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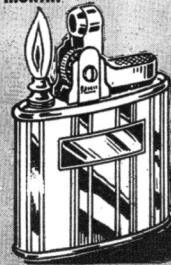
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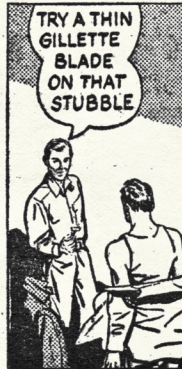
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ALL-STORY DETECTIVE



Volume 1

April, 1949

Number 2

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* * *

Arrested after carrying an overcoat from the third floor of a Baltimore department store to the main entrance without paying for the garment, Joseph Ferri explained he just wanted to see the overcoat in the light because he is "color sensitive."

* * *

Leroy J. Thompson admitted that he had smashed the front window of a Milwaukee tavern with a brick but stated he had done so only because he felt insulted after the proprietor had told him, "You always cause trouble and do damage."

* * *

Arrested for spending money belonging to his employers on drinking and gambling, Leslie Carr, a milk delivery man of Ipswich, England, said that it really wasn't his fault, that there were 18 taverns on his route.

* * *

Raymond Adame admitted to Los Angeles police that he had attempted to kidnap Celina Jarmillo but explained that he had done so because she had made him a sandwich of potatoes, beans and macaroni which had bewitched him.

* * *

Lyle Collins readily admitted to Grand Rapids police that he had stabbed five women, explaining, "Women just irritate me."

(Please continue on page 130)

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Millionairess Madalynne's murder trail led Detective Storm into the catacombs of the slave-labor spy master and into the scented arms of the sensational. . . .

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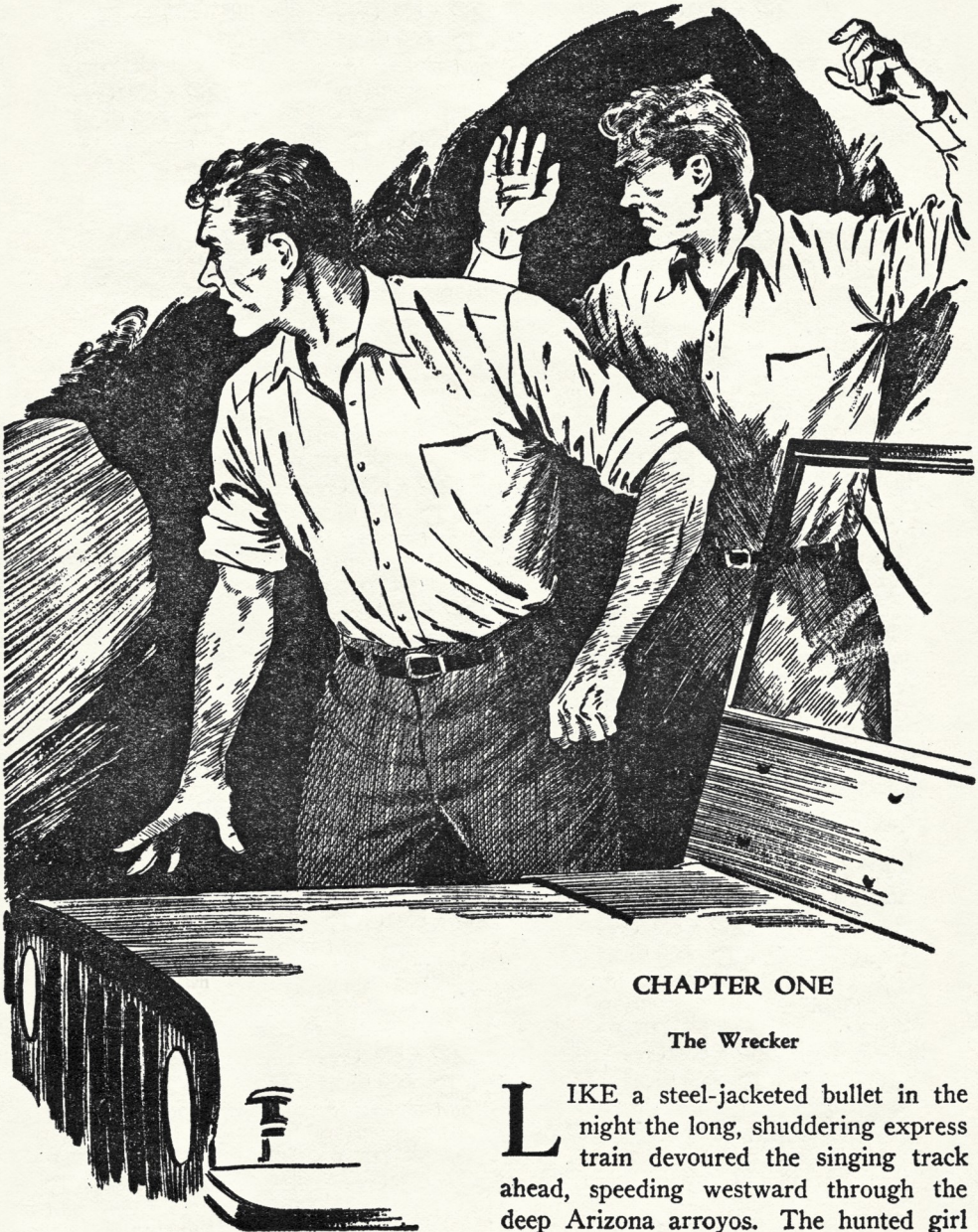
Behind the rifle stood a dark-haired girl.



● **By BRUCE CASSIDAY** ●

A Sizzling Espionage Novelette

GUN DOLL



CHAPTER ONE

The Wrecker

LIKE a steel-jacketed bullet in the night the long, shuddering express train devoured the singing track ahead, speeding westward through the deep Arizona arroyos. The hunted girl

stood in the pullman vestibule, her uneasy eyes watching the silver thread of water twisting along the desert canyon a hundred feet below.

She ground her crimson fingernail into the match head and the flame flared up in her face, painting her hair a brilliant red against the dusty glass. She lit her cigarette, dragged on it without relish, and stared at herself in the reflection.

Her eyes were tired, they were weary and wide and wrinkled at the edges. There were lines around her mouth. She was an old hag and she was only twenty-three years old. She had grown old the night two weeks before when a slender dark man had died in her arms—gunned down by a slug from her own pocket .25.

She had been a blonde then. Now she was a redhead. She had been lovely to look at, then—now she was cold and hard, worth ten thousand dollars, signed, sealed, and delivered.

She saw the man behind her before he said anything. She saw him waiting silently, staring at her reflection, making sure. He was standing there as if he had all the time in the world. She spoke then, and her breath clouded the window.

"What do you want?"

Only the man's eyes were young. His mouth was hammered down and flattened out by Old Man Time's big stone mallets. His forehead was lined with deep crisp wrinkles. His face was made out of leather and rock. His beard was close-shaven and blue-black in the pullman shadows. But somehow, every move he made and every expression on his face was go-to-hell.

"You," he said. His eyes looked into hers and she could feel the force of electric vitality in him. He let his eyes slide down over her soft white throat, over her youthful figure—down to his own coat pocket where he held the heater gripped tight.

She saw it. The life ran out of her body.

She slumped against the cold steel door. She was soft and lovely and scared to hell. Ten grand for her was markdown value.

He brought out the Smith and Wesson and let her look at it. "Gun," he said blandly. He caressed the long blue barrel. "No foxy moxie. Catch?"

She caught.

So this was Madalynne Moore, he was thinking. The runaway heiress-murderess, spoiled like a bag of mildewed gumdrops. The madcap kid who could bring half the civilized world to her knees with her father's golden whip.

This was Madaynne Moore, the girl he had hunted over half the United States—through big towns, small towns, forests, deserts. This was the quarry, cornered at last. He felt good. He felt good and rotten. She looked as dangerous as a wet kitten.

"To save wasting lead slugs," he said, "here's the way things shape up. Tomorrow a. m. you and I debark at a hotspot called Yuma on the border. For the long road back." He stared at her, cursing himself for the tightness gripping his throat with squeezing, big hands. "Any questions?"

"Sure," she said. The words slid out of her like honey on a bun. "How much, copper?"

The man grinned then, and his big front teeth stuck out. He smiled all the way down to his baggy knees. That was the funniest thing he had heard since Pearl Harbor. "To let you go, Goldie?"

"Sure," she said softly, trying to hide her murderous little claws. "To let me go."

He considered. "Say twice as much as it'd take to bust both you and your old man's steel empire flat, Goldie. Ever hear of me? I'm the last honest dick in the U. S."

Her eyes froze. Anger ran a fever in her face. "Damn it, copper—I'll remember you in my will!"

You bet you will, he almost said. You'll remember Dan Storm, and you'll remember Dave Storm, too. You'll remember us both down in the brimstone pits of hell. Dave and I. The three of us will be more than a crowd, honey. We'll be a right-angle payoff for a wrong-angle triangle.

But he said, just to keep the blotched records clear, "I'm working for the D.A., Goldie, not, like everybody else, for your old man."

She lost her blood then, and her skin turned the shade of unpaid bills. Desperation washed across her eyes. An instinct older than fear gripped her, and she smiled. She moved to him for protection, and reached up to his shoulder with her small hand.

At that instant, the car floor rocked beneath them, throwing her unexpectedly on him. With a sickening lurch, the train leaped up into the air, and spun crazily, flipping the two of them about like dice in a chuck-a-luck cage. From up ahead came the screech of steel wheels, the shattering of glass, the twisting of cast iron.

Airbrakes screamed. Already the train, flying madly up off the rails, writhing like a snake, was burrowing savagely into the shale embankment. One by one, couplings snapped between cars, and steam poured out into the still air.

In this hideous hell of flying steel and glass, the man and the girl crouched, panting in the vestibule corner, liked trapped rats. The car about them was alive, throbbing and pulsating. Then suddenly everything came to a standstill, the floor canted at a forty-five degree angle.

"**K**ID," Storm said. "Kid." He shook her, and she turned her wet eyes to him. Then she drew herself shudderingly up, her teeth chattering. "You still in one piece, Goldie?"

"Sure." Her face was wet and trembling against his.

"What a dame like you won't do to put

a poor old bloodhound in a jam! But you're not going to get away just because of this. Come on. It's you and me from here on in. Me with the rod."

"Ten thousand bucks means an awful lot to you, doesn't it, Hawkshaw?" Her agate-brown eyes were close to his.

"Gun moll murderess, one each, means a hell of a lot more," he said. His hand was circling her wrist now like a steel manacle, and he jabbed the blunt nose of the Smith and Wesson into her stomach. She writhed away from him.

He pulled her close, holding her tight, feeling her arms around him the way his brother Dave must have a thousand times. A thousand practice times before the last, double-cross payoff time. He shoved on the door above. He could hear the screams of trapped human beings further on down the tortured tracks.

Flinging himself to the ground, Storm let her slide into his arms. She clung to him for an extra long moment, her face close to his in the dark. With a wry grin he pulled her away from him.

She turned slowly and moved along the side of the overturned pullman. Dazed men and women were climbing through broken windows. A woman staggered up out of the twisted wreckage ten yards from her. Madalynne Moore started to run toward her, her heels twisting and sliding in the shale.

"Hey!" Storm snarled.

Madalynne Moore looked back over her shoulder, her eyes wide. Storm jerked out the Smith and Wesson and leveled it at her. With rapid sure steps he ploughed through the shale toward her. She slid away from him along the edge of the car. He waved the gun.

"No funny tricks, Goldie. Come on."

Her astonished eyes bored through him. She looked again at the middle-aged woman, trying to pull herself to her feet, her hair streaming out, matted and snagged, her coat torn and bloody.

"People are hurt," she cried. "We've got to help."

Storm glanced along the tracks. Twelve broken pullman cars lay jam-packed in a careless pile—like smashed egg-crates behind a grocery store. Dazed, wandering shadows that might have been people once were poking around the jagged ruins. Searching.

"Tough," he said, his face a raw, savage mask. The bitter conflict raging behind that tight-pressed façade did not show in his eyes at all. "Damned tough."

This kid had killed his brother. This kid thought she could get away with murder, blackmail, the double-cross, because she was raised on sawbucks instead of flapjacks. This kid needed a lesson—a lesson with steel bars, starched gray uniforms, dark black pits. This kid needed a lesson in the fine art of give-and-take.

She shook him off, fiercely, stumbling a few steps along the car. Then she regained her balance and turned on him, crouched, her white teeth bared at him, her eyes blazing.

"Don't you touch me!" she gasped. "What have you got in your veins, ice water? Are you going to let those people rot in there—screaming their hearts out?"

You're lecturing me on ice water blood? he thought. "Nothing can hurt me, kid, but the sound ten thousand bucks makes when it flies away like a big bird. Get around here in front of me, and head for that shale bank, or I'll deliver you on ice."

She backed against the edge of the car. Her eyes were fiery and sick in her face.

A crimson glow billowed up behind them. Storm spun around. Black smoke mushroomed up from one of the up-ended cars. Hungry little tongues of scarlet licked about the steel, popping slivers of paint off into the swirling air. There was no escape now. They were boxed in.

Her voice tore into his ears. "It's fire! We've got to help!"

"No! Back through the car!" He grabbed her violently with his left hand, tossing her heavily against the car. Agonized pain tore across her face as her spine bounced on the sharp edge of the cast iron sheeting.

The tears flooded her eyes and she brushed them angrily away. Her mouth was a splash of blood in the crimson fire-glow. She stood straight up to him, her chin tilted, anger reinforcing her like a steel rod.

"You're not playing with a bobby-soxer, mister." She came at him then, slowly, relentlessly. He stepped back to throw the gun down on her, but she twisted aside suddenly, grabbing for it. It sailed out of his hand into the rubble. A laugh tore out of her as he bent over, and she was gone.

He pulled himself to his rubbery feet, saw her figure silhouetted briefly in the dancing yellow-red flames of the baggage car ahead. He followed. The hell with the gun. He'd get her with his bare hands, and drag her back to New York every foot of the way, if she wanted to play it out that way. He had plenty time, plenty time. An eternity of hate.

She had plunged into the baggage car flames, and she was working away over scorching bags and satchels.

"There's nobody in there!" he heard himself shouting. He was over onto her then, trying to pull her away from the doorway.

She whirled on him like a big cat, her open palm smashing hotly on his face. He tasted blood. He threw her out away from the flames over the rocky ground, and ran into the fire himself. Behind him, she picked herself up and dove back in with him.

Then he heard it. It was a voice—screaming—inside the car. It was gibbering in a strange tongue, Mexican, Spanish, Italian.

Storm was helping her then, tearing the

baggage out from the flaming insides, burrowing into the torturous smoke and hot gas. Tears streaked his face, blinding heat washed over him.

She had guts, the little lady. She clawed at the heavy bags, twisting and snaking them out for him to throw behind.

Then he saw something move. It was a brown, blood-streaked ankle in a pair of soiled blue jeans—buried deeply under a burning suitcase. A wave of flame surged across his vision, and he backed off, his arm in front of his face. Madalynne Moore waved at him frantically.

"It's too late!" she cried. He closed his eyes, crooked his arm over his face, and went at it again. A tanned, brown body lay wedged underneath some sacks. It moved again! The man was still alive! If only he could get down into the smoldering guts of the fire.

In a quick crimson flash, Storm drew back, sucking in his breath with a stunned reflex action. Iron! An iron fetter was clamped around the slender ankle! An iron fetter! The man was shackled there in the bottom of the car like some medieval slave! Or like a convict.

The leg moved, the chain clanked. Storm grabbed at the fetter, and the chain came loose in his hand. It had been sheared through by the twisting, turning gyrations of the somersaulting train. The man in fetters had escaped and had hidden in the baggage car.

Another sheet of flame ripped up in front of Storm, leaping from a satchel onto his coat. He stumbled back, his face twisting in pain. He flailed at the flame desperately. It smoldered, moving down to his pants leg. Hot stabs worked at his leg, eating along the gabardine.

The body beneath the mail bags moved and a dark hand groped through the burnt sacking. Then two black eyes, pain-torn but still dark and lovely in the fire-glow, stared at Storm for a shocked instant from

a round, shadowed face. The full, soft, wine-red mouth parted in stupefaction.

Then black smoke billowed between Storm and the fugitive girl hiding under the baggage. Bitter tears ate into Storm's eyes, and he backed off, clawing at them with his scorched fingers.

He stumbled over, borne down by a weighty cloud of heavy, murderous smoke. Choking with agony, he tried to push away the black cloud, but he could not get it off his chest.

It was only in his unconscious, perhaps, that he heard the tremendous, earth-shaking explosion, that he watched the tons of metal and rock and glass mushroom up into the sky in a devastating roar that jarred the staid old Arizona arroyo out of a million years of undisturbed slumber.

Then everything was quiet except for the sobs and gasps of those who were unlucky enough to be left alive with their dead.

CHAPTER TWO

Stranger in Town

IN THE blinding noonday sun, Meredith City snoozed like a well-fed puppy over a chewed bone. Dan Storm stepped out onto the sidewalk from the hotel and blinked his eyes against the hot glare. He struck a match on one of the old hitch racks, grinned at the modern-day parking meter attached to it, and lit his cigarette.

Up and down the wide, boiling macadam street only a few citizens stirred. A fine town for thinking. And thinking was what Storm needed, plenty of it, and plenty pronto.

First of all, where would he go if he was a madcap heiress facing a murder rap? Into hiding. Where?—hills, desert, town? Unfortunately the manhunt was not a general call. Storm's brother, now dead, and Dan himself knew that Mada-

lynne Moore had killed Dave Storm. So did a handful of top-flight New York cops, including the D.A.

But old man Moore, the big metal monster himself, had ordered hands off in the publicity department. Moore's hard-bit-ten crew of private eyes, London Investigations, Incorporated, were combing the United States for the girl now, to bring her in and deliver her safe to her kin.

Storm had been approached five times by various members of London's with whimsical cajolery, with good rye whiskey, and with plenty of pocket cabbage. Eventually one of Moore's ace sharps had approached Storm with a badly placed bullet hole in the shoulder, and Storm had shattered the gunsel's wrist. That was in St. Louis.

And now Meredith City. Well, like a bad thousand buck bill, she'd turn up somewhere. That wasn't all that bothered Storm.

There was something phoney about that dark-skinned girl hiding in the baggage car. Something damned strange and a little crazy. Storm hadn't had a chance to prow around at all the night before. The blow up had come, and Storm had been smashed in the head with a piece of shrapnel. He'd come to in an ambulance headed for Meredith City an hour later. Then he'd been slapped in the guts by a couple gallons of sleep drugs punched in his arm.

What the hell was the story? Was the dark girl tied up with Madalynne Moore's misfortunes? Was she tied up with Dave's murder? Nothing made sense.

What made sense right now was that Storm was hungry as a spring bear. A sign said *Eats Beer* down the street. Another sign said *Park Avenue Bar*. Storm pushed his way through the old-fashioned batwing doors of the bar.

A sleepy barkeep stood behind the bar reading a wild West magazine. One lanky, tow-headed blond guy, tall, indolent, and

intelligent looking, stood bellied up to the bar, his heel hooked over the crummy brass rail. This city-wise gee was dressed à la big-town. But tony. No knife-edge pants legs or sleeve elastics.

Storm nodded briefly to the blond stranger and ordered himself a shot of rye and water. The man leaned over his own shot glass, rubbing it around on top the bar. Then he stared into the back bar mirror, eyeing Storm. Storm met his eyes in the mirror. The stranger looked away, and then turned toward him.

"You're Storm, aren't you? Dan Storm?" The stranger's voice was even and quiet. His eyes flicked over Storm's clothes, and then back to the heavy white bandage on his head. They were amber eyes, not at all hard or bitter. They had seen a lot, and they had watched death and grief. They had neither wept nor sneered.

They were eyes that warmed Storm to the man. The words did not. The amber-eyed stranger was in town on business. Apparently his business was Storm and that meant complications. No one knew Storm was here—no one but London Incorporated. Danger.

Storm sized the man up again, not changing any of his first-hand impressions.

"Yeah." Storm reached out for the rye and slugged it down. "So what? Who are you?"

The man leaned his lanky, tough body against the bar, crooking one knee, and raising his heel to the brass rail. He grinned a bit sheepishly and the grin spread a pleasant, lazy tolerance over his face. Smiles like that were often deceptive and curtained off emotion as blazing as sheet lightning.

"Eden. Joe Eden. Railroad investigator." His eyes filmed over for an instant. He was either watching Storm closely, or he was lying in his teeth. "I checked your name at the hospital last night. I'd like to talk with you."

Storm considered. The gent's story

could be true. But it was probably a lie. Storm was in between a high cliff and a hot rock. Fight the guy, and drop a ten grand payoff. Cooperate, and drop dead. What the hell. There was no way else to play it now. The cards were down. The chips were in.

He gestured Eden to a fly-specked table. Together they sat down, bringing two more full shot glasses with them.

Joe Eden flipped his wallet on the table and it opened to his identification card. Storm glanced at it. *International-Pacific Railroad. Investigator.* Okay, okay. A man could get gimmicks like that run off a thousand at a time in any black market printshop.

Storm looked up at Eden tolerantly. "So?"

Eden shrugged. "So it isn't foolproof. You'll have to take me at face value. I've got something you want, and you've got something I want. Care to listen?"

"A man can get sore ears from a lot worse things than listening," Storm said. "Shoot, pal." There was something about this lanky, lean guy that put Storm at ease.

"I know this desert pretty well. I know how to get places, and, what's more important, how to get back. I know every gila monster by his first name. I can cut sign on horses till hell won't have me.

"I can even spot a red-headed kid on horseback, dressed up in men's clothes. I can tell by the way she rides a horse that she's in a big hurry. I can tell her red hair is dyed. I can tell she's being chased by, say, a dark-haired guy, five-eleven—"

Storm threw a pack of cigarettes on the table, lit one. "You interest me, Eden. I'd say you've got something I want. Now, what's the price I pay to track down that red-haired bareback rider?"

Eden leaned back like a skunk finished with a ninety-five cent hunk of butter. "I'm glad we see eye to eye." He glanced around at the deserted barroom.

"Here it is," he said. "Something smells about that train wreck last night. We found one of the tie-rail sleeves burned through. We found one of the spikes hack-sawed. Little things—but they all add up to a first-class, smooth job of sabotage."

Storm frowned. "Who's trying to drive you guys broke? Competition from the Berlin air lift?"

"No one we consider important was on that spinner. No big shipment anywhere. No ice. No lettuce. But—the back end of that train was carefully blown to bits after the big toss-over. Why go to all that trouble?"

Storm chewed on air for a moment. He chewed on Eden, too, studying the open amber eyes, the finely chiseled features, the happy-go-lucky overall mask. Eden apparently didn't know who Madalynne Moore really was, or how important she was. He might be some local eye, broke and hungry, who knew a chase when he saw it and wanted a cut on a good thing. What the hell, if he knew Madalynne Moore's sagebrush address more power to him.

But I'm not peeling off ten thou just to see the bright sparkle in your happy eyes, mister. You'll have to drill through hard pan to get what I've got.

Why would anyone want to wipe out that lovely, stacked hunk of velvet-to-be? Old man Moore still fondled the gold ingots, not the kid. Who'd get anything by killing Madaynne Moore? How did this all tie in with the murder of Dave Storm?

Eden had tossed a small sack on the table—a sack of Bull Durham. He fumbled with the strings, opening it up. A yellow hunk of rock thunked onto the table. Eden held it to the light and his eyes came to rest on Storm's. Their eyes were full of questions, interests, and plenty moxie.

"What the hell is it?" murmured Storm. "Gold ore?"

"I picked it up while I was moseying

around that wreck this a.m. Gold? No. Silver? No." Eden replaced the rock in the sack, pulled the strings tight, and slipped it back in his pocket. He glanced around the barroom again. He leaned forward, and his lips barely moved when he spoke.

"Carnotite, Storm. You've heard of carnotite. They get uranium from it. They make atom bombs out of it. They bust up nations and give the international jitters with it."

Storm stared across at Eden. Prickles of interest did a soft-shoe shuffle along his spine. "Was it on that train?"

"Yeah. It was wedged in a bent piece of scorched metal. I broke this off and checked it with an assayer in town. This hunk pays off high as hell per ton. He damned near jumped out of his hip-boots when I told him I'd found it. There's none of it around here. At least none that anybody knows about."

The sweat was crawling out onto Eden's forehead. "You're used to manhunts, Storm. You're a private eye, a good one. I've stumbled across this damned big thing, and to tell you the truth, I'm not big enough for it, and it scares the living hell out of me.

"I don't think any of the company's men are good enough to help me crack it. I think you can. You're big-time. This is a large caper. It can be the beginning of the end, if it isn't nipped in the baby-fat. Follow me?"

Storm watched Eden's steady amber eyes and then he reached out his hand. "I'm with you, pal. Fifty-fifty. Once we've cracked this atomic bomb squeeze, then you track me down one saddle-weary little redhead."

They shook hands.

Eden grinned. "From where I was sitting, she looked to be a pretty nice fit on any saddle-horse. But then, I'm one of those strange guys that goes for a little redhead sometimes. Preferably now."

Storm raised his shot glass. "To red-heads, atom bombs, and hell, everything else wild that keeps guys like you and me in business."

They anchored the rye under their belts and took off.

DAN STORM let himself into his hotel room with a weary sigh. He was frankly glad that Eden had insisted they both get a good night's rest before starting out in the railroad company's jeep. They had spent the afternoon buying supplies and rigging out the jalopy for the long, hard trip into the mining areas to the south.

Storm closed the door, snapped on the lights, and tossed his gun on the dresser. His Smith and Wesson was gone. He'd had to invest in a Colt .22, one of those long-barreled woodsmen affairs that looked like an atomic ray gun.

Where the hell his own Smith and Wesson was now, he hadn't the slightest idea. The last he'd seen, it had been swan-diving into a pile of railroad rubble, searching for dames in distress.

He peeled off his jacket and turned around. Damned if his old Smith and Wesson hadn't come back, like a factory-guaranteed homing pigeon. It was staring up at him from the bed, its one black eye unwinking and stern. Attached to the handle of it was the small, well-built redhead, complete with agate brown eyes, and bright, sketched-in smile.

"Oh, hello," she said.

Storm cursed himself out silently and bent into a chair. It had a hard back, and he sat sideways in it, hanging over the edge with his right arm.

"There's only room for one of us, and I'm afraid it's got to be me. Thank you for your consideration in returning my rod, Miss Moore. I had no idea you remembered my address. I never thought I'd see you again."

She had lovely teeth, and like any wom-

an, she loved to show off her treasures. She bared her teeth at Storm. "Lay off me," she said. "I'm a touchy kid. I'll stick a seam of lead across your midriff, copper. You don't know how I love to sew!"

Storm's voice suddenly took on an edge like a rattler's song. "I'll take you back there if I've got to ride the icebox wagon back. The D.A. and I are buddies, Miss Moore. I also got an in with another gal. One you don't know. She sits up there with a weighing scale and laughs at people like you. Old Lady Justice, they call her."

Her eyes backed up into her head. "Just who are you, mister? No gumshoe, plain and simple. You're a funny one."

"Then laugh, Goldie. Storm's the name. Dan Storm."

She ran her fingers through her curly red hair. She drew it back tight on her head, and the skin above her eyes pulled across her forehead. The thin blue vein showed. The gun in her right mitt was loose and forgotten.

Her eyes were wide and hopeless. "Dan Storm," she repeated, and the syllables were like icicles dripping off her wintry tongue. "His brother."

Storm flattened his lips over his teeth. "I'm taking you back, and now you know why. Kid, there's a bottle of whiskey in the dresser drawer. Mighty soothing. Try some."

She sat there, a numb, tight little ball of suspicion. Then she eased up. She pointed the gun at him and moved across the bed. She pulled out the top drawer and reached inside. It was a pint of rye. She unscrewed the cap and drank two deep gulps of it.

She was watching him with her brown, bright eyes. She put the cap back on and set the bottle on the dresser. Then she lay back on the bed and smiled at him.

"Now I'm going to have to kill you, Dan Storm," she smiled.

Storm shrugged. "Dan Storm, target for tonight. Why did you kill him?" Sweat beaded his face, but his mouth managed a grin.

A gleam that was almost animal cunning crept into her eyes. She tasted her lips, breathed deeply, and smiled at him. Her eyes warmed over and she juggled the gun.

"I was in love with him," she said. "He was good. He was the best guy on earth. There was nobody like him. You know that. Listen. Me, I'm no good, no good at all. I'm spoiled and rotten and dead inside. I drink. I'm a tramp. I hate myself and I love myself—at the same time. You know? I'm a dirty little witch, mister. When I'm bad I can make life hell for anyone within ten miles of me. When I'm good, it all floods in on me what I am, in a black, stinking remorse that crawls all through me and makes me sick. I see myself the way I am then, and—"

Then the smike broke over her tight little face, that thin, lonely, viperish smile. The gun waved at his face.

"I killed him. I had to kill him to save him—from me! Do you see it, mister? Do you get it?"

Her eyes filled with tears, but she did not look down. She looked at Dan Storm, and the tears trickled along the sides of her nose. She had the trick. Her face did not twist and stretch and torture itself. She cried easily, with a lovely, heart-rending simplicity that tore and twisted at a man's guts.

"I killed him because I loved him and hated myself. Is there any way I can get you to see that?"

"Give me that gun." Storm stood up slowly, like a lion-tamer trying not to scare a sulky killer cat.

"No!" she gasped, backing slowly off the bed. "Don't follow me! The desert's big. I'll be all right if I'm alone. But if I go back, so help me, I may kill more! If I see you out there after me, Storm, I'll

kill you! Lease me alone! Why can't you all leave me alone?"

He stepped in to reach for the gun. She was moving slowly across the room, her left hand out, feeling her way along the dresser, the wall, the door sill. He brought his hand down sharply, and then his shin felt as if every bone in it had snapped in two. Blood dribbled down inside his pants leg. He closed up like a jackknife and let out a muffled curse.

Madalynne laughed mockingly, her voice a hoarse rattle, pulled the door open, and shut it behind her. When he limped over and grabbed it he could see no sign of her.

He leaned out the hall window and looked down in the street. No cars moved at all. Too late he remembered the horse. She would be moving silently through the back-alley shadows, off into the black desert land. Eden would help him track her down. Plenty of time.

Fifteen minutes later he bandaged up the leg, took off his clothes, and crawled into bed like a whipped puppy curling up on a mouldy old gunnysack. The girl was gone. The desert was one hell of a big, lonely place—a good place for a loony dame like that one.

Or was she so damned loony?

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Mountain

OLD man desert dies at night. He digs his grave in the evening when the shadows are building across the long expanses. When the sun skids down past the western hills, the crochety old guy turns over in his bed and lies there rattling away. Then he stops breathing and his corpse gets colder and colder. All the heat runs off him. There is nothing left but a dead man in a bed with nobody to give a sweet damn whether he gets buried or not.

Next day the old sinner is up and panting like a sick rabbit before chow. The sun pops up, and his bleary old eyes unfog and the hot soup begins to flow. By eight or nine it looks as if he's going to make the day through. Comes lunch, and the fever grabs hold of him and he swelters and burns with all the fires of hell, and his pores sweat steam. He can't get out of the furnace of his own fever, and he's ready to die all over again as soon as the sun goes out in the west.

He is an old man and he is bitter and lonely and his time is through. His days of women and liquor and glory are finished. Let him lay, pal. Let him lay.

Dan Storm did not tell Joe Eden that Madalynne Moore had come to him the night before. The two of them gabbed as they rode along, covering everything—blondes, baseball, football, brunettes, poker, pool, redheads, international politics, blue-eyed brunettes, Harry Truman, rye as opposed to bourbon, brown-eyed blondes, the logical progress of a big drunk, the odds against filling an inside straight.

They cussed the desert heat out and then stopped for lunch. They cussed the beans out and ate them. The coffee was good so they cussed it out and got back in the jeep to drive on.

The heat was a merciless beast, pressing down on them, sucking the air from their lungs, smearing their faces with hot greasy sweat. What had been rugged chaparral had turned now to a heat-tortured lava flatland. Wind-blasted sandstone heaps thrust their spires up. The scoriac remnants of a sloping valley remained—seared, ripped, parched.

Storm gazed back across the savage desolation, his eyes bathed in stinging sweat. Ahead of them rose rust-tinted tablelands, terraced one after the other up into a wild, sky-scraping cathedral of rock and sand. Suddenly it was awful and breath-takenly beautiful.

Storm mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. Eden glanced at him and grinned.

"This is the spot the devil rejected when he got the land grant for hell," he yelled above the boiling of the jeep. "Too damned hot for sinners, they say."

Finally night came, creeping over them, the long lavender shadows inching along, turning deeper blue-black, and swallowing them up. The air above was still blue, but then it too, flickered and went out. The jeep lights trickled over the red jagged boulders, occasionally catching glittering green lobo eyes in the dark.

They were climbing into the sandstone heights now. A million stars glistened in the sky above. The air which had been laden with oppressive heat shifted, and an icy, bone-chilling wind slipped alongside them, reaching in to tear the warmth out of their clothes.

Finally Eden yelled: "Two shakes of a coyote's tail, and we're there at the first of the diggin's, the Silver Queen."

"How far is it from Meredith City?"

Eden grinned and his teeth glinted in the glow of the dashboard. "Hell of a long dusty walk, pal."

Storm peered out into the darkness. The jeep lights climbed down a sheet of red rock towering up into the sky, and the road leveled off. Eden stopped the motor. Past the rock the stars glistened in a jet-black blanket. To the right and to the left towered the walls of a tight little boxed-in valley.

Behind them, before Storm could jump out, came the crunch of footsteps.

Storm flicked down for his gun, but instantly a lisping, decisive voice spoke up: "Welcome to the Silver Queen Diggings, amigos." In the clear snappy air the sharp click of a rifle bolt barked out at them. "But please to raise the hands. We are a touchy people around this volcano, senors."

Beside him, Storm could see Eden

slowly raising his hands, eyeing the approaching figure warily. It was a slender body, softly feminine. A long deer rifle glittered from the reflection off the illuminated stone wall. Behind the rifle stood a girl. She was stacked. She was eyeing Storm casually, her dark eyes smoldering in the reflected night light.

"And, please to drop your guns, senors. Okay?" Before he could oblige, Storm heard Eden's gun drop to the ground. Shrugging, Storm lifted his new .22 and let it tumble to the ground. He was going to have a hell of a big munitions deduction on his 1949 income tax.

Storm heard Eden whispering across to him. "She means it, pal. Guess we better wait for some kind of opening."

Storm growled and stood with his hands raised. The girl approached. Her mouth widened in a sudden smile. Her teeth glistened. Her body was beautifully curved under her blue jeans and man's shirt. She was scented with some subtle jungle perfume.

She was the girl from the wreck—the brown baby with the iron fetters on her neat little ankles. Now the shackles were gone. Her legs looked fine even without them. So did the rest of her.

She looked fine except for the stern little mouth, the tight little chin, and the heavily loaded equalizer in her arms. What the hell. If a man figured the angles carefully the rifle might be made to bend clean around the other way.

She waved the rifle at them, prodding them on down a narrow trail off the road. She picked up their guns and followed them, close behind. Eden walked on ahead, having no difficulty picking out the dim cut-bank. Storm found himself licking his lips, and his skin drew tightly back on his scalp. Damned strange that Eden should know this place so well! Damned strange that he should toss in the towel without putting up any kind of bluff! And then—not so damned strange!

Rage boiled up inside Storm. Rage and disgust and frustration. He looked back at the girl, glared at her, but she waved him on, her eyes hard. But she was watching him closely, and not with a guard's eyes. He could almost feel her studying him from behind. He was glad he'd shaved. It would make the double-cross game so much easier.

He kept his mouth shut. There was nothing he could say to Eden now. He'd get ventilated in the back if he opened his yap. What a sucker! What a damned-fool, slack-jawed sucker! And then, while he was cussing Eden under his breath, Eden suddenly vanished from in front of him. One minute he was there, the next he was gone.

Storm could hear a scrambling of stones down the side of the embankment. Eden was making a good getaway. Then two shots blazed by his ear, and a savage laugh echoed up from the bottom of the ravine. Rocks bounced around down there a moment.

From behind him a string of fancy southern cussing spewed out of the girl's mouth like chili peppers.

Storm whipped around and grabbed the rifle barrel without thinking. The white-hot fire seared through his flesh, and he let go a yell. He threw himself sideways, off the trail, but the rifle butt slashed down on his head instantly, and he spun out over the edge of the black chasm without hearing even the briefest fare-thee-well.

THERE was laughter and there was silence. The room was big and it was small, too. The ventilation was bad. No air got in. But at the same time it was comfortable. Wood burned in a fireplace. It was camping out when you were a boy scout. No. It was being caught in a tight jam when you were a private eye.

Dazedly, Storm sat up on the cot. He wasn't tied. He wasn't gagged. He wasn't even particularly sore. Only scabby and

tight on the head. He looked around him at the small cave-like room.

There was a long table, a couple of wooden benches, four army cots like the one he sat on, and two people sitting over by the fire. The people were the girl with the chili peppers for a tongue, and also his old double-crossing stinking pal Joe Eden, who thought bourbon was a better drink than rye.

Storm tried to say, "What the hell is this?" but he only groaned. Eden turned around from the fireplace and grinned.

"Oh. You awake? Come on over by the fire and we'll roast you a chestnut."

Storm grinned flatly. "Hell, I'm through pulling those damned things out of the fire, thanks. What's the deal, anyway?"

The girl laughed a gay, musical laugh. It tinkled through the room like ice in a tall glass of arsenic. "Come on over by the fire, baybee." The accent was so thick you could smoke ham with it.

Eden growled. "My God, Johnny," he said. "Cut that damned accent. It reminds me of hillbilly records."

Johnny got up from the bench and came around the table. She leaned over Storm as he sat half dead on the cot, and put her hand on his forehead. Immediately everything whirled away from him, and all he could feel was that hand. It was a good feel. He looked up.

"You're all right now, aren't you?" she said steadily.

Storm's mouth dropped open again. He'd have to get that damned thing laced shut. "How's that again?" The girl's accent lowered to half mast. She still had her slight lisp and that throaty, husky quality. But now she was using the prime minister's English.

Johnny laughed. "I'm Juanita Williams," she said. "Johnny."

He stared at her again, standing up to get a good look. She reached to his shoulder, her dark blue-black hair swirling

about her head like candy. Her mocking eyes were watching him, and her mouth was twisted in an amused smile. Her hands were on her hips, and in the blue jeans and the man's shirt she looked like one hundred percent woman, with an accent on the yum-yum.

"I didn't mean to swat you so hard," she said brightly. "Come on. Sit by us here in front of the fire."

Eden turned around. "We'll give you the big picture, now, pal. Now that we're sure."

The chilly wind that had been toying with the desert outside got into Storm's shirt and began fiddling with his backbone. "What big picture?" It was at that instant that he realized by the weight of his clothes that his gun had not been returned.

Eden stood up and pushed one of the burning logs into place. Sparks shot up into the flue. The flame poured out around the log, pushing heat out at them.

The girl twined her arm through his. She leaned against him, still with the joking, half-serious sunlight in her eyes, looking up at him.

It had been a long time since somebody had reached through to him like that, without any effort at all. What was it he wondered, trying to get at the thing. What made this one count, and none of the others? What made the world go around? What made the cards fall in a hand of poker?

"We're agents, kid," Eden was saying with his back to them. Storm followed the girl over to the long, bench-like seat in front of the blaze. She was close to him and light as air. All the hard stiffness was gone from his body and he was in A-1 shape. She moved away from him and he reached for his cigarettes, but they were gone.

"Got a cigarette?" Storm asked shakily. He had been conscious of Eden's words, but he had not quite assimilated them.

"Sure, pal," Eden said, turning around and handing Storm a pack. "Have a couple."

Johnny lit a pipe stem off the fire and got the weed going for him. Then she moved across the room behind them.

"F.B.I. agents," Eden continued, with a grin that stretched twenty miles across the map of his homely, happy-go-lucky face.

"We had to be sure you weren't packing any trick gadgets. Thought you might be one of them, angling us on with that manhunt gag to get up here and blow us to hell."

The girl crossed in front of them again. With a tremendous effort, Storm kept himself from staring at her.

"Rye? Joe says you like rye." Johnny's dark eyes were laughing at him as she glanced over her shoulder.

You can say you love a girl by the way you slap her face, by the way you spill her into an icy creek. Any way. Same with a dame. Johnny told Storm she loved him now by the way she poured out his drink.

"F.B.I.," Storm was repeating, by an effort of will bringing his snagged mind back to the conversation. "You mean you two are busting this carnotite mining racket?"

Eden got up from the fire and sat down. He grabbed up his own drink. "Sure. The unnameables across the ocean have got the slickest little uranium refinery you ever did see—underground here! And there's been no slip-ups or leaks because they're working it with shifts of slave labor!"

