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A Cellini Smith
Novelette

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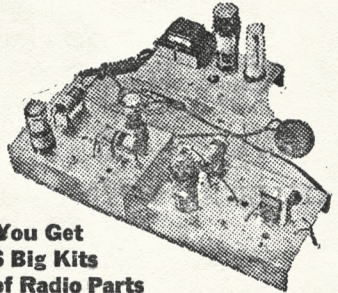
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NEXT ISSUE WILL BE OUT NOVEMBER 17TH



BLACK MASK



K. S. White, Editor

VOL. XXVI No. 9



November, 1944

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The Memphis shamus was sent to Ashton, back in the hill country, to alleviate Mark Thatcher's abaction, and, incidentally, solve the riddle of the teetotaler who met his Maker with Boysenberry cordial on his breath. But even McGavock was powerless to prevent murder, until his third victim's checkbook tied a noose around the killer's throat.

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Another Quiz Program for Firearms Fans.

Cover painted for Black Mask by Rafael De Soto

Black-and-white illustrations by Peter Kuhlhoff

**Every story in Black Mask is new and, to the best of our knowledge,
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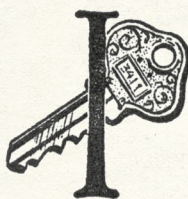
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LIFTING THE JANUARY BLACK MASK



IT WAS bad enough when the movie star saw the rattlesnake in the San Alpa lobby—it was no alcoholic figment of the first-cousin-to-a-pink-elephant variety, either, but the real thing—but when the swarm of smoked bees began to hive

out of the cooling system that air-conditioned the exclusive Palomar Bar, Manager Endicott really began to worry for fear his exclusive flea-bag had become a retreat for the more unsavory forms of wild life in earnest.

There was only one thing to do in the circumstances, of course. So he hollered for O'Hanna—as was his wont whenever shenanigans of any sort manifested themselves in those gilded purlieus. DALE CLARK tells all about it in *That's Murder For You!* in our next. It's a bullet-paced long novelette that'll keep you guessing with your favorite fiction house-dick from the minute he walks down that tenth-floor corridor to see a room about a girl, till he puts a French key in the killer's door and locks the slay-riddle up tight.

And just to make everybody happy JULIUS LONG brings back Ben Corbett and D. A. Kever in *Leave Your Killing Card*. If the wily op pulls any more of Kever's crime chestnuts out of the fire the pompous prosecutor is going to find himself in that gubernatorial sanctum in spite of himself.

C. P. DONNEL, Jr. promises another Doc Rennie novelette and ROBERT REEVES crashes through with a Cellini Smith yarn.

Plus other shorts and features by your favorite detective fictioneers.

This great JANUARY '45 *Black Mask* will be on sale NOVEMBER 17th.



CAN YOU STICK to your GUNS?

Or Are You Stuck With Them?

By JULIUS LONG



Answers to the following questions and problems will be found on page 8.

1

Suppose we had a revolver and an automatic pistol, each weighing as much as the other and each firing the same kind of cartridge. Which would have more recoil, the revolver or the automatic pistol?

2

Not all "automatic" firearms are fully automatic, some being only semi-automatic. Listed below are five arms. Can you tell which are which?

The .45 Colt Automatic (the Army .45).

The Thompson Sub-Machine Gun.

The 9 m/m Luger Automatic Pistol.

The United States Rifle Caliber .30 M1 (the Garand).

The Colt Match Target Woodsman Pistol.

3

Automatic firearms, whether semi-automatic or fully automatic, are of two main types, gas-operated and recoil-operated. Which of the five arms listed in Question No. 2, above, is operated by gas pressure and which by recoil?

4

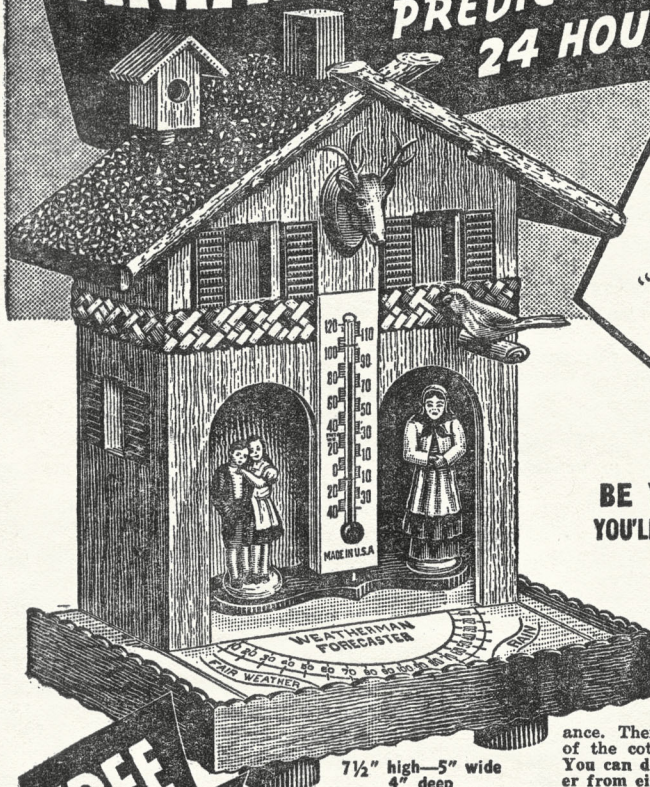
All automatic arms have movable breechblocks. Each has some device to hold the block firmly against the breech at the moment of firing, yet permit it to slide back for the ejection of the spent cartridge and the loading of a live one. These locking devices fall into four classes: the blowback, retarded blowback, the semi-locked breechblock and the locked breechblock. Which of the arms listed in Question No. 2 is equipped with which locking device?

(Continued on page 8)

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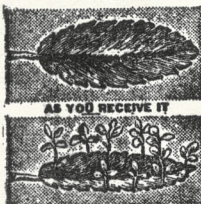
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(Continued from page 6)

5

Automatic firearms are fed from hoppers, clips, belts, box or drum magazines. Which of the arms listed in Question No. 2 is equipped with which loading device?

6

Which of the arms listed in Question No. 2 would it be possible to convert into a fully automatic, that is, "machine gun?"

Answers to preceding questions

1

Neither; the recoil of the two guns would be identical. The recoil force is the backward pressure of the gas which fires the bullet. If the gun were as light as the bullet, it would travel backward with the same speed as the bullet—to the extreme astonishment, utter confusion and general demoralization of the shooter. It is because the manufacturers are solicitous of the shooter's happiness and well-being that the gun is made about 100 times as heavy as the bullet. This helps both the gun and the shooter to stay put when the gun is fired. When you have two bullets of equal size, weight and powder load in two guns of equal weight, you are bound to get the same backward pressure in each, whether the second weapon be a revolver or an automatic. Of course, when we are talking about recoil, we are not discussing "kick." A gun's kick depends on its design. We have no yen to be sued, so, with regard to kick, we shall say guardedly that, pound for pound, the average automatic pistol produces more kick than a revolver. But, it's good! It's good!

2

The Thompson Sub-Machine Gun is the only gun listed that is fully automatic. It may also be fired semi-automatic. The other arms, the .45 Colt Automatic, the 9 m/m Luger, the Colt Match Target Woodsman and the Garand are incapable of fully automatic fire. They are self-loading, that is, they load themselves after the first shot, but the trigger must be squeezed each time to make them fire. A fully automatic gun, such as the Thompson Sub-Machine Gun, not only loads itself but fires itself so long as the trigger is held back.

3

The Garand Rifle is the only arm listed that is operated by gas pressure. Gas taken from a

port near the muzzle exerts pressure on a rod which operates the mechanism. The .45 Colt Automatic, the Thompson Sub-Machine Gun, the 9 m/m Luger and the Colt Woodsman are operated by the recoil force of the cartridge against the breechblock. When they are fired the cartridge case is "kicked" back against the block with such force that the cartridge case itself is extracted, and the firing pin or hammer is cocked. A spring then brings the block forward, goosing a fresh cartridge into the chamber.

4

The Colt Match Target Woodsman is equipped with the simple blowback breechblock which is held in place by its own weight and two springs.

The Thompson Sub-Machine Gun has a retarded blowback lock—the breechblock is not positively held against the breech, but a mechanical device prevents its opening until the bullet has left the barrel.

The Luger pistol and .45 Colt automatic pistol are equipped with semi-locked breechblocks.

The Garand has a positive locked breechblock.

Generally, the type of ammunition to be used in the arm determines the type of breechblock locking device. The more powerful the ammunition, the more powerful must the locking mechanism be.

5

None of the arms listed is hopper-fed or belt-fed. Only the Garand is fed from a clip, which contains eight shots. The .45 Colt, the Luger and the Woodsman are fed from box magazines holding seven, eight and ten cartridges respectively. The Thompson gun may be fed from a ten-round box magazine or fifty- and one hundred-round drum magazine. There is also a combination box and drum magazine made for the Luger. Its capacity is thirty-two shots. Many owners of automatic pistols refer to their magazines mistakenly as "clips." A clip merely clips the cartridges together; a magazine contains them.

6

All of them. Every automatic pistol or semi-automatic rifle contains the basic mechanism of a machine gun. Each is equipped with some type of "disconnecter" to prevent it from becoming fully automatic. Owners of automatic pistols are warned not to attempt to adjust the trigger-pull, as they may inadvertently convert their pistols into "machine guns," by causing damage to the disconnecting device.

A WORD TO THE WISE

Waste paper is still an important war material—it's essential for packing ammunition. So in order to make sure there's enough left over to go 'round for your favorite publication, don't forget to save all waste paper and turn it in for scrap.

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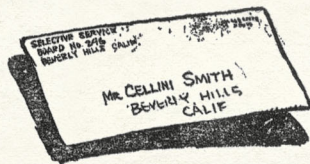
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Name.....Age.....

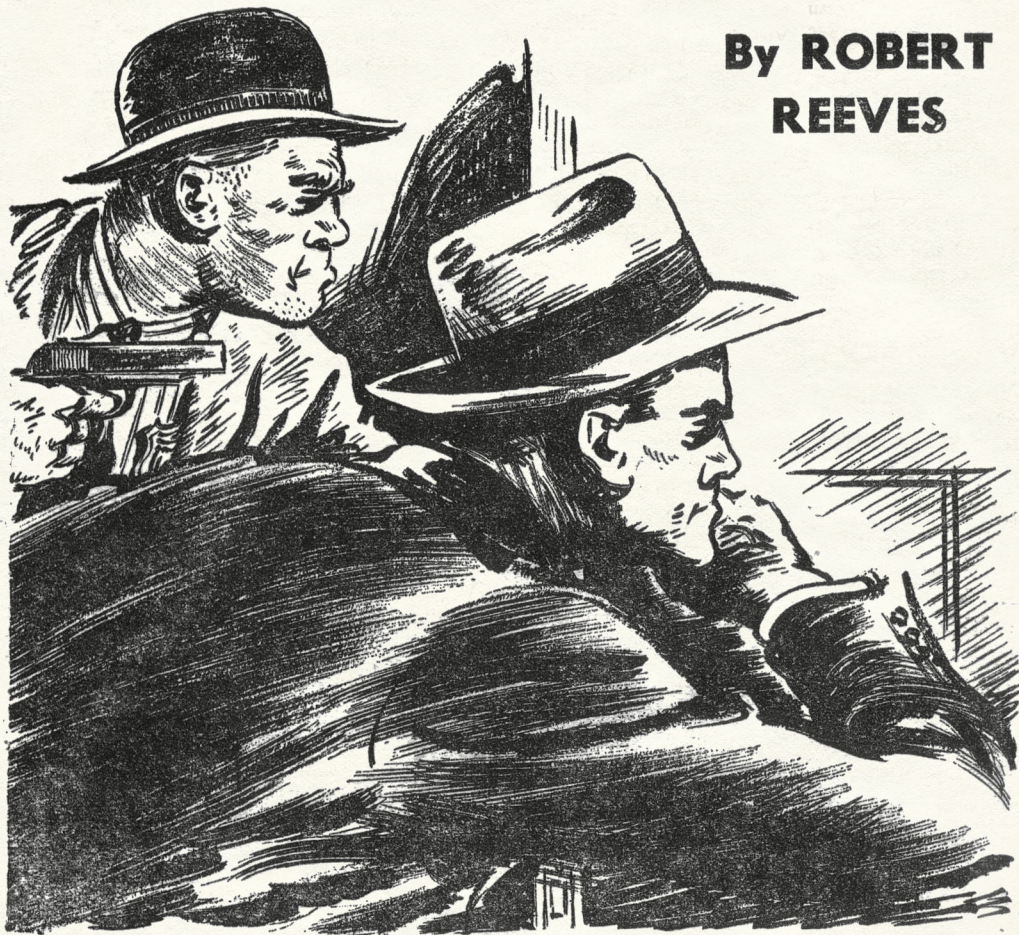
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MURDER A.W.O.L.

By **ROBERT
REEVES**



Cellini Smith wondered about three things on the day of his induction: What was the luscious brunette doing at a draft board at 6:30 A.M., unless Selective Service was supplying each draftee with a pin-up girl? Why did the smooth guy in the flashy suit keep ignoring her, unless he was hoping to be rejected for insanity by turning down such an item? And where did Dopey Delaney, who seemed to be tailing both of them, fit into the picture? A three-cornered rat race, and mixed up in it all was a sweet racket that made a fortune of money and burned up like an explosion right in Cellini's face.

A Cellini Smith
Novelette



Boggs and Cellini watched in fascination the spectacle of the beautiful girl beating the almost senseless man.

CHAPTER ONE

Greetings from the President

P

T WAS raining the way it can rain only in California. The wet drops that found their way through the cracks in the canvas top of Cellini Smith's coupe fell, with uncanny precision, down the back of his neck. The car was running on a tank of gas that

had taken the last of his coupons. It was a

miserably early hour of the day. It was a time to be in bed or going home but certainly not to be going out.

Yet, as Cellini drove along, a grin persisted on his face. This was the day, the day he was joining the army. He decided to drive a little slower. This would be the wrong moment for an accident. Selective Service Board No. 246, in Beverly Hills, would miss him.

The draft board was located in the City Hall and when Cellini Smith arrived he found the corridors jammed with the waiting draftees, friends and relatives. It was already after six-

thirty and the harassed secretary of the board was calling the roll. After Cellini had sounded off, he pushed through the crowd looking for someone he knew.

Most of the men were in their thirties and had, for one reason or another, been granted deferments to this day. There was also a sprinkling of draftees who had recently turned eighteen. Most of them seemed slightly nervous and all discussed in too-high voices their service preferences or related the experiences of friends who were already in uniform. Cellini recognized a newsboy who worked the Sunset-Vine beat and walked over.

"What'll they use you for, Mixso?"

Mixso shrugged his narrow shoulders. "They won't take me, Smith," he said with cheerful confidence. "This is my third examination. The last time the doctor told me I shouldn't bother to come around again even in case we were invaded."

"Maybe they'll grab you for psychological warfare. With your face you can scare the Japs."

"My kisser's got character. It's—speaking of faces!" The newsboy's lips pursed and let out with that whistle which means the same to a Ubangi maiden as it does to a Park Avenue debutante.

Cellini's gaze followed Mixso's and came to an abrupt halt in front of a girl standing alone by the entrance. Her face and figure would automatically have been denied second-class mailing privileges by the post office and the dark wavy hair that showed under her hat looked thick and glossy. The set hardness of her face and its over-brittle duco finish were the only jarring—or interesting—notes.

"I could like her like a sister," said Mixso. "Betty Grable's sister."

Cellini wondered why she was alone. People don't show up at a draft board at 6:30 A.M. just for the pleasure of it. Unless Selective Service was supplying each draftee with a pin-up girl on induction, there had to be a good reason for her to be up so early.

CELLINI shouldered his way toward the brunette and stopped a few feet from her. Suddenly, it dawned on him that she did have a reason for being there. Under half-closed lids she was watching a man who waited directly opposite her on the other side of the corridor.

Something stirred in Cellini as he regarded the man. He knew he had seen those sharp features, the well-kept hands and that flashy tie-pin before. He had seen him on more than one occasion and probably in Los Angeles—but where?

He would ask Mixso, Cellini decided. The newsboy would know. But before Cellini could make his way back, the secretary called for quiet and made an announcement.

"The busses are now waiting outside to take the selectees to the induction station on Main Street. Your friends can't ride in the busses with you, but if they wish they can go down on their own and wait in the U.S.O. while you're getting examined. Those of you who came with your own cars can drive down provided you report at the Station in forty-five minutes on the second floor."

There was a surge of movement past Cellini as draftees and friends pushed through the doors. Mixso was lost in the crowd. Cellini turned but could see neither the brunette nor the man in whom she was interested. Just as well, thought Cellini. He was finished with the detective game. It was no skin off his teeth.

He buttoned his topcoat and made his way out. It was still raining as heavily as when it had started the week before. As he walked toward his coupe he saw, in front of him, that figure which could have brought down a burlesque house without removing the raincoat. And ahead of her was the man she had been watching.

The man walked rapidly, as if aware of the trailing girl. He reached a Cadillac convertible, got inside and turned over the motor. At that moment, the brunette came up to the car and grasped the door handle. But the Cadillac shot forward and she was forced to jump back to avoid the splashing mud and water.

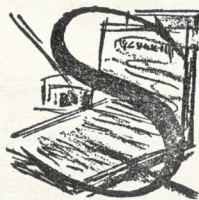
"I guess he doesn't want any," murmured Cellini. He reached his own car, started it and drove up to the girl who still stood by the curb, staring after the vanishing Cadillac.

"Care for a lift to the induction station?" Cellini called.

She glanced at him and didn't even bother to shake her head as she walked away.

The skin on Cellini's forehead strained in a heavy frown as he headed for Los Angeles. The guy with the familiar face would probably be rejected for insanity if he turned down an item like the brunette. Of course, they might be married and it could be one of those things. But then he had noticed no ring on her left hand. And why didn't she speak to him at the draft board? Why was she following him? Why—

Abruptly the frown relaxed as Cellini remembered. What was he worried about? He was going on Morganthau's payroll at fifty per.



ELECTEES from several other draft boards were reporting this morning and the large receiving room of the induction station was filled to capacity. Expertly, the soldiers shifted bodies of men from one corner to another, bringing a semblance of order out of the chaos. Cellini Smith

flattened against a wall, trying to avoid the wet clothes of the others as he told himself that he didn't care who owned that Cadillac.

A profile caught his eye. It belonged to a tough but small-time hood known as Dopey Delaney. Today's examination was no doubt just a formality for Dopey as his police record was too impressive to permit induction. Cellini was about to leave for more distant parts to avoid meeting Dopey when he stopped and swore softly.

Trying not to be too obvious, the hood was watching someone. Even before Cellini looked he knew that someone would be the owner of the Cadillac, the one with the familiar face, the one in whom the luscious brunette had shown such interest.

Cellini elbowed his way forward. "Hello, Dopey."

"Oh, it's you, Smith. So they got you."

"I see you know my friend over there."

While Dopey Delaney had earned his sobriquet because of a narcotics rap, it was also true that he was not very bright. "You mean Trosper?" he asked. "Oh, sure."

Of course, thought Cellini. That was the name—Harry Trosper, a third-rate band leader who played the town's lowest dives but sported a Cadillac.

"Why are you tailing him?"

"I'm tailing nobody. I'm here to be inducted. You better learn that right now."

Cellini knew that Delaney's bite was worse than his bark and there was no mistaking the threat in the words. "I've learned it," he said mildly. "Right now."

A tall, buck-sergeant bellowed: "I'm calling the roll on Board 246. Front and center when you hear your names, then get back to your places."

As each draftee went up, a mimeographed sheet and a War Department Adjutant General form in quadruplicate were thrust into his hand.

The roll finished, the sergeant asked if anyone had not been called. Dopey Delaney's hand went up and the buck-sergeant came over.

"Why aren't your papers here?"

"The draft board said they lost them," Dopey replied. "They said they'd send over another set later."

"I wish they'd stop doing that. All right, take this." The sergeant thrust one of the mimeographed sheets into Dopey's hand and asked: "What's your name?"

Dopey Delaney mumbled something.

"Your handle ain't a military secret. Speak up!"

The hood spoke up and then Cellini understood his reluctance for the name he furnished the sergeant was not *Delaney* but *Devers*. Cellini met Delaney's eyes and, with delight, he said: "I learned that one, too."

THE sergeant bawled out again and Board 246 slowly moved to the front to sit down on the rows of meeting chairs. Cellini began working his way toward Harry Trosper. Mixso appeared at his elbow and indicated the buck-sergeant.

"Don't try getting funny with that soldier," the newsboy said. "He's called Killer Atkins and he didn't get the name for nothing."

"I see they're inducting Harry Trosper today. Know him?"

"Sure." Mixso pointed to a thin, sallow-faced man. "His whole band is busting up. That guy's name is Spence. He plays horn for Trosper."

"Where has Trosper been playing?" Cellini asked.

"Just the dives."

"Then how come he owns a Cadillac?"

Mixso shrugged. "Maybe he bought it wholesale."

The members of Board 246 slowly found seats. Harry Trosper moved with the rest, then suddenly turned, entered a separate row and sat down in the first seat off the aisle. It was almost as if he had done it to dodge Dopey Delaney. Cellini shoved past some draftees, following the band leader, and sat down next to him.

Killer Atkins dropped a roll-chart in front of the seated draftees that was an enlarged duplicate of the mimeographed sheet. He said: "We will now fill in the various questions according to my instructions. First, pick up your pencils and write your name on the first line there where it says *Name*. Your full name. The first name, the middle name and then the last name. All three names. On that line there where it says *Name*. If you haven't got a middle name there's only one solution—don't write it down. Is that clear or should I go over it again?"

Someone asked: "Is it all right to use a pen?"

A selectee giggled. Killer Atkins whirled on him. "Nothing's funny around here!" he roared. "This is an army post and we take care of wise guys. We don't chew nobody's rear at this post. Oh, no! We chew around it, give you an about-face and let it drop out."

CHAPTER TWO

The Death of the Party



HE instructions continued and the draftees printed information. Cellini wrote automatically. He was waiting to find out Trosper's answer to the last question. This asked the draftee if he wished to avail himself of the waiting period before donning the uniform or if he desired to leave for Fort MacArthur on the day of induction.

Cellini leaned over as the band leader checked a box. He did not desire a furlough—he wished

to go to the reception center that day. Harry Trooper, Cellini Smith decided, was running away. He was running away from Dopey Delaney, the brunette and perhaps others.

The questionnaires answered, Board 246 filed into the waiting room to wait for the medical line to clear. It was a large room, lined with benches, a phonograph blaring in one corner and a U.S.O. canteen serving coffee and sinkers in another.

Cellini Smith got a cup of black coffee and strolled about searching for someone he was sure would be there. He found the brunette in a back row, chewing away on a doughnut.

He dropped into a seat beside her. "Didn't you have breakfast?"

Her words were, "I beg your pardon," but they meant, *Get the hell away from here!*

"Why can't we be friends?" he asked. "I'm old enough to be your brother."

"What do you want from me?" Her voice was pleasant, the enunciation a product of elocution lessons.

"Nothing, except to still my curiosity about your goings on with Harry Trooper." He noticed Dopey Delaney wandering about. "I wonder if, for instance, you know that guy."

"I don't. And why should I?" she snapped.

He shrugged. "It's just as well. Dopey's a tough baby from way back. He's following in his father's fingerprints."

"You talk like a detective."

"Smart girl. I was one. Until today."

Her eyes narrowed and she shook her head almost imperceptibly at someone. Cellini turned to see Dopey Delaney.

"What do you want with this guy, Jessie?" the hood asked.

"Jessie," said Cellini, "I'd like you to meet Mr. Delaney."

"We know each other, wise guy."

"Really? My mistake. Then maybe she'd like to know you by the name of Devers."

The hood slowly looked around the waiting room. Cellini could almost see his brain arrive at the decision that this was no place to start something.

"I want to talk to you, Smith." The voice was conciliatory.

Cellini nodded and followed Dopey Delaney. The hood chose a quiet place where he could keep an eye on Harry Trooper who leaned over the phonograph, listening with a critical look on his face.

"I didn't know you were a friend of Jessie Powers," the hood began.

So Powers was the girl's name. She had probably chosen it, hoping a hint of glamor would come from the thought associated with the model agency. Every little bit helped a girl trying to crash the picture game.

"What did you want to talk about?" asked Cellini.

"Smith, you got a good reputation among the boys. You're in the know. You don't stool and you play ball—"

"Don't bother, Delaney. I don't give a damn if you use the name of Devers."

The hood didn't bother to conceal his relieved sigh. He suddenly became chummier. "I knew I could count on you, Smith. I'm just sticking around to keep an eye on Trooper. I suppose you know he busted up the game."

"It was a good game, too," Cellini tried.

"Uh-huh. Sweet racket. Four fifty a week from him. A fortune of money. And then it burned up. Like an explosion," he added bitterly.

None of it made sense to Cellini. Cautiously, he said: "Well, that kind of thing can go quickly."

It was the wrong answer. Dopey's hands reached out and bunched Cellini's shirt front. "Say, you're playing me for a sucker!"

"Don't, Dopey. Just drop your hands quick and I'll forget about it. I don't like being mauled by a goon like you, so get out of my way and don't come back."

Cellini was still talking when Dopey Delaney decided to take his advice. Cellini mopped the perspiration that had suddenly appeared on his forehead. Not to hit somebody was sometimes very difficult.

IT WAS a three-cornered rat race. Jessie

Powers was trying to conceal the fact that she knew Dopey Delaney who didn't mind admitting it. But the hood didn't like it to get around that he was using the name of Devers to get into the army. Harry Trooper, the band leader, knew this pair was tailing him and he stayed out of their way without yelling for the cops. Mixed up in it all was a sweet racket that made a fortune of money and burned up like an explosion.

It was all a senseless, and probably pointless, puzzle and Cellini gave it up. He returned to Mixso who was explaining that the blood test would show his veins held luke warm water mixed with Michelob beer.

It was eight-thirty when Board 246 was told to fall in. Cellini again worked himself behind Harry Trooper as the selectees moved out for the first step in the medical line. Jackets came off and sleeves were rolled up as the doctors quickly and expertly recorded the blood pressure on medical forms. As Harry Trooper reached the small desk he rubbed his hands nervously on his pants.

The doctor made a triple check before he asked the band leader: "Feel excited?"

"Maybe. It ought to be normal."

"It's high now." The doctor nodded to a soldier. "He'll take you up to a side room where you can lie down quietly for a while before we test it again."

Cellini Smith sat down and the doctor barked: "What the devil is that?"

"That?" Cellini finally understood. "A shoulder holster."

The medic glanced at the War Department form. "Oh. So you're a detective. Well, you better take that up and file it with the Chief Clerk while you go through the line. The army will provide arms when it sets you up in business."

Cellini left the line and walked upstairs again. He found a room labeled *Chief Clerk* and entered. A first-sergeant sat at the desk. He was talking with someone Cellini knew only too well—Ira Haenigson, detective-sergeant of Homicide.

"Well!" Haenigson repeated the word four more times and began laughing raucously. "Smith, the army wouldn't take a mistake like you."

Cellini plumbed his mind for a worthy answer but the best he could remember was: "Why don't you call up the Missing Persons Bureau and see if you're there?" He left it at that, checked his gun with the Chief Clerk and walked out. Maybe Troser had yelled for the cops after all. He wondered what Jessie Powers would think of the news about the band leader's blood pressure and made for the waiting room.

The brunette thought so much about it that she forgot to tell Cellini to go away. "Will that keep Troser out of the army?" she asked.

"Of course," he said, "unless the blood pressure can be lowered. They'll test it again after he gets a rest."

"Will you let me know how he makes out?"

"Maybe, if you're willing to explain some things to me." He saw Ira Haenigson standing by the door, surveying the waiting room. "I'd better get out of here."

"Who's that?"

"Ira Haenigson—if you'll pardon the expression. He's a cop."

Cellini Smith left by a side door and walked down the hall. He saw some closed doors and figured that Harry Troser was nursing his blood pressure behind one of them. He opened the first door and looked inside. It was a lucky guess. Troser lay there, on a cot, face toward the wall.

After a few moments, Cellini quietly shut the door again and walked back toward the waiting room. He remembered Dopey's talk of the racket that had fetched four hundred and fifty dollars a week from Troser. It sounded like blackmail but it was such an odd figure. Why not four hundred or five hundred? More likely it was a three-way payoff at one hundred and fifty each. But then who would be the third

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person being paid off in addition to Delaney and the girl? Perhaps it was Spence, the horn player, who was being inducted that day.

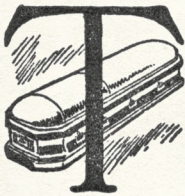
Cellini reached the waiting room again. The detective-sergeant was gone but now Jessie Powers had company. The man she was talking with was a stranger to Cellini. His large frame and handsome, shrewd features would have marked him for an actor if his clothes had been a little flashier or less expensive. Perhaps he, and not the horn player, was the third member getting a payoff.

When Cellini joined them, the brunette said: "This is Mr. Halliday." Halliday barely acknowledged the introduction. His eyes took in Cellini coolly and deliberately, as if measuring an opponent, then he abruptly turned and walked away.

"Who's that?" asked Cellini.

"Never mind about him. What about Trosper's blood pressure? Is it lower?"

"Yes," said Cellini. "In fact, it's been lowered to zero. He's got a knife in his back."



HE life of the party was dead and Jessie Powers wasn't too happy about it. Cellini Smith was certain of those two things but of little else. He sat beside her, smoking, wondering what was going on behind those olive-green eyes. He won-

dered if she kept them open when she was kissed. Probably.

He was on his second cigarette before she finally said: "You have to go back there and get something."

"Sure. I'll do better. Trosper's on one of those medical cots with coasters underneath so I'll roll him out here for you."

"I'm very serious, Mr. Smith. Look." She fumbled in her purse and held something before him. It was the half of a thousand-dollar bill.

His eyes narrowed. "Where's the rest of it?"

"He has it. And it belongs to me."

"Did Trosper steal it from you?"

"No. I can't tell you the whole story," said Jessie Powers urgently, "because the body might be found any second. I just want you to get me the other half of this bill. He must have it on him." Her fingers touched his knee pleadingly.

He shook his head. "No go, Jessie. It takes more than a catch in your voice and your paw on my knee to have me go back there."

"You're supposed to be a private detective and I'll make it worth your time. I'll give you half—five hundred dollars—if you can find the other part."

"I still want to hear."

"Very well. There's not much. I played some

engagements singing with Trosper's band and then a few days ago he came to me with a proposition. He said he wanted to impress some people to put over a business deal and if I would go around with him and help him put them in a good mood he'd give me a grand."

"What sort of a deal?" asked Cellini.

"I don't know because he never talked business with these men when I was with them. I suppose he wanted me around only because I'm supposed to be good looking."

She waited a moment, as if expecting him to concur, then continued: "I didn't trust Trosper so I asked for the dough in advance. Instead, he gave me half of this bill and because I needed the money I took the proposition."

"And he wouldn't give you the other half of the thousand?"

Jessie Powers shook her head. "Yesterday, he told me that if I went up to his apartment and stayed with him all night he'd give me the other half. I agreed."

Cellini said: "Tch, tch."

"My morals have nothing to do with this! Besides, I had knockout drops ready in case he got too insistent. The money was mine and it wouldn't have been stealing. Anyway, he caught me pouring the drops into his drink and he threw me out. I knew he was being inducted today so I came here trying to get the other half of the bill from him."

CELLINI SMITH thought of a lot of questions he could ask, but he merely stood up and said: "All right. Maybe it's worth a few minutes to find the other half of that bill for five hundred dollars."

"Mr. Smith," said Jessie Powers, "bring me his whole wallet and I'll look for it. If you examine it in there you might get caught."

He said, "Sure," as he left, thinking he'd have to get his head examined if he removed anything from the dead man.

Cellini Smith walked back to the room where he had found Harry Trosper. He knew that the body had not yet been discovered as Haenigson would have placed a guard by the doorway. Cellini entered and stood in the center of the room for several minutes before moving.

Harry Trosper lay sideways on the cot, his hands hanging over the edge. The band leader was in his shirt. His shoes were off, tie and belt were open and his garters dangled loosely from inside his trouser legs. All that was probably an attempt to gain complete relaxation. The knife in his back had a spring blade that was long enough to penetrate the heart. There appeared to be nothing uncommon about the weapon that would allow it to be traced.

There was very little gore. A few spatters of blood had stained the floor beside the cot and the white broadcloth of the shirt was dyed red in a three-inch radius around the hilt of the

knife. Legs and arms were loose and relaxed and, with the exception of the efficient knife in the back, a slight redness about the mouth was the only hint of violence.

A good, offhand guess, Cellini imagined, was that Harry Trosper had leaped up when the murdered entered and tried to scream. A hand over the mouth stopped it for a moment, a knife for all time. The few drops of blood had reached the floor and then the murderer had stretched the body out on the cot—which would explain its unnaturally relaxed position. That, of course, presupposed that the band leader realized his visitor's murderous intent.

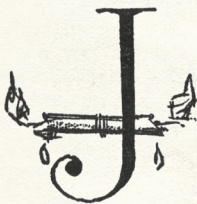
Cellini stepped closer and felt for a wallet in the back trouser pockets. There was no bulge. The side pockets had been turned inside out and the contents—the usual handkerchief, keys and small change—lay on the bed. The killer, it seemed, had been interested in something more than revenge.

Trosper's jacket had been thrown over a small cabinet but it, too, failed to reveal the missing wallet. The murderer no doubt had it. But if he did, then why would he also have hunted through the side pockets of the trousers? The wallet would not have been there. A thought occurred to Cellini and he looked behind the cabinet. It had been a good guess, for he could see it lying there where it had fallen after Trosper had carelessly tossed his jacket over the wallet.

Cellini knelt and fished out the wallet. Holding the tooled leather by the corners, he looked through it. Some tens, a few fifties and still fewer century notes—but no half of a thousand-dollar bill. He wasn't surprised. He dropped the wallet back behind the cabinet and left.

CHAPTER THREE

Esprit de Corpse



ESSIE POWERS stood up expectantly as Cellini Smith returned to the waiting room. As he shook his head he reflected that even an accountant would have approved of that figure.

"You mean you couldn't find it?"

"That's right," lied Cellini. "There's no wallet." She gave a hollow, "Oh," and sat down again.

Cellini thought he had better return to the medical line before he was missed. He went to the U.S.O. counter, got himself another coffee and sat down beside the girl. "What now?" he asked.

"I don't know. I must think."

"Well, you'd better do it some place else be-

cause the body will be found any second now."

"No. I have to stay. If I leave now someone will think I ran out because I had something to do with the killing. These men would remember my going," she added with unconscious conceit.

"They'll remember your staying, too."

"Besides, there's another thing we can do. In a little while I want you to go some place with me. I must find the rest of that bill. I need the money."

"I'm getting in the army," he reminded her, "and there are a couple of other people who want my company today."

"Well, maybe later. I'll pay you for it."

"Maybe." He stood up.

"Mr. Smith, you won't tell anything about me to the police, will you?" The olive-green eyes were suddenly moist.

"I'm not a cop," he answered noncommittally.

He walked out and headed for the Chief Clerk's office. Ira Haenigson was still there.

"So it's you again," snorted the detective-sergeant. "I think I'd better let the people here know you'd be a pretty useless addition to the Army. How come you weren't called before?"

"You know damned well I've been security foreman out at the Burbank aircraft plant and I was frozen on the job," Cellini replied with some heat.

"Smith, you're just a trouble-maker and I'm going to speak to the sergeant about you. You drink to excess."

"Only to forget you—and often *with* you. Besides, before you start talking about useless people you'd better find out how much good you were around here today."

"What's that?" Ira Haenigson was suddenly alert.

"You're here because a man called Harry Trosper thought his life might be in danger. Isn't that so?"

"No."

"All right. Then it was an anonymous message, but it still came from Trosper. At any rate, you'll find him as dead as a hangnail the first door on your left down the main corridor."

There was a muffled oath and the detective-sergeant charged out. Cellini nodded pleasantly to the Chief Clerk who sat frozen behind his desk, said, "I'm getting back to the medical line now," and left.

CELLINI SMITH found that Board 246 was several steps beyond him and only stragglers and special cases were left. His blood pressure was quickly recorded and noted on the medical sheet. He then passed on to the traditional army custom of inspection. By the time he reached the X-ray department he had caught up with the tail end of the fellow selectees from his board.

With shirt off, Mixso was waiting his turn. The newsboy thumped his pigeon-breast and said with some pride: "They had one look at me and decided to give me a large chest X-ray. They wouldn't even take me to replace a WAC for active duty. They—"

"Dopey Delaney was here before," Cellini interrupted. "Where is he now?"

"I dunno. I guess he's some place ahead of us."

A private raced by and soon passed through again with a man who was obviously a doctor. That, decided Cellini, would be Haenigson trying to get an opinion as to how long Harry Troser had been dead. He could hear a swelling murmur of voices. The news was passing from one lip to the next ear. Outside, from a distance, could be heard the sound of approaching sirens. Cellini didn't have to be in that little room. He could sit where he was and gather from the sounds each successive move of Ira Haenigson.

The detective-sergeant hadn't bothered to seal the place. Despite the opinions he voiced in anger, Cellini knew that Ira Haenigson was shrewd and capable. He would realize instantly that anyone might have walked in and stabbed Harry Troser, that, if the killer so chose, he could be far away by now and that closing the doors at this point would serve only to put the guilty on guard.

Cellini Smith wondered why Mixso had not commented upon the strange overtone of noises and said: "All this bother is about one of your customers. Harry Troser, to be specific. He's been knifed."

The newsboy said: "Why tell me?"

"To find out if you had anything to do with it."

"My, my. What big clues you have, Grandma," he noted inappropriately.

"Have you been on the medical line from the start or did you leave it at any time?"

"I told you they decided to give me a large instead of a small chest X-ray. I had to see the head man about it. I was away for about ten minutes because I went to the sandbox, too. Now, what's it to me?"

Cellini had time to say, "You'll be selling one paper less," before Mixso's turn arrived and he stepped in front of the machine.

Cellini waited his turn and then passed on for eye examination. Ear and nose followed and then he was herded into a room with the others and told to undress.

A corporal entered and called: "Cellini Smith! Front and center."

Cellini followed him out. "About the killing?" he asked.

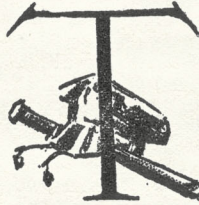
"Uh-huh." The corporal rubbed his hands with excitement. "Are you in it?" he asked eagerly.

"I'm in something."

"And to think it happened only twenty feet away from me. I probably even saw the murderer but so much meat goes in and out I don't pay any attention."

"Didn't you hear anything?"

"I think so," nodded the soldier. "I heard a kind of moan but since Sinatra I don't pay any attention to moans."



THE second time Cellini entered the small room an orderly madness pervaded the place as members of the Homicide department practiced their professions. The commanding officer of the station talked with two M.P.'s but didn't interfere with the police routine.

Ira Haenigson waved Cellini into a corner and said: "All right. Talk."

In a monotone, Cellini recited: "The first time I ever saw Harry Troser off a bandstand was at the draft board this morning. What interested me was that someone was keeping an eye on him. It was a small-time hood, whom you probably know, called Dopey Delaney. It looked queer and when I ran into you in the Chief Clerk's office I figured Troser had asked for police protection. Then I looked into this room where he was resting to lower his blood pressure and found him. I went back and you and instead of being grateful your brain is whirling like a windmill to find out how you can make me take the rap for your own carelessness."

Haenigson sent out a young cop named Boggs to pick up Delaney and turned to Cellini again. "What else?"

"Troser wanted to go into uniform today without any furlough. That sounds as if he was running away to get the army's protection. He was scared and that probably ran up his blood pressure."

"What else?"

"Troser's band was small-time and you might find out where he got all his money." Even as he spoke, Cellini realized the detective-sergeant would guess that he had examined the contents of Troser's wallet and he added smoothly: "You need money to ride around in a Caddy and buy the kind of clothes he wore."

"What else?"

"I don't know if there's anything in it, but try talking to a news jockey called Mixso and one of Troser's musicians called Spence. They're both being run through today."

"What else?"

"That's all. As for myself, I'm going in the army and I wish you'd mind your own business."

"I'm making you my business, Smith. Your

whole story smells fishy. I don't mind telling you I've informed the authorities here what kind of a character you are and they'll take special care of you."

Boggs came in and announced that Dopey Delaney wasn't to be found.

Cellini tried to think of an exit line, failed and left.

CELLINI SMITH wondered how Jessie Powers was doing and he went by the waiting room. She was still there. He went over to her.

"I kept your name out of it," he said.

Her "thank you" came from down under and seemed to hold a world of promise.

"I don't know how long I'll be here, Jessie. Maybe you'd better beat it."

"I'll wait. Do you know how to pick locks?" she inquired.

"Sometimes. If I'm lucky. Why do you want to know?"

"I'll tell you later."

He left and went back to the dressing room where he shed his clothes, putting his valuables into a small black bag which he hung around his neck.

For the following fifteen minutes, Cellini passed through a series of rooms, bending over, opening his mouth, exhibiting the soles of his feet and numerous similar activities. Finally, a chart was full of mysterious notations and he passed into another room to be interviewed by a psychiatrist.

