptly lost his ability for combat. Lou leaped to his feet, struggling in a vise of agony, Hinky was striving to bring a gun up to bear on Lou. Viciously Lou kicked him in the temple. Hinky lay still.

Somewhere in the room Leslie Parker screamed. Lou turned and saw Eddie clinging with both hands to Parker's right arm and his teeth were sunk in the right wrist, making the gun in that hand useless. Lou joined them. He reached in among those two thrashing bodies and tore the gun from Parker's fingers. He stepped back and slammed the gun down on Parker's head. Parker crumpled.

Suddenly the only sound in the room was the radio music floating across the night. Lou turned and went to where Hinky lay unconscious. As he bent to pluck the two guns from the lax fingers, he heard soft sobbing. He straightened up in surprise.

Eddie was leaning against the desk and reaching for his handkerchief. When he saw his brother stare at him, he blew his nose.

"Nerves, Lou," he said apologetically. "All the time I was being what you call a wise guy, I was half-crazy with fear. It wasn't easy not to let Parker see it."

Lou moved over to him and put a hand on his arm. That brought Eddie's smile back.

"You're a swell brother, Lou," he said.

Lou couldn't think of any answer to that. He just grinned back.

Louder Than Guns

Only one man dared face that angry armed mob. And to stave off their brutal intent, he had no weapon but words—and wits.

By Ralph J. Mercer



"DON'T let 'em take me! Please, please, sheriff, don't let 'em!" The anguished pleading of the cowering prisoner died to an incoherent mumbling from trembling lips. His agonized eyes clung to the sheriff. The priest, listening by his side, sighed sadly, realizing that his words of hope and faith were futile. The prisoner did not look to God for aid—his simpler and more direct faith lay in the tired rawboned Sheriff Behan and his deputies, his last hope against the cruelty of the mob outside.

"Don't worry. We'll take care of you." How many times had he said that, the sheriff wondered. He hoped the prisoner believed it. The sheriff wasn't so sure.

A deputy, keeping watch at a window, beckoned. The sheriff joined him.

"Looks bad. They've been comin' steady an' they're armed. I'd give a week's pay if that guy was out of here and safe up at the prison in Danville. If they ever attack this can we're sunk. You think he did it?"

The sheriff shrugged wearily. "Who knows? When they explode like this, don't they always blame the nearest stranger? This guy was a natural. No friends, no money—a tramp. If I hadn't grabbed him quick they'd have strung him up last night. Why in hell I didn't take him right to Danville then, I don't know! I didn't figure on this. If they get him now it's all my fault!"

The deputy grunted. "Your fault! You mean the governor's fault! You

phoned for help. He turned you down. Now we got this right in our laps."

The sheriff assented grimly. He'd had, he thought, his share of tough assignments, but never one like this. His was ordinarily a simple job in an ordinarily peaceful town. But the discovery the previous night of the body of the already hunger-emaciated child of a family of too many children, had turned it into a caldron of turbulent passions. This luckless wayfarer, almost immediately accused, had been saved from immediate vengeance by the quick action of the sheriff. It had been narrow.

Another deputy called from the rear window. "We could try to rush 'em, Joe. There's not so many back here."

The sheriff's car, surrounded by a small group of determined citizens, stood in the rear drive. This opened directly upon the main highway and was hidden from the front by the building itself, hence from the larger part of the mob. For a second the sheriff was tempted. It seemed the only way.

"No, Ed," he refused regretfully. "I can't risk you boys like that. We'll just have to sit it out and hope for a break." He spat impatiently. "If we could only figure some way to get them away from the back!"

He turned, encountering the dog-like, pleading eyes of the fear-crazed prisoner. He broke the contact with an effort. What could he do but wait and hope? Yet the poor devil depended upon him. He sought frantically for an out, and the more he strove the more hopeless it looked.

A sharp cry from the deputy at the front window brought him quickly forward. "There's something goin' on out there!"

THEY crowded to the window. A car had stopped at the fringe of the crowd. Its single occupant alighted and calmly sized up the situation.

"Morrison!" exclaimed the sheriff. "What's he want?"

"Maybe he came to help the mob!" remarked Ed sardonically.

"Hardly likely. He don't mix with amateurs," retorted Sheriff Behan. "Besides, he's been too close to the rope to enjoy it. I think he's comin' in. And ten to one he does it, too."

By now the man called Morrison was calmly making his way through the mob. Unsmiling, his granitelike features registering his contempt for the rabble, his gaunt frame towering even above the lean mountaineers, he stalked unhurriedly along the lane that opened ahead of him and made his way without hindrance to the office. There was something in his eyes that made the crowd give way. Frank Morrison repelled men.

"You're sure a cool hand," admired Sheriff Behan, "but what are you doing here?" Morrison's experience in prisons had left him scarred; his life had seen much of violence, and a voluntary visit, even to this little jail, could only have been prompted by the seriousness of the situation.

"I was up at Danville—heard the governor turned you down—figured I might be able to help some way," answered Morrison laconically.

"Kind of a new role for you, isn't it—helping the law save a prisoner from hangin'?" queried the sheriff. "Got a gun?"

"You know I don't use a gun," retorted Morrison. "But I've got an idea." He outlined his plan.

The sheriff looked inquiringly at his men. They nodded assent. It was as good a plan as any, and unless the mob really showed signs of getting rough, they could wait it out.

A deputy, watching the activities outside, called to the sheriff. "Here's what they've been waiting for, Joe. Here comes Jed Hawkins, the kid's old man."

The subdued murmuring outside mounted to a thundering, ominous fury. Hawkins was reeling slightly, shouting, and carrying a shotgun which he waved threateningly. Guns and clubs appeared in the crowd, which upon his arrival moved purposefully toward the front of the little jail.

"Here it comes, boys," called the sheriff. "Jim, you and Ed take the gas guns. Tom, you take the machine gun, but don't use it unless you have to. Give Frank a chance first." They nodded silently and aligned themselves behind the sheriff. "Al, you stay here and take care of the prisoner."

"Okay, Frank?" This to Morrison, who nodded briefly. Sheriff Behan and his deputies stepped forth warily.

The sheriff's last remaining hopes sank as he stepped out. Every voice seemed to join in the cry for the prisoner. "Give us Carson!"

The sheriff held up his hand. Most of them knew him. Some, he saw in a quick survey, were his friends. He felt he'd be allowed to speak his piece, but after that what?

"Men," he began, "we—"

Jed Hawkins advanced, interrupting him. "Sheriff, we know what yo'all are agoin' to say. Don't waste your time. We're not a-goin' to waste our'n. In thirty seconds we're a-comin' up, an' nothin's a-goin' to stop us. We want him! That's final!" He held up his watch.

Perhaps fifteen seconds had passed when the door behind the sheriff opened. Two men stepped out. Frank Morrison excited little curiosity. But the other, dirty, unkempt and cringing, immediately focused the pent-up hatred of the vengeful crowd.

THEY stared, Hawkins' ultimatum forgotten. Excited onlookers rushed to bring the news to those be-

hind the jail, who swelled the mob in front. Was the sheriff going to give up his prisoner without a fight—or were they going to try rushing the mob?

Morrison advanced. "Do you want this man?"

The crowd roared its assent. A man part way back bellowed, "It's some trick! Let's rush 'em!" He waved a rope.

Morrison held up his hand. "Give me two minutes—and if you still want him I'll give him to you. Is it a bargain?"

They agreed, murmuring, apparently hypnotized. Jed Hawkins merely stared, holding his shotgun tautly. Morrison continued.

"I want you to hang me first!" He paused. The crowd's murmurings were inarticulate, bewildered.

Jed Hawkins did not move. He bellowed a single word, "Why?"

"Why? For a number of reasons. First, I'm a worse enemy of yours than he is. I hate mobs and all they stand for. The man accused of the crime—if he is guilty—took the whole guilt upon himself. But you cowards will help to hang a man whom you don't know to be guilty or innocent, and afterwards will dodge the blame. You'll content your cowardly conscience with the excuse that you didn't handle the rope. Every last one of you has that rope in his hands just as surely as if you came here alone and put it around that man's neck." He pointed to the cringing creature.

Low-voiced murmurs mounted to angry resentment. Voices echoed loud and shrill from the crowd. "We don't want any sermons!" "Give us Carson!" "Who the hell are you?"

The deputies made ready at the sheriff's gesture. Was it going to fail? If so, they'd shoot it out, friends or not.

Morrison held up his hand. "Two minutes!" he reminded them. He continued, leaning forward intently.

"But there's a better reason to hang me first! The prisoner is charged with killing one person. Whether he did it

or not, I don't know. But this I do know." He paused. "I have killed more than one man—and I'm safe from the rope—the State can't lay a finger on me! And now you can hang us both!"

The mob, momentarily stunned and silent, quickly awoke. With a menacing roar it surged forward.

"Wait!" Morrison called. "While you're hanging people you might as well do a good job. In this state the man who hires a murderer is just as guilty as the murderer. There are men among you who have paid for killings—and I can prove it!"

They halted, silent. Neighbor stared at neighbor, uncertain, questioning.

"That's right! Look! Any one of you can tell a killer by just lookin' at him! That's why you're here, isn't it?" Morrison's voice was bitter, lashing. "So pick 'em out, you two bit heroes! But be careful—remember you all brought guns!"

Men separated warily, suspiciously. Guns wavered in apprehension. All but Jed Hawkins'. "Name your men!" he demanded.

"You, Hawkins, for one!"

"You're a liar!" spat Hawkins.

Morrison anxiously looked at the sheriff. "Long enough?" The sheriff nodded, at ease. The prisoner had been spirited out the back way. The mob would hang no one that day.

Morrison stared contemptuously for a moment. "Now if you'd like to hang this man you can have him—but take a good look first!" The man, no longer cringing, stepped forward, raised his face sadly, pityingly.

