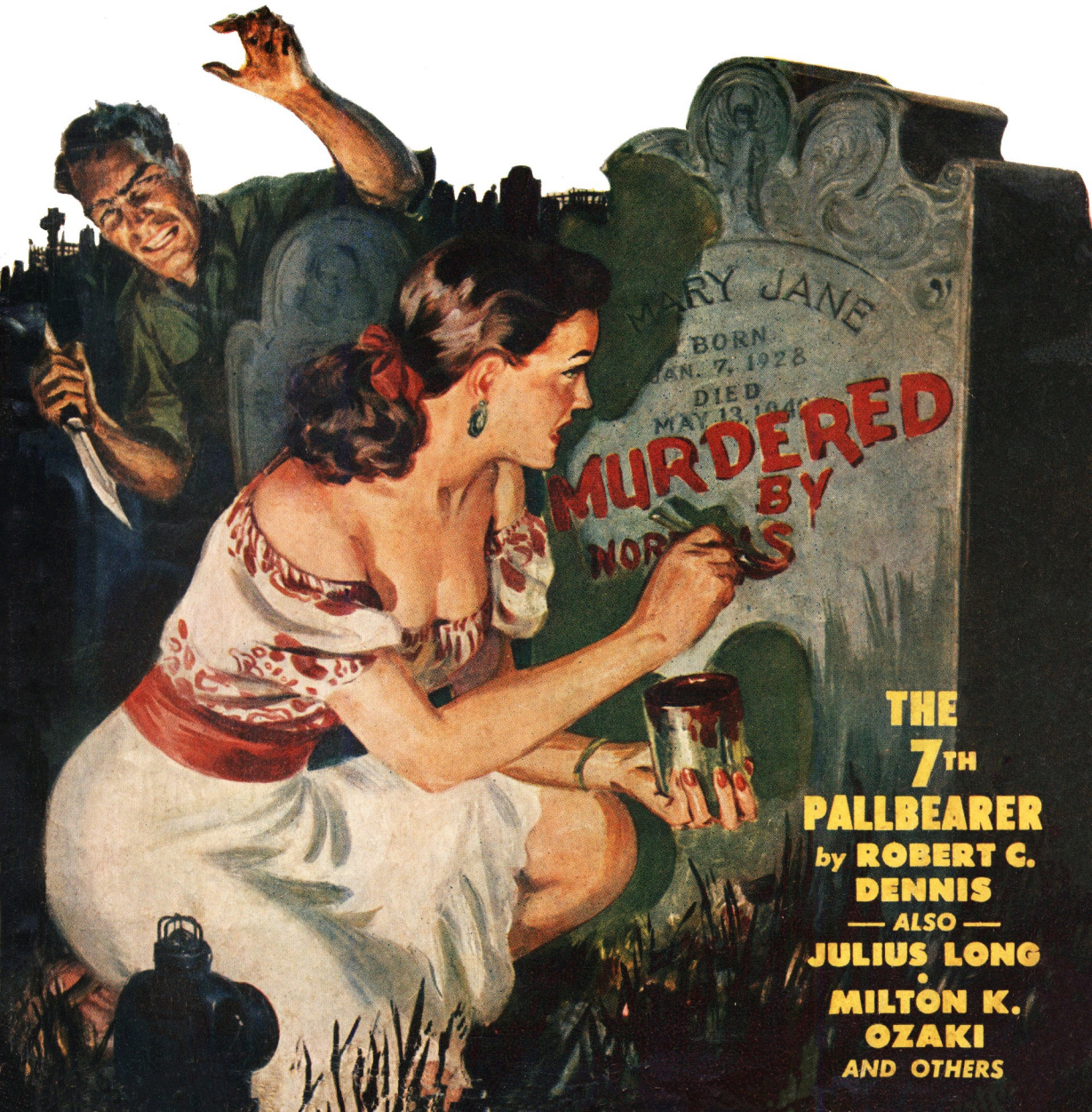


25¢

NOV.

BLACK MASK



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PALLBEARER
by **ROBERT C. DENNIS**
— ALSO —
JULIUS LONG
MILTON K. OZAKI
AND OTHERS

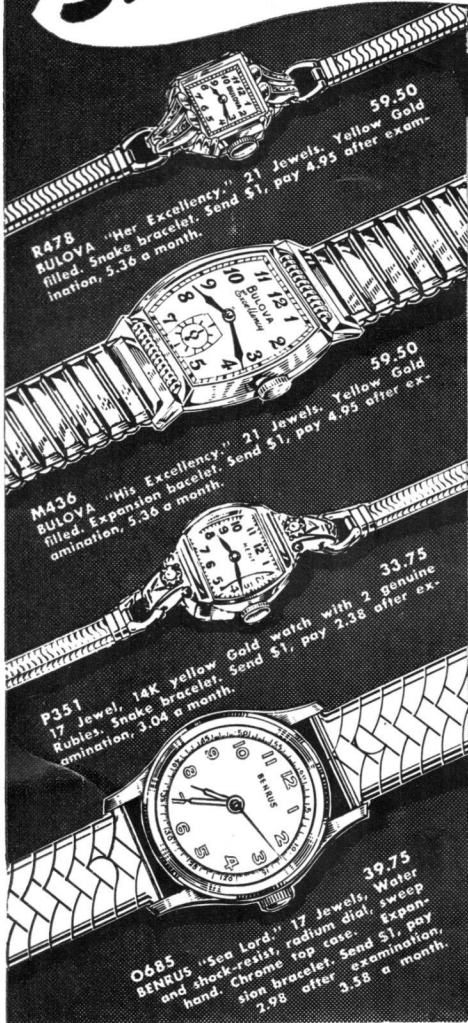
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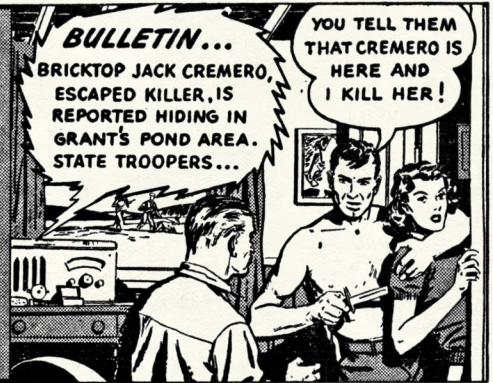
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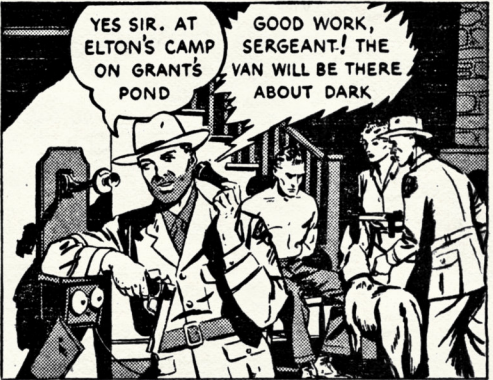
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BLACK MASK



NOVEMBER, 1949

VOL. 33

NO. 4

ONE SUSPENSE-PACKED NOVEL

- THE 7th PALLBEARER**.....Robert C. Dennis 10
I wept my tears into the wrong bier—for my own was ready and waiting.

TWO CRIME-ADVENTURE NOVELETTES

- HER FAVORITE ALIBI**.....Julius Long 72
When two-timing Clarice turned on the charm—I should have turned on my heel.
- STEAL YOUR OWN GRAVE**.....E. A. Morris 102
It was a harp for Harpie when he hooked the wallet—and let it get away.

FOUR FAST DETECTIVE SHORTS

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Henry was so eager to kill—he made a spectacle of himself.
- MOONLIGHT 'N MURDER**.....Graham Goulden 63
Never try to be your honey's hero—'cause dead heroes never get kissed.
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Murder was playing tag all over the lot—and poor little me was it.
- CRIME WAITS FOR NO MAN**.....Edward Van Der Rhoer 97
Watchman Joe didn't have all night to give the thugs the hotfoot.

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The amusing doings of some loony law-breakers.

ALL STORIES NEW

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE NOV. 18TH

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LIFTING THE JANUARY

BLACK MASK



Garage-mechanic Paul Baron put everything he had into dropping the torpedoman. For Paul, playing Galahad to the end, had to smuggle his beautiful ex-wife through Hugo Nast's cordon of hoods.



Black-eyed Dale was the luscious cause of all Paul's troubles. After a handful of days as his wife, she'd walked out on him. Now she was back—dragging him into the deadly vortex of murder.



Paul had underestimated gang-boss Nast. When Paul refused to hand over Dale for them to chill, Nast's lads stripped off his shirt. Then a thug stood over him with a steel rod in his fist. . . .



Dapper Hugo Nast looked annoyed—and ready to blast away. . . . The complete story will be told by Bruno Fischer in "The Lady Grooms a Corpse" in the next issue—out November 18th.

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*J. T. Mancelona, Mich.



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*C. S. Lucien, Okla.



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*E. T. Prichard, Ala.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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BEHIND THE



HERE we go, folks—with another page that belongs solely to you **BLACK MASK** fans and your letters. Every issue we set aside this fan-forum so you readers can share your views with other detective-story devotees all over the country. Besides, your letters are our way of discovering just what you like in the way of crime-adventure fiction. So speak up, fellers—and maybe you'll see your own letter in print next time.

Okay, fans? Then on to your letters:

Dear Editor:

I'm not usually the kind of guy who writes letters to magazines, but I got such a kick out of the May issue of **BLACK MASK** I wanted to let you know. I particularly liked that barber-shop yarn by Bruno Fischer.

Incidentally, I also enjoyed reading about that swindler's get-rich scheme in "Spare a Crime?" He's the kind of a fellow you want to avoid. If the public is kept informed about such rackets and schemes, a lot more people will hang onto their hard-earned dough.

Harvey LaSalle
Jersey City, N.J.

Dear Editor:

I'll bet you think that your magazine appeals mostly to men—but here's one girl who can't wait for the next issue.

"Diary of a Deadly Dame" is my choice of a real woman's mystery story. Maybe most women wouldn't want to be

like Thea, but they can understand what makes her tick.

I like your tough, hard-boiled detective stories too, so keep 'em coming, **BLACK MASK!**

(Miss) Jean Jensen
San Francisco, Calif.

Dear Editor:

That dog Satan was really a devil, and I can understand how Harry Wenzel wanted to break his spirit. I would have felt that way myself. I don't usually like animal stories, but this one by Robert Turned sure rates tops with me. I guess because it had so many interesting people in it and a mystery that kept increasing in interest as you went along.

Thanks a lot, **BLACK MASK**, for giving us such exciting suspense stories.

Lon Moran
Milwaukee, Wisc.

Dear Editor:

You people certainly are doing a swell job of keeping the stories in **BLACK MASK** dramatic, and I for one want to tell you that I appreciate it but good.

For people like me who don't get time to do too much reading, your magazine is dandy because the stories in it are so relaxing they take you out of yourself and make you forget your everyday worries for awhile.


Ralph Mullally,
Atlanta, Georgia

That's all the letters we have room for right now, but there'll be another issue coming up soon, with another page reserved for your news and views. Be with us then, will you? We'd like very much to print that interesting and valuable letter we know you have up your sleeve. Haul it out, put it down on paper—and mail it to: **BLACK MASK**, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, New York.

THE EDITOR

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CHAPTER ONE

Silhouette on the Door

ALL my clients are, first of all, just silhouettes on the ground glass door of my office. They stand out there in the corridor, reading the neat gold lettering—*William Carmody, Confidential Investigations*—and assure themselves that a private detective is



"Don't argue, baby," I ordered.
"Just run!"

Thrill-a-Minute
Detective Novel

By
**ROBERT C.
DENNIS**



I thought I was a lucky, lucky guy to collect a cool one hundred for weeping into a mobster's bier—until I learned how my fellow casket-toters planned to pay off . . .

THE 7TH PALLBEARER

just what they need in life. The silhouette that Vivian Ledell threw on the glass—I didn't know her name then—should have been etched there permanently for art lovers. What I mean, I started gnawing on the phone.

"What?" Margaret O'Leary demanded from the other end of the line. She'd been bending my ear for twenty minutes and I hadn't even gotten in a comma. "What did you say, Willie?"

"Upperplate wobble." I explained. "I've got to go now. Business."

"All right," Maggie said. "What I called for, Willie, is to see if you want to go to a garden party this afternoon. I'm doing a gossip spread on it for one of the fan mags. I can pass you off as my assistant. . . . There's a buffet lunch, Willie."

"I'm eating these days," I said stiffly.

"Sardines and crackers *again*? Don't be a snob, baby. Movie people are just people."

That was the tip-off. Maggie had her eye on a job for me but she knew I didn't like movie clients. Sure, the pay is great, but they're paying for insurance against bad publicity. And that means a cover-up.

The silhouette had finished reading the lettering and was beginning to undulate a little. "I've got to hang up," I said. "A client has just come in."

"It's a woman," she said bitterly. "I can always tell from the fast brush. If she doesn't hire you, call me back."

"No, thanks," I said. "I don't like Hollywood tea parties. Some clown always falls into the swimming pool." The doorknob was turning. "Good-by, Inspector," I said loudly. "Call me anytime you need help."

"You've used that routine so long," Maggie said sadly, "the inspector has been retired with full pension."

And on that note of harmony we went off the air.

My newest client was just coming through the door. The silhouette hadn't told half the story. She wore high-waisted green slacks with a narrow gold belt, gold sandals, and a white blouse. I mention the blouse last because it seemed to me she could never have gotten through the door sideways. She moved up the desk with a long slow stride and studied me from the corners of her green eyes.

She didn't say anything, possibly because she was sucking in her cheeks. It made the fine, small bones of her face stand out, but just try talking that way.

The lead seemed to be up to me. I pointed out the clients' chair and said: "Why not sit down and tell me all about it?"

SHE sneered delicately and stopped biting the inside of her cheeks long enough to say: "You don't look at all the way I pictured you. I thought private detectives were oily little men with frayed collars and thirty-five-cent haircuts. You must be making this racket pay off."

"I coin a few. How are things with you, baby?"

She parted her lips to let me see her teeth in what wasn't quite a smile. "Now you're in character," she said. "A fast line and lousy manners. At that I suppose you do cater to a certain clientele."

"I get all kinds in here," I told her. "They have one thing in common. They either weep on my lapel, or call me bad names just to prove to themselves they're tough. Either way, it's all right with me, because I know what's with them. They're all scared of something."

Her teeth snapped together and her green eyes got a queer shine on them. She fumbled around in a shoulder bag for a cigarette. I let her light it herself so she would have something to do. She

made a mouth and floated a billow of smoke at me. Then she smiled.

"So I'm frightened? Very acute of you, Mr. Carmody. But if this is a sample of your work, I think Ivan made a big mistake in hiring you."

"That makes all of us wrong," I said. "Nobody named Ivan has hired me for weeks."

Her head went slowly back as if her neck was no longer strong enough to support it. Her eyes, over the long sweep of her lower lashes, never left my face. She suddenly didn't want her cigarette. If she wasn't a scared client, she'd do till one came along.

"Ivan Castle," she said, with tight lips. "He didn't phone you? Yesterday afternoon?"

I shoved the ash tray I stole from Swifty's Bar under her cigarette. "Nobody phoned me yesterday. I wasn't in all day."

"Oh. . . . Well, that explains that." It was a great relief to her. She fumbled in her bag again and came up with a hundred-dollar bill. I'd seen one in a bank once, so I knew what it was. "Now you're hired."

I let the bill lie on the desk blotter. "What do you expect to buy at those prices?"

"Not me," she said. "Ivan Castle. He gave it to me for you yesterday. He said he'd phone you about it."

She was working a one-way street now. I gave her back a fistful of silence. Outside a plane's motor chewed holes in the rough tweed of city sounds. Probably a used-car dealer fouling God's blue heaven with sky writing.

The girl went over to the window as if to watch, but she looked down, not up. I knew she could see the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Ivar. Sometimes pigeons roosted on the ledge below the window. But nothing had ever held my attention so long.

Finally she said, to the window pane: "Ivan left for Hawaii last night on the Clipper from San Francisco."

"Lucky, lucky Ivan," I said.

"It was quite unexpected. He left some unfinished business—routine jobs and engagements, just odds and ends. But somebody has to take care of them."

"Doesn't Ivan have any friends who would lend a helping hand?"

She turned her profile toward me so I could see one side of a smile. "Perhaps he preferred to have them done professionally. He might not have wanted his friends to know all his affairs. Isn't that understandable?"

Plausible, too, I thought.

"One of the odds and ends is to escort me to a party tonight," she added.

I was getting more damn invitations to parties. "Ivan, of course, would be married."

She bit off the smile and turned back to concentrate on the street. "There's also a stack of books to be taken back to the public library. Now, there's a simple, legitimate errand, possibly more suited to your talents. And principles."

"I can handle the assignments," I told her, "if there's nothing tougher than those two."

"I have a list here for you." She held up an envelope and I got out from behind the desk. I wasn't being a gentleman. I just wanted to take a look at the street. "It won't be too difficult a way of making a hundred dollars."

The top of her head came just under my nose and I smelled perfume in her dark brown hair. It was as heady as a sniff of brandy. The corner, three stories below, looked just the same as ever. A lot of cars and people and one dog on a leash.

"Look at that!" she said. "Isn't it ghoulish?"

She had better eyes than I. "What?"

"That street car bench?"

IT LOOKED all right to me. In Hollywood there's one on nearly every corner. They're green, with stone legs, and have advertisements painted on the backs.

"Springer Mortuary," she read. "Fine Funerals on Budget Terms. Call Us In Time of Need."

The address was in one corner of the advertisement, but a small man in a black and white sport shirt was sitting in front of it. "It's indecent," she said violently. "They try to *talk* you into dying!"

A big red street car got between us and the bench for a moment. When it had lumbered on I saw that the small man in the sport shirt was still sitting there. Well, there's no law that says you have to take just any street car.

"Do you want the hundred dollars, Mr. Carmody?"

I had another sniff of her perfume. "What can I lose?"

She turned and put the envelope in my hand. She smiled and sucked in her cheeks again.

"All the instructions are there," she said crisply. "But you'll have to hurry to make the first one. You're due at the Springer Mortuary in one hour. You're a pallbearer, pet, and you're just the type!" She'd skated over to the door before I could get my face closed to ask the name of the deceased.

"My phone number will be on that list. Call me at six and I'll let you know if I want to go to the party."

She eased through the door in two movements. I'd been correct: she couldn't quite make it, sideways.

Ivan's letter said just about what the girl had told me: a half dozen simple errands which anyone going away unexpectedly might conceivably leave behind. Number six read: *Take Vivian Ledell to Livvy's party*. Vivian's phone number was attached.

I put the letter in my pocket and went downstairs and across the street to the bench. The little man had just snooted another street car. His clothes were strictly California sports wear but they were so new they still had tags on them. He lifted a gaze at me that was as pallid as an old maid's dream. His eyes were dry and gray, like ballbearings, and he never seemed to blink.

I said: "Friend, would you move it about two feet over?"

He jerked a bony shoulder at the vacant length of the bench. "Warm up your own spot, friend."

"I can't stay," I said. "I just want to see what you're sitting on."

"The back of my slacks," he said. "Is that good enough, friend?"

"I'm a connoisseur of bench ads. I just want to see what's written on the back of the bench."

He hadn't blinked yet. "Springer Mortuary. West Washington Boulevard, near Vermont. Take a V car. You can't miss."

"Thanks, friend," I said. "You've been a help."

"I wouldn't say that," he said, "friend."

But he was as right. The Springer Mortuary was a square, red-tiled building of lavender stucco, and a blind albino couldn't have missed it.

A soft, vague man in a black suit opened the door for me. "You are a mourner?" His voice seemed to come from some place else, as if he were a dummy for a not very good ventriloquist.

I told him I was a pallbearer and he bowed as if his neck was made of wood.

"You are a trifle late. The friends are paying their last respects in the Slumber Room."

"Then I'll go up too," I said.

The little silent voice that women call intuition was informing me the deceased wasn't merely Joe Blow from

Barstow. I went into the Slumber Room and had my look at the casket. . . .

THE newspapers had always tagged him a Hollywood sportsman, which, in this town, is a libel-proof of calling somebody a gambler with an A-1 rating in mob circles. But he'd not been a deso-and dose guy. He had friends in the Movie Industry, though none of them had risked the publicity of attending his funeral. But they'd sent enough sprays and wreaths to perfume his way into the next world.

He'd used the name Joey Content, which was as phony as it sounded. Even in his coffin he was still handsome and dashing. Fortunately the person unknown who had corked him six times with a thirty-eight Police Special had been careful to aim at his stomach. In the head, in the belly, you come out just as dead, but it was nice of the gunman not to spoil the profile.

The police had labeled it a gang killing. If they were right, I spent the next two hours in the company of the murderer. Because the other pallbearers were the town's five leading hoods!

Their pictures had made the papers often enough for me to know them even though I didn't recall all the names. I identified Sid Marble and I stopped there. After Sid you went down the scale anyhow. He was a new resident in Los Angeles: a not-too-tall, well padded man with perfect teeth and quite a bit of pink scalp shining through his black hair. He didn't introduce himself and neither did the others. I stood on ceremony too.

In dead silence we toted the mortal clay of Joey Content out to the hearse. Then we got into a big black car and rolled swiftly across town to the Slopes of Gilead Cemetery. It was a little pocket of silence surrounded by palm trees with feather duster tops and supple

trunks that looked tall enough to sweep away the sky-writing. We latched onto the silver handles again and lugged Joey up a gentle slope to his final resting place.

A reverend read the Bible and said a prayer. He seemed a little embarrassed that he couldn't think of something nice to say of the departed. But there wasn't much anybody could say about the likes of Joey Content. When we started back down the hill, empty-handed, there wasn't a damp eye in the house.

But now I had friends. I was the popularity kid. The boys enclosed me snugly and Sid Marble said; "You've changed, Ivan. You look fine. but different somehow. Maybe you're wearing elevators to get so tall. Is that the way it is, Ivan?"

"There seems to be a slight mistake, gents," I said.

"I nearly didn't know you, Ivan." Marable had lemon juice in place of saliva. His voice was sharp and thin and unsweetened. "But I said to myself, Ivan is chief pallbearer. Ivan wouldn't miss poor Joey's funeral. So this is Ivan."

"I'm just the understudy," I said. "This is my big chance to make good."

A tall, weedy man said, "Who *would* you be, scout? Trot out a bit of identification."

I trotted out the photostat of my license. The weedy individual glanced at it, spit on the well-kept grass and passed it on to Marable.

"A peeper," Marable said sourly.

"It's a living," I said.

"Is it?" Marable asked. He got his point across. "Where is Ivan Castle, Carmody?"

I shrugged. These were the type of men who weren't going to believe anything I could tell them. I could say Ivan was in Hawaii, or I could say I didn't know where he was, and it would be all the same to them. They were un-

believers. So I kept my flap buttoned up.

Marable stared out across the green slopes of Gilead, where a reverent wind was pushing against the palm trees.

"This is a nice place, Carmody," he said remotely. "But you wouldn't want to spend a lot of time here. You think hard on that and you'll know what I'm getting at. There's just one thought I leave with you—don't make it tough for Ivan's friends to see him. If he wants to be anti-social, that's his problem. You just pick up your marbles and play on some other street. Catch?"