The doctor glanced at his records. "Well, so you're Cellini Smith. It's only fair to inform you that I've been told to give you special attention. Do you drink?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to get in the army? Oh, I see. According to this form you're requesting induction. Have you ever kissed a girl, Smith?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about your first date."

"I took a beating."

"Really?" The psychiatrist showed interest. "Tell me about it."

"On my first date I bought the girl a lollypop—strawberry, I think—and her old man gave me a licking for spoiling her dinner. Well, maybe it wasn't."

"What wasn't, Smith?"

"The lollypop. I think it was lemon instead of strawberry."

"Um. Do you go out with boys?"

"Yes."

"What do you do on those occasions?"

"I drink."

"Um. I see here you're a detective, Smith. What do you intend to do after the war?"

"I have no post-war problem," Cellini said. "I'll look for the same job I was looking for before the war."

A hint of amusement crossed the doctor's face.

"I think you're sane enough, Smith," he said. "I don't know about that drinking, though." He made some notes on the chart. "I'm sending you back for more X-rays. Then you can get fingerprinted and leave. Be back tomorrow at ten for a final check."

Cellini went back to the dressing room and put on his clothes. He handed the psychiatrist's note to the nurse in charge of the X-ray department and three more plates were taken of his stomach. He then crossed the hall to be fingerprinted.

As the soldier in charge rolled the ink pad he glanced at Cellini's papers. "Say, you're a private dick! Hear about the murder we put on today?"

Cellini nodded and asked: "Have they arrested anyone?"

"No, but I hear they made some newsboy jump the hoop. Extend your right arm." He began transferring the prints to an FBI card. "Anyway, I hope they don't get some guy on account of his fingerprints. In every sixty-four million persons there's two guys with the same prints and sooner or later they'll get some innocent guy."

"It must happen all the time," Cellini remarked innocently.

"Maybe not often," conceded the soldier. "What do you think of this murder?"

"It was a mercy killing," said Cellini.

"No! How do you figure it?" the soldier asked, wide-eyed.

"He was being drafted, wasn't he?" Cellini dropped the papers he had been carrying into a box for that purpose, and wiped his fingers on a paper towel. He returned to the Chief Clerk's office to secure his gun and then made for the waiting room.

Most of Board 246 was already there, whiling away the hours as the records were being typed.

Cellini walked over to Jessie Powers and said: "I can go now."

"Good. How did you manage it?"

"I didn't. Haenigson gave them a story about my drinking so they took special X-rays and I have to be back here at ten tomorrow to find out if I made it."

They began walking out. Suddenly, Mixso barred their way. His face was livid with anger and his hands trembled.

"Smith, you turned the cops loose on me, you dirty rat!"

"That's right," said Cellini pleasantly. "What about it?"

"I'm gonna tell them about you and her. I ain't blind. I'm too small to fight you the way I'd like but you'll be sorry."

Cellini said: "That's what you get for wearing shoes. Let's go, Jessie."

CHAPTER FOUR

Water Cure



IT WAS still raining with heavy, California persistence when Cellini Smith and Jessie Powers reached the sidewalk. They hurried to his coupe and got in. She moved close to him to avoid the leaking top and Cellini reflected about an "ill wind" as

he turned over the motor.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Down Wilshire, please. What happened about the murder?"

"Mostly routine," he said. "Where are we going?"

"I'll tell you later. Have the police decided anything?"

"They seem to have the idea that I'm mixed up in it. I don't know about the rest."

"Who do you think killed Harry Trosper?"

"I thought you hired me to find the other half of that thousand-dollar bill."

"There's no reason to be disagreeable, Cellini. I'm just interested in your opinion."

He noted that it was the first time she had used his given name. "All right. At the moment I can think of five candidates, which makes it a pretty wide field. We can start with a man called Spence. Know him?"

"I don't—"

"Keep your stories straight," he cut in. "You said you used to warble for Trosper, so you'd know Spence because he plays in the band."

"I was only going to say I don't know which Spence you mean."

"I like that," he observed appreciatively. "The only reason I have for including this Spence is that he was being inducted today and he knows Trosper. Then there's Mixso."

"Is that the person who stopped us when we were leaving?"

"Yes. He's a newsie on Sunset and Vine and he'd know enough to be mixed up in anything. And a knife would be his speed."

"Who else, Cellini?"

"Then there's Dopey Delaney whom you claimed not to know when I pointed him out."

"I didn't recognize him at first," Jessie Powers replied, "because I met him only once a long time ago."

"Yet you knew him well enough to find out what my name was from him because I never told you. At any rate, Dopey was following Trosper all day. He used a phony name at the induction station. He can be a mean customer and he disappeared right after the murder. Next in line would be Halliday, that smooth item you were talking to in the waiting room."

"Don't be silly, Cellini!"

"Why not? This is anybody's ball game. Who is he? What's his first name? And why did he suddenly pop up there about the time Trosper was getting a little surgery performed on him and then disappear?"

"His full name is Clarence Halliday. He used to work for the government but he's looking for something else now. He was up there because he's a friend of mine. I telephoned him from the induction station and he came up to see me on some personal matter. Who would be your fifth suspect?"

"You."

"Turn right on the next corner," she said. "Why?"

"You also were tailing Trosper. The induction station is no prison and anyone, including you, could have walked down that corridor, followed him into the room and done the job."

"Left on the next, please. I told you why I was up there."

"The thousand-dollar bill. I remember."

She pointed to an open parking space and he stopped. They were opposite a small apartment building that no doubt used a doorman sporting a robin's-egg-blue uniform in times when there was less of a manpower shortage.

Cellini said: "So that's where Harry Trosper lived."

"Yes."

"I have some pass keys on me but I told you I have to be lucky when it comes to picking locks."

"We must try, Cellini. I must find that money. His apartment is on the first floor, the last one around the bend in the corridor, and no one would see us. We'll just walk past the desk and elevator. No one will bother with us."

"All right, only I'd be happier if I thought you were on the level with me."

JESSIE POWERS had been right. Trosper's apartment was cut off from the others by a turn in the corridor and until the police got around to the place they were likely to have privacy. Cellini Smith took out a ring of pass keys and reached for the door knob. The door swung open.

"You'd better find out who's in there," she whispered. "It can't be the police because they'd have cars out in front."

A cool customer, he thought admiringly. Most girls would have gasped, if not screamed. Hers were the kind of nerves that could put a knife into a man's back with less excitement than into a pre-war sirloin. He stepped inside and padded down a small foyer, thankful for the heavy carpeting. He slipped his gun from inside his jacket, knelt to the floor and peered around the wall corner into the bed-living room combination. A welcoming committee would normally not have a gun pointed toward the floor and would be caught at a disadvantage.

But there was no one there. Cellini stood up, tried the closets and then scouted the kitchenette and bath. He returned to the hall and called in Jessie Powers.

"No one," he said.

"I suppose Trospen forgot to lock the door."

"It's more likely that there's been a visitor here who forgot it. What now?"

"I want to find the rest of that bill, Cellini."

"Then let's hurry. If you have to use your fingers on anything wipe after them with a handkerchief."

Jessie Powers sat down by a small writing desk and began exploring the pigeonholes. Cellini decided to start with the bathroom. Someone had once said: "Show me a man's medicine chest and I will show you what the man is like." This chest was full of hair oils, pomades and a variety of male lotions and scents. Nothing looked promising and he returned to the living room. A fireplace caught his eye and he remembered Dopey Delaney's cryptic remark about something burning.

He pushed aside a metal screen and knelt by a fire grating. There was a sprinkling of fine gray ashes covering the brick flooring. It hadn't come from paper and certainly not from any wood substance. A small strip of something with a black sheen caught his eye. He assured himself that Jessie Powers was still busy at

the cat and then slipped the find into a pocket. He no longer expected to find anything. He was satisfied with the results of the visit and for the first time he began to find a glimmer of sense in the thing. Jessie finished with the desk and began to look through the drawers of an end table.

Suddenly, but quietly, she said: "Jump!"

Automatically, Cellini leaped to one side. Something smashed by him, hitting his shoulder heavily and painfully. He dropped to one knee and whirled in time to see Dopey Delaney charging on him again. In the hood's right fist was a blackjack.

Cellini dove forward into a tangle of Dopey's legs. The sap found his right thigh with a glancing blow. Together they rolled over the rug. Delaney was strong and Cellini couldn't reach the thrashing arm with the sap. He dug an elbow into the hood's stomach and the heel of his hand smashed at the jaw. It was a light blow but it gave Cellini the moment of respite he needed. He reached inside his jacket and raised his gun. Before he could bring the barrel down on Delaney's forehead the toe of a shoe flashed by Cellini's eyes and buried itself in the back of the hood's neck.

It was a blunt, square-toed shoe and did not belong to Jessie Powers. Cellini looked up to find its owner. It was Clarence Halliday.

Cellini disentangled himself from Dopey Delaney's inert form, stood up and said: "Thanks."

"No trouble. You had him anyway."

"I would have had to hurt him."

Jessie Powers came in from the kitchen carrying a glass of water and splashed some of it on Dopey Delaney's face. He began to move and his eyes opened. He became aware of the circle that watched him.

Halliday said: "Now you'll explain what you're up to here. It's none of Mr. Smith's business so I'm sure he'll leave us alone for a while."

Dopey Delaney slipped the blackjack into a pocket and stood up. "Smith won't use his rod

*DOES THE
MOON AFFECT
YOU, TOO?*

*NO, I GET MY
EFFECT WITH
STARS -
STAR BLADES!*



4 for 10¢



here," he said and suddenly sprinted for the foyer. A moment later they heard the apartment door slam.

"I guess you won't find out what he was doing here," Cellini remarked and went into the bathroom. He washed his hands and face and examined his shoulder. A painful throb remained but nothing seemed broken. He returned to the living room.

Jessie Powers was alone. "Mr. Halliday left," she said, "to see if he could find Delaney."

"And to avoid talking to me," added Cellini. "The police are due so let's get out of here."



CELLINI SMITH was glad to note that the rain had not abated as they crossed the street toward his coupe. As they reached the opposite curb, he maneuvered her between two cars and suddenly thrust out his foot.

Jessie Powers fell. It was a perfect fall, full length, face down in a large pool of water. It had, Cellini decided, an almost artistic beauty and was marred only by the wet, unmuffled curses as she struggled to rise. He thought it wise to lend a hand and she finally stood up.

"You clumsy pig!" she shouted.

Cellini Smith was abject as he hurried the mud-black streaming figure into his car. "I'm terribly sorry," he said. "I was just stepping aside to avoid a puddle. I don't live far from here and you can come over to my place and get showered and cleaned up."

"We'll do no such thing! You'll drive me to my place!"

"Now, not another word. It's no trouble."

"I tell you I want to go home!" She sounded like a wailing child at a dentist's office.

"Why, you wouldn't want the people at your apartment to see you the way you are. They wouldn't even let you into a foxhole on the Burma front in the monsoon season the way you look."

The appeal to her vanity did it. She merely said, "Damn you," and he correctly took it for assent. He pressed down on the accelerator and within five minutes had reached his apartment. She insisted on waiting till no one could be seen on the street, then followed him into his apartment. He shoved robe, slippers, towels and pajamas into her arms and she made for the bathroom.

He mixed a drink for himself and it was not till he could hear the shower running that he picked up the purse from the table where she had dropped it. He frowned as he rummaged through the contents. The half of the thousand dollar bill she had shown him was there but not the rest. He shrugged, polished off the rest of the drink and walked into the bathroom.

There was a sudden cessation of movement behind the shower curtain and only the cascading water could be heard.

Then: "What do you want?"

Her voice was small and hesitant, but, he noted, it did not seem frightened. "Not you," he answered reassuringly. "I'm just looking for something which you should have hidden in your clothes." He tried the pockets of her rain cape. No luck.

A little louder, the voice behind the shower curtain asked: "What are you looking for?"

"The other half of that bill." He passed up some pink items in favor of the stockings and felt inside the toes. Still no luck.

There was a sudden gasp. "You tripped me on purpose to get a chance to look through my things!"

"That's right." His fingers probed inside one of the shoes and felt a piece of paper. That was it.

"Get out of here!"

"Certainly. I've already found the rest of the bill in your shoe."

A white arm leaped from behind the curtain and smashed across his face. A whiter shoulder began to follow. He said, "Tut, tut, you'll catch a cold," and retreated into the living room.

He lit a cigarette and mixed himself another drink. Things were going his own way. Now he knew and didn't have to guess that Jessie's yarn of the thousand-dollar bill had been made from whole cloth. Bad cloth at that. The other important item was in his pocket, the bit of film negative he had picked up in a corner of Trooper's fireplace. Obviously, this bunch had been running a blackmail racket, taking pictures of people at delicate moments, and Trooper had burned the pictures before entering the army. Cellini reached into his pocket and took out the slight strip of film that had escaped the fire. He looked at it and began to laugh but no smile crossed his face.

The film was just an ordinary newsreel shot on sixteen-millimeter film of the type that could be bought in any photographic store.

BY THE time Jessie Powers came from the bathroom some fifteen minutes later she had composed herself. With difficulty, Cellini Smith restrained the whistle that came to his lips. In pajamas and bathrobe, with hair still wet, she more than passed the acid test of remaining beautiful without the insidious aid of cosmetics.

"Will some lighter fluid with a bourbon label do?" he asked.

"Anything would."

He went into the kitchen, poured her a double jigger, mixed it with seltzer and returned. She was coming out of the bathroom and said: "Those clothes are no good. How will I get home?"

"I guess I can lend you a shirt and trousers

which you can wear under your raincoat."

"I suppose you're happy," she said.

"Why not? I found the other half of the bill and earned my fee. Be glad that I won't insist on collecting because I'm a sentimentalist." He ignored her snort and added: "You see I consider this case my swan-song before I put on khaki."

"How did you guess I had the other half of the bill?"

"That story you rigged up had more holes in it than a dart board. Besides, offering me five hundred dollars—a full fifty per cent—to recover the other half was ridiculous unless you intended paying me off in Confederate money. Then, it's extremely unlikely that someone going into the army would leave half of a thousand-dollar bill in his house. He'd either give it to you or try to take your half. That, and the fact that you didn't want me to look through Trospers' wallet but to bring the whole thing to you, gave me the idea that you were looking for something else in his apartment."

"That's reasonable."

"But nothing else is. Why did your friend Clarence Halliday take a powder while I was washing up in Trospers' place?"

Sweetly she said: "Mind your own damned business."

"That's what I'm doing. As a licensed operative my business is to inform the police of all I know."

With another sort of sweetness she said: "Oh, Cellini, don't be sill."

"And don't you be ridic." He shuddered. "Let's cut that." He mixed drinks again and said: "I'm waiting."

"But I told you once. Halliday went out after that Dopey Delaney. He didn't run away. He wasn't afraid of you."

"I didn't think he was the type," Cellini agreed. "Now you'll have to do some real masterminding. I want the rest."

"What—"

"For God's sake don't ask me what rest! You gave me a cock and bull story about finding a thousand-dollar bill. What were you trying to find? What were you tailing Trospers for? There's an angle to all this. What? Who killed Trospers? Why did he refuse to talk with you? Why was he dodging Dopey Delaney?"

"All right. I'll tell, you, Cellini. Once I was terribly in love with him."

"Don't tell me you had a child."

"No," she said, "but he had some letters. Just foolish love letters I wrote him. He refused to give them back to me and when I found he was going in the army I demanded them. That's why I had the thousand dollars—to buy them. You see, I'm in love with Halliday and I don't want those letters to get out. That's why I followed him today. I hired Delaney to help me get them."

"No good," said Cellini after a pause. "Let's try again."

"Why is it no good?"

"Because you wanted Trospers' wallet and the letters wouldn't be in a wallet. Because, according to you, Delaney would be on your side and he wouldn't have acted up the way he did. And because if you had written those letters you wouldn't have let Halliday know. Is that enough?"

"Cellini, why can't we just drop this and be friends?"

"No on one and yes on the other. Let's try the whole thing again. But first I want to check on something." He walked over to her and kissed her.

The olive-green eyes did stay open.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cold Deck



CELLINI SMITH'S alarm sounded off at 9 A.M. He pushed down the alarm switch and reached for a cigarette with one movement. The night's sleep hadn't rested him. He was still tired from the hours of fencing, the wasted words and effort

trying to gain some small item of truth or fact from Jessie Powers. When he had finally driven her home, late at night, his helpless frustration had been deep enough to warrant a visit to a bar. It was then he had decided it was none of his business and certainly not his worry. But the question marks still clung persistently to his mind. He remembered that he had to be at the induction station by ten and made for the shower.

The rain had turned to a drizzle and by the time Cellini reached Main Street it had stopped altogether. The Chamber of Commerce could again breathe easily. Upstairs, the Induction Station was processing a new batch of men. Cellini reported to the Chief Clerk's office.

"Did you leave your cannon home today?" asked the sergeant.

"Yes."

"Report to Room 23 and see the captain."

"Ira Haenigson was doing a lot of talking about me yesterday. How does that affect my chances?"

"Not in the least. He told us you drank heavily and that you'd be the type to conceal it if there was anything wrong with you. We're glad to get such information because we're concerned with finding out if a draftee is physically and mentally fit to warrant induction. Otherwise we don't care what anyone says and you're treated as impartially as the next man."

"Good enough," said Cellini. "Is Haenigson here now? I forgot to tell him something."

"What?"

"That Delaney was using the name of Devers here yesterday."

"We found that out from the soldier in the reception room."

"How come someone can use a phony name like that and get away with it?"

"Occasionally draft boards misplace or spoil records and send a man down with a note saying his records will follow. Delaney was rejected by us a few months ago and the same thing happened to him at the time so he knew he could get away with it. He simply forged a note from his draft board for the name of Devers so that he'd have a chance to follow Trospen around the medical line."

Cellini nodded and went to Room 23. The captain, who proved to be of the medical staff, began to ask questions that centered around headaches, vomiting, loss of appetite, and various forms of gastric disturbances. He looked at Cellini's tongue and checked his heart and pulse.

Finally, he said: "Smith, I don't think you're being entirely honest with me. You've requested induction and you seem to want to get into the service."

"That's right."

"Exactly, and under the circumstances I don't think you'd be very frank about any physical ailments you may have."

"And I didn't think a rumor was reason for rejection."

"It's more than a rumor. Certain things I discount because you probably don't take care of yourself, sleep too little and don't trouble to eat balanced foods. But this can't be escaped." He took several X-ray plates from a desk drawer.

"What do they show?" asked Cellini bleakly.

"It's difficult to say. This cloudiness"—he pointed to a darker shade on the plate—"could have several explanations because it's still not well developed. My guess would be portal cirrhosis of the liver which often results from over-drinking. Perhaps, it is the beginning of a peptic ulcer. To repeat, it's very difficult to say."

"Where does it leave me?"

"We can't accept you right now, Smith. You're thirty-three and have a war job but if you care to request induction again in sixty days we'll be willing to give you another examination."

"I'd know if there was anything wrong with me."

"That's just the point. You wouldn't necessarily. Portal cirrhosis can exist unsuspected and we can't give you a serial number until you have a clean bill. It's regulations, Smith."

"I'll see you in sixty days." Cellini spoke calmly with an effort, trying to conceal the knotted anger which he felt in the region of his questionable liver. He left the room and walked down to the street.

One name, one person, became the focal point of all of Cellini's thoughts and obscenities. Ira Haenigson. If it hadn't been for the detective-sergeant, the army would have had no cause for suspicion and would not have taken extra pains with the medical examination. There had to be some way of getting at Haenigson. If this business of the dead band leader and his Cadillac. . .

Suddenly, Cellini stopped. Trospen's car! Trospen had wanted to go to Fort MacArthur on the day of induction and he must have made arrangements to have his car picked up. He still had his personal belongings at his apartment and someone would have been asked to dispose of them. But who?

Cellini crossed the street to a parking lot. Trospen would undoubtedly have left his car in the nearest parking station.

In answer to a question, the attendant said: "Sure I remember the Caddy. The guy wouldn't take a ticket because he told me a dame was going to pick it up later. She called for it last night."

"Was she a good looker?" asked Cellini.

"Good looker?" The attendant laughed derisively. "This dame had a dishpan face and I seen better forms on income taxes."

CELLINI SMITH made two calls. The first was to the Automobile Club. Yes, Mr. Harry Trospen was a member of the club and they didn't mind supplying the license number of his car. The second was to the Motor Vehicle Bureau. Cellini identified himself and asked if there was any recent change in ownership of the car bearing those plates. Again the answer was affirmative and they supplied a name and address. The name, was, Mrs. Harry Trospen.

Cellini returned to his car and headed for the address. His face was hard and the muscles barely moved as he puffed a cigarette. He no longer cared that there was no fee in this thing. His fee would be to beat Ira Haenigson. The detective-sergeant would yet rue the day that the army had not taken him.

As Cellini reached the address he could see Trospen's Cadillac standing by the curb. He entered the apartment and pressed a buzzer. There was an answering ring and he walked up the first flight. The woman who opened the door on his knock was middle-aged and plain.

Bluntly, Cellini asked: "Have you heard about your husband?"

"Yes. The police have been here." Her voice

was a little tired but hardly showed any excess of grief.

"My name is Cellini Smith, Mrs. Troser, and I'm helping in the investigation to find the murderer."

She didn't ask for further explanation and he followed her inside. He sighted a comfortable club chair and sank into it.

"I thought," Mrs. Troser said, "that the police have already decided on the killer and are looking for him. A man called Delaney."

"I doubt if it's Delaney for several reasons."

"You can speak up, Mr. Smith. I'm not sensitive about the murder."

"Weren't you on good terms with him?"

"I might as well tell you because I've already told the police. My husband and I had already separated—several years ago. We didn't bother to get divorced as neither of us wanted to remarry. As his wife, he still had to support me but he probably found it advantageous to be married without being obligated to me."

"Convenient," he commented.

"Yes, we both had the sense to remain good friends and we respected and trusted each other. We continued to help each other out when it was necessary. In fact, I was supposed to take care of his things when he went into the army. Now what about this Delaney?"

"I think he's out because too many people saw him tailing your husband. I, for one, knew he was there, using a false name, and he was well aware that I would have turned him in in case of murder. His I.Q. is lower than his draft number but he wouldn't have taken the chance. Besides, he sported a blackjack and for safety's sake he would have knocked your husband cold before killing him. The killer had no such weapon and had to cover your husband's mouth with his hand before using the knife."

"Then why did Delaney follow him to the induction station?"

"I was hoping you could help me there, Mrs. Troser."

"I can't. I've already told the police that I didn't know any of his friends. He just visited me when it was necessary. The police seemed to think the motive was robbery."

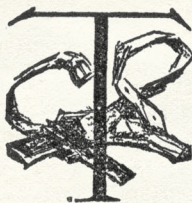
"They just say that for want of anything better. An induction station is hardly the place for robbery. It could have been any number of motives. Perhaps revenge. Perhaps no motive at all and the murder was committed by a lunatic or in error. It might have been jealousy. Do you know a Miss Jessie Powers?"

She shook her head. "If it was jealousy it wasn't on my behalf."

"The motive might have been ambition or vanity or avarice." Cellini shrugged.

"I'd be glad to help but—"

"That's all right." He thanked her and left.



IRED and depressed, Cellini entered his apartment and lay down on the day bed. The visit to Troser's wife had been a keen disappointment and he wondered what to do next. He thought of returning to Troser's apartment but it was probably sealed by now. It was not that there were no clues, no suspects—but too many of both. And none seemed promising. After a while there was a knock on the door and Cellini opened it.

Ira Haenigson stood there. He came in without waiting for an invitation. "I want to talk with you, Smith."

"I was rejected by the army today."

"They have good sense," the detective-sergeant countered.

"I have you to thank for it."

"You're welcome."

"And I'm not likely to forget it, Haenigson. Now if you don't have anything official to talk about, get out of here."

"It is sort of official. Where's your gun?"

Cellini took it from the dresser table and handed it to him. "Now what?"

"Suppose you come down to headquarters."

They went outside. Cellini said: "Unless you're arresting me I'll go in my own car."

"By all means. In fact, I'll let Boggs ride with you because you may have a poor sense of direction."

Boggs, the beefy assistant to Haenigson, sat beside Cellini and they moved off, the prowler car following. If it wasn't an arrest, Cellini thought, it was an excellent imitation.

"Did you catch up with Dopey Delaney?" asked Cellini.

Boggs said: "Yep."

"Did he sing?"

Boggs said: "Nope."

Cellini wondered if he was close-mouthed or whether he wasn't capable of a full sentence. A thought occurred to him. It seemed good even on second thought. It was a way to repay Ira Haenigson with interest. He asked: "How long have you been nursing Haenigson?"

"Five years."

"Wouldn't you like the idea of running things your own way for the next five?"

"Stick to your driving, friend." The voice exhibited the right tone of embarrassed resentment. They finished the rest of the drive in complete silence.

When they reached headquarters they filed up to Haenigson's office. The detective-sergeant handed Cellini's gun to someone and said: "Try this job on your mandolin." Then he pressed a buzzer.

Two plainclothesmen entered and stood against the wall. Haenigson said: "Get be-

tween them, Smith. Like a slice of baloney," he couldn't help adding. He was obviously enjoying himself.

Cellini stood as directed. A moment later a cop ushered in Mixso. "There you are," said Ira Haenigson sententiously, "three individuals by that wall. Can you identify the one you were talking about?"

"A lead pipe cinch," stated the newsboy and jerked a thumb at Cellini.

"Excellent," said Haenigson. "That's all." The newsboy was led out. Haenigson picked up the phone. "Anything on that gun yet? Fine, fine." He replaced the receiver.

Cellini said to the detective-sergeant: "When I look at your face backwards it spells natures."

"Have fun while you can, Smith. Now, we're going out again."

They went downstairs and once more Boggs sat beside Cellini as they followed Haenigson in a department car. A few minutes later, at Figueroa and Fifth, Boggs said: "Stop here."

They joined Ira Haenigson and walked down an alley between two office buildings. They reached the end where there stood several men from Homicide. They stepped aside and Cellini saw the body of Dopey Delaney with a bullet hole where the right eye should have been.

IRA HAENIGSON leaned against an ashcan and said: "I've got you in a corner, Smith. Or maybe it isn't a corner because gas chambers are circular."

Cellini allowed himself a laugh. "I suppose Mixso claimed that he saw me go into this alley with Delaney."

"He did that."

"If that's the only basis for this phony production number you've put on, it's been a lot of trouble for nothing. It's Mixso's word against mine and he has it in for me because I told you to check on him yesterday on Trosper's killing."

"That's not the only basis, Smith. It's your gun that killed Dopey Delaney."

So that was it. Carefully choosing every word, Cellini said: "I left my gun at home today because I had to report at the Induction Station at ten. Someone must have taken it in my absence. I was away from my apartment for about three hours. After I was finished at the induction station I visited Mrs. Trosper and went home where you picked me up."

"But it's still your gun, Smith, and the Induction Station is only a few minutes from here. It would have taken you only fifteen minutes to meet Delaney here, shoot him and visit Mrs. Trosper whom you had no business to visit."

"Haenigson, you're one big, stinking mess from your shiny top to your dull shoes but

you're not a dope. You know damned well I didn't kill Dopey Delaney."

"We both know that," said the detective-sergeant impatiently. "I just want to point out that you're in as tight a spot as anyone can be. I'm nailing you because you won't level with me."

"About what?"

"Mixso told me that you and some young lady were palling around together yesterday at the induction station. He also saw her talking to Delaney. You never mentioned her to me."

"Her name is Jessie Powers. She lives at the Maywood in Hollywood. I didn't mention her because my interest in her was not professional. I didn't notice her talking to Delaney."

"Now let me return the compliment and say you're no dope either. You know I wouldn't believe that."

Cellini was beginning to feel himself on surer ground. He said: "I'll make you a proposition, Haenigson."

"Not accepted."

"It's for your own good. I have a pretty fair idea who killed Delaney and I'll let you get the credit."

"If what?"

"If you turn me loose for a couple of hours. There are a few things I have to clear up and then you can carry the ball."

The detective-sergeant hesitated and Cellini knew he had won. Now to sell the other point. He said: "There's just one more thing. Be sure you give me a free hand and don't try to pull me in before I ask for you."

"Of course," Haenigson said it too casually and Cellini knew the seed was well planted. Someone would follow him. Boggs, he hoped.

Cellini said, "It's a deal then," and walked out. He got into his car and started off. In the rear-view mirror he could see a car pull away from the curb. It was Boggs behind the wheel. Excellent.

He drove a few blocks, then stopped and went into a drugstore. He chose a wall telephone by the door to prevent Boggs from overhearing him, dialed Jessie Powers' number.

She was in. "This is Cellini Smith, Jessie. Have you heard from your friend Clarence Halliday today?"

"No," she snapped. "Why?"

"Just wondering. You mentioned he used to work for the government. Doing what?"

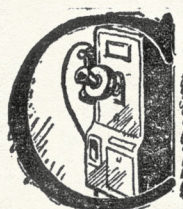
"I think he was in Customs down in San Diego. I wish you'd stop bothering me. I'm washing my hands of this whole thing."

"Not quite, Jessie. The police should be visiting you in a few minutes. They'll want to know about you and Delaney."

No sound came from Jessie and he continued: "Dopey was killed this morning. With my revolver." That, he thought as he clicked off, should stir some sort of a hornet's nest.

CHAPTER SIX

Game of Blackjack



CELLINI SMITH returned to his car wondering what Delaney had been doing in that alley. Probably looking for something again. That seemed to be the pastime. If only. . . Cellini snapped his fingers. There was one obvious place no one had thought of looking, but he had to get rid of Boggs first. He drove two more blocks and stopped by another drugstore. This time he chose a telephone booth and put the receiver to his ear without dropping a coin into the box.

He waited a few moments till he could hear the tell-tale creak of the door in the booth behind him opening, then said loudly: "All right but I'll have to meet you in a half hour because I'm being tailed by a cop. After I get rid of him I'll meet you on the corner of Seventh and Hope." He hung up and tapped a nickel against the metal box to indicate a falling coin and walked out, careful not to look into the adjoining booth.

Cellini didn't return to his car but walked down the block and turned into a department store. He dove into an elevator as the doors were closing, got out at the second floor, crossed to the rear of the store and went down again on an escalator. Boggs was nowhere in sight and Cellini exited by a side door. The cop would probably not be over-excited but would head immediately for Seventh and Hope.

Cellini hailed a cab and supplied an address to the driver. Now, if only his hunch were correct. It was certain that Trospers had something that everybody wanted and his apartment had no doubt been thoroughly examined. There remained only the place where he left his car—with his wife.

A little while later he was standing inside Mrs. Trospers' apartment again. She appeared little more than interested when he informed her that Dokey Delaney had been murdered.

"It just proves you were right, Mr. Smith, that he wasn't the man who killed my husband. Thank you for coming to tell me."

"I'm here for something else, Mrs. Trospers. With your cooperation I think I can solve it."

"I'll help in any way I can."

"Good. When your husband learned he was going into the army did he leave anything with you beside his car?"

"Yes. I agreed to take care of his apartment, have everything moved to storage and all that."

"Did he give you the key to any safe deposit boxes?"

"No."

"Did he leave anything with you other than what he has at his apartment?"

"Why, yes. He left a few of his things here."

"May I see them?"

She went to a large closet, threw open the double doors and pointed to a corner. "Those two cardboard boxes and that wooden one."

With a knife he cut the strings circling the cardboard boxes and looked inside. One was full of musical scores and the other held an assortment of books, ledgers, bank statements and such. He examined the wooden box. Its lid was screwed down and when he tried he found he could barely move it.

"What's in here?"

"He said they were musical instruments."

"We might as well check. Have you a screw driver?"

She supplied one and he went to work. Five minutes later he lifted the lid. The box was full of several dozen metal cans. Probably more than a hundred. He removed the Scotch tape binding the rim of one of the cans and pried off the lid. It was a reel of film.

He held it to the light, then said: "If you don't mind I'll take this along with me."

"But I do, Mr. Smith. That's my husband's property and I'm taking care of it."

He unreeled a strip of film and held it up for her to see. Suddenly she gasped. "That," said Cellini, "explains how he made so much money with the kind of band he had."

Her cheeks were a fiery red. "Yes, take it!" she cried. "And come back and get the rest of them out of here. Quickly!" she threw herself on a lounge and began to sob.

Mrs. Trospers, Cellini decided, was not quite as indifferent about her ex-husband as she had pretended. He replaced the reel of film in the can and quietly left.

BOGGS was striding back and forth on Seventh and Hope with an angry lope. As Cellini stepped out of the cab, he shouted: "What the hell are you trying to pull on me?"

"You shouldn't believe everything you hear in the next telephone booth," said Cellini.

"You're pulling some kind of a fast one. Smith, and I'm taking you back to headquarters."

"That'd be a fine thing to report to Haenigson. You pull me in because you mess up your shadow job."

"You didn't want to meet no one here," the cop spluttered. "Where were you?"

"Doing your job," said Cellini.

"What's that?" asked Boggs suspiciously.

"I'm giving you this whole case wrapped up like a Christmas package. It's your big chance."

"Well, come and tell it to Haenigson."

"And let him grab the credit? I'm willing to turn the whole thing over to you with mono-

syllabic explanations that you can understand and then I'll step out of the picture while you bring in the killer. Why hand it to Haenigson? Can't you use a promotion?"

"I guess so," said Boggs uncertainly.

"Then this is it because it's big-time. You'll not only nail the killer but put a stop to one hell of a racket. I'll even explain your sapience and penetrating wisdom to the reporters."

"O.K., but if you doublecross me I'll—"

"Break every bone in my body," interrupted Cellini. "I know. Is there any photographic store around here where you can rent a small sixteen-millimeter home projector?"

"There's a big place on Olive."

"Fine. We'll go together."

Boggs said it was extremely unlikely they'd go any other way and they made for his prowler car. Some minutes later they came out of the photographic store carrying the projector and Cellini handed Boggs a slip of paper with an address written on it.

"That's the next stop."

"Who lives there?" asked Boggs.

"Unless the phone book is in error, it's a Mr. Clarence Halliday."

It proved to be a small brick house in one of the more modest sections of the Hollywood hills. As they reached the porch, they heard an anguished cry.

Cellini said, "What the hell!" and grabbed for the knob. The door was locked. There was another cry inside and he said: "Your gun!"

Boggs whipped his automatic from the holster and fired twice into the door lock. Cellini crashed at the door with his shoulders and they burst inside. They stopped short at the picture that met their eyes.

Clarence Halliday lay sprawled on a settee, blood oozing from nose and mouth. Over him stood Jessie Powers with a blackjack in her hand. Feebly, Halliday tried to defend himself as she whipped the weapon across his body, his arms, his face.

A steady stream of almost unintelligible words came from her. "Mix me up, will you?" Cellini was able to make out. "Get me into your mess!" Again the weapon sliced down.

For a moment, Boggs and Cellini watched in frozen and amazed fascination at the spectacle of the beautiful girl beating the almost senseless man. The sap smashed at the jawbone and a sharp crack could be heard. It broke the spell. Cellini leaped and wrested the weapon from the girl's hand. She sank into a chair, utterly weary, staring blankly in front of her. In semi-consciousness, Halliday stirred and reached blindly at the mess of meat that was his face.

"I should have figured she might do something like this," said Cellini. "Get the projector from the porch while I phone for an ambulance."



"LL give you a broad outline of the way it had to happen," said Cellini Smith, "and you can fill in the details for yourself." Cellini began to thread the reel of film into the projector. "It begins with Clarence Halliday who was a Customs in-

spector on the Mexican border here at lower California. One day he caught someone trying to smuggle about a hundred cans of this kind of stuff into the country."

He looked at the girl. She sat dully in the chair as if seeing and hearing nothing. Halliday, still in a semi-comatose condition, was trying to sit up. Cellini said: "Pull the blinds and I'll play you a sample of the stuff on that wall."

Boggs circled the windows and Cellini threw the switch on the projector. Nude figures appeared on the wall, a man and two women, in as obscene a specimen of pornography as Cellini had ever seen. Boggs leaped forward with an oath and yanked the projector's electric socket from the wall.

Cellini pulled the blinds wide again. "I don't blame you," he said. "It's not pretty but there's a lot of money in that kind of thing—renting to stag parties and suchlike. Halliday realized that, too, so he let the smuggler escape and kept the film. But there was one trouble—Halliday didn't know how to market his product. So he went to an underworld character called Dopey Delaney who, he figured, would know. It was probably too big for Delaney, too, so he went to Jessie Powers. I suppose she met him in one of the dives she sang at. And Jessie, in turn, spoke to her band leader, Harry Trosper.

"It was a natural for Trosper who played a lot of clubs and small-time dates with his band and who probably had requests for that kind of thing. So Trosper offered Halliday, Delaney and Jessie Powers four hundred and fifty dollars a week to turn over the film to him. They accepted because one hundred and fifty bucks coming in every week for each of them was a lot of money without working for it and any time they didn't like it they could get the film back from Trosper. How much money Trosper made renting the stuff out I don't know, but it must have been plenty."

Halliday groaned and Boggs looked at him with distaste and said: "Shut up. The ambulance will be here in a few minutes."

Cellini continued: "It all went well until Trosper got a draft call. He realized he would have to return the film and that the three would probably take over his lucrative business while he was playing soldier. After the war he wouldn't even have his band. So he figured a way out. He called Halliday, Delaney and

Powers over to his apartment and announced he was going into the army. He probably said it was a dirty business and he was through with it. He showed them a bunch of film in his fireplace and pulled a gun so they couldn't interfere. Then Trosper threw a match behind the fireplace screen and they saw their livelihood practically blow up in a few seconds. Is that the way it was, Jessie?"

"The skunk talked about patriotism. Claimed we should stop such things in wartime."

"But that didn't end it," Cellini went on, "because Halliday realized that Trosper was pulling a fast one and that the films he had burned was dummy stuff. He told that to Jessie and she agreed to try to find out from Trosper what he had done with the real film. That's why she followed him down to the draft board and induction station."

"Why was Delaney there?" Boggs put in.

"He had the normal gangster's reaction to what he thought was the burning of the film. He followed Trosper to the induction station hoping for just one thing—a chance to get at him with his blackjack. Trosper of course realized his danger and that's why he decided to forego the furlough and go into the army right away. For double protection he sent an anonymous note to the police, which got Haenigson down there. All that got Trosper pretty excited and sent up his blood pressure. As he went to lie down, Halliday came in and saw him go by. Did you telephone Halliday, Jessie?"

"Yes. I told him Trosper wouldn't give so he came down to see if he could be of help."

Cellini nodded. "So Halliday followed Trosper into the room and when Trosper was about to yell he knifed him. He couldn't find Trosper's wallet and he didn't have much time to look so he went to the waiting room and told Jessie to keep her eyes open. When I told her of the murder she figured it was Dopey Delaney's job and asked me to get the wallet. What they were hoping to find was some piece of paper that would reveal where Trosper

had hidden the cans of film. They didn't realize that Trosper had simply left the stuff in his wife's keeping."

"What?" It came from the girl.

"That's right, Jessie. I didn't suppose you knew. It was one of those amicable separations. Was that thousand-dollar bill a payoff from him for your personal favors?"

"Yes!" She began to laugh shrilly.

Boggs said: "Shut up or I'll give you one."

"Then," said Cellini, "Delaney went into that room and found the body. Even he realized what the deal was. Later Jessie and I went to Trosper's apartment where she hoped to find some clue. Halliday had just left, using the key he had taken from Trosper's key chain. He watched us go in and when he saw Delaney follow he came to prevent him from talking to me. Halliday had a chance to talk to Jessie and told her to try and get my apartment key because I might have found something on Trosper's body and he wanted to search my place. At least that was the story he told her and when she was at my apartment she picked up my key from the table and made a soap impression while I was out mixing her a drink.

"Actually, Halliday was after my gun and he got it while I was at the induction station, made an appointment with Delaney and shot him. Jessie had told him about Mixso, so to sew it up he got the kid to swear he'd seen me enter the alley. Mixso doesn't like me and he'd do anything for fifty bucks. When I told Jessie about Delaney's killing she knew it had to be Halliday and realized how deeply he had implicated her. She must know what being an accessory means. So she came here, saw the blackjack he had taken from Delaney's body and began to polish him. Will that do?"

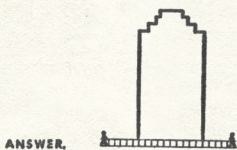
"It'll do good," said Boggs, then added primly: "Now, I'll phone Haenigson. It's not proper if I try to grab the credit."

Cellini wondered if it would be worth hitting Boggs. He decided it wasn't. He had an appointment with the army in sixty days.

TEST SIGHT

TASTE RIGHT

If the ladder is placed against building, how far up will it reach?