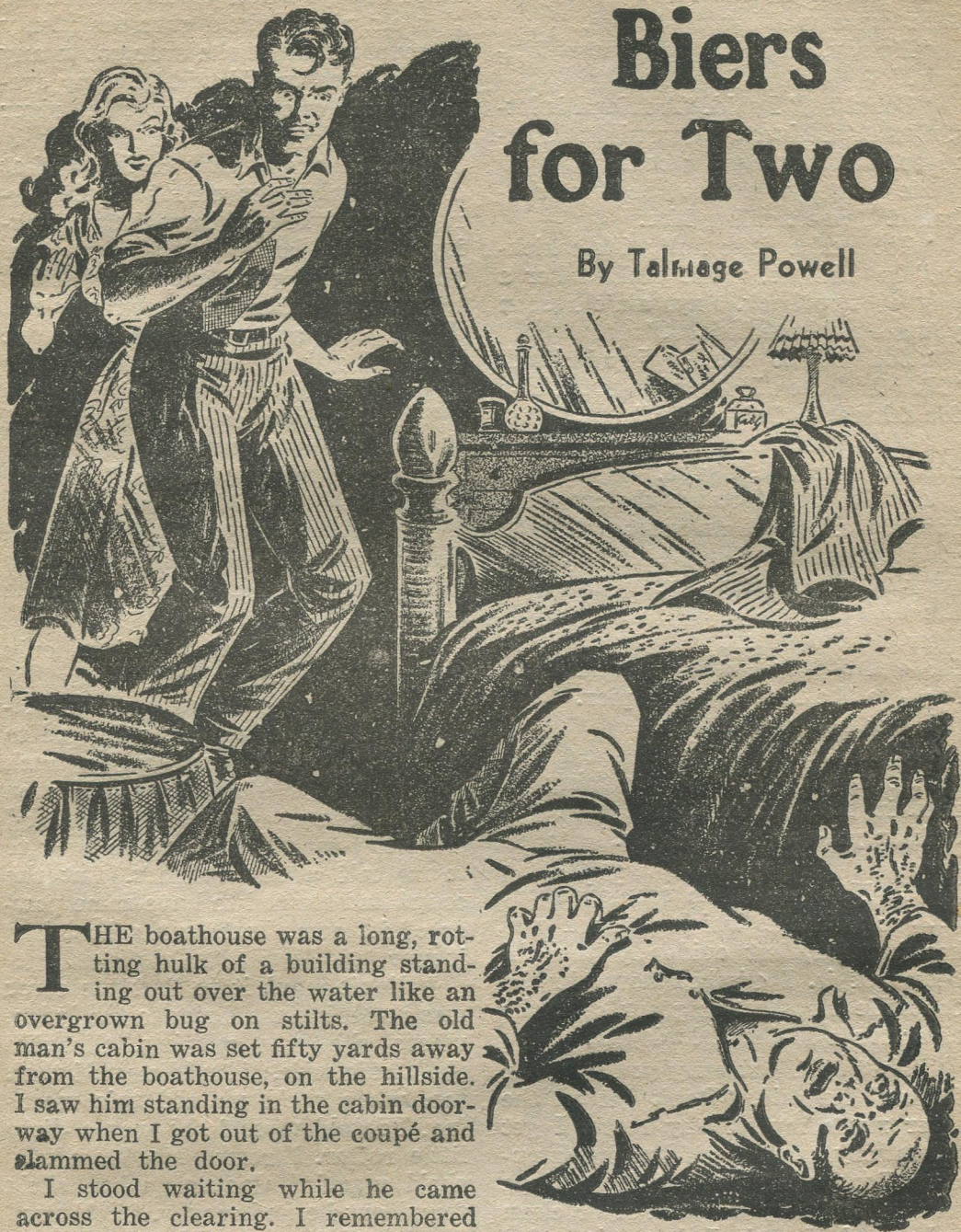
The mob gasped. Morrison spoke shortly. "Your priest, Father Farrell, has something to tell you."

The priest waited for silence. "Carson is in good hands, my sons, and safe on his way to Danville. Justice will be done, I promise. You may feel that Frank Morrison here saved Carson from you; he saved you from yourselves. That took much courage, for Frank Morrison is"—he sought vainly for a better word—"is your—your hangman!"

It was a romantic setting—the right place, maybe the right girl—but instead of cocktails, it turned out to be . . .

Biers for Two

By Talnidge Powell



THE boathouse was a long, rotting hulk of a building standing out over the water like an overgrown bug on stilts. The old man's cabin was set fifty yards away from the boathouse, on the hillside. I saw him standing in the cabin doorway when I got out of the coupé and slammed the door.

I stood waiting while he came across the clearing. I remembered him. Mac something-or-other was his name. Gnarled, beefy, with a chest that made him look top-heavy, and a wide, pleasant face with warm eyes, he moved toward me with a hint of rheumatism in his gait.

The day was warm and clear, the

mountain air just brisk enough to put a tingle in your veins. Insect life made a soft, humming rhythm. The mountains were shaggy and majestic, the gorge down which the river flowed a thing of vast, high grandeur.

I was looking out over the softly rippling water of the river, when old Mac came walking up to me.

"Howdy. Looking for some fishing?"

"Could be," I said. "A friend is letting me use his cabin overnight downriver. I'd like to get a boat."

He nodded, moved toward the boathouse. I was trailing him.

"Got a nice little hul' with a kicker," he told me. "Just caulked her a day or two back. Say, ain't I seen you around here before?"

"You might have," I admitted. "Now and then I get in from the city for a breath of clean air."

"Well, you can't beat this air around here. No, sirree."

He vanished through the creaking boathouse. I heard an outboard motor give out with a couple of popping gurgles. Then the motor came to life with a steady hum, and a moment later he tooled the boat out of the far end of the boathouse and drew it up to the low, sagging pier.

I met him on the pier.

"You got some baggage?" he asked.

"No, my friend has everything I'll need in his cabin. But I'll want you to keep your eye on my car."

HE NODDED. He seemed about to ask me which cabin I was heading for, but evidently thought better of it. I climbed down in the boat. He stood looking out over the river for a moment, loving it.

"Can't help but envy you younger fellers," he said. "Don't get on the river much myself any more. I get the misery in my legs from the dampness. Sort of hurts me, too. Always wanted to follow this old river clean to her end. Yes, sir, I always intended to find out just exactly where the river flows."

"All rivers find their way to the ocean," I said.

"Says so in books," he acknowledged. "But rivers are like people. Some hurry to beat the band. Some take things quiet and easy. Maybe

they all do end up the same place. But I always had a partic'lar love for this old river. She'd sure see plenty o' country before she ever got to any ocean. I reckon I'd still give my eye-teeth to know where this river flows."

He broke off, gave a laugh that carried an undercurrent of embarrassment. "Trouts have been striking good the last couple of days. Sure your friend's got plenty of tackle?"

"Sure." As far as I knew my friend didn't have any tackle of her own. At least not the kind to catch fish with. But I didn't intend to do any fishing. I might as well tell you—I was going downriver because another man's wife had phoned me. "Pay you for the boat now, Mac?"

"When you get back." He grinned warmly, spat on the pier, watched me until I was out of sight around the bend of the river.

It was hot out on the river, only the gurgle of water and the hum of the outboard breaking the deep silence. In less than a mile I tried to turn the boat around and go back three times. I couldn't. It had been the same way with the coupé. I'd tried to turn the car and go back to town half a dozen times. But the coupé had seemed to have some power of its own. Just as the boat had it now.

I didn't want it to, but the river was sweeping me down to the lodge, where she was waiting. Glenville Grayson's wife. I'd told myself that, too, when she'd phoned this morning. I'd told myself she was a dirty little rotter. I remembered the way she'd married Grayson when she'd found out he had money. She'd used me for all I was worth—then Grayson.

Those tender moments we'd had together must have been a laugh to her, after she got Grayson. But knowing that didn't stop me from losing sleep lots of nights, eating my heart out. And when she'd phoned this morning, I'd known that I'd nev-

er be able to turn the coupé or the boat around. . . .

The lodge was a little over three miles down river. A rambling, rustic two-story building of logs, it set snugly in the hillside. If anybody wanted privacy, it could be had here, in style. Glenville must have spent thirty thousand on the acreage, building, and its rustic furnishings. More properly, he must have talked his fat uncle, Roland Grayson, into spending the dough.

I wondered how it had set with her, with Darlene, when she'd found that Glenville's money was tied up under the administration of his uncle. It probably hadn't been too big an obstacle when she wanted a new mink. As long as it was male, Darlene would find her way over any obstacle—though old Uncle Roland must have been her toughest problem to date. He was wily and a cruel, hard-boiled business man.

I cut the motor, drifted the boat to the pier. I didn't see any sign of her anywhere. No sign of any kind of life at all. The whole, desolate countryside was so silent that when a jaybird chattered in a nearby thicket suddenly, I jumped.

I stood on the pier a moment, staring up at the lodge. Its windows, set set behind the wide, rambling porch like eyes under heavy, beetling brows, stared blankly back at me.

No smoke from the chimney, no movement. Nothing except the growl of water under my feet.

Maybe, I thought, she was taking a nap.

I wiped off my face, pushing the handkerchief in my hip pocket, and started up the hill toward the lodge. The tall shade trees were wide umbrellas over me. The breeze beneath them was cool. But I was sweating, and my pulse was a little thick and fast in my throat. I hated her for still having that effect over me, but I could never make the hatred strong enough.

I WAS pretty close to the house when I first heard it. The soft sound of sobbing. That stopped me in my tracks for a second. She'd said over the phone that she was alone, that she would be alone, but she was sobbing in a horrible kind of way, as if somebody had done something terrible to her.

I pushed my way up to the front porch. Through the wide, open doorway I could see her slumped in a chair. She heard me, and her head rose from her palms, slowly, gradually, streaked with tears. She knew how to create an effect, all right.

"John!" she said breathlessly. She was rising, still with those slow, gradual motions. Then she rushed across the living room, flung herself against me, twining her arms around my neck. I could feel her trembling.

"John, you came! I thought you'd never get here!"

"Take it easy! What's wrong?"

She looked up at me, so damned trusting and little-girl-ish and helpless I wanted to curse at her, because I'd seen the act before.

She said in a small voice, "John, something awful has happened! I'm so glad you came—you've got to help me!"

I looked over her shoulder. I saw a thirty-eight revolver lying on the table beside the chair in which she'd been sitting.

"I was afraid, John. I was sitting there with the gun beside me in case he came back. He didn't have guns like you usually find around a place like this—Glenville never did any hunting, you know. But isolated as the place is, he kept a pair of revolvers around."

I moved farther into the room. She was clinging to my arm. "What is this?" I said. "This talk about guns? This wondering if he would come back? If who would come back?"

"Glenville." She started sobbing again.

"You'd better tell me what's happened, Darlene."

She sank weakly into a chair. I didn't try to hold her. She stared at an open doorway across the room. "Glenville shot him," she said. "Glenville shot his uncle Roland."

A clutching stillness for a moment, then. A stillness that made a vacuum of my skull, with my pulse hammering inside of it. I turned woodenly, crossed the room to the open doorway.

It was a bedroom. The early afternoon sun slanted in the window, a pale rose-burst of light. I didn't see him at first. I moved into the room edgily.

He was lying on his back over beyond the bed, a big, fat, bald mound of dead blubber. I had to close my eyes for a second on Roland Grayson's death. He had been shot just above his left cheekbone.

I went back to where she was sitting. She was reaching hungrily for a cigarette. I needed one just as bad myself.

"I thought you were alone," I said. "When did it happen?"

"Right after I phoned you. Glenville must have guessed I'd come here. John—I—I hated him! He was weak and sniveling around his uncle. He never did a thing in his life that took any manhood. I used to think Glenville had an aristocratic face. It wasn't. It was just weak.

"I—I was going to leave him, John. I couldn't stand him any more. I love you, darling."

She stood up, slipped her arms about my neck. She was wearing her tears like jewels. She knew how to do that, too.

"I remembered the times we used to have, John. You're a lawyer. You could have got me a divorce, couldn't you, darling?"

"Go on," I said.