I caught and went the rest of the way for a touchdown. He was a long-winded character but that only made his point clearer. And for a hundred dollars I was nobody's hero. The lone wolf bucking organized crime, taking on a gang single-handed, reads good in comic books but less good in the obituary columns.

"You were the seventh pallbearer today, scout," the weedy man appended. "That's bad luck. Like three on a match. Or like the gal who catches the bride's bouquet. . . . Can we give you a ride?"

I said: "Neither now nor later, I hope!"

They let me walk the rest of the way down the slope alone. Even that was better than Joey Content could do.

CHAPTER TWO

Houdini Makes a Slip

IT TOOK three transfers to get me back to Hollywood Boulevard. On the way my stomach pulled itself up where it belonged and reminded me I still hadn't had breakfast. I took a newspaper into Swifty's Bar and read it over a cheese sandwich and a glass of ale.

Joey's funeral got a nice play. The pallbearers were listed by name, but the story clearly had been written in ad-

vance. Ivan Castle made the line-up, though there was no mention of the seventh pallbearer, one William Carmody. No complaints!

The little man in the black and white sport shirt slipped into the chair across from me. In the dimness of the saloon his ball-bearing eyes had an almost luminous quality.

"That wasn't much of a wake. How did Joey look?"

"Content," I said.

"That's a lousy pun," he said, disgustedly. "Besides you read it in the *Daily Star*. Where's Ivan Castle, friend?"

"You too?" I complained. "I don't know, but you might try Hawaii."

He said in a colorless voice: "You're fronting for him, Carmody. That means you know where he is. Maybe the dame thinks he's in Hawaii because he's kissing her off. That part's okay. Anybody has got a right to change women."

"You're a philosopher," I told him. "Have you got a name?"

"Luther," he said coldly. "I don't need no last name. Look, Carmody, a lot of people want to find Ivan. Nobody maybe has given you any trouble yet because they think Ivan is easy to find. But he ain't. I've been looking a week."

"What makes Ivan so popular? No, let me guess. Either he knows who chilled Joey Content and somebody is afraid he'll talk—or he killed Joey and the same somebody is sore about it."

"Either way," Luther said, "that somebody is going to come to see you. And you won't like it, Carmody. So why not tell me now, and save yourself some teeth and some broken fingers?"

A winter wind blew down my spine. I could see it happening just that way. They weren't going to believe I didn't know where Ivan was. They'd think I was just being stubborn. And I've got nice teeth, too.

I lit a cigarette, just to show him how cool I was. He winced away from the smoke I blew at him as if his pipes couldn't take it. His chest, behind the sport shirt, was so narrow and sunken there didn't seem to be room for more than one lung.

"Luther," I said. "Listen close, because this is something you'll want to tell your friend, Sid. I don't know Ivan Castle. I never laid my big blue eyes on him in my life. He paid me—by mail—to substitute for him on the handles, but I am not working for him. Or anybody else."

He kept staring in that unblinking way till my own eyes hurt. "If you're unemployed I got a job for you. Find Ivan Castle."

I stood up and threw some money on the table. I'd get better conversation yelling down a rain barrel. I left him and went out into the sun.

Somebody said, "Mr. Carmody?"

It was a fat man in a plaid suit, obviously tailored by Omar the tentmaker. He was getting weighed on a penny scales but he hadn't dropped his penny because he was trying to stand perfectly still. For him it wasn't easy; there was so much of him that quivered. "You are Mr. Carmody?"

I admitted it.

"I want to discuss business with you." He was more intent on getting the pointer on the scales to stand still. "I was up to your office. You were out, so I asked the barman in the nearest saloon. I've read about private detectives."

"I'm glad I didn't disappoint you."

He inserted the penny. The machine burped and dropped a ticket in a slot. "I am Chauncey McLee—business manager for Paul Banner. Are you free to take an assignment?"

I didn't want a movie client, Paul Banner or anybody else—not even a

Hollywood glamour queen. But the little man with weak lungs was lounging in the doorway of Swifty's and giving me a bleak, unwinking stare. Here was the answer, one way or the other, to whether I was Ivan Castle's front.

"What's the assignment?" I asked wearily.

Chauncey read the weight stamped on the ticket and winced. "I'd rather you got the details first-hand. I'll run you out to Paul's house if you're free."

"Haven't a thing in the world," I said for the little man's benefit. I'd go there and say no, and ride a street car back. One more wouldn't kill me—and that was more than I could say for Luther.

Chauncey turned the ticket over and read his fortune. "*You must be careful that people don't misjudge your cheerful easy-going nature for weakness.* How true," he said. "Uncannily correct."

"Nobody understands me either," I said. "Ain't it hell?"

THE expensive car rolled through traffic with no more noise than two angels quarreling. Chauncey stayed on Sunset till we were beyond Beverly Hills and then he dropped into one of the canyons. Chauncey chewed gum and thought. He didn't seem the thinking type of man but he was working his brain cells now.

Presently he swung into the white-graveled driveway of a house that must have contained twenty rooms. There were tall, white columns like a southern plantation home in a Selznick epic, and big green doors.

I said: "Banner must have a lot of relatives."

Chauncey gave me a sour look and led the way through a long arbor that isolated the garages, and into the back yard. But only a clod would call it that. It was the size of a polo field and

the grass looked like the greens of a country club. There were flowerbeds and a tennis court and a swimming pool.

The pool was full of water lilies and two swans. At least a hundred people were congregated around it. Chauncey said: "Forgot to mention Paul is throwing a little party. Do you mind?"

"Kismet," I assured him. "I was destined to go to a party today."

"A lot of superstition," Chauncey said. "Help yourself to a drink while I round up the Boss."

He oozed off across the town while I surveyed the crowd for signs of Margaret O'Leary. This had all the markings of the garden party she was going to write up for a fan book. But I didn't see her.

I didn't see Banner either, but he had provided entertainment for his guests. Another arbor had been transformed into a band stand for a string quartet. They were playing background music for a magic act. Being a sucker for the hocus-pocus dodge, I boldly found a vacant deck chair.

The magician was a gray ravaged man in a tuxedo he could no longer fill out. That might have been fortunate because the suit looked so old that a little bit of strain would have split all the seams. He was doing something with giant playing cards, but his hands were so shaky I didn't think he was going to get through it.

He had my sympathy. His act just wasn't sophisticated enough for this audience. They were mostly interested in seeing him louse up a trick. His long, thin face was pale and he was perspiring gently.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," he said, in a voice that had all the texture of tissue paper, "for my next effect I will need an assistant from the audience. Will some lady or gentleman please come up?"

Two sports sharing a lounge just in front of me hatched a fast plot in

hysterical whispers. The one on the outside started to get up, giggling. I came off the starting blocks a half step ahead of him, brush blocked him with a hip as I passed, and went up front.

"Here is an obliging young man," the magician announced. "Thank you, sir. First of all I want you to look at this pitcher. Look closely, please."

It was a glass pitcher, lemonade type, and full of water. I knew it was water because he poured me a glassful. Up close, I could see that he was pale to the lips, which trembled as he talked. His hands were doing St. Vitus dance set to bebop.

"You are satisfied there is nothing in the pitcher but aqua pura? I just boiled it out of the swimming pool." A small laugh. "Now you look like a man who would appreciate a real drink. What would you desire? Just name your favorite drink, sir."

"Straight scotch," I suggested.

"That's an easy one." He picked up a shot glass from his table and filled it from the pitcher of water. But now it wasn't water. It was scotch. "Try that, young man."

I took the glass. "Do I have to drink alone? Let's see you pour yourself a quick one."

The sports thought I was trying to trip up the old guy and started calling for him to produce another. He made the most of it, pretending a great reluctance, but he finally came through with another jigger of highland dew. It got a ripple of applause and under it I said: "Down the hatch, old-timer. You look like you need it."

"You are a gentleman, sir," he said, taking a bow. He never vanished anything as fast as that drink. "How did you ever wander into this snake pit?"

"Somebody left the gate open."

"Cut and run for it," he whispered. "I'll cover you."

HE SAILED through the rest of the trick, pouring any drink requested from the same pitcher. He produced everything, from absinthe to vodka. The sports were yelling for a frozen daiquiri when I saw Chauncey McLea giving me sign language to come a-running.

I joined him in the patio. "I didn't mean for you to work for your drink," he said. "Come in the house and meet the Boss."

We went into the library. Two walls were lined from floor to ceiling with books, while one of the remaining walls was used up with a picture window. The other was a bar.

The Boss was already there, but it wasn't Paul Banner. It was a tall and slender woman with fine lines that you knew were her own. You knew her coal black hair had always been that color. It was done up in braids on her head like a crown. This was what the glamour factories tried to produce and never quite managed, because it requires six generations of fine breeding. In short, here was a Lady.

"Mr. Carmody, Mrs. Banner," Chauncey said, in a voice unexpectedly subdued. "Do you want me to leave, Judith?"

"Of course not." She put out a beautiful hand to me. "It was kind of you to come so far, Mr. Carmody."

Anything under a million miles wouldn't have been too far.

"I know you must be busy, so I'll not waste your time." She smiled suddenly. "Come over here, Mr. Carmody. I want to see how good a detective you are."

She led me over to the bookshelves. All the volumes were beautifully bound and perfectly matched. She put her hand on the fourth shelf. "This one. Tell me what you see, Mr. Carmody."

"You must have bought these by the foot," I said. I went down the line.

There was no evidence that any of them had been moved since the interior decorator put them there. Except one. The little fringe of soft leather at the top was curved inward on all the others. But someone had hooked a finger over this one to pull it out and the fringe was bent backwards.

"Somebody must have got bored and read a book."

She smiled again. Wryly. "Don't be too perceptive, Mr. Carmody. Yes, that's it. I was checking the other day to see if the maid had dusted properly and I noticed it. Take the book out, Mr. Carmody."

I pulled it free. It was a book of philosophy by somebody with a long foreign name. Judith Banner took it and opened it. There was a folded paper between the pages.

"Nobody really gets desperate enough to read a book around here. It was used as a hiding place." She handed me the note. "By my husband."

"Are you sure you want me to read it?"

"It isn't a love-note, Mr. Carmody. And I'm not trying to get divorce evidence. Does that make everything all right?"

"Now you're being perceptive," I told her.

The note was a half sheet of ordinary typewriter paper. It contained a raggedly typed three-line message.

Banner: This is the last warning.
Either get me the five thousand dollars
as instructed in my first letter or I'll
ruin you.

I put the note back between the pages and returned the book to the shelves. "Forget it, just forget all about it, Mrs. Banner."

"You disappoint me, Mr. Carmody," she said.

I SMILED at her. "A crank letter. Typed on paper that couldn't possibly be traced, with a typewriter that was probably borrowed. I thought movie stars get these all the time."

"And promptly turn them over to the studio, who pass them on to the police. Why did my husband hide this one?"

I shrugged. "How long ago did you find it?"

"About a month."

"Why wait till now to take action?"

Chauncey McLee held out a pudgy hand. "Read this."

It was a clipping from a movie column that had appeared in one of the local papers.

A wild rumor, undoubtedly started by some idiot, caused a near panic last week. The newspapers received a tip that Paul Banner had been killed in a fall from a horse at the Santa Rita Ranch in the San Fernando Valley. The crank clearly had some inside information because Banner was actually out riding at the ranch at the time. One of the papers (not this one), unable to reach Banner before press time printed the rumor. The studios ought to hire a good private snooper to lay this high-flying pest by the heels.

"Nice narrative style," I said. "Why do you think this ties up with the extortion note?"

"Because Paul was so terribly upset by it. Ordinarily he is the most relaxed and carefree person in the world, but this frightened him. I'm convinced that the person who wrote the note did it to frighten Paul."

"The fact that the rumor was correct in every detail except the important one," Chauncey added, "points to the fact that the crank could have been in a position to have killed him then. Held off to get his money."

"You could pay him off," I said.

"It wouldn't solve anything," Judith

said. "Or else Paul would have done it."

"Maybe he has."

Chauncey said: "I'm his business manager. He can't spend fifty dollars without my okaying it."

I told Judith: "That implies this crank has something on your husband."

"Who doesn't have something in their past that would be better left buried? In the case of a movie personality it can be something ruinous." She laid her hand on my sleeve. "You're our last hope, Mr. Carmody."

I'd just come out for the ride. I was going to say a fast no and go home. I looked into Judith Banner's dark eyes and said: "Don't worry about it anymore. I'll land on him so hard he'll come down with amnesia."

Chauncey said hurriedly. "Here comes Paul. Keep it undercover, Carmody."

Paul Banner, like most actors, looked pretty much the same off screen. A few more wrinkles maybe and a higher forehead. And he was quite a bit less charming.

"This is a stinkin' party, Judith," he said, striding into the library. "Why do we have to invite such stupid bores?"

"They're your friends," Chauncey said.

"Keep out of this, blubber boy," Banner snapped. He gave me a look. "Present company excepted, of course."

"Don't be so polite," I said genially. "I'm a bore, too."

"Well," he said, "if you insist, old boy."

"Paul!" Judith Banner said. "William is a friend of mine." I wondered how she knew my first name.

"Sorry," he muttered petulantly. "I want to talk to you alone, Judith."

"I was just leaving," I said. Judith gave me a look that was almost pleading, as if to say, *Don't mind him. He isn't really like this.* I smiled all around and went through the house searching for the party.

That's when a female screamed. I shot through the door into the patio. Everybody was clustered at the edge of the pool on the far side, all laughing.

It was the magician. Either he had worked that magic pitcher a few too many times or one of the sports had thought of a great gag. Anyway the old guy was down among the lily pads.

Maybe if he hadn't been an alcoholic who couldn't swim it would have been funny. But he was going down the second time, and everybody was breaking themselves up so much they never realized it.

I dove so flat that I barely went under. A half dozen strokes and I had him by the collar. Of course he grabbed me with a strangle hold and of course I slugged him. Then a dozen helping hands were pulling him up on the tiled edge of the pool. Somebody offered me a hand too, but I was proud. I swam down to the

other end and climbed up the ladder.

Maggie O'Leary was leaning on the hand-rail, her chin in her palm. She didn't say anything. She didn't have to.

I pulled a water lily out of my hair. "Just like I told you," I said, "some clown always falls into the pool!"

CHAPTER THREE

Blue Birds and Schemers

LEARY drove me home while I dripped all over her car. She wore a white summer dress that didn't hide much of her nice tan. Her legs were bare and golden brown and magnificent. It is my firm conviction that Maggie's legs are the reincarnation of the original model which centuries of inferior craftsmanship have failed to reproduce. When your eye finally gets up to her pretty Irish pan, with stopovers

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and sidestrips, you are converted—or dead.

After a minute, she said, "I saw the whole thing, Willie. You were dramatic. Like a moon pitcher hero. You certainly scared hell out of those swans too."

"Maybe I should have let the old guy give the magic word." I was sulking.

She patted my damp knee. "I was teasing, baby. You're my brave boy."

"Fine," I said. "But you've got competition. I have a yen for Judith Banner."

Maggie took her hand away. "Damn you," she said bitterly. "You would pick on somebody I can't compete with. I don't need to ask if you took the job."

"Well, I'll need your car for the rest of the afternoon. Does that answer your question?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Go out to the Santa Rita Ranch. The crank who gave out that rumor must have seen Banner there. He may have phoned the newspapers from the ranch—a toll call. It's a place to start."

Maggie said thoughtfully: "And it's a very exclusive joint. It oughtn't to be hard to find out who was there that day."

"Sounds to me like one of the ranch hands," I said. "Somebody trying to pick up an easy five grand—or a guy with a grievance. . . . Do I get the car?"

She sighed. "If I don't lend it to you you'll think I'm jealous of that Banner woman."

I grinned at her. "Are you?"

She pulled up in front of a street-car bench that bore an advertisement for life insurance, and got out. "William," she said, showing her pretty teeth, "you are a black-hearted, sadistic betrayer of young womanhood, and you have all the sensitivity of a mangey coyote. And furthermore—"

"That's enough," I told her. "You

still love me. You convinced me of that."

I drove home and changed clothes and then I stopped by my office to get the afternoon mail. I knew there'd be a half dozen bills from my creditors but no Carmody has ever lacked courage. I charged in and there were bills and there was Vivian Ledell.

She was sitting behind my desk smoking a cigarette. She'd changed her clothes too, and her off-white gabardine suit was the work of a Botticelli. There was no way of describing it—like a desert sunset.

I said: "I must have forgotten to lock the door."

She watched me, with her cheeks sucked in, and then she laughed gaily. "I came back to talk about your job. How did it go off?"

I stared at her while all the little wheels in my head whirred around. Maybe my charm had produced a delayed reaction on her but I doubted it. "I didn't have time to take the books back to the library."

"But you did go to the funeral?"

"Yeah," I said. "And I was superb as a pallbearer. The funeral home wanted to sign me up."

"Big crowd?" she asked carelessly.

"Practically none. Shows the kind of friends Joey had."

She shrugged. Some people don't have any. Maybe I should have gone. I knew him slightly. . . . She looked at her cigarette thoughtfully. "Who was there?"

"That's it!" I said. "That's what I've been waiting for." I sat on the corner of the desk and looked down at her. "It begins to make sense—of a warped kind. That was a sharp play this morning. A sleeper. You worked it nice, you and Ivan."

"I don't know what you are talking about," she said coolly.

"Oh yes you do, sweetheart. It was

cute, and it worked, but let's not run it off its feet. Just why is Sid Marable looking for Ivan? Oh, he's looking for him, all right. That's what I was sent there to find out, wasn't it?"

She didn't say anything this time.

I SAID: "Okay, I'll tell you! When Joey got his, Ivan ran for cover because he was afraid he was next on the list. He isn't in Hawaii at all—he's right here in town, waiting to see if he's hot. That's what he wants to know. Of course, six bullets in the belly would tell him that, but it would be a little hard to leave town then. Except in a box in the baggage car!"

"Don't—" she said in a choked voice. "Don't talk like that—"

"So how to find out?" I drummed on. "That was the problem. If he was going to get the treatment too, it would come when he showed up at the funeral. And if he didn't show up, how would he ever be sure? So what do we do? Why, we hire a little four-for-a-quarter private-eye. One who isn't too bright, preferably! We need a luscious babe to put on a little act to keep the jerk off balance, so he won't start thinking—"

She was as pale as alabaster. "You got paid."

"Sure, I got paid! And funerals come as low as sixty-five dollars in this town."

"Please!" she gasped. "They're not after you."

"They won't be long," I assured her. "Right now they think I'm Ivan's front. They bought *your* story that he ran out on you. What kind of act did you put on to sell that? It must have been good!" I leaned down to make her look at me. "Before long they'll be coming in here to ask me for Ivan, but I'll take care of that."

"But you don't know!"

"Try to convince Sid Marable. In fact, you're going to get a chance to

try. Because when I tell them how you sent up a trial balloon to see if anybody was going to start shooting at it, it won't be my hide that gets ventilated!"

She shrank away, trying to retreat through the back of the chair. Her green eyes were glassy and her lips twitched.

"You're it, Miss Ledell! And may I recommend the Slopes of Gilead Cemetery?"

"Stop saying those things!" she screamed. "I don't want to die! I can't stand to think about it."

She clamped her teeth so tightly her jaws quivered. She was shaking all over, like someone whose soul is cold. She had a phobia about funerals and graveyards—and death. She wouldn't be hard for Marable to melt down.

"Carmody," she whispered, "what am I going to do?"

I shrugged. "I've got my own problem."

"Please!" She grabbed my arm. "Please. I don't want to die. I'm too young. Tell me. . . ."

"Forget Ivan," I said. "No matter where he's hiding, it isn't good enough. They'll find him sooner or later. Don't be found with him."

"I can't leave him alone—"

"Believe me," I said earnestly, "I should be the last person to tell you to get out of this town. I need you here to take Marable off my back." I paced the distance to the window. "I must be a movie hero at that! Go on—start running. Go far and fast. And if you see a flat-chested little man who answers to Luther, you will know you should have run a lot farther."

"Luther?" she whispered, and her head started falling back as her neck muscles went lax. "Is he—?"

"Yeah," I said. "He's down there on the bench again." I took a deep breath. "Look, there's a back way out of here.

Use it. I'll go down the front way and sucker him off."

She almost ran to the door, but there she stopped and looked at me as if something that she'd forgotten a long time ago had come back to her. "What—what about you?"

"I'll get very busy on another job," I said bitterly. "Maybe that will convince them I'm not working for Ivan."

She came slowly back across the room and looked at me with those green eyes. Then she reached up and kissed me. Her lips were as cold as winter rain.

"That doesn't mean very much," she said quietly. "I've kissed too many men for it to have any meaning left. But maybe you'll understand."

"Sure," I said. "Sure. I understand." She looked at me so sadly I bent and kissed her back. Most of the lipstick had come off, and when she smiled, without doing the business with the cheeks, I thought I caught a glimpse of the girl she must have been once. A million years ago.

She turned and walked out then and I never saw her again. But I saw plenty of Sid Marable. . . .

I WENT downstairs to O'Leary's car and waved at Luther, but he just stared back at me. I turned left on to Franklin and right off that on to Cahuenga. If he followed me I lost him somewhere on Dark Canyon Road.

Beyond Burbank I swung onto the turn-off to the Santa Rita Ranch and there wasn't another car in sight. According to directions I picked up at a service station, the ranch was somewhere in the Verdugo Mountains. But when I came to the end of a narrow asphalt road there was only a big white-washed wooden gate and a shanty.

A sliver of a man in a khaki uniform, with a gun strapped to his hip, came out of the shanty and gave me an empty

smile. "Can I see your membership card, please?"

"I'm not a member," I said.

"Sorry." He gazed back down the road. "Only members or their guests."

"Then I'll be a guest," I said.

"Whose guest?"

"How about Paul Banner?"

He continued to gaze back the way I'd come like an exile trying to see his homeland beyond the horizon. "I'll be glad to phone in and ask," he said gently.

"Don't bother," I grinned at him. "Banner never heard me."

"That's what I thought." He smiled again and there was nothing in the smile but his teeth. Maybe he thought of things but they didn't show.

"Just where is the ranch?" I asked. All I could see was a dusty, unpaved road that wound back through stunted growth, which was probably sagebrush, to the mountains in the background.

"Around the toe of that hump," he said, pointing with his shoulder. "But there's only one road. And I don't need money. So I guess you couldn't bribe me."

"I wouldn't think of trying," I said. "But tell me one thing." I started the car. "Who's the owner of this hideaway?"

"Mr. Farrington," he said gently. "Mr. Charles Farrington. And I hope you didn't mean hideaway like I think you meant it."

"Thought police!" I said. "That must be a great place in there."

I drove back down the asphalt road to the highway. About five miles further along I came to a second asphalt road paralleling the first one. I swung on to it and ten minutes later I sighted the Santa Rita Ranch.

The stinkin' liar, I thought.

The ranch house was long and low and rambling. From a distance it seemed

made of cool white adobe. A dozen cars parked in front glistened in the afternoon sun. In the rear were the white-washed stables. Directly behind, the mountains rose in a ragged line against the sky.

I followed the dirt road as it wound around some hairpin turns, getting higher into the mountains without coming any closer to the ranch. Presently I was behind the stables, looking down on the bridle path twisting through the scrub pines. And still I was no nearer. It began to dawn on me that the guard hadn't lied. Wherever the road led, it was not to the Santa Rita Ranch.