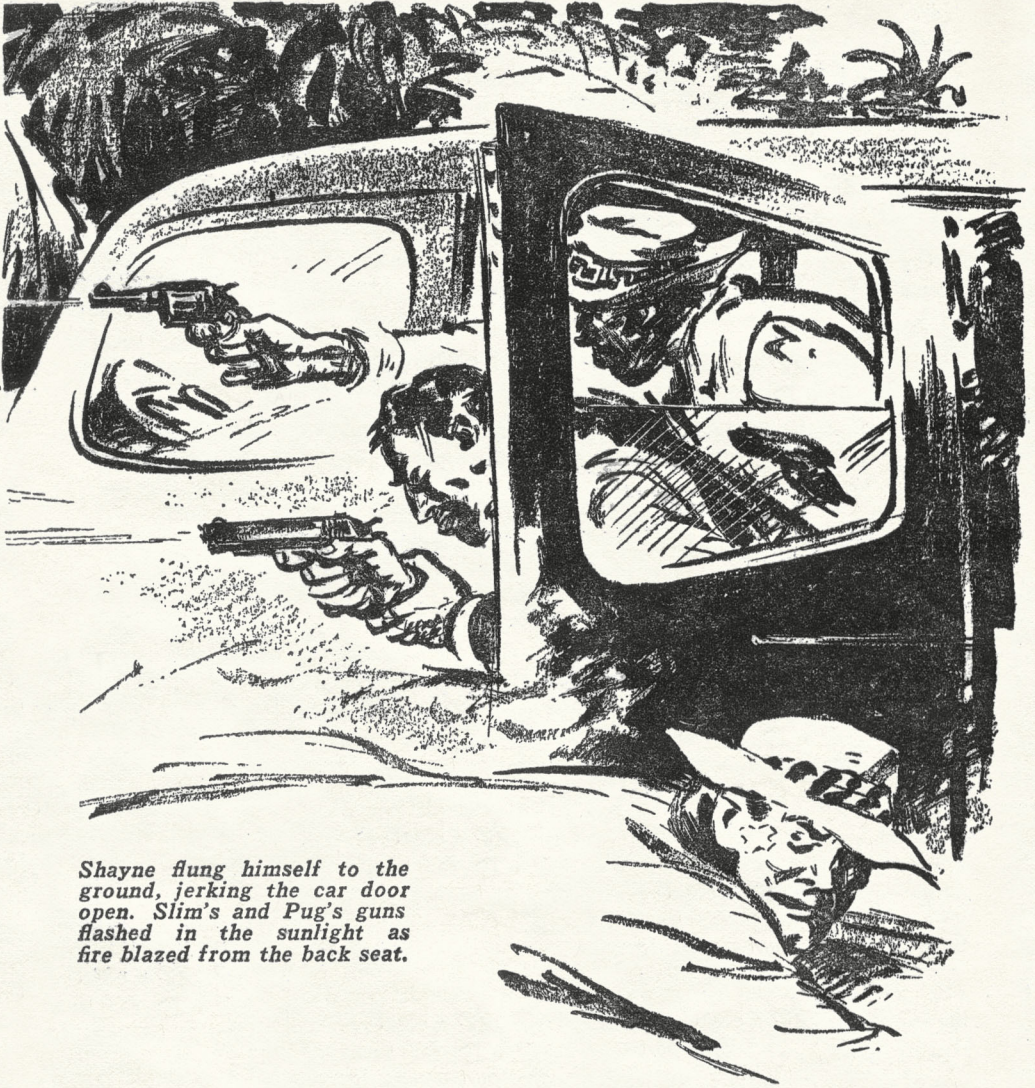
A TASTE FOR COGNAC

By
BRETT HALLIDAY



"You're horning in on things that don't concern you," the voice over the phone cautioned Mike Shayne. An unnecessary and futile warning, since the red-haired private shamus was always concerned with murder and lovely maidens in distress—particularly when his experienced nostrils sniffed a case of rare pre-war Monnet cognac as the payoff!

A Michael Shayne Novelette



Shayne flung himself to the ground, jerking the car door open. Slim's and Pug's guns flashed in the sunlight as fire blazed from the back seat.

CHAPTER ONE

Monet '26

MICHAEL SHAYNE hesitated inside the swinging doors, looked down the row of men at the bar and then strolled past the wooden booths lining the wall, glancing in each one as he went by.

Timothy Rourke wasn't at the bar and he wasn't in any of the booths. Shayne frowned and turned impatiently toward the swinging doors.

A voice called, "Mr. Shayne?" when he reached the third booth from the end.

He stopped and looked down at the girl alone in the booth. She was about twenty, smartly-dressed, with coppery hair parted in the middle and lying in smooth waves on either side of her head. She didn't wear any make-up and her small face had a pinched look. Her eyes were brown and shone with alert intelligence. Her left hand clasped a glass half-filled with dead beer as she smiled at Shayne.

The Miami detective took off his hat and stood flat-footed looking down at her. Lights above the bar behind him cast shadows on his gaunt cheeks. He lifted his left eyebrow and asked: "Do I know you?"

"You're going to." The girl tilted her head sideways and looked wistful. "I'll buy a drink." "Why didn't you say so?" Shayne slid into the bench opposite her.

A waiter hurried over and the girl said, "Cognac," happily, watching Shayne for approval.

The detective said: "Make it into a sidecar, Joe." The waiter nodded and went away.

"But Tim said cognac was your password," the girl protested. "That you never drank anything else."

"Tim?" Shayne arched a bushy red brow.

"Tim Rourke. He thought you might tell me about some of your cases. I do feature stuff for a New York syndicate. Tim couldn't make it tonight. He's been promising to introduce me to you, so I came on to meet you here instead. I'm Myrna Hastings."

Shayne said bitterly: "When you order cognac these days you get lousy grape brandy. California '44. It's drinkable mixed into a sidecar. This damned war . . ."

"It's a shame your drinking habits have been upset by the war. Tragic, in fact." Myrna Hastings took a sip of her flat beer and made a little grimace.

Shayne lit a cigarette and tossed the pack on the table between them. Joe brought his sidecar and he watched Myrna take a dollar bill from her purse and lay it on the table. Shayne lifted the slender cocktail glass to his lips and said: "Thanks." He drank half of the mixture and his gray eyes became speculative. Holding it close to his nose, he inhaled deeply and a frown rumbled his forehead.

Joe was standing at the table when Shayne drained his glass. "I've changed my mind, Joe. Bring me a straight cognac—a double shot in a beer glass."

Joe grinned slyly and went away.

SIXTY cents in change from Myrna's dollar bill lay on the table. She poked at the silver and asked dubiously: "Will that be enough for a double shot?"

"It'll be eighty cents," Shayne replied.

She smiled and took a quarter from her purse. "Tim says you've always avoided publicity, but it'll be a wonderful break for me if I can write up a few of your best cases."

The waiter brought a beer glass with two ounces of amber fluid in the bottom, took Myrna Hastings' eighty-five cents, and went away.

Shayne lifted the beer glass to his nose, closed his eyes and breathed deeply of the bouquet, then began to warm the glass with his hands.

"Tim thinks you should let yourself in on some publicity," the girl continued. "He thinks it's a shame you don't ever take the credit for solving so many tough cases."

Shayne looked at her for an instant, then slowly emptied his glass and set it down. He

picked up his cigarettes and hat and said: "Thanks for the drinks. I never give out any stories. Tim Rourke knows that."

He got up and strode to the rear end of the bar. Joe sidled down to him and Shayne said: "I could use another shot of that stuff. And I'll pour my own."

Joe got a clean beer glass and set a tall bottle on the bar before Shayne. He glanced past the detective at the girl sitting alone in the booth, but didn't say anything.

The label on the bottle read, *MONTERREY GRAPE BRANDY—Guaranteed 14 months old.*

Shayne pulled out the cork and passed the open neck of the bottle back and forth under his nose. He asked Joe: "Got any more of this same brand?"

"Jeez, I dunno. I'll see, Mr. Shayne." He went away and returned presently with a sealed bottle bearing the same label.

Shayne broke the seal and pulled the cork. He grimaced as the smell of raw grape brandy assailed his nostrils. He said angrily: "This isn't the same stuff."

"Says so right on the bottle," Joe argued, and pointed to the label.

"I don't give a damn what the label says," Shayne growled. He reached for the first bottle and poured a drink into the empty beer mug. Keeping a firm grip on the bottle with his left hand he drank from the mug, rolling the liquor around his tongue. His gray eyes shone with dreamy contentment as he lingeringly swallowed the brandy, while a frown of curiosity and confusion formed between them.

"Any more of the bar bottles already opened?" he asked Joe.

"I don't think so. We don't open 'em but one at a time nowadays. I'll ask the barkeep." Plainly mystified by Shayne's request, Joe went to the front of the bar and held a whispered conference with a bald-headed man wearing a dirty apron that bulged over a pot-belly.

The bartender glanced back at Shayne, waddled toward him. He looked at the two bottles, and asked: "'Sa trouble here?"

Shayne shrugged his wide shoulders. "No trouble. Your bar bottle hasn't got the same stuff that's in the sealed one."

The hulking man looked troubled. "You know how 'tis these days. A label don't mean nothin' no more. We're lucky to stay open at all."

Shayne said: "I know it's tough trying to keep a supply."

"You're private, huh? Ain't I seen you 'round?"

"Shayne said: 'I'm private. This hasn't anything to do with the law.'"

The bartender regarded Shayne for a moment with murky, bulging eyes. "If you got a kick about the drink, it'll be on the house," he decided magnanimously.

"I'm not kicking," Shayne told him earnestly.

"I'd like to buy what's left in this bottle." He indicated the partially empty one which he had moved out of the bartender's reach.

The man shook his head slowly. "No can do. Our license says we gotta sell it by the drink."

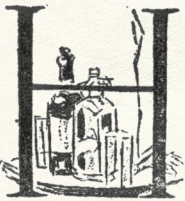
Shayne held the bottle up and squinted through it. "There's maybe twenty ounces left. It's worth ten bucks to me."

The big man continued to shake his head. "You can drink it here. Forty cents a shot."

"Maybe I could make a deal with the boss."

"Maybe." He waddled around the end of the bar and preceded Shayne to an unmarked door to the left of the ladies' room. Shayne saw Myrna Hastings still sitting in the booth watching him.

The bartender rapped lightly on the door, turned the knob and motioned Shayne inside.



HENRY RENALDO was seated at a desk facing the doorway. He was a big flabby man with a florid face. He wore a black derby tilted back on his bullet head and an open gray vest revealed the sleeves and front of a shirt

violently striped with reddish purple. He was eating a frayed black cigar that had spilled ashes down the front of his vest.

The bartender stood in the doorway behind Shayne and said heavily: "This shamus is kickin' about the service, boss. I figured you might wanna han'le it."

Renaldo's black eyes took in the brandy bottle dangling from Shayne's fingers, and they became unguarded for a moment. He wet his lips, said, "O.K., Tiny," and the bartender went out.

Renaldo leaned over the desk to push out his right hand. "Long time no see, Mike."

Shayne disregarded the proffered hand. "I didn't know you were in this racket, Renaldo."

"Sure. I went legal when prohibition went out."

Shayne moved forward, set the bottle down with a little thump and said mildly: "This is a new angle on me."

"How's that?"

"Pre-war cognac under a cheap domestic label. Monet, isn't it?"

"You must be nuts," Renaldo ejaculated.

"Either you or me," Shayne agreed. "Forty cents a throw when it'd easily bring a dollar a slug in the original bottle."

Henry Renaldo was beginning to breathe hard. "What's it to you, Shayne? Stooging for the Feds?"

Shayne shook his head. He lifted the bottle to his lips, let cognac gurgle down his throat and murmured reverently: "Monet, Vintage of '26."

Henry Renaldo started and fear showed in his eyes. "How'd you . . ." He paused, taking

the frayed cigar carefully from his lips. "Who sent you here?"

"I followed my nose."

Renaldo shook his head. He said huskily: "I don't know how you got onto it, but why jump me?" His voice rose passionately. "If I pass it out for cheap stuff, is that a crime?"

Shayne said: "You could make more selling it by the bottle to a guy like me."

Renaldo spread out his hands. "I gotta stay in business. I gotta have something to sell over the bar. If I can hang on till after the war . . ."

Comprehension showed on Shayne's face. "That's why you're refilling legal bottles."

"What other out is there?" Renaldo demanded. "Government inspectors checking my stock."

"All right, but let me in on it," Shayne urged. "A case or two for my private stock . . ."

"I only got a few bottles."

"But you know where there's more."

"Make your own deal," Renaldo said sullenly.

"Sure. All I want is the tip-off."

"Who sent you to me?"

"No one," Shayne insisted. "I dropped in for a drink. And got slugged with Monet when I ordered cheap brandy."

"Nuts," sneered Renaldo. "You couldn't pull the year on that vintage stuff. I don't know what the gimmick is . . ."

A REAR door opened and two men came in hastily. They stopped in their tracks and stared at the detective seated on one corner of Renaldo's desk. One of them was short and squarish, with a swart face and a whiskered mole on his chin. He wore fawn-colored slacks and a canary-yellow sweater that was tight over bulging muscles.

His companion was tall and lean, with a pallid face and the humid eyes of a cokie. He was hatless and wore a tightly-belted suit. He thinned his lips against sharp teeth and tilted his head to study Shayne.

Renaldo snarled: "You took long enough. How'd you make out, Blackie?"

"It wasn't no soap, boss. He ain't talkin'."

"Hell, you followed him out of here."

"Sure we did, boss," Blackie said earnestly. "Just like you said. To a little shack on the beach on Eighteenth. But he had company when he got there. There was this car parked in front, see? So Lennie an' me waited. Half an hour, maybe. Then a guy come out an' drove away, an' we goes in. But we're too late. He's croaked."

"Croaked?"

"So help me. Then we beats it straight back."

Renaldo said sourly to Shayne. "Looks like that fixes it for us both."

Shayne said: "Give me all of it."

"Can't hurt now," Renaldo muttered defensively. "This bird comes in with a suitcase this

evening. It's loaded with twenty-four bottles of Monet, 1926, like you know. It's pre-war, sealed with no revenue stamps. All he wants is a hundred, so what can I lose? I can't put it out there where an inspector will see it, but I can refill legal bottles and keep my customers happy. So I give him a C and try to pry loose where there's more but he swears that's all there is and beats it. So I send Blackie and Lennie to see can they make a deal. You heard the rest."

"Why yuh spillin' your guts to this shamus?" Lennie rasped suddenly. "Ain't he the law?"

"Shayne's private," Renaldo told him. "He was trying to horn in . . ." He paused, his jaw dropping. "Maybe you know more about it than I do, Shayne."

"Maybe he does." Lennie's voice rose excitedly. "Looks to me like the mugg that came out an' drove away, don't he, Blackie?"

Blackie said: "Sorta. We didn't get to see him good," he explained to Renaldo. "He was dressed like that—an' big."

All three of them looked at Shayne suspiciously. Renaldo said: "So that's how—" He jerked the cigar from his mouth and asked angrily: "What'd you get out of him before he kicked off? Maybe we can make a deal, huh? You're plenty on the spot with him dead."

Shayne said: "Nuts. I don't know anything."

"How'd you know about the Monet?"

"I dropped in for a drink and knew it wasn't domestic stuff as soon as I tasted it."

"Maybe. But that didn't spell out Monet, '26. Now my boy'll keep quiet if . . ."

Shayne slid off the desk. His gray eyes were very bright. He said dispassionately: "You're a fool, Renaldo. Your boys are feeding you a line. It's my hunch they messed things up and are afraid to admit it to you. So they make up a fairy tale about someone else getting there first, and you swallow it." He laughed indulgently. "Think it over and you'll see who's really on the spot." He turned toward the door.

Blackie got in front of him. He stood lightly on the balls of his feet and a blackjack swung from his right hand. Behind him, Lennie crouched forward with his gun hand bunched in his coat pocket. His pallid face was contorted and he panted: "Don't you listen to him, boss. Blackie an' me can both identify him."

Shayne turned and told Renaldo: "You'd better call them off. I've a friend waiting outside and if anything happens to me in here you'll have a lot of explaining to do."

"If I turn you over for murder . . ."

Shayne said: "Try it." He turned toward the door again, the open bottle of cognac clutched laxly in his left hand.

Blackie remained poised with the blackjack between him and the door. He appealed to Renaldo: "If it was him out there an' the old gink talked before he passed out . . ."

A sharp rapping on the door behind Blackie interrupted him. A grin pulled Shayne's lips away from his teeth. He said: "My friend is getting impatient."

Renaldo said: "Skip it, Blackie."

Shayne went past the dark, sweated man to the door and opened it. Myrna Hastings stood outside. "If you think—" she began.

He took her arm firmly and pulled the door shut behind him. He slid the uncorked bottle into his coat pocket and started toward the front with her. She twisted to look back at the closed door, and said uncertainly: "Those men inside. Didn't one of them have a weapon?"

He said: "You're an angel and I was a louse to treat you as I did." They went out through the swinging doors and he stopped on the sidewalk. "Keep on being an angel and beat it. I have things to do."

Myrna looked up into his face and was frightened by what she saw there. "Something is wrong. I felt it when you acted so funny."

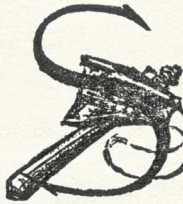
He shrugged and said: "Maybe this'll be a case you can write up." He went to his sedan parked at the curb and started to get in.

"Can't I go with you?" Myrna asked breathlessly. "I promise not to be in the way."

He took hold of both her elbows and turned her about. "This is murder, kid. I'll tell you about it tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWO

The Emaciated Corpse



HAYNE drove out Biscayne Boulevard and turned right on Eighteenth Street. A slim crescent of a moon rode high in the cloudless sky overhead and the Miami night was humidly warm. He drove slowly to the end of the street and stopped his car against a low stone barrier overlooking the bayfront.

He turned off his motor and lights and sat for a moment gripping the steering wheel. Light glowed through two round, heavily-glassed windows in a low, square stone structure at his left. It sat boldly on the very edge of the bluff overlooking the bay, and a neat shell-lined walk led up to the front door.

Shayne got out and went up the walk. The little house was built solidly of porous limestone and its only windows were round, metal-framed portholes that looked as though they might have been taken from a ship. The door had a heavy bronze knocker, and the hinges and lock were also of bronze.

Shayne tried the knob and the door opened inward easily. A square ship's lantern fitted with an electric bulb hung from a hand-hewn beam of cypress in a narrow, cypress-paneled

hallway. An open door to the right showed the interior of a neat and tiny kitchen. Shayne went down the hall to another door opening off to the right. The room was dark and he fumbled along the wall until he found a light switch. It lighted two wrought-iron ship's lanterns similar to the one in the hall. Shayne stood in the doorway and tugged at his left earlobe and looked at the man lying huddled in the middle of the bare floor.

He was dead.

A big-framed man, his face was bony and emaciated. His eyes were wide open and glazed, bulging from deep sockets. He wore a double-breasted uniform of shiny blue serge with a double row of polished brass buttons down the front. His ankles were wired together, and wire had cut deeply into his wrists.

Shayne went in and knelt beside the body. Three fingernails had been torn from his right hand. These appeared to be the only marks of violence on his body which was warm enough to indicate that death had occurred only half an hour or so before. Shayne judged that shock and pain had brought on a heart attack, causing death. He was about sixty and there was no padding of flesh on his bony frame.

Shayne rocked back on his heels and looked morosely around the room which was bare of furniture except for a built-in padded settee along one wall. Bare and scrupulously clean, the room had the appearance of a cell.

Shayne wiped sweat from his face and went through the dead man's pockets. He found nothing but a newspaper clipping and the torn stub of a bus ticket. The ticket had been issued the previous day, round-trip from Miami to Homestead, a small town on the Florida Keys.

The clipping was a week old, from the *Miami Herald*. It was headed, **PAROLE GRANTED**.

Shayne started to read the item, then stiffened at the sound of a car stopping outside. He thrust the clipping and ticket stub in his pocket.

He heard footsteps coming up the walk and the voices of men outside. He got out a cigarette and lit it, blew out the match to look up with lifted brows at the bulky figure of Detective Chief Will Gentry in the doorway.

Shayne said, "Dr. Livingston?" and Gentry snorted angrily. He was a big man with heavy features and a solid, forthright manner. He was an old friend of Shayne's and he said scathingly: "I thought I smelled something."

Shayne stepped aside and nodded toward the body on the floor. "He hasn't been dead long enough to stink."

GENTRY strode forward and scowled down at the body. A tall, white-haired man hurried in behind the chief. He wore an immaculate white linen suit and his features were sharp and clean. He stopped at sight of the body and said: "Oh my God, is he—"

Gentry grunted: "Yeah." He knelt by the dead man and asked Shayne in a tone of casual interest: "Why'd you pull out his fingernails?"

The tall man exclaimed in a choked voice: "Good heavens! Has he been tortured?"

"Who is he?" Shayne asked sharply.

"It's Captain Samuels," the white-haired man said. "I knew something must have happened to him, Chief, when he wasn't here to keep his appointment with me. If only I'd called you earlier . . ."

"What are you doing here?" Gentry's eyes bored into Shayne's.

"I was driving by and saw the lights. I don't know," Shayne shrugged, "as you said, something just seemed to smell wrong. I stopped to take a look and that's what I found."

"I suppose you can prove all that?" scoffed Gentry.

"Can you disprove it?"

"Maybe not, but you're holding out plenty. Damn it, Mike, this is murder. What do you know about it?"

"Nothing. I've told you how I drove by—"

Will Gentry raised his voice to call: "Jones. You and Rafferty bring in the cuffs."

A voice answered from the front door and feet tramped down the hall. At the same time there was the light click of heels outside and Myrna Hastings came in breathlessly from the rear end of the hall. "You don't need to cover up for me, Mike," she cried out. "Go ahead and tell them I asked you to stop here. Oh! It's Chief Gentry, isn't it?"

Gentry muttered: "I don't think—"

"Don't you remember me?" Myrna laughed. "Timothy Rourke introduced me to you in your office today. I do feature stuff for a New York syndicate. You see, I'm to blame for Mike stopping here tonight. I'd heard about Captain Samuels, about his shipwreck and all years ago, and I thought he might be material for an article. So I asked Mike to stop for a minute tonight and—well, that's how it was."

"Why didn't you tell me that?" Gentry growled at Shayne.

"I think he had some idea of protecting me," Myrna laughed merrily. "You see, I didn't tell him *why* I wanted to stop, and then when he found the dead man, well, I guess maybe Mike thought I knew something about it. Wasn't that it, darling?" She turned to Shayne.

"Something like that," he said stiffly.

"All right, Jones," Gentry said to one of the two dicks hovering in the doorway. "Put your bracelets away and go over the house."

"Now that you've got me cleared up," Shayne suggested, "why not tell me about it?"

"I don't know any more about it than you do," Gentry admitted. "Mr. Guildford called a while ago and asked me to come out here with him. Seems he had a hunch something had happened to Captain Samuels."

"I felt sure of it after I had time to think things over," the white-haired man said. "I had a definite appointment here with the captain for nine tonight and I waited almost half an hour for him."

Shayne said: "It's almost eleven now. Why did you wait so long before calling the police?"

"I had a flat tire just as I reached the boulevard driving away," Guildford explained. "I had it changed at the filling station there and was delayed. I called upon reaching home."

Shayne said: "Were the lights burning while you waited?"

"No. I'm quite sure they weren't. The house was dark and apparently empty."

"What was your appointment for?" Shayne pressed him.

Guildford hesitated. He glanced at Will Gentry. "I don't mind answering official questions, but what is this man's connection with the case? And the young lady?"

"None," Gentry said. "You can beat it, Mike, unless you feel like telling the truth."

"But we have told the truth," Myrna asserted, her eyes wide and childlike. "We were just—"

Shayne took her arm tightly. He said, "Come on," and led her out the door.



NEITHER of them said anything until they were in Shayne's car headed back for the boulevard. Then Myrna leaned her head against his shoulder and asked in a small voice: "Are you terribly angry at me, Mike?"

"How did you get in that house?"

"You brought me. I hid in the trunk compartment of your car. Then I slipped in the house while you were searching the body. I was in the rear bedroom all the time, and when I heard you getting the third degree I knew you didn't want to tell the truth and I thought I'd better stick my oar in. Didn't I do all right?"

"How did you know the captain's name, about him being shipwrecked?"

Myrna chuckled. "I found an old log-book by his bed. I had my flashlight and there was a clipping in the book." She patted a large suede handbag in her lap. "I've got the book in here. It made a pretty good story if I did think of it on the spur of the moment—the one I told Inspector Gentry, I mean," she amended and chuckled again.

"Why did you hide in the back of my car?" Shayne asked angrily.

"Because you were trying to get rid of me and I wanted to see the famous Shayne in action," she said. "But I must say you didn't do much detecting out there."

Shayne braked suddenly in front of an apartment building on the riverfront.

"I live here," he told her, and went toward a side entrance.

Myrna Hastings went with him. She said hopefully: "I'm dying to taste whatever is in that bottle you've got in your coat pocket."

She waited quietly behind Shayne in the hallway while he unlocked his apartment door. He went inside and switched on the lights and she followed him into a square living room with windows on the east side. There was a studio couch along one wall, and a door on the right opened into a kitchenette. Another door on the left led into the bath and bedroom.

Shayne tossed his hat on a wall hook and went into the kitchen without a word or glance for Myrna.

He soon came back from the kitchen with two four-ounce wine glasses and two tumblers filled with ice water. He walked past her, ranged the four glasses in a row on the table, and filled the wine glasses nearly to the brim with cognac. He pushed one of the tumblers toward Myrna, and set the smaller glass within easy reach of her hand, then pulled another chair to the table and sat down half-facing her.

It was very quiet in the apartment, very restful. Shayne sighed when he drained the last drop from his glass of Monet. He frowned at the portion remaining in Myrna's glass. "Don't you appreciate good liquor?"

She smiled and told him: "It's so good I'm making it last."

Shayne lit a cigarette and spun the match away into a corner, then got the purloined clipping and bus ticket stub from his pocket. He laid the stub on the table and read the short clipping aloud. It was an AP dispatch from Atlanta, Georgia.

It stated that John Grossman, suspected prohibition era racketeer, sentenced to federal prison in 1930 on income tax charges from Miami, Florida, had been released that day on parole. Grossman announced his intention to take a long vacation at his fishing lodge on the Keys.

When Shayne finished reading the clipping aloud, he placed it beside the ticket stub and told Myrna: "Those two items were the only things I found in the dead man's pockets."

"You didn't tell the police about them?"

He shook his head in slow negation.

"Isn't that against the law? Concealing murder evidence? Who's John Grossman and why was the old sea captain interested in the clipping about his parole?"

Shayne said slowly: "I remember Grossman. He was one of our big-time bootleggers with a select clientele willing to pay plenty for high-class imported stuff. Like Monet cognac. I don't know why the captain was interested in Grossman's release."

"What's it all about, Mike?" Myrna leaned forward eagerly. "It began back in the tavern with something funny about those drinks,

didn't it? Why did you go back to the proprietor's office and come out with a bottle, and then drive straight out to the scene of the murder?"

SHAYNE said softly: "You've done me two good turns tonight—when you knocked on the door of Renaldo's office, and out at the captain's house when I didn't see how in hell I was going to explain my presence there without telling Gentry the truth." He hesitated, then admitted: "You deserve a break. You're in it now because you lied to Gentry and he'll probably discover you lied."

He began at the beginning and related what had happened in Renaldo's office. "You know what happened after I drove out to the house."

"And this is real pre-war cognac?" Myrna lifted her glass and her voice was incredulous.

"Monet 1926," Shayne said flatly. "The captain sold Renaldo a case of it for a hundred dollars, and was tortured to death immediately afterward. Renaldo admits he had his men follow the captain to try and persuade him to tell them where they could get more, but they claim he was dead before they got to him."

"Do you believe them?"

Shayne shook his head. "It doesn't do to believe anything when murder is involved. Their story sounded all right, but that wire and those torn fingernails could very well be their idea of gentle persuasion. And if the captain did fool them by dying before they got the infor-

mation, they'd hate to admit it to Renaldo and might have made up that story about his being murdered by an unknown visitor.

"And there's another angle. Maybe Blackie and Lennie are playing it smart and did get the information they wanted before the captain croaked. If they decided to use it themselves and cut Renaldo out . . ." He paused and shrugged expressively.

"What makes you and Renaldo so sure there's more cognac where that first case came from?"

"I imagine it was just a hopeful hunch on Renaldo's part. And I wasn't sure until I found this clipping indicating a connection between the captain and an ex-bootlegger."

"Would it be sufficient motive for murder? At a hundred dollars a case?"

Shayne made a derisive gesture. "A C-note for two dozen bottles of Monet is peanuts today. That's what got Renaldo so excited. It shows the captain knew nothing about the present liquor shortage and market prices. It could retail for twenty or twenty-five dollars a bottle properly handled today."

Myrna Hastings' eyes widened. "That would be about five hundred dollars a case!"

Shayne nodded morosely. "If Grossman had a pile of it cached away when he was sent up in '30," he mused, "that would explain why it stayed off the market all this time. But Grossman would know what the stuff is worth today." He shook his head angrily. "It still doesn't add up. And if the captain knew about

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the cache and had access to it all the time, why wait until a week after Grossman's parole to put it on the market? Did you notice the condition of the captain's body?" he asked abruptly.

Myrna shuddered. "I'll never forget it."

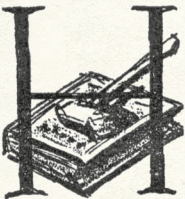
"He looked," said Shayne harshly, "like an advanced case of malnutrition."

"Who was the white-haired man who brought the police?"

"Guildford. He's a lawyer here. Very respectable."

Myrna said hesitantly: "His story about waiting at the house half an hour for Captain Samuels to keep the appointment—do you think he could be the man the gangsters saw drive away from the house just before they went in and found the captain dead."

"Could be. If there was any such man. The timing is screwy and hard to figure out. Guildford claims his appointment was for nine and he waited half an hour. It was well past ten when the muggs got back to Renaldo's office. That leaves it open either way. Guildford could have waited until nine thirty and then driven away just before the captain returned with Blackie and Lennie trailing him. Or Guildford may have deliberately pushed the time up a little. Until we know why Guildford went there . . ." Shayne shrugged.



HE POURED himself another drink and demanded: "Where's that log-book you mentioned, and the clipping about the shipwreck?"

She reached for her handbag and unsnapped the heavy, gold clasp. She drew out an aged, brass-

hinged, leather-bound book with *SHIP'S LOG* stamped on the front in gilt letters.

Shayne opened it and looked at the fly-leaf, inscribed, *Property of Captain Thomas Anthony Samuels. April 2, 1902.*

"The clipping is in the back," Myrna told him. "Lucky I saw it and made up a story that Chief Gentry would swallow."

Shayne said: "Don't kid yourself that he swallowed it. He knows damned well it wasn't coincidence that put me at the scene of the murder." He turned the log-book upside-down and shook out a yellowed and brittle newspaper clipping from the *Miami Daily News*, dated June 17, 1930. There was a picture of a big man in a nautical uniform with the caption, *SAVED AT SEA.*

Shayne read the news item swiftly. It gave a dramatic account of the sea rescue of Captain Samuels, owner, master, and sole survivor of the auxiliary launch, *Mermaid*, lost in a tropical hurricane off the Florida coast three days before the captain was rescued by a fish-

ing craft. He had heroically stayed afloat in a life-preserver for three days and nights.

"Where," asked Shayne, "was the book when you found it?"

"In a small recess in the rock wall at the head of his bed. The bedding was torn up as though the room had been hastily searched, and the bed was pulled away from the wall. That's how I saw it. Normally, the wooden head-board of the bed must have stood against the wall hiding the recess."

Shayne began thoughtfully flipping the pages of the log-book. "This seems to be a complete account of Captain Samuels' voyages from—"

The ringing of his telephone interrupted him.

The voice of the clerk on the night-desk came over the wire: "The law's on its way up to your apartment, Mr. Shayne. You told me once I was to call you—"

Shayne said, "Thanks, Dick," and hung up. He whirled on Myrna and directed her tersely: "You'd better get out. Through the kitchen door and down the fire escape. Take your two glasses to the kitchen and close the door behind you. Key on a nail by the outside door."

Myrna jumped up. "What—"

"I don't know." Shayne heard the elevator stop down the hall on that floor. "Better if Gentry doesn't find you here. He's already suspicious. Go home and go to bed and be careful. Call me tomorrow."

CHAPTER THREE

Blackjack Persuasion



HAYNE breathed a sigh of relief when she went without demur. Most women would have argued and asked questions. He opened a drawer and thrust log-book, clipping and ticket stub in it. A loud knock sounded on the outer door

of his apartment and Will Gentry's voice called: "Shayne."

He darted a quick glance behind him and noted Myrna had closed the door as she went into the kitchen. He sauntered to the outer door and opened it, rubbed his chin with a show of surprise when he saw Chief Gentry and the tall figure of Mr. Guildford waiting in the hallway. He said, "It's a hell of a time to come visiting," and stepped aside to let them enter.

Will Gentry strode past him to the center table and stopped to look down on the bottle and two glasses suspiciously. He went to the bedroom door and opened it, stepped inside and turned on the light, then looked in the bathroom. Shayne grinned as Gentry doggedly opened the kitchen door and turned on that light.

The chief came back, shrugged his heavy shoulders and sat down heavily across the table from Shayne. "Where is she, Mike?"

"Who?"

"The Hastings girl."

"I told her she'd better go home and get some sleep. She was quite upset, you know. Seems she was rather fond of the old sea captain—though she'd known him only a couple of days," he added quickly.

"She isn't in her room. Hasn't been in all evening."

"How," asked Shayne, "did you know where to look?"

"I called Tim Rourke. He told me she was stopping at the Crestwood, but she's not in."

Shayne said: "You know how these New York dames are. Why come to me?"

"I hoped I'd find her here," Gentry admitted, "knowing how New York dames are, and knowing you."

Shayne said: "Sorry to disappoint you."

Mr. Guildford said: "May I?" He cleared his throat and looked at Gentry.

The chief nodded. "Go ahead."

"Knowing your reputation, Mr. Shayne," Guildford said flatly, "I suspect you withheld certain information tonight."

Shayne said: "That's illegal. Concealing murder evidence."

"To hell with that stuff," Gentry put in impatiently. "What did you and Miss Hastings find before we got there?"

"You know I wouldn't hold out on you, Will. Unless there were something in it for me. And who could possibly profit by the death of a poor old man like that? He looked to me as though he'd gone hungry for weeks."

"That's true," said Guildford helplessly. "I happen to know he was in dire straits. Our appointment tonight was to discuss a payment long overdue on his mortgage house."

"But the poor guy was obviously tortured," Gentry broke in. "Death resulted from shock due to his poor physical condition. Torture generally means extortion."

"Which makes us wonder if he harbored some secret worth money to someone," Guildford explained. "We found none of his private papers but we did find evidence that the house had been burgled."

"So you think I did it?" Shayne fumed.

"Wait a minute, Mike," Gentry soothed him. "You see, we found that the bed had been pulled back and there was a sort of hiding place exposed. Mr. Guildford suggested you might have discovered the cache and taken the captain's papers away to examine privately."

Shayne snarled: "The hell he did! What's his interest in it?"

"As Captain Samuels' attorney and now his executor, I have a natural interest in the affair," Guildford snapped.

"Come off it, Mike," Gentry said wearily. "If you'll tell me what you were doing there I won't be so sure you're holding out."

"I told you. Miss Hastings did."

"That doesn't wash, Mike. Rourke told me she didn't hit town till this afternoon. How could she have met Samuels and learned about the shipwreck story?"

"Ask her?"

"I can't find her. I'm asking you. Did you get any stuff from the bedroom?"

"I wasn't in the bedroom."

"But Miss Hastings was," Guildford reminded him triumphantly. "And I suggest *she* found his papers and looked through them while we were in the other room with you and the body. And I further suggest that was how she learned about the shipwreck and her agile mind framed the excuse she gave us for your presence there."

SHAYNE stood up and balled his bony hands into fists. "I suggest that you get out of that chair so I can knock you back into it."

"Lay off, Mike. You've got to admit it's good reasoning."

Shayne swung on Gentry angrily. "I don't admit anything. Is a two-bit shyster running your department now?"

Guildford said: "I resent that, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne laughed harshly. "You resent it?"

Gentry said doggedly: "I'm running my department but I don't mind listening to advice. Are you willing to swear you and Miss Hastings just dropped in on the dead man by accident?"

Shayne said: "Put me on the witness stand if I'm going to be cross-questioned."

Gentry compressed his lips. He started to say something, then tightened his lips and got up. He and Guildford went out.

Shayne stood by the table until the door closed behind them. Then he strode to the telephone and asked for the Crestwood Hotel.

He frowned across the room and tugged at his left earlobe while he waited. When the hotel answered, he asked for Miss Myrna Hastings. Without hesitation, the clerk said: "Miss Hastings is not in."

"How the hell do you know she isn't?"

Shayne growled. "You haven't rung her room?"

"But I saw her go out just a moment ago, sir," the clerk insisted.

Shayne told him: "You must be mistaken. I happen to know she just went to her room."

"That's quite true, sir. She came in and got her key not more than five minutes ago, but she came downstairs almost immediately with two gentlemen, and went out with them."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive, sir. I saw them cross the lobby from the elevator to the front door."

"Wait a minute," barked Shayne. "Did she go with them willingly?"

"Why, I certainly presumed so. She had her arms linked in theirs and I didn't notice anything wrong."

"Can you describe them?"

"No. I'm afraid I didn't notice—"

"Was one of them short and the other one tall?"

"Why, now that you mention it, I think so. Is something wrong? Do you think—"

Shayne hung up, went into his bedroom and got a short-barreled .38 which he dropped in his coat pocket. Then he went into the kitchen and tried the back door. Myrna had locked it behind her when she slipped out.

He turned out the kitchen light and strode across the living room, crammed his hat down on his bristly red hair and went out.



TEN minutes later Shayne parked in front of Henry Renaldo's tavern. He shouldered his way through the swinging doors and found half a dozen late tipplers still leaning on the bar. Joe was in the back with a mop bucket turning chairs up

over the tables, and the paunchy bartender was still on duty in front.

Shayne went up to the bar and said: "Give me a shot of cognac, Monet."

The bartender shook his head. "We got grape brandy—"

Shayne said: "Monterrey will do."

The bartender set a bottle and glass in front of the detective, keeping his eyes secretively low-lidded. Shayne poured a drink and lifted it to his nose. He shook his head angrily and said: "This stuff is grape brandy."

"Sure. Says so right on the bottle." The bartender's tone was placating.

Shayne shoved the glass away from him. "I'll have a talk with Henry."

"The boss ain't in," the bartender told him hastily.

"How about his two ginzos?"

"I dunno."

Shayne turned and went along the bar to the back. Joe pulled the mop bucket out of his way and turned his head to stare wonderingly at the set look on Shayne's face.

He knocked on the door of Renaldo's office and then tried the door. It opened into darkness. He found the light switch and stood on the threshold looking about the empty office. He strode to the rear door through which the two gunsels had entered earlier, and found it barred on the inside. It opened out directly onto the alley.

He relocked it and went out of the office, back to the bar. The bartender was lounging against the cash register. He said, 'I tol' you,' and then backed away in alarm when Shayne

bunched his hand in his coat pocket over the .38.

"Where," asked Shayne, "do Blackie and Lennie hang out?"

"I dunno. I swear to God I don't. I never seen 'em in here before tonight." He was frightened and he sounded truthful.

"Where will I find the boss?"

"Home, I guess."

"Where's home?"

The bartender hesitated. He pouched his lower lip between thumb and forefinger and said sullenly: "Mr. Renaldo don't like—"

Shayne said: "Give it to me."

The bartender wilted. He mumbled an address on West Sixtieth Street.

Shayne went out and got in his car. He started the motor and hesitated, with his big hands gripping the wheel. He got out and went back into the tavern. The bartender looked up with naked fear in his eyes and put down the telephone hastily.

Shayne said: "Don't do it, Fatty. If Renaldo's been tipped off when I get there, I'll come back and spill your guts all over the floor. The name is Shayne if you think I'm kidding."

He went out again and swung away from the curb. He drove north a dozen blocks and stopped in front of a sign on Miami Avenue that said, CHUNKY'S CHILI. It was crammed in between a pawnshop and a flophouse.

Shayne went in and said, "Hi, Chunky," to the big man picking his teeth behind the empty counter. The long, narrow room was empty save for the proprietor.

Chunky said, "Hi, Mike," without enthusiasm.

Shayne asked: "Any of the boys in back?"

"Guess so."

Shayne got out his wallet. He extracted a ten-dollar bill and folded it twice lengthwise. Chunky kept on picking his teeth. Shayne extended the bill toward him. "Blackie or Lennie in there?"

Chunky yawned. He took the bill and said: "Nope. Ain't seen either of 'em tonight."

"Working?"

"I wouldn't know. Gen'rally hang out back when they ain't."

Shayne nodded. He knew that. Chunky's chili joint was a front for a bookie establishment in the back that served as a sort of club-room for the better-known members of Miami's underworld. He asked: "Seen John Grossman around since he was paroled?"

Chunky took the frayed toothpick from his mouth and squinted at it. "A guy's on parole he don't hang out much with the old gang. Not if he's smart."

"Have you seen him around?" Shayne persisted.

Chunky put the toothpick back in his mouth and chewed on it placidly. Shayne grinned and got out his wallet again. Chunky watched

him fold another bill twice lengthwise. He took it and suggested: "Might ask Pug or Slim. They usta work for John, some."

"Are they in back?"

Chunky shook his head. "Went out 'bout an hour ago."