"Glenville and Roland came here to the lodge. They took the long way, around the mountain road. I decided it was as good a time as any to tell him, John. When I said I was leaving him, Glenville went to pieces. He said it was all Roland's fault. Roland had

tied up his money and wouldn't give him enough to care for a wife, decently. As if I wanted only his money! Roland, he said, stuck to him like a leech, living his life for him, giving him no freedom.

"It was—awful, John. It seemed like all the years had suddenly gathered in Glenville and exploded. And you know the family well enough to know the kind Roland was. Hard and mean. He said some vicious things to Glenville. Then to me, John. He—called me names, darling. Glenville struck him, and Roland knocked him down.

"Glenville went out of the room, and when he came back his face was like a crazy man's. He had a gun in his hand. Roland had stepped in the bedroom and taken off his coat. I screamed. Roland turned just in time to catch the bullet in his face," she shuddered.

"And then?"

"Glenville ran. Crying like a baby, John."

She walked over to the window, looked out at the sunshine, letting the sun cloak her like a soft, rose-petal gown. She was crying very quietly now.

MY throat was tight as I looked at her. People could change, I thought. Sometimes people had to get their stomachs full of one kind of life before trying something else. Maybe she was leveling. Maybe she'd really been going to leave him and come back to the lawyer who had about as many pennies as Glenville had dollars.

A hard trembling began to shake her, and she turned to me, her hands knotted together. "John," she almost screamed, "what are we going to do with him?"

"Him?"

"Roland?" she cried.

"But Glenville . . ."

"Yes, Glenville! And Glenville is yellow. Glenville would sell his soul to save his skin. He realizes what he's

done now, John! He'll sell me out flat! John, they'll get me—for murdering Roland!"

I could hear her breathing clear across the room.

"Can't you see it?" she wailed. "Nobody but Glenville and Roland knew they were coming here. They told me. Now Roland is dead. That leaves only Glenville. And he'll swear he was never here today, John."

I began to see what she was driving at.

"They'll think I did it, John. Everyone knows what bad blood there was between Roland and me—because of the way he bossed Glenville. Several people knew I was coming here today, though not exactly why. But they'll learn that I was going to see a man behind my husband's back. That'll make it worse. They'll never believe I only wanted to tell you I was leaving Glenville, if you still wanted me. They'll say that I killed Roland, when he followed me, in an argument over Glenville's money."

"But Glenville. . . ."

"Glenville will buy himself an alibi, you can count on that! And they'll never believe the truth from me, John! In their eyes I'll be the only person who could have killed Roland. There's only one thing we can do—get Roland away from here. Hide him some place. Until we can locate Glenville and make him break, make him tell the truth!"

I was lawyer enough to see what that might mean, too.

She drifted across the room to me. She clung to my lapels and for a minute I thought she was going to sink down and kneel at my feet. "I'm not asking you to do anything really wrong, John. Just give me a break, a chance to get at the truth. I've been a fool. You've got every reason to hate me, John. But you'd give a homeless dog a chance, wouldn't you?"

Now she was breathing against my cheek. Her lips against my cheek. "A

chance to keep your house for you, John. To learn to cook for you and take care of you. To be there when you came home every night."

Darlene there, instead of the emptiness and silence of a lonely apartment. . . .

And people could change. People got wise to themselves sometimes. But still I was afraid, afraid of her, of the cold dead body in the next room.

I held her face between my palms and looked deep in her eyes.

"I love you, John," she said softly.

I didn't say anything. I turned around and started out of the room, toward the back of the house. She followed me, not speaking either.

I went out in the back yard, glancing around.

I hadn't been able to turn the car around. Or the boat. I'd need something to wrap Roland in.

I'd started toward the garage. A tarpaulin might be in there, to cover his death until I got him out of the house.

"John. . . ."

I didn't look at her, didn't speak. I wanted to close my eyes, my whole mind, to everything until it was over. Until we had fixed it so she could be safe for the moment and had cornered Glenville and got the truth.

"John!"

I paused at the gaping, open doors to the garage, looked back at her.

"John, what—what are you going in the garage for?"

"To get something to wrap him," I said.

"But—but not in there, John. There's nothing in there. John, I. . . ."

There was something in there. I could see it. A tarpaulin.

She was saying something, very fast, very brisk. Trying suddenly to laugh. She was walking across the yard toward me, words fluttering out of her. Trying to tell me there was no need to look in the garage.

SOMETHING snapped inside of me. I remembered. I remembered that she had spoken of Glenville in the past tense as much as the present. I lunged into the garage, jerked the heavy canvas back.

Glenville lay under it. He'd been shot in the back of the head. Shot, while he'd been trying to run?

I heard her breathing. I turned to look, and she was standing off there, just beyond the garage doorway, breathing hard.

"You killed them both," I said. "For Glenville's money. You married him for it, but Roland had it all tied up. I guess you were right about there being an argument here today. Something certainly did gather in a knot and burst—but not in Glenville. In you. Then with Roland's blood on your hands, you knew Glenville would never stick by you.

"But you were hung with it, up here alone. So you needed a patsy. A fall guy. A sucker to burn while you spent all the money in freedom. You ran the car out of sight, after calling me. Got it all set up. I'd get hung with a corpse on my hands. You'd see to that. You'd see too that the cops heard the right kind of story.

"Even if I managed to skin out of it, they'd never be able to hang it on you. The elements would have been all confused, the circumstances all upset. But that was remote. There was a very definite chance I'd get it in the neck for a double killing that was supposed to have netted me a pile of money and a beautiful dame."

I looked at her and saw the last veil drop away. What was left was pretty horrible to look at.

She mouthed a curse. Then she whirled and ran toward the house. I remembered that revolver lying on the table in the living room.

I was right behind her. But I couldn't quite catch her. I just managed to close in and grab her arm when she fired the first shot. It hit the ceiling. She fought like a tigress, squeezing the trigger until the gun was empty. Then she sank her teeth in the back of my hand. I tore loose and ran down the hill.

The outboard fired, and I shoved the boat away from the pier. I had one last look at her before the underbrush along the river became a curtain between us. She was standing halfway down the hillside, her long blond hair tousled about her face, shrieking at me.

My hand bled all the way upriver. I never would forget the way that blood looked. I heaved the boat in at old Mac's dock, cut the motor, and yelled for him.

I scrambled out of the boat, ran down the pier. He was coming out of his cabin with his rheumatic gait.

"You got a phone?"

"Yeah," he said, "is something wrong?"

"Plenty. There's been some trouble down at the Grayson lodge. You'd better called the sheriff."

He raised his brows, hobbled hurriedly toward his cabin. I stood there a moment, breathing deep and hard, just letting the sun hit my face.

"Mac."

He stopped in the cabin doorway. "I found out where your river flows."

"Yeah?" he said.

"You ever hear of a woman named Salome?"

"Seems that I have," he said. "She was so beautiful and evil the devil himself must have been afraid of her."

"That's the one," I told him. "And your creek flows right past her front door."



He didn't seem much like a dick, this mild, soft-spoken little man. But he knew that to ferret out larceny, not a loudmouth but. . .

The Eyes Have It

By Joseph F. Hook



I'D NEVER met a detective in the flesh, but now I was looking at one across the backyard fence, and could hardly believe my own eyes. He wasn't what I expected.

The tractor firm I represent had opened a sales agency at Tahoma, center of a rich farming district, and had put me in charge. The wife and I were lucky enough to find a furnished house, and that's how I came to meet Jim Clark.

He was in his late fifties, a small man with a thin halo of hair surrounding a pate almost as bald and brown as an onion. His hands and feet were small for a man, and his eyes held a gentle, quizzical expression. His bib overalls showed plenty of laundering and patching as he leaned on his shovel, his fingernails absently tapping out a rhythmic beat on the handle.

When I confessed that he was not my conception of a detective, he laughed good-naturedly and said, "No, I don't suppose I am. I ought to weigh two hundred, stand over six feet in No. 14 shoes, be about thirty years old, talk in a deep bass voice, and scowl fiercely. I know because, you see, I've read a few whodunits myself."

That was another paradoxical thing about him—his voice. He spoke slowly, distinctly, and gently. His was a voice that soothed you, a voice that gained and held your attention.

He continued questioningly, "I suppose you'll be putting in a garden this

spring! It's mighty good exercise."

"I don't know much about gardening," I admitted. "But the wife likes flowers, and we both enjoy fresh vegetables."

"Well, when you get ready to plant," he offered, "I'll show you what little I know. I get a big kick out of it, especially fighting the bugs. But the pheasants pretty near drive me crazy." He stopped drumming on the shovel handle and pointed to the neighboring brush-ridden lots. "They hang out in there, and the minute my peas and corn pop up, the rascals eat them off."

HIS wife came out and called to him, "Jim, you're wanted on the telephone. Headquarters." And to me, "Howdy, neighbor. We'll be popping over for a visit in a few days."

"Well, there it goes," Jim Clark sighed. "This is supposed to be my day off. Sometimes I'm tempted to tear that phone out by the roots. . . . All right, Matilda, I'll be there."

He stuck his shovel in the ground and excused himself. Presently he was back, looking neat as a pin. He said, "If you've nothing to do right now, you might's well ride downtown with me. We won't be gone long."

As he drove, he explained the nature of the phone call. A certain Calvin Dupree, cashier in the Crosby department store, had absconded with forty thousand dollars.

He was in the police station only a few minutes, and when he climbed into the car again he said, "We'll drive out to Center Street and interview the little lady in the case. I always like

calling on the ladies," he added with an infectious grin.

Center Street, he explained, had been the classy residential district in the city's early days. The house, in front of which we presently drew up, was an old brownstone which the owner had converted into apartments.

The detective opened the massive front door, and then we were standing in a spacious hall, from which the original circular staircase led to the upper apartments.

He knocked on a door to our left, and Mrs. Calvin Dupree opened it. She was a young, well-dressed, stunning blonde and, quite naturally, extremely nervous. The detective introduced himself and said that he was from police headquarters.

The woman's hand flew to her throat. "Oh!" she exclaimed. And then, "Oh, yes—from the police. Won't you come in, please?"

The owner hadn't changed the room much. The paneled wainscoting was high and dark. The original stone fireplace was intact, with its long, wide, wooden mantel. In the center was one of those old-fashioned clocks, and beside it a stuffed ring-necked pheasant. At the end of the room there was an antique wardrobe with a full-length mirror inset in the door.

The detective sat down on a chair opposite the fireplace and dropped his hat on the floor beside him. I sat next to the big bay window, and Mrs. Dupree sank into an easy chair, directly across from the wardrobe mirror, twisting her handkerchief in nervous fingers.

"This has been an awful shock," she said, dabbing at her eyes. "Calvin never once hinted that he was contemplating such a dreadful thing. There was no reason why he should have done it. And now"—breaking down—"he's left me to—to face this—this disgrace all alone."

She bowed her head, and her shoulders shook. Crying women always did get my goat, and now I was feeling uncomfortable and wishing I hadn't

come. The detective delicately refrained from looking at her. His fingernails drummed on the arms of the chair while waiting for the sobbing to subside.

"Yes, that's right," he observed at last, soothingly. "It's the innocent who pay for the guilty. Perhaps there was even another woman in the case."