I pulled over to the outer edge of the road. The mountain went up steeply behind me into the pines where wild birds were chattering in a language I didn't know. Below me a horse and rider cantered along the trail. In the ranch yard a man in a red shirt and a cowboy hat was nailing tarpaper on the side of a small building, and his hammer lifted and fell rhythmically, with the sound in between, like a movie out of

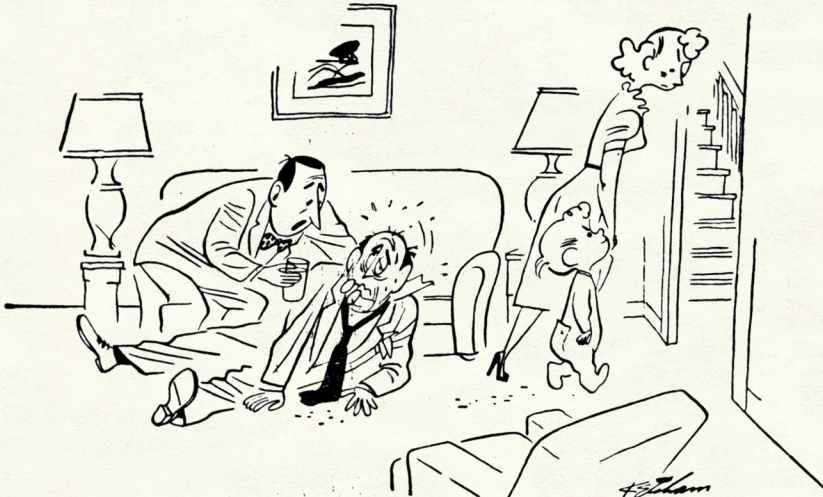
synchronization. He was farther off than he appeared.

I estimated the chances of cutting cross-country to the ranch, but I didn't estimate long. It looked simple enough from this high point, but once down there, the ranch house would be out of sight and my woodcraft wasn't equal to anything above four trees in a park.

Possibly Chauncey McLea could get me into the ranch, but that was for another day. I thought furiously about what to do now and came up with a real bright answer. I was done for the afternoon.

I started to turn back to the car when a voice said: "Stand and deliver, stranger."

THERE was nothing wrong with his woodcraft. He'd come up close enough to pick my pockets and I hadn't heard a sound of him. He was one of the narrowest men I'd ever seen and still he wasn't skinny. There was plenty of long, stringy muscles on him.



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100% whole wheat flakes, milk and fruit. Seven dietary essentials, plus second-helping flavor. Had *your* Wheaties today? Wheaties, "Breakfast of Champions!"

He was carrying a rifle with a telescopic sight. At this range he could have potted me with a bent bean shooter.

"You must be the backdoor guard," I said.

"Forest ranger," he stated briefly.

His strong bony face was narrow like the rest of him and his eye sockets were so deep that the shadow cast by the brim of his hat made him seem to be looking out at the world from behind a fence.

"Oh," I said. "I thought you were in the same business as the guy down there at the gate to the ranch. You look a lot alike."

"My brother," he said with something that was almost emotion. "A sinner. There'll be a day for him."

"Yeah," I said. I didn't know what else to say. I got the same funny feeling as when talking to a person you know is a few paces off the path.

"I just came down to tell you this is a fire area," he said, lapsing back into his dull monotone.

"You came down from where?"

"Look-out," he said gravely, and glanced up over the pointed tops of the pines. The sinking sun touched on glass and I saw his look-out clinging to the side of the mountain like an eagle's nest—high and remote and lonesome as the Ark on Ararat. "Watched you through my binoculars," he said. "Came down to warn you about matches."

One of those little flashes of brilliance that even Carmody has brightened up the day then. "You watch every car that stops on this road?"

"There's only two or three a month," he said.

"How's for June fifteenth?" I said carefully. "Just about a month ago. Could you remember seeing anyone up here then?"

He looked at me for a long time as if he knew exactly what I was getting

at, and why. And suddenly I knew here was a guy I could never outguess—nor even second-guess—because his way of thinking wasn't like other people's. Neither logic, nor experience, nor emotion was responsible for what went on inside his narrow head. Whatever his thoughts were, they were little pale creatures of a mind that had been alone too long.

"Gray coupe," he said suddenly. "License number S44683. Earlier in the afternoon than this. Parked there better'n an hour."

"That's pretty good," I said. "In fact too damn good! How come you remembered all that?"

"Had a sprained ankle," he said dully. "Couldn't get down here to warn him so I took down his number. If he'd started a fire I'd have traced him."

I stared at him but I couldn't see him. Nobody would ever see him because he was watching the world from behind his fence. "You took it down," I persisted. "That's fine. But how could you pull it out of the air like that? What made it stick in your mind? Did the guy do something?"

"He didn't get out of the car," the ranger droned. "Maybe he wasn't alone. I never saw him. But he was scheming . . ."

The distant thud of the hammer down in the ranch yard was the last tenuous contact with reality. Even the birds up in the sunless pines had long ago slipped away silent as shadows. I said, "What's that mean?"

His sunken eye sockets held no more light than a tomb.

"Scheming," he said.

"How could you tell he wasn't just necking with his girl friend?"

He considered me for a long moment, and if there was any recognizable emotion on his face, it was pity. For me. He turned as if to walk away, but he

didn't go. "That same week," he said, and whoever he was talking to, it wasn't me now, "I found a blue bird—up there." He pointed indefinitely toward his eye in the sky. "It was dead. There wasn't a mark on it—and nothing had killed it. But it was dead all right."

I didn't say anything. I was cold in the hot sun.

"I knew it was dead. Anybody could tell." He hitched his rifle up higher under his arm. "Scheming," he repeated softly, and went down the road without looking back.

I climbed into the car and backed it around in its own length. I'd had enough. But as I passed him on the way down I stopped and called out, "Thanks for the help."

"I would have told you anyway," he said vaguely as if he barely recalled it. "If you see my brother down there, give him a message for me. Tell him—there'll be a day for him."

I negotiated those hairpin turns so fast it put a permanent curve in the chassis of O'Leary's car. I didn't stop to deliver his message. I didn't stop at all until I drove into Burbank. A busy little town, white in the sun. No tiny eyes peered at me from behind fences, and the sun seemed warmer than it had been upon the hill. But I was still cold.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Alley Cat Called Murder

MISS ALBERTA SOAMES lived in a white frame house near Echo Park. It had a red door and red-trimmed windows with a flower box in front of the biggest one. It had a picture-postcard prettiness, but it was the smallest full-grown house I'd ever seen. I parked across the street and considered it, long and deeply. Not any of my thoughts make a great deal of sense.

The house and the flowers and a woman with a name like Alberta Soames went well together. A school teacher, or a lady real estate agent, would be about right. As normal and every day as a cup of tea. There was just one part I didn't like: Miss Alberta Soames owned a gray coupe, '41 model, license number S44683. The Automobile Club had been quite positive on that.

There were a couple of explanations. The ranger might have gotten the number wrong. Or Alberta had driven up there to pick wild flowers and not to spy on Paul Banner as he rode the mountain trails.

On the other hand Alberta might turn out to be just the type despite the name and the house. I locked Maggie's car and walked up to the red front door.

A pushbutton got me chimes as mellow as a country church bell on a Sunday morning. It didn't get me anything else. I rang again and waited. On the third ring I heard sounds inside as if someone was going to open the door as soon as she had time to tidy up the living room.

I was right in more ways than one. She was a small woman, perhaps in her middle forties, not quite gray, not exactly stout. She had a nice complexion with only a minimum of makeup, and a nice, quiet blue dress. Not a school teacher, perhaps; maybe the owner of a lending library who read all her books.

"Miss Albert Soames?" I asked.

"I was lying down," she said, in a voice that gave me an obscure uneasiness. "You'll come in, of course."

"Of course," I agreed.

"A bad headache," she explained, almost anxiously. "Not serious, you understand. It will be better tomorrow."

"I certainly hope it is," I said. And I meant it.

The room was just the way I'd have

expected. Neat and bright, furnished with taste and a sense of humor. There was a colorful woven rug on the hardwood floor. I tested a fragile-looking rocking chair before I sat down. Alberta walked over to a divan with stiff, careful dignity. She had something clutched tightly in one hand but I couldn't see what. She didn't sit on the divan but stood weaving very slightly, with poise and a faintly baffled expression. Somehow her eyes didn't seem to focus.

I thought: *Miss Soames, you're weefled! Shame on you!* "If you start talking about dead blue birds," I warned her, "I'll leave."

"No indeed," she said. "Though I did have a canary once. And a cat . . . Will you take these, please?" She held out her closed hand. I got up and went over to her. "It's the strangest thing," she said seriously. "I found them under the bed. They weren't there last night. I looked under the bed—" she smiled—"like all old maids."

She didn't smell of liquor not even blackberry wine. But her eyeballs kept getting out of control and the irises were greatly enlarged. If it was dope they'd be in pin points. All I needed was another nut with a left-handed thread to make it a full day!

"I can't explain where they came from," she said. "Perhaps you'll know what to do with them."

She dropped a half dozen poker chips into my hand.

When I looked back at her face there were lines of panic on it. "I think," she whispered, "you had better get a doctor for me. My headache . . ."

She fell with the same dignity that she did everything else.

I CAUGHT her before she hit the floor. I laid her on the divan and felt for her pulse. It was very faint. When I lifted her head, my hand

found a damp place in her hair. There was blood, I felt a soft spot, like a baby has before the bones grow together. Something had struck there so hard the bone was crushed under the skin. How she had ever walked and talked was the kind of miracle that causes doctors to shrug and change the subject.

I found her telephone and did what the directions tell you to do. I said: "I want an ambulance and a policeman quick."

I'd just hung up when the door chimes tolled. This time it sounded like a requiem. I put a gay, fat little cushion under Alberta's head and went to the door.

It was a man. In a dazed way I had a picture of two huge eyes staring owl-ishly at me from behind very thick glasses; of a pursed red mouth and rosy cheeks. "Oh," he said blankly. "I thought Bertie—Miss Soames—I didn't realize she had company . . ."

"I'm not company," I said. I was using someone else's voice. I sounded a little like the ventriloquist's dummy at the Springer Mortuary. "You'd better come in."

"Perhaps I'm early." He stepped just inside the door and blinked behind his glasses. "I could come back a little later."

"If I let you go," I said, "maybe you wouldn't come back. You're a friend of Miss Soames?"

"Oh, yes," he said, enthusiastically. "Yes, indeed. I'm Everett Moss."

I said: "She's over there."

He peered, big-eyed, as he walked around me to the divan. "Bertie?" he said anxiously. "What is it? Are you ill?"

"She's had a headache again."

He looked owl-eyed-blank. "Again? Have you called a doctor?"

I nodded. "She's been hit on the head, I think. Awfully hard."

I put my hand on her forehead and she gave a sudden little shudder as if it felt good. But then she didn't move again.

After a long moment I knew that last shudder had been the breath of life escaping from her body, like a little mouse scurrying for a hole. And death was that gaunt gray alley cat they call Murder.

I said to Everett: "She's gone . . . she's dead."

I don't know what reaction I expected. Almost anything, except the one I got. He literally went into an epileptic fit.

I almost envied him. He was thrashing about on Alberta's woven rug, but he didn't look as if he was feeling much of anything. I was the one who was left to do the thinking, and my thoughts were gray as the ashes in the fire place. I put a handkerchief between Everett's teeth so he wouldn't bite his tongue off and let him alone.

Then I gave the little house a quick shakedown. This is what I found: a heap of costume jewelry on the bed; a typewriter on the table in the breakfast nook; and a supply of typing paper in a drawer. The jewelry looked as if it had been dumped there from a bureau

drawer but it hadn't been pawed over by an anxious thief, and the drawers were as neat as you'd expect of Alberta. There was nothing of any value anyway. Nothing else seemed to have been moved and there weren't any more poker chips under the bed.

I rolled a sheet of the typing paper into the typewriter and I punched out: *Now is the time for the quick brown bluebird to lay me down and die.* The sentence looked perfectly all right. It wasn't until I compared it with the typing on Paul Banner's extortion note that I realized how punchy I must have been.

I went back to Everett. He was unconscious; Alberta was still dead.

And outside a siren was singing its lunatic cantata . . .

Sergeant Sheedy, out of Central Station, was young and hard-muscled and smart. He knew his job and he didn't view private detectives with a suspicious eye. For all of him I could have been a street car conductor or a sign painter. I was a witness, nothing more, and presently it was time to say my piece.

I told him a straight story; perhaps a degree too straight. Sheedy's expression got more incredulous as I talked.

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Finally he exploded: "Now let me get this straight! You were hired by this movie guy Banner—"

"Mrs. Banner—"

"—to find the crank who gave out a phony rumor about his death. So you head straight for a road behind this Santa Rita Ranch where some woods-runner has the license number all ready, waiting. Within three hours of getting the assignment you find the owner of the car dying from a blow on the skull, and her boy friend walks in like a lamb for the slaughter. Brother! I wish they'd break for me like that. Just once!"

I hadn't mentioned Banner's extortion notes; slipped my mind, I guess. "You could check," I said, "except that ranger may have forgotten all about it by now. He's been breathing that high thin air too long."

SHEEDY glanced sourly at the limp form of Everett Moss being carried out to the ambulance. "I can see this is going to be a picnic! An epileptic, a mad mountain-boy, and a private dick with second sight! Why can't I ever draw a case where everybody is normal? Just once!"

He paused and studied me while he sucked on a tooth. "Kind of coincidental, isn't it? Who knew you were going to come here tonight?"

"The ranger. Maybe the auto club. I wouldn't be sure about that last."

He grunted in disgust.

"What did you turn up in the house? And don't tell me you didn't shake the place!"

"The junk jewelry on the bed," I said. "And that's all. Maybe dumped there to make this look like a burglary."

"Sure." Sheedy dismissed that—perhaps a little too quickly. "You think this guy Moss skulled his sweetie?"

I shrugged. "Might have. It could

have been Moss up there on the mountain road in Alberta's car. If he told her what he'd done, she might have threatened to blow the whistle on him to keep him in line. So he lost his head and slugged her."

"Just because the guy's an epileptic that doesn't necessarily mean he's nuts," Sheedy objected. "You said that because you're suspicious of anybody who isn't just like you."

"I said it because you wanted me to," I snapped. "You sit there feeding me ideas so I'll put them into words for you. If it sounds good it was your idea—if it's silly, I'm stuck with it."

He stared at me, hard-eyed, and then he grinned without much humor.

I grinned back at him. I didn't mean it either. "My theory is she fell into the fireplace and hit her head on the grate."

"Get the hell out of here, Carmody," he said quietly. "And don't mess in this business till I tell you to. Otherwise, I'll talk to Banner. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"Mrs. Banner wouldn't like it," I said. "And if she wouldn't, then I wouldn't."

I went outside into the warm darkness where a mock orange tree was sweetening the night. But it was a little too much like the cloying perfume of the flowers that just this morning had been banked around Joey Content's casket. A hot-shot gambler, and a nice middle-aged lady with a sense of humor. But as far as I could stretch my imagination they had in common only this: they were both as dead as the dreams of youth . . .

I took Sheedy's advice and let the police department carry the ball for the rest of the week. They had the organization to do a better job than I could. I sat around my office playing with those six poker chips Alberta had given me. I'd forgotten about them till I

cleaned out my pockets that night and that was too late. If I gave them to Sheedy with no better story than that, he'd have roisted me right out of the private detective business. He was a tough lad.

The chips were yellow plastic with a slightly raised border and a design like a treble clef in the center. Perhaps a private mark, I thought. In the back room of my mind there was an uneasy answer to whose chips they were, but I didn't want to dwell on it. Besides, I couldn't explain how they got under Alberta's bed. So I put them in a drawer of my desk and waited for the police to pin the murder on Everett Moss.

And they did. He was arrested on suspicion of murder three days later as he left the hospital. And he promptly made a damaging statement before a lawyer got to him and dummied him up. He admitted he'd been outside the house for at least a half hour before I let him in. He thought he was catching Alberta with a secret admirer. Nobody else went into the house, he said, except me. And himself.

I phoned Judith Banner right away and made an appointment for the next day, to take another look at the extortion note.

A little later the afternoon mail came. A postal card had me thinking for a minute. It read: *Will you do one more favor for me? Misfortune has me by the heels again.* It was signed *The Great Delcema*, and the address was *out on Avenue 19.*

PRESENTLY I worked that out with the typical Carmody deduction. Avenue 19 could only mean Lincoln Heights Jail. A wino's home away from home. The one person I knew who would have a name like that was the wizard I'd saved from a watery grave. He must have been hitting that

magic pitcher again. If I was the only person he could call on for help, he was in a bad way. So I went up to see him.

He greeted me with a sort of forlorn dignity and an old-fashioned humor. "You understand," he smiled faintly, "as a student of Houdini I could escape from this smelly institution any time I chose. But I shouldn't like to embarrass my jailers."

"Probably all family men," I agreed gravely, "who couldn't afford to lose their jobs." He looked gaunt enough to slip right through the bars. "How did you know who I was, old timer?"

"That day at Banner's, I had you cast as the palace guard," he explained. "When I looked for you to thank you for assisting me out of the pool, some fat gentleman told me your name. But he said you weren't the watch-dog. So I deduced you must be a private eye."

"What can I do for you?" I wanted to know.

He looked a little embarrassed. "I was thrown into this foul dungeon because I couldn't meet their ridiculous fine. But I'm not asking for a loan," he added quickly. "I have a sum of money owing me. From Banner. I didn't collect my stipend that day. I thought of writing to him, but you know how those people are—little gold-plated gods protected by lackeys and worse." His face contorted. "He would never see the letter—some hireling would throw it away—"

"Okay, dad," I soothed. "I'm going out there tomorrow. I'll put in a word for your money. You'll be out of here before you know it."

"You are an anachronism, sir," he said in a trembling voice. "A gentleman in a benighted world full of knaves and profiteers."

"And that's the bitter truth!" I agreed. I left before he dampened my lapel.

I told Judith Banner about him the next day, and she promised to mail the check at once. She led me into the library, where I compared the extortion note with the scrambled sentence I'd typed on Alberta's machine.

Same paper; same typing.

"I guess that's it," I said. "Your troubles are over."

She smiled as if at some sad, private joke, and asked for my bill. I would have done it gratis for the sheer pleasure of doing something for her—a kid cutting the grass for the girl next door while his own lawn grows wild. But there was no way I could explain that to her, so I charged her all my conscience would bear.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Carmody," she said at the door.

"I was William the other day."

"So you were." She gave me her hand and smiled. "Good-by, William. I wish —" she looked away and finished—"the best of luck to you."

I gave her hand back to her and walked the two miles to the nearest bus stop.

Another job written off—short, profitable, and somehow disturbing. But my part was all finished. I could forget it.

That's what I thought. Thirty minutes later the whole damn thing went off like Krakatao! And you know who was sitting right on top?

Yeah . . . !

CHAPTER FIVE

Unlucky Seventh

WHEN I got off the bus, fat Chauncey McLea was getting weighed on the corner drugstore scales. His weight gave him no happiness. He didn't read me the fortune. "Another note," he said tersely. "This one means business."

Something wrong here. "When was it sent?"

"Last night. Postmarked at seven-thirty in Los Angeles. I didn't tell Judith about it. She worries. . . ."

A sudden rush of something to the pit of my stomach made me slightly nauseated. "Come on to my office."

The note had been typed with some other typewriter and the paper was different. But that figured, since Alberta's machine was no longer available.

Banner: You had your chance. Next week I'll kill you. Maybe I'll kill that dame you're playing around with, too.

It was signed: *You Know Who*.

"Something new here," I said. "What dame?"

"Hard to tell," Chauncey's balloon face was pained. "He changes them every third week."

"What about Judith? Does she know?"

He shrugged the forty pounds of blubber that padded his shoulders. "I suppose so. But she won't believe it. That woman, Carmody," he said earnestly, "is the nearest thing to an angel you and I will ever see. And Paul is purest trash."

"What keeps them together?"

He stared at something that only he could see. "I wish I knew. Will you get to work on this?"

I dug out the yellow poker chips. If the note writer wasn't Everett Moss—and he wasn't, unless they were furnishing typewriters for prisoners—the only lead I had was these chips. I tossed one to Chauncey.

"Mean anything to you?"

He studied it and his little eyes moved uneasily. "From the El Tempo Club. One of Paul's favorite playgrounds. I've never been there. But I saw a chip like this on Paul's dressing table once."

I thought: *Don't be crazy, Carmody!*

You can't tie up a gunned-out gangster, a movie star and a respectable department store buyer. That's what Alberta had been.

Any number of people might have El Tempo poker chips. I knew the answer to my own next question, but I asked it anyway. "Who runs the El Tempo?"

"I don't know—now," Chauncey said. "Joey Content used to have it. But he got killed last week."

He was telling me! I was the seventh pallbearer!

"Get on it right away, Carmody," he urged. "This guy may mean business."

"And you wouldn't want to lose a good job!" But I wasn't messing around with the boys who ran the El Tempo Club for any reason. That way lay Sid Marable. And sudden death.

"I'll see what I can do," I added insincerely.

He nodded, struggled out of the chair and squeezed through the door. A slob of a man nursing a torch for an angel . . .

An hour later Maggie walked in. I hadn't seen her since the night I returned her car but there didn't seem to be any hard feelings. She tossed me a plain black necktie.

"I don't have a thing to wear it with," I told her. "Off what stiff did you get *this?*"

"A street salesman sent it up," she said. "He told me it was for you. I

thought you must have ordered it."

I sat looking at the tie and at Maggie. Then the phone rang. I picked up the receiver but there was only a gentle, distant hum.

"Hello," I said. "Who's there?"

"Shame on you, Carmody," a dead voice whispered in my ear. "Letting a girl substitute in your coffin." Then he hung up.

O'Leary watched me strangely. "Willie, what is it?"

I was holding something heavy. The phone. I put it down. I got up and walked on frozen feet over to the window. There were three pigeons squatting on the ledge below. In the early shadows of evening, Luther, the one-lunged gunman, was watching the street cars go by from his favorite bench. I put my hot palm against the cool glass.

"If it's a woman," O'Leary said from behind me, "I'm broadminded, Willie."

I had to swallow twice to make room for my voice. I'd never thought of the possibility of them going to work on Maggie. I had to get Maggie out of my life—fast.

I said quietly, "I guess you're going to have to be broadminded, Maggie. That was Judith Banner. I wouldn't want the newspapers to get a hold of this—but you're entitled to know."

Her footsteps came quickly across the room. "Willie, what are you trying to

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SAN ANTONIO, Texas—Tony R. Garcia, San Antonio artist and illustrator, knows that it's *taste* that counts in a whiskey. "Tell everybody," he says, "that I switched to Calvert because of its *mild, and smooth taste.*"



say? What's gotten into you anyway?"

"We'll always be friends, you and I, Margaret," I said. I put so much into it I scared myself. "I know you'll understand. We both fought it—"

"Stop talking like a movie script!" she said furiously. "Tell it to me!"

"Okay, baby—if I have to spell it out for you." I turned and looked at her. "We're all wound up. But good. It's been on the way for a long time. Now it's here. Get out of my life, and stay out. All I want of you is a memory!"

SHE turned so white, I thought she was going to hit the deck. Her soft lips trembled, and her eyes went dark and remote. She backed slowly away from me, like a child who simply doesn't believe it, until her back came up against the door knob. She never once took her gaze off me. The only thing that could ever haunt me more than that look in her eyes, would be to have to carry her up the grassy incline of the Slopes of Gilead Cemetery.