Shayne said: "Tell them I'm passing out folding money." He went out and climbed into his car, drove north to Sixtieth and turned west.

HENRY Renaldo's address was a modest one-story stucco house in the center of a block containing half a dozen such houses. It was the only one with lights showing through the front windows.

Shayne drove past it to the end of the block, swung around the corner and parked. He got out and walked back, went up the concrete walk lined with a trim hedge on both sides, and rang Renaldo's doorbell.

He got the gun out of his pocket while he waited.

He showed the weapon to Henry Renaldo when he opened the door. Renaldo was in his shirtsleeves with his vest hanging open. The cigar in his mouth looked like the same one he had been chewing on some hours previously. He blinked, wrinkled lids down over his eyes when he saw the gun in Shayne's hand, and backed away, lifting his hands, palms outward, and mumbling: "You don't need to point that at me."

Shayne followed him in and heeled the door shut. The living room was small and crowded with heavy overstuffed furniture. A gas log glowed in the small fireplace at one end. There was no one else in the room.

Shayne gestured with his gun and asked: "Where's Miss Hastings?"

Renaldo rolled up his wrinkled lids and looked at him stupidly. "Who?"

"The girl who left your place with me."

"I sure don't know anything about a girl," Renaldo told him earnestly. "Look here—"

Shayne's eyes were bright with a fierce light. He palmed the gun, took a step forward and hit Renaldo in the face. He staggered back with blood oozing from a cut lip.

Shayne said coldly: "Maybe that'll help your memory."

Renaldo took another backward step and sank down on the red divan. He got a handkerchief from his hip pocket and dabbed at his cut lip. He moaned: "Before God, Mike—"

Shayne rasped: "Where are your two gun-punks?"

"Blackie and Lennie?" Renaldo shook his head from side to side. "How should I know?"

"They grabbed Miss Hastings from her hotel half an hour ago."

"I don't know about that." Renaldo looked at the blood on his handkerchief and shuddered. "I haven't seen them for two hours."

"Didn't you have them tail me when I left your place?"

"What if I did? But I didn't tell them to grab any girl."

Shane narrowed his eyes. It sounded like the truth. He said: "I'll search this dump anyhow."

Renaldo got up slowly. There was a certain dignity in his posture as he objected: "This is my house. If you haven't got a search warrant—"

Shayne said: "I'm not the police." He turned toward a passageway leading to the rear of the house.

Renaldo moved in front of him. He folded his arms stubbornly. "My wife and kid are asleep back there."

"We'll take care of him, boss," Lennie's voice rapped out behind Shayne.

Renaldo's eyelids twitched and his eyes showed frantic terror. "I told you to stay in the kitchen, Lennie."

"To hell with that. Drop the gat, shamus," he rasped.

Shayne dropped the gun on the rug. He turned slowly and saw Lennie hunched forward and moving toward him from an open door. Blackie sauntered through the door after him.

Lennie had a heavy automatic in his right hand and his eyes glittered. His face was twisted and tiny bubbles of saliva oozed out between his tight lips. He was coked to the gills and as dangerous as a maddened snake. He glided soundlessly across the rug, and the muzzle of his .45 was in line with Shayne's belly.

Renaldo said: "Wait, Lennie. We won't want any trouble here."

Lennie's hot eyes twitched toward the tavern proprietor. "He come here lookin' for trouble, didn't he? By the sweet Jesus—"

"Hold it, Len," Blackie said coolly from behind him. "Stay far enough back so's you can blast him if he starts anything." He moved around Lennie on the balls of his feet, one hand swinging his blackjack in a short, lazy arc.



HAYNE jerked his head back and it struck him on the side of the neck just above the collarbone. It was a paralyzing blow and he hit the floor before he knew he was falling. He heard Renaldo cry out: "Watch it, Blackie. Keep him so he can talk. If he croaked the old man he's maybe got some info."

Blackie said: "Sure. He'll talk." He drew back his foot and kicked Shayne in the face.

The detective saw the kick coming but he couldn't move to avoid it. He closed his eyes

and lay inert, pushing with his tongue at two loosened teeth.

Blackie put his heel on the side of his face and twisted it viciously with a downward thrust. It tore flesh from his cheekbone and the pain brought knots in his belly muscles. It also drove away the paralysis that had numbed him.

He sat up with blood streaming from his face and pulled his lips away from his teeth in a wolfish grin.

He asked thickly: "Didn't you bring your pliers along this time, Blackie? I've got ten fingernails to work on."

Blackie hit him viciously with the blackjack again.

Shayne toppled over and he heard Lennie laughing thinly somewhere off in the back-ground.

Somebody got a pan of cold water and dumped it in his face. He lay quiescent and listened to Renaldo and Blackie arguing fiercely about him. Renaldo gave Blackie hell for knocking Shayne out so he couldn't possibly talk if he wanted to, and Blackie angrily reminded him of Shayne's reputation for toughness. Lennie put in an aggrieved voice now and then, begging for permission to finish him off.

It was all pretty foggy, but Shayne didn't hear any of them mention the girl. He gathered that they had followed him from the tavern to the little house on Eighteenth and had seen the police come. If they had followed him back to his hotel and tailed Myrna from her fire escape exit, it was evident that they were keeping that fact from Renaldo for reasons of their own.

"We gotta get him out of here," Renaldo said at last. "You boys've messed hell out of this whole thing and the only way I see now is to finish him off."

"He pushed his face into it," Blackie muttered.

"Sure he did," Lennie said eagerly. "Don't worry about him none, boss."

"We'll take him out through the kitchen to our car." Blackie was placating now. They withdrew a short distance and began talking further together in low voices. Shayne kept his eyes closed and gathered together the remnants of his strength.

They came back after a time and he heard Lennie saying happily: "Once in the heart to make sure is the best way. We don't wanna muff this."

Shayne saw the glitter of a knife in Lennie's hand as he uncoiled and rose from the floor. He saw Blackie's mouth drop open just before he hit him in the belly with his shoulder. They went to the floor together and Shayne kept rolling toward the kitchen door. He stumbled through it just as Lennie's gun roared in the living room behind him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bottled Death



WITH a rush, Shayne jerked the back door open, staggered out into the night. He leaned against the side of the house and hoped Lennie or Blackie would follow him out. A light came on in the house next door and an irate voice bel-
lowed: "What's going on over there? Was that a shot?"

Shayne tried to call back but his throat muscles were queerly knotted and he couldn't utter a sound.

He shambled down the alley to the street where he had left his car, and got in. He started the motor and drove away, made a circle back to Miami Avenue and drove to his apartment hotel. He didn't feel like tackling the side stairway, so he went in through the lobby toward the elevator.

The clerk hurried out from behind the desk when he saw the detective's condition. He exclaimed: "Good God, Mr. Shayne! What happened? . . . Here. Lean on me."

Shayne put his arm around the clerk's shoulders. He croaked: "It's O.K., Dick. More blood than anything else."

Dick helped him into the elevator and rode up to his room with him. Shayne was an old and privileged client in the apartment hotel and the clerk had seen him in bad shape before, but never quite in this condition. He took Shayne's keyring and unlocked the door, then stared around in amazement when he turned on the light.

"Good Lord!" he ejaculated. "Did the fight start here in your room, Mr. Shayne?"

Shayne looked around the room with bleary eyes that refused to focus on any object. Things seemed to be in a sort of jumble but he didn't see why the clerk was so excited. He pushed past him toward the center table and stared down stupidly at the drawer that was pulled all the way out. He knew he had left it closed—with the things he and Myrna had brought from Captain Samuels' house. His fingers closed around the neck of the brandy bottle still sitting where he had left it, and he used both hands getting it up to his mouth. A long pull at it relaxed his throat muscles and cleared the film away from his eyes. He looked around the disordered room and then at the clerk.

"Have I had any visitors since I went out, Dick?"

"Just that tall man with Chief Gentry—he came back right after you went out. He didn't stop at the desk, but went straight up. He came back almost immediately and went on

out and I thought he'd come back hoping to catch you and found you'd already left."

Shayne took another slow drink of cognac. It brought the warmth of life back to him. "Was he up here long enough to do this?" He waved his hand around the room.

Dick wrinkled his forehead. "I don't think so, but I wouldn't say for sure. You know how it is. It's hard to judge time. It didn't seem as if he were up here more than a few minutes."

Shayne nodded. He said, "Thanks for coming up with me," in a tone of dismissal. He stood with the bottle in his hands until Dick went out and closed the door. Then he held it to his lips and drained it. He went out to the kitchen and set the empty bottle carefully on the sink beside the two glasses Myrna had put there on her way out. He tried the back door and found it unlocked.

He remembered it had been locked and Myrna Hastings had had the key when he went away a little while before.

He went into the bedroom and stripped off his clothes, turned water into the tub as hot as his hand could stand it. His face was pretty much of a mess with both his lips puffed and bluish, lacerated flesh on his cheekbone clotted with blood, and streaks of dried blood running down his chin.

He grimaced at his reflection in the mirror, cautiously testing the two teeth loosened by contact with the toe of Blackie's shoe. They were wobbly but would probably grow back solid if left alone. All in all he was in pretty good shape, considering the way he'd been knocked around.

He got a soft washcloth steaming hot and held it gently against his face while he waited for the tub to fill, loosened the dried blood and cleaned it away carefully.

When he sank into the hot water to soak his long frame, he continued the ministrations with the washcloth. When he got out of the tub he swabbed his face freely with peroxide, then dusted it with antiseptic powder and plastered a bandage over the worst cut on his cheek. He vigorously toweled himself and put on clean clothes, then went to a wall cabinet in the living room and got out a bottle of Portuguese brandy guaranteed to be at least five years old.

During all this time he had methodically gone about the things he had to do, consciously refraining from thinking. He had a factual mind and he liked to use it in an orderly fashion.

He filled the wine glass on the table and got a fresh tumbler of ice water from the kitchen. He sank into a chair and lit a cigarette, letting it droop from an uninjured corner of his mouth, took a sip of brandy and began slowly and unhurriedly to go over the events of the evening, testing each incident as he came to it in the light of later occurrences.

IT STARTED with his entering Renaldo's saloon expecting to meet Timothy Rourke. Myrna Hastings had been there instead. She accosted him, and he had only her word for it that she was what she claimed to be and had been sent to meet him by Rourke. Still, Gentry had phoned Rourke for her address, and at the captain's house she had mentioned that Rourke had introduced her to Will Gentry that afternoon.

Shayne went on from his meeting with Myrna. He carefully studied the scene in Renaldo's office, then jumped to Captain Samuels' home on the bayfront. In secreting herself in the back of his car, slipping into the house without his knowledge, coming to his aid while Gentry questioned him, and finally in composedly stealing the log-book which she claimed to have found in a hiding place that another searcher had overlooked, had Myrna Hastings stepped out of character?

It was difficult to say. No one could guess what a young feature writer from New York was likely to do. She had left his apartment willingly enough and had gone directly to her room as he had told her to. Then she had been immediately escorted away from the hotel by two men vaguely described by the clerk as short and tall. Had she gone willingly, or been coerced? He had immediately suspected Blackie and Lennie of her abduction, but after the interview with them at Renaldo's house he was inclined to believe they might not be responsible. It didn't quite add up. Now that he was thinking along logical lines, he realized they would have to have trailed him back to his hotel and somehow learned of her departure via the fire escape in order to have followed her to the Crestwood. He saw it was necessary to determine whether the two men who had accompanied her out had been there waiting for her return or had followed her in and up to her room. If they had been waiting, it could not have been Blackie and Lennie—unless Myrna were involved in some way he knew nothing about. And that left the whole business of the missing murder clues up in the air. When she left the room they had been lying on the table. If she had come back to get them, she wouldn't have known to look in the drawer. She might have searched the rest of the room first. She didn't, in fact, know the table had a drawer.

He switched his thoughts from Myrna to Guildford. Had he told the truth about waiting for the captain to return? Or, granting that Blackie and Lennie had told Renaldo the truth about their venture, was Guildford the killer whom they had seen drive away after being closeted with the captain for half an hour? If Guildford were the killer, why had he drawn attention to himself by calling Will Gentry? It would have been safer and more

natural to say nothing about his visit and leave the body to be discovered by chance.

What about the paroled convict, John Grossman? This seemed to Shayne the crux of the affair. He was certainly mixed up in the possession of smuggled cognac somehow. Had Captain Samuels worked with or for him in prohibition days? Did both men have knowledge of a cache of illicit cognac undisposed of at the time of Grossman's arrest? If so, why had Captain Samuels waited fourteen years to put a case of it on the market—waited until he was weak from malnutrition? It seemed likely that the captain couldn't get his hands on it while Grossman was in prison, since the first case appeared soon after Grossman had supposedly returned to Miami.

But it seemed definitely unlikely that John Grossman was in on the deal with Renaldo. The ridiculous price accepted by the starving captain showed that it must have been his own idea. Grossman was smart enough to learn what the stuff was worth in today's market. It looked more as though the captain had put over a personal deal—one that for some reason he had been unable to put over while Grossman was in prison, one that Grossman might have resented even to the point of murder.

Shayne finished his glass of brandy and his musings at the same time. He needed more facts before he could do more than ask himself a bunch of unanswerable questions.

He heaved himself up from his chair and gritted his teeth against a wave of dizziness. The loose teeth pained sharply when he gritted them, and that dispelled the dizziness. He had lost his hat in the fracas at Renaldo's, so he went out bareheaded, thinking the cool night air would feel good on his head.

Dick frowned and shook his head despairingly when he crossed the lobby, but Shayne pushed his swollen lips into the semblance of a grin and waved a derisive hand at the clerk. He got in his car and drove to Second Avenue.



HE Crestwood was a small, moderately-priced hotel, and the clerk was a thin-chested 4-F who tried to conceal his hostile amazement when Shayne showed his battered face at the desk. He shook his head firmly and began: "I'm afraid. . ."

But Shayne reassured him by saying: "I don't want a room, Bud." He showed his badge and went on: "About a guest of yours, Miss Hastings."

"Oh yes. Room 305. I'm afraid she isn't in. There's been—"

"I'm the guy who telephoned you about an

hour ago. Can you describe the men she went out with?"

"I'm afraid I can't. You see, I didn't notice their faces."

"Could one of them have been holding a gun on her?" Shayne demanded harshly.

The clerk began to tremble. "I really don't know. I— Do you think something's happened to her?"

"Do you know if they came in after she got her key and went up, or whether they were up there waiting?"

"I really don't know. I didn't see them come in after she got her key but I'm afraid I can't swear whether they were upstairs waiting for her or not."

Shayne nodded and went over to the elevator. There was only one elevator in the hotel and it was manned by a young Negro boy who stood very stiff and straight but couldn't keep his eyes from rolling around toward Shayne's bruised face.

Shayne stopped outside the elevator and asked: "Do you know the girl in Room 305?"

"Yassuh. I know the one you mean. Checked in jes' today."

"Do you remember her coming in late tonight and then going out again almost immediately?"

"Yassuh. That's what she did. Yassuh, I 'member."

Shayne got out his wallet. "Try to remember exactly what happened. Did you bring her down in the elevator with two men?"

The boy's eyes rolled covetously toward the five-dollar bill Shayne was extracting. "Yassuh. I sho did. Right after I'd done taken her upstairs."

"How long afterward?" Shayne prompted. "Did you make many trips in between?"

"Nosuh. Not none. I 'member how s'prised I was when I stopped at the third floor on the way down an' found her waitin' with them two gen'lemen 'cause I'd jes' dropped her off at three on my way up."

"Are you sure of that? You didn't take them up after you took her up?"

"Nosuh. How could I when I'd done taken 'em up prev'ous?"

"How much previous?"

"Ten minutes, I reckon."

"Did you notice anything peculiar about the way any of them acted when they came down together?"

"How d'yuh mean, peculiar?"

Shayne said: "I'm trying to find out whether she wanted to come down with them or whether they made her come."

The Negro boy chuckled. "I reckon she liked comin' all right. She was sho all hugged up to one of 'em. The skinny one, that was."

"Can you describe them?"

"Nosuh. Not much. One was skinny an'

t'other weren't. I reckon I didn't notice no more."

Shayne said: "You've earned this." The bill exchanged hands and he went out. He had learned something but he didn't care much for it.

His next stop was at the Miami News tower on Biscayne Boulevard. An afternoon paper, the early hours of the morning were the busiest ones for the staff, and Shayne found Tim Rourke in one corner of the smoke-hazed city room pounding out copy with one rubber-tipped forefinger.

The reporter looked up at Shayne with a startled oath and then laughed raucously and gleefully. "I'm not the beauty contest editor. You go down that hall—"

"And you," said Shayne bitterly, "can go to hell."

"Michael!" Rourke drawled the name disapprovingly. "Such language in a newspaper office. Did he get his littlum face scratched?"

"It's all your damned fault for sicking that female onto me."

"My fault? My God, don't tell me a female did that to you!"

"How well do you know Myrna Hastings?" Shayne demanded.

"Not as well as I'd like to. Or, is she that sort of girl? Maybe I don't want to—"

Shayne said wearily: "Cut it, Tim. I'm up to my neck in murder and God knows what-all. What do you know about the gal?"

"Not much." Rourke instantly sobered. "She brought a note from a friend of mine on the Telegram. I took her around and introduced her to a few places this afternoon. She found you at Renaldo's, huh?"

"She found me all right," Shayne said grimly.

"What's doing, Mike? I wondered when Will Gentry called me about her tonight, but—"

"Do you know if she's known in Miami?"

"I don't think so. Said it was her first trip."

"Has anyone else called you for her address, Tim?"

"Only Gentry. Is it a story, Mike?"

Shayne's gray eyes brooded across the room for a long moment. He and the reporter had been friends for a long time and he had given Rourke a lot of headlines in the past. He indicated the typewriter and asked: "Busy on something?"

"Nothing I can't give the go-by."

Shayne said: "I could use some help in your morgue."

ROURKE led the way back to a large filing room guarded by an elderly woman rocking silently while she knitted. "I'm interested in John Grossman," Shayne told him.

"The bootleg king?" Rourke stopped between a double row of filing cases. "He's back in town on parole."

"When did he get back?"

"Three or four days ago. I tried to interview him but he had nothing to say for publication. All he wanted was to go down to his lodge on the Keys and soak up some Florida sunshine."

Shayne said: "I want to go back to his arrest by the Federals—June, 1930."

"We've got a private file on him. It won't be hard to find it." Rourke checked a card index and went to a file at the back of the room. He brought back a bulging manila envelope and emptied it out in front of Shayne. He started pawing through it, muttering: "Here's the trial. It was a honey. With Leland and Parker representing him and not missing a legal trick. And here you are—June 17, 1930. Federal agents nabbed him at Homestead on his way in from the lodge." He spread out a large clipping.

"I remember it now," he chuckled. "They had the income tax case all set but had been holding off hoping they could hang a real charge on him. They thought he used his lodge to receive contraband shipments from Cuba and they raided it several times but never found any evidence. This time they thought they had him for sure, with a red-hot tip that he was expecting a boatload of French stuff, and they kept a revenue cutter patrolling that section of coastline day and night for a week. Here's the story on that." He turned back to a clipping dated June 16, captioned, CUTTER SINKS BOOTLEG CARGO.

"I covered that story. I rode the cutter three nights and nothing happened, and after I was pulled off, on the night of the 15th, they encountered a motor craft creeping along without lights just off the inlet leading to Grossman's lodge. They tried to make a run for the open sea, and bingo! the revenue boat cut loose with everything she had. There was a heavy sea running, the aftermath of a hurricane that blew hell out of things the day before, and they never found a trace of the boat, cargo, or crew. After that fiasco they gave up and decided they might as well take Grossman on the income tax charge."

"Wait a minute," Shayne said. "How bad was that hurricane?"

"Plenty bad. That's really the reason I missed the fun. The cutter had to run for anchorage on the 13th, and she couldn't put out again until the 15th on account of the storm."

"Then that strip of coast wasn't being patrolled the two nights before the sinking," Shayne mused.

"Nope. Except by the elements."

"Then that rum-runner might have been slipping out after discharging cargo, instead of being headed in."

Rourke frowned at the red-headed detective. "If the captain was crazy enough to try and hit that inlet while the hurricane was blowing everything to hell."

Shayne said gravely: "I think I know the

captain who was crazy enough to do just that—and succeeded.”

Rourke studied him quizzically. “You’ve got something up your sleeve.”

Shayne nodded. “It adds up. Tim, I’m willing to bet there was a boatload of 1926 Monet unloaded at Grossman’s lodge while the hurricane was raging. And it’s still there some place. Grossman was arrested on the 17th, before he had a chance to get rid of any of it and he left it there while he was doing time in Atlanta.”

Timothy Rourke whistled shrilly. “It’d be worth as much now as it was during prohibition.”

“More, with the country full of people earning more money than ever before in their lives.”

“If your hunch is right. . .”

“It has to be right. How long do you think a man could stay alive floating around the ocean in a life preserver?”

“Couple of days at the most.”

“That’s my hunch, too. From the 15th to the 17th might not be impossible. But the hurricane struck on the 13th and the 14th. Take a look at your front page for June 17 and you’ll see what I mean.”

Rourke hurriedly brought out the *News* for June 17. On the front page, next to the story of Grossman’s arrest was the story of the sensational rescue of Captain Samuels which Shayne had already read in his apartment. Rourke put his finger on the picture and exclaimed: “I remember that now. I interviewed the captain and thought it miraculous he had stayed alive that long. Captain Thomas Anthony Samuels. Why damn it, Mike, he’s the old coot who was found murdered tonight.”

Shayne nodded soberly. “After selling a case of Monet for a hundred bucks earlier in the evening.”

“He was the only survivor of his ship,” Rourke recalled excitedly. “Then he and Grossman must have been the only ones who knew the stuff was out there.”

“And now Grossman is the only one left,” Shayne said flatly. “Keep this stuff under your hat, Tim. When it’s ready to break it’ll be your baby.” He turned and hurried out.

CHAPTER FIVE

Murder Setting



HAYNE didn’t reach his apartment again until after three. He took a nightcap and went to bed, fell immediately into deep and dreamless sleep.

The ringing of his telephone awakened him. He started to yawn and pain

clawed at his facial muscles. He got into a

bathrobe and lurched to the telephone. It was a little after eight o’clock.

He lifted the receiver and said: “Shayne.”

A thick voice replied: “This is John Grossman.”

Shayne said: “I expected you to call sooner.”

There was a brief silence as though his caller were taken aback by his reply. Then: “Well, I’m calling you now.”

Shayne said: “That’s quite evident.”

“You’re hornin’ in on things that don’t concern you.”

“Cognac always concerns me.”

“I’m wondering how much you found out from the captain before he died last night,” Grossman went on.

Shayne said: “Nuts. You killed him and you know exactly how much talking he didn’t do.”

“You can’t prove I was near his place last night,” he was told gruffly.

“I think I can. If you just called up to play ring-around-the-rosy, we’re both wasting our time.”

“I’ve been wondering how much real information you’ve got.”

“I knew that would worry you,” Shayne said impatiently. “And since you know Samuels was dead before I reached him, the source of information you’re worried about is the log-book. Let’s talk straight.”

“Why should I worry about the log-book? I’ve got it now.”

“I know you have. But you don’t know how much I read about the *Mermaid’s* last trip before you got it.”

“The girl says you didn’t read it any.”

Shayne laughed harshly. “You’d like to believe her, wouldn’t you?”

“All right.” The voice became resigned. “Maybe you did read more than she says. How about a deal?”

“What kind of deal?”

“You’re pretty crazy about Monet, aren’t you?”

“Plenty.”

“How does five cases sound? Delivered to your apartment tonight.”

Shayne said: “It sounds like a joke. And a poor one.”

“You’ll take it and keep your mouth shut if you’re smart.”

Shayne said disgustedly: “You’re rolling me in the aisle.” He hung up and padded across the room in his bare feet to the table where he poured out a good morning slug of Portuguese brandy. The telephone began ringing again. He drank some of the brandy and grimaced, then lit a cigarette and went back to the phone, carrying the glass. He lifted the receiver and asked curtly: “Got any more jokes?”

The same voice answered plaintively: “What do you want?”

Shayne asked: "Why should I deal with you at all? I've got everything I need with Samuels' description of where the stuff is hidden."

"What can you do with it?" the murderer argued.

"The Internal Revenue boys could use my dope."

"And cut yourself out? Not if I know you."

"All right," Shayne said irritably. "You have to cut me in and you know it. Fifty-fifty."

"Come out and we'll talk it over."

"Where?"

"My lodge on the Keys. First dirt road to the south after you pass Homestead, and the next to your right after two miles."

Shayne said: "I know where it is."

"I'll expect you about ten o'clock."

Shayne said: "Make it eleven. I've got to get some breakfast."

"Eleven it is." A click broke the connection.

He dressed swiftly, jammed a wide-brimmed Panama down over his face and went out. He hesitated a moment and then went back in. He flipped the pages of the telephone directory until he found the number of Renaldo's tavern, lifted the receiver and got a brisk, "Good morning," from a masculine voice at the switchboard downstairs. A frown knitted his forehead, and instead of asking for Renaldo's number, he said: "Do you have the time?"

He was told: "It is eight twenty-two."

In the lobby, Shayne went across to the desk and leaned one elbow on it. He simulated astonishment and asked the day clerk: "Where's Mabel today?"

The clerk glanced around at the brown-suited, middle-aged man alertly handling the switchboard and said: "Mabel was sick and the telephone company sent us a substitute."

Shayne went out, got in his car and drove

to a drugstore on Flagler. He called Renaldo's number, and said briskly: "Mike Shayne."

"Mike?" Renaldo sounded relieved. "You're all right? God, I'm sorry about—"

Shayne laughed softly. "I'm O.K. Your boys could be a little more gentle but I feel I owe them something for last night. I've got a line on that stuff you were after."

"Yeah? Well I don't know. . ."

"I need some help to handle it," Shayne went on briskly. "I figure Blackie and Lennie are just the boys—after seeing them in action."

"I don't know," Renaldo said again, more doubtfully.

"This is business," Shayne said sharply. "Big business for you and me both. Have them meet me at your place about nine thirty."

HE HUNG up and drove out to a filling station on the corner of Eighteenth and Biscayne. He said, "Ten gallons," to the youth who hurried out.

He strolled around to the back of his car and asked: "Were you on duty last night?"

"Until I closed up at ten. Just missed the excitement I guess."

"You mean the murder?"

"Yeah. The old ship captain who lives down the street. And I was talking about the old coot just a little before that, too."

"Who with?"

"A lawyer fellow who'd been down to see him and got a flat just as he was coming back."

"What time was that?" asked Shayne.

"Pretty near ten. I closed up right after I finished with his tire. If that's all . . ." He took the bill Shayne offered him.

The detective swung away from the filling station and back south of the boulevard. He



If you'd married Edith, no one could blame you for sneaking out, like Wes, for a peaceful beer, even though it meant hell-a-mile when you sneaked back again. . . . But the kind of hell Wes found when he had—

"Come Home to the Corpse"

—was something different from anything he'd known before, for Edith proved to be infinitely more harmful and vicious dead than alive! This G. T. Fleming-Roberts novel will ice your spine from the word go!

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DETECTIVE TALES

stopped on First Street east of Miami Avenue and went into the lobby of an office building mostly occupied by lawyers and insurance men. He stopped to scan the building directory, then stepped into an elevator and said: "Six."

He got off on the sixth floor and went down the corridor to a door chastely lettered, LEROY P. GUILDFORD-ATTORNEY-AT-LAW.

There was a small, neat reception room, and a tight-mouthed, middle-aged woman got up from a desk in the rear and came forward when Shayne entered. Her hair was pulled back from her face and tied in a tight knot at the back of her head. She wore rimless glasses and low-heeled shoes, and looked primly respectable and quite efficient.

She shook her head when the detective asked for Mr. Guildford. "He hasn't come in yet. He seldom gets down before ten."

Shayne said: "Perhaps you can tell me a few things. I'm from the police." He gave her a glimpse of his private badge.

She said: "From the police?" Her thin lips tightened. "I'm sure I don't know why you're here." Her gaze was fixed disapprovingly on his battered face.

He said easily: "It's about one of his clients who was murdered last night. Mr. Guildford gave us some help but there are a few details to be filled in."

"Oh, yes. You must mean poor Captain Samuels, of course. I know Mr. Guildford must feel terribly about it. Such an old client. So alone and helpless."

"Did you know him?"

"Only through seeing him here at the office. Mr. Guildford was trying to save his property but it seemed hopeless."

"In what particular capacity did he need a lawyer?"

"It wasn't much," she said vaguely. "He was one of Mr. Guildford's first clients when he opened up this office after resigning his position with the firm of Leland and Parker. There was something about the collection of insurance on a ship that had been lost at sea, and later Mr. Guildford handled the purchase of a property where Captain Samuels later built his little home."

"Do you know whether Guildford saw much of him lately?"

"Not a great deal. There was some difficulty about the mortgage and Mr. Guildford was trying to save him from foreclosure. He pitied the old man, you see, but there was little he could do."

"And this appointment last night. Do you know anything about that?"

"Oh, yes. I took the message early yesterday morning. Captain Samuels explicitly asked him to come at nine last night, promising to make a cash payment on the mortgage. I remember Mr. Guildford seemed so relieved

when he received the message and he didn't seem to mind the unusual hour."

Shayne thanked her and told her she had been of great assistance. He started out, but turned back. "By the way, is Guildford generally in his office throughout the day?"

"Yes. Except when he's in court, of course."

"Was he in court last Tuesday?"

"Tuesday? I'm sure he wasn't."

"That's queer. I tried to phone him twice during the day and he was out both times."

She frowned uncertainly and then her face cleared. "Tuesday! Of course. How stupid of me. He was out all day with a client."

Shayne lifted his hat and went out. He drove north on Miami Avenue to Chunky's place and went in. A couple of men were seated halfway down the counter. Shayne took the stool by the cash register, and Chunky drifted up to him after a few moments. He leaned his elbows on the counter, carefully selected a toothpick from a bowl in front of Shayne and began picking at his teeth. He murmured: "Looks like someone prettied you up las' night."

Shayne grinned. "Some of the boys got playful. Look. I'm still hunting a line on John Grossman. Pug or Slim been in?"

Chunky shook his head. "Ain't seen 'em. Grossman usta have a fishin' place south of Homestead."

"Think he went there after he was paroled?"

"Good place to hole up," Chunky murmured. "I know he stayed in town just one night." He took out the toothpick and yawned.

Shayne got up and went out, leaving a dollar at the place where he had been sitting. There was a public telephone in the cheap hotel next door. He called Timothy Rourke's home number and waited patiently until the ringing awoke the reporter. He said: "There's about to be a Caesarian operation."

Rourke gurgled sleepily: "What the hell?"

"On that baby we were talking about in your morgue this morning."

"That you, Mike?"

"Doctor Shayne. Obstetrics specialist."

"Hey! Is it due to break?"

"It's coming to a head fast. Get dressed and hunt up Will Gentry if you want some headlines. Don't, for Christ's sake, tell him I tipped you, but stick to him like a leech." Shayne hung up and drove to Renaldo's saloon.



LACKIE jumped up nervously from his seat beside Renaldo's desk when Shayne pushed the door open. He sucked in his breath and stared with bulging eyes at the result of his work on the detective's face, while his hand instinctively went to his hip pocket.

Behind him, Lennie leaned against the wall

with his hand in his coat pocket. Lennie's features were lax and his eyes were filmed like a dead man's. The left side of his pallid face twitched uncontrollably as Shayne looked at him.

Seated behind the desk, chewing savagely on a cigar, Henry Renaldo looked fearfully from the boys to Shayne. He said: "I don't know what you're up to, Mike. The boys didn't much like the idea. . ."

Shayne closed the door and laughed heartily. He said: "Hell, there's no hard feelings. I'm still alive and kicking."

Blackie drew in another deep breath. He essayed a nervous smile. "We thought maybe you was sore."

Shayne said gently: "You got a pretty heavy foot, Blackie."

"Yeah." Blackie hung his head like a small boy being reprimanded. "But you come bustin' in with a gun an', Jeez! what'd you expect?"

"That was my mistake," Shayne admitted. "I always run into trouble when I pack a rod. That's why I'm clean now." He lifted his arms away from his sides. "Want to shake me down?"

"That's all right." Renaldo laughed with false heartiness. "No harm done, I guess. The boys'll forget it if you will."

"Whatcha want with us?" Lennie demanded thinly.

Shayne said bluntly: "I need help. I've run into something too big for me to handle, and after seeing you guys in action last night I think you're the ones I need."

"That's white of you," Blackie mumbled. "I never hold a grudge if it'll cost me money," Shayne said briskly. "Here's the lay." He spoke directly to Renaldo. "I can put my hands on plenty of French cognac. Same as the case you bought last night. And this won't cost us a hundred a case. It won't cost us anything if we play it right."

Renaldo licked his lips. "So the old captain did talk before he died last night?"

"Not to me. I got onto it from another angle. Are you interested?"

"Why are you cutting us in?" Renaldo protested. "Sounds like some kind of come-on to me."

"I need help," Shayne said smoothly. "There's another mugg in my way and he's got a couple of torpedos gunning for me. I need a couple of lads like Blackie and Lennie to handle that angle. And after that's cleared up, I still need somebody with the right connections like you, Renaldo. I haven't any set-up for handling sales. You know all the angles from 'way back. And since you put me onto it in the first place I thought you might as well have part of the gravy. Hell, there's plenty for all of us," he added generously. "A whole ship-load of that same stuff."

"Sounds all right," Renaldo admitted cautiously.

"I'm the only one standing in this other guy's way," Shayne explained. "So he plans to put me on the spot. I've got a date to meet him out in the country this morning, and I know he'll have a couple of quick-trigger boys on hand to blast me out of the picture." He turned to Blackie. "That's where you and Lennie come in. I'm not handing you anything on a platter. This is hot, and if you're scared of it say so and I'll find someone else."

Blackie grunted contemptuously. "Lennie an' me can take care of ourselves, I reckon."

"That's what I thought," Shayne grinned, "after last night. Both of you ironed?"

"Sure. When do we start?"

"Well, that's it," Shayne told Renaldo. "You sit tight until the shooting's over. If things work out right we'll do a four-way split and there should be plenty of grands to go around. I'm guessing at five hundred cases but there may be more," he ended casually.

Renaldo took out his cigar and wet his lips. "Sounds plenty good to me. You boys willing to go along?"

Both of them nodded.

Shayne said briskly: "We'd better get started. I'm due south of Homestead at eleven o'clock." He led the way out to his car and opened the back door. "Maybe both of you will feel better if you ride in back where you can keep an eye on me."

"We ain't worryin' none about you," Blackie assured him, but they both got in the back while Shayne settled himself under the wheel.

IN THE rear-view mirror he could see the pair conferring together earnestly in the back. Both sides of Lennie's face were getting the twitches and his hands trembled violently as he lit a cigarette. He took only a couple of drags on it, then screwed up his face in disgust and threw it out.

Shayne turned slightly and observed sympathetically to Blackie: "Your pal doesn't seem to feel so hot this morning."

"He's all right," Blackie muttered. "Sorta got the shakes is all."

Shayne said: "He'd better get over them before the shooting starts."

Lennie caught Blackie's arm and whispered something in his ear, and Blackie cleared his throat and admitted uneasily: "Tell you what. He could use somethin' to steady him all right. You know."

Shayne said: "Sure, I know. Any place around here he could pick up a bindle?"

"Sure thing," Lennie said, violently eager. "Couple of blocks ahead. If I had two bucks."

Shayne drove on two blocks and then pulled up to the curb. He passed four one-dollar bills back to Lennie and suggested: "Get two

bindles, why don't you? One to pick you up now and the other for just before the fun starts."

Lennie grabbed the money and scrambled out of the car. He hurried up the street and darted into a stairway entrance.

Blackie laughed indulgently as he watched him disappear. "You hadn't oughta give him the price of two bindles," he reproved Shayne. "He'll be plenty high in an hour from now on one. Another one on top of it will pull him tight as a fiddle string. Like he was last night," he added darkly.

Shayne said: "I want him in shape to throw lead fast. Those boys who'll be waiting for me may not waste much time getting acquainted." He lit a cigarette and slouched back in the seat.

Lennie came trotting back in about five minutes. His pinched face was alive and eager, and his eyes glowed like hot coals. He slid in beside Blackie and breathed exultantly: "Le's get goin'. Jeez, is my trigger finger itchin'!"

Shayne drove swiftly south on Flagler past Coral Gables and on to the village of South Miami, then along the Key West highway through the rich truck-farming section with its acres of tomatoes and bean-fields stretching in every direction as far as the eye could see.

By the time they reached the sleepy village of Homestead with its quiet, tree-shadowed streets and its air of serene dignity, he began to feel as though he were the one who had sniffed a bindle instead of Lennie. There was a driving, demanding tension within him. It was always this way when he played a hunch through to the finish. He had planned the best he could and it was up to the gods now. He couldn't turn back. He didn't want to, of course. The approach of personal danger keyed him up to a high pitch, and he exulted in the gamble he was taking. Things like this were what made life worth living to Michael Shayne.

He drove decorously through Homestead and looked at his watch. It was a quarter to eleven. He stopped at a filling station on the outskirts of the village where the first dirt road turned off the paved highway to the left. He told Blackie and Lennie, "I'll be just a minute," and swung out of the car to speak to a smiling old man in faded overalls and a wide straw hat.

"Does the bus stop here, Pop?"

"Sometimes it do. Yep. If there's passengers to get on or off. 'Tain't a reg'lar stop."

"How about yesterday? Any passengers stop here?"

"Yestidy? Yep. The old sailor feller got off here to go a-fishin'." The old man chuckled. "Right nice old feller, but seemed like he was turned around, sort of. Didn't know how far

'twas to the Keys. Had him a suitcase, too, full of fishin' tackle, I reckon. Him an' I made a deal to rent my tin Lizzie for the day and he drove off fishin' spry as you please. No luck though. Didn't have nary a fish when he come back."

Shayne thanked him and went back to his car. That was the last definite link. He didn't need it, but it was always good to have added confirmation. He wouldn't have bothered to stop if he hadn't had a few minutes to spare.

He got in and turned down the dirt road running straight and level between a wasteland covered with tall Australian pines on either side.

"This is it," he told the boys in the back seat calmly. "Couple of miles to where I'm supposed to meet these birds, but they might be hiding out along the road waiting for me. You'd both better get down in the back where you can't be seen."

"We won't be no good to you that way," Blackie protested, "if they're hid out along the road to pick you off."

"They'll just pick all three of us off if you guys are in sight, too," Shayne argued reasonably. "I don't think they'll try anything till we get there, and I want them to think I came alone so they'll be off guard. Get down and stay down until the shooting starts or until I yell or give you some signal. Then come out like a couple of firecrackers."

The two gunsels got down in the back. Shayne drove along at a moderate pace, watching his speedometer. It was lonely and quiet on this desolate road leading to the coast. There were no habitations, and no other cars on the road. It was a perfect setting for murder.

CHAPTER SIX

Last Round on the House



NARROWER and less-used road turned off to the right at the end of exactly two miles. A wooden arrow that had once been painted white pointed west, and dingy black letters said, LODGE.

Shayne turned westward and slowed his car still more as it bumped along the uneven ruts. Sunlight lay hot and white on the narrow lane between tall pines, and the smell of the sea told him he was approaching close to one of the salt water inlets.

The car panted over a little rise, and he saw the weathered rock walls of John Grossman's fishing lodge through the pines on the left. It was a low, sprawling structure, and a pair of ruts turned off abruptly to lead up to it.

Two men stepped into the middle of the lane

to block his way when he was fifty feet from the building. This was so exactly what Shayne had expected that he cut his motor and braked to an easy stop with the front bumper almost against the men. He leaned out and asked, "This John Grossman's place?" then opened the door and stepped out quickly to show he was unarmed and to prevent them from coming to the side of the car where they might look in the back.

One of the men was very tall and thin, with cadaverous features and deep hollows for eye sockets. He wore a beautifully-tailored suit of silk pongee with a tan shirt and shoes and a light tan snap-brimmed felt hat. He had his arms folded across his thin chest with his right hand inside the lapel of his unbuttoned coat close to a bulge just below his left shoulder. His face was darkly sun-tanned and he showed white teeth in a saturnine smile as he stood in the middle of the road without moving.

His companion was a head shorter than Slim. He had a broad, pugnacious face with a flat nose spread over a lot of it. He was hatless and coatless, wearing a shirt with loud yellow stripes, with elastic armbands making tucks in the full sleeves. He stood flat-footed with his hand openly gripping the butt of a revolver thrust down behind the waistband of his trousers.

Shayne stood beside the car and surveyed them coolly. He said: "I don't think we've met formally. I'm Shayne."

Pug said: "Yeah. We know. This here's Slim." He jerked the thumb of his left hand toward his tall companion.

Shayne said: "I thought this was a social call. Where's Grossman?"

"He sent us out to see you were clean before you come in." Slim's lips barely moved to utter the words. He sauntered around the front of the car toward Shayne, keeping his hand inside his coat. His deep-set eyes were cold and glittered like polished agate. His head was thrust forward on a long thin neck.

Shayne took two backward steps. He said: "I'm clean. I came out to talk business. This is a hell of a way to greet a guy."