The woman raised her head and dabbed at her eyes. "That's ridiculous," she said with some heat. "Calvin wasn't that type. Besides, we went everywhere together—the movies, clubs, and places like that."

THE detective stopped drumming and let his glance wander around the room, to settle finally on the wardrobe for a few moments.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But we've got to try all angles, you know."

He shifted his glance to the woman, and rose from the chair. He crossed to the mantel, leaned an arm on it, and started that finger-drumming business again.

"Let's review the case, Mrs. Dupree," he suggested. "As I understand it, your husband came home yesterday evening and ate dinner. He told you it was the period ending and, as usual, he'd have to return to the store, and that he wouldn't be home till late; that you were not to wait up for him."

"That's right," the woman said, nodding. "Whenever Calvin had to work overtime at the period endings, I'd take in a movie. But last night there wasn't anything showing in town that appealed to me, so I went to bed early and fell asleep."

"Then the phone awakened you, and the store manager asked where your husband was. He told you that your husband hadn't returned to the store."

Mrs. Dupree dabbed at her eyes. "Yes," she said. "Then the police came looking for him, and told me why. I nearly went insane. I cried all the rest of the night."

"I can quite understand that," the detective observed sympathetically. "And now, have you any idea where



he might have gone, or where he hid the money?"

She stared with surprised and frightened eyes at the detective and beyond him before crying out hysterically, "How should I know, when he didn't even tell me what he was contemplating?"

It isn't a pleasant sight to see a woman in hysterics, especially a pretty one. I'd about decided to get out, when the detective turned his back on the woman with a shrug.

He indicated the stuffed pheasant with a jerk of the thumb and said to me, "That's one of the pests I was telling you about. They'll root up your

young stuff in the garden about as fast as you plant it. But this one's rooting days are over. I wish all the rest of 'em were stuffed and mounted."

I realized that he was just talking to pass the time and steady my nerves while Mrs. Dupree's hysterics lasted. But when he picked up the mounted bird from its place on the mantel, the hysteria came to an abrupt end.

Mrs. Dupree raised herself half out of the chair, gripping the arms until the knuckles of her hands turned white. Then, suddenly, she relaxed, and her fingers loosed their grip, slipping off the arms.

I cried out, "Look! She's fainted!"

The little detective turned slowly

and regarded the woman intently. Then he crossed over, picked the handkerchief off her lap, and rolled it around in his fingers. He tossed it over to me with a grin.

The handkerchief was as dry as a board.

He said, "She's not bad, for an amateur actress, but her eyes gave her away."

"Her eyes?" I repeated, puzzled. "I don't get it."

"Lips lie, but eyes don't," he explained gently. "Hers weren't like those of a woman who'd been crying all night. I always study a person's eyes when I'm questioning him or her. Try it sometime."

"But you weren't looking at her eyes half the time," I argued.

"That's what you think," he grinned. "I was, though"—indicating the wardrobe with a nod—"in that mirror. If you were watching her, you'd have noticed—"

"I wasn't, and I didn't," I cut in. "She was putting on too good an act for me. I was looking out the window, mostly."

"You'd have noticed," he resumed quietly, "that her eyes would roam around the room, pause for a moment on this stuffed pheasant, then settle on me. When I picked it up, she fainted. She's been under quite a strain, and her nerves finally snapped."

A LIGHT was beginning to dawn on me. I glanced from the little detective's face to the stuffed bird he was holding. I said, "I get it. She couldn't keep her eyes off that stuffed bird because the stolen money's in it!"

His smile was gently chiding. "You couldn't stuff forty grand in a goose, neighbor."

"Well, then, where is the money?" I inquired.

He said, "That's just what I was asking myself. And when I start thinking, I start finger-drumming. Only, this time, I wasn't doing it all instinctively. I sounded out that mantel board. You see, I've got one of

them in my home, and it's solid wood. This one's different. Listen."

The fingernails started a rhythmic tattoo on the mantel edge, and it sounded solid enough. Then the nails moved over toward the point on which the stuffed pheasant had stood, and there the sound given forth was hollow, booming. The detective shoved the old clock aside, and drew the same hollow note there.

"I don't see any crack," I said, looking hard.

He said, "Neither do I. But I see putty stains where a crack might have been. We'll soon see."

He took out his pocket knife, opened the big blade, and kept jabbing at the putty stain until the point suddenly sank in deeper. He drew it along then, like you'd cut linoleum, in the form of an oblong.

I watched him in amazement, saw him rise upward with the heavy blade. Then he lifted an oblong lid and laid it aside, revealing the missing money beneath in neat, flat packages.

Just then, the blonde sighed and stirred and opened her eyes. She took one look at the little detective, saw the handful of packaged bills he was holding up for my inspection, then fainted dead away again.

He said, smiling gently, "Yes, it's hard on the nerves—acting the role of innocence with a guilty conscience, and this was probably the first time."

When I recovered my breath I suggested, "Hadn't we better call a doctor?"

"No," the little man said, "no need. But I'll call the hurry-up bus. I think the little lady will be ready to talk now and quit acting. And when hubby reads about this in the morning papers, he'll probably give himself up and try to shield the little lady; they usually do."

He moved over to the phone and dialed the police station. While waiting for the connection, he twisted around and grinned at me.

"Always watch their eyes, son," he said.

Six Tricks Make a Corpse

In that seemingly harmless bridge game, the last hand was stacked with cold-decked disaster.



MORNING light streamed in the window, touched the firm edge of Michael Munsen's jaw, and ran down his arm to the desk, where his fingers were absently palming the ace of spades.

Across the table Harry Service watched the card with fascinated eyes. It disappeared, appeared fleetingly, its center fiercely black in the sunlight, then disappeared again.

"You're good, damned good!" Service said gustily. He shifted one elegantly creased trouser leg over an-

By V. E. Thiessen

other, and raised eyes that were like bits of broken green glass to look at Michael.

"You're prepared to pay the price?" Michael asked.

"Certainly, boy. Any amount within reason."

Michael Munsen lifted eyes as large and brown and sad as a spaniel's, and said, "I don't mean money, Harry."

"What do you mean?" Harry Service's face showed bewilderment.

"Let me get it straight," Michael said. "You suspect one of your crowd has been cheating at cards?"

"That's right."

"I take it you're accustomed to playing for high stakes?"

"Too high," Service confessed.

"What game do you play?" Michael asked.

"Bridge. Sometimes we play a bit of poker, but mostly we play bridge."

Michael flipped the ace onto the center of the desk, and stared at the trademark. He said, "It's an unpleasant business, looking for cheaters. Once I found the cheat, I'd have to expose him. A lot of times the truth isn't what people think, and a lot of times it isn't pleasant. That's what I meant when I asked if you were willing to pay the price."

"I want the truth," Harry Service said viciously. "I'm prepared to pay to find the truth."

"Whom do you suspect?"

"I'd rather not say. But he'll be there this afternoon, at our clubhouse on the lake. You can come as my guest, and keep your eyes open. Is it agreed?"

Michael Munsen sighed. He began to shuffle the cards expertly, dealt thirteen cards in front of the other man.

"This is your hand," he said. "The opponents' bidding goes through four no-trump to six hearts. What do you bid?"

two aces. They can afford to lose only one trick."

Michael gathered the cards together. His eyes, dwelling on Service's face, seemed sadder than before. "You're not going to like the truth, Mr. Service."

"Why not? What are you getting at with this mummery with the cards, and why the sudden formality? Confound it, Michael, if I know my own daughter you're almost one of the family right now."

A tightness grew in Michael's chest. "Maybe you don't know your own daughter."

Service's green eyes narrowed. He leaned forward, peering across the desk. "What's the matter? You and Patricia have a little disagreement?"

"Yes." The ace of spades began to dart in and out of Michael's fingers again, like a bird flashing between boughs.

"Well, you can patch it up. I'll bring Pat to the clubhouse this afternoon."

"Don't be a fool," Michael said tautly. "She knows her own mind."

Service grinned, and got up from his chair. "See you at four this afternoon," he said. He moved toward the door, then paused and looked back. "Oh yes," he said, "I forgot to tell you Roy Tate will be there." He smiled at Michael and went out.

Michael stared after Service a moment, then he cupped his hand about a match and drew smoke from a fresh cigarette.

Why in the name of the seven gods of luck did Harry have to meddle in his daughter's affairs? Michael's investigation would be unpleasant enough without Patricia being present. Tate would be there too. "Messy," he thought, "messy." He drew a breath of cigarette smoke, let it out again in a slow swirl. Then he turned back to his office.

SERVICE laughed, like a father laughs at a child's foolish question. "I'd double, of course, I have

MICHAEL was surprised at his first glimpse of the clubhouse on the lake. He had driven down in

a pleasant frenzy of speed. Now the clubhouse came suddenly into view, and he was surprised to find that it was, literally, on the lake.

It perched on high pilings, a hundred feet out into the lake, like some huge brown wading crane. It was roughly square, and except for the large area of casement windows, was stained brown. From its entrance a narrow ramp arched shoreward. A sign at the shore end of the ramp said simply:

HAMMERHEAD CLUB—PRIVATE

Michael pulled his car to the side of the road, parked it under an elm tree, and began to walk up the narrow ramp toward the clubhouse. He was halfway there when the door opened and Harry Service's voice shouted, "Come on in, Mike. Glad you could make it."

Service's face, Michael noted, was flushed, either from drink or gambling. When he came into the room, Michael suspected it was the latter.

Four men were grouped around a poker table, playing bridge. Behind the group, on the divan in the corner, sat Patricia Service. She was a long-legged, smooth-appearing girl, with hair the color of maple syrup.

Harry Service said, "Here, Mike, meet the boys." Michael shook hands with them in turn. Roy Tate said, "I know Munsen," and did not offer his hand.

"You and Pat can cut in next rubber," Harry said. "Come on, boys, it's Sam's deal."

Sam Humble began to deal. Humble was a middle-aged, smooth-faced man. Michael watched him for an instant as he sat on the divan. The other man, Steve Brogan, was florid-complexioned, a few years younger than Humble.

Michael said, without looking at Patricia, "Mighty cool out on the lake like this. They have a nice little place."

"Very nice indeed. Did Dan tell you how they got it?"

Her voice was so soft that it fooled Michael. He looked at her, wondering about this truce between them. "No, Harry didn't mention any of the place's history," he said.

"They built it. Get that, Michael Munsen, these men are all big business men. Yet they weren't too proud to build this—with their own hands!"

Michael said, "I wouldn't be ashamed to work with my hands—wouldn't be ashamed to work in your Dad's factory. But it's not my line, Pat."

"And what is your line?" Her voice was a fierce whisper. "This playing at detective?"

"It's not exactly play," Michael said.

"It's not exactly a steady job either. It's not a job a person could depend on." Her eyes were pleading.

Michael said flatly. "A man has to choose his own job. You should know that, Pat."

SHE gave a tiny snort. Its main ingredients, Michael noted, were hurt and disbelief. It seemed a fitting finale to the conversation. Michael began to watch the card game without seeming to do so. After a time it became obvious that Sam Humble was winning; it was also obvious that he would always win.