If she had said anything then, it would have caved me in. But she swallowed rigidly; then she turned and went out.

I watched her silhouette fade off the ground glass door and I had a hole in my stomach an elephant could have lost his foot in. I flattened the tin waste basket with one kick. It didn't help. I wanted to hit something that would snap and bleed.

You can get scared enough to get brave. Maybe it's sheer cornered desperation, but it passes for the same thing. You do things that a moment's thought would tell you are crazy.

Only I wasn't thinking. Two hours later I was in the El Tempo Club.

A bartender served me a straight scotch and a sneer. You'd have had to be richer than he was to rate a smile, and only movie stars and capitalists

were. The club was on the side of a hill above that strip of Sunset that lies in the country. I'd climbed fifty-seven steps to reach it, and that was an indication that it had something more than other places. Nobody climbs fifty-seven steps if they don't have to.

And the end wasn't in sight. The gambling rooms were farther up the hill in a separate building. That might discourage some players, but by the same token the police wouldn't just casually drop in.

It took me an hour to figure the setup and five minutes fast talk to sell myself to the man with the cold-chisel face at the top of that second outdoor flight. He didn't like to let strangers in, but I dropped Paul Banner's name and that seemed to carry weight. I got in.

It was a fancy layout. Most places of this sort have a makeshift appearance because they're here today and raided tomorrow. No doubt a combination of protection and inaccessibility was responsible for this air of permanence. They had everything but Russian roulette. And girl croupiers, all looking like movie extras, in low-cut evening gowns which were never designed as an aid to concentration on the spinning wheel.

One table had most of the trade, so I wandered over to it. Paul Banner was right in the middle of a hot winning streak. He was wearing a tux and he was in a better mood than the other time I'd seen him. I watched for a few minutes, then I rode one of Alberta's yellow chips on his coattail.

Banner glanced up and apparently found my face familiar. "Hello, there!"

I didn't think he knew where he'd seen me before, but he was out in public and he couldn't be himself.

The girl croupier hadn't spun the wheel. She was looking at my yellow chip with a little furrow on her lovely forehead. She was very dark, in a

Spanish way, and as beautiful as Judith Banner. But there was a vast difference. You'd be proud to be seen with Judith any place. But if you got into an alley brawl you'd much rather have this girl along.

"I'm sorry," she said. "There's been a mistake somewhere. Your chip is not good."

I leaned on the table. "Somebody must have changed the rules."

"If you'll take it to the office," she said sharply, "I'm sure it will be straightened out." She pushed the chip toward me.

Slender fingers clamped on my arm and a silky voice said: "Right this way, Carmody. You're expected."

I picked up my chip and went with him. He floated along like a dancing master, slight and elegant. We went into an office that was also elegant—a little too elegant.

To give the room the right balance of ruggedness was Sid Marable. "I thought you'd come, Carmody," he said in his lemon-sour voice.

The dancing master said: "He tried to run one of Joey's chips."

Marable stared at me while a small fire smouldered behind his eyes. "This gets better and better, Carmody. Let's have it."

I threw the chip on the desk. "The girl says you'll redeem it."

MARABLE didn't look at the chip. He opened a drawer and pulled out a sheath of bills. He tossed them to me. A quick riffle showed me there was around fifty bills. All hundreds.

"The stakes are high," I said. "I'm sorry I didn't bring the rest of the chips."

"Don't get greedy, Carmody. I'm a guy who doesn't like trouble. I'm paying for no kickbacks. Where is he?"

"Castle?" I threw the money back to him. "We got off to a wrong start, Marable. I didn't come in here to sell Ivan to you."

"You didn't come in just to make talk," Marable said coldly. "Get on with it."

"I will." I leaned across the desk toward him. I was scared enough to be sore, and enough not to show how scared I really was "Lay off my girl, Marable. If anybody so much as whistles at her, I'll know where to come. And I'll do a lot of damage before your punks slow me down. That's a promise."

"What's holding you up, Carmody?" he asked softly. "If that dame is so important to you, why don't you do something for her? You could make some dough and save your girl. But what do you do? You come in and talk hard where talk won't buy you a cigarette!"

"You're a stupid man, Marable," I

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said brightly. I had to say something.

He spun the yellow chip and watched it moodily. "When I took over this place, I put in a new line of chips. All of Joey's were supposed to have been destroyed. Where did you get this one?"

"Not from Ivan," I assured him. "A woman named Alberta Soames had it. She wouldn't know Ivan either. She was murdered the first of the week. Suppose you fit that in for me."

Marable picked up the chip and examined it closely. "I'm going to tell you something, Carmody, though I don't know why I waste my time. Joey was making a nice thing out of the El Tempo Club. He got his cut of the take, and more. But we haven't figured out how he did it. Maybe he had some extra chips made up for a stooge to pass off on one of the cashiers. The stooge would be Ivan. That's why we're looking for Ivan."

"I didn't think of that," I said. "I thought Ivan had been a witness to Joey's shooting."

Marable looked surprised. "It was Ivan who knocked Joey off. That gang war angle is strictly for street circulation. Hell, we wanted to ask him a lot of questions."

"How about the wheels?" I suggested. "Maybe he had some of them gimmicked."

"Give us a little credit!" Marable snapped. "I took every piece of equipment apart personally. If there is a bug in any of it, do you think I wouldn't have found it?"

I stood up. "You got a problem there. Maybe you need a private detective. But not me. I just came into warn you about Luther's health. Either pull him off or I'll blow some smoke in his face and suffocate him!"

"Luther is wiry." Marable smiled. "He'll take a lot of wear."

"He'll get a lot," I promised. I

thought I had him half-convinced. I started for the door.

"Carmody," he called after me. "Joey got into us for a hundred grand. He didn't have any left when the undertaker sent in his bill. How much of it is Ivan paying you?"

You couldn't argue with somebody as convinced as that. To Marable a cut of a hundred thousand dollars was incentive enough for anything. I was front man for Ivan Castle, and all hell wouldn't change it.

I made a disorderly withdrawal into the gambling room. I'd thrown my Sunday bluff and he called it. Now how did I get out of here with all my skin?

It wasn't going to be easy. Those steep, dark steps leading down the side of the hill were a perfect place for an accident. Maybe a window in the gent's room would do for an emergency exit.

Paul Banner was still winning like he owned the wheel as I started down a softly lit corridor, following an arrow.

I never found the rest room I had a blurred sense of someone moving very fast but I didn't really see him. I took it right where my head comes to a point, and then I was falling. The floor fell away with me and I dropped nine miles without a chute.

All I knew from then on was what people told me. People in the paddy wagon. They said cops came out of the air conditioning. They never saw so many cops at one time outside of the policemen's ball. How they did it was still a mystery.

But even with a head full of pirouetting devils, I could supply the answer Marable would come up with. It wouldn't be any more accurate than the existing belief that I knew where Ivan Castle was hiding, but it was bound to catch on—in the wrong places. To wit: one William Carmody had fingered the El Tempo Club for the cops. *For time*

*and place, call the Springer Mortuary—
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CHAPTER SIX

To the Slopes of Gilead

I SPENT the night in a cell. I didn't have bail and I was in no condition to phone Lieutenant Kissinger of the Hollywood station, who would have sprung me. Kissinger didn't have much use for me, but he was fond of Maggie, which sometimes caused him to do things against his conscience. There was one other reason why that cell was good enough for me, and his name was Sid Marable. I felt safer here.

In the morning I had a headache the Grand Canyon wouldn't have held. Moving at all was pure agony and if I'd had any choice, I'd not have lifted my head. But bail had been put up for me and they wanted the cell for a triangle murder suspect. When I got outside, Maggie was waiting.

I said: "I thought I told you to stay away from me."

She was wearing slacks, which on her are a crime against mankind. She didn't look at me as she said: "I was down here for the auction, and I overheard your name being read off."

"And you just happened to have fifty bucks in your girdle?"

"I never wear a girdle," she said indignantly. "I had the money because I thought I might buy something at the auction."

I tried to focus on her. "What are you talking about—auction?"

"You know—the police auction. All the lost and found articles that have not been claimed. Let's go in."

"You can't buy anything if you're broke," I pointed out.

She still wouldn't look at me and I couldn't tell what she was thinking. But

the fact that she had bailed me out was a good sign that she'd listen to reason when the time came that Marble and his hoods weren't breathing down my neck.

"We can watch," she said. "I have a few dollars left."

I didn't believe for a minute she had come down here this early in the day for a police auction. But I went along with her. It was the least I could do.

I didn't pay much attention to the auction. There was the usual mishmash of stuff that looks good in an attic. A junkman could have made a modest haul. Presently I was aware that Maggie had entered the bidding against a Main Street character with the sniffles.

"How much money do you have?" she whispered. I had about twelve. "That's enough. I have nine-fifty. I think that little man is a shill anyway."

"What are you bidding on?"

"That box. Can't you see?"

"See?" I moaned. "I'm hardly breathing! Let's go get some coffee."

"Wait. Nine!" she called. The Skid Row gentleman sniffled indignantly. "It's perfect to keep old love-letters in," Maggie informed me, with a touch of bitterness.

"Nine dollars the lovely lady bids." The auctioneer's voice didn't do anything good for my head. "Who'll say nine-fifty?"

"Nine-fifty," the opposition bid.

"Let's get this over with." I lifted a shaky voice. "Twenty-one bucks!"

That did it. But it didn't make me any friends. Even Maggie glared.

"Why did you do that? I could have got it for a lot less."

"It's a present for you," I told her. "I didn't want anything cheap."

We got the box, a tricked-up little orange item, somewhat larger than a cigarette box. A fierce black dragon curled its way over most of the front

and cover, but today nothing could scare me. I put the box under one arm, took Maggie's hand and got out of there.

We never made the street. A plain-clothes-man latched on to my elbow. "You're under arrest, buddy. You too, lady."

"Oh, well," I said. "I didn't want to leave that cell anyway."

Maggie had more fight in her. She insisted on asking questions, though she didn't get any answers. We were rushed into an office.

Sergeant Sheedy was sitting behind a charred and scarred desk.

He took one look at the box under my arm and went off like a Chinese New Years. "Not him!" he roared at the detective. "You ox-brained moron! I'll have you walking a beat in a subdivision that isn't even under construction. Go after the other guy!"

It took quite a while to cool him off long enough to get some sense out of him. "That box," he said, in a strangled voice. "We don't know where it came from. Some fool patrolman turned it in without any report—a lost and found. But one of my boys—not that half-wit that arrested you—tied it up with the Soames kill. Never mind how," he added craftily. "So we planted it in the auction and gave it a mention in the newspapers."

"Great!" I said. "So the guy who killed Alberta was supposed to walk in and get himself arrested while bidding on it."

SHEEDY looked mysterious. "I have reasons to think he might. Did you get a look at the guy who was bidding against you?"

"A wino." I shrugged him off. "Not the type. Besides, I thought you had Everett Moss tapped for that job."

He gave me a narrow look. "Why are you so anxious to pin it on Moss?"

"I'm not trying to pin it on anybody," I yelled.

"Then stop making insinuations," he snarled. "Now get out of here before I book you for obstructing justice. And leave the box! I'll give you a receipt for your money."

Outside we pooled our pennies and found enough for coffee. Maggie asked: "Why did he say you were trying to pin it on Moss?"

"A copper's psychology," I explained. "He's got an angle he doesn't want to talk about, so he uses that way of fogging up the situation."

We found a cafe and I gulped some steaming coffee for strength to live the hour out. "Let's you come clean now. Why were you down here so early? And don't give me any more talk about the auction."

"You're certainly grumpy in the morning, aren't you? I'm glad you're not going to marry me." Then she patted my hand. "All right, Willie, I'll talk. The cop that Kissinger put on your tail phoned me that you were in jail, so I dug into the sugar bowl and came down to redeem you."

"Cop?" I said. "What are you talking about? How did Kissinger get into this deal?"

"He put a man on you yesterday when I told him you were in trouble. Good heavens, Willie, you didn't think I believed that story about you and Judith Banner! Why, she wouldn't take you in a month-end sale!"

"You can say things like that," I said stiffly, "knowing I'm in no shape to hit you."

Her eyes got tender. "You were so noble and dramatic making that speech. It's just that you're such a poor liar, baby. You never know what to do with your hands."

I just stared at her.

"I knew it had to be something bad to

make you do it," she said. "You were afraid somebody would get even with you through me—"

"Stop being so all-knowing! And why didn't you stay out of it? I'm still so hot I'm radioactive."

"You'd better tell me about it, Willie. Maybe I can think of something."

So I told her what I knew. It didn't take a lot of telling.

"The big puzzle," I said, "is to tie up Joey Content's murder with Alberta's. She had six poker chips from his gambling club. She didn't know where they came from, and neither do I. Marable says he destroyed all of them when he took over the El Tempo. If I could find Ivan, I could get some answers."

"Banner seems to be the crux of the whole thing," Maggie said slowly. "He connects with Alberta through whoever was trying to extort him, and he knew Joey Content and later Marable at the El Tempo."

"Now if I could just prove Banner wrote those letters himself and gave out his own death report, I'd have a swell suspect!"

"Don't just laugh it off!" Maggie retorted. "Maybe he created a crank and an extortionist as a rabbit for the legal bloodhounds to chase."

The girl had a point. I said: "Only we're lacking one motive. It's conceivable Banner could have dropped

enough money to Joey Content to shoot him during a beef over it. But I just can't buy a big name movie star ever knowing a person like Alberta ever existed."

Maggie put her chin on her fist. "He wasn't always a big movie star. Maybe during his early days he knew her. . . . He's not a very nice person, Willie. I interviewed him the day of the lawn party and I found out a lot about him. He didn't like my probing."

I remembered how disagreeable he'd been when he came into the library where I had talked to Judith Banner. "Give me a rough sketch," I suggested.

"Well, first, his name isn't really Banner. But he wouldn't tell me what it was. And he used to be a Broadway hooper—about thirty years ago. How he worked his way up to being a star would make a crook's manual. And, boy, is he tight with his money!"

"How about his wife? How did he ever hapepn to get someone like her?"

"Judith?" O'Leary looked a little forlorn. "She's Pasadena society—real blue blood. Paul married her because he had to have proof he was a success. Money wasn't enough."

"That's a good character analysis—for him. But why did Judith, with her looks and breeding and background and wealth, marry Banner?"

"If you were a woman," O'Leary said,



"Elementary!" says Watson

CAIRO, ILL.—Calvin Watson, Cairo businessman, says it's easy to pick today's best whiskey buy. "Judge taste, lightness, mildness, flavor—and you'll switch to Calvert. I did. Elementary!"

giving me an odd glance. "I could explain it to you. But if you were a woman you wouldn't need it explained."

"Oh, don't be so damn obscure! What else?"

"Well—there's Chauncey. Paul keeps him around for pig-sticking. More proof that he's the great Paul Banner. And Chauncey takes it because he's in love with Judith. Also because he gets a big salary from Paul. They're half-brothers."

"I will be damned!" I stared at her. "What do you know about that!"

She looked pleased. "Does that mean something to you?"

"Maybe. Let's go up to my office. I want another look at that last threat letter."

I gave the waitress our pennies and we went outside into the midmorning smog. Halfway to the next block I pulled up sharply.

"Maggie," I said urgently, "where's that tail of Kissinger's now?"

"I don't know. He was around. . . ."

"Find him," I ordered. "Find him quick. Don't argue, baby—just run!" I gave her a push in the right direction.

Luther and the weedy character, who'd been number three on Joey's coffin handles, closed in from two directions. Marable was at the wheel of a long black car.

For once, Maggie showed good sense. She was outside Luther and she kept running back toward the cafe. Maybe the tail had lingered there over his coffee. Maybe he was trying to date a waitress. It didn't make a lot of difference. I never laid eyes on him.

LUTHER'S gun must have been awfully heavy in his small hand.

He prodded me into the car. Marable, watching me in the rear-view mirror, said wonderingly: "Ivan must have given you a big chunk of that hun-

dred grand, Carmody. The things you'll do for money!"

On the coast just north of Malibu, a bleak, high cliff drops sharply into the restless Pacific. Centuries of foaming-mad waves have attacked the broken rocks of the foot of this cliff, and the seagulls have long used it as their own Wailing Wall. It's a lonely, haunted place, and I didn't think I could ever rest peacefully there. But that's where I was headed.

It was Sid Marable's idea of a handy place to lose a body, and the only one who didn't agree with him didn't have a vote.

"We got to weigh him down," his spiteful voice went on. "That dame he was with is going to kick up a fuss. But without a corpse, she's off to a bad start."

"Good enough," the weedy man said indifferently.

Luther just nodded.

Carmody wasn't asked for an opinion. "Okay, gents," I said. "You win. I'll give you Ivan."

"All of a sudden now he knows where Ivan is." Marable stared coldly at me in the rear-view mirror. "Maybe we no longer want him, Carmody. It don't matter much how he and Joey were knocking down on the profits. There ain't going to be any more profits!"

"You're a little late, scout," the other man said. "We had a very bad night last night!"

"One of the customers broke a wheel," Marable said bitterly, "and in the El Tempo when you break a wheel you can retire in your old age. That was bad enough, but when the law got the rest, we went out of business. You can't stand two raps like that, Carmody."

I began to get a vacant feeling down where my coffee was. The only hole card I had to bluff with was Ivan and nobody would even call me. I said, with

a sort of desperate hope: "How about that money Ivan got away with after Joey conked out? That ought to make a nice sinking fund."

Marable glanced sideways at the weedy character. "Maybe you got a point, Carmody. Let's hear you talk it up."

"I know where he is," I said carefully. "I found out by accident—not because I've been hiding him out. It doesn't matter if you believe that or not. The point is, I can show you where he is. I don't promise you can get to him."

"We'll get to him," Marable assured me, "unless he's in Fort Knox." I believed him. "Where to, Carmody?"

I tried not to let my breath out too sharply. But at least I'd escape those rocks in the surf. Who wants sea-gulls for mourners? "Turn left on the next street. We have to double back to Glendale Boulevard."

Luther said uneasily: "He's got a flip tongue. He'll talk you into something. I think it's a trick."

"We didn't promise him anything," Marable pointed out. "If he produces, maybe we'll put him on a train for the East."

"It's a trick," Luther persisted. "I got a premonition of trouble."

Marable said wearily: "Turn it off, Luther."

We had a lot of silence through Glendale, and more of the same for Burbank. I gave directions from time-to-time just to keep the interest up. I hesitated when we passed the asphalt road leading into the Santa Rita Ranch. The guard at the gate had a gun, and he'd be tough about letting anyone in, but he was outnumbered, and the element of surprise was against him. And Marable was desperate.

"Another five miles," I said.

We swung down the second asphalt road and presently started up the grade

into the mountains. On the hairpin turns I got sick, and it wasn't anything but fear. I was so scared my fingernails were turning blue. I didn't have any rosy dreams that I was going to be allowed to walk out of this even if I did turn Ivan over to them. And if my guess was wrong, I'd picked as quiet and lonely a spot to die in as those rocks beyond Malibu. . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hideaway Ranch

"PULL over here," I said pointing to the loop of the road that overhung the bridal paths of the ranch. Marable stopped the car.

"Well?" he demanded. "Where is he—hiding up a tree?"

"Trot him out," the other man ordered.

"I told you he'd be tough to get at," I said. "He's down at the ranch. There's only one road leading into it, and that's patrolled. This is the back way."

Marable gave me a disgusted stare. "Do we look like burros? How are we going to get down there?"

"Maybe I should have sent him to you C.O.D. I put the finger on him—you carry it from here. Maybe if you wait long enough, he'll ride along the trail."

Marable looked at the weedy man. "What do you think?"

"Could be. Looks like a tight setup from here."

"How are we going to smoke him out?" Luther demanded.

"That can wait," Marable said. "All right, Carmody—out."

"You mean I've got to walk down from here?"

"You won't have to walk far," Marable promised quietly. "You can't say you didn't have it coming. Get out."

I got out. I didn't have a talking-point. My legs held me up, but only barely. The three men got out too.

"Start walking," Marable ordered.

I tried to wet my lips. I couldn't have spit if my foot had been on fire. "Doesn't the condemned man get a last cigarette?"

"Smoking is a bad habit," Luther said coldly. "You won't miss it."

I looked at Marable. "How do you stand having a guy like that around? Doesn't he get any fun out of life?"

"Let him have a cigarette, Luther," Marable growled. "Other people have lungs!"

I lit up. I was proud of the way I did it with one match. The smell of tobacco and dust and things growing in the bright sun was sweeter than any perfume. Maybe those gray, lonely rocks would have made it easier to let go of life. Up here the world was a great place to be in.

I filled my lungs with smoke and blew a little of it at Luther. Marable smiled with remote amusement when the little man went into a paroxysm of coughing. But he kept his gun on me. So did his pal.

I made the cigarette last as long as possible. It's a terrible thing, knowing your life is only as long as a cigarette.

The coals got closer and closer to my fingers and I wondered if, conversely, I was getting closer to the Everlasting Coals.

Marable's acid voice ate through my thoughts. "Okay, we're convinced. You're a big man, Carmody. You're going out like a hero. Now walk over to the edge."

I walked over to the edge. Luther followed, flat-footed. "Turn around," he said in a half-whisper.

"Start shooting." I wondered whose voice I'd borrowed for the occasion. I sounded like a boy soprano. "Do it while

I'm looking at you. Let's see how tough you are!"

Each agonizing second I stalled was that much longer for something to happen in. But it should have happened long ago. There wasn't a sound in the hills but the heavy beat of my heart.

"I'd as soon it be in the belly," Luther's gray, ball-bearing eyes had a wild shine on them now. "I was just giving you a choice."

I turned around. Slowly. I was afraid my muscles would freeze on me in that final second. Maybe they did. The crash-and-whine of the rifle gave me an involuntary start. I went over the edge, head first.

The second shot was walking on the heels of the first one, but Luther's bubbling scream got in between. The sounds of panic on the road above and behind me imprinted themselves on the tape-recorder of my mind for later listening. Afterwards, I did remember them: the shouts, the failing screams of Luther, and the steady, methodical rifle fire. But as I went over the edge I heard nothing but myself falling.

The slope was steep and gritty with nothing to slow my tumbling body till I hit the first growth of scrub oak fifty feet down. Small rocks tore at me, and my eyes filled with dirt, and I choked on the dust I kicked up. I didn't, at that moment, know if I'd been shot. I hurt in a dozen places, but my mind was somersaulting with my body, and I couldn't concentrate. Then the scrub oak flagged me down.

For safety, I rolled deep into it. It wasn't much cover at first. But I didn't need any. I heard the black car turning around in that narrow loop of road. Marable was wrenching the gears. He'd probably forgotten to release the emergency too.

I lifted my head for a brief, spinning look at the car. It was headed down

and rocking on the turns. I felt like the last horse on a merry-go-round. I wouldn't win any races, but at least I was going to finish. With that I fainted like a coy maiden. . . .

I GOT back up the incline on my hands and knees. It was the best I could manage. That way I found the little cards which I'd not have noticed otherwise. They appeared to have been carelessly tossed there from the road—and since the last rain.