Storm turned questioning eyes on Johnny Williams. She smiled. "Get it? Slave labor. That's why you saw me in that baggage car. I got away from the death chain."

"Death chain?"

Eden's grin was flat and hard. "Johnny's been working from the Mexican side

now for a year getting herself set for this trick. We don't know just who the big boss is. Deal is, he operates this mine with Mexican convicts. Lifers and cut-throats are tricked into escaping from Mexican prisons, and then they're rounded up like cattle by fake officials, and shipped to the U. S. in chain-gangs."

"By railroad?" Storm took another shot of rye to clear out the cobwebs from his dusty mind.

"In false-bottom baggage cars," Johnny nodded. "Like those laborers they caught recently, smuggled over in a false-bottomed truck."

Eden set his glass down on the floor. "The big shot himself found out Johnny had smuggled herself into that shipment at the last minute. He knew once the load was dumped here we'd have the whole set-up nailed. So he derailed the spinner, and bombed it to hell-and-gone before any of the cons had a chance to slip away. In tight pinches like that, they often scuttle a whole shipment of slaves, so none of them will stretch their beaks and sing the blues to the feds."

Johnny smiled. "I was prepared to get away in case of any slip-up. Lucky thing I was. I hid in the baggage car, waiting for a chance to get out. But we still don't know who Mr. Big is."

"But we'll find out," Eden said confidently. "You'll help us, won't you, Storm?"

"That's what I don't get. Why did you pick on me? It's not my big gray eyes, and it's not my big gumshoe rep."

Eden let a grin sneak at the corner of his mouth. Then he looked over at Johnny. Her eyes were full for a moment, and then they dropped from his face and wandered to Storm's. She traced a line on her tall drink glass with her forefinger. Her eyes were large and sad and pleading.

"Bait, Dan. It's a tough go, but there's only two of us. It takes three."

Storm stretched his legs out luxuriously toward the fire. "Bait for who? Why pick on me?"

The girl stood up and turned to him. She spoke to Joe Eden without looking at him. "Better dump the water out of the jeep, Joe. It'll freeze if you don't."

Eden looked at her and then at Storm. "Sure, pal." He stood up and walked out the door. "Matter of fact, I'm sleeping down at the refinery. See you in the a.m." And he was gone.

He looked up to find her watching him. He grinned. "You have a way with men, don't you Johnny?"

She shrugged. "Some men have a way with me." He could feel her eyes on him even though her face was in the deep shadows.

He lazed with the drink. "I asked you who am I baiting, kid?"

She didn't move. "Madalynne Moore," she said evenly. "I thought you knew."

Storm froze. "Knew what?"

"She's working for their underground. She's one of them. Why do you think she came to the Southwest? For a rest cure?"

Madalynne Moore! The fire was suddenly ice and there was only cold in the room. So that was why she had killed his brother Dave. Dave was a lawyer, and he had run across something big. And that something must have been Madalynne Moore.

It all made sense. And so did something else. Madalynne Moore was the number one fisherman. She had dabbed Storm onto her hook before Eden and Johnny had. Because that was why she had told Storm to lay off. She knew he'd look for her. And then she'd have him where she wanted him to dust him off like lint from a coat.

He slowly put the drink down on the floor and stood up. He stretched a second, and then he looked at Johnny Williams. He reached out his arms and put them around her waist. She stood there

waiting and her long soft fingers strayed over his lapels.

And then he kissed her. And it was like Christmas day when you were young and the world was new.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wilderness Witch

DAVE STORM was in the dream, and so was Madalynne Moore. The D.A. was in it, and Joe Eden and Johnny Williams. Most of it was Johnny Williams, and she was everything in the world.

In the dream Dave Storm was still alive, and he was laughing. Those big laughs that come rumbling up from the belly like volcano explosions. Half-mad. Half-crazy. Dan Storm was going to kill Madalynne Moore—that was the reason Dave was laughing. It was damned funny. A double-cross is a double-cross is a

double-cross. That was the word in the books. One good stab in the back deserved another.

The D.A. was stern and rock-like. He was a selfish fish-faced man, the D. A., and he wanted to fry Madalynne Moore in the state hot-pan. The fact that Dan Storm was going to snare her himself gave the D.A. a pain in the department of justice.

Then Storm was awake—gloriously, joyfully awake. His head was clear and the world was in sharp focus. For once the universe was a clean-cut, definite, stamped-out plan. He was the happiest man in the world, this Dan Storm. Today was pay-off, too. Tomorrow was—well, tomorrow was Johnny and whatever the golden future held for the two of them.

The cave was deserted. Bright white sunlight burned in through a slit under the door. A candle flickered on the breakfast table. A pot of coffee sat on the kero-

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sene burner. Storm got up and dressed, singing. There were no words, no melody, no damned tune. He moved over to the kerosene stove, stretching himself luxuriously as he moved.

Storm lit the kerosene burner and got the coffee warmed up. There were two eggs and he dumped them into a pan and wolfed them down sunny-side-up. Ten minutes later he stood combing his hair in a mirror, whistling.

Funny neither Johnny nor Joe Eden were around anywhere. Oh well. Maybe they were fishing. For gila monsters or lizards. Or yucca blooms. Anything can happen on the desert.

There was no reason for it. It came like a sneeze will sneak up on a man. Like a sudden loathing for liquor that crawls into a man for no reason at all. Like a hate that hits a man square in the guts while he stares at a girl he thought he loved. Only this time it was different from a sneeze, or a loathing, or a hate.

This was green and hideous and unbecoming. It was the undignified feeling some men get and others do not; it was the difference between a live detective and a dead one.

Somewhere in the back of his mind the pattern had slipped into clearer focus. The extra pieces of the jigsaw puzzle fitted in, and he saw that there were two ways the thing worked. Two ways the picture filled in. It was like a television screen out of focus.

He had to be sure which way the land lay.

A rat smells cheese and gets his head snapped off by a steel spring. A man opens a door into the bright sunlight outside a cave and he gets himself nailed to a rock wall with singing hot slugs.

Storm grinned ruefully. If a man's a dick, he thinks like a flatfoot and feels like a flatfoot. There is no way to get him out of the pattern. There is no way to make him human. He's got to sniff his food for

arsenic, smell his liquor for Miceys, test his beds for skunk traps.

It didn't make sense that neither Joe nor Johnny should be there to give him the word. Today was the day.

He made a dummy out of blankets, firewood, and his shirt and pants. It didn't look like him, but it looked like a man. He dug into his coat for the .22. Then he remembered his heater was gone. Johnny had never given it back to him.

Storm grinned with a lemon in his mouth. F.B.I. agents! Good Lord! They could just as easily be foreign spies. If they were, they'd played him for the biggest sucker of the century! They had him without a rod in a guntrap, and he'd just have to wait for them to come in and take him. He realized suddenly that moving the dummy out to draw a shot would only tip them off that he was on to their game. That wouldn't do at all.

He could picture them both to himself, lying bushed up across the gorge, waiting for the door to open in the face of the rock, waiting to blast him into eternity. He cursed wryly. They'd play hell doing it, even if he didn't have any guns or ammo.

Disgustedly he put his shirt and pants on and stared around the room. He had the unpleasant feeling that the walls were closer in and that the ceiling was almost down to his head.

The back of the cave was walled off with beaverboard strips. When he moved one of them aside, he could see back into a dim tunnel shaft. The room had been built at the entrance to one of the mine shafts. If he remembered his geology correctly, mine shafts usually bored straight back, and quite often branched off, switched over, and joined other shafts. He might be able to switch over and escape through another exit.

In Johnny Williams' belongings he found a couple spools of thread. He tied one to the bottom of a chair, covered the

thread with a grass carpet, and started into the dark passageway with a flashlight. Twenty yards back a shaft branched off to the left. Then it joined another shaft. Storm turned left and moved along until the shaft angled off abruptly and sunlight poured in through the opening.

Clear blue sky blanketed the entrance. The shaft opened on a bare facing, apparently, with no canyon wall opposite. Storm grinned. Still, he'd better play it pat.

He moved his hat out past the edge of the entrance, letting it waggle as if his head was inside it, peeking around the corner. Nothing happened. He moved the hat further out then, a foot and a half. No sound. Storm's head poked out into the open.

He stood up, sudden relief flooding him. The shaft overlooked miles and miles of tapering sandstone slabs, down, down, down into the vast southland over oceans of desert sand. Figuring the lay of the land about him the best he could, Storm tried to reason his way across the gorge and up behind a sniper's spot that would cover the cave door.

He moved cautiously, slowly, down the slope, picking his way around smooth white boulders and along red-yellow sandstone ledges that crumbled under his boots. The sun was climbing the sky when he heard the scuttling noise behind him.

HE FROZE in his tracks, pulling himself quickly into a niche in the wall of rock. The sound behind him was not repeated. A falling stone, a slide started by some hyper-thyroid lizard. Maybe. As he moved forward, he could not help feeling that he was being tracked, just as silently and mercilessly as he was tracking someone else.

Minutes later the blood poured through his neck, and his pulse slammed hard. Directly below him lay Joe Eden, prone on a shale spur of rock, his deer rifle shining along the crook of his arm.

Then the sound bounced down behind Storm, up high, to the left. Over his shoulder he glanced up in swift panic. Had that damned girl followed him—that double-crossing, lovely, unforgettable Johnny Williams?

He could see nothing. Hell, anyone above him would have buried a slug between his shoulder blades hours ago. Storm covered every inch of the jagged, mottled landscape with his sharp eyes, but he could see no one. Nothing moved. No more sounds.

Lizards. Gila monsters. Crawl back in your damned holes and hit the sack. Don't be for giving a man a bad case of high blood pressure.

Storm tensed his muscles for the leap and jumped quickly. Rocks and gravel spat out from around him, and the noise he made would have shamed a pneumatic drill artist on Times Square. The lean, tough frame of Joe Eden spun over without an instant's wait, and the rifle barrel slanted up at him. Eden's amber eyes were glazed with shock, but his face was relaxed and confidently grinning.

The shot bruised the air by Storm's face, and his skin burnt with the hot gun-flame. But no second shot came. The rifle crashed into the stones five yards away. Eden cursed and came up at Storm with his hands.

The weight behind his leap had thrown Storm on top of Eden, but Eden was powerful and wiry and his hands were big and bony and like steel claws. His thumbs bit into Storm's throat, fondling his wind-pipe lovingly.

The breath bound up in Storm's chest, and he could not get it out through his throat. Nor could he get any more in. His face felt red and hot and bigger than a baby blimp.

He let go of Eden's neck and slammed his fist into Eden's heart. Eden twitched, snapped aside, yanking Storm's head almost off his body. Snaking sideways from

under Storm, Eden edged along the shelf. With an abrupt sunfishing movement, Eden bounced Storm into the air and off onto his side, and before Storm could get the jagged rock out, Eden was on top him, beating his head on the ground.

Black angry fog swirled in on Storm, and he bucked furiously, straining with his arching backbone, threshing with his legs. Then he felt his leg twine around a sharp edge of rock. He twisted, wrapping his calf around it, and spun sideways under Eden. Wriggling like a bleeding fish on a hook, Storm twisted and squirmed without any plan.

And suddenly Eden let go his throat for an instant to smash into his face. Storm gasped in great gulps of air, heaved upwards with his throbbing chest, and pitched Eden off him. Eden went headfirst for the drop-off, but threw his hands desperately out to save himself. His right hand drove through a jagged upthrust shale sliver, and he crouched there numbly, staring at the dusty rock poniard sticking up through the back of his hand.

Gasping and fighting for the light that was rapidly going out in his head, Storm grabbed the rifle up off the rock overlay and whirled to meet Eden. Eden was approaching now, his face white and smeared with sweat and blood. His eyes were lidded and sick. Storm raised the rifle and yelled:

"Stop, Eden! Don't move a step nearer or I'll blast you."

Eden moved on, the rock blade still hanging out of his dripping hand. A grin twitched on Eden's devil-may-care face, and the blond curly hair dripped over his forehead in a likeable, young-boy cowlick.

"Give me that gun, pal."

Storm shot him then, shot him square through the vitals. Eden's face blanched and the smile froze there like an icicle. His eyes rolled up in his head, and he plunged forward onto Storm. His hands clawed at Storm's belt, and the rock slab

ripped out through the bloody wound and hung in Storm's torn shirt.

Face down in the dust and shale, Eden's body twitched once and shuddered and lay still.

And all Storm could think of as he stood there, his chest heaving, the cold air slapping his nerves gradually back to consciousness, was, what a hell of a nice guy Eden was. What a hell of a nice guy.

The world stopped spinning and it was hot in the sun and Storm's head hurt. In the sky the buzzards would soon be arcing in. He would have to bury the body. Already the flies were buzzing in, hungrily settling down.

Then he heard the sound up above him, to his left. Wearily he swung the rifle up, raising the sights onto the figure approaching. In the blur of sweat and heat and dizziness about him he could not make out who it was until she moved into a shadow. Then his fingers tightened around the trigger and he almost squeezed off a shot.

It was Madalynne Moore, and she carried his Smith and Wesson in her hand. She was holding it trained on him, warily covering him. "Hold your fire, Storm," she said. This time her words were solid and sure and they were going somewhere. She was not the same whiskey-drenched, remorse-ridden witch she had been before.

He nodded his head. "You blast me, Goldie, and I'll pin you to a red-rock headstone."

"We've got to bury him," she said briefly, bending over the body.

Storm nodded. "Sure. Where?" Why the hell he had asked her was beyond his immediate comprehension. She just seemed to be the kind who'd know.

Madalynne Moore surveyed the face of the canyon above them. "We'll drop a slab of stone over him and fill in the gaps with shale and dirt."

Dazedly Storm obeyed her and in twen-

ty-five minutes the job was done. They crawled in under a rock overhang and sat, wiping their faces of perspiration. Madalynne's face was free of make-up and the exertion, the heat, and the fresh dry air had pumped the blood through her face. She was a neat enough chick without make-up.

She looked at him, and her agate eyes were clear and straightforward. "When did you find out about them?"

Storm leaned back, dragging out a beat-up cigarette. "Not two seconds before I almost walked into their bushwhack trap." He wiped his torn hands on his pants leg and reached out a match.

She sighed, brushed a thin chip of shale off Storm's forehead. "You look like hell," she said suddenly. "Well, now you know."

In a lightning flash he saw what she meant. He turned and stared at her, the cigarette hanging bent-up out of his mouth, the paper tight and stinging on his lip. Involuntarily his hand moved out and gripped hers. "Dave. Dave, too? You mean, that's why—"

She smiled ruefully. "He was one of them, too. I just couldn't tell you the other night. Anyway, you wouldn't have believed me."

"But how did it all happen with Dave?"

"I thought he was in love with me, Dan. I fell in love with him, and he didn't care two hoots in hell for me. He was after dad's steel business. Trying to break up the steel works, sabotaging it, getting it all good and ready for the next big threat."

Dan Storm turned her face toward him with his fingers. "So that's how it really was."

She nodded her head. "No blackouts. No remorse. Not much whiskey, Dan. Just straight, one hundred percent one-way love. Sucker's love. He tried to threaten me when I refused to work on dad. And then he tried to kill me—the gang was hounding him every second. I had to kill him in self-defense. The F.B.I. knows."

"You joined up and now you're on this job. That the idea?"

"I learned about this desert setup accidentally from Dave. I'm marked now. I killed one of their men. I've got to watch my step all my life. I may as well fight them while I'm doing it." She smiled up at him and her eyes were fine and clean. "It's the same with you now, Dan. Eden tricked you into coming up here to pin this whole cut-up onto you. I was

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to be murdered, and the two of us were supposed to have killed each other in a shoot-out. After all, your brother was one of them. Revenge for his death. Motivation. It fits in beautifully.

"They saw you on the train, and that's why they wrecked it and burned up those convicts. And when I got a peek at Johnny, she knew I'd have to be the fall guy. I'd be able to bust the racket wide open once I'd put two and two together."

Storm sat there a long time in the shade, looking out over the boiling canyon. He was thinking of a pair of long, tapering dark hands, of a pair of black snapping eyes, of a lovely smear of crimson candy where a mouth should be. He was feeling it in his guts and there was an ache and a black sadness all through him.

And he knew too, that come hell, high water, and high taxes, what was between Johnny and him would always be the same. Always. And there was nothing he or she could do about that.

"Leave her to me," he said suddenly. "I'll take care of her. I'm marked the same as you are. No sense you getting mixed up in it any more from this end."

She turned to him, placed her hand on his arm. There was nothing there now where she touched him. Maybe before, but not now. No one could ever make him forget Johnny now.

Anyway, he turned and smiled. "Where is she now?"

"She drove over to get water today," Madalynne said. "She'll be back by dusk."

"How did you get out here?"

"On a horse. I followed you here yesterday. There's an old corral about five miles from here. I'll go back to Meredith City and get the paper feds to close up the case."

He stuck out his hand. She shook it and smiled. They looked at each other for a long moment, and all the loneliness and hell inside two sold-out souls showed in their cold clear eyes.

CHAPTER FIVE

Beauty and the Bullets

NIGHT came fast in the canyon. One minute the sun was up, the next it was down, and darkness crouched on the hills like a big black panther. Still Johnny had not appeared. Storm had a candle going and he was sitting there waiting, wondering, fighting the blues that had him now by the guts. He did not know how he was going to act, what he was going to do.

Storm and Madalynne Moore had scouted the area that afternoon, and they had found everything—everything but proof to link Joe Eden and Johnny Williams to the spy ring. In a mine that shot out tentacles into the earth like a huge octopus, they found evidence of recent digging. There was a crude smelting device reconstructed from ancient works, and they found bits of chipped-up carnotite, enough to prove that ore had been worked there.

But there was no one around. The men who had worked the mines were gone. The first shift had been used for their job, and now they were dead. No one must live to tell the truth. In a ruthless caper like this one, with sizzling international complications, the big boys had to play it smart. All the first shift workers were dead. Possibly they still dragged their chains through the canyons of hell. A fitting end for the most ruthless lifers, anyway, Storm mused wryly.

Madalynne Moore had headed back to Meredith City. Within twelve hours she would have all the assistance she needed. The place would be curried with a fine tooth comb, and soon all these miles and miles of enterprise would be diverted to harnessing power out of the earth for the United States.

Eden and Johnny had headed the ring. They had seen it through from beginning

to end. Eden had told Storm that he had gone to engineering school in Colorado where he'd taken his degree in mining. Storm could figure that the thing had been planned for a long time by the bigwigs across the water. What was so fabulous was that it hadn't been tapped onto until this late date. Until the murder of Dave Storm, there had been no leaks, no traces, no dirty fingernails.

Dave. A funny guy, Dave Storm. A quiet, unassuming guy who had studied law in college, and who went into the army, and came out and was a lawyer. But all the time he had been lapping up treason soup from the propaganda pots of these damned spies. Ironic that the one person he'd picked to have no scruples at all, Madalynne Moore, had turned out to be the one trustworthy dame in the United States. Damned ironic.

So Dave was dead and his brother Dan, the slow one who couldn't even pass a cop test, had inherited the damndest spy case of the century. And Dan Storm sat now in a candle-lit room like young Abe Lincoln—wondering what the hell was going to become of him, of his country, and of his lovely brown-eyed Johnny.

In the distance he heard a short cough of a motor, and then silence. Then steps moving down the trail. The jeep was home. So was Johnny. Storm glanced quickly into the corner where he had the Winchester stashed. It was hidden out of sight behind a warped chair.

The sweat oozed out on his forehead as he sat there, reading at the torn magazine. The flame of the candle flickered and he could hardly make out the words. If he had been able to see them he wouldn't have understood what they were saying. He glanced up again towards the door. Past the slim aura of flame he could make out nothing.

The door opened and a stab of waning light flicked in. Then it closed and the dark came in again. Johnny walked

through the door, lugging two cans of water.

"Hi," she said cheerily. "Where's Joe?"

Storm stood up. The flickering candlelight made the planes of his face angular and shadowed. He could think of absolutely nothing to say. He had been wondering how she could come through that door. Now he knew. He had wondered what he would say. Now it was time to talk and he was worse off than before.

"Hi," he said. "You've been gone a long time."

She smiled. The candlelight played wonderful tricks with her hair, with her nose, with her lovely white throat. She moved toward him, set the water cans down, and put out her hands to him.

"You didn't come up the trail to meet me?" she said. Her lips moved into a pout.

His face was as stiff as a Hallowe'en mask. He couldn't have moved it with his fingers. Somehow he got his mouth open and said: "No. I didn't hear you coming." He tried to smile but he didn't.

"I forgot!" she laughed. "I forgot to leave a note. Where's Joe?" She glanced around the room. "Didn't he come in for lunch, even?"

"I didn't see him," Storm said quickly, moving back from the candlelight, watching her through hooded lids. She did not notice the tight expression to his eyes and mouth. She moved toward the fireplace and turned her head.

"Then, Dan," she said suddenly, her voice soft and husky, "why don't you kiss me? Joe isn't here. That's why I asked."

A stab of fear shot through him. He'd made a sensationally big ass out of himself already. Here he was acting like a doped-up ham actor in a two-bit role. He turned to her, and took her hands. "Good Lord," he mumbled. "I don't know. I don't know why I didn't." He drew her toward him.

Their lips met and they stood motion-

less for a long time. Then she moved away from him.

"I feel like a little kid who just saw her first swan or something," Johnny said, looking down, a smile hiding on her mouth.

He kissed her again, and her arms went around his neck. Then he drew back to look at her. "How about making dinner?"

She turned away and went to the stove. "Maybe Joe won't be back for supper," she said slowly.

"Maybe he won't?" Dan repeated, trying to make his voice sound merely puzzled—and not panicky with the dread fear welling up inside him.

"Sometimes he doesn't come back to eat," she said cautiously.

Of course! She thought Joe was off on spy duty somewhere, and she was trying to keep it from him. Storm had been worrying about her suspicions. He almost had to laugh.

"Oh," he said. "Business, huh?"

She turned around and watched him carefully. A tiny little flame of suspicion burned brightly inside her eyes for a second, and then it was gone. "Yeah," she said. She stared at him a moment longer.

So far he had not been able to tell where she kept her gun. She might have it in her belt. She might have it hidden in some spot in the room. During dinner he tried to find it, but he couldn't. She looked up at him once or twice while he was browsing around, but she didn't say anything. Once she frowned and opened her mouth, but she never said a word.

They faced each other over the candlelit table, and it was like honeymoon time. It was candles and wine and Mendelssohn music. Only the wine was a bit on the alkaline side and was sucked from rocky earth, and the Mendelssohn music was the cold canyon wind picking at the latch.

"I'm glad Joe isn't here, Dan. I don't think he'd understand what I'm going to tell you." She leaned forward, her eyes

bright black, almost pure ebony, in the warm glow of the candle flame.

The rest of her words didn't get past his ears. At the thought of Joe Eden's bloody corpse smashed under that rock slab outside, the thought pattern in Storm's mind writhed and twisted and he came back to the urgent present.

Get that gun. Get that damned gun and kill her. You've got to get her before the spy ring is busted. Eden was only a stooge. You've got to nail this doll's skin to the wall before you turn in tonight. She's dangerous, Dan—and she'll kill you first if you don't speed it up.

Then suddenly her words were coming through. "I'm quitting, Dan. Do you understand what I'm talking about?"

Dan Storm drew back, fascinated. He was like a man staring awe-struck at the eyes of a coiled snake, ready to strike. He was off-guard, and he could do nothing. She was two steps ahead of him now. Where she was leading was hard to tell. She was the one girl in four hundred million who couldn't quit. She was in this thing for life, he knew that.

Storm shook his head. "No. I don't get it."

She leaned back. "You guessed when you came in last night. The foreign agent isn't Miss Moore, Dan. Joe and I are the kingpins in this caper. We're the bigwigs," she said proudly.

HIS face froze over. He couldn't put on the surprise act. He couldn't think of any reaction at all. He sat there numbly, nodding his head. Joe Eden didn't have the plans, the secrets, the code buster. Madalynne Moore and he had looked close. It was Johnny—and she was playing the game backwards.

"Money," she said, coming around the table and standing behind Storm. "I've got loads of gold, Dan. You and I can be free of this whole mess—this doomed, double-crossed mess called the United

States. We can go away to South America, to Australia, and we can live like a king and queen. There will never be anybody happier than us, Dan."

Her voice trembled over the words, and tingles shot through Storm's spine.

He could not move. It was as if he had been suddenly carved out of granite. He was off somewhere watching himself. He was watching himself and the girl, and he didn't even want to move. Everything that was good in life was wrapped up in that girl, and he knew that now as he had never known it before.

Slowly he turned and her fingers slid around and cupped his chin, and then were around his shoulder again.

"Dan," she said once or twice. There were tears in her eyes, and her mouth was wide and bright with a smile that was second to none in the world.

After a moment he got up from the chair and walked across the room. He turned around and faced her. Her mouth was curved in a puzzled smile, and her eyes were bright and her cheeks flushed. He reached down around in back of him and pulled out the rifle from behind the chair. He watched her face as he lifted it into his hands and looked down the barrel.

Her face went white and her hand flew to her throat. The spark in her eyes kindled and black sick flames burned there. She was shaking her head. "No, Dan. No."

His voice was gravely. "Recognize that iron, kid? Do you know whose it is?"

She looked at it in mute terror. "It's Joe's!" she said. "Where did you get it?"

"Off Joe. He was bushed up in the hills to kill me, kid. I got him instead. He's under a slab of stone out there right now. His corpse is. Joe himself is probably walking the brimstone circuit flashing that spy badge to impress the small fry."

Her eyes were flaky black now. "You're not going to—you weren't thinking of—killing me with that—were you?" Her voice shook on the words, and flew up an octave at the end.

He stared at her, his cold gray eyes level and hard, and her black, glittering ones tear-studded and magnetic. It was all there between them—the electric drive that swirled about them like the lines of a dynamo, the magnetism that drew them together, the strange force that pitted them against each other—two deadly, stalking killers.

Go away with her, and don't come back. No one will ever know. They'll think you dropped into a mine shaft. What the hell.

Kill her. She and her cut-throat crew got your brother killed. They blew up a train and slaughtered innocent people.

Storm tossed the rifle down on the wooden bench and took her in his arms and kissed her. She kissed him back.

Then Storm moved back and looked at

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her eyes. She was his, and she would always be his. There was never anyone else. Nothing was worth the brutal pain of killing her. Nothing was worth leaving her. The hell with right and wrong. Those were two concrete, bloodless things. Storm belonged to life. This was life. He was sick and tired of death. And death always tied up with justice and right. The hell with it. The hell with everything but Johnny Williams.

Then he saw what she was holding in her hand. It was his own little Colt .22 that looked like the atomic ray gun. It was covering his mid-section. He looked back at her eyes, his own face chipped across like a lightning-blasted statue. The life seemed to drop right out of him so it would never come back.

Her voice was full of sugar and lime and gin. "Sucker," she cried, pleased as Punch and Judy. "Sucker, sucker!"

"Live and learn," Storm grated out. She stalked over to the seat and picked up the Winchester. She held it under her soft arm, and her right steadied the .22 at his stomach.

"Die and learn," she corrected him. "I didn't think I could work it again in ten minutes, but I did, didn't I?"

"Sure. You worked it fine." Storm's mouth bent up at one corner.

"I thought Joe was holding off on you because the Moore witch hadn't showed up yet. Joe had to be sure she was around, had to be sure she'd followed you in from Meredith City, before he blasted you down. But then you dragged out our old keepsake!"

Her eyes brightened and she smiled a wide, warm smile. "Dan Storm," she said. "Nobody gets between me and the powers that be—the power that's going to run the world! Hear me? Least of all men! Good Lord! Men. Little, insufferable, odious vermin!"

"Okay, you suckered me. Let's get it over with." Storm backed away.

"Hold it! Stop! Damn it! Okay, big boy! The king is dead. Long live the queen."

SHE shot just as he dove for the table, thrusting it up in front of him, dragging out the Smith and Wesson Madalynne Moore had insisted he wear in his coat. Fire tore into his shoulder and lead stung past his head in the semi-darkness. He blasted shots at her from over the top of the shoved-up table.

The cave rocked with the echoes of screams and the clattering whine of ricocheting bullets. Smoke and the acrid stink of cordite bit into the air and they could not see to shoot at each other in the shadowy gloom.

"Where are you, Mata Hari! Show your lying little mouth and let me seal it with a kiss! I love you, Johnny Williams!"

In the blued-in darkness an orange slash blazed at him. He fired quickly at the source, traveling around on the floor in an arc away from her. She was making for the cave exit. He drew a jagged line down the wall in front of her, and the gun ran dry. He twisted it around, filled it, and slammed it back.

She had heard. A soft rustling slithered along the edge of the darkness. The candle had gone out long ago. With a sudden deadly barrage, she laid down a blanket of shots from waist-high to the floor. The wood in front of him shuddered, and bent, and split open.

He threw down on her just as she grabbed open the door and slipped through the opening.

He ran for the door. "Come on back and fight!" Half-mad with rage and hate, he almost tore the door off its hinges as he flung it open. "Damn it—!"

A sledge-hammer tore through his knee and he staggered there for a long, suspended instant. Her shrill, maniacal laughter welled up into the heavens,

bouncing back and forth from rock face to rock face in the empty canyon.

He saw the glint on the rifle—from the cold, lovely, wonderful stars. He didn't see her, just the glint, the light from the heavens. Before the black waves could close down over him, he thumbed four shots at the rifle glint, one on top of the other, and then the gun dropped out of his numbed fingers.

He heard the gasp. The gasp choked off, and there was a startled little sniff, like a five-year-old with a head cold. "Oh Dan!"

He weighed a thousand pounds himself then, and he could not support himself on his bad knee. He caved in at the side, and on the ground he was weightless and fine. The ground became suddenly soft, and he could feel it under him like a cushiony lap.

Storm heard a rifle clatter from rock to rock, and then he heard her voice—thin and old and lonely. "Dan!"

He moved his face muscles, but nothing happened. His vocal chords were somebody else's. He waited. It was all he could do.

Johnny screamed then, the wild, hysterical scream of a horrified old woman. "Dan! Help me! I'm slipping, Dan! I'm falling!" She shrieked into the night, a high, eerie cry, like a lonely coyote's howl.

"Dan! Come here! Oh, it's blood! I'm dying, Dan!" He heard rocks bouncing down into the deep gorge then. And then more and more rocks.

Her voice this time was flat and hoarse and it bubbled out of her throat like the growls of a crazed animal. "You can't let me fall! I'm going under, Dan! Down! Down! Down!" Her voice rose steadily and ended in a jagged, ear-splitting screech. Then she said nothing more that made sense.

And finally the rocks that followed her down over the rough, hard road to hell, stopped rolling and silence settled again onto the remnants of the Silver Queen Diggings.

And Dan Storm, who lay there perfectly still for an hour, finally staggered back into the cave and fell down on the bed for the rest of the night. They found him there the next morning, and it was not long before they located the girl's body. In a small ring she wore on her right hand they found the information they were looking for—and the case of the Arizona carnotite was closed.

Storm? He's back in New York tailing errant husbands and wives for divorce dope. You meet a hell of a lot duller people there.

And Madalynne Moore? She likes rye now, too.

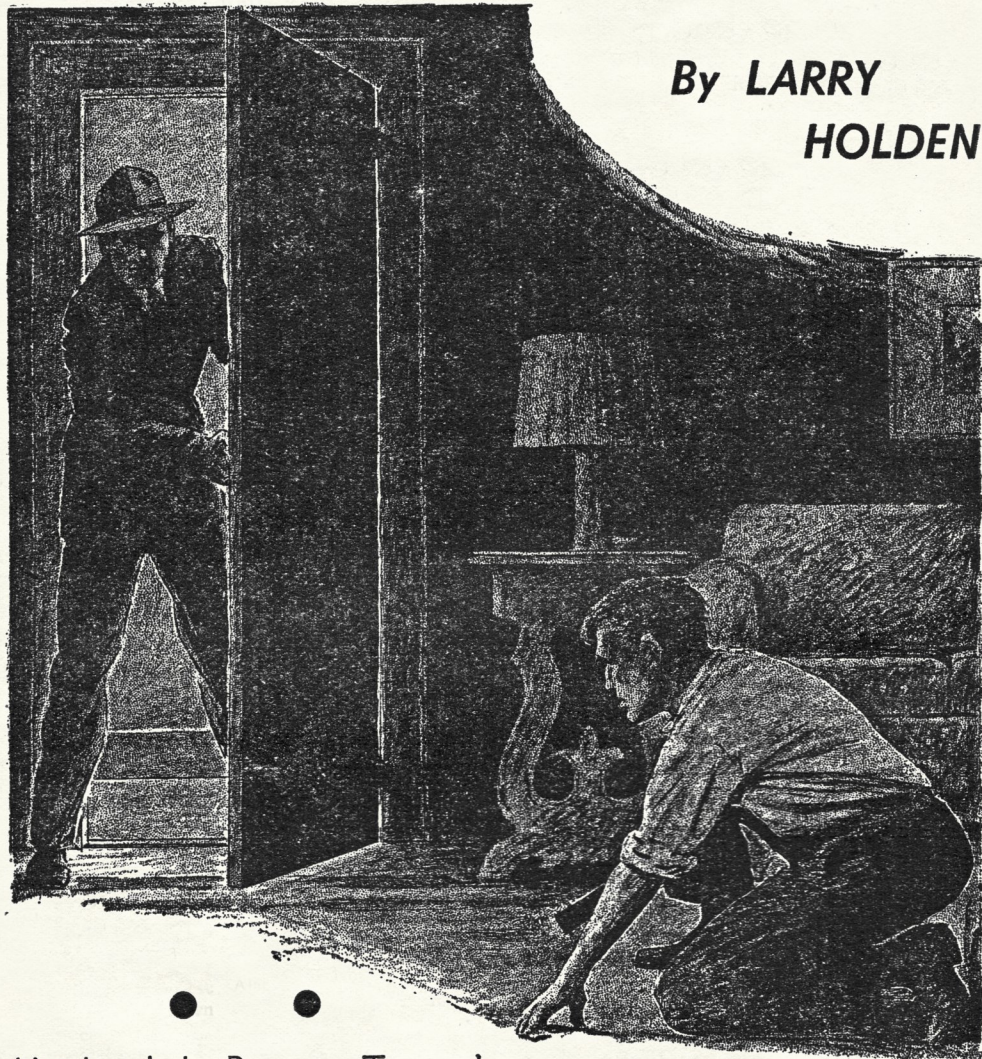
THE END

CAST-IRON ALIBI

Arrested on a drunken driving charge, Henry M. Salwach told Washington, D. C., officials that the reason he staggered was that he had dropped a piece of iron on his foot and the reason his eyes were bloodshot was that that is the way they reacted to welding, which is his trade, and the reason that there was strong odor on his breath was that he had been eating kosher pickles.

KICKBACK FOR A CORPSE

By LARRY
HOLDEN



Hot-headed Barney Travers' urge to kill his double-crossing partner handed him a sure spot on the sizzle-seat — when an unknown assassin beat him to the draw.

I caught a silhouette of the intruder.

I HAD never known the hot urge to murder until that morning when I reached down, picked up that piece of paper from the floor of Sam's office.

Sure, there was more to it than just that. Sam and I perpetuated the old cliché that business partners must fight like a pair of Kilkenny cats.

He was lean, cold, bloodless and sarcastic. His name for me was, "hot-headed fathead!" See what I mean?

Well, the first thing that happened that morning—and that started me off—was that when I walked into my office, there on my blotter was a little note from him. It was a memo, which was just another nasty little way he had of needling me, neatly typed.

FROM: S. Patton

To: B. Travers

Decided to go to the lake one day early. See that the Berman layout is completed today. See you Monday.

See me Monday! Berman Soap was his account—we ran the P & T Advertising Agency together, but I was the one who'd be stuck there in the office for twenty-four hours, sweating my brains out to get the layout over to the Berman Company before they closed at noon tomorrow, Saturday.

With half an idea of catching him at his apartment before he really got going, I called in Joe Murdock, Sam's hard-working assistant.

"Joe," I said, trying to keep my voice calm and businesslike, "how long ago did Mr. Patton leave?"

"Leave, Mr. Travers?" Joe scratched his carrotty head. "I didn't even know he'd been in."

I said, "Thanks, Joe," and buzzed for my own assistant, a stolid tow-head named Andressen, whom I was trying to teach the kind of basic English we used in ad copy.

"Did Mr. Patton give you this note this morning, Andressen?" I asked, showing him the memo. "Did he say he was leaving for the lake immediately?"

Andressen showed polite interest. but

he shook his head. "Did he say he'd give that information to me, Mr. Travers?" he asked cautiously. Andressen was a boy who wouldn't stick his neck out a quarter of an inch if he could pull it in a foot.

"Never mind," I said, "Never mind."

I stamped across my office and into Sam's to get the Berman layout, as he had known I would. I knew now that he had gone to the lake the night before, just to give me no chance of catching him. Then, halfway across his office, and, from force of habit, I stooped to pick up a piece of paper. I don't like papers lying around. It was a bill from the printer, who'd done a calendar job for us the month before. It had been paid, for I remembered signing the check myself. I laid it on Sam's desk and started toward the cabinet in which the Berman layout was kept. Something went click in my mind, and I stopped. It went click again, and I turned and snatched up that bill from the desk.

And that was when I felt that surging urge to kill. If Sam Patton had been there that moment, I would have done my damndest.

For that bill was for an even thousand dollars below the amount on the check I had signed. I'd been double-billed by my own partner! Sam had gotten a thousand dollar kickback on that job.

I reached for the phone, but stopped my hand just in time. It would be senseless asking the printer about it. He'd deny it, if he and Sam were working the raffle together.

Instead, I called Sam at the lake.

I sat there grinding my teeth while the phone rang and rang. I had visions of him lying there in bed, grinning up his sleeve, knowing who was calling. I really whipped myself into a fury. Then I got foxy. I called the community house at the lake.

"This is Barney Travers, Mr. Connington." I said craftily to the old goat who

answered—he knew me, I'd called many times before. "Say, let me know when Mr. Patton gets back to his cottage, will you? I have a little surprise for him."

"Is it his birthday, hey? But say now, come t'think of it, Mr. Patton won't be up here this weekend. He let the cottage to a young couple from Belleville. Nice folks, too. They won't be leaving till Sunday night. Birthday, hey? Well, now!"

He sounded a little surprised, and maybe he was right. As far as I was concerned, Sam Patton had hatched from a snake's egg, I hung up and sat there clenching the phone until my hand hurt, then slowly I grinned. It was just the skeleton of a grin, all bone and no mirth. I knew where Sam was now. He was home in bed, just as I had envisioned him. He was just taking himself a long weekend at my expense.

I strode from his office and snatched my hat from the rack in the outer office. As far as he was able, with that wooden face of his, Andressen looked startled.

"I'm going over to Mr. Patton's apartment," I said crisply. "Call me there if anything comes up."

He stammered, "Y-yes, Mr. Travers."

Joe Murdock appeared in the doorway, and his jaw dropped. He ducked hastily back into his office, the way he always did when the storm signals were flying. Maybe I didn't look as calm as I'd tried to sound.

And that made me all the madder. "And call Miss Bowen," I snarled at Andressen. "Tell her I can't make it for lunch with her today. Say I'll call her later."

I stormed out. The elevator boy gave me a sidelong glance and chuckled, "Hangover, Mr. Travers? They're bad, aint they?"

"Shut up," I snapped, "and take me down!"

Just because he was eighty, he thought he was a privileged character. He looked

insulted and made a lot more noise with the doors than was necessary. He took me down.

"Some folks," he observed, bitterly, as I strode from the car, "should leave it alone if they can't take it."

IT TOOK me about fifteen minutes to get my car, because it was parked at the back of the lot, and you can imagine how happy that made me feel. Then I had trouble with the heavy, slow-moving traffic and I had trouble with the lights and I had trouble parking near Sam's apartment. By that time I was really seeing red, in streaks and streamers. I went by the doorman and through the lobby like a cat through a dog pound. I took the self-service elevator up to Sam's floor and stood with my finger against his buzzer as if I wanted to push it clear through the door frame.

I was reviewing in my mind, with angry relish, exactly what I was going to say to him, when suddenly it came to me that I'd been holding that buzzer down for a long time without any results. I pounded on the door and raged, "Open it up, Sam. I know you're in there!"

I rattled the doorknob—and quietly the door swung inward.

Sam was in there, all right. I'd caught him. He wasn't at the lake or anything. Only his being there wasn't going to do me any good. He was dead.

He was lying before the sofa on his face, still clad in his pajamas. His pale, sparse hair was still tousled from the pillow, and his rimless glasses lay on the rug a foot away from his nose. One pajama leg was drawn up, showing the skinny, blue-white calf, and both arms were doubled under him.