"Six hearts," Humble said softly.

"Double," Service shot out.

There were two passes, and Humble said even more softly, "Redouble."

Michael walked over to the table to watch the hand come down. As his partner's hand was spread, Humble said, "Nice hand, Roy. I think we'll make it. How about fixing a round of drinks."

"Sure." Roy Tate watched the first tricks fall, then went into a small room to the rear of the card table. Michael heard the sound of a refrigerator door, and glasses clinking.

Humble drew in the last trick, making the bid. "Game and rubber," he said. "How about another?"

"Not for me." Service hoisted himself from the table.

Michael murmured, following, "Humble is the man you suspect. He wins often, doesn't he?"

"Too often. What does he do?"

"Brace yourself. He wins because the rest of you play stinking bridge. He doesn't need to cheat."

Service's face began to look as though it were shot full of beet juice.

"Confound you, Mike—" he began hotly.

What he would have said remained a mystery to Michael. There was a splintering crash from the kitchen, the sound of glasses breaking, and then a heavier thud, as something heavy hit the floor.

"What the—!" Service's anger became amazement. There was a general rush for the kitchen door.

Inside the kitchen Roy Tate lay huddled against the refrigerator. Broken glass lay at his feet, and a thin trickle of liquor oozed from one of the fragments. There was no sign of injury on Tate's body, no sign at all except the color of his face. It had an odd blue tinge.

First to reach him, Service raised amazed eyes to the group. "Dead," he said. "His heart must have stopped like that." He snapped his fingers, and the sound was oddly loud and indecent in the silence.

"He didn't have a weak heart," Humble said.

The fourth man of the bridge foursome, Steve Brogan, stood staring at the dead man's face. He said suddenly, inconsequentially, "I saw a man with a face like that, once. He had just been struck by lightning."

The silence of a moment before would have seemed noisy now. Michael stepped to the window and looked out at the ramp, then up at the sky.

The ramp rose, bare and deserted. There was no sign of any other presence near the lake. High in the West, the sun was a ball of brass in a cloudless sky.

Behind him, Michael heard Patricia gasp, turn, and stumble away, fighting the shock. He had the almost uncontrollable desire to put an arm around her clear brown shoulders and murmur words of comfort. For an instant the veins in his temples stood out as he steeled himself.

Then he moved quietly to the telephone and began to dial.

FIRST to arrive after Michael's calls was a nearby doctor. He had hardly more than glanced at the body when the siren-topped homicide car shrieked alongside the lake and two men came up the ramp.

Sergeant Key, in charge, herded the group into seats around the divan. The other man, a medical examiner, joined the civilian doctor in a check of the body.

Moments later the examiner came out of the kitchen, stared at Sergeant Key. "Funny thing," he said. "There seem to be no loose connections, no electrical equipment, yet this man has been electrocuted."

"Get the car to radio for an electrical expert," Key directed. "Then come back and help me."

The routine, Michael noted, was normal. They were not permitted to talk about the incident, and Sergeant Key took them one by one to the car outside for questioning.

Michael himself was last to be questioned. Sergeant Key sat beside him in the police car, queried, "Your name, address and occupation."

"Name, Michael Munsen, address Thirty Sunset Drive, occupation, confidential investigator."

Key scribbled in his notebook. Then he looked up. "I've heard of you," he said softly. "Specialize in crooked gambling exposés."

"Yeah," Michael said.

"If you're clear, we'd appreciate your help. Look at this." Key passed the notebook on to Michael. "Can you add to that?"

The dead man, according to Key's thin, crabbed handwriting, was Roy

Rogers Tate, technician at Station XVP, an experimental television station now under construction.

Sam Humble was a salesman, dealing in electrical specialty sales to big concerns. Steve Brogan was the owner of a radio retail and repair shop in the downtown district. Harry Service was listed as a radio manufacturer. His daughter Patricia had just graduated from college, lived with her father. All the group lived in one of the better residential districts on the west side of town.

"I can't add much," Michael said. "I knew Tate, and I came here as guest of Mr. Service."

Sergeant Key grunted, peered at Michael. "I understand they play for pretty high stakes. Your visit. Was it business?"

"It was business," Michael said.

"Anything I ought to know?"

"Yes," Michael said. "Sam Humble plays fine, correct bridge. Steve Brogan plays what we call poker bridge, bids psychics, likes to bid a little too high. Harry Service plays by the book, but bucks the odds a lot of times because he doesn't know any better. The dead man, Tate, played spotty bridge, sometimes fair, sometimes terrible. He was lazy, thoughtless."

"I didn't mean that," Key grunted. "Any cheating?"

"No!"

"About yourself," Key murmured. "I understand there had been bad blood between you and Tate. How about it?"

MICHAEL frowned. "In my business you make a lot of enemies," Michael said. "Last fall old man Tate thought Roy was playing too much poker, suspected he might be a sucker for somebody. He had me check up. There was some funny business, all right. Roy was running in marked cards."

Key lifted an eyebrow. "You exposed him?"

"I warn my clients. I hate a chiseler." Michael's eyes were suddenly

no longer liquid, they were frozen stone.

Key asked abruptly. "Are you in love with Patricia Service?"

Michael held his face wooden while amazement tingled through him. "What business is that of yours?"

"I guess that's answer enough. It doesn't leave you too clean."

"What in blazes do you mean?"

"I mean Roy Tate was annoying Patricia Service. He was after her to get her to go week-ending with him."

Michael felt his fists knotting, straightened them with an effort.

Key said, "I guess that's all, Munsen. We'll have to search you, of course."

Michael submitted. Bored, he watched familiar objects come into view. Cigarettes, silver cigarette lighter, pen-style flashlight.

Surprise stiffened his muscles. Key looked at him and then at the small flash. "Didn't want me to find this, eh?" he said.

"It isn't mine. I don't know how it got there."

Michael's mind was racing wildly. He had been careless, the surprise of Tate's death had stopped his watchfulness. Someone had slipped the pen light into his pocket.

"Hey, Key!" the shout from the cabin reverberated over the water. "Come here."

Key finished listing the contents of Michael's pocket, dropped the pen light carefully into an envelope and put them in his pocket. Herding Michael before him, he started up the ramp.

INSIDE an amazed group of people were looking at the kitchen. One of the cabinet doors was open and a tangle of radio parts showed inside.

A man in coveralls, the electrician called by the police, looked up as Sergeant Key entered. He pointed with a screwdriver when he had Sergeant Key's attention. He exclaimed:

"You are looking at the most diabolical little booby trap I have ever

seen. The photo-electric cell here actuates a relay, closing a connection with the electrical power of the house. That makes the stainless steel edging of the sink as dangerous as a bare power line. If a man were leaning over the sink and touching the water faucet as a ground, he wouldn't even know what hit him."

"If it hadn't been for the color of his face," the medical examiner said, "we might have passed it off as heart failure."

"Is the device safe now?" Key asked.

"Yes, until somebody actuates the relay."

Key picked the pen light out of his pocket, clicked the switch. No light became visible. He grunted, knelt on his knees and pointed the light at the mechanism. He pushed the button, and the relay clicked. He shut off the light, and the mechanism became harmless again.

Key looked at the group. "It's funny. Usually a thing like this is easy to solve. Not many men could rig a trap like that. But every one of you uses tools, and every one of you are mixed up in technical electrical work except Munsen. The only man in the crowd with the motive and the weapon couldn't have rigged the trap."

Harry Service opened his mouth. His face looked grey. He closed his mouth again.

"I was a radio operator overseas," Michael said. "I might as well tell you before Harry does."

Harry Service's face looked as though he had been slapped.

Key said, "That does it. The rest of you can go. We'll hold Munsen for a few days."

"Wait a minute. I was in the living room when he fell. How in blazes could I have flashed the light on the electric eye?" Michael asked.

Key looked at the electrician. "Did you check the wall? Are there any lights or mirrors in the wall?"

"The wall's clean. I went over it as

soon as I saw this little trap," the electrician said.

Key's voice took on a tone of wonder. "Something went wrong with the mechanism, I think. At any rate, it killed, there's no doubt of that."

Patricia Service said clearly, "I don't believe it." She walked firmly through the group, looking at Michael. "What must I do? How can I help you, Michael?"

Michael said softly, "I don't know." His mind seethed and fear kept clodding his thinking. He had been sitting by Patricia. Did she slip the light into his pocket?

Another scene flashed into his mind. Harry Service had walked beside him, arm over his shoulder, murmuring about Sam Humble's bridge.

And Michael had stood beside the table. While he was watching the cards, Humble or Brogan could have slipped the light into his pocket. His mind began a kaleidoscopic jumping. Humble was a good bridge player, Brogan played poker bridge, Service bucked the odds—the scenes from which he had drawn these conclusions were a montage in his mind.

"Come on, Munsen." Key set fingers into his arm.

And with the touch, the jumble of thoughts fell into a pattern.

"If I confess, will you let me show you something?" Michael said abruptly.

"Sure."

HE LED the way to the kitchen. "I'll need a bit of help," he said. He leaned across the sink, touched the tap. "See here. The thing is dead, not dangerous. I want one of the fellows to draw a glass of water, then drop it and fall as Tate did." He pointed at Brogan. "You'll do, Steve."

"Damned if I do," Brogan said.

"Go ahead, Brogan, give him rope," Key said.

"Come, Humble, stand right here. When I give the word, Brogan will draw the water. Now—" The tight-

ness was filling Michael's chest. He had to be right.

Water began to cascade into the glass.

"Now," Michael said, "Humble, open the refrigerator and get some ice cubes."

Humble put his hand on the refrigerator door.

"No!" Brogan leaped away from the sink, his eyes like a wild animal's. "Don't open that!"

"Stand away from the sink, and listen," Michael ordered. He opened the refrigerator. The click of the refrigerator latch was loud in the silence. Michael opened the door wide.

The second sound was fainter, but unmistakable. The relay clicked. With the refrigerator door open, the steel edge of the sink was electrified—a thin steel band of death. Michael closed the refrigerator and the relay clicked off.

His voice dripped a slow chill. "Nobody but our poker bridge player, our psychologist would have dreamed that one up. Brogan knew this crowd well. With that door open, the death trap is set. He knew there was only one man lazy and careless enough to leave the refrigerator door open while he mixed the drinks. The habits of Roy Tate's life made him the one sure victim. He died while Brogan sat playing at the card table."

The electrician snapped a wire on the relay, rendering it harmless, then opened the refrigerator and dug inside. After a moment he grunted. "Yeah—mechanism in the vegetable bin. The black light goes on and off with the switch that operates the regular light."

Key was behind Brogan. Suddenly, as Brogan tensed, Key caught his



arm, twisted it. "Been watching you, take it easy," he said. He looked at Michael.

"Any more ideas?"

"Only guesswork," Michael said. "Brogan is promoter for the new television station. Tate worked there—maybe Tate found a rake-off of some kind—maybe embezzlement."

"We'll check on it," Key said. "And radio parts can be traced. Once you know where to look, you can always find enough." He urged Brogan out the door, and after a moment the siren began to shriek away.