I picked up three. The wind might have fluttered others into the scrub oak, but three were enough. Weighing machine tickets, with someone's fortune on them. It would have been a nice touch if the fortunes were ironically close to the facts, such as: *Beware of a dark man with a gun.*

But the only thing significant was the weight stamped on each. They were all about the same—263 pounds. I knew only one person in this hassle who weighed that much.

The ranger was emerging from the pines when I got back up on the road. His rifle with its telescopic sight dangled easily on his arm. He stared at me from his brooding, hidden eyes without the slightest light of recognition.

"Nice shooting," I said weakly. "But you sure took your time!"

He continued to stare at me, silently.

"I thought the cigarette would get you interested. For whatever it's worth, you saved my life."

"I aimed at his shoulder," he said suddenly. "But I killed him." There was a long smear of blood on the road. "He was dead when they put him into the car."

"There wasn't much to Luther. A rifle bullet would go right through him. Even at that range."

He wasn't listening to me. His head was cocked a little as if he were listening to something or somebody, but it wasn't me.

I asked: "Do you have a telephone up there?"

He didn't say anything, just turned and started to climb the hill. I followed him.

He'd worn a narrow path up through that labyrinth of pines where the sun had never shone. I felt tiny sharp eyes watching us from the deep green depths, but they didn't make a sound. Strange, ashen little flowers grew beside the path looking like waifs who knew they would die when darkness fell. By the time we reached his eagle's nest we'd crossed an invisible frontier into a land where even shadows fell the wrong way.

A magnificent red setter butted open a screen door and came out to meet us. I patted his head but he didn't wag his tail or show the slightest interest. His

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brown eyes had the same remoteness in them as his owner's.

"Nice dog," I said. Neither of them answered me. I went into the lookout station and cranked an old-fashioned wall telephone. I phoned Paul Banner's house. He was out and so was Judith, so I got Chauncey McLea. Banner, he said, was riding at the Santa Rita Ranch.

"Can you get me past the guard at the gate?"

"I guess so," he said uncertainly. "But why?"

"Never mind now. Get a car and come and get me." I told him where I was. "I'll meet you down the road."

Next I put a call through to Sheedy because I knew Maggie would be there. It took several minutes to convince her I wasn't dead in a culvert. When I went outside, the ranger was sitting on a stump with the dog's head between his knees and recounting in a quiet monotone, as if in a confessional, what had happened down on the road.

I said: "He looks like he understands you."

The ranger lifted his eyes to me with nothing but pity on his mind. Of course the dog understood him. I started to ask if the dog ever talked back but I bit down hard on the question. Because I knew what the answer would be—and I was afraid I'd believe him. . . .

I tried to say my thanks again but he didn't seem to know what I was talking about. I left him and wended my way down that crooked path to the road and still there wasn't a sound except the quick beat of my own footsteps following close as if afraid of being left behind.

WHILE I waited for Chauncey, I sorted out all the mismatched patches of this crazy quilt of corruption and murder. I knew where everybody fitted and why, but when it

came to proof I couldn't prove New Year's fell on January first.

The black car skidded to a stop. Chauncey's big face was like seven pounds of dirty lard. "What's up, Carmody?" he demanded.

I ignored him, and he drove in sullen silence. At the end of the asphalt road the guard came out of his shanty and looked at a card Chauncey showed him. Then he glanced at me and smiled from the teeth out.

"I see you made it," he said in his gentle voice. He might have been calling me a dirty name.

I said, for no reason at all: "There'll be a day for you!"

He pulled the smile inside so quickly that his Adam's apple convulsed. Then he turned and went back into the shanty without another word.

"You certainly chilled him," Chauncey said, in a subdued voice. "What was that you said to him?"

"The password."

Maybe I should have said it that first time. I might have stopped this thing before it got started.

We drove down the dusty road, leaving a gray-white dragon's tail behind us, and around the toe of the hump. The ranch was right behind it. Chauncey pointed out Banner's car, a lemon-yellow convertible.

A generous share of the ranch house had been allotted to the bar. It was a horsy room with an exposed oaken-beamed ceiling and a huge field-stone fireplace and colorful Indian rugs on the floor.

Paul Banner, a girl and a man were sitting at a heavy redwood table. Both were familiar. The man wore a brown tweed sports coat with a bright orange and black show handkerchief, and burnt orange shirt. He was still as pale and wasted as a castaway, but the aura of intoxication was gone and I hardly knew

him. It was the Great Dekema himself.

"Didn't you get your money?" I asked him. "Mrs. Banner said she'd mail it."

He took the handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped his already dry face. There wasn't enough of him left to perspire. "Brother Banner is the one who owes me money," he said quietly.

"Just what the hell is all this?" Brother Banner demanded. Then he saw Chauncey behind me. "And what are you doing here, Porky?"

"Paul—" Chauncey began in a sickly voice, but I cut him off.

"I've been investigating those extortion notes of yours," I said. "Your wife found one of them and hired me—though it was Chauncey who instigated it for reasons of his own."

"Now, look here!" Chauncey protested, half rising out of his chair.

"Sit down!" I snapped. "You wrote that last letter yourself to keep the investigation from running down after Everett Moss was tagged as the crank. You did it because you're in love with Judith, and you hate Banner."

"Of course he hates me," Banner said impatiently. "But he hasn't the guts to do anything about it."

"He did plenty," I informed him. "He's been spying on you from up in the hills. He knew you were using this place to meet your girl friend and he wanted to start a scandal to ruin you—and break up your marriage." I turned back to Chauncey. "If the real crank had known about another woman, he would have used it in the other notes."

I tossed the weight cards on the table. "And I found those up in the hills. That's about your weight. The ranger up there can identify you as one of the people who parked on the mountain road. If that isn't enough, how about checking the typing on that last note against your office typewriter?"

"That's enough," Banner said, and Chauncey's face showed it was. "I'll settle the rest of this my own way."

"And you've got plenty to settle! Suppose we start on that business in the El Tempo gambling room last night?"

Banner snapped his fingers. "That's where I've seen you."

"And that's where I saw your girl friend," I shot back. "She was the croupier at the table where you made the killing."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Crazy Quilt of Death

BANNER said sharply: "Don't say anything, Lolita." He was watchful as he turned back to me. "You know I can have you tossed right out of here."

"But you won't. I've got a story to tell, Banner. It's a story I dreamed up while I was up in the hills a little earlier. It's neat and tight and it has no loose ends. Of course, I don't have any proof but maybe you'd like to hear it just for story value. You've got a fat part in it."

He decided charm was the way to handle this. "If I'm in it, then I'll listen."

"I talked to Marable today," I said. "Or rather he talked to me. He said somebody broke a wheel last night. When I was there you were riding a win streak. How much did you take the place for?"

"Enough," he said grimly. "But I just got even. I lost plenty when Joey Content had the place."

"Because Joey had a rigged wheel," I said. "You found out how it worked, and when Lolita pulled the strings you got well."

Lolita poisoned me with a glance from her hot black eyes. She wasn't a lady like Judith. Maybe that was why Banner was playing around with her. She

demanded, "Do I have to take that, Paul?"

"I don't know yet," Banner said cautiously. "He's playing a hand. Let's see what proof he's got."

"None," I said. "This is just a story. Except the part about that raid last night. I was there, remember? How did the cops work it? Big mystery. But I'll tell you how. They had inside help. Somebody tipped them off. It's the only answer. Now, in my story, that'd be you. You lost your nerve after you got into Marable for all that money, so you phoned for the law."

"That'll take a little proving!"

"If I could prove anything, I'd prove you knew about Joey Content's coked wheel. Then you'd be in the deep freeze!"

Banner's eyes flickered just a little.

I said, "However it was wired, it was a tricky job. Sid Marable took every piece of equipment apart and he couldn't find it. If it was that good, how many people do you suppose knew about it? Joey, of course, and maybe Ivan Castle. And the guy who did the job on the wheel." I wasn't going to like the rest of this, but then I hadn't liked anything that had happened thus far today.

"Joey didn't tell you," I went on, "because it was making money for him—up till he started fertilizing the palm trees in the Slopes of Gilead. Ivan might have sold you the secret, but from what I've heard you're a slow man with a buck." I grinned wearily. "Besides, that angle doesn't fit my story."

Nobody had anything to say. "And it wasn't Lolita, because she didn't work there at the time. Marable put in girl croupiers when he took over."

"Sounds to me you've talked yourself up a blind alley," Banner observed, but he was bluffing now. "You've eliminated everybody involved."

"All but one. For my story I need

somebody smart or tricky enough to gimmick a wheel so a sharpshooter like Marable couldn't find it. Somebody like a magician."

The Great Dekema didn't move. His ravaged face was so stony I couldn't tell a thing from it.

I sighed inside my aching chest. I didn't want to have to put him on the rack, but there was nothing for it.

"The police think Marable removed Joey. Marable insists Ivan Castle killed him. But let's assume neither one did it. In that case it would go like this: Joey refused to pay off when the wiring job was finished—or, better, he paid off in chips. That would be the way Joey would operate—and my magician would right away lose it all back on another of Joey's wheels. That might make him killing mad."

"What are you trying to say?" Banner demanded, almost incredulously.

"Just murder," I said tiredly. "Maybe it was something else that Joey and this presto guy quarrelled about. I don't know. Maybe nobody will ever know. But they quarrelled and the magician shot him with Joey's own gun."

"Being the only magician present, Mr. Carmody," Dekema said tightly, "may I say your story is getting tiresome?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I really am. I'll try not to be so long. Do you see where I'm leading, Banner? I'm trying to tie you up to this man. Let's say you knew him in the old days when you were a Broadway hooper. That's one part of my story that could be verified."

"I knew a lot of people in those days," Banner said curtly.

"And recently you got a letter from one of them," I said. "He's not a big success like you. In fact, he's a failure and an alcoholic. Maybe he's been irrational part of the time. He even reached the point where he began to believe

there's no justice—he has nothing and you have everything. So he writes a letter demanding five thousand dollars.”

“You get just enough truth into your story to make it sound good” Banner said. “My wife showed you a note. You've got that much.”

I HAD that much, but not a lot more. Just a solid conviction. “You didn't kick in with the five thousand dollars. You hoped it was all a bluff, so you stalled to see what would happen. That's when your old-time pal started a phony death rumor to build a fire under you. He'd been in the hills, too—in a borrowed car. You were scared—not because you thought he'd kill you, but because now you knew he'd seen you riding with your girl, Lolita. So you met him at your garden party.”

“And he told me about a wired wheel in the El Tempo?” Banner snorted derisively. “Just like that.”

“No—he *sold* it to you. I can see you singing a hard luck song—you'd lost all your allowance on Joey's crooked wheel and Chauncey wouldn't okay any checks. So you couldn't give him any money. About then he'd mention he knew all about a wheel in the El Tempo—if Marable hadn't discovered it. And he hadn't.”

I looked them all over for signs of cracking. I couldn't see any. “So you

offered him a split of what you could take out of the El Tempo. He went for that. I don't think he wanted to, but he was desperate for money.”

“Thanks,” Dekema said with faint sarcasm.

I didn't look at him. “I'm finished with that part of my story. I don't know if you liked it, Banner, I don't particularly care. I was just rehearsing it—to tell Sid Marable. So if you want to argue any points, take it up with him.”

Banner's tanned, handsome face had taken on a faintly greenish cast. He was the scariest actor in Hollywood.

I turned to Dekema. “I've libeled you in front of witnesses, old-timer by calling you a murderer. But in case you're thinking of suing, here's the end of my story. . . . You had the details of that trick wheel hidden away for safe keeping. A piece of paper in a box. A box about the right size to hold old love letters—or jewelry. You gave it to a lady friend as a gift. You didn't get enough work to need it anyway.”

All I had to do now was tie in Alberta's murder. It was there, and Dekema was the link, even if I didn't have enough proof to fit in my eye.

“But in the meantime you'd been hitting the muscatel so hard the lady handed you your walking papers. She even got a new boy friend. So when you


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went around to her house to get the box, she wasn't glad to see you. I think she tried to keep you out. You blew your top and forced your way in and took the box."

I was hoarding my few crumbs of real evidence for the psychological moment. "You dumped Alberta's jewelry on the bed. There wasn't an empty drawer or container in the place, and the jewelry had to come from somewhere. You took the container with you."

Banner said abruptly: "That's all built on the premise that she refused to give him the paper. There's no reason why she'd refuse."

"She didn't know about it." I wasn't slamming my words over now. I was just too damned tired. "It was in a secret compartment—it was a trick box. It's down at headquarters now. Do you want to bet I can't find a false bottom in it, old-timer?"

"No," he said grayly. "That's one of the few points you can check. Another is Alberta. I admit I know Alberta. But that's all I admit."

I stared at him. I'd forgotten that he'd gone to jail that same night. And he'd just gotten out. He couldn't have heard—

"She won't talk on you, old timer." I tried to say it as gently as possible. "You must have hit her when she scuffled with you at the door. Maybe you knocked her against the grate in the fireplace. Anyway—she's dead."

"Dead?" he repeated. "Not Alberta!"

His harrowed face twitched spasmodically and something leaked out of his eyes and found a crease to run down. "I didn't know. No one told me. . . . I never meant any harm to come to her. She was the only person in the world I gave a damn for. Why, I *did* all those things to get money so she'd come back to me!"

"Shut up, you fool," Banner com-

manded. "I'll get you a good lawyer."

"It's too late for that," he said, in a bottomless voice. "Don't you see? With Alberta dead, what difference does it all make?"

He turned back to me. "You were right all the way, sir. Every step. I've always had a bad temper. I shot that gambler and I struck Alberta. I mailed the plan of the wheel to Banner. Then I got dead drunk. When I came to, I was in the tank and I didn't have the box. I got word out to an old drinking friend to try to find it."

"Your friend did pretty good," I said. "But he didn't have enough money. The police found a tieup between the box and Alberta. Maybe fingerprints, maybe an old letter or a picture that was still in the secret compartment—they wouldn't tell me. But I guessed about the secret compartment when I saw your handkerchief."

His hand went to his breast pocket. "This?"

"It's the same color of orange, with the same black dragons as on the magic box."

"Yes," he said, "of course. All my props were marked the same way."

"Besides, you dropped some poker chips on the floor of Alberta's house. She didn't know where they came from, so they had to be in the box, and that meant a compartment she didn't know about."

I WAS wrung out like a bar rag on a Saturday night. I'd been planning to hit him with a small lie that Alberta had named him to me before she died. If he'd blinked I'd have been sure. Instead he cracked wide open on something I hadn't even thought of. A great detective, that Carmody.

"The six chips," he said, almost dreamily. "My masterpiece—that wheel. You see, the plastic spindle has a steel

center. You'd have to break the spindle, to find it. The wire from the magnet led through the thickness of the table. I inlaid a small piece of wood that would make contact with a certain minimum weight—six poker chips”

I said: “It fooled everybody.”

He beamed sadly. “The spot on the green baize wasn't marked. You had to memorize the exact point where the stack of chips had to be placed.”

Then he must have thought about Alberta because the light went out of his eyes. He stood up, one hand in the pocket of his brown tweed coat. “I think,” he said distantly, “I'll leave here. Please don't try to detain me. I should not want to shoot anyone else. . . . Your car keys, please, Paul.”

Banner hesitated, glanced at me, and threw the keys sullenly on the table. Dekema took them and walked away.

Banner said, explosively: “I think he's bluffing. He doesn't have a gun.”

“All he needs to settle it,” I said, “is a stiff finger! I've had mine for today.”

Outside a flash of yellow shot past the window. “The guard can stop him,” Banner suggested, but nobody made any move to phone him. “What are you going to do, Carmody?”

“I don't know. Tell it all to the police. They know they've got the wrong guy in jail. Maybe they can get evidence to make my story stand up. . . .”

“You take Chauncey's car back to town.” Banner looked uncomfortable. “Lolita is catching a bus.”

I said: “Lolita is very wise to get out of town! A vacation wouldn't do *your* health any harm. If I can't make any attempted murder charge stick against Marable, I'm going to throw you to him to get him off my neck.”

I walked out, and I didn't look back.

Outside, I felt a hand on my sleeve. I looked up tiredly.

“Willie. . . .” Maggie was standing beside me. She hadn't had any trouble getting past the guard. “Darling, are you all right?”

I said, “Get me out of here. Don't talk, Maggie. Just get me away.”

On the way out we passed a tall, handsome man with graying hair.

“Mr. Farrington?”

“Yes,” he said cordially.

“Would you have Ivan Castle stashed away somewhere?”

“I would not,” he snapped.

I stared at him. It was very obvious that he was telling the truth.

“Well, I'll be damned,” I said.

Maybe Ivan *was* in Hawaii. But who cared now? Not me, certainly. I'd never wanted to know where he was from the start.

In all my years there'd never been such an accumulation of weariness in my bones. I thought of all the people who'd been involved in larceny, extortion and murder—and for the life of me I couldn't understand why. No one, not Joey nor Ivan nor Banner nor Chauncey, had needed money. Dekema alone had understandable motives, and he would pay the greatest price for it. And I was the one who had to pull the plug on him.

“Only the poor,” I told Maggie, “have the right to be crooked.”

It seemed like a fine bit of philosophy. It did me until we were on Dark Canyon Road, almost to the Cahuenga Freeway, where several cars had pulled off on the shoulder. A little knot of people were down in the roadside ditch. I slowed up, but I didn't stop. There wasn't anything I could do. . . .

A car had slammed into the far bank of the ditch at a terrific speed. It was folded up like a lemon-colored accordion. I couldn't see the driver but I knew he was in there. Not even Houdini could have gotten out of that.

THE CORPSE DIDN'T KICK

By MILTON K. OZAKI

Slay-happy Henry put his wife in a triangle—to prove he was on the square.



He was almost on his feet when Henry's gun exploded.

HENRY EBBETT had spent weeks perfecting his plan. He had considered it from every possible angle, and there was absolutely no flaw in it. It was complicated, of course, but the reward was worth all the trouble and patience required. Everything fitted together beautifully—and the timing was perfect.

It was too bad he had to kill Joe Carson, but Joe was the keystone of the whole idea. There had to be a fall guy—or Henry hadn't a hope of getting away with the money. So Joe was the fall guy. It was as simple as that.

Henry soaped his hands carefully and rinsed them under the faucet. Removing his horn-rimmed glasses for a mo-

ment, he polished them thoughtfully, then replaced them on his small pudgy nose. They gave him an owlish look, but without them he would hardly have been able to see himself in the mirror over the washbasin.

"Contact lenses, that's what I'll get," he thought fleetingly. "In some other town, I'll get rid of these glasses and make a fresh start. A man can do anything with \$20,000."

The thought of the money brought a smile to his lips. He had the money—all of it!—and no one would ever figure out where it had gone.

For weeks, he'd been purchasing traveller's checks at various banks under a fictitious name. They were waiting for him in a distant city, mailed there in care of general delivery. When everything was settled here, he'd pick them up and cash them at his convenience. He chuckled as he dried his hands. "This will fix Bertha, too," he thought, "once and for all. No matter what she says, no one will believe her!"

Bertha, of course, was his wife. . . .

He walked from the bathroom to the bedroom, then went slowly into the living-room, pausing in the doorway like a stage designer inspecting a new arrangement. The lamp, the table, the chair—everything was perfect, even to the convenient ash-tray, the bottle of bourbon, and the highball glass. Joe liked his bourbon with plain water. The glass and fixings were there, utterly devoid of fingerprints, waiting for him.

Impatient now that the critical moment was almost upon him, Henry walked to the window and looked down the deserted street. The cold had taken a sudden drop and the weather was freezing, but, fortunately, there hadn't been much snow. He wouldn't have to worry about footprints on the carpets, the back stairs, or the rear sidewalk. No one had seen him come in. No one

knew he was here—except Joe Carson.

Insided the room, the steam radiator hissed cheerfully, spreading its warmth. Henry was anemic and he liked it warm.

"If Bertha were here," he thought, "she'd have the heat turned off and the window open." Involuntarily, he shivered at the idea. "As long as I pay the rent, I'm entitled to heat. This is the way I like it, and this is the way it's going to be—from now on."

As though in answer to his wish that Joe hurry up, a tall man in a heavy brown overcoat turned the corner and, his face lowered into the cold wind, made his way slowly toward the building. Henry nodded approvingly. Joe was on time. Everything was working out exactly as he had planned.

A moment later the downstairs door banged and Joe's heavy feet ascended the stairs. Henry's heart did an excited little dance as he waited for Joe to reach the landing. Then, moving soundlessly across the room, he unlocked the door and opened it. The smile he managed was perfect—pleasant, friendly, a little abstracted.

"Hi, Joe. Pretty cold, eh?"

"Sure is!" Joe came into the room, puffing a little and slapping his hands together. "That wind must have come straight from Alaska! You've got it nice and warm in here, though."

"Throw your coat on the couch, Joe. Make yourself at home."

Unconsciously, Henry kept his voice low, moving softly about the room in his old felt slippers so Mrs. Pettigrew, downstairs, wouldn't hear two pairs of feet above her. She undoubtedly was sitting out in front on her glass-enclosed porch, watching the goings and comings of her neighbors, but there was no sense taking chances. Henry liked things to be perfect.

Waving Joe toward the chair beside

the table, Henry said: "Pour yourself a drink, Joe. I knew you'd be needing one, so I got the fixings ready."

"Thanks, Henry." Joe sighed and stretched his legs comfortably. "Bertha get to the train all right?"

"You know Bertha. Always ready and always on time. This is the first time she's been away in a coon's age."

"Uh-huh. You're a lucky guy, Henry, having a wife like Bertha."

"Don't I know it?"

ONCE again, Henry surveyed the room. No, everything was perfect. The stage was set for death. With a confident smile, he went quietly into the bedroom and put on his overcoat, muffler and hat. He buttoned the coat, drew on a pair of light flannel gloves, then went to his dresser and, removing two guns from a drawer, slid them into his coat pocket—the revolver on the right, the automatic on the left. Bending carefully, he picked up a pair of black oxfords from the floor and tucked them under his arm.

When he walked into the living-room, Joe was smoking a cigarette and sipping a highball. He raised one eyebrow in surprise as he saw Henry dressed to go out.

"Hey, going some place?" he asked. He set down his drink and started to get up, but Henry waved him back.

"Need a few things from the grocery," Henry explained briefly, "and I want to drop these shoes at the repair shop before it closes. Won't take a minute. Sit still and make like a guest, Joe."

"Glad to go for you, Henry, if—" "Wouldn't think of it."

Henry wondered if Joe would notice he was wearing his felt slippers. Even if he did notice, of course, it wouldn't make any difference. But Joe wouldn't notice—and he didn't.

As smoothly as an actor going through

a well-practiced role, Henry walked to the door, snapped his fingers to show he'd remembered something, and came back. With one gloved hand, he picked up the telephone and dialed Mrs. Pettigrew's number. The phone buzzed repeatedly, indicating that the phone was ringing. When it had buzzed four times, he set the receiver back onto its cradle. Mrs. Pettigrew would be on her way to answer it—and the phone was in the rear of her flat.

"No one home," Henry said cryptically. He shrugged and started for the door again.

This time he opened the door and went quietly downstairs. At the foot of the stairs, he sat down, removed the slippers and put on the oxfords. In a matter of seconds, he opened the front door, stepped onto the porch, and closed the door. He stamped his feet loudly on the boards of the porch, opened the door, banged it shut, shuffled his feet in the hallway. Hesitating only an instant, he rapped on Mrs. Pettigrew's door.