Pug moved behind Slim. He was obviously the slower-witted and the less dangerous of the pair. He blinked in the bright sunlight and said: "Why don't we let 'im have it here?"

Slim said: "We do." His lips began to smile and Shayne knew he was a man who enjoyed watching his victims die.

Shayne pretended he didn't hear or didn't understand the bplay between the two killers. They had both moved to the side of the car now, and were circling slowly toward him.

He said: "I brought along some cold beer. It's here in the back." He reached for the handle of the rear door and turned it steadily until the latch was free. He flung himself to the

ground, jerking the door wide open as he did so.

Slim's gun flashed in the sunlight at the same instant that fire blazed from the back seat. Slim staggered back and dropped to one knee, steadying his gun to return the fire.

Shayne lay flat on the ground and saw Pug spun around by the impact of a .45 slug in his thick shoulder. He stayed on his feet and his own gun rained bullets into the tonneau.

Slim fired twice before a bullet smashed the saturnine grin back into his mouth. He crumpled slowly forward onto the sunlighted pine needles and lay very still.

Pug went down at almost the same instant with a look of complete bewilderment on his broad face. He dropped his revolver and put both hands over his belly, lacing his stubby fingers together tightly. He sank to a sitting position with his legs doubled under him, and swayed there for a moment before toppling over on his side.

There was no more shooting. And there was no sound from the back of the car.

Shayne got up stiffly and began dusting the dirt off his clothes. He heard shouts and looked up to see excited men filtering through the trees and coming from behind the lodge to converge on the car. He went around to the right-hand side and opened the back door to peer inside.

BOTH Blackie and Lennie were quite dead. Blackie lay with his body sprawled half out on the running board, his gun hand trailing in the dirt. Blood was trickling through two holes in his yellow polo shirt. His mouth was open.

Lennie was crouched down on the floor behind him and there was a gaping hole where his right eye had been. His thin features were composed and he looked more at peace with the world than Shayne had ever seen him look before.

Will Gentry came puffing up behind Shayne, his red face suffused and perspiring. A tall, black-mustached man, wearing the clothes of a farmer and carrying a rifle, was close behind him. Other men were dressed like farmers, and Shayne recognized half a dozen of Gentry's plainclothes detectives among them. He saw Tim Rourke's grinning face and had time to give the reporter a quick nod of recognition before Gentry caught his arm and pulled him about angrily, demanding: "What the bloody blazes are you pulling off here, Mike?"

"I? Nothing." Shayne arched his red eyebrows sardonically at the chief of detectives. "Can I help it if some damned hoods choose this place to settle one of their feuds?" He stepped back and waved toward the rear of the car. "Couple of hitch-hikers I picked up. Why

don't you ask them why they started shooting?"

"They're both dead," Gentry asserted angrily after a quick survey. "And the other two?" He started around the car.

"This one's still alive," Rourke called out cheerfully, kneeling beside Pug. "But I don't think he will be long."

Shayne sauntered around behind Gentry. Blood was seeping between Pug's fingers laced together in front of him, but his eyes were open and when Gentry shook him and demanded to know where Grossman was, he muttered thickly: "Inside. Cellar."

"You. Yancy and Marks," Gentry directed two of his men. "Stay here and get a statement from him. Find out what this shooting is about. Everything. The rest of you fan out and surround the house. Take it careful and be ready to shoot. The real criminal is in there."

Shayne took Gentry's place beside Pug as Gentry moved away to direct the placing of his men around the house. He leaned close to the dying man and asked: "Where's the girl, Pug? The girl. Where is she?"

"Inside."

Shayne got to his feet. Rourke got up beside him and grabbed his arm. "Sweet Jesus, Mike! I don't know what any of this is about, but it's some Caesarian."

Shayne pulled away from him and started stalking toward the fishing lodge. Rourke hurried after him, expostulating: "Hold it, Mike. Don't try to go in there. Didn't you hear the guy? Grossman's inside. Let Gentry and the sheriff chase him out in the open."

Shayne didn't pay any attention to him. Unarmed, he strode on toward the sprawling stone house, his face set and hard.

Gentry was spacing his men about to cover all exits. He saw Shayne's intention and called out gruffly: "Don't Mike. No need for anybody to get hurt now. We'll smoke him out."

Shayne went on without hesitation. He mounted the wide stone steps, his heels pounding loud in the sudden stillness, and went on to a sagging screen door. He pulled it open and went in, blinking his eyes against the dimness.

The interior of the house had a stale, long-unused smell. It was cool and quiet inside the thick rock walls. A wide arched opening led into a big room on the right.

Shayne went in and saw Myrna Hastings sitting upright in a heavy chair fashioned of twisted mangrove roots. Her legs and arms were bound tightly to the chair and her mouth was sealed with adhesive tape. Her eyes rolled up at him wildly as he strode across the room, getting out his knife.

He slashed the cords binding her arms and legs, pulled her upright and put his left arm

about her shoulders. "This is going to hurt," he warned. "Set your lips and mouth tightly."

She nodded and her eyes told him she understood. He ripped the adhesive loose in one jerk and put his other arm around her. She clung to him, crying softly.

He looked around the room and gave a grunt of satisfaction when he saw a square of water-soaked canvas on the floor with a pile of straw and bottles on top of it. An empty bottle lay on its side and another stood open.

Shayne drew her forward gently, instructing her: "Try to walk. Use your arms and legs and they'll limber up."

She said, through her tears: "I'm trying. I'm all right. I knew you'd come, Mike."

She drew away from him as he leaned down to pick up the open bottle. He studied the water-soaked label and his eyes glinted. It was Monet cognac, vintage of 1926. The bottle was half-full. He drew in a long gulping breath of the bouquet, then put the bottle in Myrna's hands. "Take a good drink. Everything's all right now."

She obediently tilted the bottle to her lips. A flush came to her cheeks as she swallowed. Shayne laughed and took it away from her. "It's my turn." He drank from it and then led her over to a dusty rattan couch.

She sat down limply and he got out two cigarettes. He put one between her lips and the other in his mouth, thumb-nailed a match and lit them both.

She started violently when Gentry's voice bellowed at him from outside. "Shayne! What's happening in there?"

Shayne called back: "A lady and I are having a drink. Leave us alone." He laughed down at Myrna's bewildered face. "We're surrounded by a posse of detectives and deputy sheriffs. They're summoning their nerve to storm the place."

"What happened?" she asked tensely. "All that shooting. They were laying a trap for you, weren't they? I heard them talking before they went out. They were going to kill you because they thought you'd read the log-book. I told them you hadn't but they wouldn't believe me. I was so frightened when I heard the shooting. I was sure you'd walked right into the trap." She began to tremble violently.

Shayne patted her hand reassuringly. "I practically never walk into a trap."



HEY heard cautious shuffling footsteps on the porch outside, and Gentry's voice lowered to a rumble. "Mike. Where are you?"

"In here," Shayne called blithely. He put the bottle to his swollen lips and sucked on it greedily. He

lowered it and grinned as Gentry tiptoed in

with drawn gun, followed closely by the mustached sheriff with his rifle cocked and ready.

"You look," Shayne chuckled, "like the last two of the Mohicans."

Gentry straightened his bulky body and glared across the dim room at Shayne and the girl. "What the devil's going on? Who's that and how did she get here?"

Shayne said: "You met Miss Hastings last night, Will. Why don't you and Leatherstockings run along down to the cellar and look for Grossman? That's where Pug said he was."

Other men began to file cautiously into the hallway behind their leaders. Gentry turned to them and growled: "Find the cellar stairs. And take it careful. Grossman isn't the kind to be taken alive." He crossed the room heavily. "And you can start talking, Mike. What are you and this girl up to?"

"Nothing immoral—with so many people around."

Gentry stopped in front of him on wide-spread legs. "What kind of a run-around am I getting?"

Shayne said: "You're giving it to yourself, whatever it is. I didn't invite you out here."

"No. Thought you were pulling a fast one. Covering up for a murderer to get a rake-off on a bunch of smuggled liquor. By God, Shayne, you can't wiggle out of that one."

Shayne took a pull from the bottle. "It's mighty good liquor. Next time you send a stool to cover the switchboard on my hotel don't use a guy with d-i-c-k written all over him."

Gentry gulped back his anger. "I wondered who sent Tim Rourke to me with a tip there'd be fireworks. You can't deny you brought along a couple of gunsels to wipe out Grossman and his gang and keep the stuff for yourself. If I hadn't overheard the call and beat it out here you might have pulled it off."

Shayne laughed and sank down on the couch beside Myrna. "How much of the deal do you know?"

"Plenty. I always suspected Captain Samuels was running stuff for Grossman when he lost his boat in '30. That's why Grossman killed him last night. Fighting over division of the liquor that was cached here when Grossman was sent up."

"You're fairly close," Shayne admitted. "When you find Grossman—"

"He'll talk," Gentry promised.

"Want to bet on it?" Shayne's eyes were very bright.

"I never bet with you. With your damned shenanigans. . . What's this girl got to do with it?" Gentry pointed a stern finger at Myrna. "One of Grossman's little friends?"

"She wanted to see a detective in action," Shayne replied.

Shayne set the bottle on the floor and sat up straighter when a detective trotted in and reported excitedly: "We've searched the cellar and the whole house, Chief. Not another soul here."

Gentry began to curse luridly. Shayne got up and interrupted him. "I don't think your men knew where to look in the cellar. Let's take a look."

He went out to the hallway and found Rourke coming up the cellar stairs with a flashlight in his hand.

"No soap," Rourke reported to Shayne. "He must have made his getaway when we left the house uncovered to see what the shooting was about."

"Your fault," Gentry said bitterly behind Shayne. "If we don't pick him up I'm slapping a charge of obstructing justice on you."

Shayne took the flashlight from Rourke. He led the way down into a small dank furnace room with a dirt floor. He flashed the light around, then walked over to a small rectangular area where the ground showed signs of having been recently disturbed. "Try digging here, but don't blame me if Grossman doesn't tell you the whole story when you find him."

"There?" Gentry gagged over the word. "You mean he's dead?"

"Unless he's a Yogi or some damned thing." Shayne shrugged and handed the flashlight back to Rourke. "Hell, he had to be dead, Will. Nothing else made any sense."

"You mean nothing makes sense," Gentry said perplexedly.

Shayne sighed and said: "I'll draw you pictures. One question first, though. Did Guildford make a phone call between the time you checked for Miss Hastings at the Crestwood last night and before you came to my place looking for her?"

"Guildford?" Gentry's tone mirrored his bewilderment. "The lawyer? What the hell has that got to do with it?"

"Did he?"

"Well, yes, I think he did, come to think of it. He called his home from the public booth in the Crestwood after we learned the girl wasn't in. I suggested that we see you and he didn't want his wife to worry if he got home later than she expected."

Shayne nodded. "He said he called his wife. But you didn't go in the booth with him and listen in on his conversation?"

"Of course not," Gentry sputtered.

SHAYNE took his time about lighting a cigarette, then continued. "If you had, you would have heard him calling Pug or Slim at Chunky's joint and telling them to hang around the Crestwood until Myrna Hastings came in—and then grab her. He was covering

every angle," Shayne went on earnestly, "after he discovered that empty hiding place in the captain's bedroom. He knew the captain knew the location of the liquor cache after Samuels brought in a case and sold it for a hundred bucks to make a payment on the mortgage. And when the poor old guy died while he was torturing him, he must have been frantic for fear he'd never find the stuff."

"Are you talking about Mr. Guildford? The attorney?"

Shayne nodded. "Leroy P. Guildford. Once a junior member of the firm of Leland and Parker which specialized in criminal practice and defended John Grossman in 1930. He must have known of the existence of the liquor cache all the time, but it wasn't worth much until the recent liquor shortage, and Captain Samuels wouldn't play ball with him. After he killed Grossman, Samuels was his only chance to learn where the liquor was hidden."

"Are you saying Guildford killed Grossman?"

"Sure. Or had Pug and Slim do the job for him. He brought Grossman out here last Tuesday, then went to Samuels and told him what had happened, and suggested that with Grossman dead they might as well split the liquor."

"But Grossman talked to you over the phone just this morning," Gentry argued.

Shayne shook his head. "I knew that couldn't be Grossman. He *had* to be dead. The only other person it could be was Guildford, disguising his voice to lure me out here so he could get rid of the only two people who knew about the log-book and the liquor."

"Why," asked Gentry with forced calm, "did Grossman *have* to be dead?"

"Nothing else made sense." Shayne spread out his big hands. "Captain Samuels knew where the liquor was all the time and he was practically starving, yet he never touched it. Why? Because he was an honorable man and it didn't belong to him. Why, then, would he suddenly forget his scruples and sell a case? Because Grossman was dead and it no longer belonged to anybody."

Gentry said gruffly: "My head's going around. Maybe it's this air down here."

In the big room upstairs, Shayne knelt beside the bottles and straw. "Do you know where this came from, Myrna?"

"Certainly. Those men fished it up out of the lagoon this morning, all sewed up in canvas. They talked about it in front of me. I

think they planned to kill me so they didn't care what I heard."

"What did they say about it?" Shayne was shaking the bottles free of their straw casings and lining them up carefully on the floor.

"It's all in the bottom of the lagoon. A whole boatload. Just where Captain Samuels and his crew dumped it overboard as he described in his log-book. That's why the authorities could never find any liquor here when they raided the place, the men said."

Shayne got up with a bottle dangling from each bony hand. He slipped them into the side pockets of his pants as Detective Yancy came hurrying in to tell Gentry excitedly: "We got the whole story from that man before he died. Grossman is dead, Chief. Buried in the cellar. And the real guy is—"

"I know," said Gentry wearily. "Get to a telephone and have Guildford rounded up right away. Leroy P.," he snapped.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, as he turned in time to see Shayne slide a third and fourth bottle into his hip pockets.

"Making hay while the sun shines." Shayne stooped stiffly to get two more bottles from the floor. "With you horning in I won't have any chance at all at that stuff under water." He put two more bottles in his coat pocket and stooped for two more, looking wistfully at the remaining bottles on the floor. "This is the only fee I'll collect on this case."

Myrna laughed delightedly. "I can carry a few for you."

Gentry turned away and said gruffly: "There'd better be a couple of bottles left for evidence when the revenue men get here." He strode out and Shayne began stacking bottles in Myrna's arms.

"You owe me something," he told her, "for the turn I got when I went back to my apartment and found the back door unlocked and the place burgled. I thought you were mixed up in it and your feature writing story was just a blind."

She laughed as she swayed slightly under the weight of eight bottles. "I wondered if you'd suspect me after they found the key and I admitted that it was to the back door of your apartment. I'm afraid they thought I was an immoral girl. I hated to have them take it away from me," she ended gravely.

Shayne promised, "I'll give you another one," and they staggered out with as many bottles as both could carry.

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BLIND BOGEY

By
JULIUS LONG

A
Ben Corbett
Novelette

The D.A.'s bundle carrier, that's me. I crack the cases while Keever cracks the headlines. But a policeman's picnic is hardly the place for a crime wave, I thought—until someone got bored with shooting at bull's-eyes on the range and left a string of human targets in his wake—all with bullet holes sprouting between their eyes.



"This time it's your finish. I'm going to kill you, Ben," said the voice from behind the portieres. The protruding gun was cocked for emphasis.

CHAPTER ONE

Black-Powder



IT WAS going to be a bull's-eye, dead center. I knew I couldn't miss. At last I had caught up with the wily "Pop" Andrews, most famous gun handler of the Middle West. Ever so slowly I took up the slack on the trigger. Momentarily my target went off the sights. When it came back I would

squeeze a little harder on the trigger, and Andrews would be in the bag. It came back, and I started the squeeze. Then it happened.

The other gun roared in my ears. Blinded, I lowered my own gun and turned helplessly. A face grinned gloatingly into my own.

"What's the matter, Ben, can't you take it?"

Brad Karpur, captain of homicide detectives, guffawed in my face. He looked around for appreciation from the dozen-odd other shooters lined up at the range. He didn't get it. Everybody had stopped shooting after that heavy report of Karpur's black-powder-loaded gun. There was hardly a breeze, and the black smoke that had obscured my vision still hovered in the air.

Struggling to keep my mouth shut, I lifted my gun again for my tenth and last shot. I had a feeling I wouldn't get it off right, and I didn't. I consciously pulled the trigger, knowing the gun was going off. That's all wrong—when you shoot slow-fire you should just squeeze the trigger a little every time the target lines up in the sights, never know when the gun's going off.

I knew this time, and my .38 slug barely cut the seven ring at six o'clock. Somebody behind me groaned. I turned. It was Pop Andrews.

"Too bad, Ben. You had me beat. You tossed a seven when a nine would have won."

Brad Karpur cut loose with another guffaw. "Oh well, Ben, maybe you can win the blind bogey!" Karpur laughed hilariously at the idea. Pop Andrews gave him a dirty look.

"It's your fault, Karpur, that Ben didn't win this match! You spoiled a perfect shot. What's the idea of using black-powder loads anyway?"

Karpur straightened up indignantly. "Patriotism! With ammunition so scarce I'm patriotic using up this box of old cartridges!" Karpur ignored the several contemptuous glances. "Besides, what are you beefing about? You win the match now, and it stays in the Force. Ben's nothing but a bundle-carrier for the D.A.!"

I PUT my gun in its case and walked away.

I didn't want to mar the Annual Police Picnic with a brawl. But I had a feeling that sooner or later I'd hang one on Karpur's button. He had nothing against me except that I'd cracked a case or two that he had muffed. I was pretty sure that he had entered the match solely to throw me off with a well-timed shot. The heavy report of the black-powder load had been almost enough, and the engulfing smoke had cinched it.

Karpur himself couldn't shoot for sour apples. He made fun of range practice, cracking that a cop should use his brains instead of his guns. Besides, he argued, slow and timed fire meant nothing to a cop—it was rapid-fire practice that he needed.

"Take it easy, Ben." It was Pop waddling along beside me. He was just short of sixty, and in a year he would be retired—as a sergeant. He was tangible support to Karpur's contention that learning to shoot well was a waste of time. Pop was the best shooter on the force, but that hadn't won him much in the way of promotions.

"Congratulations," I said. "I'll admit I wanted to beat you pretty bad. I don't want to have to wait till they bring you out here in a wheelchair before I do it, but it looks as if that's the way it'll be."

Pop looked pained. "Listen, Ben, what do you say we go to the range officer and get permission for you to shoot that last shot over? It'd be the only fair thing."

"Skip it. I'll take you next year."

Pop fell back miserably. He was gnawed by the same thought that was eating me—without Karpur's help he'd have lost the match. Karpur was still shooting. I could pick out his shots because of the excessive racket the old black-powder loads made. I wondered where he had come upon that old ammunition. I had noticed him loading from a full box.

Mike Hilton, the range officer, ordered the range cleared as I reached him. He gave me a questioning look. I shook my head.

"Tossed a seven that last shot, Mike. Pop's done it again."

Mike sighed. "Well, get your target. Second's not so bad when there're a couple of hundred shooting."

I went down to the pit for my target. It was tacked to a piece of wallboard cut to fit a wooden frame. The frame was set low to the ground—too low, in fact, for slugs were embedding themselves into the bank.

Of course there was no danger of a slug getting through. A man was safe in the pit so long as he ducked. Behind the pit was a two-foot-thick concrete wall rising twenty feet. Tons of sand had been thrown up against the wall to catch bullets and eliminate any chance of ricochet.

I pulled the tacks out of my target and took it back to Mike. He looked at it and moaned.

"What a shame! Nine shots in the ten and a stranger in the seven! You'd have had a possible if it hadn't been for Karpur!"

A post-mortem didn't interest me. I walked away. The grounds were crowded, for the Annual Police Picnic had a terrific draw. It beats all how many people get a kick out of being chummy with cops. I suppose a good share of the thousand guests cherished a notion that by building up a speaking acquaintance with a captain or at least a sergeant, they would never have to worry about traffic tickets.

But there was a minority present with ambitions less ingenious. Most unsavory of the lot was Sammy Glasford, who had run every

racket in town until Winset had been made chief. After that there had been no rackets. Believe it or not, there wasn't even a pin-ball pay-off. In another year Winset would be retired, and Glasford was already mending his fences.

I really wasn't surprised when I saw that he was in a huddle with Inspector Murtag. Murtag was almost Winset's age, but his viewpoint was nowhere near the same. He was right with the mayor and would rate appointment as temporary chief after Winset's retirement. That made him important to Glasford. Still, neither man was very smart, meeting this way in the open at a police picnic.

It was no skin off my nose, so I headed with my gun case to the parking lot to the right of the range.



HUNDRED or so cars overflowed the parking lot—there was a row clear up to the range itself. My own coupe was in the middle of the lot, and I walked between cars until I got to it. I was through for the day. The blind bogey wasn't for me. I locked my gun and case under the turtle-deck and turned back toward the clubhouse. A cold beer would be just right.

Then someone called my name. I stopped short, looked around. At first I didn't see her, then I spied her standing on a bumper three or four cars away. She motioned for me to come to her. I did this quickly enough, for Patricia Winset was very special in my book. Give a red-head a good complexion, and it's a winning combination every time.

"Hi, Pat. Didn't you know this is a stag affair? Better scam before papa spansks you and sends you home."

"Have you seen him? Have you seen him anywhere?"

She was worried. I could tell it not only from the way she had repeated her question, but from the look in her eyes. I shook my head.

"Haven't seen the chief all day. But I'll go get him."

"That'll be fine, Ben. Thanks a lot."

I went back through the parking lot and into the clubhouse. It had once been a horse barn, and though the city council hadn't appropriated more than a few lousy dollars, the cops had chipped in and fixed it up. It was a pretty fair place with a nice long bar.

You couldn't see it now for the crowd. Everybody was laughing and having a hell of a time. There were tables, too, and they were filled. I spied Keever at one of the tables with four other guys. I identified two of them as local hot-shot manufacturers, and the other two I had never seen. I wasn't trying to see

them, but Keever spotted me and beckoned.

I had to go, of course. Keever is my boss. You've heard the name, Burton H. Keever, the clever D.A. on his way to the governor's mansion. I'll let you in on something—if Keever does get there, it'll be because I've carried him on my back. I crack the cases while Keever cracks the headlines. No, I'm not a bit modest.

"Hi, Ben old boy!" said Keever, and I knew from his cordial tone that he had had too much beer. "Want you to meet some swell fellows." He introduced me to the four men at the table—Caldwell and Amstutz, the local manufacturers, and Ramsey and Catell. Keever described the latter two with a flourish as visiting "investors." His tone indicated that they were big stuff.

None of the four men did more than barely acknowledge the introduction. Plainly they had an axe to grind with Keever, and they resented my interruption.

"I'm looking for Chief Winset. Have you seen him?"

"No, Ben, haven't seen the chief today. But if I see him I'll tell him."

I said thanks, excused myself and continued looking for Winset. He wasn't in the clubhouse. I needed a beer, but I went on out, began a systematic search of the grounds. Even though there were five hundred cops and a thousand visitors present, it seemed likely that the chief could be easily spotted. I wondered if he'd left the picnic.

"No luck," I told Pat finally. "He's just plain vanished."

My light tone didn't seem appropriate. Pat looked very much worried.

"Can I help? Maybe I could give him your message when he turns up."

Pat instantly shook her head.

"No—no, I'll find him and tell him myself." She walked away, not as if she wanted to go anywhere, but as if she feared to continue the conversation. I walked back to the range. The blind bogey had already started.

A BLIND bogey seems like a waste of precious ammunition to me. Instead of shooting at a target you can see, you shoot at a target tacked onto the back of the wallboard. It's not even centered, except by chance. Usually the target is put in one corner or another of the wallboard. You never know where it is, and the odds are that you'll miss it entirely.

That's what makes it fun for dub shots like Karpur. The poorest shot entered in a blind bogey match has as good a chance to win as the best. So I was surprised to see that Karpur wasn't in the match. And I got a second shock when I saw that Pop Andrews was.

His gun was making a lot of noise. It was a .38, and right away I guessed that Pop had bor-

rowed it from Karpur. That explained why he would waste ammunition on this thing—the ammunition was the old black-powder stuff that Karpur had brought out.

Pop was making a nice group in the lower lefthand corner of the wallboard. If the target on the other side had been placed there he would turn in the winning score. But if the target were anywhere else, he'd get a zero.

When everybody had shot ten rounds Mike Hilton cleared the range, and each man went down to the pit for his target. For some reason, however, everybody began to gather around Pop Andrews' target instead of his own. But nobody paid any attention to the target—everyone stared into the pit. Something was wrong, and I went on the run.

My search for Chief Winset was ended. He lay in the bottom of the pit. A slug had caught him between the eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

Sample for Murder



WE ALL stared at Pop. His face was horrible to see.

"My God, I shot my best friend!" he shrieked.

Everybody knew that he had not exaggerated. He and Winset had started out on the force as rookies, and the fact that his friend had risen to become chief while he had got no farther than sergeant had never caused any differences between them. Winset had tried his best to help Pop along, coaching him for the civil service exams, but somehow Pop just couldn't make the grade.

"Don't take it so hard, Pop." It was the first time I had ever heard Karpur sound like a human being. He put his hand on Pop's shoulder. "It wasn't your fault. Winset must have been standing right behind your target when you started shooting."

Pop seemed to be racking his memory. Stubbornly he shook his head.

"My shot wasn't the first! There were others who got started before I did. Tad would have heard those shots and ducked down out of the way!"

I had forgotten that Winset's first name was Tad—Pop was the only man I had ever heard use it.

Mike Hilton said calmly: "Pop, you're excited. You'd better go away from here. This accident wasn't your fault. Now just go away and let us handle it."

Karpur took his hand off Pop's shoulder and assumed his full authority.

"Joe," he said to a patrolman, "you get the M.E. out here. Nobody goes near the body un-

til he comes." He leaped into the pit and knelt professionally beside Winset. I jumped into the pit after him. He looked up and scowled. "That means you, Ben. This is one case where I'm taking no interference from the D.A.'s office. This is a department job."

I shook my head. "I know how you fellows feel, but the plain fact is that this case isn't in your jurisdiction. I guess in the excitement you've forgotten that the range is just outside the city limits."

Karpur stiffened. His face whitened, then became as red as a tomato. He stared up at the rapidly enlarging throng of city policemen as if he expected one of them to have something to say. No one did. Karpur looked back up at me, finally finding his voice.

"I guess you're right, Ben. Better get the D.A."

I sent one of the boys. It wasn't pleasant, waiting for Keever. I got along with these fellows, but still I was a rank outsider. Their chief had been killed, and he had been a popular chief among his men. Of course there were plenty of crooked cops on the force who would welcome Winset's replacement by a man who was "right." But they were in the minority, just as crooked lawyers are in the minority in the legal profession and quack doctors in medicine.

I couldn't help speculating about Winset's successor. There would be a temporary appointment pending the selection of a permanent chief by civil service examinations. That would be Inspector Murtag—he would merit the temporary post by seniority.

But the civil service examination would be wide open to anyone with a captain's rating or better. The exam was strictly on the up-and-up. And, much as I hated to admit it to myself, Karpur would have about the best chance to win the high mark. It looked as if his sneering contempt for pistol marksmanship and emphasis on brain work would be finally justified.

I wondered if Karpur would be "right" with Sammy Glasford and his ilk. I knew a few answers around town, and so far I had never heard of the slightest hook-up between Karpur and anyone in the rackets. But sometimes a cop will build up a reputation for honesty of years' standing on the gamble that he will get the right moment to sell out and clean up. You never can tell.

"WHAT seems to be the trouble here, Ben?"

It was Keever. He had walked into the pit from the nearer end, the one where all the cars were parked. I told him what I knew, certain Pop was too broken up to talk about it. Karpur listened intently, and I was sure he would try to pick a flaw in my account. But he didn't.

"I've phoned Miss Spain," said Kever. "She'll come out and take statements in shorthand. There shouldn't be much to it—this thing is pretty plain. But I want everybody who knows anything to give me a statement."

Karpur looked up at the mob of cops.

"You heard him. Stay put!"

There didn't seem to be anything for me to do. Miss Spain would attend to the matter of the county coroner, who would act now because the M.E. was confined to cases within the city limits.

Pop Andrews still held the gun. I reached up for it, and he handed it down.

"The cartridges?"

Pop's voice didn't seem to be his own as he answered: "They're back at the stand."

I went around the end of the pit and walked back to the firing line. Pop's target had been fourth from the end, and on the fourth stand from the end I found the cartridges. They were boxed in one of those old-style boxes with round corners and a top. There were cardboard strips to hold the cartridges in place like eggs in a crate. That made it easy to count them. I wondered why twenty-one were missing instead of twenty.

Karpur would have used ten in his match and Pop would have used another ten in the blind bogey. Of course one round might have been used as a fouling round, but only expert shooters bother to foul their guns before firing them. Karpur was no expert, and Pop wouldn't have wasted a cartridge on a gun that was already fouled, especially for a blind bogey.

A couple of minutes later I had both Pop and Karpur back at the stand. When I showed them the box of cartridges, I didn't have to draw a diagram.

"I used only ten rounds," said Karpur emphatically. "I don't know what became of the odd one. The box was full when I broke it."

Pop said: "There were forty rounds in it when Karpur gave it to me. I just don't know what could have happened to the odd one either!"

"When did Karpur give you the box and his gun?"

"Right after I left you. I went back and Karpur asked me if I wanted to shoot up some of his old ammunition in the blind bogey. I decided I would just for the fun of it. I wouldn't waste good ammunition on a blind bogey, but it didn't seem any harm would be done by using those black-powder loads."

"But there was a lapse of time before the blind bogey started. What happened to the ammunition and gun then?"

"Why, I left them over in Inspector Murtag's car. It's parked there right in the front row. I supposed the stuff would be safe enough. Do you think—"

"Yes, I think somebody took Karpur's gun

and a round of ammunition from the car. I think that same someone then killed Chief Winset before the shooting match was over. The shot would have been lost amid all the others. Then Winset was dragged around the end of the pit as the blind bogey started and planted under Pop's target. The killer had overheard your conversation with Karpur and knew you would use his gun and ammunition."

Pop was trembling.

"Then you think I really didn't kill Tad?" He looked as if he were awakening from a horrible nightmare. I nodded.

"I'm sure you didn't, Pop. You were meant to be the fall guy." I faced Karpur. "Do you recall who was standing around when you talked to Pop?"

Karpur took his time, then answered: "Murtag, now that you make me think of it."

"Sure he was!" Pop spoke excitedly. "That's why I put the stuff in his car. I noticed him and happened to remember his car was in the front row."

I looked at Karpur. "Where's Murtag?"

"I haven't seen him since that time." As an afterthought, he added: "You might ask Sammy Glasford."

"I think you've got something."



I GOT Kever to one side then. He'd been beefing a lot lately about my keeping him in the dark, so I brought him up to date on what I had. His appreciation was as usual.

"I think you're crazy. Now, don't go off half-cocked trying to make another big murder mystery out of what was very probably an unavoidable accident. It couldn't be that you're just trying to make Pop feel better?"

"Then you think the missing cartridge means nothing?"

"Absolutely. Someone wanted a sample cartridge, that's all. Don't you yourself have a collection of sample cartridges?"

I had. It did seem that someone might have helped himself to a sample, but that could easily be checked.

"Let me put it on the P.A. system and find out."

Kever looked horrified. "Then everyone would know that something was up! I don't want a hint of this to get into the newspapers. Understand?"

I did. Kever's batting average on solved murders was one hundred per cent so far. He didn't want to give a political opponent a chance to hint that instead of being an accident, the death of Chief Winset had been an unsolved murder.

"But let me follow it up on the quiet," I

begged. "I promise I won't tip my hand until I've got the goods."

"What about Karpur and Andrews? Can you handle them?"

"I think so. I'll tell them we've got to keep it quiet to work effectively. They'll understand that."

I had a short talk with Pop and Karpur, and they were away ahead of me. It was plain as day that Karpur meant to conduct his own investigation. I knew he wouldn't give me any lead if he got one, so I didn't ask him to. I was holding out one of my own. I went to my car, managed to squeeze it out of the parking lot and drove back to the city. It wasn't going to be easy, breaking the news to Patricia Winset.

I had to do it, though, if I were to find out why she had been so anxious to locate her father. Whatever her reason was, it had worried her plenty.

Her car was in the drive when I reached the Winset home. I parked behind it, hesitated coward-like several seconds, then took a deep breath and walked to the house. The housekeeper came to the door.

"Miss Winset is engaged."

"I must see her. Tell her it's Ben Corbett."

I waited in the hall till Patricia said: "Hello, Ben. Have you found Dad?"

"Can't we go into another room?"

She led me into Winset's den. It seemed the worst possible place, but I blurted out what had happened. Perhaps questioning her under such circumstances was pretty crude, but then again it probably helped to divert her mind.

"I want to know why you were so anxious to see him, Pat."

She gave me a startled look.

"Does it make any difference now? Please, Ben. . ."

"I suppose it really doesn't matter. Just the same I'd like to know. It seemed pretty important that you see him at the time."

Pat's eyes flashed resentfully.

"You've got a nerve to question me at a time like this! Dad's death was accidental. Why don't you let me alone so I can go to him?"

I told her about the missing cartridge. The idea stunned her.

"Why would anyone want to kill Dad?"

"That I don't know. But I do know that his death will make radical changes in the city set-up. For example, Karpur will probably win out as permanent chief, but Murtag will be in the driver's seat for four or five months. A lot can happen in four or five months."

"You're not implying that Murtag—"

"I'm implying nothing. But this afternoon Murtag had the brass to be seen publicly with Sammy Glasford. You can add that up and get your own answer."

"I'm way ahead of you!" a voice said behind

me. "The answer I get is a sock on your kisser!"

I turned. It was Murtag.

HE didn't bop me, but only because he had sense enough not to start a brawl on the eve of his almost certain appointment as temporary chief.

Knowing this, I asked calmly: "When did you find out that Winset was killed?"

"Just now when I overheard you. I looked for him at the range. When I couldn't find him I decided to come out here."

"What did you want to see him about?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Yes, and I will know, because we've exclusive jurisdiction to investigate this case. It happened outside the city limits."

The idea bothered Murtag. He could see Keever hogging all the publicity while he basked in obscurity as temporary chief.

"Well, if I do any talking, it'll be to Keever, not to his stooge."

He turned on his heel and left.

Pat asked: "Will you please drive me out to the range?"

When we got to my car, Murtag was rounding the corner where he had left his own. He went away toward the range at a fast clip. I drove slowly.

"Now, Pat, what was your urgent business with your father?"

She hesitated for a moment, then said uncertainly: "It couldn't have anything to do with his—his murder."

"Let me decide that."

"All right, but promise me you won't repeat it unless you're sure it means something." I nodded. "This afternoon I had a phone call from Laura Worth. Know her?"

"I know of her. She's the woman member of the city zoning commission."

"Dad is—was, too. The city charter provides that the chief of police cast the fifth vote. Recently he's been on the spot. There's been a furious argument about Freedly's Seventh Subdivision. You know where it is?"

"Sure, over by the Big Four tracks. They call it Freedly's Flop. He found only a few suckers to sell lots to, and now he wants to have the thing zoned for factory sites."

"That's the issue. The rest of the commission is evenly divided, two and two. Dad's vote will—would have decided it. He was going to vote against the change. He felt that though Freedly had sold only a few lots in the subdivision, some poor devils had built homes on them, and it would be unfair to throw them into a factory zone now."

"I see. And which way will Laura Worth vote?"

"With Dad—that is, she's against it, too. The vote was to have been tomorrow, and Laura

was worried for fear someone would get to Dad and change his vote at the last moment. She'd had a tip that a couple of big-shot financiers were to be at the picnic today and would try to put it over."

"In that case you did your father no honor by trying to warn him. You ought to know that nobody could get to him."

"Of course I know that! But Dad's a cop, not a businessman. People who have made a lot of money always impress him. I was afraid these big-shots would convince him that he was holding up the war by not permitting Freedley's Flop to be used as a factory site. I wanted to prepare him."

"I see." I was thinking of the two visiting "investors," Ramsey and Catell, who had been at Keever's table in the clubhouse. It looked as if there had been a bit of stage-setting. Given an introduction by Caldwell and Amstutz, local millionaire manufacturers, a comparatively ingenuous man like Winset might have been overwhelmed.

"You won't say anything, then? I mean this couldn't have had anything to do with what happened. Financiers are supposed to stop at practically nothing, but they don't go in for murder—not, at least, for something as small as this."

"Well, we'll see. But why so hush-hush?"

"I promised Laura Worth I wouldn't reveal the source of the tip."

CHAPTER THREE

Freedley's Flop



So we rode on silently to the range I mulled over the situation. It was five o'clock when I parked. Hundreds of people lingered out of morbid curiosity. I led Pat through them to the pit, then gave Mike Hilton the high-sign to take over and

look out for her. He could do this, as he had seven daughters of his own.

I gave another high-sign to Keever. He was in a huddle with the county coroner and Ned Biglow, the sheriff. Biglow was a politician, period. And plenty glad to let Keever carry the ball without asking any questions.

"Well?" said Keever. I told him about Murtag, but kept my promise to Pat about the Laura Worth call. "Find Murtag," he said. "I'll get some fast answers out of him or else!"

"That's great, but I want an answer out of you. Those out-of-townners at your table with the local men—what about them?"

"Are you crazy? You aren't trying to tie them into this?"

"Will you answer my question?"

Keever gave me an almost pitying look, but didn't argue. Lately I'd made a few good guesses, and he was mellowing.

"All I know about Ramsey and Catell is that they intend to make some kind of investment here, a big one, I gather. They stand well with Caldwell and Amstutz, and that makes them all right."

"When I came along they were busy not noticing me. They had some axe to grind with you. What was it?"

Keever eyed me very interestedly.

"They wanted my opinion on the prospect of detaching a part of the city from the corporate limits."

"Freedley's Flop"

Keever's interest grew.

"You guessed it. They wanted to have Freedley's Flop put outside the city limits so the zoning board would have no control over it."

"What did you tell them?"

"To hire a lawyer. I'm fed up with grinding private axes on a public salary. Anyway, they'll never get away with it. Taking an inch of ground away from a municipality is like trying to take an all-day sucker from a baby." Keever eyed me shrewdly now. "You're holding out on me again. What have you got this time?"

"A big secret. I'll give it away if it means anything."

Keever started to protest, but by now he knew better. He shrugged.

"Well, find Murtag."

I tried to, but nobody had seen him since he had left the range. Evidently he had changed his direction after he had left the Winset house. I couldn't find Pop Andrews, either. Everybody said he must have gone home, and they didn't blame him. My third try was equally unsuccessful—I couldn't find Karpur. So I gave up and drove from the range.

MY destination was across the northwest tip of town, Freedley's Flop. It had been ages since I had been out that way, and now the place looked even worse than I had remembered.

It was a forty or fifty-acre tract stretched along a railroad right-of-way. Anyone unfamiliar with Freedley's history might have thought him a lunatic ever to have picked such an unlikely spot for a real estate development. As a matter of fact, it was perhaps more promising than any of the six other dump heaps he had promoted into gold mines.

This one, his seventh, had been one too many. Only a dozen dingy houses rose from the wilderness of shoulder-high weeds. Freedley lived on in one of the houses, a lonely, broken old man. I didn't know which house it was, but I knew there would be a realtor's sign in evi-

dence, so I kept an eagle eye peeled for it.

It was there, all right, planted in the front lawn of an unpainted house within a stone's throw of the tracks, barely noticeable in the weeds. I parked and went up the front walk. The front door was open, and I yelled. When no one answered I went in.

There was nobody home. I went upstairs and down into the cellar. Then I went out to Freedly's garage. A car was there, but not Freedly. I went back to my own car, turned around, giving the wheel a quick twist when I saw a broken bottle. That's all that saved me. The bullet grazed my left ear and put a big star in my windshield.

I jumped on the gas and made the motor pound getting away from there. I kept on going. I had never been so scared in my life.

A brave man would have stopped, shot it out with the man in ambush. Also he would have been killed. I had a gun, my target .38 and plenty of cartridges—outside its cylinder. By the time I had loaded it I would have been dead, and even if I lived that long, I would have been a fish in a barrel for the man hidden in the weeds. So I skeddaddled back to civilization, pausing at the first filling station long enough to phone headquarters.

"Find Freedly," I instructed. "The real estate promotor."

"O.K.," the desk man grunted. "Got any lead?"

"Look in the weeds around his house in Freedly's Seventh Subdivision. And get this—tell the boys to wear their guns cocked in their mitts. If you think I'm kidding, wait till you see my windshield."

Laura Worth lived in a swank part of the other side of town, and it took me an hour to get there. I caught her leaving, just getting under the wheel of her own car. It was a big one, like Laura. She was so fat that no man had ever given her anything more than a horse-laugh, so she had consoled herself by going into politics. The boys had taken her dough and handed her an honorary, no-salary job on the zoning commission.

I introduced myself and told her I was on the Winset case.

"I'm going to Patricia now," she said. "The poor child needs someone."

"I agree, and I hope you won't think less of her for telling me of your phone call this afternoon. That's why I came out here to see you."

"Go on." She seemed a little perturbed but not angry.

"I'm pretty sure you wouldn't really care about having your own name revealed, since you're voting against the zone change anyway. You meant to protect someone else. Will you tell me who?"

"No."

"Even if it will help to crack this case?"