Death is always sobering, but there are forms of it that run with the outriders of horror and shock—and Sam Patton had two bullet holes in his back! The blood had seeped into the thin cotton fabric of

his pajama jacket and it looked like one of those blotto-patterns. Know what I mean? You shake a drop of ink into a fold of paper, rub it with the flat of your hand, then open it. You're supposed to see things in the pattern, like butterflies, or flowers, or fairies. I didn't see anything as pleasant as that. One side of the pattern on his bloody jacket looked like a yawning wolf, and the other like a reaching, dripping hand. And the stain was still the red of blood.

And Sam Patton or no Sam Patton, rat though he was, I felt suddenly and completely sick. I made the bathroom just in time. It wasn't just that he was dead—it was that the sight of him lying there on the rug, curiously flattened in death, brought sickeningly home to me that, an hour earlier, I might have been the one who would have done it to him.

Sam drank nothing but stout, he was that kind of guy, and there were always a half dozen bottles in the refrigerator. I gulped one down. I drank another. I could have drunk a keg of it and it wouldn't have helped.

I went back into the living room, taking the third bottle with me. He was still there. I couldn't drink that away, not with stout. The gun, I noticed dully, was lying on the floor by the leg of the sofa. All guns look alike to me, and this was just another gun. It might have been a pair of pliers, for all it meant to me. I

didn't know anything at all about guns.

Someone buzzed at the door, and I went mechanically to answer it. I'm the type that always answers doorbells and telephones. This time I was just plain lucky. It was Lila Bowen. I grinned at her like an idiot, standing with the bottle of stout in my hand.

She looked at the bottle. "Well!" she said, in relief. "Andressen really had me scared that time. He said you went out with blood in your eye. You can pour me one too, Barney. I can use it."

I just kept standing there with that inane grin plastered on my face. Her ash-blond hair was just a little wispy at the edges, and there was more of a flush in her face than you'd expect to see in a cameo, but she was still lovely—and all I could do was stand there and stammer.

Her eyes went wide and she grasped my arm. "Barney!" she said. "Barney, what's the matter?"

My senses came back with a rush at the fright in her eyes. I took her hands and started to turn her back out of the apartment.

"I'll see you later, honey," I said. "We're busy now. Suppose I see you at Mack's for lunch?"

She must have caught a glimpse of Sam over my shoulder. "Oh Barney!" she cried and stared up into my face. "Barney!"

"It's nothing," I said quickly. "He's—"

HATE TO SHAVE YOUR NECK?

Make the
**TOUGH
SPOT
TEST**



Try a Star Blade on those tough stubble patches — those spots where whiskers are wiry and skin tender. Feel the smoother, better shave you get. Sturdier Star Blades are precision-made to take and hold a sharper edge. Try better shaving at a real saving.

STAR



SINGLE OR DOUBLE EDGE BLADES 10¢ and 25¢ Pkgs.

he's a little under the weather. He'll be okay. I'll meet you at Mack's."

"No, Barney, no! He's dead!"

She darted under my arm. I made a grab for her and missed.

"All right," I said angrily, "so he's dead. Now will you get out of here before you get mixed up in it?" I wasn't sore at her; I was sore at myself for letting her get away from me.

She stood, horror-stricken, three feet away from the body of Sam, her hand trembling at her chin, then slowly she turned and looked at me with the big question in her distended eyes.

"For heavens sake, Lila," I said roughly, "don't jump to conclusions. He was that way when I came in."

"**Y**OU'RE sure, Barney?" she whispered. "Your temper—they said you were in a towering rage. You're sure, Barney?" She was pleading.

"Temper? Sure, I was in a temper. Look at this!" I snatched the printer's bill from my pocket. "He was getting a kickback—"

The sound of the sirens was a knife that cut my words off short. Lila ran to the window.

"You sent for the police," she sounded relieved.

I shook my head.

"But they're here, Barney. They stopped. You've got to get out of here," her words came with a rush. "You can't let them find you here."

"Why not?" I said stubbornly. "I didn't kill him."

"Oh, Barney, don't argue. If only you'd called them when you found him. Come, Barney, please!" Her hand trembled on my arm and tears spilled out of her eyes. "Please! Don't make it worse for yourself."

I knew she was right, but what made me mad was that I had gotten myself in this jam with that damned temper of

mine. I turned abruptly and walked out of the apartment, fuming. I heard the lock snick as she followed me and closed the door behind her.

We walked down two floors, then took the elevator and left through the side entrance. The moment I put my foot on the sidewalk, I went cold. Lila took my arm.

"You're not angry with me, are you, Barney?" she whispered.

"I left my hat in Sam's apartment," I said calmly—it was the icy calm of fear. "On the bathroom floor."

"And I locked the door, Barney!" she wailed.

"Don't blame yourself, honey. We couldn't go back for it anyway, not with the police there."

"M-maybe they weren't going to Sam's apartment."

"And maybe," I said, without sarcasm, "if I put out my hand, the hat will fall in it. Don't worry about it, honey. It didn't have my name in it. And there's nothing we can do except wait. Let's go down to Tony's and have a cocktail. Okay?"

"A b-big one, Barney." She tried to smile.

I put her in a booth near the window and ordered the drinks. Then I went back to the phone and called the office. I got Murdock.

"Put Andressen on, Joe," I said. "This is Barney Travers."

"He went over to get some proofs, Mr. Travers. Anything I can do?"

"Come to think of it, Joe, maybe you can do it better. You know the Berman layout? Berman Soap?"

"Oh sure, Mr. Travers. I worked on that with Mr. Patton. Actually, it's my layout."

"Fine, Joe. Look, I won't be in for awhile. That layout has to be finished with art and copy and delivered to Berman before noon tomorrow. Do you think

you can handle the job by yourself?"

"Sure I can, Mr. Travers." Then he laughed self-consciously. "In fact, I can handle anything in the agency. I've been wanting to talk to Mr. Patton about that—"

"Nice going, fella. I'll see you when I come in."

"Thanks for the chance to let me show you what I can do, Mr. Travers," then his words started to trip over themselves in his haste to get them out before I hung up. "And when you open the branch agency in Boston, I hope you'll consider me for the managership."

"Sure, sure, Joe," I said impatiently. "I'll see you when I come in."

I hung up and went back to the table. Lila gave me a wan smile.

"I just thought of something," she said eagerly. "If Sam was—was dead when you went in, the police will know that. The doctors have ways of knowing that. I mean, how long Sam was— They do, don't they, Barney?"

"I wish I'd thought of that," I said heartily. "Sure."

BUT the remembrance of those wet, red stains on Sam's back was like a hand squeezing my heart. He had either been shot just before I got there, or he had lived long enough with those bullets in him to put the killing on my timetable.

I lifted my glass, trying not to show in my face what I was thinking. "Anyway," I said as cheerfully as I could, "this is a pleasant way to wait. Good drinks, beautiful girl."

She smiled and touched glasses with me.

A half hour later, I went to the phone and called the office again. This time I got Andressen.

"Has Mr. Patton called, Andressen?" I asked. This was my idea of being very smart. "He wasn't at the lake or in his apartment."

"He hasn't called me, Mr. Travers," he said in that stolid voice of his. "But—"

"Are you helping Joe Murdock with the Berman layout?"

"You know you've never let me write copy, Mr. Travers," he said stiffly. "You've never given me any responsibility at all."

He was right about that. The ads he worked on always sounded as if they'd been written at the point of a gun. And as for responsibility, I'm a guy who likes to do most things himself. Andressen was nothing more than a typist and receptionist for me.

"I have a message for you," he went on. "Captain Stowe of the Police Department wants you to call him at your earliest convenience."

It seemed to me that I sat frozen there forever. Andressen kept bleating, "Did you hear me, Mr. Travers? Captain Stowe wants to see you. Are you there, Mr. Travers? Mr. Travers! Mr. Travers!" After awhile he hung up.

I must have looked like my own ghost when I walked back to the booth, for Lila cried, "Barney! What happened?"

"The waiting's off, honey," I said drily, "and the heat's on."

She said, "Oh," then, in a very small voice. "They're looking for you?"

"A Captain Stowe wants to see me at my earliest convenience, but the way it looks now my earliest convenience will be somewhere around Nineteen-hundred and ninety."

I sat down and tossed off the fresh drink I had ordered.

Lila faltered, "You're—you're running away, Barney?"

I shook my head. "Dammit, honey, if I didn't shoot Sam, somebody must have. That's logic. All I'll have to do is find the guy and I'll have nothing to worry about. Sam didn't shoot himself."

"I wouldn't put it past him, Barney. He was mean enough for anything,"

there was a touch of hysteria in her giggle. But she caught herself and said seriously, "But why would anyone shoot Sam? Let's get out of here, Barney. Let's go to my apartment."

I said, "Nuts to that, honey. You're in the clear, and you're going to stay there."

"But where else will you go, Barney? The police are looking for you. You can't go to your apartment. They'll be watching trains, busses and planes. They're sure to have the license number of your car. You can't go to a hotel, and you can't walk the streets. Where will you go?"

"Not to your place. No."

"Just temporarily, Barney. Just till you think this out a little. Do you know where to go from here, Barney? What to do?"

She looked as if she'd break into tears if I didn't say okay, so I said okay.

"But we'll work it my way," I said. "Let's go."

My car was still parked around the corner from Sam's apartment, but there was no more sense in going after that than there was in going back after my hat. Hell, where I was headed for, I wouldn't need a car or a hat. The good die young, my mother had always said. But that didn't apply to me. I wasn't as good as all that.

We took the bus to the corner before Lila's, and all the way I laid it down to her.

"You go in first, honey. If they're waiting, they'll grab you on the way in and go up with you. They'll go through the apartment, then come out again and wait for me to show. Then I'll come up, because they won't break in again until they know I'm there, and that's something they won't know. I'll come up the dumbwaiter from the basement."

She nodded. She was pale, but I knew she'd carry it through without a quiver. I ducked into the doorway of a men's

shop while she crossed the street and walked steadily toward her apartment.

As I watched, two men got out of a car, parked in front of the apartment, and fell in step on either side of her. One held out his hand, as if showing her something in it, then they walked up the steps together and disappeared through the big iron grille doors.

I stepped out of the doorway and walked rapidly in the opposite direction. I'd never had any intention of going up with her, but I just wanted to make sure she was in good hands before I left. About two blocks down I got rid of my tie and jacket. I rolled my shirtsleeves above my elbows, mussed my hair and rubbed a little dust across my face. When I stepped out to the sidewalk again, I looked like just any guy who'd spent a hard two hours polishing his car.

All this might give you the idea that I'm a guy who isn't easily panicked, but let me tell you I was scared. My scalp crawled every time I passed a cop, and when a squad car coasted down the street beside me, my legs gave funny little jerks as I desperately held them down to a walk.

THERE was only one thought in my mind—someone had killed Sam, and the cops were looking for me. I couldn't get over that thought, I couldn't get under it, around it or through it. My mind had just stopped at that point and wouldn't budge. I was scared clean through. I kept walking and trying to think.

I like a good scrap, see, and I don't mind being in a tough corner, but, damnit, I like to see what I'm fighting. I wasn't fighting the police department. They didn't care who I was. All they wanted was the guy who'd killed Sam Patton.

And so did I. That was the guy I was fighting. And that was the guy I wasn't able to see. I felt frustrated. My temper

started to rise, and that only confused me further.

I went into a bar for a drink. That was a backfire, if you want to put it that way. I didn't need a drink. I just needed a starting point. This was one of those tough bars down on River Street, with the shells of steamed clams rail-high on the floor, and in the back a battered old souse hammering on a battered old piano. I shouldered up to the bar between an unshaven character in a sweat shirt and a drunk who stood nodding with his nose in his beer. Before I could open my mouth, the sweat shirt guy turned on me, gave me the elbow and snarled, "Don't crowd me, cap!"

Something spurted up inside me, and a thin, prickly laugh bubbled out of me. I said nastily, "Crawl back into your sewer and give a man room to drink."

He swung on me. I knew he would. He looked as if he'd been wanting to swing on somebody for a long time. His little pig eyes narrowed down to pencil-line slits, and he heaved everything he had right at my face. I swayed back and let it whistle by, then hit him four times on the jaw before he had time to recover his balance—and by that time he didn't have any balance left to recover. He collapsed against the bar and slid down among the cigar butts and clam shells. I reached over, finished the double he'd had standing before him, and walked out.

No one said a word. They just looked down at him. It was that kind of joint.

But, once outside, I felt clean and alert, and my mind was sparking on every plug. I'd hit something I could see and it had gone down.

I had a starting point, Sam's apartment. And that wasn't as silly as it sounds. The cops would clear out when they were finished, and it was the one place in the city they'd never expect me to go. He had a duplicate set of keys back in the office, and they were a cinch to pick up. Our office was in a building that didn't have anything so fancy as a night watchman or even an elevator. There were only three floors and every tenant had a key to the door and could come and go as he pleased.

All I had to do now was wait until it got dark enough and late enough.

I was in a state of elation. I could do anything now. I went into a dog wagon and had three franks and a cup of coffee. Then I went to a movie and thoroughly enjoyed it. Does that sound funny? It wasn't. It was just the way I felt. I was calm, but higher than a kite.

It was about ten when I got out of the movies. No cops were watching the office, who but a dope or a Barney Travers would go back there? There were two sets of keys, but they were duplicates, so I just snatched one and left.

No one was watching Sam's apartment.

NO LUCK? - make a date with

WILDROOT CREAM OIL



WILDROOT CREAM OIL HAIR TONIC

RELIEVES THE HAIR
RELIEVES DRYNESS
REMOVES
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also in
TUBES

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WILDROOT CREAM-OIL
LONDON

EASY TO USE
NO WASTE
OR SPILLING
HANDY FOR
TRAVELING

I could have lived there until the lease ran out, for all the cops would know. I was really high, believe me, reckless. A smart cop could have had me just for the taking. But I wasn't so headlong that I turned on the lights. I still had that much sense left. Sam had a flashlight in the kitchen, and I used that.

Don't ask me what I was looking for, I was just looking, but I was sure I'd pick something up. He'd been killed there, hadn't he? I knew Sam, I'd worked with him for five years, five scrappy years, and maybe there'd be something that would mean something to me, if not to the cops—a scrap of paper, a notebook, something that would give me a lead.

I combed his bedroom and found orderly piles of socks, shirts, underwear.

I found the same order in the kitchen, except for a bottle of Pernod he'd hidden behind the pots and pans.

By the time I hit the living room, my elation was running a little low—then I heard a soft, metallic readjustment as if someone were turning a key in the lock. I cut the light of the flash and rose to my hands and knees, scarcely breathing.

Slowly the door opened. The light was dim in the corridor, and all I caught was a faint silhouette as the intruder slipped into the apartment and closed the door behind him.

With a feeling of exultation, I dived fiercely at his knees—and fell flat on my face. The rug, on Sam's carefully waxed floor, slipped out from under me. I grabbed at a scarcely seen ankle and got a beautiful kick on the jaw. While I lay there groaning and blinking the stars out of my eyes, the door reopened and the intruder fled. I heaved myself at the door, jerked it open and yelled; "Hey! Stop! You!"

THE footsteps, fleeing down the stairs, paused for a moment, then continued, though at a diminished tempo. I stag-

gered to the head of the stairs, but by that time there was nothing to be seen but the empty stairwell, and nothing to be heard but the echo. Downstairs the street door closed with a hiss of compressed air.

I sat weakly on the top step and gingerly felt the bruise rising on my jawbone. Maybe I'm the kind of guy who needs a kick on the jaw to bring him to his senses, but this I knew—that guy, too, had been after something.

And I had a pretty good idea who and what it was, and that he'd be waiting downstairs for me to come out.

I went back to Sam's apartment and called a cab. I waited at the window until I saw the hack drive up and stop, then I took the elevator down. I hopped into the cab and said; "Kearny Avenue and Quincy." That was the office address.

As the cab started from the curb, I gave the street a quick glance. There was a shadow in the doorway of the delicatessen beside the apartment that might have been a man, or a woman, or nothing. It didn't move, and we were gone too quickly for me to make sure.

It it was the murderer he could call the cops and have me taken, but I didn't think he would. I still had something he wanted. I don't think he knew I had it, but he wanted it.

I had time to spare when we hit Kearny and Quincy, but I sprinted all the same. I didn't need lights in this building, not even a flashlight. I'd been working there for five years. I went straight to my office. I took out that printer's bill and slipped it under my blotter. That was what he wanted, that bill. That was the only thing that tied him to the murder. Then I went out into the hall and hid in the broom closet beside the stairway.

He knew where I had come. He had heard me give the address to the hack driver. I was sure of that. And he probably had the idea that I was after the same bit of evidence that he was. I was

almost sure of that. And I damn well knew he had recognized my voice when I yelled, "Hey!" after him back there in Sam's apartment.

It had taken me ten minutes by cab. It took him forty minutes. I stiffened as I heard the soft whisper of tiptoes mounting the steps. I had the door cracked, and I watched him steal stealthily to the office door and lay his ear against it. He stood that way, it seemed to me, for hours, listening, before he opened the door and slid in.

I groped in the closet and found the short, hardwood handle of a plunger. The plunger came off with a soft plop.

He must have been in there for twenty minutes. Then I saw the door open, and he came out briskly, slipping something into the inside pocket of his jacket. I let him take the first two steps down the stairs before I rounded the broom closet door and swung that plunger handle with everything I had. I was sure he'd hear me, and that was why I swung that way. He gave a choked cry and flung up his hand. I heard the forearm bone break as the stick thwacked across it. He screamed, and I hit him again. He fell and thudded meatily down the rest of the stairs. I dragged him back to the office and called the police.

You couldn't say he exactly spilled his guts. It took four hours to get it out of him.

You see it was this way. I had never given my assistant, Andresen enough responsibility, and he resented it. Sam had given Joe Murdock too much, and Joe had taken advantage of it.

Joe had held up everybody, not merely the printer. He got a kickback from the artists who did our art work, he got a kickback from the mailing service that handled our direct mail campaigns, he got a kickback from everybody.

The printer had gotten tired of it and

had shrewdly sent the correct bill to Sam. If Joe had gotten hold of it he could claim it had been sent by mistake—and the printer wasn't even sure that Sam and I weren't getting the kickback. He didn't dare call to find out because he wanted the business. He was afraid we'd resent being asked about the kickback.

Anyway, Sam had gotten the bill and immediately had fired Joe, threatening to prosecute him. Sam would get a big kick out of that. Joe had gone to Sam's apartment that morning to plead with him. I could have told him how much good that would have done, but he found out for himself. He shot Sam; and don't say that Sam hadn't asked for it. When I went out after Sam in a rage, Joe had called the police.

Joe was ambitious, and he was willing to take a chance, because he was gambling for something. He was a smart boy, Joe was. All he wanted was for me to be burned for Sam's murder, then he'd take over the agency. He was efficient. And he gave me the creeps.

I went to sleep at my desk with my head on my arms.

A shake on the shoulder awakened me, and when I looked up, there was Andresen.

"What are you doing here so early, Mr. Travers?" he asked.

I rubbed at my eyes with the back of my hand. "The Berman layout," I mumbled. "It has to be finished today."

He gave me one of those wooden looks of his. "I finished it and delivered it yesterday," he said primly.

"You!" I goggled at him.

"Well," he said, "Mr. Murdock ran out and left it and I had to show you I could do something, didn't I?"

I just stared at him, stupefied. "Andresen," I finally managed to say, "just don't get too damn efficient, that's all. Just don't get too damn efficient!"

Ex-con Ziggy's feverish flight for life started with a gravedigger's ten-spot — when a murder-minded musician framed him for a brutal beheading.



With a whip-like motion,
he swung the spade.

By
ED BARCELO

• • •

AN ICY blast of wind swept across the railroad tracks, swept through Ziggy O'Neil's thin baggy trousers. Shivering, his fingers stiff with cold, he pulled his cap down close to his ears.

It was this cap that made him again feel his loneliness for Mabel, his wife, made him sorry they'd quarrelled again. She'd given him the cap when he'd got out of

HEADS — YOU DIE!

prison. It had only cost two dollars with twenty-five cents extra for the gold initials in the hatband, but she'd had to hock her wedding ring to buy it. The cap was priceless.

Suddenly, behind him, a horn beeped. He moved to the side of the dirt road to let the car pass, but then he heard the motor slow. He spun around and two gleaming headlights blinded him.

"Say, bud, how would you like to earn ten dollars?" The words dribbled out in an expressionless monotone. Ziggy came closer. A sleek, black sedan with plenty of chrome and white-walled tires.

"What's the catch?"

"I'd like you to help me bury a dog." The man had a thin, pasty face, cat eyes magnified by heavy glasses.

"Bury a dog!"

"Yes, you see, I was hunting the other day and—well—I missed the rabbit—and—"

"And you shot your dog."

"Exactly. I'm afraid I'm not much of a hunter."

Ziggy was close now, and he could see the guy's thin, sensitive mouth, the long, tapering hands playing with the steering wheel, and finally, the violin case on the seat beside him. Those rich jerks were all alike. They couldn't stand the sight of blood.

"Where's the dog at?"

"He's in the luggage trunk. I'll have to unlock it." A faint smile had crept into his face.

He unlocked the trunk, and the night was suddenly ridden by the sickening stench of death. Ziggy stared at the huge, burlap bundle, at its reddish stains. No amount of swallowing could get the bad taste from his mouth.

Together, they dragged the heavy sack toward a clump of trees. A mile away, a train whistled a warning, but it was quickly picked up by a blast of wind, carried off into the night.

Five minutes later, Ziggy was standing by himself in the snowy darkness. Ten dollars was in his pocket, a small garden spade in his hands, and on the ground in front of him, a bag of death. The rich jerk had turned sick at the sight of blood, so Ziggy had waved him off. He could do it quicker by himself.

He'd dug about two feet when he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. He whirled around.

"What d'ya think you're doing there, Mac?"

Ziggy was dumbfounded. The guy could have been a circus gorilla, he was that big. Bulging eyes flooded with menace, enlarged nostrils sensitive to trouble. But when Ziggy had added a billy club and a gun holster to the picture, he knew he had a railroad cop on his hands.

"I'm burying a dog. Anything else you want to know?"

"Kind to dumb animals aren't you?" He was poking at the misshapen bundle with his billy club.

"Listen, copper, you got no right—"

"Shut up!" He had his flashlight out and was slipping the end of his club under the cord at the neck of the sack. He gave a sudden jerk and the cord snapped. The odor was almost overpowering. Ziggy came closer, and the cop drew his flashlight onto the sack.

"I wouldn't move if I was you." The railroad cop had one hand resting on the holster.

A cold sweat streamed over Ziggy's body, and he blinked his eyes in crazy disbelief. This was no dream, no mirage, no dog. He was trembling and he couldn't help it. He was looking into the sack, looking at a butchered corpse. Ziggy didn't have to look for the head. There wasn't any!

"Look, copper, there was a guy in a fancy car. He gave me ten bucks to bury a dog, see. And then he drove off."

"Sure, Mac. You were framed. They all are." The cop didn't even grin when he said it.

Ziggy fought the impulse to vomit. "Honest, copper, you got me wrong." His voice was rising on every word. "You can ask Mabel. She knows I ain't no killer. He gave me this ten-spot, see." He had the bill out, waving it in the air.

"Put the money away, Mac. You'll need it for a lawyer."

In a flash, Ziggy knew that an ex-con couldn't get mixed up with a stiff. It was suicide. What cop would believe an ex-con caught with the goods?

With a sudden whip-like motion, he swung the garden spade up from the ground, slammed it against the cop's face, spun him halfway around. The cop reached for his gun, but Ziggy came down with a hard, smashing blow. The cop's legs turned to jelly, buckled, and he slumped like a rag doll, into the grave, on top of the corpse.

Ziggy dropped the shovel, jumped a small ditch, leaped the first of a dozen railroad tracks. Red and green signal flares flashed their warnings as Ziggy skipped across the icy ties.

A mile away in the night, came the steady clickety-clack of a train speeding and roaring down the rails, and behind him, the copper was yelling. An instant later, a gun cracked, a bullet knifed the darkness.

ZIGGY jumped another track, heard a faraway train whistle growing louder, warning, challenging. Again, the cop's gun exploded, and a bullet whistled too close to his head. He hurtled another track.

In the eerie darkness down the tracks, a train thundered faster and faster, closer and closer. The whistles were screaming now, a giant searchlight slashing the darkness.

Again, a gun cracked, and Ziggy knew

there was only one way to go. That was straight across the tracks. If he could beat the train, he could put a wall between him and the cop's bullets. If he didn't beat the train—he mustn't think about that.

He darted from the icy gravel to another railroad tie, leaped to clear both rails. He stumbled on the second rail, and the ground came rushing up to meet his body. Pain shot through his leg and gunfire rang in his ear.

Tiny daggers stabbed at his left leg, but he staggered to his feet. Just two tracks over, only a few hundred feet away, the train thundered toward him. He couldn't make it now, he knew it, and yet the bullets behind him told him he had to.

He leaped, cleared the one track, then with fists clenched, and the shrill whistle screaming madly inside his brain, he sprang from the gravel, shot dizzily into space, went crashing, tumbling into the gravel beside the tracks. Inches from his body, the steaming monster thundered down the tracks, and on into the night.

He picked himself up, hopped the final track, ducked under a wire fence. The nightmare was behind him. A long freight separated him from a corpse and a trigger-happy railroad dick, from his own bloody doom. Perhaps, his luck had changed for the good.

A cold blast of wind lashed at the snow, and instinctively, Ziggy reached for his cap. Suddenly, the coldness was there inside him. His cap was gone!

He was trembling again. He couldn't help it. If his cap had dropped off in the flight, they would find it. They would notice the initials, and then they would start their checking. He sucked in his breath, held it.

It was too late to return. They'd have three-thousand cops down by the railroad tracks by now, reporters snapping the gruesome pictures, and at last, scores of irate citizens demanding justice.

By the time Ziggy hit Wade Avenue, the snow was falling much harder. Automobile chains slapped at icy pavements, and here and there, people darted from darkened streets into warm, gayly-lit homes. He shivered in a doorway, and felt more than ever the need for Mabel. He was sorry they had quarrelled, and he was even more sorry that he had stomped out of the house, wandered aimlessly to the railroad tracks—to murder.

He had to hurry. It wouldn't take Homicide very long to check the local files. There was nothing to it; just find out how many mugs had initials like Z. O. Ziggy knew how many they'd find. Only one.

His name would be Ziggy O'Neil, alias Butcher Boy, two-year con man, ex-butcher. Cops liked to wrap things up fast, and as far as they were concerned, the picture would be complete. They'd start their manhunt, and he'd become a roving target, an odds-on-favorite for the hot seat.

He turned at Canal Street. It was so easy to tell when he was nearing his home-ground. The dumpy brownstones, the box car tenements, the unpainted shacks that fringed the narrow slush-coated streets, these were the signal flares. He hurried into one of the ramshackle tenements.

He hoped Mabel had coffee on. They could talk this thing out. Mabel was

smart. She'd know what to do. He took the steps two-at-time. Third landing, rear suite, the O'Neils.

He slipped his key into the lock, hesitated a second, then went in. The lights were out, and almost at once, he was tinged with the feeling that something was wrong. He switched on a light and looked around.

The note was propped against a powder box. Ziggy knew what it said before he read it. Once again, she'd gone to her mother's. It was their argument earlier that night. She wanted to get out of the slums, she wanted more than two rooms filled with junky, secondhand furniture. So maybe he was tired of her nagging. Maybe, he'd said something that hurt.

So easy to get her back, so very easy.

"Leave her alone," he was saying to himself. "Hell, you've given her enough headaches. Leave her be. Give her a break."

He walked back and forth through the closet-like kitchen. He couldn't stay here long. The cops would be coming, but he wanted to see Mabel so badly. He wanted to hold her in his arms, hold her close, and then say, "Mabel, I didn't kill that guy. He didn't have a head. Jeez, honey, it was awful. But you believe me, Mabel. You know I didn't do it, don't you?"

Her kiss would be his answer. But what kind of an answer did you give the cops? Did you kiss them, too?



WELL, he was a sucker to hang around and find out. What Mabel believed didn't count. It was the cops that did the believing, the executioner that did the electrocuting. He turned out the lights and went down the steps.

The wind had stopped blowing, but the thin coat he wore was little protection against the near-to-zero cold, and he shivered.

Ziggy felt alone and lost. There was no place to turn, no one to turn to. It was like he'd lost his best girl, or his last buck in a crap game, only worse.

At the corner, he stopped. Why go on? Another hour, two at the most, and the cops would be on the hunt. How many of them would be trigger-happy rookies itching for the kill, anxious to bring home the bacon, bring home Ziggy O'Neil, dead or alive?

He tried to light a cigarette, but the wind somehow got through his cupped hands, blew out his last match. He flung the cigarette into the snow, kicked at it.

If there was a way to get out of town, across the state line—but how? Dicks would be spotted at every bus and train terminal, every cop on the force alerted, every gun packed with death.

Quiz the relatives and the wife, check all hotels, neighborhood gin mills, even tip-off John Q. Public with the bloody news story. How long could you play ring-around-the-rosy?

He thought about facing the music, going down to headquarters, but that was no good. It would be like a policeman's ball, only there wouldn't be any music, and the cops wouldn't be so friendly. Oh, they'd listen to his incredible story, all right. And when they were done laughing, they'd light up their cigars, their pipes, get those Sherlock Holmes' superior smirks on their kissers, then they'd say, "C'mon, Ziggy. Cut out the fairy tales. Sign the confession and we'll all go home. All except you. that is."

He turned and went into a drug store. He broke the ten, bought a pack of cigarettes. There was a row of telephone booths in the rear of the store. Hell, why not take a chance? Maybe, they'd believe his story about the black sedan, the fancy pants who liked to bury corpses and call them dogs. If they didn't go for the yarn, it was easy to hang up.

A minute later, he was speaking to Homicide Detective Joe McGuire.

"Ziggy, Ziggy O'Neil. I want to set you coppers straight."

"Swell, Ziggy. We're glad you called." His voice was sugar-coated. "Hold the line a minute."

"Okay, coppers. Go ahead. Trace the call."

"Now what were you saying, Ziggy?"

"That murder rap, McGuire. It's a frame."

"Sure, Ziggy. Go on, I'm listening." He sounded like a politician.

"McGuire, you got to believe me. I didn't have anything to do with this."

"Sure, Ziggy. Keep talking."

Yeah, that was the idea. Keep talking, he'd trace the call, and in a few minutes, a million cops. Ziggy hung up, hurried out of the drug store.

He didn't need any sirens to warn him. He saw the police car a block away. He whirled, darted between two buildings. Behind him, brakes screeched, doors slammed. He jumped a low fence, circled a garage, then stopped to listen.

For a second, there was only the sound of his heart as it beat out a mad drum solo. But suddenly, this sound was joined by the sound of footsteps, snow crunching under the weight of gumshoes.

There was no chance to make a break now. They were closing in too fast. A lot of cops meant a lot of bullets. Slowly, crouched forward, he tip-toed along the garage toward a row of huge garbage cans. There seemed to be no escape; an invisible rope was tightening around his neck.

THEN, the idea smacked him, the million to one shot—the garbage cans. Quickly, holding his breath, Ziggy lifted a lid from one of the cans, set it on the ground. He stepped into the partially filled can, garbage slushing beneath his feet. Reaching outside, he picked up the lid, then guided it carefully over his head, set it softly into place.

The smell of fermenting garbage sent butterflies racing to his stomach. It seemed like something was moving inside the can. Was it a rat, or was it crawling maggots?

He tried to blot it out. He knew rats could be dangerous as hell when they got cornered, but there was nothing pleasant about the thought of maggots crawling over your body. Maybe maggots didn't live in the winter time. Maybe, it was his imagination.

Every part of his body seemed to tingle. This was great. Blood-hungry maggots inside the can, coppers outside the can. He waited, but no sound came.

It seemed like centuries elapsed before he finally lifted the lid and crawled from the garbage can. His whole body became flooded with pain as he tried to straighten up. He brushed the slop from his clothes, but he couldn't brush away the smell of the rotting garbage.

The cops were gone, and there was reason to feel victorious, but he was cold and tired, and his body ached, and in place of victory, there was only fear and emptiness.

His feet were numb with cold as he trudged back onto the streets. A fresh layer of snow had blanketed the streets, and not faraway, a church bell sounded three.

A police car crossed an intersection a block below. Ziggy spun backwards into the shadows of a doorway, waited for the car to pass. This was the plight of the hunted. One fleeing fox. Three-thousand game-hunters.

He turned to face himself in the frost-laden mirror of a gum machine. His red-rimmed eyes saw only defeat and despair. His jaw sagged and his lips were blue from the cold. He wasn't a youthful ex-convict trying to go straight. The mirror said he was an old, old man, tired and cold and hungry. It said that he missed Mabel.

At Twelfth Boulevard, near Pine, he found a two-bit movie house. It was really an all-night flop that specialized in hard seats and B-Westerns. He was too tired to go any further.

He found a seat close to a radiator, not too far from an emergency exit. He still had nine dollars and fifty-two cents left, and as long as there was money, there was hope.

Handsome cowboys flitted across the screen while a dozen bums scattered through the theatre slept off booze jags.

Ziggy tried to fight the sleep. He tried to tell himself he had no business sleeping, he even tried to get interested in the screen boom-booms, but it was no soap. The warmth of the radiators was too good and his eyelids were sore and heavy. It was no use. He was falling, spinning, catapulting dizzily into a bottomless pit of blackness.

Twenty years later, a gun exploded. He jerked up, stiff and tense, his eyes blinking, but then he saw he was still in the theatre. The cowboy hero had just plugged another villain, and a heroine was rushing into the cowboy's open arms for the final kiss. He thought of Mabel.

In the lobby, he looked at a clock. One-thirty. It didn't seem possible that he had slept that long, but outside the theatre, the sidewalks were crowded with shoppers, and a bright, noonday sun had melted the snow into a grayish, mud-like slush.

Down the street, the punks were hawking their newspaper headlines: *Police Continue Search for Butcher-Killer!* They'd have his picture, maybe Mabel's.

Well-meaning civic organizations would offer rewards for his capture. Capture a killer and win yourself a heap of reward gold. Pay off Aunt Tilly, buy a new car, be a hero and get rich.

Too many eyes watched him, too many stolen glances, too many traffic cops. But there was a gnawing hunger burning in his stomach and, chance or no chance, he had to eat.

It was a dimly-lit beer-and-sandwich dive called The Black Whale Cafe. From a booth near the back, he ordered a hot beef and a beer. The waitress charged him sixty cents, but she smiled and he slipped a dime under the plate. He lit a cigarette, then stuck a nickel in the juke box, selected *My Happiness*. He still had eight dollars and seventy-seven cents left.

Ziggy never got *My Happiness*. That was always the way. You never got the number you selected. All he could hear was fiddles and violins, strictly classy stuff.

He leaned to the juke box to see what was playing. And then it happened. The number, the number on the juke box. It was *Fiddle Faddle*.

FIDDLES! Hell, why hadn't he thought of that before? That was it. The rich jerk, the one with the black car, the killer. Hadn't there been a violin case in the seat beside him? Ziggy was positive he'd seen it. And how had he got the black sedan? Playing a violin, or was he just a playboy who played with fiddles?

Ziggy grabbed a newspaper from a nearby table. He tore frantically at the amusement section. The long, tapering hands—a fiddle—big, sleek car. That had to be it.

Suddenly, he saw it. The Pendleton Symphony Orchestra was staging its closing concert tonight at eight, the Bradford Auditorium, a Strauss Programme.

He got up quickly, but at that instant a cop came in and straddled a stool at the

bar. The cop rubbed his big, meaty hands together, ordered a shot, then started blabbing about the big manhunt. Ziggy lowered his head, murmured a silent prayer, then hurried past the bar, past the cop.

He breathed easier, once outside, but he had a new worry. If he was going to attend the concert, he had to get a shave and some clothes. He hit back on the main drag, got jostled into the crowded streets.

Suddenly, a police whistle screamed. He whirled, to spot a copper waving his billy club, blowing his whistle. The cop had recognized him, was shouting at him to stop.

Ziggy buried himself into the bewildered crowd, spun past a fat lady, knocked down a goof with a lunch pail, then turned and barrelled into a crowded department store. The cop would never shoot into the crowd. Ziggy tore through the store, caught an elevator going up.

He got off at the third floor, brushed past the counters. He jumped aboard a descending escalator, got off at the second floor, then raced through the hardware department to the back stairway.

A floorwalker with a smell-pretty carnation blocked the stairway. Ziggy unblocked the stairway with a hard right cross, then plunged down the steps and raced into the streets.

Police cars were racing to the scene, an ambulance took a corner on two wheels, and crowds mobbed the streets to catch the excitement. Ziggy elbowed his way through the crowds to a back street. He knew he'd won another round, but he also knew he couldn't win forever. There were only four aces in the deck and he'd used three of them.

Behind him was the tear gas, the siren, and the tommy guns, and down the street, ahead of him, a blind peddler. Ziggy bought a plastic razor kit from the old man, handed him a pocketful of change.

There was still eight bucks left, but how

much luck? He went into a branch library, into the men's room. Cops didn't look for killers at the corner library, and with the beard, he was just another eccentric college professor.

It took ten minutes for the shave and the scrubbing. After that, he strolled into the periodical room. The sign said, *Watch Your Coats*. That was exactly what Ziggy did. He watched a tan gabardine job, watched its owner move to a magazine rack. That was when he removed the coat from the table, scooted into the sociology room, through another doorway to the lobby, and then into the street.

A police car raced past and Ziggy automatically jumped back behind a statue of George Washington. The damn cops were everywhere.

That night, the Bradford Auditorium packed a full house. All the swells were present, and self-consciously Zizzy closed the gabardine coat to hide the baggy pants, the ragged necktie. The ticket had cost him two dollars and fifty cents, leaving him with five dollars and fifty cents. The killer's ten-spot had certainly come in handy.

Now, at this moment, he knew it was funny, but he thought of Mabel. She had always wanted to go to a real, classy concert like this, to mix in with the swells, and here he was, but without her.

An usherette flashed a toothy smile as she took him to his seat. He tried to catch

all the faces in the audience, but there were too many, and none of them resembled the killer's. He wondered if his hope had not been too far-fetched.

From his seat, he craned his neck, searched for that one face, and now for the first time, realized it was stupid to believe he'd find the killer here. He might be in Cape Cod or Arkansas.

Suddenly, the house-lights dimmed, the curtains parted, and spotlights criss-crossed the stage, lighted up the Pendleton Symphony Orchestra. A huge applause went up, then quiet, then music.

They sailed into the *Tales of the Vienna Woods*, and for a minute, the music made Ziggy forget. Clarinets whined, the violins screamed—and then with the sudden fury of a tropical hurricane, it hit. On the stage, in the first seat of the violin section, sat the killer!

ZIGGY waited until intermission, then he hurried up the aisle, through the lobby, and outside. He slipped onto the side street that bordered the Auditorium. Halfway down, near the stage entrance, he stopped to glance at the killer's car.

The joker at the stage door was wearing dirty overalls, trying to play the part of watchman, but he needed a drink too badly to play it well.

"How'd you like to make an easy five, Mac?" Ziggy was staring into the guy's bleary eyes.



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"I'd like it a lot. What do you want?"

"Just a few questions." He handed the old guy the five. "Who's the four-eyes that plays first violin?"

Pain was written on his face as he searched for the answer. Suddenly, it brightened.

"Oh, you mean Riccardi—John Riccardi."

"Yeah, I guess that's the guy."

"He ain't much of a violin player, I can tell you that. The only reason he's up there in first seat is on account of Palmeroy."

"What about Palmeroy?"

"Eric Palmeroy. He used to be the first violinist, but then his old lady started divorcing him and he went on the skids."

"Where is he now?" Ziggy asked.

"Nobody knows. That's what got him fired. He'd hit the alky too hard, then disappear for a week. Can't have that in a concert orchestra, so when he disappeared this last time, they fired him. He ain't even come back to get his pay."

The pieces were starting to fit together now. The Palmeroy guy had probably lost more than his job. It was an even bet that he'd also lost his life and was the butchered "dog" Ziggy had started to bury.

He saluted the watchman, then went back outside, over to Riccardi's car. He tried all the doors, but they were locked. Then there was nothing to do, but wait.

He crossed the street, stood in a doorway out of the wind. He flipped the last of the killer's ten dollar bill, a fifty-cent piece. He fingered it momentarily, then slipped it into the lapel pocket of his suit coat.

Riccardi was the killer, Palmeroy the corpse, but where the hell was the motive? Musicians didn't butcher each other out of professional jealousy. It went much deeper.

It was eleven before the concert ended and Riccardi came out and got into his

car. Ziggy waited for the car to start, then he darted between parked cars, into the street, leaped onto the rear bumper of Riccardi's car. If a copper saw him, he was washed-up.

It was a long ride and his hands went stiff with the cold. Every muscle ached, every cell in his body was tensed.

Finally the car turned, purred quietly up a long, stretching driveway, and then halted. Ziggy crouched low on the opposite side of the car as Riccardi climbed out, and hurried towards a darkened house.

When he was inside, Ziggy hurried up the driveway to the side of the house. He found a basement window open and dropped into the blackness of the basement.