He heard her slow, dragging footsteps come from the rear of her flat. The slippers! With a whispered curse, he bent and snatched them from the hallway floor. With one swift jerk of his arm he tossed them up the stairs. What if he hadn't remembered them? What if Mrs. Pettigrew had seen them? He shivered at the thought, and, when old Mrs. Pettigrew opened her door, he looked exactly like a man who'd tramped several blocks through freezing weather.

"Hello!" he said, smiling cheerily into the aged woman's face. "Cold, isn't it? Did my groceries arrive?"

"Oh, good afternoon, Mr. Ebbett. Winter's here, all right!" The old woman nodded her head and peered at him over her spectacles. "Thought you'd forgotten the groceries, Mr. Ebbett, when I saw that friend of yours come and go

right up. Thought you'd come home without my noticing and—"

"Friend?" Henry's face as he stood in the cold, drafty hallway was a masterpiece of puzzlement. "You say one of my friends came—and is upstairs?"

"Sure is. The tall, thin one. Works the same place you do, I believe."

"Joe Carson?" Henry shook his head. "Didn't know he was coming." Bending quickly, he picked up the large bag of groceries sitting just inside the door. He grunted as he lifted the bag. The flour was heavier than he'd expected. "Well, thanks for taking care of these for me, Mrs. Pettigrew. I'll go right up. Perhaps Bertha returned, and—"

"No, she ain't been back," the old lady assured him. "I been watching for her."

"Oh." He mumbled a few words, then shook his head worriedly and started up the stairs like a weary little man whose wife had unaccountably left him and who now had to cook his own dinner. When he heard her door close, he sighed with relief.

At the top of the stairs, he shifted the weight of the bag onto his left arm and put his right hand into his coat pocket. A curious thrill trembled the length of his arm as his fingers closed about the hard steel of the revolver, and he stood there a moment, breathing heavily.

This was power. This was the mo-

ment he'd been waiting for. Death for Joe—but freedom and ease for him. . . .

When he pushed the door open, Joe was sprawled comfortably in the chair with a half-finished cigarette drooping between his lips. He straightened sluggishly as Henry came into the room.

Henry said, "Take this bag a minute, will you, Joe?"

Joe was almost on his feet when the gun in Henry's hand exploded. A surprised expression crossed his face. The gun crashed again, and, without a sound, Joe collapsed.

SWIFTLY, Henry set the bag on a chair, crossed the room, got the automatic out of his pocket and pressed it into Joe's right hand. He grunted, straining mightily, as he forced Joe's body and arm up to the correct height.

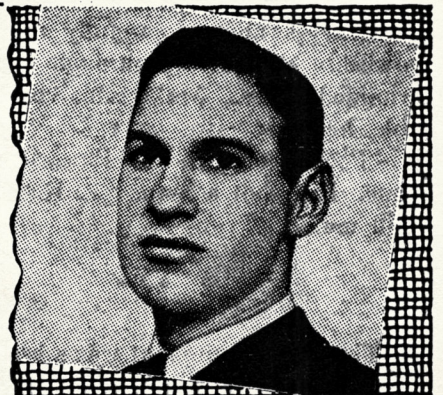
With his finger over Joe's he pointed the automatic at the bag and pumped two bullets into it—and then, for good measure, another one into the wall, toward the bedroom doorway and at about the level of his own head. That done, he pushed Joe away, recovered his slippers from the hallway, and deliberately sent a lamp crashing to the floor.

Everything was crystal-clear in his mind. He moved swiftly and surely, setting the stage. First, the groceries. He lifted the bag, from which a trickle of

REPORTER REPORTS ON SWITCH TO CALVERT

WASHINGTON, D. C.—Arnold Fine, Washington reporter and night club editor, flashes this news about today's whiskies. "Switch to Calvert," he says. "I have. Calvert honestly is lighter, smoother, milder."

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N.Y.C.



flour was already coming, and let some of the flour stream onto his coat. Then he dropped the bag onto the floor.

The bag burst and a can of corn fell to the floor, to be followed an instant later by a bottle of catsup. The bullet hole in the flour sack tore wide and a white Niagara of flour cascaded onto the carpet. He overturned the chair on which the bag had rested.

Next, the bedroom—he made it in a single stride, jerked open the top drawer, rumbled its contents. He tossed the slippers under the bed. Was that all?

He scanned the room quickly. The ticket! Frantically, he got the envelope from his pocket, making certain that only his gloved hand touched it. Carefully, he slid it into Joe's breast pocket. As a final touch, he got one of the extra door keys from Bertha's dresser and laid it on the table beside Joe's highball glass.

The whole thing, from the first crash of the revolver to the final planting of the key, had taken merely seconds, yet already Mrs. Pettigrew was screaming in the hallway. "Mr. Ebbett! Mr. Ebbett!"

He'd done it!

Henry sucked his lungs full of air and walked to the telephone. He dialed a number and stood there, a slight smile on his round face as he waited for the connection to be made.

A metallic voice came over the wire: "Police headquarters."

Henry swallowed carefully and stared owlishly at the wall through his horn-rimmed glasses. Making his voice tremble, he said:

"Please come to 107 Pinegrove Avenue. I've shot a man. . . . He tried to kill me. . . ."

* * *

The police lieutenant was a heavy-set, dour-faced man in a rumbled blue serge

suit. He eyed the body unhappily, almost as though he resented its presence, then looked at Henry. "Well, let's hear the story," he said heavily.

"He was here, waiting for me," Henry told him, remembering to shiver realistically. "I picked up a bag of groceries downstairs, then came right up. He was sorta crouched there in front of the chair, as though he'd heard me and was getting up, and as soon as I stepped into the room, he began shooting. I guess I reacted automatically, because as soon as I saw him with the gun in his hand, I dropped the groceries and ran for the bedroom. I got my gun out of the dresser drawer and I fired back at him—twice, I think." He shook his head dazedly. "I got him, thank God, before he got me!"

"Who is he?"

"His name is Joe Carson. He works the same place I do."

"Any idea why he wanted to kill you?"

"I'm not sure, but I think perhaps—well, I was sitting here, thinking, after I phoned police headquarters, and a lot of things I couldn't understand before began to make sense. My wife didn't come home last night, and now with Joe trying to kill me, it seems as if maybe—"

"Triangle, eh?"

Henry nodded weakly and bent his head. The lieutenant shook his head sympathically and gestured to the other officers in the doorway.

"Well, get to work, boys," he said gruffly. "The usual photos, diagram, and so on. Keep a sharp eye out for prints." He walked over to the body, glanced shrewdly at Henry. "You touch anything?"

"No, sir." Henry's face became a picture of horror at the thought. "I called you, then sat down, right here in this chair, until you came. I was completely stunned, I guess, but the—well, you know."

A young man with a black bag strode in, his thin face flushed from hurrying. He nodded to the lieutenant and bent over the body.

"Dead," he said promptly. "One bullet passed between fourth and fifth ribs. Not long ago, either." As he got up, he loosened his heavy overcoat and added: "Lord, it's hot in here!"

The lieutenant grunted. "We called you ten minutes ago. Where do you docs hide during the day? You must have been holding a full house."

The coroner's physician smiled good-naturedly. "No game today, darn it. I was taking a shower and O'Brien wasn't available." He nodded toward the body. "It's okay for you to proceed. I'll have him picked up. Suppose you want the autopsy rushed through?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Be seeing you." He picked up his bag, winked at one of the other officers, and went out. His feet clattered loudly as he descended the stairs.

"How are you coming?" the lieutenant asked, breaking the silence.

"Not bad, sir," one of the men replied. He paused to wipe his perspiring face. "A few more pictures, then I'll start in on the sketch. Would it be okay to turn off the radiator?"

"Leave everything as is," the lieutenant said shortly.

WALKING slowly about the room, he peered at the bottle of bourbon, the highball glass, the ashtray, and the key on the table. Turning, he pushed his hands in his pockets and stared at the opposite wall. His eyes found the bullet hole and, evincing no surprise, he went over and examined it casually.

"Bullet in here," he announced, swinging toward Henry, he said: "So you think he and your wife were trying to deal you out, eh?"

Henry wet his dry lips. "Yes, sir."

"Where do you work?"

"I'm a bookkeeper at the Safeway Loan Company."

"He a bookkeeper there, too?" The lieutenant nodded toward the body.

"No, he was a cashier."

The lieutenant shrugged and walked over to the bookcase in the corner. He scanned the titles, peered at the dust on top of the case, came back. As though he had all the time in the world, he stood and watched one of the officers pick the two guns up upon rods which he inserted down their barrels. "Might have a look in his pockets, Pete," he suggested mildly.

"Sure, lieutenant." The officer deposited the guns in a cardboard box and carefully set the box on the couch. He knelt beside Joe's body then and slid his fingers into the pockets, expertly removing the contents.

"Coat, right pocket—nothing," he droned mechanically. "Left pocket—two theatre ticket stubs dated November 7th. Outside pocket—one clean white handkerchief, no initial. Inside pocket—a notebook, a bank book, an envelope, and—"

"Anything in the envelope?" the lieutenant asked.

Silence for a moment. "Yes, sir. There's a one-way ticket to Hot Springs, Arkansas."

The lieutenant's eyebrows flicked upward. He extended his hand. "Let's see." Frowning, he examined the ticket, then handed it back. "Be careful of that envelope," he warned. "There may be some prints on it."

"Yes, sir." The officer nodded and went back to his search. "Trousers, right pocket—a dollar and thirty cents in change. Left pocket—\$46 in bills." With a soft grunt, he rolled the body over. "Right, rear—a soiled white handkerchief and a key ring with six keys. Left,

rear—a card case containing a few receipts for payments on a suit and several identification cards.”

The lieutenant pursed his lips, nodded, and studied the neat piles of objects on the floor. He picked up the notebook, turned its pages carelessly, dropped it on the floor again.

“Make a list, Pete,” he said.

He started pacing around the room again, stopped at the table, picked up the key which lay there. He walked to the door with it, pushed it into the keyhole, turned it. The lock snapped back. With a pleased expression on his face, he tossed the key to the officer named Pete.

“Be sure to label this. No prints, of course.” More to himself than anyone in the room, he added: “They shouldn’t be allowed to put that fancy engraving on keys.” He looked at Henry suddenly. “Know anybody in Hot Springs?”

“No, sir.”

“Your wife got friends or relatives there?”

“Well, I don’t really know, sir. I don’t think so. She did mention it once, but only to say that it’d be a nice place to go to for a vacation someday.”

“Where was Carson from?”

“Some town in Wisconsin, I think.”

Apparently satisfied, the lieutenant turned away. “How’re you coming?” he asked. “Any prints?”

“Yeah, quite a few.” The officer with the short curly brown hair stood up and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. “There’s a good set on the glass and the bottle.”

“Hey, what do you know!” another officer exclaimed suddenly. “Look at this!” He held up a lead slug. “It was in the flour, lieutenant! Why, if it hadn’t been for that bag, it’d have killed him sure!”

Henry’s eyes widened. “Good Lord!” he gasped. “Why, he—almost—!” He quivered so realistically that his glasses

came very near to sliding off his nose.

“Very nice,” the lieutenant commented. “In which arm were you carrying the bag?”

“My left. Like this.” Henry bent his arm so the lieutenant could see how he’d carried the heavy bag of groceries.

THE lieutenant nodded, studied the pile of spilled cans and flour, then announced: “I’m going down to talk to the old lady. Wait here until I get back.” At the door, he added: “Give the bathroom and bedroom a going-over, too, boys.”

He was gone fifteen minutes, during which time an ambulance arrived, two men climbed the stairs with a wicker basket, and the body of Joe Carson was removed, leaving only a chalked outline to show where his corpse had lain.

Henry sat hunched in his chair through all this, his eyes following the careful, methodical work of the officers as they took measurements, labeled and packed items in boxes, and dusted powder over various surfaces. From time to time the faintest suggestion of a smile touched his lips fleetingly as he saw them checking the details which he had anticipated. He had nothing to worry about. He’d read and studied dozens of detective stories and he knew what they were looking for. But let them look. He had thought of everything.

When the lieutenant returned, he glanced around the room and gestured impatiently. “Hurry it up, boys. I’m taking Mr. Ebbett to the station. When you finish, seal the door and report to my office.”

Riding downtown in the squad car, the lieutenant explained: “It looks open-and-shut to me, Mr. Ebbett, but we have a certain routine we have to go through. I’m taking you to the station, where you’ll be formally booked on

a charge of murder. There'll be a coroner's inquest tomorrow morning, and then, following that, a hearing in Felony Court. If your story checks, you'll be released by the court. But first, of course, I have to get a detailed, signed statement from you."

Henry hadn't expected to be charged with murder. Somehow, he'd thought the police, knowing he was innocent, would simply take his statement and let him go.

But he didn't protest. He nodded quietly and looked sad, like a man utterly crushed by the fact that his wife had deserted him and that his best friend had plotted his murder.

At police headquarters, he was most cooperative. He gave the lieutenant a detailed statement, signed it, and let them take his fingerprints.

* * *

The coroner's inquest was called the following morning at nine o'clock, but, at Lieutenant Barr's request, it was adjourned for two days to permit the police time to locate Bertha Ebbett.

In the meantime, a score of detectives attached to the homicide detail began checking Henry Ebbett's statement. They found it to be surprisingly exact; in fact, in combing the city they learned details which Henry, though

he had planned them, had not been able to mention.

They learned, for instance, that Joe Carson's accounts at the Safeway Loan Company were short. A hasty audit, made overnight by a crew of accountants, established that, over a period of months, a sum exceeding \$20,000 had been cleverly embezzled. Many of the records were in the neat handwriting of Henry Ebbett, but that was to be expected. Ebbett was only a bookkeeper. Joe Carson, on the other hand, had been a cashier and had had direct charge of the money.

What had happened to the money? The Safeway Loan Company, fortunately, was protected by insurance. Insurance investigators pored over the records and delved into Carson's habits, hobbies and bank account, but there was nothing to suggest that Carson had ever possessed more than \$450 at one time.

One of the investigators, a radical, thought of Ebbett and made a thorough inquiry regarding him. But Ebbett, it developed, was even more spotless than Carson. Ebbett didn't drink, didn't smoke, didn't gamble, and had never been known to pause to look at a well-turned ankle. His bank account was small, he possessed no jewelry, had indulged in no luxuries of any kind. Obviously, Carson had stolen the money

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as well as poor Mr. Henry Ebbett's wife.

The investigators were helped to that conclusion by the discovery that a man resembling Carson had, a week earlier, purchased two tickets to Hot Springs, Arkansas. On learning this, Lieutenant Barr wired the Hot Springs, Arkansas, authorities to locate and hold Bertha Ebbett—age 26, height 5-8, weight 120, dark hair, brown eyes, regular features, probably registered at a local hotel.

That done, the lieutenant sighed, rubbed his brow, and sank back in his swivel chair. He raised his eyes wearily when the door of his office opened. "Well, sergeant?"

"The ballistic reports are in, lieutenant," his aide reported. "They check with Ebbett's statement. Carson's prints—and only his—were on the glass and liquor bottle. He evidently opened the door with the key we found, threw his hat and coat on the couch, and made himself at home. Ebbett can thank his lucky stars that he was carrying that sack of flour. They found a second slug in it, which accounts for all the empty cartridges."

"Okay. Anything else?"

"Well, Peterson checked those theatre ticket stubs we found in his pocket. They were to a neighborhood movie. The cashier recognized Carson's photo. Said he came there often, sometimes with a woman who wore a cheap silver fox jacket. There was that sort of a jacket in Ebbett's wife's closet."

"Uh-huh. Go on."

"That's about it. The revolver was Ebbett's. Bought it several years ago. The automatic was Carson's. His landlady saw it in his closet once, when she was cleaning."

"How is Ebbett doing?"

"About the same. He keeps asking how long he's to be kept locked up."

"Asked for a lawyer yet?"

"No."

"Funny." The lieutenant rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You'd think he'd be hollering habeas corpus, or something, at the top of his lungs."

"Huh! That guy, he's too tight! Says he can't afford to waste money on a lawyer where there's no doubt of his innocence."

"Well, maybe he's right, at that." The lieutenant, in dismissal, swung his chair so he could gaze out the window. "Let me know if anything comes through from Hot Springs."

"Yes, sir." And the sergeant, knowing Lieutenant Barr's mood, closed the door gently.

AN HOUR later the phone in Barr's office rang. The operator announced that a long distance call from Hot Springs was waiting, charges to be reversed. Growling his acceptance, Barr waited expectantly.

When he put down the phone, his thick brows were knitted in a curious frown. In brief, he had been informed that Mrs. Bertha Ebbett had registered the previous morning at a local hotel under her own name, had paid in advance for a room, and, when told that her husband was being held for the murder of Joe Carson, had demanded permission to return home immediately. Barr had told the Hot Springs police to put her on a plane immediately and to wire him the exact time of the plane's departure . . .

* * *

Later that afternoon, Lieutenant Barr phoned the coroner's office and advised the coroner that the witness he had been waiting for had been located and that the inquest could be resumed the following morning.

When Bertha Ebbett was shown into his office, Lieutenant Barr studied her

with interest. She seemed slimmer and prettier than the girl whose photograph he had in a folder on his desk. Her pale face was attractive, though her eyes were faintly shadowed with gray. Her step was firm and brisk, and, when they shook hands across his desk, her grasp was cool but sincere.

"What is it about Henry?" she demanded anxiously. "I asked and asked, but all they'd tell me is that he's supposed to have killed Joe. It isn't true, is it?"

"Yes, it's true," Barr told her gravely, "but it isn't as bad as it sounds. You needn't worry about Henry. He'll undoubtedly be released as soon as the coroner's inquest is completed.

"Henry really . . . killed Joe?"

"Yes," Barr studied her with his eyes, then said: "I need to know many things about this case, Mrs. Ebbett, which only you can tell me. I'm going to put my questions to you bluntly, without any fancy trimming, and I want you to answer them truthfully."

"Of course! If there's anything—"

"Is it true, Mrs. Ebbett, that you and Carson were friendly and that he was to meet you in Hot Springs as soon as—" He paused, stopped by the look of absolutely incredulity which flooded her face.

"What!"

"Is it true or not, Mrs. Ebbett?"

"Of course it isn't true!"

"Isn't it true that Mr. Carson was a frequent visitor at your home, even when your husband wasn't there, and that he often took you to the movies in the evening?"

"Why, yes—but not the way it sounds! The whole idea is fantastic!"

"Why is it fantastic, Mrs. Ebbett? According to your husband, you were unhappy and fought with him continually. Mr. Carson was more nearly your own age, unmarried, attractive,

with many interests similar to yours."

"Henry told you that?"

"Yes."

She closed her eyes and sank back in her chair. Barr knew by the way her teeth sank into the red of her lips that she was shocked and fighting desperately for control. When she opened her eyes, her voice was a hoarse whisper: "Tell me . . . please tell me what happened!"

Barr hesitated, then reached for the folder on his desk. He removed a typed copy of Ebbett's statement. In a dry, expressionless voice, he read it to her.

"It's a lie!" she gasped, when he finished. "I don't understand what's happening. It's like a dream, a nightmare. But that"—she pointed at the type-written sheets—"that's not true!" Her eyes stared into his, dark and hollow, like two great holes in a loaf of uncooked bread. "Henry couldn't have said anything like that!"

"He did say it, though," Barr assured her. "It's signed, sealed, and sworn to."

"But don't you see, I didn't run away from him! Henry knew I was going to Hot Springs. He gave me the money, bought the ticket!"

"Carson bought the tickets, Mrs. Ebbett. The ticket-seller at the station remembers him. He bought two one-way tickets to Hot Springs last week."

"But—" She shook her head helplessly. "Then he bought them because Henry asked him to. Joe often did little things like that for Henry, just as he took me to a movie, once in awhile, when Henry had extra work to do at home. I tell you there was nothing to it."

"The second ticket was found in Carson's pocket," Barr said gently.

HE didn't get the significance of his statement immediately; when she did, her hands clenched so fiercely that her knuckles stood out.

"Then Henry put it there!" she exclaimed. "When I left, the other ticket was in an envelope on Henry's dresser. That's why I engaged a double room. Henry was to have followed me in a couple of days."

"Did any of your friends know about that arrangement?"

"Joe Carson did."

"Anyone else?"

"I—don't know. I'm afraid not. Henry didn't want anyone at his office to know. You see, he asked for a vacation and was refused. But he was to receive a bonus this week, and, as soon as it was paid to him, he was going to quit his job and come to Hot Springs. I've had a bad cough for several months, and he was going to look for work there, so we could stay permanently."

"In that case, wouldn't it have been better for you to wait until he received his bonus before leaving? The two of you could have travelled together."

"Henry insisted that I go on ahead and look for an apartment. He said he'd pack our things and arrange to have the furniture shipped. I didn't argue because, as I said, I haven't been well and it seemed like a sensible arrangement."

Lieutenant Barr shook his head slowly. "It may have seemed sensible to you, Mrs. Ebbett—but I doubt if the coroner's jury will believe it."

* * *

The coroner's jury convened the following morning and made short work of the case. Dr. Felix Adelman, the coroner's physician, testified to the approximate time of death, described the bullet wounds, and stated the results of the autopsy on Carson's body. Then Henry Ebbett's signed statement was read.

Experts testified that the bullets found in Carson's body were from a revolver

admittedly owned by Ebbett, and that three bullets, fired from an automatic pistol registered in Carson's name and found in his hand, had been located in the apartment: two in the sack of flour which Ebbett had been carrying, and one in the wall adjoining the bedroom. Their angles of entrance and trajectory had been established and were in agreement with Ebbett's statement.

The experts further testified that Carson's—and only Carson's—fingerprints had been found on the highball glass, the bottle of liquor, and ashtray. A paraffin test revealed that Carson had actually fired the automatic. The envelope containing the railroad ticket had borne Carson's and Mrs. Ebbett's fingerprints—but not Henry Ebbett's. The ticket-seller identified a photograph of Carson and stated that Carson was the man who had purchased two one-way tickets to Hot Springs from him. A certified public accountant appeared in behalf of the Safeway Loan Company and testified that Carson had embezzled the sum of \$21,125 from his employer. A locksmith identified the key found on the table as one made by him for Mrs. Ebbett. The ticket stubs were introduced as evidence, duly identified, and the theatre cashier repeated her story about Carson and Mrs. Ebbett.

Then old Mrs. Pettigrew was called. She stated that, on the day previous to the murder, Mrs. Ebbett had left the house in the middle of the afternoon with two suitcases, and, when Mr. Ebbett returned home from work, he had been obviously shocked at discovering his wife was gone.

On the day of the murder, she had seen Carson enter the building at least 15 minutes before Mr. Ebbett came in. Yes, Mr. Ebbett had knocked on her door and picked up a bag of groceries. He had gone directly upstairs. And had Mrs. Pettigrew heard the shots? Yes,

indeed. Mr. Ebbett had hardly stepped into his apartment when the first shot rang out, to be followed quickly by four others. Mrs. Pettigrew had screamed, but, being a victim of arthritis, had been unable to go upstairs.

Henry Ebbett, called to clarify and amplify his statement, testified in a quiet, self-possessed tone in which his grief was evident.

His wife, Bertha Ebbett, on the other hand, testified that everything presented to the jury was a lie, was twisted, was utterly impossible. She admitted that she had attended movies with Carson, that she had been located by police in a Hot Springs hotel, where she had engaged a room, but she denied vehemently the implications which the admissions inferred. She also admitted that she had admired and liked Carson.