Patricia Service said, "I don't think I shall ever forget this horrible day. Take me somewhere and hold me, Michael."

Michael did.



Snooty Piper and Scoop Binney, those sappy Beantown news-sleuths, get slated for early planting when they dig into a . . .

Hayseed Homicide



"Dizzy Duo" Yarn

By Joe Archibald

SNOOTY PIPER wins a football pool one day and the take is over a hundred bucks. Right away he jumps to the nearest phone in the city room of the *Boston Evening Star* and calls a dame. Then he comes over to where I am sweating out a tough lead on a story and says he has fixed me up, too.

"I hope you never get sentenced to burn," I sniff. "Somehow you will see to it I am in the next chair. Why don't you put the easy scratch in the bank for a rainy day?"

"It is drizzlin' outside now, Scoop," the crackpot says. "Anyway, how

much interest does a bank give you? I just called Gloria Schmitzhuber an' told her to get a friend. We will meet the two cheesecakes in front of Piro's."

"How does this lead sound, Snooty? 'The indubitable fact that some crimes do pay is borne out by the following list of those called unsolved in the files of our own police department. The slaying of the Harvard College widow, the liquidation of Benny the Burp, Bubble Gum Vending Machine King, via the Charles River, the assassination of a cop and a payroll chaperone in

Sullivan Square and the theft of twenty-one grand—"

"Abigail must be mad at the police commissioner once more," Snooty says. "Why is she gettin' Guppy to needle the cops, Scoop?"

"Maybe he gave an order she should also stop at red lights," I says. Abigail Hepplethwaite is a fabulously rich old babe out in Back Bay who has more pull in Boston than all the molar extractors combined. She could carpet the road between South Africa and Siberia with thousand-buck bills and have enough left to pay Europe's board bill.

"Don't forget the robberies at Braves Field and Fenway Park the last couple of years," Snooty says. "Look, it is five P.M., so knock off until tomorrow, Scoop."

"Who was the suspects they had on that Sullivan Square slaughter?"

"Ask me the date Lee surrendered," Snooty retorts. "I was the worst bum in ancient history."

WE MEET the bimbos in front of Piro's, a hot spot a block from Park Square. I take one quick gander at a lumpy blonde and start to run but find she has already hooked her arm through mine.

"Hee, hee, your frien' is bashful," she giggles at Snooty, who is telling his babe what a shame it is she has to let down the old hem to get that New Look.

She is a wiry redhead evidently trying to look like Hepburn. I am sure I could of hung my hat on one of her cheekbones. She has flared nostrils like a horse sniffing at smoke in a burning barn.

Snooty says my handicap is named Essie Garbitsh, and I make her spell it to be sure. We trip inside Piro's and get a table behind a post, which means at times I get a break.

We'll save on zombies, I says to myself, as we have already got two.

The waiter comes and leers at us.

My babe says, "I'll take one of them boxcars."

"Make mine a clover blossom," Gloria Schmitzhuber chips.

"Yeah? An' what will you—er—gentlemen have?" the flunkey asks.

"Dry Martini," Snooty sighs.

"Likewise," I says. "But it should be a mickey. I—"

"Them dry cocktails are fakes," Essie says, slapping a powder puff against her pan until I wonder am I in a flour mill. "I had one the other night and spilt it in my lap and it was just as wet as any other snort."

I wish the joint would get raided. The waiter seems quite glad to leave. Then in comes a male citizen who has with him a snappy babe wearing a strapless evening gown and the dolls with us applaud.

"It ain't the floor show yet," I choke out.

"Shall we dance, sugar?" Essie Garbitsch says to me, grabbing me by the arm and yanking me out of the chair.

We dance and it is not easy. It is like pushing a pushcart loaded with anvils through Filene's basement on Saturday P.M. I ask the babe quite pleasantly to stop using my left wing for a pump handle, and she says, "You're cute. Say, where you from?"

"Where I should have stayed," I retort, and then we pass Snooty and his dame and I hear the carrot-top ask him does he know the Charleston. It is murder.

When the music stops and gives us a reprieve, we limp to our table, and then we see the odd-looking character wearing a blonde on each arm. The trio is being seated at the next table to us. The dolls are in no pain; they are higher than prices.

"How'd they let that lug in here?" Essie Garbitsch wants to know. "I thought it was a refined joint?"

But I am too interested in the arrival. It is very apparent that it is his first try in café society, for he is as much out of place in Piro's as a polecat in an aviary. He wears a shiny blue serge suit, the sleeves of which end too soon below his elbows.

His dome, which is as round as a muskmelon, is topped by gingery colored hair sporting the biggest cowlick I ever saw. He has buck teeth and a pair of eyes the color of blue overalls that have been through the wash a hundred and three times.

"I wonder did he get his milking done?" Snooty quips, and the babes howl.

"If he did he never brought none with him," Gloria giggles. "He's petrified, not homogenized, Snooty!"

The oaf's blondes yelp for red-eye. Hiram calls the waiter and I bet all the hogs within a hundred miles of Boston get on the move. A citizen in a tux comes over and admonishes the hayshaker. The wrens tell him to go and drop dead.

I lean close to Snooty. "This is goin' to be good. You can have the floor show."

"It's my night to howl!" the fugitive from a plough yips. "Le's have champagne! Four quarts, by gorry! Li'l service here!" He bangs the table with a fist as big as a three-rib roast and the water jug bounces and irrigates the bistro floorman's trousers.

"You tell 'em, Horace!" a blonde yips, picking up a big stalk of wet celery and cramming it in the hanky pocket of the night spot bouncer's tux. That does it. The outraged citizen calls another employee and rolls up a sleeve.

"Oh, so you wanna get tough, hah?" the blonde yips and throws her reticule. It hits the bouncer right where he smells and he rocks on his heels.

"Le's rattle!" the ginger-locked gee yelps and picks up the boy in the tux and throws him halfway to the orchestra.

Essie Garbitsch is delighted. "I bet it's part of the act, Scoop! What a renovation, huh?"

FIVE minutes later the babe has changed her mind. Six tables are upside down and she is under one of them. Outside four big cops are load-

ing the hick and his geishas into the wagon. A bouncer is staggering to and fro, counting his teeth. He also has one eye closing rapidly. The doll in the strapless evening wrapper is quite frantic as some wires have snapped loose in the shuffle. A chivalrous character wraps her up in some drapes he has yanked down. What a rhubarb! The best part of it all is that a lot of the tabs got stepped on or lost.

Order is finally restored and the orchestra plays. "Shall we danth?" Essie says to me, and I suggest we look for her partial plate. There is a gap in her choppers a nice fat cigar would fit in very snugly.

Me and Snooty get rid of the pair at one A.M., and taxi to our rooming house. "Iwa Jima must have been somethin' like that, Scoop," the crackpot says, taking off his shoes. "If that blister I had would stamp juice out of grapes instead of dancin', she'd make dough."

"Don't look at me," I reply. "I could of dug up better numbers in a Revolutionary churchyard."

We arrive at the city room the next A.M. a trifle late. Two hours to be exact, and it is a good thing an irate citizen is threatening to murder Dogface Woolsey at the time, thereby distracting the redactor's attention.

"Why threaten me?" Dogface screeches. "I ain't runnin' this rag! I just do what Guppy says. Leggo my lapel!"

"It is the police commissioner," Snooty says.

"Awright, lemonhead, I'll talk to Guppy! No old babe, no matter how much of a sock she has, isn't goin' to make no bum out of me, understand? Yeah, my boys only held her up while some fire engines go by. Only about two minutes is all! Just a chocolate factory is on fire!"

"The way I heard it," Snooty calls out, "she told the cops so what as she'd finance a new one. Being stopped made her almost too late to get to the bookie's. She had a forty-

to-one shot a jockey tipped her off on and—"

"You keep outta this!" Dogface howls. "Binney, that story ready yet which you started ten days ago?"

"Forgetting who the suspects was in that Sullivan Square murder and robbery is holding me up," I says. "I got to go to the morgue."

"You all will," the commissioner says, "if you don't lay off my department."

"It would be to the best interests of the taxpayers if we did lay 'em off," Snooty says. "Especially Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy. What has he got on the City Hall?"

Dogface jumps up, holding the paste jar in his right mitt like Lujack of Notre Dame ready to fire a pass. "Both of you jerks get out of here!" he snarls.

We go and wind up later at the Greek's. Snooty says his tongue tastes like it was used as a shoeshine rag.

"Mine ain't exactly hygienic," I admit. "Who were the two gees that were suspected, Snooty?"

"There were seven all told," he says. "I remember they picked up Two-Trigger Atombi and Nitro Armitage, the two crude operators who later got three for five each for a punch job on a safe in East Boston. Then I think there was Baby Lips Brophy—"

"I recall some cops chased a sedan all the way down the pike to Ipswich where they lost it in a fog," I says. "Iron Jaw took a left turn and dropped into a river."

"And they sent to Newburyport for a steam shovel," Snooty chuckles.

A few days later Abigail Hepplethwaite takes off her spurs and promises that the commissioner will soon get a raise. She has had her fun. The old doll would switch the North and South railroad terminals around just for a lark. Things move along about normal until one night me and Snooty take a drive along the pike with Gloria and Essie and stop at a road-

side stand for hotdogs and coffee. It is nica to stop after a ride in Snooty's 1930 Gnash Six. There are more springs in Death Valley than there are in his jalopy and it is a caution how he stops without brakes.

WE are wolfing the weenies when a goggle-eyed native traipses in and asks for two coffees and a cup of doughnuts. "Ha," he says, "I ain't meself tonight. What you think happened?"

"You lay offen the reefers," Essie Garbitsch warns.

"Huh?" says the citi-en. Then he gets it. "No, I don't mean it like that. There was a murder last night. I just saw the body. Somebody murdered Horace Pickering. He never got in Ipswich with his milk today an' his customers kept callin' him. Never missed a day since he was here, so they called the cops an' said they should better check as maybe he was kicked by a horse or somethin'. Well, they did, but he wasn't kicked by no horse."

"Let's go," Snooty says. "How do we get to the farm, pal?"

"Next road you come to towards Newburyport to the right. Go about a mile an' a half—you'll see the police cars."

"Oh, this is like a radio program, Essie." Gloria Schmitzhuber yelps. "Let's hurry."

"This is official business," Snooty Piper says sternly. "You and Essie grab a bus back."

"Why, of all the adulterated nerve, Essie!" Gloria huffs. "You'd think we was married to these bums!"

"Precious forbid," Essie snorts. "Anyways, dearie, look at the two handsome truck drivers just coming in!" She glares at me. "Get lost!"

"Come on, Scoop," Snooty urges.

We drive away from the roadside stand and out onto the Pike, Snooty hardly looking where he's going. A truck trailer half as long as a through freight nearly splatters us.

"I wonder how some guys get a

license!" Snooty says indignantly while I swallow my ticker and drop it into place. Suddenly he lets go of the wheel and we angle toward a Greyhound bus. "Horace! Why, that was the name of that character we saw at Piro's with the two blondes. They, watch where you're goin', Scoop!"