"No."

I laughed admiringly. "You're quite a girl. I knew you wouldn't tell. But it's all right—Freedly told me himself."

Her mouth hung open. "Well, in that case—"

"Sure, you're free to talk now. What I really came out here to find out is why Freedly is working against the zoning change. He's flat on his back. To be able to move that subdivision now would mean plenty of money for its owner."

Laura Worth shrugged her massive shoulders.

"Really, I haven't the slightest idea. Of course I wondered. I think Freedly must be angry with these men he's dealing with. If that's so they don't realize it, or they never would have taken him into their confidence. Of course if it becomes known that there was a leak, they'll guess at once where it came from. That's why I asked Patricia to keep it a secret."

I thanked her and started away.

"You'll protect Freedly?" she asked.

I turned back and nodded solemnly. "In every possible way."



THE range was pretty well deserted when I pulled into its parking lot. I found Keever at a table in the clubhouse. Murtag was there now, and Karpur. There was also a bashful little man standing before the table.

The district attorney was

eyeing him inquisitorially.

"You're absolutely sure of that?"

"Yes, sir. Absolutely."

I asked: "Absolutely sure of what?"

The little man looked at me, but he was answering only Keever. Keever looked up triumphantly.

"I don't know where you skipped out to, Ben, but while you've been gone I've been cracking this case. This man is Benny Smith, a trusty sent out from the city jail to help in the parking lot. He was down at the far end by the range pit just before the blind bogey. He is very probably the last man to see Winset alive." Keever paused for effect. "Except Karpur. Karpur, he says, was talking with Winset—rather, arguing with him. In fact, they were both pretty loud. Is that right, Benny?"

Benny nodded eagerly. "That's right, Mr. Keever."

I looked at Karpur. He sat serenely at the table, affecting contempt at the entire line of investigation. Murtag was openly enjoying the situation. I faced Benny Smith.

"Did you see Karpur shoot Winset?"

Benny looked to Keever, who nodded. "No, sir," said Benny.

"Did Karpur have a gun?"

"No, sir. At least I didn't see any, sir."

I faced Keever. "Did you say you've been cracking this case?"

Keever reddened and snapped: "Are you on Karpur's payroll or mine?"

He knew the answer to that, so I said: "Well, it strikes me that just because you're seen talking to a man, it's no sign you killed him. I don't think a jury will convict Karpur on that evidence."

Keever had built me up for his next statement.

"No, not on that alone. But a jury won't need a diagram when it finds out what the argument was about. Winset had demanded Karpur's resignation. He had found out that gambling was open in Karpur's precinct. You can't throw an orange down there without hitting a slot machine. It's only been going on since last night, but Karpur had to be wise. So it was Karpur or Winset, and Karpur settled that."

I faced Benny Smith.

"Was that what the argument was about, Benny?"

He nodded. "Yes, sir. I heard that much all right."

CHAPTER FOUR

Blind Bogey

K

EEVER faced Karpur. "I shouldn't have to remind you, but I will, that anything you say will be held against you. Do you care to explain your meeting with Winset?"

Karpur said coolly: "Sure, I had a talk with the chief. Even an argument, and I'll

admit we got pretty loud. You would, too, if someone accused you of being a crook. Winset jumped to the conclusion that I knew that gambling started running in my precinct last night. The fact is, I didn't. I still don't know it, except from hearsay. But I'll believe it, all right, because I know who's behind it."

Karpur glowered at Murtag. Keever pressed a question.

"If your conscience wasn't guilty, why did you try to hide the fact that you'd talked with Winset?"

"I knew what Murtag would try to make of it. Ask him, if you want to know about gambling in my precinct. He had his pal, Sammy Glasford, dump a bunch of slots in there on Saturday night when he knows I'm out at my country place without even a phone. He figured he'd ruin me so he'd have clear sailing for the civil service exam when Winset was through.

Winset wasn't going to be through soon enough to suit him, so he borrowed my gun and a cartridge and took care of that."

"It might interest you to know," I cut in to Keever, "that Murtag and Glasford had a pow-wow out here this afternoon. Then Murtag went out to Winset's house—he says. But he could have been here when Winset was killed."

Murtag was not giving me a pleasant look. "I've told Keever all about my talk with Glasford," he growled. "Ask him."

Keever nodded. "Glasford complained to Murtag about the slots in Karpur's precinct. He said he wasn't going to stand by and see an out-of-town mob move in. So Murtag immediately tried to find Winset, not knowing he already knew what was up. When he couldn't find Winset here at the range he went out to his house. Patricia Winset will give him an air-tight alibi. I've checked it for time."

Murtag sat back with a "that's that" look. Karpur was beginning to look a little desperate.

"If I wanted to kill anyone, do you think I'd use my own gun?"

"If you had it in your hand and were mad enough. You lost your temper and let Winset have it. Then you got cute. You offered Pop Andrews the use of your gun for the blind bogey, staying out of it yourself to give you time to plant Winset's body back of Pop's target. But you overlooked the fact that an extra cartridge would be missing. That was a bad mistake, Karpur."

Karpur was white.

"I'm saying nothing till I see my lawyer!"

The phone rang. It was at the bar, and the barman called: "It's for you, Ben."

I answered the phone. It was Laura Worth. "Come out to my place," she said, "and I'll tell you who killed Winset."

She hung up. I left the phone and started from the room. Keever called after me.

"Where are you going now, Ben?"

"I've got a date with a fat lady."

DUSK had fallen. As I reached my car, two men closed in from the shadows of another car. They were Ramsey and Catell, the two visiting financiers interested in Freedly's Flop.

"Just a minute, Corbett. We'd like to have a word with you."

"I'm listening."

"You were out to Freedly's Seventh Subdivision today."

"It would be interesting to know how you found that out."

"Well, we did. What we want to know is your angle in this deal."

"Find that out the same way you discovered I was at Freedly's."

I started to climb into my car and had to brush away Catell. He looked mean.

"We've spent a lot of time on this thing," he said. "We don't want to have it queered by any meddling cop. If it's a shakedown, name us your price."

I settled under the wheel. Then I got my .38 out of its case and loaded it. The two men watched me sullenly. I stuck the .38 under my belt and said: "Will you gentlemen kindly step aside? I've got a date with a fat lady."

They moved when I gave the motor the gun. I thought I heard swear words even over its roar. It took a lot of will power to keep under thirty-five until I got to Laura Worth's house.

It was lit up like a church. I pulled into the drive and stopped near a side door. It was open. I walked to it and knocked. There was no answer. I called. Still no answer. I got out my gun and went inside.

The servant problem has hit everybody, and I suppose that explains why a money-bags like Laura Worth has nobody around the house on a Sunday evening. I walked through two big rooms and into another before I found her. Like the others it was well lighted, one of those inverted reflector affairs giving indirect light in every corner.

Laura lay slumped in a chair. A slug had hit her in the same place as the one which had got Winset, right between the eyes. I cocked my gun.

"Hold it, Ben!" called a voice from behind the portieres.

I turned, gun leveled, saying before I was all the way around: "Hi, Pop."

The gun in my hand didn't bother him, for he had a gun of his own, and it was cocked. But my greeting widened his eyes.

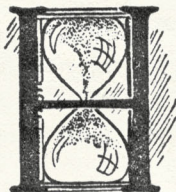
"You expected to find me here?"

"Sure, Pop. I knew you'd forced the fat lady to call me."

His eyes hardened.

"Then you told Kever you were coming here?"

"No, Pop. I didn't tell a soul. That's me all over, Pop. I'm always on my own, risking life and limb for dear old Kever."



E glared at me disgustedly. "You always were a braggart and a show-off. I counted on your playing a lone hand. This time it's your finish. I'm going to kill you, Ben."

"Don't apologize, Pop. I understand your predicament. You've got to kill me because I'm the only one who thoroughly understands your game. The only thing I don't understand is how you tumbled into it."

"Just dumb luck, Ben—the first lucky break I've ever had in my life. I was out alone in a cruiser when I saw a couple of men looking over Freedly's Flop. You know them, Ramsey

and Catell. They looked like money, and I figured they weren't walking around in those weeds for their health.

"I knew Freedly was destitute, that his land was mortgaged for all he could get on it, which wasn't much. I got him to give me an option for a song, and the price was the assumption of the mortgage. I was positive those fellows wanted the place for a factory site, and I was positive that with my old friend Tad Winset on the zoning board, I could have it converted into a factory zone.

"But Winset turned me down cold. All his life he had tried to do something for me and failed. Now he wouldn't turn a hand. As for the four other members on the board, they're all wealthy people—nobody could touch them. I counted on the prestige of the chief of police to do the trick. As it turned out, two members were for the change.

"I needed only the chief's vote. I sounded out Karpur and Murtag. Both conscientiously believed the change in zone should be made, for they thought the war effort should come first. So all I had to do was to eliminate Tad Winset.

"You saw how cleverly I did this. I diverted suspicion from myself by the simple act of making it appear that I had killed Winset, accidentally of course. Getting him to meet me at the end of the parking lot was easy enough, and I carefully shot him at a range that would leave no powder marks.

"After I had dragged him behind a target it was no trick to get the coinciding stand to shoot from. Everything went fine until you got nosy about that missing cartridge. I didn't dare say I'd used it myself. I knew that if you ever found out about my option with Freedly, you'd smell a rat.

"I'd been using Freedly all along to front for me, paying him in buttons. He was furious when he learned that my deal with Ramsey and Catell had netted me fifty thousand dollars, but he couldn't afford to turn down the extra money I was paying him. That turned out badly when Freedly tipped off Laura Worth to what Ramsey and Catell were up to this afternoon.

"Freedly told me about it when I went out to see him. I went there to raise the ante a little, to be sure he stayed in line. But he refused to take any more money and said he was through working for me. Winset's murder committed, I had to deal with Freedly."

I nodded. "Yes, I know. I told headquarters they'd find him in the weeds."

"Then you knew it was me shooting at you this afternoon?"

"Of course. The report sounded about thirty-five yards away. You're the only man in this part of the state who would try such a shot. Certainly old man Freedly wouldn't, not even with a rifle. When I realized that Pop An-

drews was gunning for me, you can bet your boots I got out of there fast."

Pop seemed pleased by the compliment.

"You'll get the credit for Freedly's killing, Ben. I tipped Ramsey and Catell that you'd been out there, that you were a meddler with an angle. By phone, of course, and through a handkerchief. I told them they could find you at the range. Did they?"

"Sure, and I admitted to them that I had been out there, just as you planned. Are you going to make it appear that I got Laura, too?"

"Of course. Both jobs have been done with the same gun, one I took out of a car at the range. There were hundreds of guns lying around loose there, and I picked a fine one. Smoothest trigger pull you ever saw. You'll find out in about a second. Then I'll take care of Pat."

That got me. The one break I had been counting on was that Pop didn't know Laura Worth had gone after Pat and brought her here.

"I'm sorry about Pat. I always envied Winset a daughter like that. But she can tie me in with this, so she'll have to go."

I shook my head.

"Pop, you're nuts! You'll never get away with this! What makes you think Keever will believe I committed these murders? What possible motive could I have?"

POP smiled tightly and drew a paper from his pocket.

"This. It's the option to Freedly's Flop. It's a bearer option—there's no name inserted. So far Freedly has been the front man. Ramsey and Catell don't know I'm in the picture. My voice was disguised when I tipped them tonight about your being at Freedly's place. They'll think like everyone else that you're the man behind all these murders. My shoes will fit you nicely, huh, Ben?"

"But if you plant that option on me after you've faked my suicide, what will that get you? You won't make a dime out of all your murders."

Pop shrugged sadly.

"True. I gambled. I didn't win, but I'm going to bow out before I lose my life. I'm especially sorry it has to be you, Ben. I always liked you. You're a fine shot. If Karpur hadn't pulled his stupid trick today you'd have beaten me."

"I'm going to beat you now, Pop. I'm going to shoot first."

Pop frowned like a father who has just caught a son in a lie.

"You know better than that, Ben. You're as good as I am on a range, but as a practical shooter you aren't in my class. I can kill you before your finger tightens on that trigger."

It was a fact. I knew it, and Pop knew I knew it. Pop had had an eye on my trigger

finger all along. It was a cinch that he had taken up all the slack possible on that hair-trigger—the slightest movement of his finger would trip the hammer.

My only chance was to stall until Pat came along.

"If you're expecting help from Pat," said Pop, "forget it. The old lady here gave her enough sedative to knock her out till morning."

He said this with an air of finality. It was coming.

"Well," I sighed, "I might as well toss this gun away."

No gunman of the wild and woolly west was ever more flattered than Pop as he watched me toss my gun across the room. To have one's prowess recognized by such a gesture. . .

The gun dropped into one of the inverted lamps, broke the bulb and shorted the circuit. There was a flash, and the lights went out. I got to the gun in about three strides, ducked, and just in time. Pop's shot would have drilled my heart if I hadn't anticipated it.

I couldn't see exactly from where the shot had come, so I heaved the lamp across the room. Pop shattered it with another blast. This time I tried one. I missed, too, and Pop was right back with a shot that took a piece out of my sleeve. I tried to move quietly, but I wasn't quiet enough. Pop tried another, and he got my right arm. I managed to get off another shot before my fingers went numb and let the .38 fall to the floor.

I followed it. I was still there two hours later when Keever came along. I was conscious all that time, but I was playing safe. I couldn't make up my mind whether I had really heard Pop groan or just imagined it.

It wasn't imagination. When they got the lights on, they found Pop lying face downward as if he were trying to sniff the floor. He couldn't have been doing this, though, for he had no nose.

"I finally figured out who the fat lady was," said Keever. "Next time you'll have sense enough to drop the lone wolf act." He reflected. "Or will you?"

"I'm afraid I will. Deep down I always thought I was a better shot than Pop—until he got the drop on me tonight. Boy!"

Murtag and Karpur had come with Keever. They seemed friendly enough, and I gathered that Murtag now realized that someone had pulled a fast one on Karpur, planting those slots in his precinct as a weathercock.

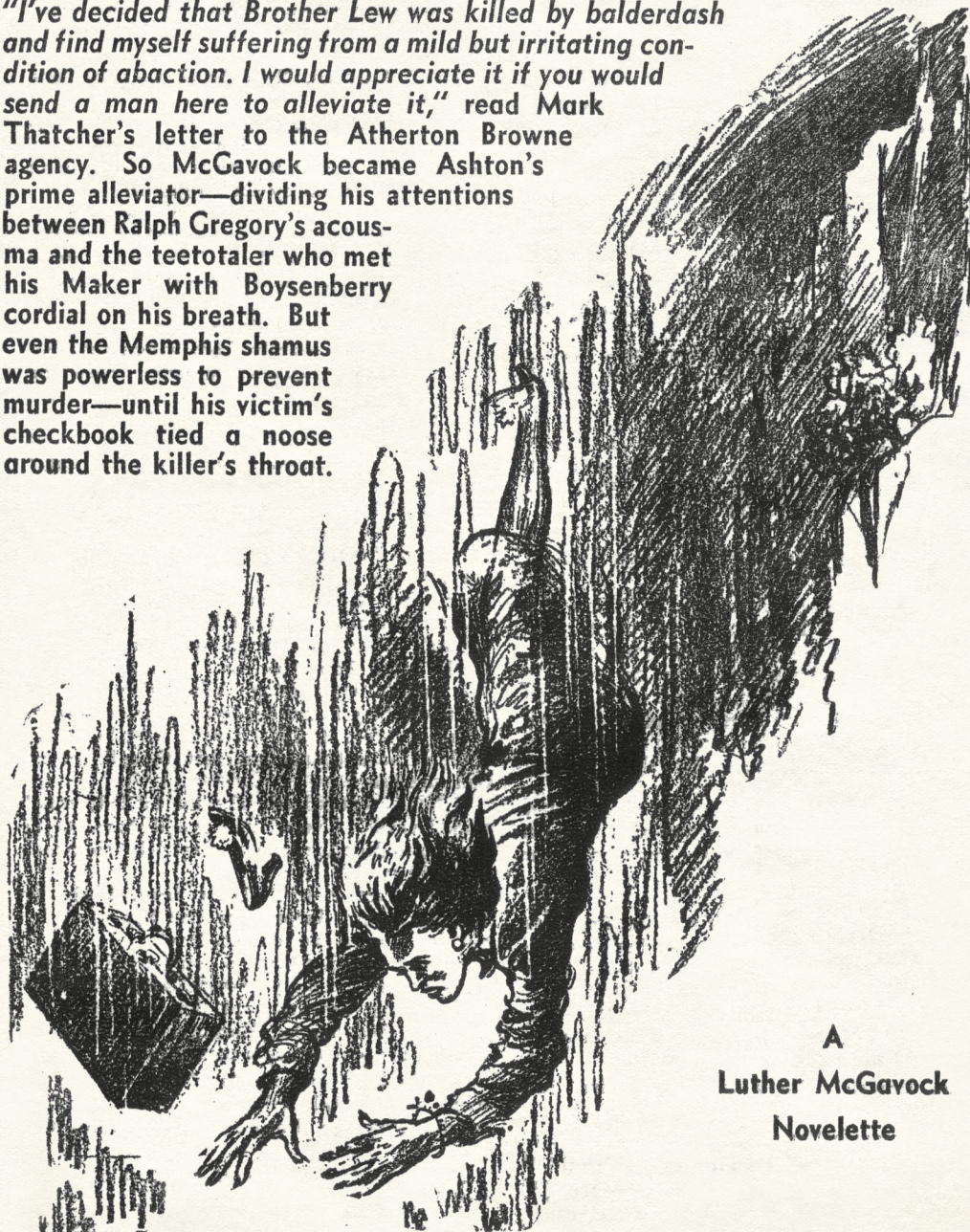
"By the way," said Murtag, "in all the excitement, nobody bothered to score the blind bogey until a while ago. Imagine—Pop Andrews won it!"

I looked around the room in which darkness had brought death.

"This was one blind bogey that he managed to lose."

KILLER STAY 'WAY FROM MY DOOR

"I've decided that Brother Lew was killed by balderdash and find myself suffering from a mild but irritating condition of abaction. I would appreciate it if you would send a man here to alleviate it," read Mark Thatcher's letter to the Atherton Browne agency. So McGavock became Ashton's prime alleviator—dividing his attentions between Ralph Gregory's acousma and the teetotaler who met his Maker with Boysenberry cordial on his breath. But even the Memphis shamus was powerless to prevent murder—until his victim's checkbook tied a noose around the killer's throat.



A
Luther McGavock
Novelette



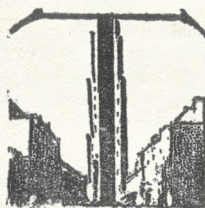
Golden Vevay's broken body was found at the bottom of Jackdaw Cliff. Four hundred dollars was pinned to her clothing and a traveling bag lay nearby.

By

MERLE CONSTINER

CHAPTER ONE

The Deadly Balderdash



HE grimy old office was golden in the autumn sunshine—golden and hot. McGavock, sprawled in his swivel chair, was whiling away the tedium composing a poem about a bizarre brazier in a Byzantine bazaar, and trying to work in a brassiere for luck, when a clamorous thumping came from behind the frosted glass partition.

McGavock got to his feet, strolled into the chief's sanctum.

Old Atherton Browne was seated behind his battered bird's-eye maple desk, waiting.

This morning he seemed particularly ancient and weary. Before him was a small white enamel tray containing an open box of ampules and a four-ounce bottle of greenish liquid. His pitifully spare shoulders were hunched forlornly and his mucous-rimmed eyes, usually so malevolent and venomous, were veiled in gentle introspection. He gazed at his ace detective fondly, spoke in a quavering voice. "Luther, together we tread Life's highway. You are at the crest. But I'm an old man, at the end of the lane, groping in the dusk for the garden gate!"

McGavock was touched in spite of himself. He said brusquely: "I've told you before, and

I repeat it, when you want me, send for me. Don't hammer on the floor as though I were a— What's this all about, anyway?"

"They're having a bit of difficulty up at Ashton, that's a cozy little village back in the hill-country. Maybe you'd like to knock off a couple of days and go up to Ashton to—"

"So that's it!" McGavock cleared his throat with a derisive, hacking sound. "Not me. Get Pete Coyle, he's your pet! I don't even have a decent contract with you." He leaned against the plasterboard wall and glowered.

HE WAS a little man, wiry and tough, with a tweedy touch of gray above his temples. Through the years he'd worked in about every major agency in the country, but never until he'd tied up with this Memphis outfit had he found a real home. He was a genius at getting results—but a hard man to take.

Old Atherton Browne screwed up his face, thrust his fist into his vest against his chest. After a moment he said: "Don't worry about me, Luther. I'm all right." He pawed listlessly in the desk drawer, came out with a legal-sized envelope addressed to the agency. Inside this was yet another, note-sized. "A cagy customer," the old man explained. "He was afraid his message would be candled." From the smaller envelope, he took a folded sheet of paper, handed it to McGavock.

In neat, rounded script was written:

Atherton Browne Detective Agency
Memphis
Gentlemen:

To be perfectly frank, I'm worried. Things are happening here in Ashton that I don't seem to be able to grasp. Last week my brother Lewis died and while at the time we considered his passing normal, by Jove, I've been giving it some thought

and have decided that he was killed by balderdash!

However, I must admit that the theory is merely conjecture. I'm writing you about a different matter. I find myself suffering from a mild but irritating condition of abaction and would appreciate it if you would send a man here to alleviate it.

I'd like a fairly good man and am disposed to offer him board and room here in my home and a generous wage of sixty-five cents an hour. Should he care to bring his wife and family with him while he is on his sojourn, they are, of course, welcome. In such instance, however, we would be forced to make just and amicable deductions in his remuneration.

Sincerely,
Marcus Kimberly Thatcher

McGavock roiled. "What a chiseler! Wants a detective with a wife and family, so he can take out a chattel mortgage on them. Wants to pay his fee by turning his home into a hotel. A crackpot if I ever—"

"He's no crackpot, Luther," the old man said patiently. "And he's well able to raise that sixty-five cent limit. I've heard of the Thatchers. They're a powerful and wealthy family back in that neck of the woods. I'm firmly convinced that you can go back there and dig up a case of homicide—"

"Brother Lewis killed by balderdash!" McGavock snorted. "That's not crackpot, is it! And wanting a man to alleviate his abaction! What is—"

The old man sighed. "Mr. Thatcher, as I said, is a wary human. He uses roundabout speech. Abaction had me stumped, too. I called up the public library. It simply means cattle stealing."

"So someone's been taking his cows. Why doesn't the local sheriff—"

Old Atherton Browne spoke quietly. "The local sheriff isn't quite up to this, Luther. It's my guess there's mighty bad business afoot back in those hills. There's an atmosphere of secrecy about this whole thing that I don't like. I want you to take a flyer on it, see what you can uncover, and I don't want you working for birdseed, either. How about it? This is no rustling case. Big stakes are involved."

"No soap," McGavock said dourly. "Send Pete Coyle. He'll make a better impression with the nobility than I will. He shaves three times a day and watches his whom's."

"Forget it, then. What with this other situation coming up, I'd just as soon have you around the office here. You're my backlog." With trembling hands he shifted the enamel tray on the desk top.

Curiously, McGavock asked: "What's that stuff?"

"Oh, just glucose and digitalis." The old

man smiled bravely. "My heart is giving me a bit of trouble again. Doctor says I have to go home and stay in bed for a couple of days. That's why I can't send Pete, by the way. While I'm away from the office, he's going to be acting manager."

McGavock seethed. He said in a monotone: "I'm to be a big shot, the backlog, and Pete's to be the manager. I see. All I gotta do is be on hand so Coyle can order me around as if I were his personal lackey. I've changed my mind. How do I get to—"

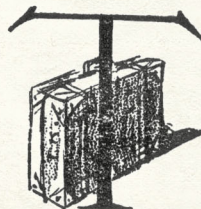
"You get there by bus," the old man said mildly. "Good luck."

McGavock slammed out of the room.

A little later Miss Ollinger, the chief's secretary, entered. The old man was sitting alone, a dreamy, evil smile on his ancient face. He said: "That McGavock is the best man who ever drew my pay, but you've got to boot him into a job." He picked up the box of ampules, dropped it into the waste basket.

Miss Ollinger asked: "What's that? What are you throwing away?"

"How should I know?" the oldster answered, nettled. "It's just some junk I had sent up from the drugstore."



HE bus rounded the black-top ridge-road and McGavock observed the little hamlet just below him, nested in the cup-like hollow. To either side, as far as the eye could see, great tumbling, wooded hills stretched to the horizon.

The town in the miniature valley was larger than he had expected. Maybe a population of, say, six hundred. There was a water-tower, a thriving business section, and the sun's rays glowed on a prosperous-looking cotton compress and warehouse.

The bus pulled up before a drugstore and McGavock got out. It was just at supper hour, Main Street was deserted. He saw the courthouse, a squat, stolid building of weathered stone centered in a patch of weedy, eroded lawn and knew that he'd hit a county-seat. The business section was built about Court Square in a rectangle. In the setting sun, the place seemed almost a memory of something else, abandoned, ghostlike.

McGavock located the hotel at the far, rear corner of the square. It practically took a detective to find it. About halfway down the block-long brick building, an entranceway between two dingy shops bore the information: HOTEL. At the bottom of the sign, beneath the lettering, a scabrous golden hand pointed vaguely up a flight of narrow steps.

McGavock stepped into the gloom, ascended the rickety staircase.

He came out into a small, cell-like lobby. The carpet on the floor was musty, the walls, in the dim light, appeared to be papered with great clusters of twining grapes and flying pheasants. There was an antique, built-in hotel desk, a marble-topped table, a few plush-bottomed chairs. There was no one behind the desk. McGavock set his luggage beside a spittoon, looked about him. At the front of the lobby, a tall casement window was opened wide to the stifling autumn evening. McGavock pushed through a rusty screen door, found himself on a thumbnail veranda.

This small upstairs porch was located, McGavock realized, directly above the sidewalk. From where he stood he could gaze down into Court Square, and beyond. As he turned to re-enter the building, he pretended to notice his companion for the first time. He asked gruffly: "You the manager here?"

The man was lolling just outside the window sill, his cane-bottomed chair tilted back against the clapboard siding. He was a big man, unhealthily fat, and dressed in dirty white flannels and white canvas sport shoes. The ribbon on his filthy sailor straw hat had been lost, and repainted on with liquid shoe polish. His cheeks were stubbled and unshaven and his jowls had been rubbed with talcum to hide this negligence. He was dangling a ready-made polka-dot bow tie on his knee and when McGavock addressed him he hastily donned it, said formally: "Good evening, suh. No, I am not the proprietor of this hospitable hospice. And while I'm on the subject, I may say—"

"Thanks," McGavock said curtly. "That's all I wanted to know."

The fat man cleared his throat, and said cordially: "Welcome to beautiful Ashton, suh! Didn't I, harrumph, just see you get off the Memphis bus?"

"You did."

"Permit me to introduce myself. I'm Jimmy Kitchell, ex-schoolteacher, ex-postmaster, ex-sheriff. An all-around ex-cellent fellow, ha-ha!" The fat man rolled his eyes at his own drollery. "What brings you to our lovely village?"

McGavock looked embarrassed. "You'll have to excuse me. It's a secret."

Mr. Kitchell went deadpan. He gazed far away at the circle of hilltops fading in the afterglow. "I certainly don't want to pry." His voice was bland. "But I have the inside track here in Ashton. Just what is this secret mission of yours, suh? Mayhap I can help you."

"Do you think so?" McGavock seemed doubtful. "O.K., then, I'll take a chance on you. It's snakeskins!"

Mr. Kitchell gaped. "What say? I don't quite grasp—"

McGavock's face became taut. He spoke

softly, rapidly. "That's right, snakeskins. They're using them for everything nowadays, shoes, belts, billfolds. These hills are loaded with rattlers, black snakes, copperheads, and so on—all this fine stuff just going to waste. The way I do it, I go to country schools and offer the kids a prize for the biggest pelt. All skins become the property of the sponsor. Give me five years and I'll parley it into a monopoly! It'll be a gold mine!"

The fat man looked baffled, and a little nervous. He said: "What a remarkable idea." He got to his feet, wiped his perspiring jaw with a soiled handkerchief. "Well, I'll be getting on. Good luck to you, suh." He strolled through the casement window.

McGAVOCK waited until Mr. Kitchell's huge form appeared below him on the street, waddled out of sight around the corner. The detective then re-entered the lobby. He made straight for the phone on the desk. He got the local operator, asked for the railroad station. His connection made, he spoke in a neutral, colorless voice. "Stationmaster? This is Mr. Marcus Thatcher. I hate to bother you, but here is a minor detail that I overlooked. Just when did that wire come in? Two hours ago, eh? Fine. If you have it handy, would you mind reading it to me again?"

The stationmaster's voice squeaked tolerantly. "Be glad to oblige, Mr. Thatcher. She's addressed to you care of Barstowe's Hotel. I don't know why, but that's the way you wanted her. She says: 'Sorry, do not seem to comprehend the gist of your communication. Must be some mistake.' She's signed, 'Atherton Browne, Memphis.'"

Someone was coming up the stairs from the street. McGavock said, "Thanks," replaced the receiver on its bracket.

The hotel clerk appeared at the head of the landing, came forward to greet his guest. He said apologetically: "Sorry to keep you waiting. I was just 'round to see the preacher."

"You mean you've just been down the alley for a couple of snorts of beer." McGavock signed the register.

"Who's this Jimmy Kitchell?" he asked.

"So you know Mr. Kitchell?" The clerk spoke with respect. "He's a very brainy gentleman." He picked up a key. "May I show you to your room?"

"Not just now." McGavock rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "I've got a good friend here in town. I think I'll drop in and surprise him. Maybe you can tell me where he lives—Lew Thatcher?"

The clerk's face expressed polite consolation. "Lew Thatcher passed away last week, heart trouble. Hadn't you heard? His brother Mark lives in that big brick house at the corner of Cherry and Elm. On the left. Lew lived

diagonally across from Mark. The houses are sort of curiosities. They're exactly alike, and built facing each other thataway—"

McGavock nodded absently. "Who's the best doctor in town?"

"There ain't but one and he's jim-dandy, if you can catch him at home. Doc Powell. He's quite a card. Studied medicine all over the face of the earth and come back home to practice. He'll doctor you if you force him to it but his hobby is trading stock. And a mighty sorry swapper he is, too. I'll betcha right this minute he's in some farmer's barn lot trying to trade a buckskin mule for a run-down mare with a speck in her eye. I mind the time, like the feller says, when—"

McGavock chuckled heartily. "No kidding. Think of that. Well, I'll be seeing you."

He left the hotel. Dusk was darkening into night. McGavock stopped a passerby, inquired about a Dr. Powell.

The doctor's residence was on a lonely strip of hillside just outside of town. The cracked pavement came to an end. McGavock took a graveled drive through a grove of locust and came out on a weedy, unkempt lawn. The small, one-story house was flatish, with a peaked roof and a projecting, railed porch that enclosed all four sides of the structure. Like a summer lodge—or a makeshift sanatorium. The doctor's car a cumbersome, clay-smeared sedan, was parked by the front steps. A lighted window showed warm in the gloaming.

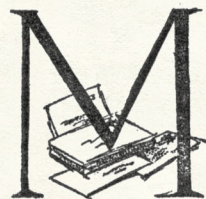
McGavock crossed the porch to the door. He was about to touch his thumb to the buzzer when he realized that the door was standing open. From his position on the threshold, he was looking down a short, dark hall, and beyond, into a brightly-lighted room.

It was then that he saw the corpse.

The head and shoulders of a man—a man twisted in death—lay on the apple-green carpet.

CHAPTER TWO

Cordially Yours



McGAVOCK entered the building. Softly and quickly, he walked down the hallway, stepped into the room at the rear.

It was a combination bedroom and study. The walls were lined with books. There was a small cot with a row of shoes beneath it, several comfortable overstuffed chairs, and a big rolltop desk. A frugal but somehow pleasant layout, the quarters of a man who knew what he wanted in life—solitude and leisure.

The body on the floor, McGavock decided, was Dr. Powell. He was plenty dead. shot

through the temple. A large blue automatic lay under his buckled hip. He was a skinny, undersized little fellow, and he pretty well fitted the hotel clerk's intimations of eccentricity. He wore a stiffly-starched white dress-shirt with gold cufflinks, blue denim pants, and old-time leather motorcycle puttees. His legs were spread-eagled and his black horn-rimmed glasses, unhooked from one ear, lay askew across his mouth. He was a kindly man, you could tell that even in death—kindly and sensitive, and shrewd.

A blind mood of dark, angry resentment surged through McGavock. He dropped to his hunkers, went through the dead man's clothes. In one hip pocket was a key clip, a wallet containing a few bills, a driver's license, some loose change. In the other, wrapped in the doctor's handkerchief, was a large red candle, burned down to a half-inch stub. McGavock replaced the articles, stood up.

He sauntered to the big rolltop desk. On the blotter was a sheet of gray notepaper. A letter had been started on it. The script said:

Dear Mrs. Gregory:

In regards to your husband's acousma, I'm forced to consider it very gravely indeed! I've been doing a bit of extra curricular activity lately, buying cattle, etc., you know—fieldwork. I'm now in a position to inform you—believe me, this comes difficult to such a sweet child—that events occurred precisely as Ralph described them. He may never have the hallucination again but Rest assured that he is perfectly insane. It was, according to my medical opinion, dear girl, a most extraordinary incident and I don't feel that, all things considered, you should make it public, or as yet that I should release the full story.

Sincerely,

Michael Powell, M.D.

P.S. I'm very tired tonight, and blue. I think I'll . . .

Here, at the end of the postscript, the writing fell into a scrawl. It was a weird document. McGavock shook his head in amazement, carefully reread it. After a moment's concentration, he left the study, began a painstaking search of the house.

It was in the third bedroom that he noticed something which interested him.

As he stood in the doorway, crisscrossing the cubbyhole with his flash, he felt that something was wrong. At first it was just a vague sensation. Cautiously, he made a mental invoice. The same straw matting on the floor, the same washstand, bedpan, and bed. But this bed was different—different in one minor detail. *It had no blue quilt on it.*

He stepped forward into the room—and the tornado hit him.

One second he was wrapped in meditation,

the next he was fighting wildly for his life. He knew where the quilt was now. It was engulfing him!

Things happened, and fast. The coverlet fell in an enveloping tangle over the detective's head. McGavock clawed frantically to free himself, an arm from behind grappled him about his waist, twisted him roughly to one side, off balance. And then, in a flash of fear, McGavock realized his true peril, and went to work. He threw his body into a half turn, stepped directly into his assailant, and let loose with everything he had. He brought his right fist up in a haymaker from his belt, felt it crash into his attacker's cheek, followed it through, hit or miss, with three furious heart punches. His assailant stumbled. McGavock pushed his advantage, swung wildly, left and right, fanned the air.

Suddenly, he realized that he was alone.

He pawed the coverlet from his shoulders, stood panting against the door frame. After a moment, he groped about the floor, located his flashlight. He located something else, too. A vicious, wooden-handled pruning knife, its hooked blade whetted to a razor edge.

These folks in Ashton were playing for keeps.

DR. POWELL'S study was just as McGavock had left it. With a bleak, sympathetic glance at the body on the rug, the detective walked to the bookcase. After a bit of searching, he found what he wanted, a dictionary. He'd been mulling over Client Mark Thatcher's vocabulary since he'd left Memphis. He reasoned this way—if Client Thatcher used "abaction" for cattle stealing, he must like big words with concealed meanings. Maybe "balderdash," too, had a hidden meaning. Deftly, he thumbed through the b's. Yep, here it was. There was the ordinary meaning—jumble, but the very first definition was something entirely different. The dictionary said: 1. *Balderdash*—A shabby concoction of liquors.

That was more like it!

Out of sheer curiosity, he then looked up *acousma* and found it to be a medical term denoting an auditory hallucination, an imaginary sound.

He replaced the book on the shelf, sat down at Dr. Powell's big desk. He pulled the sheet of gray notepaper over in front of him, ran his eye carefully over it once again. The message was bogus, of course—that is, half true, half fake. It was written in big, round script, a handwriting easy to forge. The margins were wide, and originally the lines were widely spaced. Someone had simply supplied alternate, interlocking lines, new lines, to change the whole message. Lots of things about it indicated the alteration. The added lines contained so much unnecessary padding—"my dear girl," "you know," "in my medical opinion," and so

on. But most of all, there were two little things that gave it away. One, the forger couldn't change; the other, he attempted to. The word "Rest" originally began a sentence, and as a consequence was a capital letter. The other was that absurd expression "perfectly insane." Originally, the word had been "sane." The meddler had simply prefixed it with "in."

McGavock, taking alternate lines, read Dr. Powell's last message to himself: "In regards to your husband's acousma, I've been doing a bit of extra curricular fieldwork. I'm now in a position to inform you that events occurred precisely as Ralph described them. Rest assured that he is perfectly sane. It was a most extraordinary incident and I don't feel as yet that I should release the full story."

The postscript, of course, was a phony to indicate suicide. "What the hell!" McGavock said sourly. "If this is a round robin, I think I'll join the party." Carefully, and in a remarkable imitation of the rest of the text, he expanded the postscript. When he finished, the garbled message read:

Dear Mrs. Gregory:

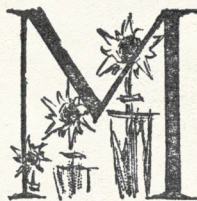
In regards to your husband's acousma, I'm forced to consider it very gravely indeed! I've been doing a bit of extra curricular activity lately, buying cattle, etc., you know—fieldwork. I'm now in a position to inform you—believe me, this comes difficult to such a sweet child—that events occurred precisely as Ralph described them. He may never have the hallucination again but Rest assured that he is perfectly insane. It was, according to my medical opinion, dear girl, a most extraordinary incident and I don't feel that, all things considered, you should make it public or as yet that I should release the full story.

Sincerely,

Michael Powell, M.D.

P.S. I'm very tired tonight, and blue. I think I'll have a tough time staying awake—and yet I must! I know my life is in danger and have every reason to believe that before sun-up I shall be murdered!

"That," McGavock murmured proudly, "puts the kibosh on the phony suicide picture. From now on, the killer's out in the open."



McGAVOCK returned to town, headed for the home of his client. This was mighty bad business. He didn't know what it was all about, but he intended to find out—and soon. There was a sly, ruthless killer walking Ashton's pleasant streets, mingling genially with its citizenry. A murderer who had killed twice—for Lew Thatcher's death had certainly been contrived.

The two big brick houses faced each other across the intersection of Cherry and Elm. In the luminous night, McGavock could see that, as the hotel clerk had said, they appeared to be identical in structure. From their slate roofs, silver-blue in the starlight, to the orderly black evergreens which edged the low stone wall along the pavement, in very detail they were identical.

In every detail except one. The late Lew Thatcher's residence was dark, while Brother Mark's was blazing light from every window.

McGavock strode across the flagstone porch, jangled the old-fashioned doorbell.

The door opened a couple of inches, a suspicious voice said through the crack: "Who's there? What do you want?"

"If you're Mark Thatcher, I'm Luther McGavock—the man from Memphis."

"Oh, splendid!" The door opened wide. "Come in. I have company but I can, ah, get rid of it."

Client Thatcher was a mighty seamy looking customer. He had a bony forehead, a big bony nose, and tiny crescent eyes retracted in pouches of puckered skin. A dab of yellowish hair on his chin was trimmed vaguely in the general style of an imperial. His clothes were good, but threadbare. He said: "I never employ anyone at this hour of night. Therefore your time will start tomorrow morning, say at nine sharp. However, I'm delighted that you dropped by. Come in, we'll just, er, chat, hey?"

McGavock smiled blandly. "Sure, Mr. Thatcher. Anything you say."

The parlor was spacious, gloomy. High on the walls were a few primitive portraits of sallow, stern-eyed gentlemen and dainty apple-cheeked dames. There was a small, serviceable fireplace, some odds and ends of good furniture. There was a bay window with a built-in bench, and seated on this bench was Jimmy Kitchell, the fat man in dirty whites. He watched McGavock's arrival gravely, said: "Well I do declare! It's the snakeskin gentleman. Howdy, suh."

Mark Thatcher said: "I'm sorry, Jimmy, but this is personal. I'm going to have to ask you to leave us alone."

Kitchell got to his feet, ambled lugubriously toward the door.

McGavock ruminated a moment, said: "If I'm going to start to work tomorrow, I'd better get all lined up. Now your letter said you wanted me to find out about some stolen cattle, and investigate your brother's death—in that order of importance. We'll take the cattle first. What about them?"

THATCHER looked blank. "I don't know what about them, and that's the God's truth. After Lew died last week, I was going through his papers, paying his debts and so forth, and I found this bill from Keenan's Feed

Store. A milking stool and feed and other bovine impediments. Now Lew never owned any cows. I searched his stable to no avail. My first reaction was that there must be some kind of error. The story got around town and one day I got a phone call from Mrs. Vevay. She—"

"And who is Mrs. Vevay?"

"She's better known by her first name, Golden. She's not a person you'd be interested in, though. Well, Mrs. Vevay said she'd heard about my befuddlement and called to tell me it was really true. Lew had bought three Jersey cows over in Swanson county just before he died. Now here's the astounding thing. She claims that she herself conducted the deal, delivered the cows, according to Lew's direction, at his stable, in the dead of night, and that if they're not on hand, they've been stolen."