Throughout her testimony, Bertha Ebbett spoke in a low, reluctant tone, which the jury was quick to note. They took the indistinctness of her voice to be from shame. In fact, the general tone of her charges and testimony only made them the more certain of her embarrassment and guilt.

It took the jury hardly any time at all to reach a verdict: "Justifiable homicide, with a recommendation that Mrs. Bertha Ebbett be referred to the grand jury for possible indictment as accessory-before-the-fact to an attempted homicide."

TEN minutes after the jury's verdict was rendered, Lieutenant Barr and Sergeant Jablonsky entered a lunchroom across the street from police headquarters. They sat at the counter and ordered coffee.

"You taking Ebbett up to Felony Court this afternoon?" Jablonsky asked after a while.

"I suppose so," Barr admitted.

"You don't seem too happy about it."

Barr took a sip from his steaming cup, then set it down on the counter. He grimaced, as though the coffee had left a bad taste in his mouth. "Frankly, between you and me, I'm not."

"You think Ebbett could have framed it?"

"I don't know," Barr said heavily. "Ebbett is intelligent. Seems to me, if his wife had been playing around with Carson, he'd have known about it and been prepared. I'm not saying she didn't, because it's hard to tell a thing like that about a woman—but I'm not saying she did, either. She says she didn't, and she certainly was shocked when I suggested the setup to her, but the evidence is all the other way. But I will say this: Ebbett is nobody's fool. He wasn't as surprised as he said he was."

"But if Ebbett framed the murder, then he framed the embezzlement, too, and where's the dough?"

"Let the insurance investigators worry about that. I'm a homicide man, and I hate being outsmarted. If Ebbett is working a frame, I want to get him."

"Yeah."

"The thing is," Barr said slowly, "the whole darned thing seems to have gone off like clockwork. I've studied it from every angle, and it must have happened exactly like he said it did. That old woman having seen him coming home after Carson is the sticker. She saw him go up, then heard the shots fired. At that, I don't see how Carson missed plugging him. I'd have emptied my gun into Ebbett before he got to that bedroom."

"One shot would have been enough," the sergeant pointed out, "if it hadn't been for the sack of flour. Carson still had to make a getaway. Maybe he didn't want to fire any more than necessary."

"Maybe," Barr agreed.

"You don't think so?"

"I think Ebbett had to move darned

fast, faster than a man surprised could ordinarily move. He had to see Carson, size up the situation, and get started for the bedroom almost before the first shot was fired. The evidence all says that that's what happened, but somehow it doesn't sound reasonable."

They sat there, sipping their coffee and looking out the lunchroom windows into the street. A car drove past, its radiator billowing steam.

"Really cold today again," Jablonsky commented. "Zero, at least."

"Uh-huh."

A man came in from the street and slammed the door. He wore a pair of rimless glasses on his sharp beak of a nose, and a red woolen muffler about his neck almost concealed his chin. He stopped just inside the door, stomped his cold feet, and began to grope in a pocket of his coat for a handkerchief.

Barr's cup hit the counter with a loud thud. "Good Lord!"

"Huh?" Jablonsky looked up.

"Get Ebbett and take him to that apartment of his," Barr ordered. "Don't tell him anything except that we want to check a few details before ordering his release. Take a couple of the boys with you."

Barr hesitated, then added grimly: "I'll take the other squad car and pick up his wife. I have an idea she'll enjoy being in on this!"

* * *

Bertha Ebbett stared stonily at her husband, but Henry refused to look at her. He sat in a chair near the telephone, his small eyes studying a wall through his thick horn-rimmed glasses. Lieutenant Barr appeared very much at ease. With his long legs stretched before him, he sat slumped in the chair Carson had occupied beside the table.

"This probably seems peculiar to you,

Mr. Ebbett," Barr said conversationally, "but now that the coroner's jury has exonerated you, it's my responsibility to take you before the Felony Court for a hearing. That may only take a few minutes, but sometimes the judge asks for details and I like to have everything in apple-pie order before proceeding. Understand?"

"Of course, lieutenant. If it's anything that isn't in my statement, I'll—"

"Just a detail, Mr. Ebbett. You said that, on the day of the shooting, you spent most of the afternoon calling at the railroad stations, airport, and bus depots, trying to trace your wife."

"Yes, sir, I did. I went—"

Barr waved one hand airily. "Yes, we checked on that, and you really did. But we forgot one thing. When you started back home, you came by streetcar and got off on the corner of Farwell and Elson. You walked from that corner to this building, a distance of three blocks."

"That's correct."

"How long did it take you to walk that distance?"

"Why—" For an instant, Henry's eyes flickered. "I don't know, exactly. Not more than a minute or two. Is that important?"

"It may be—and it may not," Barr said succinctly. "But I want to check on it, just to make sure. Jablonsky, suppose you take Mr. Ebbett to the corner of Farwell and Elson in the squad car and put him on the corner. Note the time he starts walking back, then drive slowly along beside him. You, Mr. Ebbett, I want to walk at about the same speed you did the other day. When you reach this building, knock on Mrs. Pettigrew's door, say a few words, and then come right upstairs. Maybe you'd better pretend you've got a bag of groceries in your arm, too."

"But, I don't understand," Henry

(Please continue on page 127)

MOONLIGHT 'N MURDER

*I decided Whitey Farr
wasn't fooling.*



By **GRAHAM
GOULDEN**

'Cause his cuddle-bunny developed a yen for a hero, Johnny rushed out to slay the dragon—in a gangster's den.

“YOU'RE beginning to bore me, Johnny. With you there's no excitement, no adventure. You're just a humdrum ole humbug.” That was my true love talking. My sparkling-eyed blonde with kissable lips and crushable form.

I settled my long, lean frame more deeply into the sofa.

“All you want me to do,” she said, pushing a stray curl from her forehead, “is to read to you and serve you coffee.”

I pushed myself upright. "My kissable pet," I told her, reaching for my Junior Stetson. "If you crave an adventurous hero, you're going to get one."

Little did I know of the mad mayhem my casual resolution was cooking up for me. My pet just glanced at me with those big brown eyes and I stalked out into the cruel world. Or underworld.

My stalking ended at Benny's Bar. Benny is a right guy who lets me cuddle one drink all evening when I'm broke. His bar is one of those joints with a five stool counter, side cubicles and a stale beer atmosphere you could cut. Benny must have read the trouble in my eyes as soon as I sat down.

"What," he asked, "the matter is she with you?" In spite of his name, Benny is a French-Canadian and a true murderer of the English language.

"Detective-Sergeant Melvin Stinout," I said.

"She's after you?" Benny whispered, his black eyes shining in awe.

"He's after Carol," I replied, shuddering at Benny's pronouns. "We meet him at the police brawl, see, and when his eyes travel up and down Carol he drools. Being a fancy-talking braggart, he now has her yearning for adventure."

"*La femme*," said Benny wisely. He glanced thoughtfully through his favorite glass and came to a decision. "Johnny. You must make the adventure."

"Yeah, Benny. A very clever conclusion. Like solving a murder, eh?"

"The Benstein one, no?" said Benny.

I SNAPPED my fingers. That case had our fancy dan detective running around in circles. "Ben," I chortled, "have a drink on my bill. I can see the headlines: *Clever Citizen Solves Murder. Detective Sergeant Demoted.* It'll be a cinch. I read detective magazines regularly. Dig out your old

newspapers and we'll look up the case."

Fifteen papers and seven drinks later, I had the case sewn up tight. I was a little that way, too, and so was Benny. "My pal Benny," I explained. "Benstein was undoubtedly murdered, there being six slugs in his back. A case of small time bookie muscling in on the Whitey Farr mob. The D.A. knows Farr did it but has no proof. He wants the mob busted. All I gotta do is pin enough evidence on Farr to put him in the chair. Simple?"

"Yes, simple," Benny agreed. "Roses you like or lilies?"

"Pour another and don't be a pessimist. I'll make a direct approach tonight."

I had no trouble finding Whitey's headquarters. The place was over a diner on the west side of town. I stood across the road in a doorway casing the joint before I went in. All private-eyes do that. There was a light shining through the front window so I lit out across the road and down the side alley. The door leading to the upstairs was locked.

I was juggling a match in one hand and poking at the lock with my comb when I suddenly realized I wasn't alone.

"Trouble, Mac?" inquired a voice which sounded like ten rocks rolling around in a culvert.

I jumped around with my hand held menacingly in my coat pocket. There were two of them, each the size of a garage and with faces that had seen better days. "What's it to ya?" I spat.

"Thought we might be able to help you," said the rocky-voiced guy.

His approach surprised me and I relaxed. It was a tactical error. They both moved in and one held while the other felt.

"No rods?" asked Rocky. The other lug just shook his head.

"Well, well, wise guy," said Rocky.

He glared at me. "Whaddya want?"

"To see Whitey!" I roared. "And you mugs'll pay for this!"

Rocky laughed and Voiceless grunted again. They opened the door and hustled me up the stairs. Without waiting to knock, they kicked open a door and gently heaved me in.

IT WAS a tastefully decorated den. A small rug, sporting a large hole, lay in front of an ornate claw leg desk. The desk was bare save for numerous scratches and glass stains. A broken down chair and two spittoons completed the furnishings. Whitey himself was bulked in an oversize mohair chair behind the desk. Looking him in the eyes, I realized where his nickname came from. One eye was brown, the other a pale blue, almost white. I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck come to attention.

"What," he rasped, stroking his blue jewels, "do you want?"

I took aim at a spittoon and spattered the baseboard. "I'm a private eye and I'm putting all my cards on the table," I said. "Why did you kill Benstein?"

He sat back and roared. His two hugs took the cue and joined in. Then we stopped abruptly and gave me his two-tone glare.

"Throw this punk out" he bellowed.

It was the first time I'd had the rush from an upstairs apartment and Whitey's boys weren't gentle. After I hit bottom, they heaved me out the door. It was raining a little and I sat in the dark alley gratefully drinking in the clean air and cursing myself for a two-bit fool. Maybe this direct approach business worked in novels but not for me. To hell with adventure, I thought, limping into the nearby diner. I'll woo my bundle with kindness.

The phone rang a long time before she answered, but hearing her voice was

worth the wait. It put new life into my backbone, bruised though it was.

"Hi, Sweet," I said. "Look, we got time to catch the last show at the Ritz and afterwards we'll drop into the Gilded Cage and . . ."

"But, Johnny, Melvin is here. He's telling me about a murder case he solved and he's promised to take me for a ride in the prowler car."

"You've always wanted to go to the Gilded Cage. Now that you've got your chance, you turn it down for adventure."

"Ah, adventure!" she sighed. "Johnny, if you . . ."

"Lissen," I snarled. "That Melvin knows from nothing about adventure. While he sits cooing at other guys' property, I'm out solving his cases. Know where I've been? In Whitey Farr's hangout."

She gasped and a mumbled conversation took place. She sounded breathless when she came back to the phone.

"Johnny, Melvin says you're to stay away from me. You'll probably be tailed and . . ."

"He's afraid I might steal my own girl from him."

She started to protest so I hung up. I hopped into my old jalopy and poured the gas at her. She knew the way. The only light in Carol's place when I arrived was our love-lamp beside the sofa. I crept in quietly, poked my head in the door and yelled boo. Melvin jumped three feet. He had been working himself into an advantageous position, with one arm over the back of the sofa behind Carol.

"Moore," he bellowed. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, hello, Johnny," said my naive gal.

I flung down beside her, pulled her in and gave Melvin the once over. "Stin-out," I said. "Johnny has a claim staked

out here. So why don't you drop dead?"

His slick black hair almost curled. "You dope! You let Farr know we're still on to him and make him think you know something. Then you come straight here."

"So what? Should I go into isolation?"

"Look. If he thought you had something on him he'd shut you up by going after something of yours. What? Carol, you meathead."

Nobody calls me meathead. I jumped up and grabbed him by the tie but Carol was between us before I could get into high gear.

"Boys! Relax. I'll make you some coffee."

His pretty face took on a purple hue but Carol shoved him in a chair and me on the sofa and went out. We heard a rattle of pots and settled down to glare. At the end of ten minutes we would have known each other in the dark. The guy was strictly a smoothie. He'd made me look silly while he was posing as Sir Galahad protecting Princess Carol from the knaves. And Carol, in her present frame of mind, was drinking it all in.

"Quiet in there," he said.

"What's she supposed to do? Beat a drum?"

"Don't be smart! She hasn't made a sound for fifteen minutes."

MY HEART did a flip and I was right on his heels as he made lines for the kitchen. The kettle was bubbling impatiently on the stove but there was no Carol. The back door was open and the rain was drumming through the screen.

We dashed around to the front of the house but there wasn't a soul in sight. Melvin dashed into the house and left me cursing to myself. It seemed only minutes before two police cars screamed

into the street. Melvin met them at the steps.

"Boys!" he hollered. "A Miss Carol Lewis has been kidnapped, probably by Farr. She's five-four, blonde hair, brown eyes, pug nose, 115 pounds, wearing red and white polka dot dress, no stockings and red sandals. Check all hang-outs. I'll go in Car 230. Car 89 will take this man into protective custody."

"Hey," I yelled, but Melvin, ignoring me completely, trotted away to his cruiser. Two of the cops clamped onto my arms and half carried me towards the other car. What a warped mind that ham had—dispose of me so he could have a clear field to rescue Carol!

"Look, boys," I protested. "He said protective custody. That doesn't mean you have to be rough."

"The way Sergeant Stinout said it," replied the big guy on my right arm, "means you're to be kept from under his feet."

So that was that. With two king-size gorillas clamped onto me, I was beat. Unless . . . The boys had left their motor running and if I could break away and reach that cruiser I'd be away. But their hams of hands were like vises and I had only a few yards left in which to do something. I squirmed gently to test the situation and they immediately tightened up. So tight in fact, that I went down to my knees. When I looked the sidewalk in the face the idea struck. I spit quietly.

"Hey!" I hollered. "Blood!"

They dropped me like an empty fuel tank and, being detectives at heart, bent down for a closer inspection. In best tough-dick style I jumped up and pushed their heads into contact with the pavement. Then I lit out for the cruiser.

A block away, I looked back and saw them climbing into my old can. I patted my pocket. The police were always

drumming people not to leave the keys in their cars.

Where now? The siren was wailing and I couldn't find the shut-off button. Soon I'd have an entire police force searching for me. The radio began to crackle.

"Hello all cars. Be on lookout for man in stolen cruiser 89. Five-ten, 155 pounds, dark hair. Wearing cream gabardine trousers and blue jacket."

I love police calls but not that way. The guy was in error though. My pants had been cream but after that brief shower and the scuffle in the dirt they were gray with a ragged hole in the left knee. Without the jacket, I'd be hard to spot from that description.

My little motto came to mind—"In times of stress visit Benny." A block from his place, I slid the car into an alleyway and, leaving my jacket behind, I headed for help. Benny was standing at the front door.

"Lissen," he said. "The fire. Where is she?"

"I dunno but how about a drink?"

He came bustling in after me. "Hey. What's she happen? Pants ripped, hair mussed. You been in the fight, no?"

I plopped onto a stool and looked around. I was really catching on to this private-eye racket. The only customers were two drunks draped over a table and a luscious redhead staring moodily into a glass of beer. She looked innocent too.

"Benny," I said confidentially. "I'm cracking the Whitey Farr mob. Remember?"

"Yeah, somebody she is getting cracked, sure. Mebbe you, eh?"

"I just got into a little fight."

"Yeah. Lissen! The siren still blows. Mebbe the riot, eh?"

"Carol's been kidnapped, Benny. And there's no riot. They're after me."

"The cops!" he screamed.

THE next thing I knew, the little redhead was beside me. Her perfume caressed my nostrils and made my toes twitch.

"I thought I'd find you here," she said huskily. This babe was no moonlight and roses kid after all.

"Who?" I croaked.

"I heard you with Whitey. You've got what it takes."

This was interesting. Well, she was beautiful—close—and inviting.

"How so?" I asked.

"I was his girl and—hey, the sirens have stopped. They must have gone."

"Gone. That means they're here, sister. Benny, watch the door."

He waddled away and I turned back to Cuddles. "Go on."

"Whitey has crossed me and I'll see him behind bars before I'm through."

"Look, baby, if you'll co-operate I can help you with that noble resolution."

"Co-operate? Wait'll you hear my news. I know where your gal is!"

I spilled a nickel's worth of Scotch down my shirt.

"They're here! Down the street! The cops!" Benny was incoherent.

I felt that way, too, because I'd just had a thought. While most cops wouldn't recognize me by the description, my two burly friends certainly would and they'd likely be with the pack now.

I grabbed Cuddles' arm and headed for sanctuary. Benny, in a touch of patriotism, had named his rest rooms Femmes and Hommes. We entered the Femmes.

"Hey," Cuddles said, "this is cozy."

I shushed her and, seconds later, there was the sound of heavy boots outside. Two thuds announced that our drunks had collapsed on their dash for the door.

"Leave 'em," said a voice which sounded like the character who had had the squeeze on my right arm. "Listen,

Frenchie, let's keep your nose clean, eh? Now—has a guy in shirt sleeves and wearing cream pants been here?"

"Here?" Benny sounded hysterical. "I have the decent bar. No."

"What's Homs and Fems?"

"She's men and lady laboratory," Benny explained.

There was a tap on the door. Sweat started to ooze from my brow. Cuddles stirred in my arms and put a tasty finger to my lips. Then she put her head outside the door.

"Yes?" she inquired scathingly.

I could picture the cop's red face.

"Sorry, lady. I—I was just—"

Loud guffaws cut him off. A moment later I heard the front door slam. Benny began a toneless whistle and I let out my breath. Being a cuddly form close by, I cuddled it more closely.

"Look, baby. We could go places together, but not now. Where's Carol?"

"In Whitey's lodge on Lake Wana-pagi. Ten miles down the Shore Road there's a turnoff which leads to it. You can use my car out front." It was a speedy job and I really breezed it along the shore road.

The turnoff was a narrow trail through the brush. I cut the lights and eased the car along. After about a mile I could see a glimmer of lights through the trees. I edged the car into the side.

There was a light breeze and, after the gentle rainfall, the air was warm and sweet. As it was hemmed in by trees, I had the wiggles twisting around in my stomach. I cut in about fifty yards from the end and followed a narrow path through the bush. The blackness didn't bolster my courage any.

I HAD no warning that anyone was within a hundred miles. When the blow hit me, bringing a million stars into focus, I dropped to my knees

and could only wait for the next one to fall. But it didn't come.

"Well, well," sneered a voice which could belong to only one. I rocked back on my heels and looked up through eyes slightly blurred by the trip hammers thudding in my head.

"How'd you get here, Stinout?" I said.

"Stop blabbing, dope, and get out of here," he snarled. "I don't want you lousing things up. Now scram or I won't hesitate to wing you. No amateur gumshoe's gonna gum things up!"

I sat rubbing my cheek and watched him sneak down the path. He'd evidently known about this place and had figured that Carol would be brought here. And true to type, he was going to pull off this rescue all by his lonesome.

I shook some of the cobwebs from my head and started after him. After a couple of wobbly steps I stopped dead. Stinout had just entered the clearing and behind him, coming out of the trees, were two burly shapes.

The stinker that I am, I didn't even holler. One of the men pinned Stinout's arms to his side and the other wielded a short length of hose around his noggin. He went as limp as cooked spaghetti. Brother, was I glad he'd been around.

I cut into the undergrowth as silently as possible. Not that noise would have mattered—the ambushers were too absorbed in their catch. One was arguing and the other was grunting. Farr's faithful—Rocky and Voiceless. I had a debt to pay those lugs but now wasn't the time.

I made my way to the back of the lodge and the rooms were in darkness. Everything seemed too serene. The lake was lapping softly on the small beach and off in the distance a loon was screaming. In the house, Carol was

either alone or—well, what did I have to lose but my life.

The steps and door didn't creak like they're supposed to. I found myself in a small kitchenette which smelled of stale whisky and tobacco smoke as though Farr didn't air the place out after his parties. I tip-toed into another room and waited with thumping heart but nothing happened. I figured I was in the living room and the only light came from under a door to the right. Boy, this detective game was getting easier to master.

I rushed the door fast and hit the room with my fists at the ready. The only reaction was a muffled scream. Carol lay on the bed, trussed like a pot roast.

"Baby, did they hurt you?" I said, getting to work on the knots.

She sat up, brushed her hair back and rubbed her arms. "No, Johnny," she replied. "But am I glad to see you."

"We gotta move fast, kid. They'll be back any minute. Can you walk?"

She couldn't with a cramp in her legs so I picked her up. What a soft, sweet bundle. I brushed her lips. "Baby, if they'd—"

I was interrupted by a thumping on the front porch and I almost dropped her.

"Johnny," she whispered.

"Don't worry," I said, hammers tripping against my heart. I put on a burst of speed and reached the back door just as the front door opened. There was a good hundred yards to the protective trees and with Carol I knew I couldn't make it in my usual ten seconds. A thunderous bellow came from inside and we both trembled together. The moon was out now, casting a silver glow over the lake. A perfect night for romance—or murder.

We took the only possible course and squeezed under the back steps. In an-

other few seconds they were standing above us.

"She musta come this way," growled Rocky. "When I find 'er, I'm gonna crunch every bone in her body."

Carol pressed closely to me and I put a finger to her lips.

"You search along the lake. I'll beat the bush out back."

They stomped off and we both took a deep breath. "Legs okay, honey?" "We'll sneak through the house."

THE front clearing looked still and peaceful. As long as Rocky didn't work his way around the front too fast we'd be all right. We left the porch at full steam and paused for breath only when we hit the shelter of the trees. Carol was half laughing and half crying.

"You nearly pulled my arm out," she said. Then she noticed me peering around the clearing. "What are you looking for?"

"Just wondered if there was anybody around." There wasn't. I didn't know where they put him. "C'mon, baby, let's make that car."

I backed the wagon all the way out with Carol hanging on for dear life. On the Shore Road I shot out the wings and let 'er fly.

"They can't follow," Carol said. "Farr took the car back."

"Well, I hope they don't phone him to meet us."

"No phone," she said, and I bent over to kiss her.

Benny's front door was locked when we arrived but the lights were on. I rattled the knob and Benny came popping out of one of the cubicles.

Cuddles slid into view and gave me a toothpaste-ad smile. "Well, you did it," she crooned.

"Yeah—ah—Carol, this is . . ."

"Linda," Cuddles said.

"Yeah. Linda. Look, get acquainted. I've got to phone."

I was relieved to get away. You could almost see Carol's mussed up curls begin to straighten in anger. I called Farr's home number and, as luck would have it, he answered.

"Hello, Whitey," I said. "Thought you'd like to know that a couple of your boys have pulled a double-cross."

There was silence for a moment, then he hissed, "Who's that?"

"The guy who's gal you snatched and, for a small sum, I've got her back."

The receiver slammed down. I grinned and pulled a battered fag out of my pocket. I glanced outside and saw Cuddles heading for the front door. Carol was staring at her with unconcealed loathing. When I saw them together I knew where my heart lay. There was only one Craol. But Cuddles was a pip and a little aroused jealousy wouldn't hurt my cause.

I dialed police headquarters. "If you go down to Farr's lodge," I said "you're likely to find something interesting." I hung up quickly and was swaggering a little when I came out of the booth. The thing was now practically tied up and I could drop out. Farr would get tough with his boys and the cops would walk in. I'd rescued Carol and I had lost time to make up for.