He groped along the brick walls, found a light switch. Two work tables lined the wall, and in the center of the basement was the furnace. Cluttered on one of the work tables were stacks of old newspapers. On the other table, stains.

They might have been red paint, or perhaps Riccardi had been hacking away at a chicken, but more than likely, this was Eric Palmeroy's blood! It was the evidence Ziggy needed. It took the noose from Ziggy's throat and wrapped it right around Riccardi's.

In a matter of hours, the bloodstains on the work table could be checked against the blood on the headless corpse. There were probably additional stains in the trunk of Riccardi's car. But all this was a snap for the police lab. Funny, but now Ziggy was sure he liked cops.

He was looking at the shelves over the work tables, at a huge jug of ammonia, and then a door creaked.

"**A**RE you getting a good look, Ziggy?"

Ziggy spun, caught Riccardi at the top of the steps, a .32 looking all out of place in his thin, pasty hand.

"You bet I got a good look. I saw

enough to put you away for keeps, killer.”

Slowly, cautiously, a step at a time, Riccardi descended.

“And isn’t it a dreadful shame that you won’t be able to do something about it, Ziggy? It’s also a shame you weren’t a hobo as I had supposed, but still, it’s worked out nicely, hasn’t it?”

“Just what d’ya think you’re gonna do with that rod?”

“That should be obvious even to you, Ziggy.” The fragile line of his jaw melted with a sickly grin. He reached the bottom step.

“You’ll never get away with this, Riccardi.”

“That’s what all the victims say, Ziggy.”

“Is that what Palmeroy said when you chopped off his head?”

“You put it so crudely, Ziggy. Palmeroy was decapitated. Thus, if the body *was* discovered, identification would have been practically impossible. Palmeroy was a fool, Ziggy, and fools have no business living, as you’ll soon see.”

“So Palmeroy played a better violin and you killed him.”

“No, you’re quite wrong. You see, his wife was divorcing him. He had quite a little bit of property and he was afraid she might get it, so—”

“So he had it signed over to you, huh, Riccardi?”

“Now you’re getting intelligent. It was legally mine, and then after the divorce, I was to turn it back to him.”

“Only you put the ax to him and that made everything legally yours for keeps.”

“Exactly. And now, Ziggy,” he was moving closer, “I think we can use a little fire.”

Zizy froze, motionless. The horror of what was to come flooded through him. First, a couple of hot bullets tearing into his guts. That was the appetizer, and then the big blow, the last act, a flaming furnace to destroy his corpse.

“Ziggy, I’m waiting.” Riccardi was motioning the gun in the direction of the furnace.

Ziggy wanted to see Mabel once more. This was the end of his ride through hell, the pay-off. There was so much that he might have accomplished in his life, but so little that he had.

From the heaps of magazines and newspapers, Ziggy grabbed a handful, moved toward the open door of the furnace. He wrinkled the papers, then glancing back at the muzzle of Riccardi’s gun, struck a match to his flaming tomb.

Ziggy found himself hypnotized by the fire. Flames crackled and danced in funereal delight. But this was too horrible a way to go. If he was going to be shot, then burned, he was going to make a gamble on something.

His eyes burned with the smoke that was now beginning to belch from the furnace mouth and he moved toward a work table. He reached onto one of the shelves for more papers, then with a sudden switch of direction, grabbed the ammonia jug, spun and let it go.

Riccardi’s gun cracked, a bullet slammed against the wall, and then with a splintering crash, the ammonia jug burst on the cement floor. The volatile fluid streamed across the floor. Riccardi coughed, choked, staggered, wiped frantically at his eyes, his nose.

Like a leopard, Ziggy shot off through the air in a flying tackle, smacked Riccardi just above the knees. Ziggy wrestled for the gun, but Riccardi rolled over, burying the gun beneath him. Ziggy swung a vicious backhand, catching Riccardi’s glasses, smashing them to sauce and knocking them across the floor.

Suddenly, Riccardi slipped a hand loose, fired the gun. Ziggy leaped away, scrambled to a darkened coal bin. Two bullets splintered an orange crate.

From the darkness of the coal bin, Ziggy watched Riccardi stagger, helpless,

lost as he sifted his hands through the ammonia and broken bits of glass in search of his spectacles.

There was nothing helpless about the .32 in Riccardi's hand, nor the two bullets still in the cylinder.

Ziggy dug further into the black heaps, gripped a lump of coal in his hand. Riccardi forgot the glasses, stood up, moved slowly toward the coal bin.

Ziggy heaved the coal. At the last second, Riccardi ducked. He wasn't going to be so dumb after all. He was holding on to those two bullets, waiting for that gilt-edged opportunity.

Ziggy grabbed up another lump of coal, heaved again. The throw was way high, went smashing into the light bulb in the ceiling. The basement was pitched into darkness and Riccardi came closer to where Ziggy waited.

HE WAS silhouetted weirdly against the fiery furnace, coming forward, drawing closer and closer, straining his eyes to see Ziggy.

The ammonia cut sharply at his nostrils, but again Ziggy backed away, then heaved a lump of coal. It missed a mile. A shot rang in his ears, and a bullet crashed into a coal pile behind him.

It was now or never. Riccardi had one more bullet. It meant Riccardi's life, or his. Ziggy picked up a lump of coal, cocked his arm back.

Suddenly, orange fire exploded from Riccardi's gun. Something slammed hard against Ziggy's chest, pitched him backwards into the coal.

He lay helpless, stunned, listened as Riccardi clicked frantically at an empty gun cylinder. Puzzled by what had hit him, he staggered to his feet, grabbed at Riccardi.

Riccardi threw the gun and it smashed against the wall. With a terrific right hand blow Ziggy staggered Riccardi. He fin-

ished him with a thumping left cross to the jaw. Riccardi went down with a thudding sound and stayed down.

Ziggy dragged him upstairs, threw him into a chair. The seltzer water brought him around, but the tough, desperate look of a cold-blooded killer was all gone, and in its place, a trembling mouth and skin bleached milk-white.

Ziggy picked up the phone and tuned in on Homicide. It was all over now. Put it in a box, tie a string around it, and send it off to hell.

As he waited for the operator to put him through, he noticed the hole in the gabardine top coat. He checked his suit coat, noticed the powder burns. From inside the lapel pocket, he pulled out the fifty cent piece. It was bent and twisted out of shape, and suddenly he realized that this coin had saved his life, had stopped a lethal bullet from entering his heart and ending his life.

It was ironic, he thought, that the ten dollars that had got him into the murder mess had also got him out of it, even saved his life. They were putting him through to Homicide. There was just one thing missing, he remembered. Mabel's perfume.

He set the phone down, walked slowly toward Riccardi. He jerked Riccardi's coat open, tore at the inside pocket, pulled out Riccardi's wallet, and riffled quickly through the bills.

"I'm taking ten bucks, Riccardi. That's for my trouble." He flung the wallet back at Riccardi. "It's gonna take at least ten bucks to smooth things over with Mabel. She's crazy about perfume, you know." He picked up the phone again, fingered the battered fifty cent piece that had saved his life.

"And just so you don't think I'm cheating you, sweetheart—" Ziggy threw the twisted coin into Riccardi's lap. "Here's your change."

POKER FOR BLOOD

I WENT over and looked down at the ugly bruise marks on her throat, and there wasn't any doubt that she had been strangled: expertly and violently choked to death. I lifted up her arm, and it was as cold and stiff as a marble statue. She had been there for quite a while.

When I let the lifeless arm fall back onto the couch, it spraddled to one side and threw the body off balance. In a grotesque imitation of life, the dead girl rolled slowly onto the floor. I jumped a foot; I don't greatly mind corpses, but I don't like having them come to life on me.

It was a good thing it happened, though, because where she had been lying on the couch there was a sheet of paper. I picked it up carefully by one corner, and it looked like the last page of a letter. It was written in a strong, masculine hand, and it said:

Don't flatter yourself that I feel either hatred or anger for you. My feeling for you is the same as my feeling for a snake. We have a lot of snakes out here, you know, but I never waste any time thinking about them. When one of them crosses my path, I simply kill it.

There was no signature.

The first thought that flashed across my mind was that the firm handwriting would just about fit the personality of my new client, the sun-tanned Sandford Lane. The next thought was that in most places in the world where you get sunburned to a saddle color, there are likely to be a lot of snakes. I put the paper in my pocket and walked out.

Of course I had to call the cops, but I didn't want to. This was the third corpse I had stumbled over in as many months, and the boys in blue get suspicious when a guy is always getting mixed up in a murder.

I dialed the old, familiar Homicide number. I had the bad luck to latch onto Lieutenant Henry Martin, who looks on me as

being a sort of licensed gunman. I gave him the story straight. Finally he yelled, "You hang on right there, and get that client of yours down there too."

Next I called the hotel where Lane said he was staying. After a little wait the operator said, "We have no Mr. Sandford Lane registered here."

What I had walked into was a booby trap, but I didn't quite make all the hidden mechanisms yet. I felt a sudden desire not to see Martin. I knew perfectly well if I admitted to him that my client had taken a powder, he would give me about forty-eight hours to think where he might have gone. If he even believed I ever had a client.



I called the office and asked if there had been any messages. The girl said, "You've got one here now. Wearing a mink coat and Chanel Number Five. . . ."

The complete story will be told by William Groppenbacher in his novellette—"A Corpse in the Cards"—in the next issue of ALL-STORY DETECTIVE . . . published April 27th.

THE EDITOR.

THE WIDOW

Punch-drunk Dutch's death led his torch-song widow and racket-busting writer Haber into a bout for life and love when they encountered a fight-fixing czar and his set of slab-happy murderers.



A Two-fisted Crime-Adventure Novel

WOULDN'T WEEP



By **JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

"Is that the only way out?" he said,
looking to the door.

CHAPTER ONE

A Slugger's Saga

SHE gave the crowded tables at the Marees Club a hard and insolent stare as she walked out to the mike. He walk itself was the flaunting of a studied insult.

Jud Haber remained unimpressed until

the overhead lights faded, and a baby spot outlined her against the shadows of the band stand.

Then he found that his breath came a little faster. Stella April, she called herself. Actually it was Stella Jensen. Before that, it had been Stella Marazek. Back in the days before Dutch Jensen.

Jud Haber, seated at the ridiculously small table, tried to regain his objectivity by inspecting each feature in turn. Stella's face was slightly broad, with heavy cheekbones, eyes of gray-green with a faint oriental tilt, a full, passionate, petulant underlip, jet black hair with a theatrical white streak at each temple.

The pale aqua dress left her shoulders bare and outlined her full figure.

Haber decided that only the ancient and biblical words would suit her. Musk and incense and the frail bough, heavy with ripened fruit.

And after the short piano introduction, Stella sang. Not to the audience. To herself. Head thrown back, a tiny frown between her heavy brows. And every other woman in the room was at once shallow, insipid—made of the cheapest tinsel.

This makes it perfect, he thought. This will fit the book. This is a woman built for tragedy.

Upstairs, in the office, Columbo Magesteri, owner and manager of the *Marees*, had said, "I don't get it, Haber. Why do you pick Dutch? Why not the champ?"

The green-shaded lamp had hung low over Magesteri's desk, the smoke from Jud Haber's cigarette floating in pale gray tendrils across the blotter.

"I'm a sportswriter, Mr. Magesteri. Books on champs are a dime a dozen. I've got my advance from the publisher already. This is a documentary. Two years ago they talked about Dutch Jensen as being the leading heavyweight contender. Ten days ago they fished out of the East River what the crabs didn't want of Dutch Jensen. Names, places, dates I need."

"You sound like you want to make it a murder mystery."

"The police don't talk about murder. The police talk about a stumble-bum who hit the end of the road—or the end of a wharf."

"Stella don't like people bothering her."

"I've heard that. She's only one of them, Mr. Magesteri. She can fill in some of the names, some of the dates, some of the places. They separated eight months before he went into the river, didn't they?"

"And the next week I gave her back her job. She started here, you know."

Magesteri talked, and his dark eyes, above their tired pouches of sagging flesh, had a faraway look.

"She was Stella Marazek then. She and Dutch grew up in the same neighborhood. He was working on the docks and each night he would come here to see her, to hear her sing. She sang to him. Nobody else. He wasn't marked up then, you know. His face was like one of those Norse fellows that went all over the world in those big rowboats.

"Dutch started fighting amateur over in Jersey to pick up some extra coin. Arney Block saw him over there, signed him up and trained him. They got married after he won his first pro bout. They used to come back once in a while. Then they stopped."

"Will she mind talking about him?"

Magesteri shrugged. "Who knows? Don't make her feel bad, Haber. She's—she's okay in my book."

That night Haber came to hear her sing. He didn't know what he had expected. Not this, certainly. Maybe a small tired girl, faintly pathetic. But this woman, this Stella April was as elemental as earth and fire. And her husky voice was true. The band backed her up with merely a piano, trumpet and base. She had the knack of singing like another instrument in the band.

The waiter had given her the note. She did four songs, glanced once more at the audience, as though surprised to see them there, and walked off. The applause did not bring her back.

The lights brightened, and the MC began his interlude before introducing more talent.

Stella appeared so suddenly that she startled Haber. He stood up, was surprised to find that the top of her head was level with his lips. He had expected her to be taller.

He smiled and introduced himself and she sat down, stared at him across the small table. There wasn't the faintest glimmer of interest in her eyes.

"I appreciate your talking to me, Mrs. Jensen."

"Columbo asked me to. Otherwise I wouldn't. He says you're writing a book on Dutch. Why?"

Haber fumbled for the right words. "Well—Dutch was a pretty flamboyant figure, Mrs. Jensen, and the public is always—"

"Don't kid me, newsboy."

"But I—"

"Dutch was just another punk."

Haber was suddenly angry. "You were certainly in a position to know."

He saw a tiny flicker of something deep in her eyes. She smiled wryly. "Dutch was okay up to a little over a year ago."

"This is no place to talk, Mrs. Jensen.

I'm not writing this book to be comic. I think that basically Dutch was a sympathetic character. I think the boxfighting racket killed him. I want to write a book that will make it a little more difficult for kids like Dutch to be killed in the future. Will you cooperate?"

She balanced her chin on her fist and looked at him steadily. "And if I don't?"

"I'll do the book anyway. But it won't be a good book."


"Who else have you talked to?"

"No one. Yet. Up until the moment this afternoon when Magesteri told me a little, all I knew was what I read in the papers."

"Give me a pencil. I'll write my address. Be there at three tomorrow."

Ten minutes later Haber pushed through the turnstile of the Eighth Avenue Subway, sat and rocked sleepily, thought of Dutch Jensen. He remembered Jensen in the Locardo fight. That fourth round. Jensen flat on his face up until the count of six. Stirring at seven. Up on one knee at nine. On his feet, helpless at ten. Then the bell.

The fifth round had been where Locardo had made his mistake. He had tried to slug it out. Toe to toe, until arms were leaden and gloves were sodden and then Jensen was swinging at nothing and the referee had to yank him over to a neutral corner, where he stared stupidly through a mask of blood.



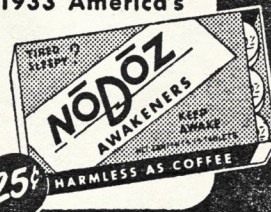
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Haber got off at the station stop and slowly walked the four blocks to his room and bath on Ninety-seventh. The typewriter rested in the middle of the heavy oak table, a neat pile of paper beside it. Anette, who lived down the hall, had heard him come in.

Someone in the office had given her a bottle of sherry. She sat in his big chair by the window and he filled her glass and his own.

"Hey!" she said. "I just asked you how the opus was going?"

"Oh! Sorry, Annie." He looked at her. He remembered Stella April and somehow Anette looked anemic, and her smile was strangely like the antics of a puppy who tries eagerly and fails to be endearing.

"What's the matter?" she asked, her smile fading. "I have all my teeth and hair."

He was shocked to realize that she had half understood his thoughts. He made himself smile, bent over the chair to kiss her.

She pushed him away, stood up and said, "Don't force yourself, darling." The door slammed behind her.

Jud noticed that she took the bottle as she passed the table. He finished his glass, sat down at the typewriter and picked out, *Dutch Jensen—Death of a Warrior*.

No words would come. He showered, went to bed.

Haber found Arney Block in his small cluttered office shortly after eleven. They went down the street for coffee.

Arney babbled cheerfully about a welter he was bringing along slowly, and then when Jud Haber mentioned the name of Dutch Jensen, Arney's expression became guarded. Arney was a bald little withered man with the face of a sardonic parrot. His reputation was good, and, a thousand years before, he had been a promising flyweight.

"Why the hell dig up history?" Arney

asked in his rasping, low-pitched voice.

"Why not? I'm writing a book on him. It won't hurt guys like you, Arney. But I hope it hurts the slick operators—the guys who pad the fighters' expense accounts, and build the boys up with tank jobs and fight them with half-mended hands."

"You're going to hurt them the way a flea bites hunks out of an elephant and he bleeds to death."

"How about Dutch?"

"I don't like to talk about him."

"You don't get quoted, Arney. I promise."

Arney still looked uncertain. "Nothing to tell. I find Dutch fighting for dimes in Jersey and I sign him up and teach him how and handle him for a year or so before I sell the contract."

"You sold him when he was looking his best. Why was that?"

"I sold him at the top of the market."

"Don't kid me, Arney. You never sold potential championship material in your life."

"Did he get to be champ?"

"He would have, if you'd stayed in his corner."

Arney's mouth twisted and he nodded. "Yeah. Look, kid. I put it this way. There is a little kid who likes to play marbles. He has a dozen nice marbles, and one is a hell of a good marble. A big kid comes along and says give me the good marble. The little kid says no. Then the big kid says, okay, chump. Now I bust your hands so you can't play with marbles anyway. So the big kid gets the good marble, and the little kid still has eleven to play around with, and so he pretends everything is still fine."

"And the big kid was Sam Rice?"

"I was talking about kids and marbles, not Sam Rice."

Jud sipped his coffee and leaned back. "So what did the big kid do with the marble?"

Arney's voice was tight. "He chipped it all to hell in a big hurry and threw it away."

"Couldn't the Commission help the little kid keep his marble?"

"When both hands were busted, and maybe the head too, the Commission would say they were very sorry."

"How good was Dutch?"

"The best. But he got into the big time when he was still raw. He needed another year of polishing. They beat his brains out. Kid Douglass does the training for Sam Rice. Kid Douglass wanted a crowd pleaser. A guy who can box usually doesn't please people. So Kid Douglass made Dutch forget everything I taught him and set him in with the idea of getting in one good punch, even if you got to take five to do it."

"Maybe they would have made more dough in the long run using your system?"

"Those boys like their dough fast. Anyway, they had insurance on him."

"That wasn't in the papers!"

"Two hundred grand. Term insurance. I carry it on my boys too when I got a big investment. It's legal. Insurable interest, they call it. You renew it every six months."

Jud finished his coffee, clattered the cup into the saucer and said, "It would have been worth two hundred thousand dollars to Sam Rice to have Dutch killed."

Arney laughed. "Up till now, kid, you've made sense. Take it this way. Sam Rice has his dough spread out in all directions. He's a big boy now. He's smart. He doesn't give anybody a handle to squeeze him with. Cross that off the list, kid."

"What's your angle on the death?"

Arney shrugged. "A guy has got everything, and all of a sudden he's got nothing. He's going punchy and the wheel horses are beginning to lick him and his eyes—" Arney shut his mouth tightly.

"What about his eyes?"

"I didn't mean to say anything. Hell, what have I got to lose? For old time's sake I stopped in to see Dutch after the last fight he ever was in. The time Louis Gorgon shebobbled him in the seventh. Dutch sits on the dressing room table. I come in the door and he can't recognize me. I got to get right up to the table first. Well, like I was saying, when you're all through and your peepers are fading out, maybe it's a good idea to get dressed in your best and walk off a dock."

Jud grinned. "I don't know why I'm getting ideas. The whole book is based on the idea that Dutch killed himself."

"You going to talk to Sam Rice?"

"Hope to."

Arney stood up. "When you do, kid, I didn't say a word."

"You don't have to tell me."

"I keep eating because I'm not in Sam Rice's hair. Remember that."

Jud watched the small man walk with quick, jerky step toward the door and push his way out onto the street.

THE address Stella gave him was a five minute walk from Sheridan Square. Her apartment had been built as an afterthought over a three stall garage. The stairs were open, and bolted to the side of the building which the garage adjoined.

The shades were pulled down. Jud walked up the open stairs and knocked at her door. She opened it immediately. Her dark hair was gathered in the back, tied with a ribbon. She wore a cotton print dress, flat heels, and there was a smudge of dust across one cheek.

"Cleaning this place. Come in."

The room was small, and very light. Stella tossed the dust cloth aside, leaned forward as he lit her cigarette, then sat down and waved him toward the couch. He pulled his notebook out of his side pocket, grinned at her, said, "Don't let this bother you."

"Nothing is going to bother me."

"Good! Do you want me to ask questions, or do you just want to go ahead with it?"

"Ask questions."

"You knew each other for some time before you were married?"

"Grew up on the same block. He was two years older."

"When did you and Dutch decide to get married?"

It was the second time he had seen her smile. This time the smile wasn't as wry. "I think he was thirteen and I was eleven. But we had to put it off for a while. He finished high school and went to work on the docks. When he was seventeen, he was as strong as most grown men. I took a secretarial course and worked in an office. We didn't have the dough to get married. Each of us had to chip in at home. His people are dead now. He's got a kid sister out on the West Coast. My people moved to Scranton. People in the office heard me singing, and they thought I ought to try to do something with it."

"How did Dutch feel when you landed a singing job?"

"He hated it. I was making four times what he was making, and he got dollar hungry. Pride, I guess. He had a few brawls on the docks and made out okay, and then he started to pick up some spare change over in Jersey in the little clubs."

"Then you got married?"

"Yes, after Arney Block signed him up and he won his first pro bout. As soon as he started to get decent purses, he made me quit my job, said it wasn't right for his wife to be working."

"You were happy?"

She looked at him coldly. "Yes, we were happy. Put that in your book."

"And when did it start to go bad?"

She frowned. "I guess it was about a month or two after Arney sold his contract to Sam Rice. Before that we used to go to the movies together, and talk

about the house we'd buy someday. Sam lives, you know, in the Cordan Hotel. It's an apartment hotel. He has an office there too. Sam had us move in there. There were a lot of parties. Late nights. A bunch of women around who thought it was lovely to rub up against a real fighter. I made out like I was having a fine time, but I was wishing we were back in our own place where people weren't wandering in and out at all hours of the day and night."

"Dutch began to act funny there?"

"He was fighting a lot and he began to get marked up and, like they say in my kind of work, he was trying to live up to his advance billing. He wanted to give all the girls a good time and drink all the liquor at all the parties and beat the hell out of anybody who didn't like it."

"It went to his head?"

She frowned. "No, I think Dutch realized that the change wasn't doing him any good and he was trying to forget it. He bought a lot of bright clothes and a flashy car and those are the only things he left me. The car's still in the garage. We couldn't go to the movies any more. He wanted to be seen in the spots, and he played up every tramp female around, and smacked a few drunks and then smacked me when I didn't like it."

"But you stuck?"

"For a while. I thought I could steer him out of trouble. A wife doesn't stop being a wife because the going gets tough. He began getting pains in his head and getting crazy mad in the ring. Of course, every time he got sore in the ring, he'd get knocked out. Sam Rice and Kid Douglass and the rest of them started ribbing him and started giving the big play to some of the other boys in Sam's stable, and that seemed to make Dutch worse. I didn't move out until he started going with a trampy girl."

Stella had a sneer on her lips, but there was a look of hurt in her eyes. On im-

pulse, Jud went over to her, took her hand and said, "You had a rough deal."

She snatched her hand away. "Oh sure. Little lady, you had a rough deal, and I am a sweet and understanding guy and I will make a big show of sympathy to soften you up so that I can make the standard play for you."

Jud Haber walked back and sat on the couch. "It won't do any good to say that I had no such idea?"

"All men have that same idea."

"You protest too much."

"And what does that mean?"

"It means, fair lady, that you're too conscious of your charms. Maybe, in some cases, they aren't as effective as you think." He smiled blandly at her.

Stella bit her lip and her eyes blazed. Then she laughed. "Okay. I'll accept your sympathy as sympathy."

"What did Dutch do after you came back to the Marees to work?"

"He came around a few times. Made a big fuss. Columbo put up with it for a little while, and then had him thrown out. He tried to get in touch with me. But that girl was still with him at the Cordan. After the Gorgon fight he disappeared. You know the rest."

"Was there any insurance money for you?"

"Not a dime. There was some business insurance that was split between Sam Rice and his wife."

"Split?"

"That's right. Tax reasons. He cuts her in on a share of every fighter he handles."

"How did Sam Rice scare Arney into selling?"

"A man in Rice's organization handles those details. His name is Francey Silver. There's something wrong with him. He has a face like a vanilla pudding and little thin red lips."

"I've seen him."

"What Sam usually does is send out some boys to pick up a prospect and take him back to the Cordan and put him in a room with Francey Silver. Then Sam calls the cops and says that somebody is trying to break into his apartment. By the time the cops come, Francey has had his little paws on the prospect for long enough to make whoever it is wish they'd dropped dead on the way over to the Cordan."


"Pretty!"

"Very. That's what Arney wanted no part of. Some people, on meeting Francey, have been pushed over the edge and have spent the rest of their days in padded rooms with thick bars on the little windows."

"What was Dutch like before he went sour?"

She got a faraway look in her eyes. "Oh, he was just a big blond guy with a nice grin. He wanted the same things I

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starting to throb.




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wanted. Kids, a place to grow stuff, a house not to close to other houses."

She looked at him quickly and narrowed her eyes. "You think that sounds like corn? Listen, newsboy, I'm peasant stock. My grandparents and a hundred generations before them came right off the land. I've walked in the park and picked up handfuls of dirt just because I like the feel of it. Look at me. I'm not big, but I've got good strong bones and good strong muscles."

"I didn't say a word."

"It was the way you looked. As though I was telling you something my press agent told me to tell newspaper people because it sounds good."

"That is a pretty standard line."

She seemed suddenly depressed. "I guess it is and I guess I lost my chances at getting it, too."

"No more questions right now, Stella. Look, can I come back here and talk to you again when things come up that I need answers for?"

She shrugged. "Suit yourself. Drop me a note at the Marees and I'll tell you what time you can show."

Jud stood up and walked toward the door. She stood and there was something beaten about her, something infinitely weary. "Who else should I talk to to get the whole picture?" he asked.

"Arney Block. Sam. His wife, Gloria. Kid Douglass. Jane Tour, the dish Dutch took up with. Even Francey Silver if your stomach is strong enough to stand that white-faced rat."

"I hope the book will do some good," he said softly.

Stella came alive then. "Smear them all, newsboy. Stick a pin through them and hold them up so the public can get a good look. Then, maybe—"

She turned away, but not before he saw the quick tears. He went down the steps as she shut the door softly behind him.

CHAPTER TWO

A Gold-Plated Louse

A CAR was parked directly across the street. Jud didn't notice it particularly until he heard his name called. Then he walked over.

The back door of the car opened and a big brown hand was thrust out at him. He found himself shaking it, listening to a voice say "How do you do. I'm Sam Rice."

Jud Haber had seen him many times, but never to meet. Sam was a tall gaunt man who consciously cultivated a Lincolnnesque appearance. In a world of careful tailoring, he wore rusty black suits which always seemed too short in the arms. His deep-set eyes had a sad melancholy, a sad and wise honesty.

On invitation, Jud Haber got in the back seat beside Sam.

"Take us to the Cordan, Mark," Sam said to the driver. He settled back in the seat, gave Jud a sad smile and said, "That is, if you haven't got anything pressing, Jud."

"No. As a matter of fact, I was going to come and see you, Mr. Rice."

Rice nodded with slow majesty. "I thought as much. It's about Dutch Jensen."

"Word seems to get around."

"In many ways, Jud, this is a small town. Cigar? Had dinner last night with a dear friend of mine, Mr. Ameree from Gaynor and Sutton. He told me that they'd given you an advance on a book about Dutch Jensen. He seemed very pleased about it. Then, this morning, one of my boys reported seeing you at the Marees with Stella. Lovely girl, isn't she?"

"Quite." Jud Haber felt uncomfortable. Sam Rice was cleverly taking the play away from him. He felt as though he were being rushed, and yet Sam had

said nothing to which he could take exception.

"And then we were driving by, and I saw you coming down Stella's steps, so I asked Mark to stop."

Jud managed a pleased smile, saying, "Well, it certainly does save a lot of trouble."

"Did you see my boy, Billy Rain, at the Garden the other night?" Sam Rice said pleasantly.

"No I missed that one."

"He looks like a comer." From that point on Sam easily kept the conversation on other subjects.

At the entrance to the Cordan Hotel, the car stopped, and Sam, a friendly hand on Jud's shoulder, walked him through the lobby to the elevators. They got out at the fifth floor, walked back and into an office. The girl behind the typewriter greeted Mr. Rice with a very proper smile, and Sam held the door open for Jud to walk into his private office.

The room was paneled in a pale silvery wood, and it was without windows. Cleverly lighted dioramas were set into the walls so that they gave the impression of being windows opening out on broad sunlit fields and forests.

Rice's desk, in blond wood, was semi-circular. Jud sat in a comfortable chair as Sam went around the desk and sat down. He put his elbows on the desk, put his fingertips together, gave Jud a charming smile and said, "The case of Dutch Jensen. Or Sam Rice fumbles the ball. Frankly, Jud, I'm a bit ashamed of myself."

"How do you mean?"

"Drink? Soda or water? Good. I always say that soda spoils good liquor. Frankly, Jud, I saw Dutch in action and it made me greedy. I wanted to manage him. I persuaded Arney Block to sell him to me. Sell his contract, that is. Kid Douglass handles my stable. I don't think that Douglass did very well with him."

"I imagine Arney thinks so too."

"That is neither here nor there, Jud. You look like a bright young man. Surely you can understand my position. If the case of Dutch Jensen were written up and the book happened to have a good sale I certainly wouldn't look very good, would I?"

"No, you wouldn't."

"And Dutch is one failure as compared with many successes. Look at Jackie Orange."

Jud smiled tightly. "Sure. Look at him. He'd still be fighting for you if he hadn't got scared when his ears started to ring. He's the one that retired and bought the dude ranch. You didn't urge him to do so."

Sam Rice smiled sadly. "You listen to gossip, my boy. But that's neither here nor there. The main thing is that your book might be unfair to me."

"And maybe the whole racket, as run by men like you, is unfair to the guys who climb into the ring and paste each other."

"Ah, the idealism of youth! It's a tough, nasty business, Haber, and your book isn't going to clean it up. However, if you want to get your name on a book, I have a proposition for you. I got Mr. Ameree's go ahead on it last night. I'd like to hire you to write my biography. I'll pay you five hundred a month and expenses during the writing period, and assign half the royalties to you on completion."

Jud stood up and said, "Thanks, Mr. Rice."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I had some pretty serious doubts as to whether my book about Dutch Jensen could make you squirm. But apparently it can. No, I don't want to be bought off. I'll go right ahead with my book."

For a moment the mask of Lincoln slipped from Rice's face, and something vicious and unmannerly showed through.

Then the mask was quickly adjusted. Sam Rice sighed. "That's perfectly all right, Haber. Perfectly. Your book won't bother me particularly. You certainly realize that. I also know that in all fairness you will have to quote in the book my honest confession of having made a mistake in the case of Dutch Jensen. I let Douglass bring him along a shade fast."

"Yes, Mr. Rice. I'll be fair. I'll have to mention that insurance money too, you know. How much was it? Two hundred thousand? Some to you and some to Gloria."

The mask slipped in earnest, and was not replaced. The fine diction slipped along with the mask. "That book'll never be published, punk. Take your big talk some other place."

"May I quote you?" Jud asked.

"Get out of here!"

Leaving his untasted drink, Jud walked out of the office, smiled politely at the girl and went down the hall. He pushed the button and the elevator came up.

He was alone in the elevator. He said to the operator. "I was supposed to take a paper Mr. Rice gave me to his wife, and I forgot to ask which is his apartment."

"Four. Here we are. Right over there. Knock on that door, bud."

After the elevator had dropped out of sight, he knocked. A woman opened the door an inch or two. A large, china-blue eye stared out at him.

"Mrs. Rice?" Jud asked, giving her his best smile.

"My name is Gloria," she said, almost breathlessly.

There was something very childish about that whisper. She seemed about to slam the door. "Wait a minute," he whispered. "I'm looking for somebody who can keep a secret."

The door swung wide. "Come in quickly," she whispered. "Nobody is allowed to come and see me."

She looked out into the hall, and then shut the door quietly. The room was long, wide and high, furnished almost completely in white. It was enormously startling. He looked at her. She was a woman in her late thirties, dark and too thin. She wore a cerise housecoat. She had the bearing, mouth, throat of a mature woman. But her eyes were the wide blue of a child's eyes.

Gloria locked the door. "I've been making rooms," she said softly. Jud gazed where she pointed. A huge scrap book was on the floor. Near it were scissors and paste and a pile of magazines. He saw that she had cut furniture out of the magazine, and, regardless of scale, had pasted it on one of the big sheets.

"That's very nice," he said gravely.

Her smile was please. "Thank you. I have nearly two hundred rooms now. Do you want to see them?"

"Some other time. Right now I want to ask you about Dutch Jensen."

She simpered with absurd girlishness. "He's nice! Big and rough. Like a big animal. Sam doesn't like him."

"No?"

"Oh, goodness no! Sam wants Dutch's wife and Dutch would kill Sam with his bare hands if he knew."

"Dutch is dead now," he said softly. She put the back of her hand to her lips. When she took it away, he saw the marks of the sharp teeth, a dark red droplet of blood.

"Do you suppose Sam killed him?" Jud asked.

Gloria laughed. A very flat, very calm laugh. "Oh, no! Certainly not! Sam only kills women, you know. He killed me several years ago. Of course, he probably didn't mean to, but he did. That's why I have to stay here. If I went out they'd see me and know that I was dead. So I make rooms that I'll never live in. Never." Tears stood on her eyelids and her lips quivered.

Jud Haber realized that this was a blind alley. He said, "Well, that was my secret. Dutch is dead."

She pouted. "That's not much of a secret. I like better secrets than that."

He moved toward the door. As he started to turn the key, she moved close to him, put her icy hand over his. She looked up into his face. "Who are you?"

"Just a guy."

"A guy with a nice lean face, and crinkly eyes and a nose that was broken once."

Suddenly her arms were around him. Her lips were like ice. In sudden revulsion Jud pushed her away. She tripped on the long housecoat, fell to her knees. She stayed right there, looking up at him with odd mockery, as though she had done something exceptionally mischievous and cute. Then the look faded. She said hurriedly, "If Dutch is dead now then Sam will take his wife, won't he?"

"Goodby, Mrs. Rice."

"I'm Gloria. I could kill him, I suppose. It would only be fair, wouldn't it?"

Jud pulled the door shut, hurried off toward the elevators. He couldn't chase her blue eyes out of his memory. He wondered what she had been like once upon a time. Before Sam Rice had entered her life.

HE WALKED up the two flights of creaking wooden stairs and walked into the dense blue smoke of Markson's Gym. The place smelled of antiseptic, dirty socks, sweat, hair-oil and cigars.

Three rings were set up. In the first one near the door, the one with the make-shift bleachers, a gangling, spidery guy was jabbing expertly at the grayish scar tissue across the brows of a blond kid who consistently counterpunched too late.

Two overweights were mauling each other in the middle ring, slimy with perspiration. In the far ring were some young fast kids.

The low-ceilinged room was full of the sound of grunts, the thud of fists on the heavy bags, the rattle-bang of the light bags, the slap of feet on canvas, the full-throated muttering of the crowd of sharpies and angle-boys who were dickering with each other.

"Hones', Joey, when I give you that fill-in in KC, I coulda swore that your bum would take such a fancy-pants. How'd I know he developed a left? Where'd he get it? Hones', Joey, you gotta gimme a break. I need the match for my boy, and hones' I didn' cross you in KC. Come on, Joey, gimme a break!"

Jud elbowed his way through, yelled to one yawning character, "Where's Kid Douglass?"

"Over there. With the holes in the T shirt."

There is a certain family resemblance in all retired gentlemen of the ring. There are shelves on each eye, thickened cartilage on the nose, lips. The hair has been burned spare by the hot overhead lights. The voice is thick and husky and the hands are knots of broken bone.

Kid Douglass was indistinguishable from his venerable brethren, except that his watery blue eyes were considerably more shrewd. He probably had a higher native resistance to the effect of myriad pinpoint concussions which spread scar tissue across the surface of the brain.

He was yammering at a tall, gangling kid who was driving left hooks into the heavy bag. "Straighten out that wrist! Elbow close. No, no, no. You sucked it back a little before you let it fly. Drive it right in from a standstill. No, you dropped your left shoulder. There! Better. Wrist straight. Pivot a little more. That's the way!"

Kid Douglass saw Jud standing off to the side. He swaggered over. "Want me? Who're you?"

"Jud Haber. I'm collecting stuff on Dutch Jensen, Kid."

Douglass' face split in a broken-toothed grin. "Now ain't that nice! I know all about you, Haber. And I know what the hell you're trying to do. Well, you won't queer me."

Before Jud could move the lumpy fist had thudded into his middle. It landed perfectly on the nerve center, the solar plexus. His legs turned to rubber balloons filled with water, and he gagged up through a haze of pain at the grinning face of Kid Douglass.

A crowd closed in and he was picked up roughly, still unable to breath.

"This guy is one of them reformers," Douglass said. "He's going to clean up the fight game. Ain't that a laugh? Anybody else want a poke at him. He's pie."

Jud heard somebody mumble that it wasn't good practise to put the slug on a sportswriter.

"Hell, this guy quit the paper to write a book. He's got no backing. Somebody toss him down them stairs. I got work to do."

But they let Jud pick his way carefully down the stairs. He leaned against the wall with one hand, not trusting his legs. Down on the street he swallowed the acid nausea in his throat, walked steadily up to the corner, sat in a dark booth and drank a cup of coffee. By the time he had finished it he was feeling almost normal, except for a sharp area of pain in his middle.

No matter. That little incident would make a very nice chapter in the book. He wondered vaguely if, while hitting him, Kid Douglass had kept his elbow in, his shoulder high, his wrist straight, and had pivoted properly. Undoubtedly he had. The punch had come out of nowhere, and had thudded like a bullet.

Obviously, Sam Rice had gotten in touch with Kid Douglass.

It took him from seven until quarter of eleven to find Jane Tour. When he found her, sitting at a circular bar on Thirty-

ninth Street she was about what he had expected: a short, rather wide girl, with puffed lips, blue eye shadow and a dirty neck.

"Jane Tour?" he asked.

She focused her eyes with difficulty.

"Who you?"

"I want to talk to you."

"Wait. Wait a little while."

He went over and sat at one of the circular tables near the wall. A piano, high in the middle of the circular bar, played perpetual boogie.

A tourist was slumped over against Jane. Suddenly she pushed him away and screamed. He goggled drunkenly at her and the pair of bouncers caught him by each arm, rushed him out the door and sat him on the sidewalk.

Jane came over and sat down. "You're pretty," she said archly.

One hand was tightly clenched. He saw the green corner of the bill. "How much did you lift off him?"

"Enough," she said. "But you buy me a drink, hey."

"Sure." Jud waited until she had slugged down half the drink and then he said, "Tell me all about your great love, Dutch Jensen."

"Oh, you're that guy!"

"What guy?"

"The guy I'm not supposed to talk to. They said some guy would come around and ask about Dutch and I'm supposed to tell you to go to hell."

"Why don't you?"

"Because you're a cute kid, fella. Buy 'nother?"

"Sure thing."

"Old Dutchie. Off his damn wagon. That was his trouble. Plain nuts toward the last."

"In what way?"

"Oh, alla time calling me Stella, like I was that dumb little wife of his. Imagine! Then he got to beating guys up. They were suing him. Beat anybody up.

You, that fella over there. Anybody. Hell of a note. Had pains in his head. Moaned and yelped all the time in his sleep. Walk the floor. Even let cigarettes burn down so that you could smell his fingers burning and he wouldn't seem to feel it. Punchy, that was his trouble."

Jud Haber shrugged. "I don't know why anybody should try to shut you up. You don't know much about him."

She glared at him. "Now you're not cute. Now you're getting wise, see? I could tell you something all right, but now I won't."

"Because you don't know anything to tell, sister,"

She stood up, leaned drunkenly over the table, and said, "Well suppose I happened to tell you that Dutch didn't—" She stopped, smiled wickedly. "Smart boy, huh? Trying to fox your old pal, Janey. Hell with you, fella. I say the hell with you!"

"Not so loud!"

"In here, guy, I get just as loud as I want to get, see?"

The bouncers were angling over toward the table. Jud got up, gave them a happy smile, tossed a five dollar bill on the table and walked toward the door. When he glanced back one of the bouncers was prying the bill out of Jane's chubby hand.