"You forget," I choke out. "You're drivin'."

We finally approach the farm and see three cars in the yard. Snooty nearly liquidates a pig, six hens, and a brindle cow as we go through the gate. A cop holds up a hand and Snooty steps on the brakes he hasn't got. We stop because a barn gets in our way. We climb out and show our credentials.

"I hope you are acquainted with the Bill of Rights, my friend," Snooty argues. "This is a free press in the U.S. If you want to suppress us, we will call the U.N. The public has a right to know—"

"Did I say anythin'?" the cop wedges in. "Stop beefin' and go look at the stiff."

"Oh, brother!" I sigh.

The corpse is in the kitchen. We let out twin gasps as we ogle it. It is the remains of none other than the character who upset the aplomb of Piro's not so long ago. Rigor mortis has not spared the horses with Horace. There are two bullet holes through the bib of his overalls.

"Been dead for about eighteen hours, I figure," the cadaver connoisseur opines.

"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," a local gendarme quotes. We turn and look at him. He is holding a dame's compact in his hand.

"Don't tell me he brought them blondes out here!" I say *sotto voce* to Snooty.

"Open and shut case," a plain-clothes cop from Newburyport says. "That French babe come back an' fixed his apple cart. Or should I say milk wagon?"

"We're from the press in Boston,"

Snooty says. "I would like to get the details."

"Huh? Well, Horace married the doll only about a year ago—he got her over from Paree," a native explains. "It looks like he give her a snow job about how big a place he had and that he had a sock in the bank. Huh, he never had a dime, an' this place was mortgaged to the hilt. He never took her nowheres an' didn't give her any new clothes. So she runs off an' leaves him."

"Well, she must've found out he'd been kiddin' her as only a month ago he pays off his mortgage, paints the house an' barn and buys a new jalopy. He goes off oncet in a while on a bender. Can you blame the French babe? So she comes back an' demands her share of what he's got. He don't give an' she lets him have it. Initials on this compact are M. R."

"Her name was Madelon Rissette," a cop says. "We found that thing on the floor. You can see the dishes ain't cleared from the table. He was eatin' with somebody. We have called headquarters and have sent out the alarm. The doll won't get far. It goes to show what you get for treatin' a dame like that."

"So all at once Horace got in the high brackets," Snooty says. "Say, is this Ipswich?"

"Yeah."

"It's famous for plenty of clams," I says.

"That wasn't funny, Scoop," Snooty sniffs. "And shut up. I want to think of something." The crackpot sits down at the table and absently stares at the remains of a late repast.

THE medical character gives an authorization to have the remains taken to the deep freeze. He snaps his bag shut and makes his exit.

"She sure turned the joint upside down lookin' for dough," a cop remarks. "Horace's pockets were as clean as a baby's conscience."

"Horace bought a brindle bull off-en me a week ago," a native says. "Handed me a five hundred dollar bill I couldn't change. He still owes me fer it."

"Half a grand?" Snooty yelps.

"Like I been sayin' to Edie—" the native goes on, "she's my wife—it all happened just after Horace cleared a piece of ground to plant in potatoes. Well, he ain't planted any after all that work. Edie says maybe Horace struck a gold mine."

The phone rings and a cop gets it. "Sergeant Longfellow speakin'. What? You grabbed her already? Gettin' on a train? We'll be right in."

We leave two cops guarding Horace Pickering's homestead and they get orders to see everything is left just as it is. We drive to Newburyport and go into the bastille to see the French babe. No, she isn't. She is maybe the homeliest babe ever looked cross-eyed at the Eiffel Tower. She has no more waistline than a plastic balloon and the only thing that could improve her looks would be a guillotine.

"Peegs an' she-hens!" she screeches. "Vooze leaf me go! I deedn't keel ze bom, nevair!"

The cops grill the femme for nearly an hour. She admits she was in the farmhouse at ten P.M., but left an hour later. She tried to get enough money out of Horace to grab a boat back to Paree, but he wouldn't cut loose with a thin dime. She did whang him one with a skillet but it failed to etherize the rustic. Then she was tossed out of the maison.

"I get ze boss *ici* an' eet ees where I been all ze time planneeng ze murder, vooze say. Bah, I want ze American console, *oui*! An' anozzer ceegaret!"

"A likely story," a cop sighs. "Lock her up again. It'll take us a couple of days to pin it on the babe so it'll stick, boys."

"What do you think?" I says to Snooty.

"Let's drive back to the farm,

Scoop, as what I'm thinkin' you would scoff at. Would it seem odd to you that a citizen should prefer maple syrup over catchup on a fried egg?"

"Snooty, we pass the Danvers nut hatch on the way back to Boston. Stop in and get a reading, will you?"

"I'll show you, Scoop," Snooty says. "Are't you catching on?"

"The Frog femme was at the farm at about the right time. She admits it," I says. "She had the only reason to rub out Horace."

"Maybe," Snooty says.

The cops let us in the farmhouse again. Snooty shows me the cold fried egg and the goo on it. There is a bottle of maple syrup on the table. "Huh, there is no accountin' for tastes," I sniff. "I had a second cousin put celery salt on apple pie."

"Yeah? An' you remembered it, even if he was only a second cousin?" Snooty yelps. "You give me a swell idea, Scoop!"

"I did? Don't mention it," I says.

"Let's go out and look where Horace made a place to plant spuds," Snooty says.

What else was there to do? I follow the gland case across the yard, over a patch of ground recently fertilized and through a barbed wire fence on which I leave part of the seat of my pants. We find ourselves in a clearing and look at a pile of brush and pieces of old stumps Horace has dynamited loose. Snooty keeps mooching around and soon he comes to an old half-dead oak tree and drops on all fours.

"Come here, Scoop!" he yelps. I join him and I see where somebody has excavated near the roots. "It is where the hayshaker was goin' to plant dynamite, Scoop. But instead he hit the jackpot."

"What could spill out but acorns?" I ask, then keep my mouth open. "Say, this is near Ipswich, Snooty. And from here you can see the river where Iron Jaw fell in. They never

found the scratch from the Sullivan Square crime."

"You catch on quick, beetlehead," Snooty sneers. "All we have to do now, Scoop, is find out the whereabouts of all the suspects they pinched at the time. But I got an idea."

"I was afraid of that," I gulp.

WE GO to headquarters when we get back to the big town. We check on several characters whose whereabouts are of continued interest to the cops. Baby Lips Brophy is doing ten to twenty up in Maine. Eno Saltz departed this world six months ago after a losing argument with a gendarme out in Woburn. Ipsy Fink is doing a stretch at Sing Sing, N. Y., a sentence which will never have a period after it. Two Trigger Atombi is still in the State clink in Charlestown because of getting caught digging a tunnel not three months ago. His pal, Nitro Armitage is out on parole.

Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy comes in as we get up to go. Despite the cost of victuals the big slob looks more ponderous than ever. He leers at us and wants to know what in aitch we are up to, and how was it we happened to be out in the sticks just at the time the apple knocker was expunged by his war bride.

"It is metrophysical," Snooty says. "Binney is my psy-kick. Get it? Come on, Scoop."

Iron Jaw scratches his dome. "Hah," he scoffs. "I jus' read about it in the paper. The way I figger it the rube brought some lettuce back from the black markets when he was a G.I. He waited awhile before he started the spree. That French pigeon'll sing 'fore mornin'. But Ipswich—that was where I—" He stopped, his mouth wide open.

We leave Iron Jaw there playing like he had a brain. We go home, such as it is. Snooty Piper starts rummaging through his old trunk

after huddling with himself for almost an hour.

"So maybe the hayseeder did find the loot," I says. "But who put it there?"

"Here is what I been lookin' for," Snooty says, waving a booklet at me. "You remember that shindig we went to at the big house over a year ago, Scoop? The cons put on a show and had programs made which were like high school year books. It was quite a gag. Maybe what I want to know is in this. Ha, *State Pen & Scroll*."

We look through the book. It is a howl. Then we come to the half-tone of Randolph "Nitro" Armitage. Snooty reads the type under it out loud.

"Born in Punxatawney, Pa. Who knows when? Nickname, Nitro. Attended State Industrial School and got his B.S. (Burglary Specialist). Matriculated at Lyman Reform School Dorchester. Studied Civil Engineering for awhile but gave it up when his tunnel ended in the warden's office . . . Halfback on the State Pen Tigers. Likes redheads, especially if they're named Lola and live in Chelsea, and corn syrup on his eggs. Not likely to succeed. . ."

Snooty suddenly snaps his fingers. "That is it, Scoop!" he yelps. "Of course they wouldn't give maple syrup to cons so Nitro used the next best. I don't know why the F.B.I. don't come after me."

"Be patient," I says. "They will. Now what?"

"In the mornin' we will go to East Boston an' brief the flatfoot who got the goods on Nitro and Two-Trigger. Say, I wonder if the dames are still sore at us. That Gloria is my type, Scoop. I'll phone her first thing tomorrow night after supper."

At nine A.M. we are in the East Boston bastille quizzing a lumpy dick named O'Brannigan. "Ycah," he says. "I kept on that punk's tail for ten days 'fore I got the goods on him, Piper. Had a moll with him one night

in a joint on the road to Concord. A redtop. Looked a lot like that Hollywood babe, Hepburn."

I feel faint. "No, no!" I says under what breath I have left. "A thousand times no!"

"Of course," Snooty scoffs. "It would have to be a coincidence, Scoop."

"This cupcake worked in a beauty saloon in Dorchester," O'Brannigan goes on. "Lola somethin' or other."

"Come on, Scoop." Snooty gets up and has to use both hands to lift his hat off the cop's desk.

"I don't believe it," I says over and over.

"We're bein' silly," Snooty Piper says.

We visit nine gin mills between the hours of ten A.M. and four P.M. Finally we wind up at the Greek's and Snooty makes a phone call. He comes back with his left ear as red as a boiled shrimp.

"She says to drop dead again," he chokes out. "It'll be just too bad," she says, "if I dare see her again as her boy friend is the kind would tear off my leg and beat me to death with it afterwards. Anyway, she says she expects to move to New York very soon. Now let's see." Snooty whips out his Wolf Patrol Book and flips the pages. "Here it is, Gloria Schmitzhuber, Apt. B 29, Sholder Arms.

"You'll go there all alone," I says flatly.

"I have got to be sure, don't I?" Snooty sighs. "Suppose I should never know?"

"Don't you think we should confide in the police department?" I asked sweetly. "If it was Nitro who stashed the clams out under the old tree, they would love to know about it."

"And put him on his guard?" Snooty yips. "We'll wait a couple more days to see if my idea will work."

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THE next day the journals say that the French babe hasn't sung and keeps howling for the U. S. Consul and a transatlantic phone to call up DeGaulle. We walk into the city room of the *Evening Star* and find a character cleaning the empty bottles out from under Snooty's desk. Snooty asks the meaning of it all.

"You're fired," Dogface Woolsey says with relish. "Make that two!"

"I've changed my mind, Snooty," I says sadly. "I would like to make sure of Essie Garbitsch, too, as maybe she is an ex-strangler and four-time poisoner."