"Don't worry, we'll run this business down." McGavock smiled. "Mr. Mark, you are a man who enjoys the color of his money, as don't we all. I've got a bit of good news for you. While I'm here in Ashton, I'm working for you at half price!"

Thatcher's cheeks cupped greedily, his wispy goatee reared itself avidly. Then he looked a little worried. "What's the catch? Maybe the agency in Memphis just sent me a low-grade detective, is that it?"

"No," McGavock said. "I'm very high-grade. It's not that. It's just that Mr. Gregory and his wife are taking part of the financial burden from your shoulders. Yes, sir, they're sharing the expenses, fifty-fifty!"

Out popped Client Thatcher's cheeks. He boggled angrily. "None of that! No, sir, we'll have none of that!"

McGavock wheedled. "But they're good people, aren't they? What's your objection?"

"Ralph Gregory is a very sorry human indeed, as you will discover. Jenny, my niece, is a dear sweet child, a little highly seasoned perhaps, but I've taken care of her in the past and will continue to do so in the future."

"Hasn't her husband a job?"

"I'm referring to Jenny's own personal income. I don't care to go into the matter."

"Of course," McGavock said sanctimoniously. "Far be it from me to pry. You're interested in those three missing cows, Mr. Mark. To be honest, it's the death of your brother that intrigues me. There's something alluring about the idea of homicide, isn't there? You said in your letter that he was probably slain with balderdash. Now balderdash, as everyone knows, is a mixture of cheap liquors. Would you care to amplify?"

Thatcher was impressed. "You appear to be very astute, despite your irritating mannerisms. Yes, by balderdash, though I used the word loosely, I meant cordial."

McGavock waited. Thatcher said: "Lew had heart trouble, bad. That part of it was per-

fectly true. Medical charts from a dozen big-town specialists will bear that out. Well, not so long ago he had an attack and a few days later, last week, he had another. This second one was critical. He went around to Dr. Powell's little hospital. It cleared up, or appeared to, and at Lew's insistence he was allowed to come back home. The first night home, he died."

McGavock raised his eyebrows politely.

"He had no servants, and being worried about him being across the street there, all alone, I worked out a system of communication with him. His bedroom was upstairs, at the front, and his bed was by the window. If anything should go wrong, he was to hang his bed-light out the window by its cord. I couldn't miss it. That very night, about eleven thirty, before I'd retired, he did it. I went flying over. He was there on the bed, almost in a coma. He talked though, a little."

"What did he say?"

Thatcher was somber. "He said he'd been killed by drink. That surprised me. Lew was always a militant teetotaler. Well, I gave him a good tongue lashing—"

"You scolded him?"

"Certainly. I knew he was dying so I told him it was a disgrace to meet his Maker with whiskey on his breath." Thatcher looked self-righteous. "Then he told me it wasn't whiskey he'd been drinking, but cordial. He said they'd given it to him and explained that it was good for his heart. Boysenberry cordial."

"Maybe he said poison berry?"

"No, I quizzed him on that. He was quite definite."

"Who gave the stuff to him?" McGavock looked at his wristwatch.

"I was so annoyed at what I thought was his moral lapse that I forgot to ask him. He slipped into an unconscious state and never came out of it. Dr. Powell attributed death to a bad heart. I think it was morphia."

"Why?" McGavock scowled. "Do you know more about medicine than this Powell?"

"No, I don't. But I do observe things. There was no glass in the room. If Lew was done away with, the murderer must have brought his own bottle of cordial, must have taken the glass downstairs, washed it and put it in the cupboard."

"Or taken it from the house with him." McGavock changed the subject. "This fat man, Jimmy Kitchell, is he a good friend of yours?"

"Quite to the contrary. I find him most revolting. He bested me in an important business deal some time ago. Since then he constantly comes around, trying to ingratiate himself back into my good graces. I despise him."

McGavock asked: "When you write letters, do you stick them in the mailbox by the gate for the postman to pick up?"

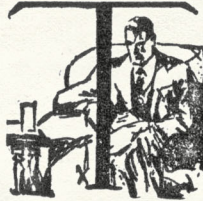
"That's right. I'm a man of habit. I always

attend to my correspondence before I retire."

"Thanks," McGavock said. "Good night."

CHAPTER THREE

Mr. Gregory's Acousma



HE Gregorys, McGavock learned, lived on the south edge of town. He had no trouble at all in locating them.

The small stone cottage lay back in a crescent of neat lawn flanked by formal poplars, sepulchral and rigid in the moonlight.

The girl who answered his knock was a pretty little brunette in her early twenties.

McGavock said: "Mrs. Gregory? Fine. I'm a detective brought to town by your Uncle Mark. I'd like to talk a bit with you—confidentially. Is it possible?"

"It's possible," she said placidly. "Come in. I'll call Ralph, Mr. Gregory." She stepped back, showed him into a cozy living room, indicated a huge overstuffed chair. "Did you know we had another murder tonight? Dr. Powell has just been found dead, in his study. Sheriff Durbin got an anonymous telephone call and there he was—"

"Get Ralph," McGavock said pleasantly. We'll thrash this all out together."

She left the room. McGavock attempted to estimate the household's income. The furniture was fair enough, but inexpensive. The walls were tastefully hung with excellent water colors. He'd just finished his inspection when Jenny Gregory returned with her husband in tow.

Ralph Gregory was a youngish, slightly balding lad in worn brown tweeds. He put out a good handshake, firm and calloused, and his tan, weathered face was creased about the corners of his eyes with a network of crow's-feet. He seemed highly interested in McGavock. "A detective, eh?" he said. "Brother, you've come to the right house. I'm in a jam."

"How so, friend, how so?" McGavock grinned.

"A mysterious female voice phoned me the other night. Jenny's burning. I thought I recognized this party, and yet I couldn't quite place her. It was some kind of joke. She wanted to sell me half interest in three Jersey cows."

Jenny Gregory flushed. "Cows? Malarkey!"

"I wouldn't stand for it a minute, Mrs. Gregory," McGavock said solemnly. "It might have been a wrong number, but I wouldn't stand for that either." He paused. "Uncle Mark feels that his brother Lew was deliberately eliminated. From the looks on your faces, the idea doesn't come as a surprise. Now before I start on a case, I always like to lay in a little back-

ground about my client. He tells me he doesn't care much for you, Ralph, but that in the past he's contributed to the upkeep of this beautiful niece of his. Just what does he mean by that?"

Ralph Gregory wagged his hand at his wife. "You take it from here, Jenny. It's too delicate a subject for me to tackle."

The little brunette nodded. "First we'll take Ralph. When I married him, my uncles put up an awful howl. He wasn't good enough for a Thatcher. He didn't know how to hold a salad fork—I taught him. Then it was his clothes. They said he dressed like a wild man. I taught him a little about clothes, how to tie his cravat, and so on. And still my uncles weren't pleased. By then we began to get the idea they simply didn't like him."

McGavock asked: "Does he have kale?"

"No," Gregory said, "no money, but a pure heart, a wholesome nature, and aspirations."

The girl ignored him, said throatily: "My uncles were all right, just misguided. All my life they've cared for me. About ten years ago my grandfather died. He was an exceedingly wealthy man. He left no will. My parents had both died previous to that. The only heirs were Uncle Mark and Uncle Lewis, with me coming in for a possible minor share. Well, they never settled the estate—"

McGavock coughed politely. She spoke quickly: "I know you think that sounds bad, but it's done every once in a while in families that get along all right together. Now listen to this. From the very moment that my grandfather died, they began dividing the income from the estate in three ways—a third for each of my uncles and a third for me. When I became of age, I got my third, no questions asked, and annually since then I get the same proportionate disbursement. I've no kick coming there, have I?"

MCGAVOCK didn't answer. After a moment, he said: "Do you have any Boysenberry bushes?"

They chimed in together: "No."

Ralph then said: "I don't think there are any in town. Why?"

McGavock said intimately: "There's a fellow been pestering me since I hit Ashton. A Jimmy Kitchell. What do you know about him?"

They both laughed. Jenny said: "Don't tell me that Uncle Mark brought you here to pin something on Mr. Kitchell!" The two of them seemed to be enjoying some sort of secret joke.

McGavock looked attentive. "What's the gag? Let me in on it."

"It's Deacon Witherspoon," the girl answered. "Haven't you heard about him? Here's the story. A few years ago, Ashton put in a water-tower. The engineers from the capital came out and looked over the land, trying to decide where to drill the well. They narrowed

their selections down to two choices—Dowdell's Hollow, just north of town, and the meadow out by Sycamore School. They said there was a good pool under the ground in both places, and both were in easy piping distance of the hill where they were going to put the tank."

"So?"

"Dowdell's Hollow belongs to my grandfather's property. Uncle Mark tried to close the deal but failed. The town bought the Sycamore land—that's where the pump is now. The Sycamore meadow was owned by Jimmy Kitchell."

So that was the business deal Mark Thatcher had referred to. McGavock asked: "But it couldn't have brought much?"

"Only about five hundred dollars. But you evidently don't know Uncle Mark. Five hundred dollars is a staggering sum to him."

"Who," McGavock asked, "is this Witherspoon? How does he tie into the affair? Where does he live?"

"You'll have a pretty hard time locating him," Jenny Gregory answered. "I imagine he's disintegrated. He shuffled off this mortal coil about a hundred years ago. Why don't you ask Uncle Mark? He'll give you all the details."

"Phooey," McGavock said reprovingly. "You kids are just shoving me around because I'm a city slicker. You better watch out or I'll get mad and go back to Memphis. Then you'll be sorry. You need me." He stood up.

Ralph Gregory said quickly: "Don't pay any attention to Jenny, Mr. McGavock. We'll help all we can. As a matter of fact, I'd like your professional advice myself. Have you ever heard of acousma?"

"Sure," McGavock retorted carelessly. "I guess everybody knows about good old acousmas. It's an auditory hallucination, an imaginary noise. What about it?"

"I'm subject to them. That's all. I'm daffy."

The girl began to look troubled. Gregory explained: "A couple of days after Lew Thatcher died, I was in his old house, seeing what was what. We've been toying with the idea of moving in the old place. It's a little Victorian, but much more roomy than where we are now. Uncle Mark wasn't enthusiastic about the plan, but he didn't say no, so I thought I'd give the joint a critical once-over. It was at night—"

McGavock asked: "Will this take long? Shall I sit down?"

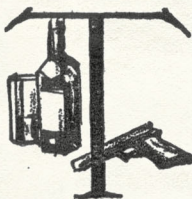
"It was at night. I'd got the keys from Uncle Mark and had let myself in by the back door. I'd inspected the downstairs, had gone upstairs. I was in Uncle Lew's master bedroom when I heard the noise. This was the first time I'd ever been in the old mansion and I was so interested in gazing around that I hardly realized I'd heard anything. About five minutes later my brain registered it, in a kind of delayed response. There had been a low creaking

sound, not like the noise made when someone steps on a floorboard, but as if two polished sticks had been rubbed together. It had come from the room directly across the hall. I went over and investigated."

"A very foolish thing to do. You should have hightailed."

"The room was empty except for an old broken-down sofa and one of those big, old-time wardrobes. I experimented with the sofa—no squeak. I swung open the doors of the wardrobe—no squeak there. On the way out, I even tried the door to the room, with the same negative result. You see, it was all in my mind. It worries me. I can still hear it just as plain—"

McGavock made gestures towards his head with his hat. "I'll be getting along. I imagine I'll be seeing you folks again."



HE courthouse was deserted. McGavock wandered through the corridors, looking for the sheriff. He found the sheriff's office, at the end of the hall, but the door was locked and there was no light. It was just as well, he reflected. He wasn't sure he was quite

ready to talk to the local law. He sauntered out of the building, down the broad stone steps, and dropped onto a park bench in Court Square.

The air was balmy and pleasant. With night, a crisp, sweet breeze had come down from the hills. Though it was scarcely nine o'clock, the town was closing up for the night. A shaggy hill-nag pulled a solitary, rickety buggy down the uneven street, bound for the timber and home. The rectangle of dingy shops about the square was lonesome-looking, derelict of movement. Here and there a feeble night light burned in a store, but for the most part Main Street was blacker than the inside of a hoot owl's egg.

It wasn't long before McGavock noticed the little glow of red. Across the street, in an alley mouth, someone was smoking a cigar and watching him. This made him bull-mad. He controlled himself with difficulty. After a moment, a huge sloppy figure detached itself from the shadows, ambled awkwardly across the square toward him. Once more—Mr. Jimmy Kitchell.

Wordlessly, Kitchell seated himself on the bench beside McGavock. He tossed the stub of his stogy into the dry magnolia leaves at his feet, produced another, struck it to flame. In the light of the match his stubbled, piggyish jaw sparkled like tinsel. His eyes intent on the operation, he blew out the tiny bulb of flame, said vaguely: "Glad I ran into you. Ashton gets a might lonesome at night. Being an ex-

chief of police, I can't sleep. Would you like to walk around while I point out the sights? It might be entertaining to you. I can show you where I arrested different fellers for doing different things. What do you say?"

McGavock was bleak. "I say get the hell out of here. When I want you, I'll send for you."

"Now what on earth do you mean by that?" The big man sucked and the cigar glowed. "You're just downright unsociable. Are you a F.A.T.U. man?"

"No. Don't tell me you're a bootlegger."

"Of course I'm no legger." Mr. Kitchell was highly indignant. "I'm just making sure before I offer you some Southern hospitality. I want you to meet a lady, a mighty fine, educated lady who enjoys the company of sporting gentlemen."

"Who is this lady?"

"Mrs. Golden Vevay. She runs a gambling and drinking establishment that caters to a very select and wealthy group of distinguished citizens. They ain't more than twenty fellers, all businessmen, who can get through her doors."

McGavock got up. "O.K. But I don't gamble. It always brings out the beast in me."

"Nobuddy's asking you to. This ain't the night that the club meets, anyway. I just want you to meet the lovely hostess, and maybe fight your way into a bottle of good red whiskey on the house."

About a quarter of a mile beyond the corporation line, a dirt pike forked off from the State Highway. In the crotch of these two roads was a small triangular yard, enclosed on all three sides by an eight-foot osage hedge. Trespassers were barred by a tall board gate that swung from timber gateposts.

The gates were chained. Kitchell thrust his hand through an aperture, dragged the chain forward so that a padlock came into view. He unlocked the padlock with a key from his watch pocket and they entered. Meticulously, the fat man relocked the gates behind him. McGavock said: "Don't tell me I'm a prisoner?" Kitchell chuckled tolerantly.

There was hardly a blade of grass on the lawn. The bare clay was rutted in the criss-cross pattern of many automobile tracks. Directly in the center of the open space was a foul-looking stucco cottage which stood a couple of feet above the ground on log stilts. The steps to the front door were of new pine planking. In the moonlight, McGavock could see that the roof had been patched and repatched with many-toned tarpaper. The detective followed the fat man up the steps into the building.

They were in a small parlor. McGavock stared about him with interest. To his surprise, the place was scrupulously clean. Five chairs, of assorted ages and styles, were pulled up to an old-fashioned circular library table with a

green felt cover. The floor was laid with red linoleum, the two windows shrouded with heavy lace curtains decorated with a froth of frills and appliqued pink silk butterflies. On the wall was a flowered motto which said, HOME SWEET HOME. Lined up on a little shelf above a cordwood heater-stove were two silk pillows, one saying DAD AND MOM, the other with the greeting, *Hello from Lookout Mountain!* Impressed, McGavock took off his hat.

A woman came through a doorway at the rear. She was about forty years old, not much over five feet in height, and as plump as a partridge. She was dressed quietly, but expensively, and in the latest style. Her fine flaxen hair shimmered in highlights and, astonishingly, there was a tremulous sort of beauty in the doll-like delicacy of her chubby face. She smiled, said: "Good evening, James." She went to the table, drew out three chairs, arranged them in a sociable grouping. "Glad to see you. Sit down."

They followed her suggestion. Kitchell spoke formally. "Golden, this is a gentleman from out of town. He's got time on his hands. How about a drink?"

She gave McGavock a flash of white teeth. "Lots of us here in Ashton have time on our hands." She went to the stove, opened it, and came back with a quart of whiskey and a cruet of homemade catsup. At Kitchell's insistence, she tilted the bottle to her lips, took a quick swig of the catsup as a chaser, passed the paraphernalia to McGavock, who followed her example. The whiskey was red-hot popskull, but he was amazed at how pleasantly the catsup obliterated the gag. Kitchell took the bottles from his hands, joined in.

FOR about ten minutes hardly anyone said anything. The two bottles went the rounds three times. Finally, McGavock broke the ice. "I'm Luther McGavock, a private detective," he said. "I'll tell you something if you guarantee it won't go any further—" They both nodded. "Good. It's this. I'm working for Mark Thatcher."

Mrs. Vevay made a maidenly gesture. "Maybe I'd better leave if you men want to talk."

"No, stay." McGavock went on seriously: "I'm here working on a murder case—that's one thing. The other is a cattle theft. Mrs. Vevay, they tell me you are the one who brought those cattle in from Swanson County. What became of them?"

She grimaced. "How should I know? The whole thing is mighty funny, if you ask me. Lew Thatcher, the skinflint, paid me fifty dollars to go for those cows. Why me, a woman? A man would have done it for less than half!" She suddenly frowned. "What was that? James, didn't I hear something outside in the yard?"

Kitchell shook his head disparagingly. "Not likely, Golden. That gate and chain will keep out prowlers."

They passed the whiskey and catsup around again. McGavock said: "Yes, sir. In Dixie land I'll take my stand. Whoof. What were we talking about? Mr. Kitchell, how did you flimflam the Thatcher brothers on that city pump deal? What's this about a Deacon Wither-spoon?"

They were plenty taut. Mrs. Vevay held up her hand for silence. "There it is again. It was scratching at the door."

Kitchell grinned nervously. "You're on edge, Golden. Ain't nothing outside, honey. No, Mr. McGavock, I didn't flimflam anyone. Did old Mark Thatcher say—"

Mrs. Vevay arose unsteadily. She lowered her voice to a hoarse whisper. "You men listen to me. It's outside the window now. I know. I've got ears like a cat. We're being eavesdropped."

She walked to the row of silken pillows on the shelf, pawed behind them, came out with a blue steel .38 in a man's work sock. She took off the sock, held the gun, butt first, to McGavock who was across the room. "Just go out and look around, and I'll feel better."

Kitchell was between McGavock and the woman, a little to her left. He reached out an enormous hand for the pistol, said good-naturedly: "We'll go, honey, if it'll make you easier. But—"

McGavock said sharply: "*Don't touch that gun, Kitchell!*"

The big man froze. He blinked, said: "What's got into you, Luther?"

"Don't touch that gun," McGavock repeated, "until you hear what I have to say. If anything should happen to me, they wouldn't like it back in Memphis. They know a little about you, Kitchell, in Memphis. I've wired them some interesting lowdown."

The fat man looked hurt. "What you talking about, Luther? You drunk?"

"Maybe. I didn't hear anything outside any window, and neither did Sister Vevay here. Could be a knockoff, couldn't it? Could be you're the triggerman and I'm the goat."

Kitchell looked exasperated. "Don't get unreasonable, McGavock. We're all good friends. We just—"

"Jimmy, me boy," McGavock said genially, "let me tell you what they know about you in Memphis. Client Mark Thatcher wrote his letter to us at night before he turned in, and stuck it in the mailbox by the gate. You were snooping. You examined the letter, saw the Atherton Browne Agency address and figured he was bringing in a detective. That's what you figured, but you wanted to know for certain. You used the old tracer gag."

Golden Vevay said coldly: "Really, Mr. McGavock, I must ask you to leave. I main-

tain a refined establishment and you're getting boisterous—"

McGavock ignored her. "You went to the hotel to wait for me. From the hotel you sent a wire to the agency, a phony tracer. You said something like 'Detective hasn't shown up yet—when can I expect him?' You signed Thatcher's name, gave the hotel as the return address, and loafed around on the veranda, waiting to make a rush to the telephone. But Old Atherton Browne was too smart for you. He wired back that he didn't know what you were referring to. Nevertheless, you stayed around and gave me a cross examination when I hove in on the bus."

Mrs. Vevay said: "James, you and your friend had better leave me. I'm getting a headache." Kitchell's cheeks sagged. He said hoarsely: "Even if it was true, they couldn't prove it."

"It isn't forged telegrams they're after in Memphis," McGavock declared. "It's homicide. If the lady doesn't want us around, I guess we'll mosey along back to town, eh?"

Kitchell nodded dumbly. "Sure," he mumbled. "That's what I say. Good night, honey."

CHAPTER FOUR

Mrs. Gregory's Quandary



SHERIFF Trego Durbin was that variant from the species, a highly talkative hillman. He was dressed in a doggy suit of brown shark-skin and wore a big beryl ring on his little finger. His pants had been home-

pressed and had several overlapping creases running down the front of each leg. His cheeks were weathered and hollow, his hands and chest were scrawny to the point of malnutrition, but he didn't fool McGavock one minute. Sheriff Durbin was as tough as whit leather and as smart as a hungry fox. He said: "That's the way hit stacks up. I shorely appreciate yore jedgment on hit."

McGavock took off his purple pajamas, put on his shorts and shirt. He said sleepily: "When I heard your knock on the door, I could hardly believe it. I thought it was the hotel clerk with my breakfast. See me later, after I've had some food." He reached for his socks. "I don't know anything about any murder."

"Come around to the house," the sheriff suggested, "an' leave my woman dump out some scrambled eggs fer you. We'll tell her yo're from Hollywood and she'll go hogwild a-layin' out her fanciest vittles."

"I'd like to," McGavock answered blandly, "but I'm not allowed to accept free meals while

I'm on a job. I guess I'm awake now. Let's get this straightened out. What's troubling you?"

"You are, fer one thing. We had murder last night and doggone if you didn't come to town, with yore nice yaller travelin' bag, jest in time for hit. In the memory of man, this-here is the fust murder that Ashton's ever had."

McGavock looked mildly surprised. "That's quite a record, isn't it?"

"It shore is, an' we're all mighty proud of hit. We've had election shootin's, an' bush-whackin's, an' jealousy killin's, an' all them things, but we never had no genuwine murder like this Dr. Powell business. I got a anonymous letter in the mail this morning claiming you was a detective an' saying that you was out at the doctor's place at the time of the death. We figure he was slew about sundown. Where was you at sundown?"

"I was right here at the hotel, out front on the veranda. I was chatting with Jimmy Kitchell. He can alibi me."

"Kitchell?" The sheriff didn't like it. "You playin' around with him?"

"It's all over now. We're mad at each other." McGavock put on his tie and coat, sat on the edge of the bed. "Forget that anonymous letter. It was written by the killer—it had to be. Either the killer or some troublemaker. Listen, Sheriff, answer me this—is there any big gambling going on here?"

The sheriff looked offended. "O' course not! They may be some pastime gamblin' down at the poolroom—fellers bets on them little balls amongst theirselves and hit's hard to get to—but they hain't no bigtime stuff in Ashton. I wouldn't stand for hit. Why?"

"I just wondered. Do you recall the name Deacon Witherspoon?"

"Witherspoon? They ain't nobuddy in town named— Oh, I recollect now. Deacon Witherspoon hain't no gambler. In fact he hain't alive. He's been dead a hunnert years." The sheriff's eyes crinkled in silent laughter but when he spoke his voice was level and polite. "Somebuddy's been prankin' you because you come from the city. Lemme tell you about the Deacon."

McGavock said impatiently: "Please do. That's what I'm trying to find out."

"HIT all goes back a few years, when Ashton was puttin' in a waterworks with tower an' all." The sheriff indulged in a bit of chimneysnook gossip. "The experts from Nashville come out and looked over the land. They picked two places to drill—Sycamore School which was owned by Jimmy Kitchell, and Dowdell's Hollow which was owned by the Thatchers. The Hollow was a little closer to where they was going to put up the tank an' the deal was about closed in favor of the

Thatchers when this old guy Witherspoon popped up."

McGavock waited. The sheriff took out a toothpick, began to pick his molars. "Back yonder, afore the War Between the States, they was a small log church in Dowdell's Hollow. Along in the seventies, the church was moved into town. Not the church, o' course, jest the congregation. The old buildin' was left to rot away—I remember playin' around it when I was a little chucklehead. Well, they's a old lady back in the hills, a Miss Donovan, who owns the original record book, afore the church moved. Some o' her kin were preachers. While the water deal was pendin', the editor of the county paper got an idee that he could make a news story out of the history of the de-funct Dowdell church. He went out to look at Miss Donovan's record book."

"And he found Deacon Witherspoon, eh?"

"That's right. An' printed about him in the paper and there was hell to pay. They was just a little mention of him. The church secretary had wrote down that on so and so day they'd went and buried Deacon Witherspoon alongside his dearly beloveds, in the shadow of the chapel where he had so devotedly served. Well that did hit."

McGavock puzzled. "I don't quite get you."

"Ever'buddy in Ashton had heered about the old church, but nobuddy had knowed they was a ole churchyard buryin' ground alongside hit! Graveyard water shore don't make healthy drinkin'. Town Council changed hits mind an' went an' bought Kitchell's property instead. The Thatchers hollered their heads off!"

McGavock said calmly: "Well, Sheriff Durbin, you've come to the right man. I'd be glad to go along with you on this. Maybe the two of us can break it."

The sheriff said smoothly: "Now don't get me wrong. I like you. Hit's jest that the taxpayers would want me to keep hit in our fambly. I'm gonna have to turn you down. This I will do, though. I'll offer you the freedom of the city, as long as you mind yore own durn business. No hard feelin's, McGavock."

"Of course not," McGavock smiled bravely. "It's just the vicissitudes of the profession. You can tell me this, though—were there any clues to Dr. Powell's unhappy—"

"He left a goofy letter." Sheriff Durbin looked cornered. "I been a-studyin' hit but I cain't make too much sense out'n hit." He brought out a big wallet from his hip pocket and McGavock got a split glimpse of a gun-belt and a big walnut-handled revolver. "See. Here she is." He held out the paper, the round robin forgery that he'd left on the doctor's desk.

He bent forward to look at it, clasped his hands behind his back. "I won't touch it, fingerprints, you know." He stared for a mo-

ment at the script, his own among the others, said impressively: "H-m-m! Very interesting. That's the first one of those I've seen this year."

Sheriff Durbin reddened. "What in hell are you talkin' about? What do you mean by that nutty remark?"

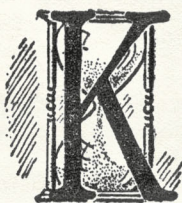
"That letter has been tampered with. It's what we call an interliner alteration. The postscript looks authentic enough, but the remainder has been monkeyed with. Look, even that *in* has been added to *sane*." He pursed his lips. "You just read every other line: 'In regards to your husband's acousma, I've been doing a bit of extra curricular fieldwork,' and so on. The killer added the rest to reverse the meaning. Dr. Powell was telling this Mrs. Gregory that her husband was sane, the forger switched it around so that it says just the opposite."

Thunderstruck, Sheriff Durbin glared at the paper. Finally he said: "McGavock, I apologize. I've shore had a change of heart. By golly, I want you on my side."

McGavock answered piously: "Thank you, Sheriff, it'll be a pleasure." They walked out into the lobby, down onto the street. As they parted, McGavock said: "I'll be seeing you in your office, say, about one o'clock. O.K.?"

"O.K., Luther. I'll shore be there!"

The letter in his hand, the sheriff hurried away, in search of the mayor.



EENAN'S Feed Store was in the alley just back of Main Street. The management would buy, sell, or barter, as the occasion demanded. It catered to countryfolk. McGavock wove his way precariously through the crated chickens, stacked high in the entranceway, entered the cool interior, fragrant with the sweet yeasty smell of grain and clover, musky with the odor of raw small-game hides. He passed through an aisle of bulging burlap bags and packing boxes, located a small office at the rear. The proprietor, a freckled little man in blue denim and plow shoes, was seated straddle-legged across a bench, fiddling with a fish-hook on a catgut leader. Before him on the benchtop was a collection of feathers, quail and rooster and guinea, to say nothing of a piece of red flannel underwear and an assortment of dime-store costume jewelry. He looked up, said: "Hidy, brother. I'm jest about to invent hit, the foolproof trout-fly!"

McGavock said: "Good morning. Mark Thatcher sent me around to talk with you."

"He still gripin' about that statement I sent him?" The man on the bench picked up a quail feather, snipped off a piece of the red

flannel, gathered them in a sort of a little cor-sage about a glass emerald stickpin, tied the conglomeration onto the fish hook. "That should do hit," he said in critical admiration. "They hain't nary a trout in Letcher County kin resist hit!" Before McGavock could retort, he pointed over his shoulder to a canvas ledger on a littered desk. "See for yoreself, brother. Page 37, fifth item down."

McGavock opened the ledger. On page 37, fifth item down, the entry said that on the 17th of the month Lewis Thatcher had purchased a milking stool, a milk bucket, feed, and salt, to be charged and delivered. McGavock said: "What's the salt for? Don't tell me he was aiming to barbecue these mysterious cows!"

"I kin see you don't know much about farm-in', brother. This salt is block salt. Hit comes compressed in small bricks. Stock raisers leave 'em in the field fer the cattle to lick."

"How long does one last?"

"That varies accordin' to rainfall an' sech. Mebbe a season. They melt, but they don't melt as fast as table salt."

"Is it poison to humans?" McGavock asked.

"Lawsey no! I wouldn't want to eat hit, but hit wouldn't poison anybuddy. You go back an' tell Mark Thatcher what I done told him myself a dozen times. Lew called me on the telephone an' ordered that stuff. I even delivered hit jest like he wanted. I delivered hit at night. I put the milkin' stool an' feed, an' so on, in the barn. I carried the salt blocks out in the pasture behind the house and set them in the fence corners."

"I'll tell him," McGavock agreed. "But he's a hard man to convince."

The town was full of hillfolk in for Saturday excitement. Buggies and wagons lined the curb. A little knot of people had gathered in front of the post office and McGavock, curious, slowed up.

A hand-lettered sign in the post office window said, *SALE—Letcher County Ladies Uplift and Helping Hand Society*. So that was it, a country bazaar. Inside, he could see a plank trestle table loaded with pies and cakes and doughnuts, with canned fruit, with golden squash and watermelons and nosegays. It made him a little homesick for something he'd missed. He was standing there on the cracked pavement, indulging in a light recreational mood of self-pity when Jenny Gregory walked up behind him. She brushed his elbow with her hand, said in a whisper: "Follow me."

He caught her reflection in the grimy window, stood rigid until she had passed, and then dropped into step behind her.

She walked about five blocks, out of the business district, turned down a side street and stopped before a small boxlike frame building set flush to the pavement in a vacant lot.

Across the side of the building, in four-foot letters, was painted, *THE ROSELAWN CAFE*. Mrs. Gregory took a key from her purse, unlocked the door, and entered. McGavock lagged a moment, followed her inside. He shut the door behind him, said: "Nobody knows we're here—nobody but the whole town."

It had been a long time since the place had been used. There were several tables with wire-backed chairs, a counter, some empty shelves. Dust was an inch thick. The girl said: "This is one of the Uncle Thatcher enterprises that didn't pan out. If anyone catches us, we'll say that you are a barbecue tycoon with the impulse to expand. Pretty slick, hey?"

McGavock said venomously: "I won't bother to answer. What brings this on? This is bad business. Let's get it over."

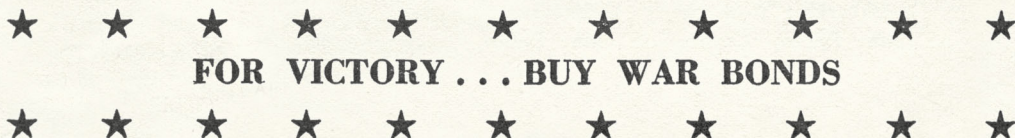
SHE was pretty, all right, and trim and neat in that little-girl print frock. She studied him gravely with level hazel eyes. He wiped the dust from the seat of a chair with his handkerchief and she sat down. She placed her ankles and knees together, folded her hands in her lap, said: "I want to talk to you. I'm in a quandary. My husband and I love each other, but sometimes I think I'm just a trial and a tribulation to him. Is there an easy, non-scantalous way of getting a divorce that would protect him in the eyes of the public?"

"Why, sure," McGavock said heartily. "Just sneak back into the hills some night when he's asleep, crawl into a cave, live there for twenty years or so on earthworms and mushrooms—and he can slap an Enoch Arden on you. Now I'll be getting along."

She flushed. "Don't you want to hear all about it? Such as why I'm a trial to him?" McGavock looked bored. She went on: "I'm very conservative, really, and domestic, but I somehow give him the impression of being flighty and too social-minded. Take that sale around at the post office. All the prominent ladies in town are connected with it. I'd like to be there right now."

"Then why aren't you?"

"I have a feeling Ralph wouldn't approve—



because of the way he acted the last time." "I'll bite," McGavock said. "How did he act?"

She smiled bravely. "It's so personal, I'll have to keep it locked in my bosom. Maybe when I get to know you better—"

McGavock said silkily: "Mrs. Gregory, what you need is financial advice. According to my talk with you last night, your husband's a pauper. Why don't you throw a little coin his way now and then? It might get that hunted look out of his eyes. Maybe even set him up in some small business. Give him a chance to—"

She looked hurt, but her jaw went granite hard. "Everything I have is his, and he knows it. We have a joint bank account. And he's perfectly welcome to draw on it if he should ever need anything. But what could he need? He can charge his clothes at the dry goods store, I feed him, and he can charge his tobacco at the grocery store. He can go in and get a coke whenever its real hot and I keep him supplied with razor blades. Good gracious, he's living in clover! I bet that even makes your mouth water, doesn't it?"

"It does at that. It makes me slaver."

Her voice icy, she added: "And he actually has an income of his own. Not large but appreciable. He owns fishing privileges in a small lake over in the other part of the state."

"Then why doesn't he buy his own tobacco?"

"I don't think you're being particularly sympathetic about this, but I'll answer you. I told you we had a joint account. He puts his money in with mine, as is obviously only fair."

"And you pay him off in cokes and merit badges. Was this Uncle Lew's idea?"

"It was. And everybody's happy. I think you're being difficult about it. How did we get on the subject anyway?"

"Would that give Husband Ralph a motive for murder?"

She cast down her eyes. "Yes. A motive, but—"

McGavock gave the conversation a twist. "I've been thinking about Ralph's strange experience in Uncle Lew's house, you know, the acousma. Have you seen the sheriff in the last hour? Has he showed you the proper way to read Dr. Powell's dying letter? The doctor was saying that your husband was perfectly sane."

"Yes. It was a little intricate, the way Sheriff Durbin explained it, but I certainly agree. Of course Ralph's sane. I have a personal theory that, looking at it one way, everyone in the whole world is actually sane. You see—"

"Oh, sure." McGavock flagged her down. "Now that we're taking down our hair, I'd like to find out a few things for myself. Ralph said last evening that he heard this noise while he was going over Lew's house with an eye to

moving in. Now what happened that you people changed your minds on that score?"

"We haven't changed our minds. We're moving in as soon as the place is redecorated. Uncle Mark wants to touch it up here and there with a bit of paint first. It may take a week, or six, but when he gets through we'll occupy—"

"Who's doing the painting for Uncle Mark?"

"Why, he's doing it himself. It's more economical that way."

"And pennies have a strange fascination for Uncle Mark." McGavock nodded. "However, there's something wrong with this picture. Here's the way you explained it last night. Your grandfather died and left a big estate. The settlement hung fire. There were three prospective heirs, your uncles and yourself. Your uncles divided the income and gave you a third. Right?"

"That's true. They were very scrupulous on that point."

"Now that Lew Thatcher is dead, you're in for a half. O.K. Now if Brother Mark, my client, is so—er—formal about cash on the barrelhead, how come he breaks down and offers you the place rent-free?"

"Oh, he doesn't. We couldn't expect that. We're to pay rent. He pays rent for his place, too."

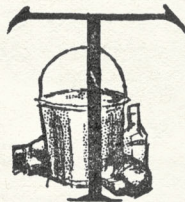
"But look here. There are just two houses, and two heirs. The houses are exactly alike, have the same appraisal value. Why can't one heir take one house, and the other go and do likewise?"

She stood up. "It's not that simple, the way Uncle Mark explains it. I own half of his house and he owns half of mine. So we must each pay rent to keep the records straight. Uncle Mark is fanatic about records."

McGavock put his hat on his head with the flat of his palm. He said rudely: "I'm going now. Give me at least five minutes before you show. And don't waste my time like this again. I'm a busy man."

CHAPTER FIVE

Golden Vevay Meets Her Maker



HE small pasture behind the late Lew Thatcher's residence was bare with shale outcropping, starved looking. McGavock made a round of the fence corners. There was no sign of the salt blocks the man in Keenan's Feed Store had spoken of, and no sign of cattle dung, either. Just shale and Bermuda grass and prickly pear. He left the field and made for the rear of the big brick house. It was high time, he decided, that

he have a look around the place for himself.

On the back porch were several buckets of paint and brushes. He glanced at them, tried the china knob, and found the door unlocked. He stepped into the kitchen, listened, heard no sound. Painter-client Mark Thatcher was evidently taking this day off. McGavock had decided to give the place a thorough searching, from roof to cellar, and the best way to do this, he felt, was to begin with the attic and work down. He took the back stairs to the second floor, located a second flight at the end of the upstairs hall.

The attic, itself, proved to be of little interest. It was a long, narrow, empty room which appeared to run the entire length of the building, just under the roof. A rough ladder, nailed to the south wall, led to the roof, dormer windows looked out over the street in front. The ceiling and walls were covered with stained, dank paper, the floor was tongue-and-groove planking. He had a feeling that there was something wrong here, but he couldn't place it. Finally he gave it up, dismissed his suspicions as being unfounded, and descended to the second story.

Here he found a big bathroom with a new bathtub, an unused bedroom, a sort of upstairs study, and at the front, just as Brother Mark had described, the master bedroom where Brother Lew had died. It was a creepy layout indeed with its mouldy red brocade drapes, its high tester bed, and ornate gilt bric-a-brac. There was nothing of importance here, either.

Across the hall, according to Ralph Gregory, was the room from which the acousma had originated. McGavock crossed the hall.

The room was precisely as Gregory had pictured it to him. Uncarpeted floor, empty but for a large old-fashioned wardrobe which stood between two tall windows, and reached from the baseboard almost to the ceiling. Gregory had said that the eerie noise sounded as if two sticks were being rubbed together, a squeak and yet not a squeak. McGavock swung the wardrobe door open on its hinges. It opened silently, closed silently.

There was no sense to it. The wardrobe was the only thing in the room, and yet it gave off no sound.

Suddenly the answer occurred to McGavock. The wardrobe was on casters. The entire closet had been moved. McGavock placed his shoulder against the wardrobe, swiveled it from the wall. The old casters gave off a rusty, ticking sound.

There was nothing whatever behind the wardrobe. If anything had ever been there, it had been moved.

McGavock shoved back the big cupboard, went down to the ground floor. He made a painstaking inspection of the dining room, kitchen, library and parlor, discovered nothing.

It was in the cellar that he made his big strike—the best break that had come his way since he'd been on the case.

As cellars go, it wasn't much. It was more of a hole under the kitchen. There was no light, so McGavock used his flash. Lacy tree roots had groped through the crevices in the stone walls, hung in the darkness like gnarled festoons. The dirt beneath McGavock's feet was hard-packed and dry, crusted with time. He played his torch about him. Nothing but the moist, whitewashed walls, the raftered ceiling, the vile stench of long disuse. And then, from a far corner, his beam picked up a flickering, silver glint of reflected light. He walked over to investigate.

It was a new tin can. A can of white corn syrup, such as you put on pancakes, and it was almost full. Beside it, on the earth, were three splotches of candlegrease. McGavock remembered the candle-end in Dr. Powell's pocket.

The detective dropped to his haunches, sat on his heels, and studied the objects in brooding concentration. And then he noticed that the ground had been disturbed. He stirred the loose earth with his hand, uncovered a tiny bottle. The label had been scratched from it. Holding his flash behind it, he saw that it contained a bright red liquid, like red ink, or mercurochrome. He uncorked it, smelled it. It was odorless.

Grinning to himself, he laid it back in its hollow, smoothed the dirt. He was beginning to see the answer to a good many things. So that was the story behind this business!

It might prove fruitful, McGavock decided, to have a little talk with Mrs. Sheriff Durbin. Not with the sheriff this time, but with his good woman.

McGAVOCK left the house, as he had entered, by the rear. He'd circled the building, was going down the front walk, when he observed Client Thatcher across the street, fiddling around in his yard. Uncle Mark was down on his scrawny hands and knees, with a paring knife, cutting dandelions out of the lawn. When the detective hove into view, Thatcher jerked his goateed chin to one side, pretended not to notice. If he doesn't want to see me, McGavock decided, then I'd better see him.

He rounded the corner, advanced across the grass. He said loudly, jocularly: "Why, Mr. Thatcher, I'm surprised. Engaged in manual labor—a man of your great wealth and exalted position. You could get a smart chimpanzee to do that for you at ten cents an hour!"