He hadn't handled that too brightly. Maybe if he hadn't tried to make her so mad she would spill something.

Something was definitely queer about the death of Dutch Jensen. Sam Rice was too disturbed about his nosing around.

He went back to his room, wearily unlocked the door and walked in. He clicked the light on. A dumpy little man with a face like a vanilla pudding was sitting on his bed.

"How did you get in here, Silver?"

"Oh ho! The little man knows me. Hello, little man. Five bucks gets the use of the pass key. You ought to have

your own lock put on the door." He said.

Francey Silver sat with his fat fingers interlaced, a pleased smile on his thin red lips. "What's on your mind?" Jud asked, puzzled at his own sudden feeling of dread. This white, fat little man on the bed was smiling pleasantly enough, but there was something about him which gave Jud much the same feeling as when he looked at an open wound.

"Oh, Sam asked me to stop up and get acquainted, little man. He said you are a brave, staunch little man. I wonder how brave? I wonder at what point you'd start screaming, little man. Did you know that a man can scream just as high as a woman?"

"Very interesting. I'll put it in my book."

"Oh, but that's the point! Don't miss the point! There isn't going to be any book. Sam doesn't want there to be any book."

Jud sat down behind his typewriter and lit a cigarette, pretending a nonchalance that he didn't feel.

"And what if I get stubborn?"

"Oh, I hope you do, little man."

Jud lifted his cigarette to his lips and realized that he had pinched it so hard between thumb and finger that it wouldn't draw.

He faked a yawn. "Go away, Francey. I'm sleepy."

Silver got up and trotted to the door. His white cheeks jiggled when he walked. "Just a friendly call, little man," he said.

The door shut silently behind him. Jud didn't hear his steps on the stairs, but when he opened the door and looked cautiously out, Francey Silver was gone.

As he stood in the hall, Anette opened her door, looked out and said, "There was an awful pudgy man in your room, Jud."

"Old friend of the family," he said.

"Oh."

She looked at him with a pout on her lips and invitation in her eyes. "Good-

night, Annie," he said. Her door slammed sharply.

Jud locked his door, opened the bottom drawer of the bureau and fished in the back of it, finding the worn leather holster of the .45 he had kept after being discharged. He took it out, saw the gleam of white between the butt and the holster. He pulled it out. It was a note. It said: *Don't try to think this will do you any good, little man.*

CHAPTER THREE

Wanted for Murder

THE light was on in Magesteri's office. Jud went up the stairs, down the short hall. Magesteri looked up quickly.

Jud sank into the chair across from him, lit a cigarette.

"What do you want?" Magesteri said softly.

"Nothing much. I just want to leave a note for Stella."

"For Stella April?" Magesteri's small troubled eyes seemed to be trying to tell him something.

"Who do you think? Is the joint loaded with people named Stella?"

In a wooden tone, Magesteri said, "Do you want to talk to her about Dutch?"

"Who else?"

Quickly Magesteri said, "Haber, I couldn't do anything else. Honest! I got to live. I got to keep my business. These guys, they could—"

"Shut up, mister," a strange voice said behind Jud. He whirled. It was the driver of Sam's car, the one he had called Mark.

Behind Mark the round face of Francey Silver beamed. "I warned you last night, you know," he said in a pleased tone.

"Okay, Magesteri," Jud said. "No hard feelings."

He closed his hand around the bronze

ash tray on Magesteri's desk, whirled and threw it with all his strength at the face of Mark, the chauffeur. He yanked the cord out of the ceiling fixture and, just as the room went dark, he saw the white face of Mark sliding slowly down the door frame.

Magesteri moaned softly in the darkness.

"You are a stubborn little man," Francey said softly.

"Where is he?" a new voice asked. Jud recognized the voice of Kid Douglass.

Jud realized that in a matter of seconds, their eyes would grow accustomed to the gloom. He ran full tilt at the door, driving his knees high with each step. He stamped on something soft, struck out with his doubled fist, yelled with hoarse joy as he felt a jolting pain run up his arm.

Then something crashed against his head, and he felt as though he were trying to run through warm, clinging surf. He fell heavily against the wall on the far side of the hallway, but retained enough presence of mind to roll as hard and fast as he could. Somebody toppled down on him. He grasped a necktie in his left hand, yanked hard as he drove his right fist into the darkness at an estimated distance above the necktie.

A match flared in the darkness just as he scrambled to his feet. He kicked up at the flame, heard a scream of pain as his toe connected with something solid, something that snapped. By luck his foot hit the bronze ash tray. He stooped to pick it up, just as something brushed his hair and smacked against the wall.

Jud swung the ashtray in a wide arc at face level. It struck something solid and bounced out of his fingers. A body tumbled heavily to the floor.

As a hand caught at his coat, he raced to the top of the stairway, ran down three steps at a time, and, breathing hard, ran down the crowded sidewalk, slowing and

straightening his clothes as he rounded the corner.

A block away was a drugstore. He got change at the counter, looked up the number and shut himself in a booth.

He got the desk at headquarters and asked to be connected with Lieutenant Tom Donnelly.

"Tom? This is Jud. Jud Haber."

There was an odd silence on the other end of the line. "Where are you, boy? I'll have a car pick you up."

"Don't make jokes, Tom. Look, three guys just tried to beat me up. They all work for Sam Rice. Francey Silver, Kid Douglass and a fellow named Mark who drives Sam's car."

"Maybe they're sore about Jane Tour, Jud."

"Jane Tour. What makes?"

Tom's voice was heavy. "No jokes from you either, Jud. Three witnesses saw you leave the bar with her. We got pictures of you from the paper and they picked you from a batch of ten pictures. So did the landlady. She saw you leaving the girl's room. It wasn't pretty, Haber. Strangling never is."

Jud Haber gasped. "Tom! Use your head, boy! This is a frame. For some reason I can't figure, I'm getting in Sam Rice's hair. I think it is because Dutch Jensen was murdered. Jane Tour knew the score. That's why she got it. Sweat those witnesses a little. Hell, I thought you were a friend!"

"How many friends does a cop have? Better come in here soon as you can."

"I'll come in when I'm damn ready!" Jud snapped, hanging up.

He had to guard against the call being traced. He left quickly, walked two more blocks, went into another drugstore. He called the Marees. After a long delay, Magesteri came to the phone. He sounded tired.

"This is Haber. Can you talk?"

"Yeah. They left."

"How did I do?"

"Too good, friend. You potted Mark twice with the ash tray. You busted Silver's wrist and Douglass broke his hand on the wall. All three of them have gone to a hospital to get patched. They'll be eager to see you, I think."

Jud hung up slowly. Far from being improved, the situation had gotten rapidly worse. He understood why the three of them had trapped him. Once he was unconscious they would have called in the cops. Their story would be that he had tried to run when they called the police. He wondered what time the cops had arrived at his room uptown.

It had bothered Sam that he had talked to Stella. Maybe Stella knew something that she thought unimportant, but was in truth of great importance. He glanced at his watch, saw that the dial was shattered, the hands bent. The drugstore clock said five minutes of two. Maybe the best plan would be to go see Stella, pump her a little, and then give himself up. He was confident that he could clear himself.

He grabbed a cab, gave an address which he guessed was about a block away from Stella's place.

The shades were drawn at her apartment. He hurried up the steps. The door was ajar. He frowned, wondering why she should leave it that way. He knocked, and the force of the knocking drove the door open. He stepped into the gloom, and as the pain crashed against his head, he felt as though he had stepped into a bottomless well.

THE world came back into focus, a fragment at a time. First there was a small blue vase against a pale wall. There was a rosebud in the vase, a crack in the wall, dust on the base of the blue vase.

He was on something soft. Comfortable. His arm hung over the edge and his hand was cramped and heavy. He moved and something fell from his hand, thumped

heavily against the rug. He frowned, trying to remember where and with whom he had been drinking. But when he frowned, it tightened the scalp and pain throbbed. He touched the area of pain tenderly with his fingertips.

Where had he fallen? His head rocked and his stomach rolled as he sat up, his face in his hands. The liquor smell was strong. His white shirt clung to his chest and stank of liquor. He looked at the rug. Silly place to keep a gun. Odd gun. Long barreled twenty-two target pistol with a silencer.

He looked over to one side. There was a hand peeking around the corner of the couch. A lumpy hand. Gray. Black hair on the back of it. Ridges where the bones had been broken. The hand looked so familiar that he wanted to see the rest of the person.

Kid Douglass, of course. Sleeping peacefully, on his back.

Suddenly he was standing up, his mouth dry with fear, his head throbbing. Kid Douglass lay without breathing, and between his eyes, just above the pulped nose, there was a small black, crusted hole.

The room was very still. There was a white, fresh cast on Douglass' other hand.

Jud wanted to be as far away from Douglass as possible. He backed away, and his heel thumped into something soft. He turned quickly.

Stella was on her side. Under her head a pool of blood soaked into the rug. Her face was very still, very pale.

With a small moan, he dropped to his knees. He touched her hand. Her eyelids fluttered, opened. She looked blankly at nothing, then her full lips twisted and she moaned.

Tenderly he rolled her over onto her back. Her black hair, above the right ear, was matted with blood. He parted the sticky hair with his fingers, saw the three inch wound.

She moaned again. "Stella!" he said. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," she said weakly.

He hurried over to the door, locked it. Then he opened another door. Closet. The next door was the bathroom. He opened the medicine cabinet, saw the nail scissors, adhesive tape, alcohol on the glass shelves.

Jud went back to her. "You won't be as messy, Stella, if you can make it to the bathroom where I can clean that wound."

"My—head hurts," she said weakly.

"Of course it does, honey. Come on."

Stella wavered helplessly. He carried her into the bathroom, kicked a high stool over in front of the sink and sat her on it. He ran cold water, took a towel and gently parted her hair along the wound with it. With the nail scissors he clipped the lush black hair away from the edges, then brushed alcohol along it. She gasped. He cut long narrow strips from the adhesive tape, used them like stitches to pull the edges of the wound together.

She looked weak and sick. He carried her back in and lowered her onto the couch. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Four—four of them came. Sam and Silver and Mark and Kid Douglass. They were angry. They thought you would come here. Sam saw you coming, and Mark held me with his hand across my mouth. Then, when you came in, Kid Douglass sapped you behind the ear and caught you when you fell."

"What did they say?"

"Sam kept smiling in that sad way. He asked me if I'd reconsider a proposition he had once made me. I told him never. He had a long, skinny gun in his pocket. He held it in his hands and suddenly it went off with just a little noise, like slapping two books together.

"Kid Douglass looked funny and then he fell on his face and rolled over onto his back. Sam said that such things happen

to people who get too big an idea of their value. Silver laughed and Mark looked sick.

"Then he said, 'You too, Mrs. Jensen,' and pointed it at me. Douglass had dropped you on the couch. He looked at you and said, 'The brave lad will hang for a triple murder.' He sneered and his mouth looked funny. I couldn't move and I couldn't scream. He pointed the gun at me and I could look right down the black hole at the end of it. Then you were bending over me. I'm sick."

Jud quickly explained what he had found on regaining consciousness. He knew that only his prints would be on the gun. He picked it up and wiped it clean, and was immediately sorry, thinking that maybe the police would have been able to tell the difference between normal prints and prints that had been faked.

More color came back into Stella's cheeks. Her eyes were wide as she looked at the dead face of Douglass.

Jud said, "Think hard. What do you know that made it worth while for Sam Rice to try to kill you?"

She looked puzzled and slowly shook her head. "Nothing." Then she asked in a small voice, "Do you think they will call the police and tell them to look here?"

"I better run for it. I can't explain that," he said pointing at the body.

"Don't leave me here," she said. "They'll come back."

It had all moved too quickly. First Jane Tour and now—this. Jud felt confusion and fear. He rubbed the sweating palm of his right hand against the side of his jacket. He said, half to himself, "If we could go someplace where I could think. Where I could puzzle this out. Come with me if you want to. We've got to get out of here."

Stella wavered when she first stood up, but seemed to gain strength. She took a suitcase from the closet, threw clothes in it. Some blood still matted her hair.

She bound it up in a gay red and white bandanna.

Just as she was ready they heard the growl of sirens. Too close.

"That door there is cut through the wall into the rooming house," she said. "It's locked."

He snatched the pistol off the floor, spun and fired directly into the keyhole from a distance of an inch or so. Something tinkled on the far side of the door. He tried the knob. Together they stepped into the hall, shut the door, found the stairs and went down to the exit which was around the corner from the stairs that led up to her apartment. The sound of the sirens filled the air.

He held her back, made her walk casually across the street toward the cab stand.

The driver said, "What's doing back there?"

"Search me. Take us to Penn Station."

On the way he whispered. "This is no good, Stella. You shouldn't have come. The police will be after you too."

"Better the police than Sam Rice," she said in a husky whisper.

"They'll be watching the stations. If we only had a car."

"We do," she said quickly. "Dutch's car. I've got the claim check here in my pocketbook."

JUD wanted to go further, but Stella was shivering so badly by the time they were ten miles south of Poughkeepsie that he located some tourist cabins, rented two that were side by side with an arch between them to house the car.

Stella shivered so badly, she could barely walk. Her cabin had a small gas stove in it. He was worried about the car. It was too flamboyant. A pale blue convertible with Dutch's initials in Chinese red on each door. But the shadows were deep where he had parked it.

Jud got the fire going, sat her in front of it and wrapped her in blankets.

"What's wrong with me?" she asked, her lips blue.

"Shock. Loss of blood. The main thing is to get you warm and get a lot of fluid down you. Sit tight and I'll see if I can find some coffee."

He brought back a milk bottle full of steaming coffee. He had to guide the cup to her lips. The coffee seemed to help a little.

"Better get to bed," he said. "Keep your clothes on for warmth. I'll go get the blankets out of my place."

Morning light filled Jud's cabin. He awoke with a start. The cool gray light of dawn. He left the cabin, sat on the low wooden step. In the distance the highway was a gray silk ribbon. There was an unreality about the morning, as though the events of the previous day had happened in delirium, a dream with little meaning. He knew that he had made a mistake in permitting Stella to come with him. Had she remained, added her testimony to his own, they might both be technically free—though probably in protective custody. But terror knows no logic. Flight had seemed the answer. But flight to where?

Jud counted his money. Twenty dollars. If they could find a safe place, he could then write a complete report on the entire affair, send it to Tom Donnelly, trust Tom to take the necessary steps to clear him. Obviously Sam Rice and his people would have alibis that had been carefully manufactured. Those alibis would have to be broken. But the report to Tom would make a lot more sense, if he could find out exactly what was so very peculiar about the death of Dutch Jensen.

Just as the sun came up, Stella opened the door of her cabin and walked over to him. He looked up at her.

She had changed to slacks and a white

shirt. He stood and put his hands on her shoulders and looked down into the gray-green eyes, which were devoid of the insolence that had filled them when he had first see her at the Marees. He kissed her very lightly and very quickly.

"All this is—funny," she said in almost a whisper.

"Funny? Ha, ha?"

"Funny peculiar, newsboy. What happened back in town is a bad dream. We're on a vacation. Nothing is important but us."

"But we have a problem. Where to?"

"While I was dressing I was thinking of that. Look, Jud, you would know about this. Have any of Sam Rice's fighters got such an important bout coming up that they would be using the camp?"

"Camp?"

"Sam owns it. It's on a little lake on a dirt road about twenty miles northeast of Albany."

Jud thought, said slowly, "No. The Ryan fight was cancelled when Red broke his hand in that ginmill. Unless Rice has loaned it to somebody it should be vacant. How do you know about it?"

"I went there with Dutch and Kid Douglass and two sparring partners right after Sam bought the contract from Arney. It was—the last time we were happy, I guess. I had to leave before the last two weeks of training. When Dutch got back to town, we moved into the apartment at the Cordan."

"It's secluded?"

"Oh, yes. We could buy groceries and hole up there and nobody would know. They'd never look for us there, Jud."

"And then we're going to sit down and you're going to tell me everything you can remember about Dutch and Sam. Maybe we can figure out why Sam has gotten excited enough to take crazy chances. Okay?"

"Let's go, darling."

CHAPTER FOUR

Homicidal Hideout

JUD guided the long lean nose of the car down the winding rutted road, the leaves and branches on either side brushing the pale blue body. He had parked in Albany while Stella had bought the essential groceries.

They rounded a turn and ahead he saw the dark logs of the camp against the deep blue of the small lake.

"There it is," she said. "Electricity, phone, bottled gas, running water—all the conveniences. You can park right over there. That shed is where they keep the equipment. And that platform is where they set the ring up."

"Neighbors?"

"There's one other camp on the lake. It is around that bluff over there. All we have to do is stay out of sight when there's a boat out on the water. They won't be able to see the car. And at night we better try to get along without lights."

"That shouldn't be too hard," he said, cutting the switch and opening the door on his side. He lifted the box of groceries off the rear seat, followed her up onto the porch. The camp was built of logs with a long porch facing the lake. She stood on tiptoe and reached up, felt on top of a beam. She frowned. "That's odd! No key."

"Okay, so we break in. What's one more offence?"

He set the box of groceries down and tried the door. It opened. Frowning, they walked into the silent room. The kitchen was an alcove at the end furthest from the lake. Opposite the door, a staircase indicated the upstairs rooms.

The place was very quiet. Insects bumbled against the screens when he opened the windows. The floor creaked under their footsteps.

"Look!" she said, pointing at the kitchen table. A bottle and a glass stood on the kitchen table. He walked over, looked at the tan dregs in the bottom of the glass. A few droplets, unevaporated, stood on the inside of the glass.

"Probably some tramp broke in," he said. He smiled. "Anyway, he's gone now." Yet the bulk of the long-barreled .22 was a comfortable weight in the side pocket of his jacket.

"Look upstairs," she whispered.

Four bedrooms opened off a common hall. Three were empty. The door to the fourth was closed. Every muscle tense, Jud flung the door open, stepped aside, covered the exit. That room too, was empty, but the bed was rumpled. The beds in the other rooms were neatly made.

Stella came up behind him and held his arm tightly. The trail outside had been moist. A clot of half-dried mud

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rested on the floor beside the messy bed.

"Made himself a home," Jud said with cheer that rang false. "Drank the liquor and slept it off in the bed."

"Maybe heard us coming," Stella said in a low tone. "Maybe he ran out and he's hiding in the brush watching us."

"Let him watch, honey. Can you cook? I starve by degrees."

As he had anticipated, her fear diminished in the face of responsibility. Before long the frying pan crackled cheerfully, and the smell of coffee and bacon and eggs filled the camp. She even began to hum softly.

They sat across from each other at the table. She lifted her cup and said, "A toast to us, newsboy. We own this place. We live here. You are a struggling novelist. I, your suffering wife, run a trap line and a home laundry to keep you in bond paper until a book club recognizes your true worth."

"I'll even drink your coffee to that."

Long after the dregs of the coffee had chilled in the cups they sat at the table and talked in low tones about the death of Dutch Jensen. They talked without success. At the end of two hours they were as much in the dark as when they had started. Having had such high hopes of being able to figure it all out they were depressed when it all came to nothing in the end.

The afternoon sun was low. Jud looked at Stella and saw the sallow rings of exhaustion under her eyes. But when she looked up and met his gaze her smile was strong, and brave, and tender. She touched his hand with her fingertips. "We'll make out, newsboy. Somehow."

His back was to the door. Just as the last rays of the sun faded, he saw her eyes go wide with terror. Her face went slack and she was as white as death itself. Jud saw Stella's mouth open and he tensed himself for the scream, but she toppled off the chair with only a small,

stifled moan, thudding heavily against the floor.

It seemed to take an eternity of time to turn, to force himself back and to one side, his hand fumbling for the butt of the pistol, his chair clattering against the floor as he tipped it over.

The man silhouetted in the doorway was big. He stood, massive shoulders stooped, curled fingers hanging almost to his knees. He was motionless, as though carved of heavy wood, and yet Jud sensed that he had an animal alertness.

Jud pointed the pistol at the stranger's head and said, "Who are you?"

The big head turned slowly away from him, turned toward the girl, her blouse pale against the dark linoleum. The man didn't seem to have heard his question.

"Who are you?" Jud demanded, hearing the rising note of panic in his own voice.

In answer, the man reached out a quick hand to the light switch just inside the door. The sudden glare hurt Jud's eyes. He blinked, and then stared. It was as though fingers tightened on his throat.

"Who do you think I am?" the hoarse voice asked, with ponderous amusement.

"Dutch! Dutch Jensen!"

This then, was the Viking. The strong young blond warrior. His face was coarsened and thickened. One cheek was sunken where a broken cheekbone hadn't set properly. The eyes were small and blue under the massive ridges of bone and scar tissue. The lips were thick and brutal, and the nose was a pulp of smashed cartilage.

Stella moaned, opened her eyes and sat up. She looked in a bewildered manner at Jud, then turned and once again saw Dutch. She began to move away from him, crawling across the linoleum toward the shadowed corners. "No!" she said softly. "No!"

Dutch laughed and his big hand rested casually on the top of a cane chair. Sud-

denly the chair flashed through the air towards Jud's head. As he tried to duck to one side, his wrist was caught in a crushing grip and he was stunned by a blow over his ear.

He staggered back against the rough stones of the fireplace, shook his head to clear it and saw Dutch Jensen looking curiously at the pistol he had taken away from Jud.

He squinted, blinked, rubbed his eyes. "Come here, guy—so I can see you."

Jud walked slowly toward him. Dutch grabbed the front of his shirt, yanked him close, said, "I seen you before, guy."

"As ringside, Sportswriter. Jud Haber."

Dutch shoved him away with contempt. He turned toward Stella and called her several short blunt names.

Those names seemed to wipe out her fear. She jumped up and said, "You're wrong, Dutch. But even if you were right, what difference would it make? What difference?"

That seemed to puzzle him. He scratched his head. "I can't remember so good, baby."

She snorted and turned away.

"The papers said you died, Dutch," Jud said softly. "They fished your body out of the river after it had been there nearly three weeks."

"That was a wise guy," Dutch snarled. "He talked real big. I met him in a bar and he drove me over into Astoria someplace. I had to put the slug on him. Then I find the guy is dead. At least I think he's dead. He's my size, so I switch clothes with him, all my good monogrammed stuff. Then I toss him in the water. Damn if he don't yell and then the current sucks him away."

"Why did you do that?"

"My head hurts and I don't want a murder rap. Besides, Louis Gorgon has licked me and I can't see good enough to fight. I stay with Sam Rice and if I don't

fight, I don't eat." He chuckled. "Oh, I know all about the insurance. So I hide out. I had a place."

"And Sam Rice didn't know that it wasn't your body?"

"No. Not until after the insurance was paid. And then I phoned him up one day. And he said I'd better go to the cops. And I said to him that I'd tell the cops that he had made me hide and he was going to get me out of the country and he had killed that wise guy." Dutch suddenly pressed hard against his forehead with his thumb and fingers. "What was I talking about? This pain—"

While his eyes were shut Jud took the chance to move a bit closer. Dutch looked at him quickly, said, "Get back, guy. Get way back."

"Who else knows you're not dead?" Jud asked.

"I forget. Oh, I let Kid Douglass know it. I figured he might want to squeeze Sam a little. And then, just before I came up here, I got hold of Janey, had her come to my place for a couple days."

Jud glanced at Stella, saw the comprehension in her eyes. Douglass and Jane Tour. Both had known and both had died. Sam Rice hearing the incredible voice of Dutch Jensen on the phone had known that his tightly-knit empire was vulnerable, could collapse at the whim of a blond battered giant whose mind had been damaged by the countless hammerings he had taken. No wonder then that Sam Rice hadn't wanted Jud Harber digging up the facts in the story of Dutch Jensen. Jud immediately recognized that if he could present Tom Donnelly with the single fact of Dutch Jensen alive, the evidence against him would dissolve.

"How long have you been here?" Jud asked.

"Three days. I walked a lot of the way. Hitched at night. Couldn't chance anybody recognizing me."

In a firm voice, Jud said, "You ought to let the doctors go to work on you, Dutch. They could fix that pain, you know. And those eyes."

The blue eyes turned suddenly dull. "Who are you people?" Dutch asked. "Where'd you come from? Where is this place?"

"I'm Stella," she said, walking toward him.

He threatened her with his big fist. "Get back! I don't know you. What did you call me?"

"Your name, of course. Dutch."

"Dutch is dead. He drowned in the river. I seen him. I saw the paper. He's dead I tell you," Jensen said, his voice querulous like a misunderstood child.

Suddenly he turned and went quickly through the door, moving with tight, animal economy of motion, his arms not swinging.

Outside there was an odd metallic sound. Jud glanced at Stella, then went to the door. Dutch had opened the hood of the car; the muscles on his back writhed under the ragged white shirt as, with his bare hands, he tore loose wires, cables, carburetor. He turned and grinned emptily, then looked back at the motor.

Jud clicked off the lights, held Stella tightly, then whispered, "Go on up and lock yourself in your room. Any room. I'm going to try to get the police."

He drifted quietly across the dim room, found the phone, lifted it carefully from the cradle. There was a faint buzzing sound that told him it was hooked up.

"Number please," the shrill voice said, startling him.

In a half whisper, he said, "Get me long distance."

"You'll have to talk up, sir. I can't hear you."

A board creaked behind him. He half turned, was clubbed behind the ear and was knocked sprawling. He fell across the table, spilling a cup and saucer.

Dutch growled low in his throat and began to stalk him, shoulders hunched, huge hands ready, moving with amazing speed.

The dangling phone made thin noises. Dutch listened, turned and went back to the phone. Jud heard him say, "Oh, sure. Yeah, gimme long distance. Long distance? Hey, I want you should give me this number in New York."

Jud didn't recognize the number. There was a long wait. Jud moved, an inch at a time, toward the open window. He knew that if he hurled himself at it, the screen would give.

"Hello, Sam," Dutch said. Jud stopped moving toward the window.

"Sure, this is your boy. Who'd you think? Yeah. No, I'm at the camp. That's right. Sure. That lying wife of mine is here too. Yeah, he's here. Skinny guy. Okay, Sam. And bring the dough. In a big green bundle. All wrapped up nice. Understand?"

He hung up. Jud flung himself at the window, but the screen was tougher than he thought. It split, but not enough. Dutch grabbed him and whirled him around. "Not yet, guy. Not so fast. Sammy Rice wants to talk to you."

"Don't be a damn fool, Jensen! Don't you know what Rice will do? He'll give you the same—"

"Yak, yak, yak," Dutch said. "You got too much lip."

The left drove into Jud's middle, and as he doubled over it, the short right chop drove down at him.

The camp spun like a wooden top in the hands of a giant, and whirled Jud Haber away into the crashing darkness.

He fought the return of consciousness, because with it came pain. But at last he opened his eyes to the bright glare. He was tied tightly to a kitchen chair, his hands lashed painfully behind the back of it.

Jud sat at the kitchen table, and across

the table, the bright lights making harsh shadows on his face, sat Dutch Jensen. A half tumbler of straight liquor was at his elbow.

"Awake, huh?" Jensen said heavily. "Now you can tell me where that tramp went to. Where is she?"

Jud licked his dry lips. "I don't know."

Jensen leaned across the table and cracked his face with the hard heel of his hand. "Where the hell is she?"

The next blow brought merciful unconsciousness. When he awakened he was in pitch blackness. He could hear the distant sound of water lapping against the piling of a dock. Off in the woods a hoarse voice bellowed, "Stella! Oh, Stella baby!" It got too far away, died out altogether. There was no feeling in Jud's hands or feet.

By lurching with his head and shoulders, he managed to tip the chair off balance. His face smashed against the floor and blood filled his mouth. But he was no better off than before. He drifted off into something that resembled sleep.

THE voices awakened him. The voices and the slam of the screen door. Heavy steps in the cabin. He opened his eyes. He was half under the table, and blood was dried on his face. The chair was lifted roughly. The kitchen was gray with dawn.

The chauffeur, Mark, stood by the door. Dutch and Sam Rice stood looking down at him. "This the one?" Dutch asked.

"That's him. Where's the woman?"

"I don't know. She run off somewhere and I can't find her."

Francey Silver strutted in, his white cheeks jiggling. "Why, hello, little man!" he said to Jud. "A pleasure, I assure you."

"It's all yours," Jud said sullenly.

He tried to conceal his wild hope that Stella had gotten clear of the camp, had heard the trouble and had gone after the law.

"Where is she?" Rice asked him.

Jud noticed that both Mark and Francey kept giving Dutch odd, sidelong glances. He guessed that neither of them had known, until arrival at the camp, that Dutch Jensen was still alive.

"I haven't any idea," Jud said.

Sam Rice looked beyond Dutch, nodded at Mark. Jud saw Mark take a quick step forward, hauling a sap out of his hip pocket. Mark had a long strip of adhesive across his temple. The sap flashed up, descended and caught Dutch just over the ear. The big man crumpled slowly and hit the floor with a crash that shook the cabin.

Sam Rice spat on the linoleum. "Mark, get some wire under the camp. And there's some cinder blocks down there. Get them ready and then we'll drag this clown down to the dock and take him swimming."

"For keeps this time," Mark said, as he left.

"And what happens to the little man?" Francey asked.

"Don't rush me, Silver. This has got to be a clean up all the way across the board. We got to get that woman and plant her in the lake beside Dutch. Sort of a family swimming bee. Then I got to figure out what Haber here can tell the cops."

"Maybe the little man better go swimming along with them?"

"Maybe."

"But let me have a heart to heart talk to him first. I owe him a little and I'll gag him so he won't make too much noise."

"There isn't time for that."

Suddenly there was a shout from Mark. Sam and Francey hurried out. They came back, grinning broadly. Mark was carrying Stella. Her face was dead white and her ankle was puffed. Mark said, "She must have tried to drop out the upstairs window and sprained that ankle and crawled under the camp."

"They all swim," Sam Rice said quick-

ly. "That's the only way out. Mark, go get three of those cinder blocks ready. And get some pliers out of the car to cut the wire."

As soon as Mark left, Sam said to Francey, "Or maybe four cinder blocks."

"But not five, of course."

"No. Not five."

They both had their backs to Dutch. Jud saw an eyelash flicker, saw the big fingers whiten with their pressure against the floor. He said quickly, "Sam, you're quite a manager. You kill Jane Tour, and Kid Douglass. Now you're going to kill me, Dutch, Stella and Mark. When will you get around to Francey?"

"Never, little man," Francey said. "When I don't make a phone call, a special phone call, on the first of the month, an envelope goes to the New York City Police. Sam knows that."

"Did you have to kill Jane Tour?" Jud asked.

"She drank too much. And when she drank she talked too much."

"Won't Dutch be a pretty heavy load to dump over the side of the rowboat?" Jud asked.

"You talk too much," Sam said.

Dutch's eyes were still closed. Stella's eyes had a blank, dead look. Sam's hands trembled as he lit a cigarette.

Mark walked heavily in, said, "The big guy first?"

Sam nodded. Mark bent over and grabbed Dutch's ankles. "Give me a hand, Francey," he said.

"One hand is all I can use at the moment, thanks to the little man over there."

Francey bent over to take hold of Dutch's wrist. Dutch whirled, sat up, grabbed Francey's wrist, yanked him down. He fell on his back across Dutch's raised knee, Dutch's heavy forearm across his throat. He gasped once, there was a muffled crack and Francey, like a doughy little doll, was rolled away toward the table. As Sam turned Jud heard move-

ment behind him, felt the sudden release of pressure at his wrists, knew that Stella had taken that chance to crawl closer, to sever the rope with a knife grabbed from the shelf.

Dutch scrambled to his feet, just as Mark yanked a short-barreled revolver from the waistband of his pants.

"Don't move," Mark ordered, holding the gun on Dutch.

Dutch's eyes were mad, and his lips lifted off his teeth. He took two slow steps toward Mark. The shots blasted the still air. The big broken hand closed over the revolver and Mark screamed as it was twisted out of his hand. He turned to run and the butt of the revolver, smashed with all the force of the right hook that had floored twenty men in the ring, hit Mark behind the ear as he went out the screen door.

Dutch turned around slowly and the blood bubbled through the two holes in his massive chest. He took a slow step toward Sam Rice. Sam made a shrill bleating sound.

Dutch gave him one dull glance and then turned toward Stella, who had pulled herself up by clutching the stove.

Sam made a dash for the door, and Dutch ignored him. Jud picked up the knife in numb hands and tried to cut the ropes that bound his ankles.

For that one last moment of his life, Dutch became like he once had been. In that instant, Jud knew why Stella had married him.

"All this," Dutch said heavily and brokenly. "A waste. Things—could have been—different. I'm sorry—"

He reeled to one side, his face distorted. Clutching hands reached out for support that wasn't there and he fell.

A car motor started. Gears clashed and the sound dwindled into the distance.

Stella didn't cry with dignity. Her face screwed up like the face of a child. Jud blundered over to her on numbed feet,

held her close for a precious moment.

He left her alone with Dutch while he looked first at Francey and then at Mark.

Stella had covered Dutch with a blanket from one of the upstairs beds. Jud Haber went to the phone, said flatly, "I wish to report three murders."

THEY sat side by side in the small, very efficient looking office. After a week, Stella was still favoring her taped ankle. They finished reading the typed reports and signed them.

Tom Donnelly's handshake was warm and firm. "If a cop ever apologizes, Jud, this is it."

"I don't blame you. As far as I'm concerned, the police work in this thing has been fine. But I do blame the upstate people for letting Sam Rice slip through the net and get back here to town."

Donnelly shrugged, his face impassive. "What the hell? It saved the state the trouble of burning him for the Douglass killing. He went back to his apartment to pick up the cash he had stashed there, and his good wife, the crazy Gloria, got him with the scissors when he bent over to look at her scrap book. A very determined woman, that Gloria. Maybe shock treatments will cure her."

Stella shuddered. "Is murder always so senseless?" she asked.

Donnelly grinned. "Count 'em, folks. The stranger in the river. Joe Halloran from Cleveland, his name was. That's one. Tour is two. Douglass is three. The chauffeur is four. Silver is five. Dutch is six and Sammy is seven. The law of averages says you two ought to lead a pretty quiet life from here on in."

He stood up. "Thanks again, folks. The file is closed."

Outside headquarters the rain was silvery on the late night streets.

"Taxi?" Jud asked.

"I want to walk for a little while. I

don't want to keep you, Jud." She said.

He walked in silence beside her, matching his step to hers. "What's the matter, darling?" he asked. "A week ago we were set for keeps. Now you freeze me out."

In the glare of the streetlight, her face was expressionless, her lips tight. "You saw my kind of people, Jud. You saw them die. Run along and have a nice clean life."

"What I want doesn't count?" he asked.

"Not particularly. Not when I know what's best."

He walked in silence for a half block. Then he chuckled. When he did so, she looked at him in quick surprise, her eyes showing the extent of the hurt.

"Don't mind me," he said. "I was just laughing at myself for being such a damn fool. I fell for that line of yours about kids and cooking and picking up handfuls of dirt in the park. Me, I should know better."

"Have fun laughing," she said coldly.

"I am. I am. I even had a friend of mine get me a lease for a year on a little house down in a hick town in Virginia. I've got enough in the bank so that I thought if we took it easy we could live okay. Nice black soil there, too. Things grow good. I should know. I was brought up in that town. I thought we'd have a year there and by then the book would be done."

She stopped then and turned toward him, the old spirit and insolence back in her eyes. Her warm lips were parted. "Okay, newsboy," she said huskily. "My conscience is clear. I gave you your chance to run. But you didn't. Now you've got yourself an armful."

They stood in the rain and he kissed her.

"Buy our tickets soon," she whispered.

"They're on my bureau," he said.

"Along with a blank they want at the City Hall."

KILL ME, KATE!

By EDWARD WILLIAM MURPHY



Pat sensed danger
and jumped aside.

It was curtains for cute Kate, the sensational sleuth—unless her hard-hitting hubby could battle his way through the homicide-hungry murderess and her slashing sidekick.

DETEKTIVE Pat Shannon tried to tell himself he was as happy as a chorus girl in a mink factory. Lolling at ease with a huge beer in his hand, he was listening to a quiz program that practically guaranteed to make every contestant a millionaire. Everything was swell, perfectly swell, he told himself. All

the same, he'd feel better if his wife, Kathleen, had been a little less mysterious when she left the apartment earlier that evening. All he had been able to pry out of her pretty lips was that she had a date with the commissioner!

Kathleen was gaining a reputation as the city's ace policewoman. As a result they were handing her more of the spectacular cases. Pat Shannon didn't know whether he liked it at all.

High heels clicked out a brisk message against the marble flooring of the outer corridor.

Kathleen Shannon had been at the head of the line when they were handing out accessories. She was tall and statuesque and at first glance looked frosty. A stub nose and merrily twinkling green eyes convinced all who took a second glance, all of the male sex between six and ninety-six that is, that Kathleen was anything but frosty. She had been voted "The girl I'd most like to work a case with" by the past seven classes at the police academy. Her green eyes took in her husband sprawled on her best sectional sofa with his feet stuck out of the window.

"I'll have some sawdust thrown on the floor," she said sweetly. "Then we'll have a real barroom in our home!" Stalking over to the radio she punched buttons until she got some dance music. Kathleen hated quiz programs!

Satisfied that he had nettled her, Pat hauled his feet in from the window. "Ah-h," he breathed, "the Queen of Centre Street. And how did things go with the commissioner, Madame Sleuth?"

"Cut the comedy," Kathleen snapped. "We've got plenty of work to do." Changing the subject abruptly, she said: "Pass that glass. Do you want me to perish of thirst?" She pulled a tricky little hat from her cascade of red hair, tossed it across the room and dropped beside Pat on the sofa.

"The commissioner's blood pressure is

getting out of hand over these four slasher murders. The papers are sniping at him from all angles and he's decided on a bold step—he's letting me try a scheme—"

"Whoa!" Pat roared. "Nix, no good, whatever you're about to say is out." His stomach seemed to have parachuted down to the laces on his shoes. He knew the fantastic schemes his wife could devise.

Kate ignored his protest. "You know the facts in the case: these four girls were hacked to death in the same fashion in the last two days. It looks as if the same person did all four jobs. Singularly enough, there doesn't seem to be any connection between them; except for one thing that may be nothing at all—each of the girls had been seen in the Unicorn night spot on Fifty-third Street. And then too, each of them had galloped off with somebody else's cash. To put it vulgarly, they were on the dodge."

"I get the picture," Pat said crisply. "Everybody who swills the Unicorn's martinis ups and dies." He lowered his voice to a secretive whisper. "And we, the daring sleuths, are going to bust the case wide open."

Kathleen stabbed her mate with a look cold enough to liquefy oxygen. "Maybe I should talk the commissioner into sending you back to your old beat; the air will be good for that meatball you call a brain. Now listen, and don't miss any of this: I'm going up to the Unicorn tonight. All I want you to do is walk in, give the place the professional scrutiny, grill me for a few minutes, and leave."

"Then what?"

"Just come home, take a shower, drop your pretty pink body ino bed and cork off for a restful sleep, that's all!"

"Wa-ait, a minute! You can kill me, Kate, but I'm not going to let you—"

Kathleen shut off his protests with a firm finger. "Don't you worry. Moynahan will be outside, ready to pick me up when I leave. I won't be in any danger.

The commissioner was pretty firm on that section of the setup!"

"Why Moynahan? Why can't he go in and give you the business in the joint while I wait outside?"

Kathleen bounced an impatient glance at her husband's set face. "I wanted someone who looks like a cop to speak to me in the bar," she explained as if to a child. "You couldn't look more like a cop if you had a badge tattooed on your forehead!"

"I don't like it!" Pat snapped. "I don't like even the smallest part of it."

"Nonsense, darling," Kathleen said soothingly. Her voice as sweet and smooth as sun-warmed butterscotch. "You know nothing will happen to me. And, anyway, I want you where I can reach you quickly on the phone if anything breaks. You know I have to depend on you; these other fellows in the department can't stack up against my cop!" Kathleen didn't need lessons on winding a husband about her finger—she was an expert in that field. She won her point within three minutes.

THE Unicorn Club had seen the last days of its glory when repeal made speak-easies passé. With the passing years, the club had gotten a little brassier, a trifle dirtier, and the patrons a shade crummier. It was located in the basement of an old brownstone building that looked tired enough to lay down in the street at any moment. A set of brownstone steps led up to the first story. Beneath the steps, the arched entrance led to the night club. A wrought-iron grille that left flakes of rust on the fingers sagged across this archway.

Pat Shannon kicked the grill open and shoved his wide shoulders into the thick, overheated air of the club. On a tiny dais at the far end of the smoky room, a hopped-up trombonist was making his instrument scream in agony. The sound knifed through the smoky air and drove

into the eardrums like sharp darts. The patrons might have been enjoying the music, but you couldn't tell it from their faces.

Kathleen had been right; Pat looked so much like a cop that a half dozen patrons hastily buried themselves in menus, napkins, or dropped their heads in imitation of deep thought.