"You'll regret this, Dogface!" Snooty exclaims as we depart.

We go over to Chelsea and keep tabs on the modest brick pueblo where Gloria hives up. At five P.M. she enters the joint. At seven she saunters out.

"I feel awful, Scoop," Snooty says. "Look at her and tell me could she do anything dishonest."

"Huh? Sincet you ask me I would bet ten to one she is not goin' to a Bible Class," I reply.

"Oh, she don't look that bad," Snooty sighs. We trail the babe to a delicatessen and then duck into a doorway adjoining the baloney bazaar and wait some more.

"I know how to find out if she is really Nitro's cupcake, Scoop. It might take a little time."

"What else have we got more of to spare?" I snap.

Gloria Schmitzhuber traipses out and wends her way homeward, and Snooty leads me into the delicatessen. He flashes a fire badge quick and says he is from headquarters. I turn to run, but the gag works.

"The redhead that just went out," Snooty says to the fat dame on duty. "Could I see what she bought just now?"

"Sure, I scribbled it down on this old paper bag an' added it up. You couldn't never read me writin'. Two pounds cold ham, half pound potater

salad, two dill pickles, pound of cheese, two apple turnovers, two choc'lit eclairs, an' a bottle of maple syrup."

We turn toward the door in unison and reel out like two drunks. Snooty grabs at a lamp post and holds on. A harness bull comes up an' taps me on the shoulder. "Git that bum home or I'll lock 'im up. Tell 'im if we find his lost weekend we'll get in touch with him."

Snooty is quite himself when we get to the next block, not that it means



much. "Scoop, we could still be wrong. Two apple turnovers, two eclairs—let's ask is she havin' company."

"Wait here a sec," I says, butterflies consolidating the beachhead in my stomach. "The landlady asked this mornin' would I git her some thread an' I forgot the number."

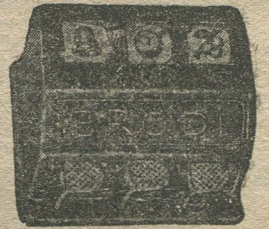
"Make it fast, Scoop," Snooty says, none the wiser. I hop into the cigar store and call a number, talk faster than a tobacco auctioneer for forty seconds, and then hang up. "Come on, Snooty," I says.

"I never heard you more confident," the crackpot says.

We walk into the Sholder Arms and get into the elevator. We leave

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it and walk down a hall and stop in front of a door marked B29. Snooty Piper knocks. Gloria Schmitzhuber does not answer for nearly five minutes. Then she opens the door and peers out.

"You!" she squawks. "Go 'way!" She tries to slam the door but Snooty has his foot in it in more ways than one. "Lola, huh? All the time you was a crook's moll! So Nitro come back to you with over twenty grand!"

"Fourteen," the doll says quick. "I mean—what am I sayin'?"

SHE is very dumb. Under her cosmetics she gets the color of a clam that has just been steamed. Then a door bursts open and a very ugly and disheveled gee jumps at us with a Roscoe in his fist. "Yeah, go ahead an' tell your life history, babe. Why I come here las' night, and everything."

"The housing shortage of course, Nitro," Snooty says. "So you bumped the farmer boy an' got what was left of that payroll you an' Two-Trigger hid under a tree. You made the mistake of supping with the victim and putting maple syrup on your eggs. It is quite a scoop for us newspaper citizens."

"They work close with cops!" Nitro yelps at the doll. "I ought to bump you with 'em! Well, we got to work fast if we want to see the bright lights which ain't got volts in 'em, you dumb chick! Git some rope!"

"I'll haul in the clothesline," the doll says. "Why tie 'em up after you shoot 'em?"

"Shoot 'em? No noise, see? That kitchen ain't more'n three times as big as a phone booth an' should fill quick with gas. Catch on, blubber-head?" Nitro howls. "The gas will choke the life out of them. You want Broadway an' a mink coat, Baby?"

"For them I'd shoot me own grand-ma," the redhead cries out happily, heading for the kitchen. **Snooty Piper**

looks for an out and then shakes his dome at me.

"Yeah, pal," I says, as Nitro drives us at gun point into the kitchen. "Let's take it like men."

"I never saw you as brave as this before," Snooty chokes out. "Look, this is for real, Scoop."

"Chin up, white tie for dinner, Snooty," I says, and then we are on the floor getting tied up. Then the redhead blows out a pilot light and turns on the farewell fog.



"Come on, Baby," Nitro says. "Next stop—Broadway an' the hot spots!" They go out and shut and lock the door.

"Scoop, it is the end," Snooty chokes out and then inhales a slug of public utility vapor.

I feel little people with ice-cold feet run up and down my spine. Did I forget to give the cops the address? My noggin gets as light as Betty Crocker's angel food cake. Looks like I did. Good-by, Snooty, ol' pal!

It is not so bad, choking with gas. Me and Snooty soon are romping hand in hand over a field of cotton batten. Canaries are singing and and frogs are making with deep bong-bongs in a nearby lily pond. Then three big white birds wearing blue coats swoop down and lift us up and we soar blithely through space. Up and up and up. . . .

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"Ain't is wonderful, Snooty?" I says. "It is a good thing all citizens do not know what's comin' or they'd all knock themselves off. Just floating an' floating—what did you say?"

"Keep on pumpin'," a voice says. It sounds like Snooty's. "I think I saw his ear wiggle. Hey, Scoop, snap out of it!"

I do. I am on the floor looking up at some cops and at Snooty Piper. "He swallowed enough to fry a carload of veal chops," another familiar voice says. "You couldn't never kill either of these clucks."

"Iron Jaw," I says weakly, and sit up. I see Nitro Armitage out in the next room with the shackles on, and the babe is on the sofa with him and is not pleased with the jewelry she has on either. The things she says—tsk-tsk!

"So you called the cops, Scoop, you double-crosser," Snooty sniffs.

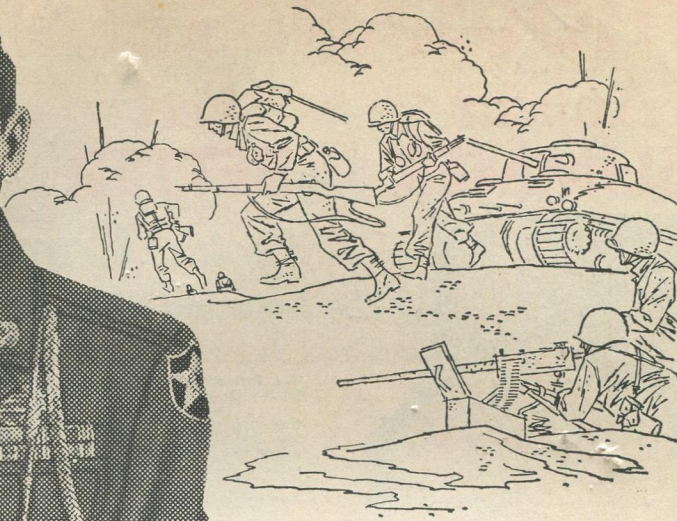
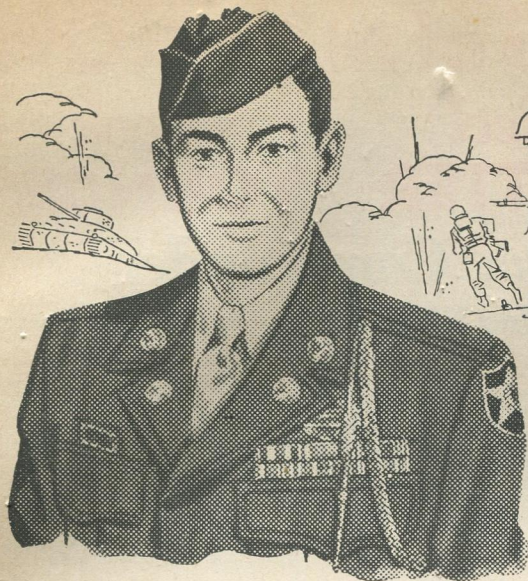
"I hope you will forgive me," I cry out hysterically and make a try for his windpipe. I faint instead.

I am in a healing hacienda later and Snooty sits at my bedside. "Well, Nitro had to confess," he says. "The cops have the rest of the loot. Gloria—er—Lola says for me to please understand. She didn't even know Nitro was in circulation until he showed up last night. When she saw the fourteen grand, she said, she forgot she wanted to go straight. She ain't got a bad heart, Scoop."

A nurse comes in. She is a redhead with greenish lamps. She gives me orange juice. After a word or two with Snooty Piper she gives him her telephone number. I pull the sheets up over my dome and scream. "No—no! It is where we come in!"

"He's the nervous type," Snooty tells the nurse. "Look, how about a little drive in the country when you knock off, huh? I'll fill up with gas—"

It is then I throw the water pitcher. They have to make up a bed for Snooty and book him for an X-ray. Some day I'll really get rid of him.



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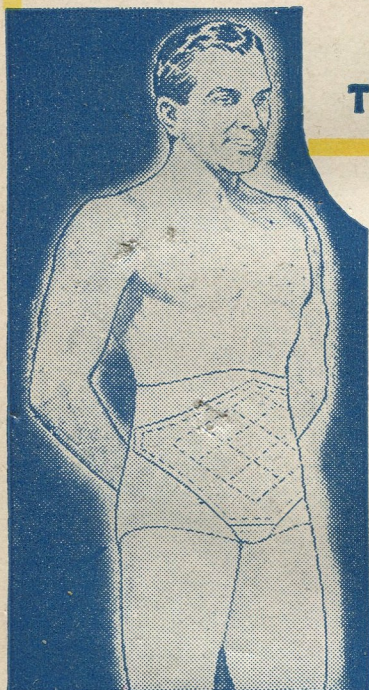
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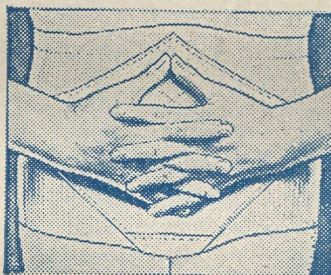
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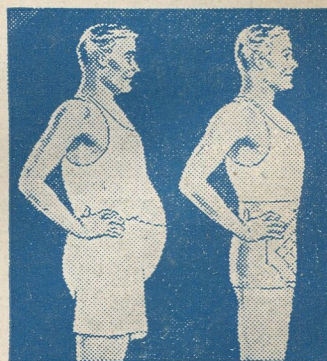
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Dr. G. C. S.
St. Charles, Ill.

"Received the Commander about a week ago. To say that I am well pleased with it would be putting it mildly—I can see that it fills a long felt want, giving the needed support and a most comfortable feeling. I never miss putting

it on the first thing in the morning. Enclosed is my check for another."

J. C. McG.
St. Paul, Minn.

"I recommend the Commander for what it is made for. It sure has been a great help to me. I want to thank you for what it has done. I might add it has helped me more than anything I have ever tried."

Fort Knox, Ky.

Above are just a few of the many unsolicited testimonials for the Commander that we receive regularly. Originals of these and others are on file.

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