Thatcher stood up with effort, brushed off his trousers, said severely: "Mr. McGavock, please don't yell at me. It's not in our contract. You're a little late, aren't you? Our appoint-

ment was for nine sharp." He reared back sternly. "You've committed a breach of agreement and I'm afraid I'll have to penalize you two dollars for your negligence. You see—"

McGavock spoke with adulation, said flatteringly: "Mr. Thatcher, you're the stingiest client I've ever had. I bet you didn't get that way overnight. I bet you learned it the hard way!"

"My boy," the old man answered, "I'm not stingy, I'm thrifty. I'm the custodian of a great estate. I owe it to my beloved father and my beloved brother to keep this accrued wealth intact. On sunny days I work about the yard. When the weather's inclement I retire indoors to paint and repair and polish. Every dandelion out of the lawn enhances the property, every bit of painting contributes to its value, every bit of carpenterwork increases—"

"Sho', sho'." McGavock nodded agreeably. "You make it sound attractive. I wish I had some property to slave over. And while we're on the subject of interior decorating, I've just come from the house across the way. I was wondering why you started with the floor in your brother's bedroom. I see you've given it a shiny coat of nice black paint."

"Do you like it?" Thatcher seemed pleased. "That's just the beginning. I'm going to do that entire room over. Lew's gone and there's no sense grieving over him. That's the way he'd want it. Remembrances of death can be pretty trying. I'm going to—"

"I think I see your point. By the way, can you keep a secret?"

Mark Thatcher, for a moment, seemed almost human. The corners of his mouth quirked downwards, his eyes twinkled. "Indeed I can, sir. I've kept quite a few in my day. What is it you wish to confide?"

"It's this. I went out last night and did a little roaming around. I heard that this Golden Vevay, the gal who was mixed up in your brother's peculiar cattle deal, runs a ritzy gambling joint for Ashton's firebrand sportsmen. Is this news to you?"

Thatcher pursed his lips, pondered a moment. "Yes, it is news. I can hardly believe it. I'd heard nothing about it, and I'm pretty well informed about local activities."

"Jimmy Kitchell said so."

"Then it's certainly true. It's the sort of a project about which he'd be informed. I'm sorry to hear it. Ashton's such a lovely little paradise—"

McGavock spoke casually. "I was wondering if, say, Brother Lewis had acquired the habit. It's a vice that has a strange lure and reaches into some strange places."

"No." Mark Thatcher shook his head with finality. He showed no resentment whatever. "Lew wasn't a gambler. He couldn't have hidden it from me if he was. It would have cost him money, and I handle our account books.

Any defalcations on his part would have been immediately apparent."

McGavock said obliquely: "Ralph Gregory, they tell me, has a small income. They say he owns fishing privileges on a lake somewhere in the other part of the State."

"So I've heard. It's a most peculiar way to earn a living, isn't it? However, if you're intimating that his income is derived from gambling, I must ask you to disabuse your mind of that idea. It isn't likely that Jenny would condone it."

"And Jenny's a Thatcher, and the Thatchers know everything, eh? Well, that's one way of looking at it."

McGavock's gaze traveled upward to the roof of Mark Thatcher's home, then turned and studied the roof across the street. They were identical, built in the style of the early 1900's—hipped, with a small platform at their peak, a platform surrounded with a little wrought-iron railing. The detective said: "Now here's a question for the grab-bag. Your house is like your brother's, isn't it?"

"In every detail, yes."

"Described your attic."

"My attic? Why, it's empty."

"Describe it anyway."

Thatcher looked irritated. "That's rather foolish, it seems to me. However, if you say so." He closed his eyes. "Let's see. The floor is bare. The walls and ceiling are a patchwork of old wallpapers—you know, odds and ends left over from previous downstairs jobs. There's a ladder that leads to the roof and some dormer windows. Is that any help?"

"No. Frankly, it isn't. How do I get to Sheriff Durbin's from here?"

Thatcher told him, added: "I hope you're not in any sort of partnership with the sheriff in this sad affair. You may make discoveries of a highly confidential nature, and Durbin's a little too garrulous for my taste."

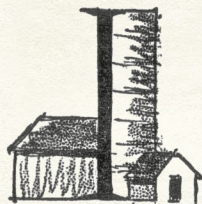
McGavock turned on his heel, started down the walk.

Angered at this abrupt rudeness, Thatcher called out: "You heard my warning. Stay away from Sheriff Durbin! He's a dunderheaded numbskull!"

McGavock stopped deadstill in his tracks. He leered, said blusteringly: "What did you call me?"

Thatcher was taken aback, answered nervously: "I didn't call you anything, Mr. McGavock. I was speaking of Sheriff Durbin. I said—"

McGavock made his face a mask of fury "You called me a dunderheaded numbskull. I'm forced to consider that a breach of agreement. I hereby penalize you two dollars and ten cents. You owe me a dime." He wheeled, headed down Cherry Street. He felt supremely happy.



IF SHERIFF DURBIN was wiring any graft from his fellow Letcher Countians, it didn't show up in his residence. The little white frame house was quaint, rural. A telephone wire ran to the gable but there was no electric wire. Evidently

the Durbins preferred the good old-fashioned kerosene lamp. A grape arbor, lush and pleasant, afforded shade on the front porch, and another ran from the back doorstep to an out-house. A gnomish-looking little woman in a voluminous apron and sunbonnet was drawing water into a cedar bucket at the well. McGavock took off his hat, said courteously: "May I assist you, ma'm?"

Mrs. Durbin said, "Thank you," handed him the pail. He carried it to the cool back porch. They seated themselves in hickory rockers. McGavock asked: "Is the man home?"

"No, sir. He's down to his office. Ashton's havin' itself some very bad trouble at the present an' the sheriff's got the runnin' fits. In, out, bing, bang. Kickin' the foot of his bed at night and yellin' out ballot counts. I do declare I sometimes wish I was back home in the hills where life is calm an' peaceful."

McGavock sighed sympathetically. "How true!" He watched the grape leaves in the breeze turning their smooth, silver-furred undersides this way and that. "The ladies are having a big sale at the post office this mornin'—"

"I know. I'm generally on hand. I shorely hate to miss—"

"Jenny Gregory was telling me she had a little difficulty with her husband the last time they—"

Mrs. Durbin looked indignant. "Why cain't menfolks leave us alone? Hit was a scandal an' a shame. Jenny's as sweet a child as ever was borned an' she's a-totin' a mighty heavy cross, a finicky husband. She baked a nice big layer cake with marshmaller icing. She'd hardly brought it in and went out when Ralph busted through the door, and bought it hi'self."

"Maybe he's got a weakness for marshmallow icing?"

"No. He cain't abide cake of any kind. I heard later, though I hain't know-ratin' no gossip, that he takened hit home and throwed hit out."

"That must have caused a fine domestic squabble."

"It hain't no jokin' matter." Mrs. Durbin looked outraged. "You know what we ladies think? We think he was ashamed of her cook-in' 'cause she's so young. I swear, since that happened I cain't bear to gaze on Ralph Gregory!"

Her voice trembled with emotion. McGavock

said: "It was just one of those things. I wouldn't get all het up over it."

"Oh, you wouldn't? Well, let me tell you somethin', young man, but keep hit under yore hat. Jenny Gregory cain't bake a cake. She can cook a mighty good meal, but cakes go flat on her. When she decided to give a cake to the sale, she brought the mixin's around an' asked me to do hit for her as a favor. They don't nobody know hit but the three of us, but I baked that cake! I get ribbons at the fairs for my cakes. I stood over a hot oven and then that Ralph Gregory—"

A grocery truck came rocketing around the corner. It made the turn on three wheels, bounced up over the curb and down, skidded to a stuttering stop in front of the house.

Sheriff Durbin piled out of the seat, came hurrying around the house. He was hatless, his hair was mussed, and he looked at McGavock with distraught, unseeing eyes. He brushed past them, into the kitchen, and reappeared with a big red-and-white checked tablecloth.

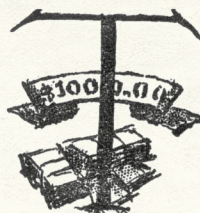
McGavock said: "Howdy, Sheriff. Don't tell me you're going on a picnic?"

The sheriff turned his head, spoke over his shoulder. "This hain't no picnic. They just found Golden Vevay's body at the bottom of a bluff jest south of town. I'm bringin' her to the undertaker—she's in the truck. I gotta cover her up. Hit's more decent thataway. You wanta come along with me?"

"No." McGavock answered grimly. "I've got other things to do."

CHAPTER SIX

The Mythical Deacon Witherspoon



HE detective found Ralph Gregory sitting on the front steps of his stone cottage. He was wearing an undershirt and a pair of baggy corduroy pants. On the lawn before him was a beautiful young Irish setter. The dog was frisking about in circles, watching Gregory's hands. Gregory heaved out a small block of wood, as large as a man's fist and studded with sharp brads. The dog raced after it, retrieved it. "He's just a pup," Ralph Gregory explained. "That teaches him to bite easy on birds. He likes it."

"Maybe so," McGavock answered doubtfully. "But I'm certainly glad I don't have to do it. My gums are tender. Is the wife in?"

"No, she isn't, McGavock. She's in town somewhere."

"Swell. Then we can talk. I've got personal questions to ask."

"Personal, eh?" Gregory's eyes crinkled thoughtfully at the corners. "I'm not so hot at answering stuff like that. I have a natural impulse to evade such issues. However, we'll see what we can do. Shoot."

"I'm going to put pressure on you," McGavock said amiably. "You'll see what I mean in a minute. First, we'll pick up a few tag-ends. Why did you gallop around to the ladies' sale some time back and buy up your wife's layer cake? That seems to trouble her a great deal."

"Man! When you detect, you really detect." He meditated a moment. "Is that cake fracas tied up with this murder business?"

"You tell me."

"I'd say no. Nevertheless, here are the facts, just to be orderly. I'd heard that Uncle Lew Thatcher—he was alive at the time—was circulating around the village putting out the word that he was just a poor bachelor, cut off from his female kinfolk, meaning Jenny, and that whenever he wanted any of his niece's cooking he had to purchase it on the public market. He claimed he always bought Jenny's cakes. Well, my old pride rose up and I—"

"You're lying by the clock. And frankly, I haven't time to listen. Jenny doesn't bake cakes. She can't."

Gregory shrugged. "It's the best I can do on the spur of the moment."

McGavock said genially: "This isn't a parlor game, as you are about to find out, my boy. They tell me you have an income from some lake."

The young man looked nervous. He said rapidly: "It's nothing much, but in a way I'm pretty lucky. My folks, on my mother's side, owned some land and there was a lake—"

"Of course. What I want to know is where this lake is. What county, near what town—longitude and latitude. You're in a hole, son, and you'd better come clean."

"Oh." The young man studied the tips of his fingers. "I'm beginning to learn a little about big city detectives. So this is what you meant when you said you were going to apply pressure." His face looked strained, tired. "Presto, and it's all over, eh? You know, McGavock, you haven't been in town a day, and I think you've got me."

"O.K., then, I got you. Let's hear about that phantom income."

"McGavock, that income is blackmail!"

"Blackmail?"

"Yes, I'm pretty sure."

"You mean you're on the receiving end of a blackmail payoff and you still have doubts?"

Gregory took a deep breath. "To be charitable to myself, I like to think of it as involuntary blackmail, except for the obvious fact that I've been accepting it."

"Involuntary blackmail? I thought I'd heard

of everything. Would you care to elucidate?"

"It started about a year ago, I guess, in a pretty devilish way." The young man's voice was low. "I got a letter from Nashville with a hundred-dollar cashier's check on a Nashville bank. The letter said that the money had been awarded to me because of my remarkable eyesight. That was all—just one little sentence signed with an illegible scrawl. Well, I was confused. I banked the draft for safekeeping and waited to hear further. Two weeks later I got another check, and this time the envelope was postmarked right here in Ashton. This letter was a different story."

"Let's have it."

"The letter said I was getting the money with the stipulation that I could forget anything and everything I might have witnessed between seven and eight, on the night of the 3rd. It said that from that letter on I would receive a check weekly, and that the payments would extend for one year."

"And that was a year ago?"

"Yes. I figure my next check will be the last."

McGavock said pointedly: "Now, I wouldn't want to ask you to break such a profitable arrangement, but would you consider—"

"You're wondering what happened on the evening of the 3rd? I'll be glad to tell you. If it looks like five thousand dollars a year to you, I wish you'd enlighten me. I was at Uncle Lew Thatcher's. In those days, Jenny was still attempting to placate the old gentleman and, shoes polished, hair neatly parted, I was on one of my periodic errands of humility. He let me in, in that grudging way of his, and we sat there in his study for an hour and chatted. He did the chatting, I did the listening. The conversation ran, as usual, to finances and family prestige, both of which I appear to lack."

"But what did you see?"

"I didn't see anything that I remember—until I got up to go. There was a folded newspaper on the desk and as I stood muttering my farewells, I happened to notice a sports item about a field trial for bird dogs. Without realizing what I was doing, I picked up the paper. When I started to replace it, I saw a dozen or so steel penpoints on the desktop, all laid out in a little row. Stub points, ball points, crow quills, all kinds. There was a small file there, too, and a piece of emery paper. I said: 'I never heard of filing down penpoints. And look, there's just about every style, too!' Lew passed it off with a shrug and said something about them belonging to Mark." Gregory paused. "From the way he said it, I had a feeling that he was lying."

McGavock frowned. "Did you say anything about it to anyone?"

"I think I mentioned it to Jenny when I came home, but she wasn't interested." Gregory hesi-

tated, asked quietly: "Would you like to hear my analysis of the thing?"

"Sure."

"It's simply that the whole affair's fantastic. Let's look at it logically. The only possible persons involved are Thatchers—one, two, or all, including Jenny. All right. For some reason, if that's true, they're buying me off at the rate of five thousand a year. Why? I'm in the family. The Thatcher clan is notoriously close-pursed and here they're tossing hundred-dollar bills into my lap like—"

"I hate to mention this," McGavock said, "but have you spent any of that kale? No? You banked it, but you've banked it in a joint account with Mrs. Gregory. If it's Thatcher dough, it's right back where it came from—if it's Thatcher dough, I say."

"If you're implying that I don't have the freedom of my own bank account, you're being just a little on the insolent side."

"And that's been said before, and better." McGavock smiled mirthlessly. "This is a bit more serious than you imagine. Say it was Uncle Lew who was sending those checks. Now he's dead, murdered in my book, and now, it just so happens, there'll be no more income. You said it was to last a year and the year's up. Do you see what this might mean?"

Gregory was ashen. "It gives me a motive for murder. It looks as though I had Lew in my talons and when he stopped paying off, I killed him to silence him! And it's all there, my deposits and everything, in the bank records."

McGavock said soberly: "How do I know that isn't exactly the case? In the meantime, don't tell anybody you've talked to me—and I mean *anybody*!"

SHERIFF TREGO DURBIN locked the door to his office, twisted the knob to test it, and started down the cool corridor at McGavock's side. They left the courthouse by the back, came out into a small combination hitching and parking lot. The sheriff reached languidly for a battered lard can, filled it at a cement watering trough and lugged it to the radiator of a powerful, gray coupe. Fastidiously, he carried the bucket back to the very spot on the dry earth from where he'd taken it, and joined McGavock on the car seat. He got the big job rolling, tooled it out of the narrow alley like an expert. McGavock sank back into the pneumatic leather cushions.

They rolled down Main Street, past the cotton compress, left the city limits. When they reached the tall osage hedge which enclosed Golden Vevay's yard, they turned from the State Highway, rambled onto the dirt fork.

McGavock sighed. "Good old Golden Vevay. What happened to her?"

"Was you acquainted with her?" The sheriff

looked astonished. "Where'd you meet up with her?"

"I was a guest in her home last evening, suh. More about that later. What's the lowdown on—"

"Like I done tole you, we found her south of town, at the bottom of Jackdaw Cliff. Ever' bone in her pore body is busted som'eres. She was all dressed fer travelin'."

McGavock perked up. "No kidding?"

"That's right. Her little black bag was found a few feet from her corpse, with underclothes and stuff in hit."

"Was she carrying any money?"

"Yep. Had four hunnert dollars in big bills pinned under her arm. Does that make any sense to you?"

"It certainly does. Where is she now?"

"Where would she be? Why, at the undertakers. In the stockroom back of Lace Heppleman's general store. Lace is the Letcher County embalmer—"

The dirt road began a climb into the hills. They left the hickory and oak, turned left at a tiny frame school, and hit the ridge-road. They were in pine country now, sweet-smelling and silent. Finally, the timber broke and they could see a little hollow before them. Directly below them was a miniature cabin, its broad shingles weather-warped, the chinking crumbled from its rough log walls. The small, cup-shaped depression was enfolded on all sides by the wild, steep hillsides. It was lonely, isolated, but the hollow and the cabin seemed somehow to McGavock to be proud and arrogant, sufficient unto itself. Sheriff Durbin said: "Put yore teeth in yore pocket, Luther. Here we go!"

He spun the wheel and the big coupe bucketed down the slope. McGavock's shoulders slapped against the back of the seat, his hat went over one eye. He grabbed blindly for anchorage, got a fuzzy prolonged impression of whipping brush and endless rose-and-silver sage and the car eased to a stop. "Here we are," Sheriff Durbin said calmly. "Get out."

Understandingly, the sheriff had pulled up a good fifty feet from the building. He called out: "Miz Donovan! Hit's me, Trego Durbin." There was no response. McGavock stared at the desolate, abandoned-looking little place, its one window webbed with cracks, vine tendrils prying loose mortar of the crude stone chimney.

The detective said: "Maybe she isn't at home?"

"Oh she's at home, all 'right, Luther," the sheriff insisted out of the side of his mouth. "She's jest a-doin' like she was brought up to do—hidin' from menfolks. A hill-lady always takes to the house when strange men come into view. They's city fellers that have drove all through the hills an' swear they hain't nothin' in the brush country but little

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boys an' men." He lowered his voice still further. "I see her now, dadrat her. She's a-peep-in' out the corner of the window. I'll try once more." Woodenly, he yelled: "Oh, Miz Donovan! Hit's the Durbin boy. You recall me!"



A WOMAN appeared in the dog-run. Except for the fact that she wore a long cotton dress, you could hardly tell that she was a female. Her hair was done up on the top of her head under a knotted red handkerchief. She was gaunt-framed, with a long horse-face, lean and bronzed. She was barefooted, and her feet, like her hands, were horny and knotted. She had an old Marlin .30-30 under her arm, and she held it just as politely as she could under the circumstances. She stared at the two men for a long moment, said at last: "I recall you now, Trego. Yo're from Two Chapel Hill. Yore mother was a Flannagan and yore pappy saw the light at the age of fo'ty-one. Come in an' set."

"Thank you, ma'm." The sheriff beamed. "This is Mr. McGavock. He—"

"You mean McGannet, Trego, from over at Birdfoot Branch. I hain't laid eyes on a McGannet for years. When I was a girl, they was knowed as very trashy humans. But I'm not one to turn a leper from my door. Come in, come in."

The bedroom-parlor was feebly lighted, but clean. There were a few staunch chairs, a table, a pallet in the shadowed corner. Though the day was warm, a log smouldered in the fieldstone fireplace. The three of them seated themselves stiffly about the hearth. Sheriff Durbin said: "Miz Donovan, we come here to talk about that church record you've got. I've heerd about hit but I hain't never seen—"

For the first time, she smiled. "That book has give me a heap of bother lately. Yo're the second that's asked about hit in the last five year. Some time back the editor of the Letcher County Journal come out an' read it, an' went back an' printed all about hit in the newspaper. I've heered say hit caused quite a rumpus an' even had somethin' to do with Ashton's water-tower. Shore, Trego, y'all can see hit."

There was a cabinet by the mantel, a cabinet filled with starfish and sea urchins and dusty, branching coral. She fumbled around in the gloom, came out with an old leather-bound book. McGavock took it from her hands, went to the window with it.

It was an authentic church record, that was certain, and an ancient one. One by one, he leafed through the dry pages of crisp, decaying paper, read the spidery brown script. For the most part the items were about church busi-

Killer Stay 'Way From My Door

ness—tithes, collections, births and christenings. Then he located the Witherspoon note. It said: *On this day, May 7th, 1847, we buried our good friend and brother, Deacon Witherspoon, beside his wife and loved ones, in the protecting shadow of the church he so devotedly served. Signed, P. K. Yarwood, Sec.*

It was the last inscription in the book. McGavock flipped back a few pages. It was a different secretary, too.

McGavock beckoned the sheriff to him, pointed out the page. "It's a forgery, Sheriff. He stuck it back at the end here since that was the only place he could sneak it in. He changed the secretary's name because, although he's a smooth penman, he didn't want to tackle all that fancy shaded script. Nope, Deacon Witherspoon never died—because he never lived. That's no obituary, anyway. An authentic record would say Deacon Tom, or John, Witherspoon."

Miss Donovan rose ghostlike from her chair. She took the book from their hands, restored it to its cabinet. "I didn't ask you-unes to come out here an' make light of my beloved relics! That record has been in my family for nigh a hunnert year. If it sayeth Deacon Witherspoon died, then, 'y doggies, that's what he went an' did. An' no new-fangled smart alecks can change hit!"

The sheriff said hastily: "Jest a minute, Miz Donovan, jest a minute. What Mr. McGavock is tryin' to say is—"

Miss Donovan said coldly: "If yo're headin' back to town, don't leave me stop you."

As they climbed into the car, she said: "Yo're the sheriff, hain't you, Trego?"

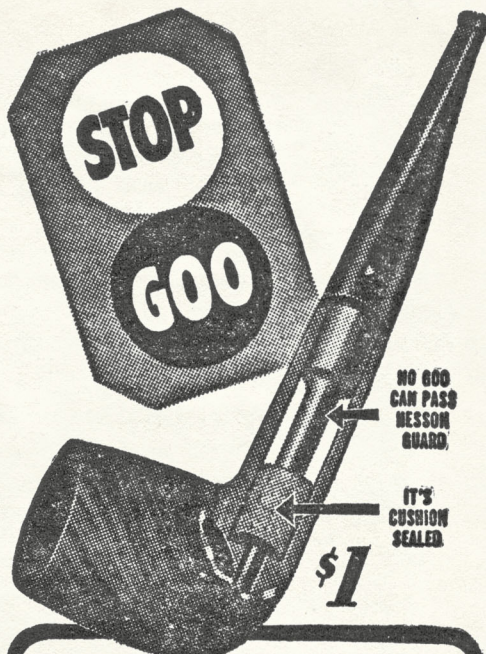
"Yes, ma'm."

"Then why don't you keep yore own house in order? Why you meddlin' around back here where you hain't wanted?"

Sheriff Durbin was offended. "What you mean, ma'm, keep my own house in order? You ferrerin' to those killin's that—"

"No, I hain't ferrerin' to no killin's. I don't know nothin' 'bout no killin's, an' I don't want to. I'm referin' to that addle-pated courthouse you run. I been intendin' to call this to yore kind attention for some time now. A while back I got a crazy letter from the courthouse at Ashton sayin' they was goin' to foreclose my mortgage on a certain day. Well, I don't have nary a mortgage on nothin', as my Redeemer knoweth, so I walk to the State Highway an' ketch a bus on in. What do I find out? They hain't nobuddy at the courthouse wants to own up they sent that slanderous letter. I swear, I'm glad I don't live in the city where such goin's-on sap the very vitals o' them that—"

McGavock asked quietly: "Miss Donovan, when did you get this mortgage letter? Before



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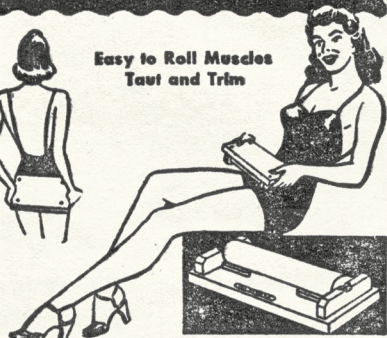
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or after the editor came out to see your record book?"

"I got hit about a week before, Mr. McGannet, if hit's any of yore business."

McGavock waved her good-by. He said: "O.K., Sheriff, get rolling. That does it."

THE drive back to town started in a pained silence. Sheriff Durbin devoted his entire attention to handling his car. It was pretty plain that he was uncomfortable. After a while he spoke. "Durn them Donovans! The way they put on airs! They hain't one whit better than the Durbins, an' they ding-dang well know hit. I've heered my pappy say hit was a Donovan that stole the new window curtains back at Two Chapel when he was a young 'un. Yes, sir, a Donovan stole them nice new mail-order curtains to make his bride some petticoats. The secret come out when they had a fire an'—"

McGavock broke into the reverie. "I'd like to get back to Golden Vevay for a moment. Wasn't there anything in her overnight bag but clothes?"

"Nothin' but clothes, Luther."

"I see. Now what was in her purse?"

"Rouge an' lipstick an' cigarettes. Some small change an' a couple of one-dollar bills."

"That all?"

"Yep."

"Then there's something missing, something important." McGavock eyed his companion. "Aren't you all fired up over what we just discovered, over that Witherspoon forgery? You see what it means—"

Sheriff Durbin said reluctantly: "I hate to tell you, but I figger you're all wrong on that. Witherspoon died a hunnert year ago. It's wrote there in the church book and church books are good enough for me."

"You better come in with me on this, if you want to catch your murderer. That item's a forgery, and a fluoroscope will show it up in a hurry. Here's the way our party worked it. He sent Miss Donovan a letter, just at the time they were deciding on the location for Ashton's water supply. The letter was phrased to make her mad, bring her flying into town—which it did. The forger stole into her house while she was away, and did his fancy penmanship."

"But why, Luther? Wait a minute, now. Kitchell had the Sycamore land an' the Thatchers had the Dowdell property. That fake entry condemned the Dowdell deal, and Kitchell sold his Sycamore place. You a-sayin' Jimmy Kitchell negotiated all that jest to make a little money?"

"There's more than a little money involved, Sheriff. But let's look at it another way. Maybe the Thatchers didn't want to sell."

"O' course they wanted to sell." The sheriff

Killer Stay 'Way From My Door

looked disgusted. "They was belly-achin' all over town when Kitchell beat them to it."

"You were here at the time, and know more about it than I do. But let me put it this way. Could the Thatchers really have sold?"

"Why not? They owned the Dowdell property, didn't they?"

"That's my point. Did they?"

"Sure they owned hit. Hit was part of the estate. O' course, they'd have to settle the estate to get a good negotiable title to it but—"

"That's all," McGavock said. "There's the solution to your case." He considered a moment. "When does Lace Heppleman, the undertaker, close shop?"

"Undertakin's jest pin money for him, a kinda hobby. He runs a general store. Locks up about nine. Why?"

"Meet me in the alley behind Lace Heppleman's at nine. And don't be late!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wired for Death



UTHER MCGAVOCK returned to his hotel. He bathed, shaved, and put on clean underclothes. It had been a strenuous day and he was a little tired. The bath and shave picked him up considerably. He was alone in the hotel dining

room, stowing away a succulent supper of black-eyed peas and stewed chicken, when Jimmy Kitchell came wandering in. The big man strolled over, pulled up a chair, and sat at McGavock's table, facing him.

McGavock first thought he was drunk, and then wondered if the man had been weeping. Kitchell spoke in a deep vibrant voice. "They've killed Golden Vevay, did you hear?"

"You mean the lady who put the bee on me last night? Yes, I heard."

"I'm not going to argue with you, McGavock. It may be that she really heard someone outside that window last night. It looks like it now, doesn't it?"

"Could be, I guess," McGavock replied.

"You bet. And you know what I think? I've got a hunch I'm next on the list!"

"Death has struck for the last time, Kitchell. Take my word for it."

Kitchell said heavily: "Golden Vevay never hurt anyone. She ran a gambling joint, but her games were square and she catered to a select clientele of respectable gentlemen. And they pushed her off a cliff. Ain't it awful?" His eyes filled up. "McGavock, I liked that woman mighty well. From the way I feel now, I guess I loved her. Yes, sir—"

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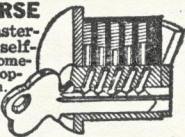
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McGavock said: "Tut-tut! Let's not—"

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"I know she'd appreciate it, but why not let her pay her own way? She can afford it."

"You mean that four hundred dollars she had on her? Pshaw, that's not a drop in the bucket compared to what I aim to—"

"Listen, Kitchell," McGavock declared quietly. "You might have been in love with Vevay but you evidently didn't savvy her. She left plenty scratch."

Kitchell's liquid eyes searched McGavock's face. "I don't believe it!"

"I know what I'm talking about. I've just come from Lace Heppleman's back room. I've been going through Vevay's things. I found her bankbook. It was in her overnight bag, stuffed down in a toe of a shoe. She was filthy rich when she died."

"Baloney!" Kitchell smiled sadly. "Let's see it. I won't believe it, till I—"

"I don't have it with me. That Lace Heppleman's quite a character. I tried to swipe it, but he watched me like a hawk."

The big man looked puzzled. "Why swipe it?"

"I'm trying to beat Sheriff Durbin to the draw in this mess. I want to keep it out of his sight until I figure it out. That bankbook ties in with all these killings!"

Kitchell pushed back his chair, got to his feet. "Well, you can count on me. I won't tell the sheriff." He seemed dazed. "It's too much for me! I'm completely flabbergasted!"

McGavock nodded good-by. "Sure," he murmured sympathetically. "Sure."

IT WAS twenty minutes of nine when McGavock paid a second visit to the house in which Lew Thatcher had died. He'd seen something in that attic, something that didn't register. He decided to return and clear it up.

He crossed the lawn toward the dark building, tried the back door. A skeleton key from his keyring flipped the bolt in the mortise lock.

Hooding his flash with his hand, he made his way up the stairs to the attic.

Foot by foot, he inspected the empty room with his beam. Then he noticed it—the big stain on the ceiling, a large brownish blotch such as comes from a leaky roof. He walked to the ladder, played his flashlight up and down it. At the top of the ladder, set into the plaster of the ceiling, was a small trapdoor. He ascended, laid the flat of his hand against the door and lifted.

The trapdoor refused to budge.

He examined it. The beam of his torch caught flecks of silver in the yellow pine. It had been nailed, and recently, with new finishing nails.

Killer Stay 'Way From My Door

He went back down to the kitchen, prowled around, located a flat-iron and a bath towel.

He turned to the attic, again ascended the ladder. He wrapped the towel around the iron to deaden the sound of the blows, and slammed into the trapdoor. The third stroke and the nails gave with a wrenching squeak.

He climbed upward, through the opening, and found himself in a tiny garret, a small, cramped space between the attic ceiling below and raftered roof above.

And the first thing he saw was *starlight*.

Above his head was a second door that led out onto the roof. And this panel was open—about three inches.

He got his flashlight up where he could use it and cold sweat beaded itself along his jaw.

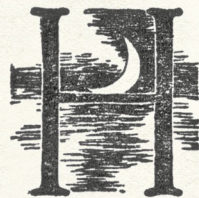
Three sticks of dynamite were neatly brack-eted to an overhead timber by a leather strap.

With a steady hand, he disengaged the de-tonating cap. It was a tricky set-up—and mean. Wires ran from the dynamite to a copper plate on the doorsill. There was a companion plate on the trapdoor.

The trapdoor was propped open by a small white cube which McGavock first took to be chalk. Then he knew it wasn't chalk at all—it was a small block of salt. This was the end of the trail. Here was the cattle salt!

It was a simple device, and deadly. With rain and bad weather the salt would slowly dissolve, the trapdoor would drop closed, the circuit would be completed. And the force of dynamite, McGavock had always heard, drove downward.

McGavock left the house, crossed the street to the home of his client. It was almost all over now, and it might be a good idea to have Uncle Mark present at the showdown.



UDDLED in the alley back of Main Street, McGavock and his client stood with the sheriff in the protecting shadow of a blacksmith's shop, their eyes fastened on the shabby row of stores across the rutted road. The rear of Main Street was

actually one long brick facing, with a continuous, dilapidated loading platform a few feet from the ground, onto which the back doors of the shops opened. Singly, and almost in order, the window lights were going out.

Finally, after a hesitant interval, the window directly opposite them went black. "That's hit," the sheriff exclaimed. "Lace Heppleman's general store an' undertaking parlor. He's went."

McGavock asked: "You got the passkey from the marshal?" Durbin grunted.

They crossed the alley, ascended the plat-form. The sheriff produced a key, unlocked



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the door, and they entered an impenetrable blackness, smelling of harness oil and roofing paper. Sheriff Durbin turned on his big coon-hunter's flashlight.

It was a typical country store back room, topsy-turvy and littered with an assortment of odds and ends. Over in the corner, on a rough plank table, lay the body of Golden Vevay. The undertaker had given her an old style hair-do, the same that he'd been using for the last decade, had touched her up rather skillfully with rouge, and all in all, she appeared to be enjoying the experience of death.

Mark Thatcher's voice sounded querulous, reedlike, in the somber silence. "This, gentlemen, is scandalous. What are we doing here anyway? I demand—"

Sheriff Durbin threw his flashbeam on a shelf above a flat-topped desk. "Hit ought to be there. He puts their effects up yonder."

"You hold the light," McGavock ordered. "We've got to work fast." There was a pitiful little bundle of garments tied together with a string, the clothes she'd been wearing when she died. McGavock passed them up, turned to a large alligator pocketbook. Nothing there, other than the personal articles the sheriff had previously mentioned. He picked up the pig-skin overnight bag. Here he found it—the bankbook—beneath the lining and fastened to the side of the case with adhesive tape. He ripped it out, opened it, ran down the column of figures. "We've got him now," McGavock grinned. "Our killer. He can't squirm out now."

Client Thatcher's blue-veined hand reached forward. "Oh, a bankbook. Let me see. . . Perhaps I may be of some assistance here. I'm something of an expert on finance—"

There was a sharp metallic *clink* out front. Sheriff Durbin switched off his light. McGavock said in a low voice: "Our company's arriving per schedule. He's forcing the front door. Quiet everybody. Are you ready, Sheriff?"

"I'm ready, Luther. I got hit out an' cocked."

After a moment, they caught the sound of cautious footsteps. The footsteps became clearer, less guarded. And now they knew it—the visitor was here in the backroom with them. McGavock said: "Now!" Sheriff Durbin flicked on his powerful flash.

Jimmy Kitchell stood centered in its beam. The big man was startled, slack-jawed. He held his hamlike hands before him, in a wrestler's position, fighting off the blinding glare. McGavock walked to the wall, turned on the ceiling light. Kitchell said stupidly: "What you folks doing here? I just want a peaceful minute with Golden before they—"

McGavock whispered in the sheriff's ear. Sheriff Durbin started for the back door. On the threshold, McGavock halted him, called out: "She's sitting in Court Square, according

Killer Stay 'Way From My Door

to agreement. She may give you trouble, but bring her along."

The sheriff nodded, then went out.

About three minutes went by, three minutes of tension.

And then, suddenly, there was a scuffle out front, out in the store. Sheriff Durbin appeared in the doorway, herding a handcuffed Ralph Gregory. Durbin looked grim. "Jest like you said, Luther. He was out there eavesdroppin'."

"Just one more mistake, Gregory," McGavock said calmly. "When Kitchell told you about the bankbook, you should have stayed clear. I see you've got him manacled, Sheriff. That's right. He's bad medicine—he's killed three times. He attacked me last night with a quilt and a knife."

GREGORY narrowed his eyes. He spoke softly, viciously. "You'll pay for this, with your hides. You can't kick me around just because—"

Mark Thatcher cleared his throat. He said pompously: "Now, in my opinion—"

"Shut up," McGavock said roughly, "until you're called upon. Or I'll have to penalize you again! Any questions, Kitchell?"

"None, McGavock," the big man answered. "Except I don't want to get mixed up in this. I never killed anybody in my life."

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Merle Constiner

"Well, just hang around. We can use you. Sheriff, since I hit town I've really been working for Dr. Powell. I liked the looks of that man, and I'm picking up where he left off. I've been working for Powell but Mark Thatcher's going to foot the bill. Ralph's first kill was Lew Thatcher. He went to his home just after the old man had come back from the hospital with a bad heart. While the oldest was upstairs in bed, he went to the cellar, lit a red candle, the one you found on Powell's person, and mixed up the Boysenberry cordial. He simply colored corn syrup with red cake coloring—and added a slug of poison. He called it Boysenberry because the old man had never tasted Boysenberries, and couldn't spot the strange flavor. He got into a jam over the cake coloring, by the way. He had to recall a cake that his wife put on sale about that time to prevent the whole town from being poisoned. He thought he was being careful, but he just left a trail of indignation behind him. That was the way he got rid of Lew."

Gregory laughed. "I'd like to hear you tell that in court!"

McGavock went on: "He laid plans for Uncle Mark, too."

Mark Thatcher blinked. "Me? You mean—"

"Yeah man. He got some rock salt, rigged up a weather-trap in Lew's attic. He knew you dabbled around fixing up the house, painting, and so on, and he knew you always did this when the weather was inclement, rainy. His trap was set for a succession of rains. Of course it might be sprung at night, when you were at home, but he'd be far away and could afford to take the chance. What could he lose? That brought on Dr. Powell's murder."

Jimmy Kitchell looked disgusted. "Why should anyone want to kill Doc Powell? He had a heart as big the the Baptist churchbell!"

"That was another blunder he pulled, trying to be super-careful. He got the key from Mark to the house, pretending to look it over before he moved in. In reality, he was rigging up his trap in the attic. Now, he reasoned that Uncle Mark knew he was in the house, and if the dynamite should be discovered prematurely, suspicion would point to him. So he prowled around, learned that the wardrobe would squeak when it was moved, and put out the acousma story. He expected his family physician, Dr. Powell, would investigate and corroborate his story. That would imply that someone else, a mysterious nobody, was in the place at the same time he was. Powell solved the wardrobe puzzle—but he went further. In the cellar, he found the can of corn syrup and bottle of cake coloring. He found the candle, too, the candle with Ralph's fingerprints on its nice waxy surface."

"I know the candle you mean," Gregory re-

Killer Stay 'Way From My Door

sponded readily. "He borrowed it from me some time ago. However, I don't know anything about any cellar or—"

Sheriff Durbin said: "So that's hit. He's been killin' off his wife's kinfolk, one by one, to inherit. I should've guessed."

Gregory smirked. "So now I have a motive, eh? Uncle Mark, tell them about the agreement I signed."

Mark Thatcher looked disturbed. "I hate to admit it, gentlemen, but he's clear of the charge you make. Lew and I wouldn't permit him to marry our niece until he, er, signed a legal paper forgoing any part of the principle of the estate." He frowned. "That seems harsh but the proviso was that if he passed his probation the paper would be destroyed."

"But," McGavock put in, "he shared a joint account with Jenny."

"That's true," the oldster confirmed. "He shared Jenny's income, not her principle. He certainly wouldn't sacrifice the ten or fifteen thousand in her account for the much larger amount they were slated for!"

THE detective corrected them. "Yet that's precisely what he did. He took big sums from the joint account. Has been doing so for some time. When Ashton decided to put up a water-tower, believe it or not, the project almost wrecked him. If Mark Thatcher had sold the Dowdell property to the town, the Thatchers would have had to settle the estate."


"We were ready to," the oldster said. "Lew and I should have settled it before, but we never got around to it."

"That's the picture," McGavock explained. "Who would suffer the most if the Thatcher estate were settled? Ralph, because there would naturally ensue a general over-all checking of family finances. And you could count on the pennypinching uncles to discover that Ralph had been filching from his wife." McGavock paused. "So he forged the Witherspoon item. He's quite a forger, by the way. You should have heard the spiel he got off about Uncle Lew and his mythical assortment of penpoints. Lew, I might add, discovered the truth to this Witherspoon business and that set off the whole chain of deaths. He wasn't killing to eliminate the other heirs, he

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Merle Constiner

was killing to keep himself in good standing until the payoff."

Gregory said suavely: "But the opposite is true. Everyone knows I have an income of my own!"

"It's that income," McGavock declared, "that's going to hang you. You were, though you probably didn't know it until now, a victim of a swindle. You took your wife's money to finance Golden Vevay. You thought Vevay was running a gambling house. Actually, Kitchell, here, and the Vevay woman were running a confidence game on you. There was never any gambling at all done at that stucco cottage. You stayed away, by agreement, and poured in the capital. They pulled that ancient gag on you, gave you back part of your funds as profits. They milked you, friend."

Gregory's voice was gentle, deadly. "What do you say to that, Jimmy?"

McGavock continued relentlessly: "You went to Golden Vevay this morning, tried to get back your kale. She brushed you off—you killed her. We've got her bankbook. It'll show deposits and withdrawals to correspond with the records at your bank."

Ralph Gregory wasn't listening. His reptilian eyes were fastened on the fat man in dirty whites. He said absently: "I should have known. I should have taken care of you, too."

Jimmy Kitchell said loudly: "Me, I'm a lawman at heart. I'm an ex-postmaster, ex-sheriff. You can count on me to cooperate, Sheriff Durbin. I'll take the stand for you!"

Mark Thatcher reached into his pocket, came out with a greasy, worn billfold. "McGavock," he said ceremoniously, "you've done a good day's work and it's a pleasure, sir, to pay you off. Let's see. Twelve hours at sixty-five cents an hour is—"

"You'll get a letter," McGavock said wryly, "from the chief in Memphis. He'll tell you all about it. We'll handle it that way."

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(Continued)

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