Reflecting that conscience was a wonderful thing to find on Fifty-third Street, Pat let his eyes drift over the room. He hardly recognized Kathleen who was sitting alone at a table at the end of the room. She had changed her makeup and her hairdo enough to make her cheap and hard.

A waiter in a spotted tuxedo and a greasy boiled shirt hurried over to Pat. He flashed a mottled toothed smile at the big cop. "Yes-s sir, what can we do for you s-sir?" His s's came out in a fine spray of spittle. His canine teeth were capped with gold that twinkled as he spoke.

"Know that girl over there?" Pat demanded.

"Which one s-sir? The one with the red hair? No s-sir, never s-saw her before."

"All right." Pat gave the waiter a bite of his badge and a hard look. Without another word, he squeezed his way between tightly packed tables to the one at which Kathleen was seated.

A cigarette was stuck to her over-painted lower lip. The smoke, curling up, caused her to half close one heavily mascaraed eye. Pat's blood pressure began to soar as he noticed the dress she was wearing had a neckline of the plunging type.

"Put your eyeballs back in, stupid." She hissed under her breath as she gave him a slow size-up with her shadowed eyes. "Are you trying to crab the act?"

"Look sister," Pat snarled loudly, "I want to talk to you." Under his breath he asked, "See anything out of the way?"

"Only that fat woman over there. She gave me a quick deal in the powder room," Kathleen added significantly. "Said if I needed protection she could help me. I coyly dropped a hint or two that I might be interested, but not right now. She hasn't given up yet, I'm sure."

Suddenly Kathleen raised her voice. "Look copper, you ain't got nothin' on me. Now beat it before I get nasty." She blew a plume of smoke directly into Pat's eyes and, pushing back her chair, walked sinously away toward the ladies' lounge.

Pat stalked toward the exit. He was rehearsing a number of things he was going to say to Kathleen when this job was over.

THE telephone bell dragged Pat Shannon out of a sound sleep. Grumbling, he picked up the phone and growled: "Shannon."

"Pat—Captain McCarthy. Is Kathleen there?"

Pat felt as though he were sunk to the chin in dry ice. "No!" What's happened?"

"Look Pat, something slipped somewhere. Moynahan missed her when she left. He waited till the joint closed and then went in. She was gone! The few people cleaning up claimed they hadn't seen her!"

The cold paralyzed Pat. "You mean she's alone—with a killer?" he yelled.

"Now wait, don't go off like that. Maybe she didn't even meet the killer!"

"Where is she then?" Pat roared. "It's four o'clock and she isn't here yet!"

"Don't worry," McCarthy counselled. "We've got half the force working on this. And anyway your wife is a smart apple, she won't get into any trouble."

"I'm worried!" Pat bellowed. Slamming the receiver back onto its cradle, he slipped on his shoes, pulled up his tie, and brushed back his chestnut hair with hasty fingers. Going to a chest of drawers he

got his gun a five-inch cylinder of teakwood that fitted smoothly into the palm of his hand. Stowing the weapons into his pockets he left the apartment on the run. That waiter might know something. He must have seen Kathleen leaving the night club.

The lank-haired waiter with the golden canines half-opened his door and demanded sourly. "Whatcha want? I'm tryin' ta get some s-sleep, don't bother me. I just got rid of a flock a cops."

Pat crowded against the door, bowling the waiter Sibby Raphael, back into a room as tight and smelly as a rat's nest.

"That girl I spoke to tonight," Pat said without any preliminaries, "what did she do after I left?"

"Who knows?" Raphael shrugged. "I don't get paid to watch the tomatoes that come into the joint. I told that to the cops who was just here."

Pat dug his teakwood club out of his pocket and juggled it before the waiter's dull eyes. "I asked, what did that girl do after I left. Did she meet anyone?"

"What do I know. Them tramps is always—" Raphael's words broke off abruptly as Pat leaned over and tapped the waiter with his teak-weighted fist. The waiter caromed off the end of the bed, bowled over a table on which a pitcher of water and a glass had been standing, and brought up in the corner with a resounding thump. After a dazed moment he spit one of his golden canines onto the wet floor.

Grabbing the waiter by the front of his dirty shirt, Pat hauled him to his feet. "For the third time," he said ominously, "what happened to that girl?"

A trickle of blood spilled out of the waiter's gray mouth as he quavered. "S-Swede Hansen picked her up about a half hour after you beat it. He s-slipped me a s-sawbuck to let them out through the private entrance."

The private entrance! Suddenly Pat

remembered! That entrance was a hang-over from the club's speak-easy days when a number of the clientele were extremely shy and bashful about meeting the law in the form of a raiding party. The private entrance had been cleverly built into the walls of the establishment. It led out, through a blind alley, into the next street. No wonder Moynahan had missed Katy when she left the club; the big dope hadn't bothered to cover the private entrance.

"Swede Hansen, you say. When did they leave?" Hansen was a flashy young man with no visible means of support, but with a nicely stuffed wallet. He was rumored to be the man behind a policy bank, but the police had never been able to nail the numbers racket to him. He didn't seem the murder type—but that too wasn't certain.

"Maybe one o'clock, I don't remember." The end of the teakwood dowel protruding from the top of Pat Shannon's fist did wonders for the waiter's memory. Hastily he blurted, "Yeah, it was ten after one exactly. An' listen, I can give you the address they was goin' to. S-Swede tole me if a guy he was lookin' for came in I was to tell him they'd be at a hotel on S-Sixth Avenue."

Somewhat mollified, Pat dropped the weapon into his pocket. "If I find you're lying," he said ominously, "I'm going to come back and crack you open like a bag of peanuts!"

"I'm not lyin'," Raphael whined.

At that moment the door was kicked open and a powerful looking man plunged into the room. He was wearing a well-cut tweed suit, a cream-colored oxford shirt and a yellow knit tie with a knot a size larger than his fist. His cheeks were as smooth and pink as a woman's. A thin, white scar ran from the corner of his mouth down to his chin, giving his cherubic face a slight leer. He had light blue eyes, one of which was almost lost in a discolored mass of swollen flesh. Someone

had decorated Mr. Swede Hansen with as cute a shiner as ever was hung on a mortal outside of the prize ring.

The powerful looking young man ignored Pat Shannon as he charged across the room and let the end of his fist splat against Sibby Raphael's thin mouth.

"That'll teach you to put me next to a tomato with a punch like a pile driver!" Hansen roared at the fallen Sibby.

THE teakwood dowel in Pat's fist caught the powerful Swede right at the corner of his squared jaw. Hansen wobble-legged into the bed and collapsed with a grunt. His eyes were far back in his head, showing half-moons of white when Pat rolled him over on his back, but he was not completely out.

"You, Raphael!" Pat snapped. "Wait in the hall. Don't lam, or I'll have you up for everything but kidnapping!" Turning, he pulled Hansen to a sitting position on the bed.

All the fight had gone out of Hansen. Beneath his well-padded tweeds he was about as muscular as a soft-boiled egg. Sullenly he took in the shield Pat Shannon shoved under his nose.

"What happened to the girl you left the Unicorn with?" Pat demanded.

"What you mean is, what happened to me!" Hansen corrected sourly. "Huh!" He ran tender fingers over his mottled eye. "You think I had insulted her the way she blew up." His well-manicured fingers explored his jaw. "What did you use, a hammer?"

"Go on!" Pat snapped.

"How did I know she was Mrs. John L. Sullivan. When the stars stopped, she was gone. That's all I know."

"You mean, you didn't see her again?"

Hansen probed the inside of his mouth with his tongue. "Feels like nothing's broke," he commented gloomily. He lifted his good eye to Pat's implacable face. "Yeah, I saw her just once more since

then. I was coming over here to hand that scrawny rat a handful of fist when I saw her climbing into a cab with Mrs. Devore!"

"Who's Mrs. Devore?"

The man on the bed shrugged his padded shoulders. "What kind of cop are you?" he asked sourly. "Mrs. Devore owns the Unicorn. She's got a couple of guys fronting for her, but she's the boss!"

"Keep talking," Pat said. "Where does she powder her nose when she gets up in the morning?"

"She got a thirteen-room flop over on West Fifty-seventh that costs somebody a grand a month."

"Somebody?" Pat growled. "What does that mean?" His first urgency had worn off somewhat. If Katie was with a woman she must be safe, he felt.

"The Unicorn's been hardly making expenses lately," Hansen explained. "I know old lady Devore was knocking herself out a short time back trying to keep the joint open. Now, she floating high—you figure it!"

Pat's brain was churning like a tabulating machine, and it kicked out an answer almost as quickly. All of the girls who had been murdered were bulging with stolen cash—cash that never was found! His stomach felt as though it were digesting powdered glass! Katie was with that woman now! Pat galloped for the door.

Third Avenue was deserted at that hour of the morning. Pat almost ran toward the lights of an all-night restaurant on the off chance a cab driver might be gulping coffee inside.

Except for a sleepy short-order cook the place was empty. Pat had to get a squad car rolling toward Mrs. Devore's place. Slapping a nickel into a phone fastened to the wall he ground out his precinct number on the dial.

The desk man snapped. "Hold it Shannon, Captain McCarthy's been jittering around for an hour trying to get you." In

spite of Pat's angry orders, the man switched him over to his superior, Captain McCarthy.

McCarthy's voice was crisp with displeasure. "Where have you been hiding?" he snapped. "The commissioner's down here waiting to speak to you!" He made it sound as if the commissioner might at any instant snap his fingers and wipe out the entire force. "You know the commissioner doesn't like to be kept waiting!"

"Look, Captain, I've got a lead on where Kathleen might be. I've got to run it down!" Pat said desperately.

"Nonsense," McCarthy snapped, "give the tip to me and I'll have a squad car cover it for you. You can't keep the commissioner waiting."

"But—" Pat pleaded.

McCarthy had only one method of dealing with the men under him when they questioned his orders. "It'll be tough pounding a beat up in Pelham," he said ominously. "Get down here and make it snappy!"

Before Pat could answer the last stinging order the captain had crashed his instrument back on its hook, breaking the connection.

Savagely Pat dialed the number of the closest cab company. While he waited, the sleepy counterman said: "You a cop, huh? You guys ain't doin' so good. I see in the paper they foun' another a them slasher victims, over on the West side. Says she's a cute redhead. You guys shouldn't let them kill no redheads, they ain't enough a them aroun'."

Pat's stomach hit his ankles on the way down. Seizing the early edition lying on the counter he scanned the headlines, and the scanty story:

REDHEAD LATEST

SLASHER VICTIM!

An unidentified woman, about twenty-six years of age was found slashed to death on West Twentieth Street at three-thirty a.m. by Carl Munson, a milkman. The woman, whose red head was almost completely sev-

ered is the latest victim in a series that have the city terrified. . . .

Katy! The savor of life seemed to ooze out of Pat's big frame. He recalled what he had said earlier, "Kill me, Kate, but I'm not going to let you—" And now it was Kate who was—killed. He felt cold and lifeless. And then, suddenly the anger burst in him. He was still cold, but it was the coldness of a man who is going to commit murder!

THE apartment building in which Mrs. Devore lived was dark and lifeless. Pat slid forward on the cab seat and in the light illuminating the driver's license checked his police positive. Six slugs. Six slugs to avenge the beautiful Kathleen!

Furtive movement in the street held him just as he was about to leave the cab. Pat's hard eyes narrowed; it was Sibby Raphael, the waiter at the Unicorn!

The waiter shot a stealthy glance at the cab but evidently didn't see who was inside, for without hesitation he opened the door.

Pat found himself grinding his teeth. That little rat was up to something. This sneaky visit in the middle of the night had something to do with Katy's death!

Pat strode over to the locked door, twisted the knob as hard as possible and threw his weight against the glassed panel. The automatic lock gave with a snap like a gun-shot. Pat plunged into a softly-lit lobby. The bank of mail boxes on the wall near the self-service elevators gave him the number of Mrs. Devore's apartment. It was on the sixth floor. The indicator on the elevator showed the car had just stopped at that floor. Sibby Raphael must be entering the apartment now!

Pat took the stairs four at a time.

A little peep hole in the center of Mrs. Devore's door was slightly open. Evidently it had been opened for Sibby Raphael and imperfectly closed. With cautious fin-

gers Pat prodded the circular plate open further and peeked into a small foyer. By straining sideways he could see part of a living room.

In the center of the room the large woman Kathleen had pointed out at the Unicorn was standing with her hands on her hips.

"A fine mess you've gotten us into!"

Sibby whined. "I had to get rid of her any way I could. What else could I do?"

"Dope!" The woman prowled back and forth on a thick maroon rug. "We're in it now and bad! The cops will dig out the hideaway we've been running for lam-misters and after that they'll smoke out the killings. I was a fool to let you kill that first kid. You didn't even have sense enough to get her out of the hideaway before killing her."

"Could I help it? S-she screamed. Them other babes got wise."

"I know, I know. This Jane figured the setup and jumped me. Lucky I was able to put her out of the way. But we've got to think fast if we're going to beat the chair."

The butt of the gun in Pat's palm grew slick with sweat as he listened with horror to his wife's murderers discussing their crime. Leveling the gun, he sent two slugs screaming into the lock. A terrific kick finished the job that the slugs had started. The door crashed open. Pat charged into the room like a maddened buffalo.

Sibby Raphael's eyes started from his head. He squealed like a rabbit in the jaws of a wolf. A thin slaver of foam spilled from his lips. Desperately, he pulled a knife from his dirty clothing and slashed wildly at Pat.

Pat jumped clear. He took no chances with the slavering killer. The .38 kicked once. The slug caught Raphael in his thin chest, bowling him over like a duck in a shooting gallery. As Pat's spun to see what Mrs. Devore was doing, his eyes raked a sofa set against the wall. With a

start of horror, he saw a woman's body on the sofa. It was Katy!

Mrs. Devore struck like a tigress, attacking with teeth and claws. Her sudden onslaught threw Pat off balance. His feet caught in the thick rug and he went heavily to his knees. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the big woman bend over quickly. Her heavy breathing sounded like sheets of sandpaper rubbing against each other. One hand snatched up her skirts, revealing a garter holster. The gun was so small that it was lost in her fist, but its wicked bark was as deadly at that short range as a heavy police positive would be.

Someone screamed. Pat, his eyes on the hefty woman, sensed danger and jumped aside. His movement saved him.

Pat squeezed off a shot with the muzzle of his gun against the waiter's chest.

The waspish bark of Mrs. Devore's tiny gun echoed the heavier boom of Pat's .38. Pat spun to meet the new attack, and almost dropped his gun in astonishment. The big woman was savagely struggling with a slender, red-headed fury. Somehow Katy was very much alive.

Mrs. Devore thrashed about using her weight like a flail. Before Pat could move the big woman dumped Katy to the carpet. The muzzle of her tiny gun vanished into Katy's red mane.

Pat's one hundred and eighty pounds crashed against the big woman just as the gun cracked viciously.

FINGERNAILS as sharp as steel blades dug burning furrows into Pat's face. He wasn't fighting a woman, but a savage jungle beast. In the mad swirl Pat couldn't see what had happened to Katy. He drove his fist into the angle of Mrs. Devore's jaw and she went limp.

Pat leaped across the room, gathering up his wife who was sitting up on the carpet. Her hand was clapped against the

burnished mane of her hair. "Katy!" Pat croaked, "I thought she had killed you!"

"She did even worse than that!" Kathleen's green eyes shot sparks across the room. "Look at this burned patch in my hair!"

Pat groaned. But his evident relief ruined the effect of the groan. "What a woman! I save her life, and do I get one single word of praise? No, all I get is complaints that her carrot-colored mop is scorched!"

"You saved me?" Her voice was overloaded with contempt. "You just about ruined everything, that's what you did! Perhaps I'd better tell you that we've got a recording set in the apartment below. Everything that was said in this apartment was being overheard by our men."

"What?" Pat demanded. "Who had it put there?"

"Why, the commissioner and I, of course. I called him right after I sloughed Hansen. The Swede gave me the tip-off on Mrs. Devore's sudden wealth, and I worked it out from there. They had a neat setup for hiding girls wanted by the police. Naturally their price came high. The first girl was murdered because she was tired of being hunted and was going to turn herself in to the police. Sibby tried to stop her. He did too—with a knife. The other girls heard her scream, and so they were slated for the embalmers.

"I sort of hinted to Devore that I knew about her business, suggesting a small price for keeping my mouth shut. She enticed me up here and tried to slip me a Mickey. But your little Katy only drinks with her big bold husband, so I unloaded the drink behind the sofa. Now, stop that will you. Please, Pat, the commissioner's watching."

"So what—a guy doesn't save his wife's life every day, he deserves a break when he does."

She laughed off the stranger's chill warning—and became
luscious game for the

CURSE OF THE BLOOD-RED ROSE



A sharp spasm of fear tore
at Yvonne's heart. . . .

By **JOSEPH W. QUINN**

YVONNE'S long, crimson-tipped fingers cupped the solitary blood-red rose in the gilded porcelain vase that stood on the table among her grease-paints, powders and puffs.

Early each evening the Sheraton Flower Shop delivered the rose to her dressing room in the Paradise Club, where thrice nightly she thrilled the customers with voluptuous figure and throaty voice

in her own inimitable song-and-dance routine.

After Alan, her husband of two glorious years, and her nightclub career, she loved roses. Big roses. Roses red as life's warm blood, with petals fragile, soft, smooth as satin, teeming with living fragrance—roses that thrilled her to touch, to smell, to behold.

Alan, whose work in commercial art kept him confined to their modest apartment through much of each day, had often complained, good-naturedly enough, about her fetish.

"All these roses, Yvonne. They make the place smell like some funeral parlor. At times I catch myself looking around for the corpse."

"Nonsense, darling," she'd laugh and run her fingers through the rich brown waves in his hair, or stroke the lines of his face. "It's just that old imagination of yours. It's having itself another one of its morbid sprees."

"Besides," he'd add earnestly, his brow pulled into a tight frown, "they give me a strange feeling. A queer uneasiness that I can't seem to shake off."

She'd offer him her lips then, puckered into a bud, moist and red. He'd take them, hungrily, and forget his uneasiness. . . .

A week, two, sometimes a whole month would go by before he'd mention the roses again. Never had he insisted that she do away with them. It wouldn't be like Alan to deprive her of any pleasure, especially one so simple and yet so full.

He was good, Alan. Good to her. Good to everybody. In fact, she'd often been struck by the thought that he went much too far out of his way to be good.

It had never occurred to her that anything could ever change him.

Light from the bulbs that lined the rim of the mirror over the table gave her skin a gleaming texture, comparable to the porcelain of the vase. She arched forward, drew in a long slow breath, pulled the

fragrance of the rose deep into her lungs.

It was then that the knock sounded on the door panel.

"Come in," she invited, moving her dark head so that the tip of her nose brushed delightfully against satiny petals.

Hinges creaked as the door swung slowly inward. The caller didn't speak. Yvonne turned her eyes toward the mirror. She glimpsed the reflection of a tall man whose eyes were shadowed under the snap brim of a battered gray felt hat. The front of his khaki trenchcoat was unbuttoned and unbelted. It hung in loose folds, exposing the vest and coat of a rough, brown tweed suit.

Yvonne uttered a single, startled cry. She straightened, turned, snatched her crimson robe from a nearby clothes-tree.

An amused smile toyed with the corners of his mouth. "Think I was your husband?"

"I know his knock. Any other callers would be female—otherwise they'd speak before they entered."

"Sorry." He dug a pack of cigarettes out of coat pocket. "You're just as beautiful out of the spotlights as under them. Cigarette?"

"Thank you, no." Yvonne knotted the robe's wide sash, quivering in a sudden chill. She couldn't be sure whether it was the effect of the early morning cold creeping into the dressing room, or her caller. "Only the performers are allowed back here," she pointed out. "No strangers."

"I'M HERE," he put a cigarette in his lips, let it dangle unlighted. "How doesn't matter." He studied her face.

"I suppose it's about that little accident the other night?"

"When your husband borrowed a friend's roadster to take you on a wee-hour joy ride," he finished for her. "Quite a bump he's wearing."

"He hit his head on the steering wheel. That fool ahead of us slowed without

warning." Her tone grew reproachful. "It would have been more decent of you to call at our apartment, during the day. After all, it's my husband that you want to see."

He put flame to his cigarette, flipped the match away. "It's you I want to see. And it's not about that accident."

"No? Then—" Her brow pulled into a frown. She flung a sidewise glance at the battered alarm clock ticking noisily on a shelf. The hands showed five to three. "My husband should be her any moment."

"Picks you up after that last show every night?" It was more a statement than a question.

"You seem to know a lot about us. I'd almost think you were a detective."

"Officially, no. I'm afraid you'll find that your husband will be a little late tonight. If he gets here at all."

Yvonne's white teeth dug into the red of her underlip. "Has—has something happened?"

"Depends upon how you look at it."

Cold tentacles of fear clawed at Yvonne's heart. She waited, her fingers curled into little balls at her sides.

"Looks like your husband's trying to drink up all the Scotch in town."

"But," she came back at him almost vehemently, "Alan doesn't drink!"

"Didn't," he corrected. He crossed the room, cigarette smoke trailing blue tendrils over his narrow shoulders. He touched the underside of the huge rose, cocked an eye at her. "Pretty fond of roses, aren't you?"

Yvonne held the door wide open. "You've not told me who you are or what you want. I'll thank you to leave. At once! Whatever business you have with me will hold till this afternoon at our apartment. Four twenty six—"

"West Side Avenue," he finished flatly.

Yvonne flashed him a fiery look, her lips pulled into a tense, thin line.

He dropped his cigarette, ground it out

with his heel. "Don't be so quick to chase me away. It may be that I'm saving you."

"Saving me?" she laughed scornfully. "Are you crazy? Saving me from what?"

"Death!"

Yvonne paled. Instinctively her crimson-tipped fingers sought the white column of her throat. "If this is your idea of a joke Mister whatever-your-name—"

"The name's Vaughn," he lifted his foot to the seat of the chair, let his weight and arm come down on upraised knee. "Spike Vaughn. Newspaperman. The *Gazette*. Been overseas quite a few years. While I was away my sister, Ella, went out to a town named Wokane and married a guy named Fred Daring. Never had the pleasure of meeting my brother-in-law." He paused, eyed her.

Yvonne tossed the name Wokane over in her mind. Only once had Alan mentioned his home town, where he'd also gone through college. An orphan, he'd come to New York to take up commercial art, at which he'd managed to find a measure of success. The name of the town had sounded something like Wokane. She became conscious of Spike Vaughn's cool blue eyes, watching her narrowly.

"Does the name sound familiar?" he ventured.

"No," she answered quickly, impulsively—then wondered why she had lied. But had she lied? After all, lots of towns have names that sound alike.

"How much *do* you know about your husband's past?" he shot at her.

"That, Mr. Vaughn, is none of your concern."

HE SHRUGGED, thumbed his hat back on his head, revealing the fore part of a thatch of reddish brown hair. "Ella was very pretty, very vivacious. A swell kid. Daring was madly in love with her." He let his eyes sweep up over Yvonne's form, from satin dance slippers

to the jet black eyes set deep in the creamy oval of her face. "She looked a lot like you. A lot like you," he repeated.

"Thank you." Yvonne crossed to the table, threw back the glass lid of her cigarette box, lifted a long, rose-tinted cigarette to her lips.

"Apparently," Spike Vaughn struck a match for her, "Daring was a nice guy—except for a vivid imagination and a fiercely jealous nature. That's a wicked combination."

"Always," she agreed flatly, letting rose-scented smoke plume from her nostrils.

"He killed her."

Yvonne's eyes widened. "Oh!" Her tone was genuinely sympathetic.

"Strangled her in a fit of jealous rage, then vanished." He sought and held her eyes with his own. "Daring and your husband look very much alike."

"Really, Mr. Vaughn! Lots of people look alike. We all have one or more duplicates of ourselves in this world."

"In Wokane a young fellow named Alan Newton was Daring's idol and pal. Put a mustache on your husband's upper lip, take the gray out of his temples, part his hair down the middle instead of far on the right side, and you've got—Fred Daring!"

Yvonne's tone was one of incredulous amazement. "Are you trying to tell me that after Fred Daring killed your sister he would be stupid enough to assume the identity of a close friend?"

"If my theory is correct, and I'm fairly sure that it is, your husband doesn't *know* that he's actually Fred Daring."

"That's fantastic!" she scoffed.

"Daring was the kind who could commit murder, but not the kind to get away with it—knowingly. He was emotional, excitable, easily flustered, always damning himself for the things that he did that were wrong. He wanted profound respect, but his complex, unstable nature always got in his way. That's why he idolized Newton, who was admired and respected

by everyone. The last Wokane saw of Alan Newton was when he left for New York, after his folks died, to study commercial art."

Yvonne's nails bit into the palms of her hand. She waited.

"Daring, you see," Spike Vaughn's voice went on, "could do a bit of drawing, too. But with him it was a hobby. His business was banking. I've learned that Newton didn't stay in New York very long. Sailed to South America. He's probably still there."

He took his foot off the chair, straightened. "Daring, after killing Ella, was overwhelmed by a sense of guilt. The mind will tolerate only so much of anything, particularly an extreme sense of guilt. Sometimes it cracks. Sometimes it loses its identity. Amnesia. Or it will assume the identity of another person known to be good and respected."

"You think that Daring assumed the identity of Alan Newton, *my* husband?"

"Not only that, but I'm afraid he's on the point of returning to his real identity. In which case he's very apt to kill you. Consider this: Daring was a drinker. Your husband didn't drink. He's drinking now. You look a lot like Ella. Hence he was drawn to you. And Ella was very fond of roses. . . ."

"Roses?"

"Did your roses ever disturb your husband?"

She ignored his question. "What do you intend to do?"

"Wait here for him—for your sake."

"No, Mr. Vaughn." She moved across to the door, held the knob in mute invitation for him to leave.

SPIKE VAUGHN buttoned and belted his trenchcoat. "That's up to you. Your husband got a bad wallop in that accident. It was enough to start him back to his real identity. I'd advise you to stay clear of him. Leave now."

"Thank you, Mr. Vaughn. I've always been able to manage my own affairs. Your story is far too fantastic for even a child to believe."

Spike Vaughn shrugged, turned, went out. Yvonne closed the door. Alone now, thoughts began piling in on her. Alan going far out of his way to be good. Alan complaining about her roses and the strange uneasiness they gave him. Alan's moodiness since that accident.

But, no! It was all a crazy nightmarish story concocted by Spike Vaughn.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor. Involuntarily, Yvonne sent her hand to her throat. She stared at the door panel.

There was no knock. It swung in hard. Alan stood there, teetering a little. His eyes seemed bloodshot, glazed.

"Alan!"

He moved toward her.

"Alan, you—you've been drinking!"

"Who was that man?" his voice was loud, guttural. "I saw him leave here. Damn you! Who was he?"

"A newspaperman."

"What did he want?"

"A story," she blurted.

"You're lying!" His feverish gaze swung to the rose on the table. He swept his arm in a vicious arc. Rose and vase tumbled to the floor. The vase shattered with brittle sound. "You and your roses! You and your men! You've come back to haunt me, taunt me! Well, you can't! You hear! You can't do it!"

He lunged at her. A sharp spasm of fear tore at Yvonne's heart, put a tight band across her chest. The scream started in her throat, but never got out. His fingers closed about her neck.

Yvonne kicked savagely, but her soft slippers had no effect on his shins. She clawed frantically at the rigid bars of his wrists. Her back bowed in as he bent her down, down, down. . . .

A red haze swam before Yvonne's eyes.

A haze of blood in which swam the vision of another girl being choked to death just like this. The red grew darker, ever darker, and then was blotted out. . . .

Yvonne opened her eyes. She was on her back in the dressing room. Memory flooded her. She screamed.

"You'll be all right," a voice assured her.

It took a long while before she recognized the voice as that of Spike Vaughn. She looked up the length of his tall form in its rough, brown tweed suit. It was then she noticed that his trenchcoat was under her. And that there was something familiarly soft and satiny against her out-flung hand. She saw the rose, pulled her hand away as though it were something hot—or evil. She choked back a scream.

Spike Vaughn reached down, lifted her to her feet. The hard feel of his arms quieted her, reassured her.

"You came back."

"I never left the place. I was outside, waiting to hear what he had to say. I waited a little too long."

Over his shoulder she glimpsed the crumpled heap of the man who had been her husband. His face was blood smeared. Blood had splashed down on his shirt and coat. Yvonne closed her eyes against the sick feeling that began to claw at the pit of her stomach.

"It's all over now," Spike Vaughn spoke quietly at her ear. "The police will be here any moment. After that I'll take you home."

Yvonne dreads roses now. And there are nights when she wakes up screaming. Nights when she can't sleep at all, wondering whether people she knows are not really *other* people even though they don't know about it, wondering whether she, herself, is really Yvonne D'Arcy or someone else.

Spike Vaughn's doing all that a husband can to help her.

THE UNREPENTANT LADY



When her husband's demise scandal-shocked old England, witchy Catherine Hayes wailed her woes in public.

By **HAROLD
PREECE**

She was still screaming when the police led her to the stake.

WHEN the Constable brought Catherine Hayes the severed head of her husband, she howled till a servant handed her a steadying glass of brandy. She slipped to her knees, vainly imploring a lock of the hair.

Then Mr. Justice Lambert rang down

the curtain on the performance by ordering the star back to her cell.

A few weeks later, Catherine Hayes was again on her knees begging. But this time, the girl who had gone through life on an act was playing it straight. Twelve good Englishmen had just found Catherine and her two gentlemen friends—Thomas Billings and Thomas Wood—guilty of chopping off John Hayes' big head.

The sentence: death on the two gallows for the two Toms, death at the stake for Catherine.

It was a hot day in July 1726, when Catherine groveled on the floor before the august court, praying to escape the hot flames that Merry England lighted for arch-murderers. But the court showed her as little mercy as she and the Toms had shown John Hayes. The powdered and wigged man on the bench told her to look to Heaven for mercy, but not to His Majesty's court.

England may have hanged and burned shrewder she-killers in the last five hundred years than the languorous lassie from Warwickshire. But it has sprouted up none whose crime has been remembered longer for bloodiness than that of cuddling little Catherine. Nor, for that matter, has it grown one who could wrap herself around the heartstrings of as many love-smitten swains.

By the time that she was twelve, in the year 1702, Catherine was, after her fashion, the most popular girl in her native village. She seemed to have a fondness for nature and often went for long walks in the woods with just about any young man who happened along.

Like many a young girl, Catherine liked a uniform. So it chanced that, at fifteen, she followed several young army officers who had been billeted near her village. Her parents didn't bother hunting for her, and when she found herself stranded she begged from door to door in various vil-

lages. Then she came to the town of Worcester, and was taken in by her future mother-in-law, Mrs. Hayes.

Catherine impressed the good lady as being such a nice innocent little girl that Mrs. Hayes started a match for her twenty-year-old son. John, whose innocence matched Catherine's, took the little stranger to wife. Then the two moved to a house on Tyburn Road in London—prophetically enough, a stone's throw from England's famous execution yard, the Marble Arch.

There the two lived well by sharp business practices on the one hand and sharp leeching of the old folks on the other. The Hayes family sent them a regular allowance, thinking that they were poverty-stricken. John used the money to become an outstanding loan-shark with connections all over England.

In a little while, Catherine found herself again the most popular girl in a community. Since John was away on business trips a great deal, she decided to make up for her loneliness by taking in two boarders. They were Billings, the neighborhood tailor, and Wood, who had no particular occupations except dodging the press gangs which would have kidnapped him and sent him off to work on the Virginia plantations.

Catherine took a deep liking to the tailor and the vagrant. It was then that Catherine decided that while two might be company and three a crowd, four might be murder. Quietly, calmly, the landlady and the two boarders decided to kill the husband.

Their chance came when John Hayes returned home in high spirits over a very profitable piece of business. He took off his boots, hung up his coat, kissed his wife, and swore that he could drink a gallon and a half of red wine without getting drunk. Like a good wife trying to please her husband, Catherine sent one of the boarders out for two gallons of wine. She

then used the old trick of mixing drinks. She opened four bottles of ale and sat them by her husband's side. A glass of wine, followed by a glass of ale, and the process repeated a few times, put Hayes under the table in twenty minutes. The first part of the three murderers' plot had worked without a hitch.

The two men carried him upstairs. Then, they gathered in a huddle with Catherine to decide the best way of finishing him off.

The result was that Billings went downstairs to the cellar and fetched the hatchet. He cracked the snoring Hayes over the head half-a-dozen times. Then Wood picked up the hatchet and quickly beheaded him.

* * *

THE head was put into a small pail and carried by Catherine to Horse Ferry on the Thames River—the ferry being a general place for the disposal of rubbish in eighteenth-century England. The two men disposed of the body in a deep pond at Marleybone Fields.

Wood soon departed to a village twenty miles from London. Catherine told neighbors that John was away on another of his extended business trips. She might have gotten away with it if she hadn't let her purse go and trip up her tongue.

Always hungry for money, Catherine began converting John's tangible assets into cash. Billings got some of the money, but most of it went into her fine silk sock. People began talking about her flush prosperity. Simultaneously, they began whispering about John Hayes' prolonged absence.

Then Catherine began making different explanations to different people. On March 4, 1792, a cousin of Hayes' named Longmore came inquiring for his missing kinsman. Catherine shooed him off by telling him that John was home, but had

gone for a long walk. She added that she didn't expect hubby to be coming home for hours.

A day or so later, Hayes' friend, Joseph Ashley, showed up looking for him. Catherine confided to Ashley that John had killed a man in a drunken brawl and fled to Portugal. Later, Longmore and Ashley compared notes when they met in a tavern. Then they went to the authorities.

Catherine's world of murder and deceit began caving in. A watchman named Robinson saw the bucket floating around the wharf near Horse Ferry. He fished it out and discovered the head. A few nights later, a gentleman and his servant saw the arms and legs of a man floating on the surface of the pond in Marleybone Fields. The police assembled the corpse in one piece.

For days, the head hung at St. Margaret's, as was the identification procedure in those days. Longmore and Ashley recognized it and rushed to the office of Justice Lambert.

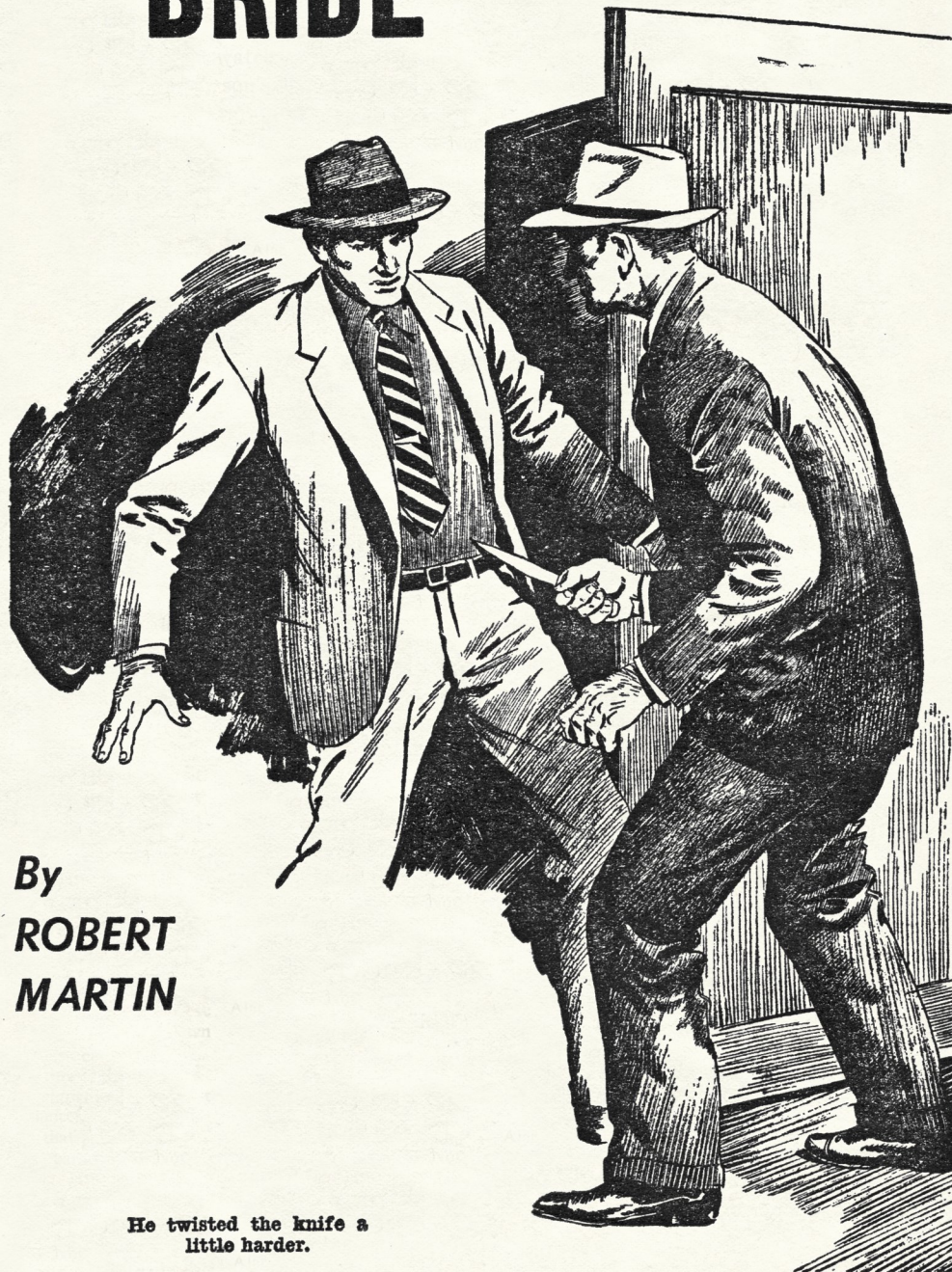
The Justice himself led the raiding party of police. The pair were nabbed at the house. Wood was caught a few weeks later when, ignorant of the pick-up, he came to the house inquiring for Catherine Hayes.

Even after Billings had confessed and implicated Catherine, she would hold his hand and gaze soulfully into his eyes during Sunday chapel services. Wood speedily confessed. And so did Catherine, thinking that she would be spared capital punishment because she had not struck the actual blows.

She was still screaming when the police led her to the stake.

Billings and Wood went to their deaths quietly without making the usual speeches of the condemned, their bodies serving as a warning to London's fraternity of cut-throats.

BULLETS FOR THE BRIDE



By
**ROBERT
MARTIN**

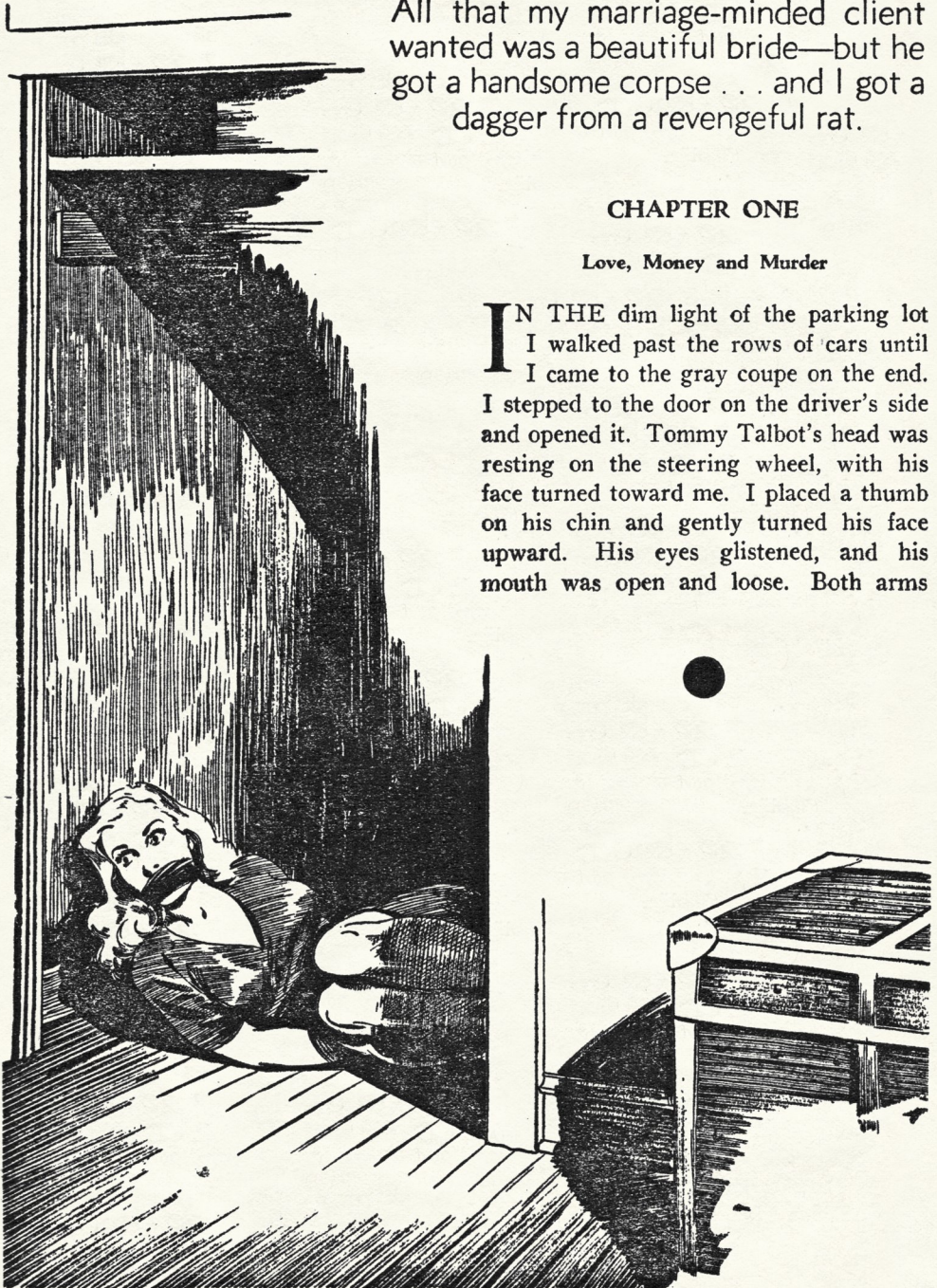
He twisted the knife a
little harder.

All that my marriage-minded client wanted was a beautiful bride—but he got a handsome corpse . . . and I got a dagger from a revengeful rat.

CHAPTER ONE

Love, Money and Murder

IN THE dim light of the parking lot I walked past the rows of cars until I came to the gray coupe on the end. I stepped to the door on the driver's side and opened it. Tommy Talbot's head was resting on the steering wheel, with his face turned toward me. I placed a thumb on his chin and gently turned his face upward. His eyes glistened, and his mouth was open and loose. Both arms



hung forward beneath the wheel, the fingers of his limp hands pointing at the car floor.

I leaned closer, and I saw the black handle of the knife protruding from beneath Talbot's left arm, nailing his coat to his body. In the faint light I couldn't see any blood, but I figured there wouldn't be any until the knife was drawn out. The killer had picked a good spot—between the ribs, into the heart, easy and fast and up to the hilt. A nice silent method, with no fuss and no noise.

I sighed, and closed the car door quietly. I wished I had never heard of Tommy Talbot, and I wished I had never met Irwin Blane.

He had called me—Blane, I mean—the previous afternoon and asked me to come to his office. He had a stomach as big as a wash tub. The rest of him didn't harmonize with his stomach. He was over six feet tall, with narrow sloping shoulders and a small round head. His shirt collar was too big for his thin neck, probably because he had to buy his shirts big enough to cover his stomach. He had thin black hair parted neatly in the center, and his pale blue eyes looked twice their natural size behind thick dark-rimmed glasses. I guessed him to weigh at least three-hundred pounds.

Except for a small bronze plaque which read, *Irwin C. Blane, Consulting Engineer*, the top of his desk was as bare as a baby in a bathtub. He peered across the desk at me and said: "Mr. Deegan, I understand that you are a private investigator."

I nodded.

He hesitated, cleared his throat. "I also understand that you sometimes undertake—uh—special work."

"That depends," I said.

His round face took on a pink tint, and he swallowed a couple of times. "I realize that this is—uh—rather unusual, and I debated at some length before I called you.

There—there is a girl with whom I have been fairly friendly. I want our relationship to be more than friendly. I—I want her to marry me." He hesitated, and glanced down at his enormous stomach. "I'm not exactly a lady's man," he said ruefully. "At least, not since my college days. But this girl has been nice to me. That's not enough. I've got to marry her."

"Got?"

He nodded slowly. "That's right. What's your fee?"

I ran a hand over my face. "Look, maybe you better get somebody else."

He smacked a palm on the desk. "Damn it, name your fee."

"I don't run a matrimonial agency," I told him. "What did you want me to do?"

He looked at me steadily. "That's your problem. She likes me, but not enough. Your job is to make her like me well enough to marry me."

I thought he was a little nuts, and I argued with him. But he stuck to his guns. It ended with my accepting his check for two hundred dollars and a card bearing the address of one Rosalie Hunter, a public stenographer with an office in the Continental Building. I didn't know how I was going to convince Rosalie that she should marry Irwin Blane, but for two hundred bucks I figured I could at least act like I was trying.

As I stood up, Blane said: "There's just one thing, Deegan. She's been seeing a lot of a young man named Tommy Talbot. I don't know much about him, except that he conducts a dance orchestra, and plays some kind of a horn. He gave me a wry smile. "Glamour's stiff competition for me."

I said: "You don't need me. You need a trigger man."

"Don't joke about it, Deegan."

"Sorry. Where does this Talbot live?"

He gave me the name of an apartment on the South Side, and I wrote it down on a card.

Blane said: "I may as well tell you this—if she marries me, I'll inherit sixty-two thousand dollars."

I stood still for a second and tried to visualize sixty-two thousand dollars. I couldn't, and I said: "So that's it?"

"No," he said coldly. "That isn't it. I want to marry Rosalie Hunter for her own sake. But if I marry her soon, it will mean sixty-two thousand dollars for both of us."

I wished I had a drink. I just stared dumbly at Irwin Blane.

"My mother died when I was born," he continued in a quiet voice. "My father raised me. He was an engineer, too—hydraulics. I guess I caused him a lot of trouble. In my college days I was pretty wild. When I was twenty-one, my father died. He had made a little money by that time, but he didn't leave me a cent. And because of my escapades, the will stood up in court. The money has been in trust all these years. His will states that if I am married before I am forty years old, and if I stay married to the same woman for five years, I'll get the estate—all of it. Otherwise, it goes to charity." He looked out of the window, and added: "I'll be forty one week from tomorrow."

"Hmmm," I said. "Can I tell Miss Hunter about the money?"

"Certainly not," he snapped. Then he added in a tired voice: "That is not unless it's a last resort."

I grinned at him. Suddenly I kind of liked the job. At least, it was a change from checking on the life insurance beneficiary of some deceased Joe Doakes. "All right," I said. "You've got a boy—for one week." Blane smiled as I left his office.

Rosalie Hunter's office was on the sixth floor of the Continental Building. She looked up at me as I entered, her fingers poised over a typewriter. I realized why Irwin Blane wanted to marry her—

even without the sixty-two grand. She was not a small girl, but everything was in the right proportion. Her sleek black hair was braided into a kind of halo around her head. She had big black eyes, a short nose, a firm chin, and a generous red mouth.

She was very business-like, and I had a little trouble convincing her that it was a matter of life and death for me to have, by eleven o'clock that evening, copies of a stack of handwritten case reports I had dug at random out of my files. When I offered to double her fee for working over-time, she finally agreed, and I told her my name and that I would call for the reports at eleven that evening. Then I left before she could change her mind.

From a phone booth downstairs I called Easy Jack Redwood. He was a character around town, an ex-jockey, who occasionally did odd jobs for me. He claimed to have once belonged to one of Capone's mobs in Cicero, and also that he had ridden a winning horse called Easy Jack in the Kentucky Derby. The crowd around Doon's Bar and Grill had taken to calling him by the alleged horse's name. I never knew his real name. He was a little brown man with a passion for pink shirts and two-tone shoes.

I found him at Doon's, and I told him to meet me in the drug store on the street floor of the Continental Building. I had two root beers at the soda fountain before he showed up. He came up to the counter at his characteristic half-run, shooting quick furtive glances over his shoulder. He perched himself on the stool beside me and ordered a glass of milk. Without looking at me he muttered out of the corner of his mouth: "What's up, John?"

"Relax," I told him. "Nobody's tailing me. Do you want a job?"

"What kind of a job?"

"A holdup job."

There was a hurt expression on his wizened brown face. "I been leveling,

John. You know that," he said reproachfully.

I grinned at him. "This is a fake hold-up—for a pal of mine. There's twenty-five bucks in it for you."

He ran a tongue over his thin upper lip. "What else?" he said craftily.

I shrugged. "You might have to take a sock on the jaw to make it look good. But I don't think it'll go that far—if you handle it right. Anyhow, if you do get punched, I'll give you another ten."

He leaned closer. "Tell me more, John," he muttered.

So I told him about my deal with Irwin Blane, and how I was supposed to build Blane up in the eyes of Rosalie Hunter, but I didn't tell him about the money Blane would get if he married Rosalie before the week was up. I ended by saying: "I've arranged for Rosalie to work late tonight. When she leaves her office, all you've got to do is stick an empty gun in her ribs and act tough. I'll have Blane handy, and he'll do the rest. It'll make him look like a hero. But don't let him collar you. I don't want to bail you out of the jug."

"And that little caper is supposed to make the babe fall for this Blane slob?"

"It'll be a start," I said. "I'll think of something else."

"Cupid Deegan," he sneered.

"It's a living. Do you want it, or don't you?"

"Did I ever turn you down?" Easy Jack said. "But if this Blane gets tough, I'll kick him in the belly. He won't be packing a rod, will he?"

I shook my head. "Don't worry about that, just be sure your's is empty. Rosalie's office is on the sixth floor of this bulding—number six thirty nine. I'll meet her at eleven. You can hide in a closet three doors from her office. I'll have Blane around the corner. If he gets too tough with his hero act, I'll tangle with him until you get away."

When Easy Jack smiled, he looked more like a cornered rat than ever. He smiled now, showing his narrow front teeth. "Does Blane know it's a gag?"

"Sure."

He slid off the stool. "When do I collect?"

"Tomorrow, at Doon's."

"Okay, John." He trotted out of the door.

By that time it was five o'clock in the afternoon. I walked to a florist's shop and ordered two dozen red roses sent to Rosalie Hunter's office. I told the florist to write on the card. *Darling— How about dinner tomorrow night? Love, Irwin.* Then I telephoned Blane to meet me at the Continental Building at a quarter of eleven that night.

I had a couple of beers at Doon's followed by his specialty, hash with a boiled egg on top, and while I ate I scanned the amusement section of the evening paper. I learned that Tommy Talbot, his Orchestra and his Trumpet, were playing at a wine-and-spaghetti joint on the south side called The Naples Cafe. There was a picture of Talbot. He had a hollow-cheeked face, rippling black hair, and a toothy smile. I tore out the picture and put it in my pocket. Then I went to a movie and dozed through a double feature. At thirty I left to meet Irwin Blane.

HE WAS waiting for me, all dressed up in a double-breasted blue suit, about a size fifty-four, I figured, and a tan panama hat with the brim turned up all around. With his coat buttoned he made a rather imposing figure. In fact, I decided that if I were Rosalie Hunter I'd think twice before I turned him down—even without the sixty-two thousand thousand dollars. But the money would help make up for a lot of things—a handsome kid with curly hair and a silver trumpet, for example.

I walked up to him, and said: "You are about to rescue Miss Hunter from a hold-up man. It's all fixed. Come on." I started into the building.

He grabbed my arm. "Hey, wait. Holdup man?"

"Sure," I said impatiently. "He'll take a dive. Just don't hit him too hard and let him get away. That ought to impress her."

His laugh boomed out. "That's silly, Deegan."

I shrugged. "You want her to like you, don't you? At least, she won't dislike you if you rescue her from a thug. It's a start, anyhow—to get her thinking about you—and then we can pull something more subtle." Out of the corner of my eye I saw Easy Jack Redwood coming up the street at his habitual trot. I wanted to give Easy Jack a chance to get himself planted, and so I pulled Blane into the drug store.

Blane had stopped laughing, but there was still amusement in his face. "This is fantastic, Deegan," he chuckled. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Look, Mr. Blane," I said wearily, "she's the kind of girl who has to be shown, and we'll show her that you care enough to maybe risk your life for her. That's basic, any woman will respond to that. By the way, I sent her some roses for you. You asked her to dinner tomorrow night. On the card you called her 'Darling.'"

"I did?" Blane looked embarrassed. "Say, Deegan, maybe we'd better just call this whole thing off."

"Too late now," I snapped, and I led him out of the drug store.

The sixth floor of the Continental Building was quiet and dimly lit. As we neared Rosalie Hunter's office we could hear the faint sound of her typewriter. I stopped and peered around the corner of the corridor. It was deserted and I knew that Easy Jack had concealed himself in

the closet. I looked at my wrist watch. Five minutes of eleven.

I said softly to Irwin Blane: "My man is hiding in a closet down there. I'll go in her office, and when we come out, he'll jump us. Then it's your show. You come around the corner, see us, and the rest is up to you. This fellow will act mean, but his gun is empty. You act mean, too, and talk tough. He'll run. Chase him, but not too fast. Let him get away. Then you can take your girl out, buy her a drink, and act modest."

Blane seemed to be entering into the spirit of my little plot. "There won't be any slip-up?" he asked.

"Not a chance. You're a hero already—just don't over-do it."

He nodded tensely, his cigar clamped between his teeth. I grinned reassuringly at him, patted his arm encouragingly, and went down to Rosalie Hunter's office.

As I entered she looked up at me and smiled. "Just finished, Mr. Deegan," she said. "Right on the nose." She slid a stack of typed pages into a large envelope and handed it to me.

"Nice work," I said. "How much do I owe you?"

"I haven't figured it up. I'll send you a bill."

"Are you sure you trust me?"

She smiled again. "I looked you up in the city directory. You know some of those reports were very interesting. I never met a private detective before."

I grinned at her and looked at my watch. Two minutes of eleven. She covered her typewriter, stood up, took a coat from a hanger behind her desk and switched off the lights. I moved out of the darkened office and stood aside while she locked the door. I heard soft footsteps behind me, but I didn't turn.

Easy Jack Redwood's voice grated: "Stick 'em up."

Rosalie Hunter let out a little gasp and whirled around. I turned, too, but I took

my time. Easy Jack was crouching over a big black .45 automatic, showing his teeth in a vicious, realistic snarl. "Gimme your dough," he rasped, "before I start blasting."

"Why, you cheap little crook," Rosalie Hunter said indignantly, "you just put that gun away right now."

Easy Jack shot me a perplexed look, and then he took a menacing step toward the girl. I looked down the corridor. I wished Irwin Blane would hurry.

"Don't shoot," I quavered, and I took out my wallet. "This is all I've got."

Rosalie Hunter looked at me contemptuously. "Put it back," she said coldly. "He won't dare shoot."

The huge form of Irwin Blane rounded the corner, and I sighed with relief. He began to run in a sort of ponderous gallop. He slid to a stop. "What's this?" he spluttered. "What's going on here?"

I lifted an eyebrow at Easy Jack, and he wheeled obediently on Irwin Blane with his big gun held level with his nose. "Put 'em up, Fatso," he snarled, "before I drill you."

Irwin Blane did all right. "Drop that gun, you rat," he roared, and he jumped for Easy Jack. I grabbed Rosalie Hunter to keep her out of the mix-up while Easy Jack pretended to struggle desperately in Blane's grip. Blane was panting heavily and trying to twist the gun from Easy Jack's hand. Easy Jack squirmed away easily. I thought I heard him giggle. And then he was running down the corridor.

"Stop, thief!" Blane shouted dramatically, and he lumbered after Easy Jack.

A man rounded the corner. A tall man with black curly hair. Easy Jack ran smack into him and tried to scramble away. But the tall man got Easy Jack by the collar and hung on like a dog with a coon. Easy Jack twisted and tried in vain to break free. The tall man laughed, twisted the gun from Easy Jack's hand, and hit the little man over the head with it.

Easy Jack slid limply to the floor just as Irwin Blane skidded to a stop in front of the two of them.

With a sick feeling I recognized the tall man. He was Tommy Talbot, the trumpet player, Irwin Blane's chief rival for the hand of Rosalie Hunter.

Easy Jack lay quite still on the floor of the corridor. Irwin Blane stood uncertainly by. Rosalie Hunter watched Tommy Talbot as he removed the clip from Easy Jack's automatic. "Empty," he laughed. It was a nasty laugh.

Rosalie Hunter went up to Talbot. "Tommy," she breathed, "you were wonderful. He tried to rob us."

I said quickly: "Mr. Blane scared him away."

"Yes," the girl admitted. "Irwin was very brave."

Talbot looked at Blane and me. "Who are these guys?" he asked her.

"Mr. Blane," she said, "and Mr. Deegan."

"Huh," Talbot sneered. "The punk's gun was empty."

"We didn't know that," I told him. "I was about to give up our money when Mr. Blane took charge of the situation."

Blane said modestly: "I merely did what I, uh, thought was necessary."

Easy Jack stirred. His legs moved, and he lifted his head from the floor. Tommy Talbot winked at Rosalie Hunter. Then he brutally kicked Easy Jack in the face. It was a hard, vicious kick. Easy Jack groaned and his head hit the floor again. A narrow stream of blood ran out of his mouth and across the marble floor. Talbot gave us a loose grin and lit a cigarette.

I said to Talbot: "You didn't have to do that."

"Friend of yours?" he sneered.

I stared at him silently and I knew that if Rosalie Hunter was smart she'd stick to Irwin Blane. Talbot's eyes shifted away from mine, and he said to the girl: "Come on, Rosie. I knocked off early

tonight—just to take you home. When you told me on the phone that you had to work until eleven, I decided that the band could get along without me from eleven on.”

She looked at Blane. “Thank you for the roses, Irwin,” she said gently.

“That’s all right,” he said gruffly.

“It was sweet of you,” she said. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Nuts,” Talbot said, and he took her arm. “Come on, Rosie.” He paused to stare down at the form of Easy Jack.

What about this punk. Want me to turn him in?”

She said: “Mr. Deegan is a detective. He’ll handle it. Won’t you, Mr. Deegan?”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll handle it.”

“I’ll bet,” Talbot sneered. He took the girl’s arm and led her away.

She looked back over her shoulder. “Goodbye, Irwin.”

“Goodbye,” Blane said stiffly.

Talbot and the girl disappeared around the corner of the corridor.

Easy Jack moaned and rolled over on his back. I leaned down and lifted him to his feet. He fumbled for a handkerchief and began to wipe the blood from his mouth. After a bit he looked at Blane and said: “I’m sorry the caper got fouled up, chum.”

Blane shrugged. “That’s all right,” he said.

Easy Jack said in a nasty complaining voice: “John, I don’t like guys what kick me in the kisser. Do I get the ten buck bonus?”

“Sure,” I said. “Double.”

The three of us went down the corridor to the elevator. Irwin Blane was silent, and I figured I was shy one client. But when we reached the street, he said to Easy Jack: “Thank you for your help, sir. I am sorry that it turned out so—so unfortunately.”

Easy Jack dabbed at his mouth with

the handkerchief. “All in the day’s work. You’ll get that babe yet.”

Blane shuffled his feet uncomfortably. Suddenly he laughed. “Thank you,” he said. “I hope so.”

Easy Jack trotted away. “See you at Doon’s tomorrow,” I called after him. But he didn’t look back.

Blane said: “Well, Deegan, what now?”

I was surprised. “Am I still working for you?”

“Of course. It wasn’t your fault that Talbot showed up.”

“If you want to call it off,” I said hopefully, “I still have your check.”

“No, no,” he said impatiently. “No harm has been done.”

I sighed, and said: “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Good, Deegan. You just do that—no more holdups, though.” He laughed, and strolled toward the corner.

I felt that I needed some relaxation from my duties as an amateur Cupid, and so I stopped at the South Side Social Club for some dime-limit poker. An hour and a half later I caught a bus for my part of town. After I had climbed the steps of my rooming house I found a note under my door. It was from Mrs. Dwyer, my landlady. *Mr. Bennett: Call Miss Hunter at 3-200. She said it was important.*

I went back down to phone in the hall and called the number. Rosalie Hunter answered right away. Her voice sounded faint. “Yes?”

“This is Deegan.”

“Oh, Mr. Deegan, I—” She broke off.

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s Tommy. He—he’s dead.”

CHAPTER TWO

Missing—One Blonde

I LET her words sink in. Before I could say anything, she begged. “Please come.” I could hear her sobbing heavily over the wire.

I found my voice. "Where?"

"My—my apartment," and she gave me the same address that Irwin Blane had written down for me. It was an apartment hotel called The Hartford Arms, over on the other side of town.

"Stay there," I told her. "I'll be over."

I caught a taxi a block from my rooming house. The Hartford Arms was on the East Side, and the names on the mail boxes in the lobby enabled me to find Rosalie Hunter's apartment number. Third floor, 18-C. I climbed the stairs and knocked softly on her door. She opened it right away and I went inside.

There was a big living room, which doubled as a bedroom, too. There was a kitchenette, and a bath. Wide windows overlooked a parking lot below. The place was attractively furnished. On a table near the windows was a bottle of whiskey, half full, and two tall glasses with the remains of ice cubes melting in their bottoms.

Rosalie Hunter was dressed in the clothes she had worn earlier in the evening. Her face was pale and her generous mouth was quivering a little. Her eyes were big and dark and her cheeks were wet. I looked around the room again, but I didn't see any bodies—not Tommy Talbot's, or anyone else's."

I asked the logical question. "Where is he?"

Her mouth opened and shut, but no sound came out. She moved to one of the big windows and looked down. I stepped up behind her. The parking lot below was dimly lit, and I could see the tops of a double row of parked cars.

"Down there," Rosalie Hunter said in a choked voice, "in the gray coupe, on the end. He—he's inside—stabbed." She turned away from the window sobbing.

I felt cold. "Stay here," I told her. I went out, and down to the parking lot below.

It was then that I found the body of

Tommy Talbot, slumped over the wheel of his car, with the knife sticking in his heart.

I went back up to Rosalie Hunter's apartment. She was sitting with her head against the back of a lemon-colored chair. Her eyes were closed. The door clicked shut behind me and she opened her eyes. They seemed to scream at me.

I moved to the table and helped myself to a long drink of the whiskey. It was bourbon. I didn't know how the smart boys would handle a deal like this. I was strictly a peeper, an insurance investigator, a runner-downer of home-skipping teen-age girls, but I figured I couldn't go far wrong by taking a drink. Everybody knew that a private detective always did that, and besides, it was good bourbon. Then I said: "You'd better tell me about it. He's liable to be found anytime and it'll look bad if you don't tell the cops first."

She said in a quiet voice: "I'm sorry to have bothered you, Mr. Deegan. I—I suppose I should have called the police. But I knew you were a detective, and, well—I guess I wanted to tell someone first, so that they would know."

"I see," I said. "Now I know. I'd better call the police." I moved to a telephone in a corner.

She stood up quickly. "No, wait until I tell you." She was trembling.

I let my hand rest on the phone. "All right, but make it fast. Were you in love with this Talbot?"

She sat down and stared out of the window. "I—I liked Tommy very much, and he was nice to me. He wanted me to marry him, but I couldn't make up my mind. After he brought me home tonight we came up here and had a drink. He asked me again to marry him, and I told him that I wanted a little more time to think it over. He—he became angry and he left. I undressed and turned off the lights. When I opened the windows, I

saw that his car was still in the parking lot below. That puzzled me, and I watched a while, waiting for him to leave. After a while I got dressed and went down, and I—I found him."

"Well," I said, "it's still a case for the coroner."

She opened her eyes and looked at me steadily. "Mr. Deegan, I had a reason for calling you. I want you to find the person who killed Tommy. I owe him that much. I'll pay you—"

"Now, wait," I broke in. "I'm just a second-rate peeper. Murder is way out of my line. Leave it to the police."

For the first time she smiled faintly, "You didn't sound like a second-rate peeper in some of the those reports I typed for you today. Will you do it?"

"I'll see," I mumbled, and I picked up the phone and called the cops. Before I had finishing talking to the cop on the desk I heard a knock on the door behind me, and I saw Rosalie Hunter get up and cross the room. The apartment door slammed and I hung up and turned around.

Irwin Blane stood just inside the door. He was holding a cigar in one hand and his panama in the other. When he saw me he laughed, but his laughter had a phoney ring to it.

"Irwin!" Rosalie Hunter said. "What are you doing here?"

Blane stopped laughing and shuffled his feet. He looked embarrassed. "I was just driving around and I saw the light in your apartment, and I—" He broke off, and looked at me. "I didn't know you had company."

"This is Mr. Deegan," Rosalie Hunter said. "I did some work for him today. He was with me tonight when that ridiculous little man tried to rob us. Remember?" She smiled brightly.

Blane laughed and held out his hand to me. "Of course. Glad to see you again, Mr. Deegan," he said heartily.

I shook his hand and I decided to push things a little. I said: "Miss Hunter and I were discussing a murder."

Blane frowned. "Murder?"

I said: "Somebody stuck a knife into Tommy Talbot and killed him dead."

He started to laugh, thought better of it, and composed his features. "You're joking," he said. "You mean the young gentleman I met this evening at the time of the, uh, attempted hold-up?"

I nodded and took him by the arm. I led him to the window. "That gray coupe down there," I said. "The one on the end. That's Talbot's. He's inside—dead."

Blane's voice was puzzled. "What coupe?"

I looked down at the parking lot, and the skin on the back of my neck felt as if there was an ice cube on it. The coupe was gone.

There was a banging on the door behind us. I turned and crossed the room like a drunken man. I admitted a uniformed cop and a young sharp-jawed man in a blue suit and a gray felt hat.

The sharp-jawed man snapped: "Lieutenant Stronski. We had a call about a body."

I began to explain to him, and from then on it was a nightmare. The three of us answered a million questions and the lieutenant took a lot of notes. Rosalie Hunter began to sob and Irwin Blane's face got red and stayed that way. The uniformed cop went down to the parking lot, came back and reported: "There ain't no stiffs in any of them cars down there."

The lieutenant snapped his book shut, and he cocked one eye on the bourbon bottle. "All right folks," he said in a hard voice. "We'll play it straight. None of you are to leave town. If this Talbot doesn't show up by tomorrow, we'll report it to Missing Persons. If he shows up alive you'll hear from me." He gave us all a wolfish smile and swung on his heel. He went out, the cop after him.

I didn't see any point in hanging around. I left Irwin Blane with Rosalie Hunter. I figured I could at least do that much for him. As I closed the door, he was standing in the middle of the room, still holding his hat and what was left of his cigar.

Late the following morning I went up-town to Doon's for a combination breakfast and lunch. Easy Jack Redwood was waiting for me. He was perched on a stool at the counter crumbling crackers into a bowl of milk. I sat down beside him, but he didn't seem to notice me. His upper lip was swollen, exposing his front teeth, and he looked more like a rat than usual.

I said: "I'm sorry about last night, Jack. Here's your dough. There's an extra ten there, above your bonus."

He put the money into his pocket without looking at it and spooned up some crackers and milk. "Who was that punk?" he muttered. "The one what kicked me?"

"Name of Talbot," I said. "But don't blame him. He wasn't in on the deal, Jack."

Easy Jack just grunted. I ordered toast and scrambled eggs. While I was waiting, Easy Jack finished eating, slid off the stool, and trotted out of the door. When Doon brought my order, he said: "What's the matter, John. Easy Jack sore at you?"

I smiled. "He'll get over it."

I was on my second cup of coffee when Doon told me that I was wanted on the telephone. It was my landlady, Mrs. Dwyer, and as soon as she spoke I could tell by the sound of her voice that she disapproved of something, and I tried to remember if I'd left an open whiskey bottle on my dresser, or forgotten to pay my rent, or left the lights on, or the water dripping in the bathtub. But it wasn't any of those things.

"There's a woman here, Mr. Deegan," she said coldly. "She's waiting for you."

"Where? In my room?"

"In the parlor, Mr. Deegan. She refused to tell me her name. She's got yellow hair and lip paint and actress-like shoes."

"Fine," I said. "There's a bottle in my closet. Give her a drink and hang on to her until I get there."

MRS. DWYER'S response was a sharp click of the receiver in my ear. I went out to the street, grinning to myself. But as I stood on the curb looking for a taxi, I stopped grinning. I didn't know any yellow-haired women, at least not any who knew me well enough to come to my rooming house with Mrs. Dwyer on guard. A taxi pulled up, and fifteen minutes later I was walking up the steps of Mrs. Dwyer's, rooms by day or week.

She was in the hall vigorously dusting furniture, and she gave me a down-the-nose look. Her long chin jerked at the big sliding door at the right of the hall. The room behind that door was never opened in the winter-time, and only occasionally in the summer. It contained a shawl-draped piano, two potted ferns, a thread-bare green carpet, a red plush sofa and fourteen pictures of the late Mr. Dwyer. It was cold in there, even in summer, and smelled of damp plaster and furniture polish.

A pocket-sized girl was sitting on the sofa. She had nice legs. They were crossed, and I admitted to myself that Mrs. Dwyer had been right about her shoes. They were small and stubby, with inch-thick soles and high heels. Narrow straps accentuated her slim ankles. And her lips were certainly painted, but she had a nice mouth—full, but not too full, with a suggestion of softness. Her hair was the color of corn in November and it curled softly over her shoulders. She was wearing a simple little black dress and a light gray cashmere coat lay over her knees. She had a short straight nose, and eyes the color of sea water on a sunny day.

She gave me a perky smile. "Mr. Deegan?"

I nodded.

"I'm Jean Talbot—Mrs. Tommy Talbot."

I waited.

"I—I came down from Chicago last night. Do you know my husband?"

I hesitated, and then I said carefully: "I've met him."

She leaned forward, her eyes pleading. "Is he in trouble? Where is he?"

I told her the truth. "I don't know."

She lowered her head, and her yellow hair fell forward in a shining loop. She stared down at her clasped hands and said quietly: "I've been working in Chicago. I haven't seen Tommy for over a month. We—we had a little trouble. It was silly, maybe—jealousy on my part over a girl who sang in his band. I left him, but now I'm sorry. I want to tell him I'm sorry. I learned that he was here, playing at The Naples Cafe. But when I went there last night they told me Tommy had left and they gave me his apartment address. The janitor let me in and I waited for Tommy. But he didn't come. On a pad by his telephone I saw where he had written a name—Rosalie Hunter, at The Hartford Arms. Your name was written there, too, and a man named Irwin Blane. I—" She paused, and for a second I was afraid she was going to cry.

"And then what?" I asked.

She continued in a steady voice. "I went to The Hartford Arms and I met a man coming out of the parking lot there. I thought he lived there and I asked him if Rosalie Hunter was a tenant. He acted very queerly and refused to answer me. I—I guess I was a little excited by that time and I wanted to talk to somebody. I told him I was Mrs. Tommy Talbot and that I was looking for him. The man just turned and walked away from me. I went up to Miss Hunter's apartment then and she told me that Tommy had been—"

I got excited, and I broke in. "What did this man that you talked to look like?"

But she was looking beyond me, at something behind me, and there was an expression of recognition, and of terror, in her eyes. And then I suddenly realized that I could no longer hear Mrs. Dwyer moving about in the hall, and the house was very quiet. I started to turn, but I was far too slow. I got a glimpse of a quick shadowy movement behind me, but that was all. I heard the beginning of a scream from Jean Talbot, and then a shower of bright lavender lights exploded inside my head. . . .

I opened my eyes and rolled over on my back. From somewhere I heard a woman screaming, and continuous banging sound. I stared up at the faded paper on the ceiling and let the racket hammer at my ear drums.

"Help! Help! Let me out!"

I didn't bother about it. My head hurt too much. After a while I turned over and pushed myself to my hands and knees. I looked around the room. All that remained of Jean Talbot was a lingering perfume and a red-tipped cigarette stub burning its way into the frayed carpet. I got slowly to my feet, stepped on the cigarette, and steadied myself on the piano. The shawl slipped over the polished surface and a fern pot crashed to the floor. I stumbled forward, but I caught myself by leaning on the keyboard. The piano let out a tortured discordant sound which made my nerves jump. I took my hands from the keys and staggered to the door. The screaming and the banging sounds seemed to be coming from behind a closet door beyond a mirrored umbrella rack.

I remembered Mrs. Dwyer then, and I stumbled down the hall to the hall closet door. The key was on the outside, and I turned it. The door swung inward and Mrs. Dwyer boiled out. She looked like a wild woman.

"A man," she gasped. "He grabbed me, held his hand over my mouth and shoved me into the closet."

"What did he look like?" I snapped at her.

But she seemed not to hear me. "The minute I laid eyes on that girl," she said wildly, "I know there was a-going to be trouble. He snuck up behind me—"

"What did he look like?" I shouted at her.

Her eyes focused on me. "Look like? Land, I don't know. I didn't have a chance to size him up at all. He had a nose, and a hat—Mr. Deegan, you're bleeding!"

She ran down the hall, her skirts flying. I went to the telephone and told the operator to get me Sergeant Julius Donner, of the Chicago police. She said she would call me. I leaned against the wall. Mrs. Dwyer came bustling back with a thimble-size glass of wine and a basin of water. I drank the wine, winked at her, and stood still while she bathed the back of my head.

The telephone rang, and when I lifted the receiver, Julius Donner's voice said: "Hi, John. What's up?"

"I need some information, Sarge."

He laughed. "Lieutenant now, John. I got promoted—after you helped me nab that blackmailer last winter."

"Good," I said. "You got anything on a musician named Tommy Talbot, or his wife?"

"Talbot? Anything to do with Homicide?"

"I don't know."

Donner said he'd call me back, and I gave him Mrs. Dwyer's number. Mrs. Dwyer finished fussing with my head and I sat down on the carpeted steps of the stairs. "How about some more of that ink?" I asked her. "Or maybe you'd be kind enough to go up to my room and bring the bottle in my closet?"

She gave me her down-the-nose look.

"Blackberry wine is good for the blood," she said primly. "That telephone call will be added to your rent."

"All right," I said wearily. "How about some more of that blood medicine?"

She went out and came back with the bottle. I would have preferred bourbon, but I sipped at the wine and tried not to listen to Mrs. Dwyer's chatter. I tried again to get a description of our visitor, but I didn't get anywhere. Presently the phone jangled.

"There's a little something, John," Donner said. "About a month ago a Jean Talbot sued a two-bit band leader named Tommy Talbot for divorce. She claimed he was chasing around with a babe named Lily Lorenze, who sang in Talbot's band. Talbot pleaded innocent and asked for a dismissal of her charge. And then it turns out that this Lily Lorenze had a husband, and Lily claimed that he was sweet on Jean Talbot. About that time Mrs. Talbot withdrew her charge, and that's all we know about it. This stuff is out of my line, I got the story from the clerk of courts. Does it help any?"

"Maybe," I said, and I thanked him and hung up.

Mrs. Dwyer went back to her dusting, muttering to herself, and I managed to make it up the stairs to my room. I had a couple of drinks of bourbon and it blended fine with Mrs. Dwyer's blood medicine. Then I washed my face, combed what hair I had left, changed my shirt, and went back downstairs. I heard the buzz of a vacuum cleaner from somewhere in the house, but I didn't see Mrs. Dwyer. I walked a block to the corner and caught a bus which deposited me close to Irwin Blane's office.

He was working at a draftsman's board by the window. He had to sit far back on his high stool to make room for his stomach. This forced him to lean forward at an awkward angle. As I entered, he looked up. "Well, well, Mr. Deegan."

"How're things going?" I asked him.

He turned on the stool to face me. "The police have found Talbot's car," he said seriously. "I just tried to call you."

I sank into a chair. "Where'd they find it?"

"In a woods along the river, north of town. His body wasn't in it. They're dragging the river."

"Did the cops say anything else?"

"Lieutenant Stronski was rather unpleasant. He told me not to leave town. I supposed they have contacted Rosalie, too. I tried to call her, but she doesn't answer at her apartment or office. Deegan, I don't like it."

I shrugged. I felt mean. "Anyhow, you don't have to worry about Talbot anymore."

He looked at me for maybe thirty seconds. Then he said evenly: "Deegan, I don't like that remark."

"Sorry," I said. "Am I still working for you?"

Suddenly he laughed. "Of course. You have your money for a week. After that it won't make any difference."

"How are things between you and Miss Hunter now?"

"Better, I'm happy to say. We talked a long time last night after you left. She was more—" He hesitated, and looked out of the window. "More friendly toward me," he finished.

"Fine," I said. "Maybe now, with Talbot out of the way, would be a good time for me to tell her what a swell guy you are. In a subtle way, of course."

"All right," he said, and his face got red. "If you can find her," he added in a worried voice.

"I'll try," I told him. "Are you interested in catching the killer of Tommy Talbot?"

He turned and gave me a level look. "Not especially," he said coldly. "That's a job for the police."

I pushed myself to my feet and moved

to the door. "That's right. No need for us to worry about that, is there?"

He was still watching me steadily. "I don't think so. Do you, Deegan?"

"Heck, no. Let well enough alone, I always say."

He stared at me silently as I backed out and closed the door.

Down on the street I walked aimlessly for two blocks. I was supposed to be a detective on a job, but I didn't have the slightest idea what to do next. My head still hurt, and I leaned against a lamp post and watched the traffic moving past. Doon's Bar and Grill was across the street. Suddenly in the crowd on the opposite sidewalk I saw a cream-colored hat bobbing along. Beneath the hat was the slight figure of Easy Jack Redwood moving along briskly at his usual trotting gait. I ran across the street, ducking the traffic, and grabbed Easy by an arm. He whirled on me, his rodent teeth showing in a quick snarl.

I grinned at him. "Still sore at me?"

"It's you," he sneered. "I suppose you got another easy setup for me?"

"Forget it," I said. "I couldn't help that guy horning in last night. Come on, I'll buy us a slug of bourbon."

His thin little face took on a mournful expression. His upper lip was still swollen where Talbot had kicked him. "You know I can't take any amber, John," he said reproachfully. "My ulcers are getting ulcers."

I took him by the arm and led him into Doon's. "Milk, then. I want to talk to you."

We found an empty booth in the rear. Easy Jack had a glass of milk and I changed my mind about bourbon and had a cup of coffee instead.

"This guy I'm working for is named Irwin Blane," I said. "I told you the act last night was for his benefit. Okay, it backfired. The guy who caused the backfire was named Tommy Talbot. I told

you that, too. I couldn't help it, and I said I was sorry."

"He kicked me in the kisser," Easy Jack said.

"You can't blame him for that. You pulled a rod on his girl."

"But I was flat on the floor," Easy Jack protested angrily. "And my rod was empty."

"You can forget him," I said. "Somebody stuck a knife into Talbot last night, while he was in his car. And then the car turns up missing. The cops found it this morning—empty. They're dragging the river."

Easy Jack giggled. "Carp bait," he said. "I like that, John. I really do. Where did they find his heap?"

"Heap?"

"Yeah, heap. In the old days in Cicero we always called a car a heap. Where did the cops find this Talbot's coupe?"

I grinned at him, and then I said: "Out along the river, north of town. But forget about Talbot. I want you to tail Irwin Blane."

"Now?"

"Right now. He'll probably be in his office until five. Stick around and see where he goes." I gave him Blane's address.

Easy Jack smiled slyly. "He's paying you, ain't he? Just how close you want me to watch him?"

"Very close," I said. "I want to know how he spends his time."

Easy Jack finished his milk and stood up. He gave me a crooked grin. "Okay, John." He trotted out to the street.

CHAPTER THREE

A Shot in the Dark

I FOUND Rosalie Hunter in a bar two blocks from her apartment. After I got started it didn't take me long to locate her. The super at The Hartford Arms

gave me the address of the bar and told me that Miss Hunter frequently ate her dinner there. She was alone in a booth along the wall. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and there was nobody in the place but a sleepy-looking bartender and two white-uniformed waitresses talking at a table in the rear.

I sat down in the booth beside Rosalie Hunter. There was an empty coffee cup before her and an ash tray piled high with cigarette stubs. She didn't appear surprised to see me, but merely moved a little to make room for me. "Hello," I said. "You didn't work today."

She shook her head slowly. "I couldn't. I've been thinking about poor Tommy."

"Did the police see you this morning?"

"Yes," she said. "They told me about finding his car." She crushed out a cigarette and her eyes were veiled. "Have they found Tommy yet?"

"I don't think so, but I haven't talked to Stronski, probably because he can't find me. Didn't you tell me that Talbot wanted to marry you?"

She nodded without looking at me, and she lit another cigarette. I thought her hand shook a little.

I said gently: "I met Mrs. Tommy Talbot today."

She didn't move, or look at me, but her painted lips looked suddenly very red against the white of her face.

"How long have you known that he was already married?" I asked her.

She answered in a voice so low that I could barely hear her. "Since last night. He—he told me he was getting a divorce, and—" She stopped, and her eyes shifted toward the entrance to the bar.

Two men were walking toward our booth. One of them was Lieutenant Stronski. The other was a stranger in a brown suit and brown snap-brim hat. They stopped beside us. "Hello, Deegan," Stronski said. "I've been looking for you."

"Here I am, Lieutenant."

But he wasn't watching me. His eyes were on Rosalie Hunter. But still he spoke to me. "I don't want you, Deegan—now. I want Miss Hunter."

I knew what he was going to say, but I asked the question anyhow. "What for?"

He smiled thinly. "For the murder of Thomas Talbot."

Rosalie Hunter seemed to shrivel in the seat beside me.

Stronski said to me: "I don't know your connection with this deal, Deegan, but so far you're in the clear. You're one private peeper who never caused us any trouble, and I don't mind telling you that we found Talbot's body about an hour ago. He wasn't in the river. He was buried beneath a pile of underbrush close to his car. The knife was still in him. We found a typed note in his pocket." He teetered on his heels and stared up at the ceiling. "Let's see—the note went something like this! 'Tommy! I can't stand it any longer. If you see that girl again, I'll kill you. I mean it. Rosalie.'" Stronski cocked a cold eye downward at the girl.

There was a small silence, and I looked at Rosalie Hunter. "Did you write that?" I asked her.

She closed her eyes. "No, no."

Stronski said: "The type on the note checked with the typewriter in her office. It was written on the same machine." He motioned for me to get out of the booth. I stood up, and the man in the brown suit leaned down and grasped the girl's arm. I moved aside as she slid out of the booth. The two waitresses were staring at us with mouths open, and the bartender didn't look sleepy any more.

Rosalie Hunter stood silently between the two men. Her eyes were downcast, and her chin was trembling.

"Stick around town, Deegan," Stronski said. "I may want you later."

I nodded. The three of them went out the door.

Twenty minutes later I walked once more into Irwin Blane's office. He was sitting at his desk with his hat and coat on. He wasn't doing anything—just sitting.

"Now what?" he said wearily.

"They've just arrested Rosalie Hunter for the murder of Tommy Talbot."

It didn't seem to surprise him. "She didn't do it," he said.

"How do you know?" I asked him.

"She couldn't. She's not capable of such a thing."

"Who killed him, then?"

His fingers curled a little, and his eyes glittered behind the thick glasses. "How should I know?" he said in a tight voice.

"You knew Talbot was already married?" I asked him.

He nodded slowly. "Of course. For obvious reasons I didn't tell Rosalie, but I made it my business to do some checking on him. I found out that he had a wife in Chicago. I also learned that his wife had left him because of another woman. And I know that his wife was here in town last night."

"You know a lot," I said.

He lifted a hand and wiggled a finger at me. "Listen, Deegan. I have to know a lot. It means very much to me."

"Sixty-two grand, for example?"

He flushed. "I choose to ignore that remark, Deegan. Mrs. Talbot called me late last evening. She told me who she was and asked me if I had seen Talbot. I told her the truth, that he had taken Rosalie home. After all, why should I lie for him? But afterwards I got to worrying, and that is why I went to Rosalie's apartment last night."

"But why should Mrs. Talbot call you?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "She said she had found my name on a pad by her husband's phone."

"That pad of his must be a city directory. My name was on it, too," I said.

"Mrs. Talbot came to see me today. While I was talking to her, somebody sneaked up and slugged me. When I came around, she was gone."

He frowned, and looked down at his hands. "I don't like that, Deegan." He looked up at me. "You're supposed to be a detective. How about finding Talbot's killer and clearing Rosalie? There's a thousand dollars extra in it for you."

"All in a week?" I asked.

"A week would be fine, but I don't care how long it takes—just so she's cleared."

"You'll lose the sixty-two grand," I reminded him, "unless you marry somebody else quick-like. But, after all, there are a lot of girls."

He held up a hand. "Listen, Deegan," he said harshly. "the money means nothing to me if Rosalie is convicted of murder. She's got to be cleared."

"At any cost?" I asked softly.

"At any cost," he repeated.

I sighed, and moved to the door. "Be seeing you," I said to Irwin Blane, and I went out. I didn't know what I was going to do, or where I was going. In the first place, I was irritated that I had been sucked into a job like this, and in the second place I didn't like anything to do with murder. There are too many reasons why a person kills another person, and nobody knows who will kill, or why. Somebody had killed Tommy Talbot for a reason. Maybe a big reason, and maybe a very slight one. I thought of the people who would benefit by his death, in one way or another, and I didn't like what I thought.

Outside of Blane's office, at the turn of the corridor, Easy Jack Redwood was intently studying a list of firms occupying this floor of the building. He didn't look at me, but as I went past, I said: "He's in there. Stay on him."

He didn't make any sign, but I knew that he heard me.

Down in the street the late afternoon

traffic was jamming up at the intersections. I walked through the crowd to Doon's and sat in a back booth. I was on my second martini when Doon came back and told me I was wanted on the telephone. I carried my drink to the phone and lifted the receiver to my ear. "Deegan speaking."

"Oh, Mr. Deegan. My name is Martha Love."

"Love?"

"Yes." Her voice took on a cool note. "Why?"

"Nothing. It's a name." I waited.

After a second's silence, she said: "Mr. Deegan, I live across the hall from Rosalie Hunter. She just phoned me from jail. She said she couldn't locate you, and she asked me to find you and give you a message. I called your rooming house and was told that I might find you at Doon's Bar and Grill, and so—"

"What's the message?" I broke in.

There was a short silence, and then she said: "Rosalie said I should tell you personally in private."

"All right. I'll be right over."

I placed some money on the bar for my drinks and headed for the door. On the sidewalk I bumped into Easy Jack Redwood. He danced away from me, muttering to himself. Then he recognized me, and stood fidgeting, his sharp little eyes darting quick glances up and down the street.

"Where's Blane?" I snapped at him.

"In Feeney's Barber shop, on the corner," he said. "He told Feeney he wanted the works, so I figure I got time for some crackers and milk. I gotta eat, John."

"All right," I said, "but keep your eye on him."

He muttered something I didn't catch, and trotted into Doon's. I walked to the corner and looked in the window of Feeney's. In the second chair from the window there was a mountainous object draped in a towel which very possibly could have been Irwin Blane reclining un-

der the razor. I stepped out to the curb, caught the eye of a roving taxi driver, and headed for The Hartford Arms.

THE card in the lobby mailbox didn't read Mr. and Mrs. It just said, simply: *Martha Love 17-C*. I walked up the stairs to the third floor and pressed the bell beside the door opposite Rosalie Hunter's apartment. It opened before I had taken my finger from the button.

The girl who stood in the doorway appeared to be about twenty, but after looking at her eyes and the sharp outline of her full, carefully painted lips, I decided that she was nearer thirty. Her eyes were brown and wide-set, and the contours of her face were in good proportion. Her figure, simply clad in pale blue silk pajamas, was very obviously in good proportion, too. Behind her I got a glimpse of a softly lighted, well-furnished room.

She said: "Mr. Deegan?"

"Deegan speaking."

Suddenly she smiled. A nice smile, full of pretty teeth. "Come in," she said.

I held my hat on my lap and sat down. She moved to a table, picked up a small leather-covered notebook, leafed it, and turned to face me.

"I feel so sorry for Rosalie," she said. "Everyone in the building read about her trouble in the papers. I can't believe that she—" She hesitated, and stared at the notebook in her hands.

"Could kill a man?" I finished for her.

She nodded.

"Why not?"

She looked up at me suddenly. "Do you think—"

I shrugged. "Murder happens in the best of families."

"Not Rosalie," she said. "In the first place, she's too smart to do a thing like that—" She paused, and then added: "You're a detective, aren't you?"

"I suppose so."

"You don't look like one."

If she wanted to play games, I decided I had time to dilly-dally a little while. "What do I look like?" I asked her.

"Like a banker, or a druggist, maybe an insurance salesman. I work in an insurance office, you know."

I smiled, placed my hat on the floor, lit a cigarette, and prepared to relax.

Suddenly she said: "Shall I read Rosalie's message now?"

The game's over, I thought. Or did it start? I said: "That's what I'm here for."

She sat down opposite me and crossed her legs. "Rosalie talked pretty fast," she said, "and I wrote it down in shorthand. I'll read it to you just the way she gave it to me."

"Shoot," I said.

She lowered her eyes to the notebook and read: "Tell Mr. Deegan that right after Tommy left my apartment last night a girl came to see me. She said she was Tommy's wife and that she had come from Chicago to try and effect a reconciliation with him. I don't know how she knew where to find me. I told her the truth—that Tommy had just left. She didn't get angry, she just said thank you, and went out, quickly. Honest, I didn't know Tommy was married until he told me last night. He insisted that he was getting a divorce, as I told you. I was angry with him for deceiving me, we quarrelled, and he left."

She lifted her eyes from the notebook a minute, and then went on. "The rest is just the way I told it to you. I didn't kill him and I didn't write that note the police found. I meant what I said about you finding the person who killed Tommy, and I'll pay you—honest. The police think I did it, but I didn't, I didn't. Please help me. Tell Irwin that I am sorry for the way I've treated him. Tell him, but forget about that. Please, please find the person who killed Tommy and get me out of here."

Martha Love stopped reading and closed her book. "That's all," she said. "Poor Rosalie."

I picked up my hat and got to my feet.

She lifted her smooth eyebrows. "Leaving. Can't I get you a drink?"

"No, thanks. I haven't had dinner yet."

She made an impatient gesture. "Why do people always say that? Don't you know that before dinner is the best time there is to drink?"

"Yes," I said, grinning. "I know it. I meant that I haven't time."

She rested her head against the back of the chair and gave me a slow smile. "Aren't you even going to thank me?"

Games, again, I thought. "Sure," I said. "Thanks. Did you know Tommy Talbot?"

She laughed shortly. "A lady-killer—he thought. He knocked on my door one night—after he'd left Rosalie. I didn't let him in. He was not my kind of a man."

The desired response to her last words was so obvious that I almost involuntarily asked the next question in the game, *What is your kind of man?*, but I checked myself in time and glanced at my wrist watch. A quarter after six in the evening. Martha Love was watching me. Her eyes were bright and there was a faint flush on her cheeks.

I said cautiously: "Mr. Love—he's working?"

The flush left her cheeks, and I could see pain in her eyes. Then she said: "He's dead."

The room became very silent, and I could hear the sound of traffic in the street below. I said: "I'm sorry."

She closed her eyes and said: "He died on Omaha Beach on June sixth, nineteen hundred and forty-five."

I moved over to her. Her cheeks were wet. "I'm sorry," I said, again.

She kept her eyes closed. "Go away, Mr. Deegan," she said in a tired voice. "Quickly."

I went out and closed the door swiftly behind me.

When I hit the sidewalk there was a small green sedan parked in front of The Hartford Arms. I gave it a casual glance and started up the street. When I was abreast of the sedan I saw a faint metallic glitter over the front window, and I paused. In that instant a yellow burst of flame exploded from the car and I heard the ugly impact of bullets against the bricks of the building beside me. I pitched forward to the sidewalk and began to roll. The gun cracked again and I felt a hot, heavy jolt on the back of my neck. I kept rolling until I came to an alley entrance. I jumped to my feet and stumbled along a wall in the darkness. From the street behind me I heard the sudden high whine of meshing gears. As I turned, I saw the green sedan flash across the end of the alley, headed up town.

"Try again, buddy," I muttered to myself as I moved slowly back to the sidewalk. Blood was seeping down my neck beneath my shirt collar, and I held a handkerchief to the back of my head. A cruising taxi saw me and swung in to the curb. I got in and leaned back. I felt dizzy and weak and my whole body was trembling. The taxi driver asked me twice before I told him to take me to Doc Dudley's office on Fourteenth Street. Doc was a poker-playing friend of mine, and he swabbed out the bullet groove on my neck without asking too many questions. Not that I minded the questions, I just didn't feel like talking. He gave me a tetanus shot while his pretty nurse deftly applied gauze and tape to my neck.

Doc said: "You're going to have a stiff neck for a couple of days, John. See me tomorrow." He hesitated, and then he added: "That's a bullet wound. I'll have to report it."

"Tell Lieutenant Stronski," I said, as I moved to the door on rubbery legs. "He'll be interested."

"Right-o," Doc said. "Don't forget to see me tomorrow."

I said I would, and I went out and got into the waiting taxi. I gave the driver Mrs. Dwyer's address and leaned back in the seat. I had decided to call it a day and I tried to relax. But my mind refused to slow down and one by one the events of the day paraded in bright clarity before me. And as the taxi stopped in front of Mrs. Dwyer's I suddenly realized that there would be no rest for me that night, not for a while, anyhow.

I got out, told the driver to wait, and went into the house. There was a dim light burning in the hall, and except for the faint sound of Mrs. Dwyer's radio in the rear of the house, the place was quiet. I went up the stairs slowly, trying to hold my head steady so as not to disturb the bandage on the back of my neck. In my room I washed my face with cold water, took two long drinks of bourbon, and put on my third fresh shirt for that day. Then I pawed through a dresser until I found my old nickle-plated .38. The cylinder was empty, but I found three cartridges in a corner of the drawer. I loaded the gun, turned the cylinder until the first slug was in firing position, put the gun in my inside coat pocket, and went back down the stairs. When I passed the tall, old-fashioned clock in the hall I was surprised to see that it was a quarter of nine in the evening, and I remembered that I hadn't had any dinner.

I gave the taxi driver Irwin Blane's home address.

He lived in a six room bungalow in a quiet section four blocks from the center of town. The place was dark, and I didn't see anything of Easy Jack Redwood.

I said to the cab driver: "Turn off your lights. Do you mind waiting some more?"

He laughed. "Hell, no, Mister. As long as the meter keeps ticking."

"Let 'er tick," I said, and I lurched up the walk. My legs still felt weak, and my head was buzzing.

I didn't see Easy Jack until I was almost to the door. He stepped out from behind some small pine trees. "You drunk, John?" he whispered anxiously.

"Just hungry," I said in a hoarse voice. "And tired, and beat up. Is Blane in there?"

"Fatso? He's been in bed for ten minutes."

"Where did he go tonight?"

"Feeney's Barber Shop, the Fountain Inn to eat, and then to a flicker at The Sigma, and then here."

"Sure he didn't leave the movie before it was over?"

"If he did, it was through the back door. He came out with the crowd at the end of the early show." Easy Jack was dancing about nervously. "Okay if I go home now, John?"

"Sure," I said. "You did a nice job. I'll see you tomorrow."

He trotted off down the street. I pressed the bell button beside Irwin Blane's front door. I waited maybe three minutes before I saw a light come on in the rear of the bungalow. I stood back from the steps and waited. The door opened and Blane stood staring at me. In his white pajamas he looked about as big as a circus tent.

"Well, well," he said. "Mr. Deegan."

"Can I come in a minute?"

"Sure, sure."

I stepped into his neat little house. He took a bottle of brandy and two glasses from a cabinet and motioned me to sit down. As he poured the brandy, he said: "Any news on the Talbot killing?"

"It looks worse for your girl friend," I told him. "She quarrelled with Talbot last night after he told her that he was married."

He made a whistling sound with his lips. "That's bad." He handed me a glass

of brandy and nodded at the bandage on my neck. "What happened to you?"

I tasted the brandy. It was smooth and hot. I took another sip before I answered him. "Somebody took a shot at me in front of The Hartford Arms tonight."

"No! Who?"

I drank more brandy. "Somebody who figured I knew too much about the killing of Talbot." I said. "Remind me to stick to insurance jobs from now on."

Blane frowned into his glass. "Have you heard anything from Talbot's wife?"

I shook my head. "No. And I didn't get the license number of the guy who slung lead at me tonight."

Blane took a swallow of his drink. "What kind of a car was it?" he asked. "A coupe, or what?"

I didn't answer him. I was looking at something I hadn't noticed before. It was a large pigskin bag sitting just inside the front door. Blane's eyes followed my gaze. He said quickly: "I'm taking the morning train to Chicago that's why I went to bed early tonight. I've got a deal on with a mining outfit up there."

I shifted uneasily in my chair. My brandy was all gone, and Blane tilted the bottle over my glass. "You look tired, Deegan," he said. "Maybe you'd better forget this mess for tonight and get some sleep."

I felt helpless and confused, and my mind refused to function. I just sat and sipped at the brandy. Something that Blane had said filtered into my brain, and I finished the brandy in one swallow. I knew what I had to do. I stood up. "Get on some clothes," I said to Blane. "We're going to take a little ride."

He laughed, but there was a hard edge to his laughter. "Not tonight, Deegan."

I wasn't in any moods for arguments or explanations. I just wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible, with the least possible effort. I took the .38 from my pocket and pointed it at Blane. "Hurry

up," I said wearily. "I'll give you three minutes."

He looked at me silently. Then he said in a hurt voice: "You don't have to do that, Deegan. If it's that important, of course I'll go with you. Do you mind telling me where?"

"You'll know when we get there," I said.

He laughed and stood up. "You're upset, Deegan." He moved to a bedroom door. "Be with you in a minute."

I stood in the bedroom door and watched him dress. In spite of his bulk, he moved swiftly. He didn't say anything more to me, and I was too tired and groggy to say anything to him. Once he gave me a half puzzled, half amused glance. Presently we were outside and Blane locked his front door. My taxi was still waiting. I climbed in after Blane and said to the driver: "The Wyandot Hotel, on Lake Street. We're in a hurry."

As we moved away, Blane said: "Who lives at the Wyandot Hotel?"

"Never mind," I grunted.

He chuckled softly. "You know, Deegan, if it weren't for Rosalie, I'd be enjoying this cops and robbers stuff. Really."

But I wasn't enjoying it. Not a bit. I held the .38 in my lap with the muzzle pointed at Irwin Blane. I was scared blue.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Cornered Rat

THE Wyandot Hotel was a combination pool room, bookie joint, beer parlor and rooming house. I had been there before, and I knew that behind the place was a back stairway opening on to a court. To get to the court you had to walk down an alley leading in from the narrow street facing the lake. Down in this part of town the street lights were scarce, and the whole

section had a murky and bedraggled appearance.

Blane and I got out of the taxi, and I said to the driver: "Want to wait some more?"

He looked around uneasily at the narrow, littered street. "How about calling another cab when you wanna go?"

"Stick around," I said. "I'll double the meter."

He nodded, but he wasn't happy about it.

I motioned Blane toward the alley entrance at the back of the Wyandot Hotel, and I followed him until we came to the dark court. I opened the back door, and we went up a steep flight of stairs with a dim yellow light at the top. Here a narrow hall, filled with shadows and the smell of disinfectant, ran past a row of closed doors. I knocked on the second door from the stairway. Blane stood quietly beside me, but there was a bright, alert look in his eyes. I knocked again.

There was a soft movement from inside the room, and a voice said: "Who is it?" "Deegan."

A key turned, and the door opened. I pushed Blane in ahead of me. Easy Jack Redwood began to swear—and then he saw me. He stopped swearing and backed to the middle of the room. He was moving his feet like a fighter shadow-boxing, and his little brown hands kept closing and unclosing. He was fully dressed, even to his cream-colored hat. Except for a battered trunk and an old-fashioned brass bed there wasn't much furniture in the room, but it was clean and tidy.

I moved around the wall until I had a clear view of both Easy Jack and Irwin Blane. Blane stood solidly, chewing on a cigar, and watching me with a flicker of amusement in his eyes.

I took a deep breath and said to Easy Jack: "Wasn't it kind of tough tailing two people at the same time?"

He stopped his dancing and screwed up

his face into a puzzled expression. "I don't get it, John." He looked at Blane. "I only tailed him like you said. Tell him where you was tonight, Fatso."

Blane chewed his cigar and winked at me. "Feeney's Barber Shop," he said. "The Fountain Inn for dinner, and the early show at The Sigma. Then home."

Easy Jack swung on me triumphantly. "Ain't that what I told you, John?"

I was feeling sicker by the minute, and I would have given a lot to have been back in my room at Mrs. Dwyer's with nothing on my mind but the ten o'clock news broadcast. But I'd had this brainstorm and I heard myself blurting it out.

"You tailed Blane part of the time," I said to Easy Jack, "but you kept your eyes on me, too—when Blane was in the barber shop, for example. That was when you followed me to The Hartford Arms and decided that I knew too much about the killing of Tommy Talbot. You rented a car, waited for me to come out, and tried to kill me, only you didn't shoot straight enough. Then you scooted back to the barber shop and were lucky enough to find Blane's trail to the restaurant, and to the movie. After that you followed Blane home and waited until I showed up." I paused for breath.

Easy Jack looked at me with an expression of amazement on his wizened face. Irwin Blane's eyes looked big and bright behind his thick glasses. Neither of them said anything.

I continued talking to Easy Jack: "You killed Tommy Talbot. After he kicked you during the fake holdup you followed Talbot and Rosalie Hunter to The Hartford Arms and waited for Talbot to come out. When he got into his car you stabbed him. As you were leaving the parking lot you ran into Mrs. Talbot. You were afraid that she would remember you and give your description to the police after Talbot's body was found and so you stuck around. When Mrs. Talbot left the apart-

ment house you followed her to her hotel, made sure that she was set for the night, then you went back to the parking lot, drove Talbot's car out along the river and hid his body. In the morning you hung around Mrs. Talbot's hotel, and when she came out you followed her to my place. That worried you. You guessed that she intended to tell me about seeing you in the parking lot, and so after I arrived you sneaked in, pushed my landlady into the closet, slugged me, and took Mrs. Talbot with you to keep her from talking. Where is she now? In some back-road ditch?" I stopped talking. I was trembling a little.

"Ah, nuts," Easy Jack said. "You got the creeps, John. I don't know nothing about no dame and no killing. I been working for you."

Blane watched the two of us, still chewing on his cigar. He began to chuckle, and his big belly jumped up and down. "Now what, Deegan?" he said, and he chuckled louder.

Easy Jack began to grin, too. He looked like a rat sizing up a hunk of Rocquefort. "You know me better than that, John. You're punch-drunk. All I done tonight was tail Fatso, there, like you told me."

Blane stopped chuckling. "Hmmm," he said, looking at me.

The room became quiet. Both Blane and Easy Jack were watching me silently. I had a scared, lonely feeling. And then I heard a faint thudding sound. It came from behind a door across the room. Easy Jack's eyes shifted. Blane's cigar tilted upward and remained motionless, like a hound's tail on a pheasant point. I moved over to the door and turned the knob. The door was locked, but there was a key on the outside. I turned it, and the door swung open.

Behind me, I heard Blane blurt out: "What the hell!"

A girl was lying on the floor of the narrow closet. Her wrists were tied behind her and lashed to her drawn-up

ankles. A red bandanna was tied tightly across her mouth. Her eyes stared up at me, wide and numb with terror. I didn't recognize her at first, and then I realized that it was Tommy Talbot's wife.

I turned quickly to face Easy Jack Redwood. His long teeth were showing in a set grin. In one swift dancing movement he was close to me, moving nervously on his nimble feet, and there was a bright thin blade tight against my stomach.

"Don't move, John," he said, and his breath whistled from between his teeth. "Don't try nothing. You're too dumb to pack a rod, and this sticker goes in real easy." Without taking his eyes from me, he snapped at Irwin Blane. "You, too, Fatso. I'm walking out of here, see, and you guys ain't a-gonna stop me." He pressed the knife a little tighter against my stomach, and I moved backward involuntarily. Behind me, the girl was making strangled sounds through the bandanna.

EASY JACK began to talk in a shrill rapid voice. As he talked, he danced about on his little feet, but he held the knife very firmly against me. "Sure, I killed that horn-tooting pretty boy. Do you think I'd let any punk like him get away with kicking me in the face? But I played it smart, real smart, just like the old days in Chi and Cicero. I busted into the Hunter babe's office and typed that note to put in the pretty boy's pocket. When I gave him the business he never even squawked. It was easy—"

He paused, pointed a finger at the girl on the floor of the closet, and his lips curled over his teeth. "Then she came spooking around just when I was leaving, and I figured she would sing to the cops, but she went to you, and that was just as bad. The rest was like you said, John. I had to slug her too, before I got her here. Nobody saw me carry her up here, except a guy from the pool room, and I

tell him she's my girl friend with too many beers in her. I figured on taking her out someplace tonight, but when you tell me to tail Fatso, the guy you're working for, I figure you're up to something, and so I keep an eye on you, too. I know the cops have found the pretty boy, and when I see you go back to the apartment house I think for sure you're on my tail. So I rented a heap and tried to blast you."

He stopped his rapid flow of words and snickered. "I shoulda used a sticker on you too, John," he went on. "But I know I only wing you, and so I go back to tailing Fatso in case you check on me. You know, John, I always kind of liked you, and you was pretty cute, at that. How did you get wise to me? From what the babe told you?"

"No, Jack," I said, and my voice sounded strange in my ears. "I didn't connect you with the deal until a little while ago, at Blane's house. He said something about a coupe to me, and I remembered that yesterday when I told you about the cops finding Talbot's body and car, you said: 'Where did they find the coupe?' You weren't even supposed to know Talbot, and yet you knew that he drove a coupe. That's why I came here tonight. That was a dumb thing to do—kill a man just because he kicked you." While I talked I tried to decide if it would be worth-while to make a grab for my gun. But my back was against the wall, and the point of the knife was already a small, sharp pain against my stomach.

There was a kind of a mad glitter in Easy Jack's eyes. He laughed gleefully. "We used to kill 'em for a lot less than that in Chi, John. Them was the days. Booze, women and tommy guns." He laughed again, and twisted the knife a little. I saw his eyes go flat and hard.

Irwin Blane said quietly: "The man's crazy, Deegan."

As if speaking to himself, Easy Jack

muttered softly: "I don't wanna stick you, John. I don't wanna, but it'd be so easy."

I could feel the sweat running down my ribs. I knew I could reach out and grab Easy Jack, but by that time he could have the knife against my backbone. And the same thing would happen if Blane made a move for me. Easy Jack seemed to sense what I was thinking and he laughed. Abruptly his feet stopped their dancing movements, and his little body stiffened. The point of the knife was a sharp, real pain now, and I felt like a fly on a pin.

Irwin Blane's right arm moved. It was a smooth, swift motion, and the room rocked with the blast of a gun. Easy Jack yelled and swung sideways, his knife clattering to the floor. He crouched low and raced for the door, and I got a glimpse of his bloody wrist where Blane's bullet had hit him. Easy Jack reached the door, jerked it open. Blane fired again. For a second Easy Jack's body sagged and he hung over the knob. Blane lowered his gun and chewed rapidly on his cigar.

And then suddenly Easy Jack was gone, and I heard his running steps in the hall. I was nearest the door, and I jumped through it, and I got my .38 in my hand. Easy Jack was halfway down the stairs when I fired. He pitched forward, turning as he fell. He ended up on his back, with his feet pointing up at me and his head against the door at the bottom.

Side by side Irwin Blane and I moved slowly down the steps and leaned over the body. Blane said grimly: "I thought sure my second shot would stop him."

It made me a little sick to look at Easy Jack's face with his rat teeth showing in the dim light. I turned him over and pointed to the spreading red stain on his back. "It did," I said. "I aimed for his legs. I think he was already dead on his feet."

Blane sighed and blew smoke from the muzzle of his gun. It was a big blue-steel

.45 with a long barrel, an over-size target sight and a rubber grip. A big gun for a big man.

"Where did you get that?" I asked him.

He chuckled and his big stomach moved up and down. "I've had it in my coat pocket all the time—ever since this afternoon when I spotted this guy following me. Didn't you know that I'm the champion pistol shot of six states?"

I didn't say anything. For a detective, I decided dismally, I'd make a first rate bill collector.

We heard a murmur of excited voices, and the movement of people in the alley outside. I looked back up the stairs and saw a row of faces peering down at us. I said to Blane: "You've got the biggest gun. Stay here. I'll go up and untie that poor girl, and call the cops."

Blane laughed. "Oh, no. I'll attend to the pretty girl. You keep the mob away." He lumbered up the stairs, still laughing.

The stair door opened, and a ring of faces peered in at me and at the body of Easy Jack. I waved my gun. "Police," I snapped. "Stand clear."

I reached out and slammed the door shut. I felt hard and tough, like a private detective should.

* * *

Lieutenant Stronski said: "Why didn't you call me before you dragged Blane to Easy Jack's place?"

I squirmed in my chair. "I guess I've

got a one-track mind, Lieutenant. I didn't know for sure then who had killed Talbot. It still could have been Blane, or Talbot's wife, or even Rosalie Hunter, for all I knew. I figured I couldn't afford to let Blane out of my sight until I checked on Easy Jack, and I didn't want to bring you in until I was certain—but I guess maybe I should have."

Stronski grinned. "You'd better stick to insurance jobs, John, and leave the rough stuff to us."

I remembered my sore head, my bullet-nicked neck, and Easy Jack's knife in my stomach. "Amen," I sighed.

Irwin Blane never made the grade with Rosalie Hunter. After they let her out of jail she returned the flowers he'd sent her, and she wouldn't talk to him on the telephone. I did my best, but I guess I wasn't very good at playing Cupid. It was a screwy job anyhow, and I told Irwin Blane so when I reported to him on the last day of the week—the deadline for his marriage.

But he just chuckled and chewed on his cigar. "Don't worry about it, Deegan. You've earned your bonus. You see—uh—Jean and I were married yesterday. Tomorrow we're leaving for a honeymoon at French Lick."

"Jean?" I said blankly.

He chuckled again. "Sure. Jean Talbot—I mean Jean Blane. Wonderful girl."

I went down to Doon's and had three quick drinks. I wanted to forget the whole thing.

THE END

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When the implacable reformer met the impudent hussy, she nagged herself straight into the . . .

HOUSE OF SUDDEN SILENCE

By H. HASSELL GROSS

THE elderly widow glanced complacently at the gold wedding ring embedded on her left hand.

The girl standing before her followed the glance. She had great yellow eyes—bestial in colour, it was said later—and now they shone magnificently in her pale face. "It's only the job I want," she said. "The job to support my child."

Mrs. Thomas daintily adjusted her lace cap, this time throwing a significant and reproving glance at Kate Webster. "You do not look poor, my dear," she purred. "Nor, I must add, respectable. However, the point is whether you are willing to be saved and uplifted?"

The girl was silent.

"Go on, tell me again!" urged Mrs. Thomas, leaning forward. "You followed a soldier from Ireland to England—"

An expression of scorn dented one corner of the girl's lips. But when she spoke her tone was almost patient. "Sure, Ma'am, lately I've been in and around Liverpool, working in the taverns."

"Well, Kate, I see that you'll do. I know you'll make an excellent conversion—and an excellent parlor maid!"

"Ma'am, I must have one evening off each week. My boy is living at Hammer-smith with good people named Porter.



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All-Story Detective

He's my own dear and my all. I'll not desert him, nor miss a week seeing him. That wouldn't be reforming, Ma'am!"

Later, in the pub down the street, Kate decided it all went to show how clever you could be without even thinking it out. She'd said just what the old bossy wanted to hear. The things about the boy, too—that hadn't hurt for, much as you meant it, she took it to prove you were a softy she could work on. Gor! But all the same, she did love her little tyke.

But Mrs. Thomas would get just so much of the repentant act from her—just so much and no more.

"I'll still have me a bat now and then, for old time's sake!" she announced to the startled pub keeper.

But Kate was wrong. Kate scarcely ever got out of her sight and never out of the sound of the widow's exhortations. The neat little house contained enough explosive atmosphere to blow both occupants to Kingdom Come—as Kate suddenly remarked on a Sunday morning in early June.

"You'll not like coming with a bashed head to the Pearly Gates," she threatened with a look so sultry the missionary spirit quailed in Mrs. Thomas' bosom. She fired Kate, who swept past her like a tornado on her way to the nearest tavern.

The tavern keeper was a man with a memory for wild, animal-like beauty. "This yer first bat in a pair of months?" he inquired cheerily. "'Pears ye're not doing so well with the old lady, then!"

Kate stared him down with enraged eyes. But that was the truth. The widow had got the upper hand.

"Calls it keeping me in line," she thought. "Well, there's more good to my fun than her second-hand kind. Thinks she'll get credit in heaven for bringing me to 'righteousness.' And how does she do it all?" Kate slammed her glass on the bar. "Does it by paying me money."

House of Sudden Silence

Kate's thoughts slowed while she figured it all out as she never had before. "Why can't I go back to the taverns to feed my boy? Well, sure, and why don't I?"

She remembered the girl she'd met in another bar like this one, the girl who'd given her the first hint of Mrs. Thomas.

"It a home for the like of us she keeps," the girl had laughed. "A new one every month or so, she's such a nagger on teetotaling and the like; but then she has money, the old dame, and trinkets lying about to be picked up."

"Not one ring nor the other ornaments have I touched yet!" Kate suddenly informed the tavern keeper. "Always lecturing and plaguing! Is that gratitude?"

The fright of seeing the bartender's sharpening eyes turned her thoughts toward discretion. Perhaps the old cow was not so bad after all. At least, she wasn't a gaol—Kate had seen her share of them—and if you did your work and looked pious enough, she paid your wages on the dot. There was many a girl would be glad of a Mrs. Thomas. . . .

AN HOUR or so later, Kate was beginning to feel some actual repentance. Home she'd go, that's what she'd do, and re-do the house for the old lady, give it a fair cleaning for once.

Inside the house, she found Mrs. Thomas absent. "Gone to church, the stinking old Liddy!" she thought, her rage returning.

But gradually, as she thrust out mattresses to air on the upper landing and pulled down curtains for washing, she began to amuse herself with a fantasy that the house was hers. She imagined how she would bring her boy to live there, and have a maid to see to him when she visited the pubs or had a gentleman caller. She saw herself in Mrs. Thomas' jewels

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All-Story Detective

and best taffeta—wine-coloured and with real lace on the overskirt. She was Mrs. Thomas as she stood dreaming on the stair, a Mrs. Thomas who was young and beautiful and with plenty of zip—but also plenty of money, a house and a maid.

Unfortunately, the widow, opening the door at that instant, mistook the dreamy stare of Kate's yellow eyes for an expression of horrid malignancy. The presence of the mattress and bed covers in the upper hall, undoubted evidence that Kate had been profaning the Sabbath with toil, enforced her opinion. Purple with anger, the real Mrs. Thomas mounted the stairs.

For a moment the two stared in hatred, the withered, religious zealot and the beautiful, strong animal who lacked the power to wring from life what the other had somehow gotten. Then a torrent of frenzied abuse burst from Mrs. Thomas' mouth. The girl stood, looking patient and almost bewildered. She even bent obediently to lift one of the mattresses back to its place in the bedroom. But the voice flamed on, shrill, raging, irrational—nothing could stop it.

Until, finally, with one thrust of her arm, Kate sent it hurtling off down the stairs to silence. . . .

The lolling dead thing sent no message to Kate's mind for a long time. She tidied up a little. When she looked again, it was still there at the foot of the stairs, blood winding like a dark gauze over the slyly staring eyes. It had hurt its head. . . .

But the impulse of pity died as she crept down to it. Tidying up did no good with that thing there. She heaved it up in her arms like a mattress and thrust through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

It was too big to fit into the pantry. She pulled it out again, and saw the kitchen table. Laid out there, the arms folded and the legs neatly pushed together. The legs annoyed her. She hur-

House of Sudden Silence

riedly picked up the kitchen knife. . . .

When the morning came, she had not finished. There was a hammering in her temples and in the sick pit of her stomach. And somewhere in her dazed mind a half-desperate, half-cunning longing to put the common daily acts of toil between herself and those oddly shaped paper-wrapped bundles draining into the kitchen sink. She rubbed out some cloths in the wash tub and hung them on the line in the backyard. She noticed the sun was shining—a hot day.

Three hours later, she came back from the grocer's and found a butcher's boy on the kitchen stoop. Her yellow eyes gleamed in alarm.

"Nothing today," she said; and then, as her nose caught the faint odor, "we're butchering for ourselves." She waited until he left the yard; then she unlocked the door and went into the house.

It was not a horror to her yet. She was busy at work, cleaning, washing. The next-door neighbor, an old busybody as Kate well knew, saw her come into the yard several times to empty a pailful of thick, dark water. That night, she brought up a trunk and black bag from the basement, and at dawn all the little parcels were out of sight. She slept.

When she woke in the afternoon, the plan was there in her mind. It meant escape in two senses, one of them cunning and cold, the other merely childish. She remembered how she had been Mrs. Thomas two afternoons ago, with a house of her own, a place to bring her boy to. . . .

She shuddered. Not to this house, no. But with the money from selling this house. . . . She went out into the sunshine dressed in Mrs. Thomas' wine taffeta and carrying a small oilcloth bag. She took a hansom cab to see her boy in Hammer-smith, and all the way the valise hiding Mrs. Thomas' head bumped on her knee.

She never looked at it lest she should

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All-Story Detective

see what was inside; but she saw it all the same. Jewels—she must tell the Porters she had jewels in the bag. The story she would tell came to her piecemeal—her sudden marriage last week to a Mr. Thomas who had died three days after the wedding, leaving her his nice little house in Richmond where his old aunt had also died recently; and her plans now to sell the house and take her boy home with her to Ireland.

She'd ask the Porters to find a customer for the house. The sale must be quick. Another little idea came to her, then. She'd get the Porters' seventeen-year-old son to go back to Richmond with her.

BY MIDNIGHT, it was all done. Young Porter had helped her convey the small trunk and the black bag the short distance from Mrs. Thomas' house to Richmond bridge; and then, at her request, had waited at the far end of the bridge.

When she rejoined him, saying briskly, "It's a good thing this man who bought the trunk thought I was alone! he's a timid one, for sure!" the youth laughed. He'd heard the splash, he told her, when she tilted the trunk and bag over the bridge parapet into the water below.

She laughed with him. "Come along to the pub, Georgie, and have a nightcap, eh?" she said.

She threw more gusto into the invitation than she felt at the time; but the youth proved not a bad one, and as the night wore on at the tavern, he showed himself cunning and cute enough for twice his age. For a little while Kate forgot what she still had to do.

Then, shortly before closing time, Georgie passed into a dead sleep. Images of the dark, murder-haunted house returned to Kate then, and she huddled close to Georgie, touching his warm cheek and softly crying. For she realized now that

House of Sudden Silence

throughout the whole evening at Porter's she had never once taken her boy on her knee.

She fell into a fury, cursing the damned black bag. She was white and spent when they put her out of the tavern. She stayed in the streets until the first light of dawn. Then, with every lamp lit, she hurried to scrub the kitchen again.

At ten o'clock she was still at it, scouring over and again every exposed surface in the room. When the doorbell rang and she went to answer it, she looked like a sleepwalker. But as soon as Mr. Church explained that the Porters had sent him, that he had come to buy the house, the hammers leaped to life in her temples again.

Swaying under a sudden onrush of terror and urgency, she stammered that she must sell—immediately; she would sell for eighteen pounds. She went through the details of the transaction in a daze of fear and afterward returned to the kitchen. She was still there when Mr. Church returned with a dray for the furniture.

She could not remember this part of the bargain, and she knew the danger to herself in the public removal of the household goods. The curtains in the house next door moved and the face of Mrs. Thomas' next-door friend peered out. Mr. Church returned from a last trip to the dray and put eighteen pounds in Kate's hand.

"Well, Mrs. Thomas," he said loudly, "I suppose you'll be on your way to Ireland by tomorrow then?"

She did not answer him, but stood staring at the old busybody's face in the window. The loaded wagon drove away. Then the window was raised. "So, Mrs. Thomas, where is your mistress and what dirty business are you up to, selling the furniture and play-acting as Mrs. Thomas! The magistrate will hear from me, I can tell you!"

Kate began to run, out of the yard, down

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All-Story Detective

the street, toward Hammersmith. Behind her, the shrill voice screamed over and over, "Where is Mrs. Thomas, you hussy?"

* * *

Kate Webster went to trial on July 2, 1879. Sometimes during the long nights in gaol, she remembered her flight, the fearful hours of walking in the hot summer sun, carrying her boy, and the shivering nights on the roadside with the mist curling up out of the hollows in the shape of Mrs. Thomas' head.

She had screamed then, frightening her boy; but now in the prison, she was silent, At first she had babbled, desperately and wildly, accusing young Porter and then old Church. They had not believed her, and at last she had had to tell the truth.

After that she had no more to say. She heard the sentence of death with an air of frozen terror.

The yellow eyes were flat now and dead, like an animal's indeed. They filmed a little when she mounted the scaffold, but that was because she turned her head and saw her boy being held up in Mrs. Porter's arms for a last look at the "ugly murderer."

(Continued from page 6)

Viviano Pantoja admitted to San Antonio police that he had fired his pistol 47 times at 4:30 in the morning but explained that he was turning back an invasion of cockroaches.

* * *

Admitting that he had pulled an alarm at a fire box when there was no fire; Robert L. Johnson explained to Philadelphia police that he had done so because he had got into a fight with his wife and needed help.

—H. H.

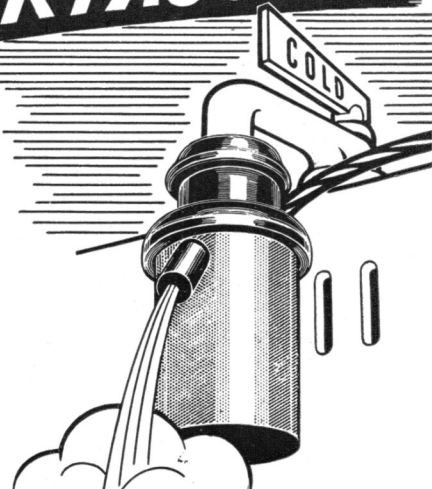
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