"Well, honey," I said. "Let's have a drink. Where's Cuddles?"

"Oh, you mean her? I don't know and care less."

"Lovely girl," I said. "Wants me to set up a private detective agency with her."

"Oh?" she said, gulping a little.

"Gone overboard for me. Here she comes now."

Cuddles slipped into the seat beside me and placed her hand over mine. My toes did the curl act.

"If Melvin were here, now," I said,

"we could have a nice little party."

The daggers were flying again. "Johnny," said Carol. "Take me home please."

I WAS interrupted by an insistent banging on the door. Benny turned green. He'd never had such an evening in his life. He opened the door a crack and I could see two men standing there.

"Is there a Johnny and a Carol here?" one of them asked. They were both tall and well-dressed. The spokesman had an ugly scar running down his left cheek.

"Yeah, that's us. Why?"

They pushed past Benny and I crouched ready for action. "We're from headquarters," Scarface said. "We're to take you to the station for a statement."

I relaxed. Every muscle in my body began to sing. I'd thought the merry-go-round was going to start again.

"Who's this?" Scarface asked, pointing to Cuddles.

"She helped us," I said.

"You better come along, too," he ordered.

We climbed into the back seat of their car. It was a classy wagon with power to burn. I wouldn't mind being a plainclothes cop to drive around in a car like that all day.

"Nice wagon," I remarked, feeling happy.

Scarface turned and winked at Cuddles. "Should be," he said. "The boss paid plenty for it, eh Linda?"

Cuddles chuckled. "Hey." I said, ugly suspicion beginning to form. "You know each other?"

The driver beat the wheel happily and broke into a loud laugh. Scarface was grinning too. The scar pulled one side of his mouth up and gave a squint to his eye. He looked very mean.

"Sure do, sucker," he said.

I glanced at Cuddles and the love-light had gone from her eyes. "Sucker?" she said. "He don't rate that high. He fell too easily."

I made a grab for her but Scarface, for all his size, was plenty quick. He rapped me neatly on the ear with his gun and sat back to count stars.

"Nice," murmured Cuddles through the fog. "What happened anyway? The others were supposed to be waiting for him."

"Dunno," Scarface replied. "The boss is plenty hot. When he got your call he sent us right away. Thinks this guy knows too much."

So that was it! Rocky and Voiceless had been waiting for me! Instead they conked Stinout. I began to laugh.

"Shuddup!" said Scarface. "We ain't bungling this time."

Carol was stroking my ear which felt like an over-inflated tire. I took hold of her other hand and found she was trembling. Or maybe it was me.

"Oh, Johnny," she said. "I got you into all this."

"Don't worry, baby," I consoled her. "We'll get out of it somehow."

The trouble was—how? Scarface was hopefully pointing his gun and Cuddles was contemplating us with an amused grin. I prayed for a police siren but I was afraid the cops had tabbed my call a crank one.

We turned off onto the roadway to the lodge. The house was a blaze of lights this time. Scarface patted his gun tenderly. "C'mon," he grinned. "Let's go see Whitey."

Carol clutched my hand as we were shepherded inside. "Grit your teeth, kid," I said.

I had heard that Farr goes insane when he loses his temper and, when we saw him, I could well believe it. His pudgy face was chalky white. His eyes

were closed to mere slits and he was clutching his gun so tightly that his knuckles stood out white.

"Here y'are, Boss," Scarface said.

Carol let out a terrified gasp and pointed to one corner. What had once been my friend Voiceless lay spread out peacefully on the floor. There was a neat hole drilled in his forehead. I could see Carol and me—suddenly I felt sick. Rocky sat huddled up beside the body and from the stark terror in his face I could tell that our entrance had just forestalled his coup-de-grace.

"Get over there," Whitey snarled, waving his gun.

In spite of leaden legs I moved fast, pulling Carol after me. "Listen," I said. "Knock me off for no good reason if you want to but let this girl . . ."

"Shuddup!" He began to walk towards us. The muzzle of his gun pointed directly at my stomach.

"We don't know anything," I began to say but the implication hit me. We did now. Our neighbor had a hole in his head.

HE ADVANCED very slowly, seeming to savor the moment.

His big body waddled forward at each short step, with the gun jammed against his tremendous stomach. Cuddles was sprawled in an easy chair, her long legs crossed enticingly, while Scarface and the driver stood like two Indians.

Farr stopped halfway across the room and, for a moment, I thought we'd been granted a reprieve.

"Your face," he said, "is hideous. I think the first shot would do a good job square on the nose."

Cuddles laughed uproariously at that big joke but it was easy to see that Farr wasn't fooling. Carol's cry of fear snapped me out of the paralysis which

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◆ I was oh so much more than just a trophy on Clarice's shelf—now that I could help her beat the slumber chair. ◆

CHAPTER ONE

For the Love of Clarice

UNTIL I saw her there, lovely in my doorway, I had convinced myself that I was forever cured of her, safe from relapse. But the mere sight of her was enough to blast away my resolution, and when she spoke the sound of her voice reduced all remaining fragments to atoms.

"I'm sorry, George. I wouldn't have dreamed of coming at this time of the night if it hadn't been dreadfully urgent."

By

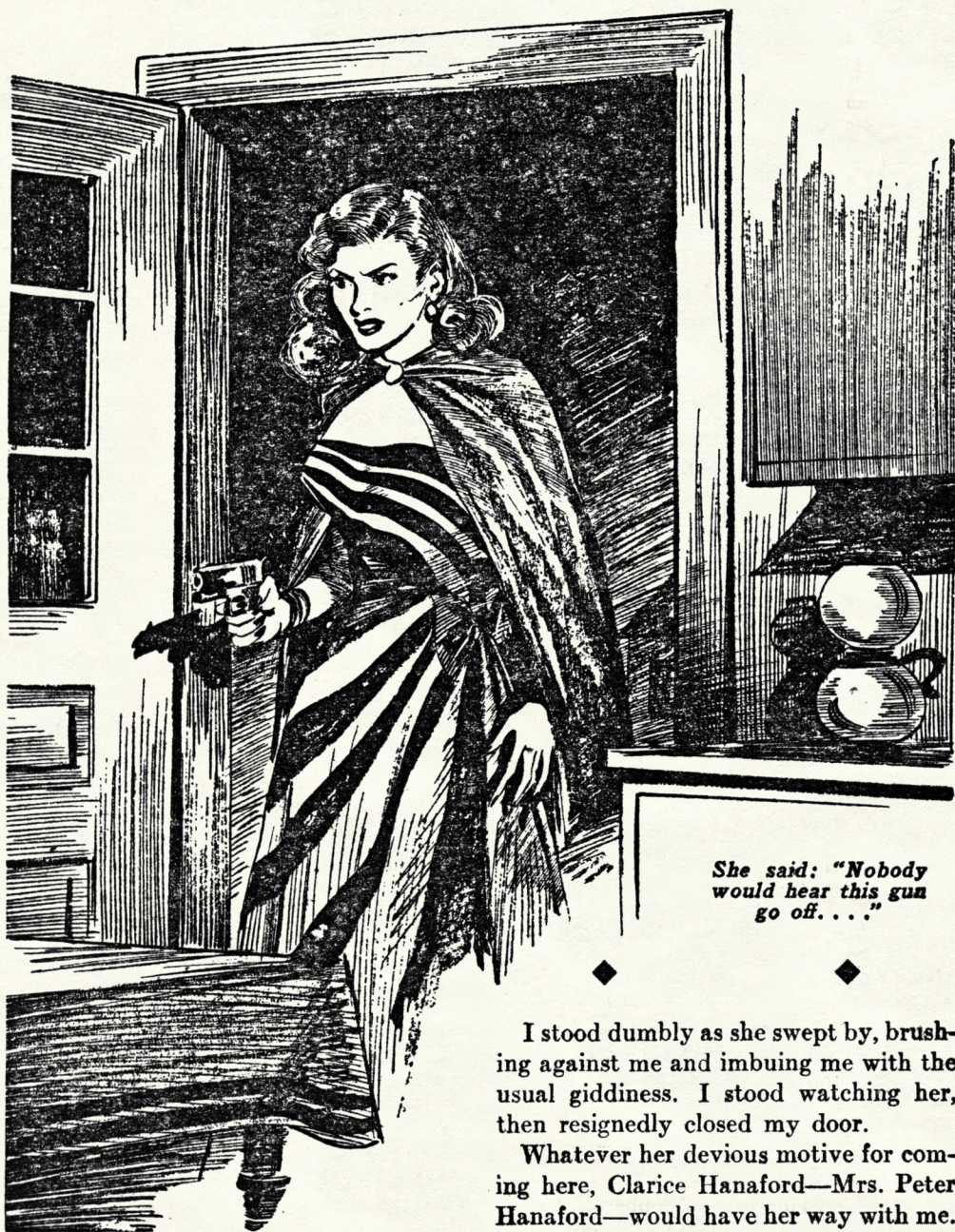
JULIUS

LONG

**Daring
Crime-Adventure
Novelette**



HER FAVORITE ALIBI



*She said: "Nobody
would hear this gun
go off. . . ."*

I stood dumbly as she swept by, brushing against me and imbuing me with the usual giddiness. I stood watching her, then resignedly closed my door.

Whatever her devious motive for coming here, Clarice Hanaford—Mrs. Peter Hanaford—would have her way with me.

Because once I had been able to refuse her, I had deluded myself into thinking I had won immunity. I had been as foolish as a wino momentarily freed from the fermented fury of the vineyard. I moved after Clarice.

She sat down in my living room, crossing her nyloned legs and holding out her hand for a cigarette. I gave her one and lighted it. The touch of her hand steadying my own had the usual effect, and her sultry eyes peering appraisingly into my own must have plumbed the depth of her power. She inhaled smoke from the cigarette, tossed her head back carelessly and sent a single wayward wisp of her smoky black hair into its proper place.

I had said nothing. Now:

"Clarice, you're up to something. You haven't come to me for nothing, after six months of not seeing me. Out with it."

My affected bluntness did not fool her. She smiled amusedly, her voluptuous lips curling mockingly at the corners.

"You are so cynical, George. Always so suspicious. It's a shame, George. We could have gotten along together so well. You would have gotten my divorce where Sam Carter failed. And then..."

"And then I would have been another Peter Hanaford for you to push around. No dice, Clarice. The mere sight of you melts me down, but not to utter idiocy. So tell me why you've come here tonight."

She shrugged shoulders which, though covered by the thin stuff of her dress, seemed bare.

"It's Peter again. He has made threats. He has sworn to kill both Martin and me if Martin ever comes to my place again."

Martin. At first the name meant nothing; then I remembered gossip picked up a couple of months before. Martin was Martin Wainright, Middle

City's plywood tycoon. At the time I had inwardly shuddered for the man. Clarice was sure to lead him a merry chase.

He would be fair game for her, a rich widower socially acceptable—and a handsome fifty in the bargain. There was a daughter, Jackie, but Jackie would only be amused by her father's playboy phase. Jackie was a playgirl herself, a flaming redhead with an alabaster skin that made a combination Middle City swains found irresistible. I knew Jackie and her father only slightly; there were a million dollars between us.

"What happened to Leo?" I asked Clarice. "Did you put him out to pasture, or is he waiting in the wings?"

Leo Tracey was the sharp lad whom Clarice had found behind a bar at the Flamingo Club and picked up for her very own. Leo hadn't had to tend bar since Clarice discovered him; he wore diamond studs with his white tie and tails.

Clarice shrugged. "Oh, that? Well, after all, a girl gets bored with a profile." She looked at me in a way to indicate that I was much more than a profile. "You've got to help me, George. This time Peter is serious."

I THOUGHT she believed it, but I couldn't believe poor Peter would seriously threaten to take the life of anyone. It was his accepting the responsibility for killing two men that had wrecked him and his marriage to Clarice. Of course the marriage would have cracked up sooner or later. But the fact was that Peter Hanaford, deep in his cups, had blamed Clarice for the tragedy that had taken place in Denver.

I remembered vividly the day he had accused her.

I had found him in a back street saloon. My role was that of an unwilling lawyer retained to handle Clarice's di-

voice case against poor Peter Hanaford.

"I won't take the case if you contest it, Peter. I thought maybe you'd just let her have her divorce."

He lifted bleary eyes and rubbed the stubble on his chin.

"Just like that, huh? After what she did to me in Denver?"

"Come now, Peter. You can't blame Clarice for what happened. In fact, nobody ever really blamed *you*—only *you* yourself."

It was true. Nobody blamed Peter Hanaford for the tragedy which he had permitted to wreck his life. But Peter Hanaford, over-sensitive, over-conscientious, just hadn't been able to take it. Perhaps he had always been too successful, too sure of himself. He had built up a reputation in his line of work as being a man who just never slipped up.

It was a tremendous asset, for his line of work was the installation of elevators for a great manufacturer. Paul had been superintendent in charge of installing a pair of elevators in a Denver office building when tragedy had overtaken him. Planking laid across the shaft had split, and two men had fallen ten floors to their doom. Investigation revealed that the men themselves had selected the planking. But Peter Hanaford publicly took the blame upon his own shoulders. He resigned his job and began a descent almost as fatal as that of his two unfortunate employees.

"I never told anyone," Peter told me, his hand clutching a whiskey glass, "about the telegram Clarice sent me that morning. The telegram said everything between us was finished—she was leaving me. I went to the job in a daze. Always I had insisted that my men use new lumber. I didn't even know they had found that old scaffolding until I heard the horrible sound of splintering wood.

"Clarice killed those men. From a

thousand miles away she killed them with a telegram. And she killed me, too."

He began to cry. I fled from the bar booth. I went back to my office and sat a long while, trying to make up my mind about Clarice's case.

A man in whose custody is placed the lives of others should not attempt to blame his marital troubles for his own carelessness with lives. Peter Hanaford, shedding tears of pity over himself, had earned my disgust. But so had Clarice.

I phoned her and told her that I could not take her case. Divorce, I explained, was out of my line. She pleaded, teased and exerted all her wiles during the next several days to get me to change my mind. For once I could refuse her. The memory of Peter's face was enough.

Clarice used Sam Carter, a divorce lawyer credited with being able to get anybody a divorce, but Sam had piled up on this one. It wasn't that poor Peter, with his idleness and drunkenness, hadn't provided her with adequate grounds for divorce, but in our state, if both parties have grounds, neither can get a divorce. Leo Tracey was just one of the reasons why Clarice couldn't get hers.

Now Clarice was back, telling me Peter was threatening her.

"What do you expect me to do about it?" I asked Clarice.

She exhaled a stream of blue-gray smoke. "Get me a divorce, George. Then I can have Peter taken in for annoying me. So long as he's my husband, I can't even call a cop. It's a hell of a situation."

I almost reminded her that she had created it. Instead I said: "No, Clarice. Sam Carter's the best divorce lawyer in the business, and I couldn't succeed where he failed. Besides, Peter is harmless. He wouldn't try to kill you or Martin Wainwright in a million years."

"No? You didn't hear him last night! Martin and I were coming out of the

Flamingo Club. And Martin was scared to death. I tried to tell him what you're telling me now, but he'd seen the look in Peter's eye. It was a look different from any I had ever seen before."

"He was probably drunker than he ever was before."

Clarice shook her perfectly molded head. "You're wrong, George. What really scared me was that Peter was cold sober."

"But he was angry. He's not the killer type."

"No? Weren't you quoted in the papers not so long ago as saying that there is no such thing as the killer type, that even the mildest, meekest man can be provoked into murder?"

"That's right. So why don't you stop provoking Paul into murder? Tell Martin Wainright to go on his way."

Clarice gave me a wry smile. "What do you expect me to do? Sit at home and twiddle my thumbs? I rate a good time, and I'm going to have it. She moved very close. "Please, George—help me get that divorce."

She was perfectly sincere in at least one thing—she thought I could get the divorce she wanted. I shook my head.

"I'm a jury lawyer. I couldn't fool a judge about your past. Nobody could do that."

SHE slapped me before I even knew that was her purpose in rising from her chair. She slapped me with her right hand, which held her cigarette, and its burning core struck my face and fell to my rug. I stepped on the butt and ground my foot on it.

"You'd better go, Clarice."

"I'm sorry, George. You're so very right. I've a past. A honey of a past. But I could change if someone gave me a chance. You're that someone, George. Help me. Please help me."

"No."

She probed me with eyes intelligent enough to see that for all my weakness, I meant my refusal. She shrugged.

"Well, at least you can take me home. I hate to be out alone this late. It's a quarter after eleven."

I knew it would be dangerous to drive her home. But I said:

"All right. Come with me, and I'll get my car."

My car was in the garage, and we went out through the kitchen. I live alone in a semi-country place, keeping no servants save a couple who live off the premises. I was beginning to wish my home was even more inaccessible.

"It's nice of you to do this for me."

Clarice was snuggling close as I turned into the road to Middle City. I liked the warmth of her, the engulfing fragrance of her perfume. My dash light illuminated her carefully revealed knees. She was not giving up. She wanted that divorce. I tried to guess how long she would tolerate me after I had got it for her.

Her head was on my shoulder by the time we reached the Belmont Arms. I opened the door for her.

"You must come up and let me make you a drink.

"It's really too late for that. Thanks, anyway."

"No. I mean it." She stepped quickly from the car and was in my arms, her lips pressed against mine before I knew it.

I don't know how long we stood there. Then I noticed a movement in the shadows. I thrust Clarice away.

"I think Peter has been watching us."

"So what? All the more reason for the privacy of my apartment."

It wasn't subtle, this attempt to compromise me in Peter's eyes and put an end to any argument I might have that Peter was a friend of mine. I knew the game, but that long kiss had done

its work. The promise of those lips again dissipated all discretion at my command.

There was no one in the apartment-house foyer when we entered. After an early evening hour, only one of the pair of elevators was in use, and it was an automatic. Clarice, lived at the top and tenth floor. Inside the car I pressed the button, the door closed, and we rose smoothly. At the tenth floor we walked to No. 10-D. Clarice found her key in her purse, and I unlocked the door.

Inside the vestibule she turned suddenly, and again she was in my arms. Finally she pulled away and said:

"Let me fix my face. Get yourself a drink and make me a scotch and soda."

She walked to her bedroom door and closed it after her. I went into the living room, found a floorlamp and switched on its light. Then I forgot all about mixing drinks.

A man lay sprawled on the floor, his face staring at the ceiling. The eyes were sightless. The red smear on the white dress shirt front left no doubt that a bullet had torn through the heart of Martin Wainright.

I hadn't thought of Jackie Wainright for a long while before tonight. Clarice, mentioning her father, had made me think of her, and my thought had not been sympathetic. Jackie looked after herself. But this thing, the murder of her father, would be a haymaker.

I crossed into the vestibule, found the phone and dialed police headquarters. I told the desk sergeant who I was, who the dead man was and where to find him.

"If your boys don't use a siren they may pick up someone loitering outside. From the way the blood looks, I think this must have happened only a few minutes ago."

I hung up and went to Clarice's door. I rapped.

"Yes? What is it you want, George?"

"I want to talk to you. Now."

"But I'm—oh, well, wait a moment."

Five seconds might have elapsed when Clarice opened the door. She eyed me suspiciously.

"What are you up, to, George? Why, you haven't even fixed me a drink!"

"No, I haven't." I walked into the bedroom, closed the door and faced her. "Were you expecting Martin Wainright tonight?"

"Martin? Why, of course not." A little look of hysteria came into her eyes. "Don't tell me he's shown up now!"

"I won't. But he *was* here. You're sure he wasn't expected?"

"Sure, I'm sure! But how do you know he was here?"

"Because his remains lie on your living room rug. He's been shot through the heart."

CHAPTER TWO

No Alibi Ike

CLARICE seemed about to fall. I took her by her arms and guided her to a chair. Peter!" She gasped. A convulsion went through her body. "I hope they burn him! I hope he sizzles in the chair! This finishes me in this town! Oh, George, if only you had listened and handled my case for me when I asked for you. Oh, George, what am I going to do?" A thought struck her. "Why, they may even accuse me of killing the old fool! George, you won't let them!"

"They won't accuse you, Charice. My guess is that Wainright was murdered within the past twenty minutes. The blood on his shirt front has clotted but not thickened. I'm your alibi, Clarice."

Her eyes, moist from the tears of hysteria, looked up into mine. Her hands

reached my face and pulled it down to her own. Her kiss was apparently meant to endure forever. Suddenly she drew back and said:

"Shouldn't we call the police? Right away?"

"I already have."

The radio cruiser crew got there first. Then came a captain of detectives named Jim Crawford, whose manner was testy because I had once beat a second-degree case he'd thought he had all wrapped up. I told him the story as the M. E.'s assistant went to work on the body. By the time I had finished the assistant had confirmed my surmise as to the time of Wainright death. It had probably taken place at about eleven-fifteen, the very time when Clarice and I had driven from my place. That made it about twenty minutes before our arrival at the Belmont Arms.

"Somebody must have heard the shot," I told Crawford.

He frowned. "I've got guys checking on that. What I want is a statement from this Hanaford dame. Where is she?"

"In her bedroom. I can tell you what her statement will be. She didn't know Wainright was coming here tonight."

"How did he get in?"

"Maybe the contents of his pockets will show you."

The M. E.'s assistant turned over a key-case, and Crawford found the key to Clarice's apartment on the second try. At that moment a plainclothes-man came up with a report that two tenants on the same floor had heard a shot at about eleven-fifteen but had thought they had just been imagining things.

"That puts the Hanaford dame in the clear," Crawford conceded. "But still I want to hear her story."

I went to Clarice's door again and told her to come out. She had changed into a conservative suit. She remained in the vestibule, averting her eyes from the

living room entrance as she told her story.

"It was my husband," she ended it calmly. "He threatened to do this. That's why I went to see George tonight. But George thought it was only a threat. Now he knows. I may be the next victim if you don't do something fast."

Crawford was studying her. I asked him: "Your boys didn't pick up anyone downstairs?"

"No. Who else saw the guy you think you saw?"

"Nobody."

"Nobody saw you come in?"

"No."

"Nobody saw you leave your place at eleven-fifteen?"

"No."

Crawford gave me a long, sardonic look.

I said: "Listen, Crawford, if you think what I think you're thinking, you're a fool. Why would I kill Martin Wainright? Do you think I'm crazy?"

"No, but I think you're plenty interested in this da—Mrs. Hanaford. You could be giving her an out. There's nobody but your word and hers that she was with you."

I eyed him without making only comment.

Clarice was looking worried. "Why don't you pick up my husband?" she demanded of Crawford. "He did it. I know he did it!" A thought occurred to her. "There was a taxicab driver who heard him make threats. Also I think the doorman at the Flamingo must have heard him. He threatened to kill us both if Martin ever came here. He'd have killed me, too, if I had been at home!"

"We'll take care of your husband," said Crawford. "Suppose you tell us how you got out to George Rand's place tonight."

"I took a cab, of course."

"What company?"

"It was—well, I don't remember. But I'm sure the driver would remember me. I tipped him all the change out of a five-dollar bill."

Crawford was taking notes on her statement.

"If you're through," I said, "I'll take Mrs. Hanaford downtown to a hotel. She won't want to remain here tonight."

Crawford said he was through for the moment. I took Clarice downtown and checked her in at the Mayfair. She wanted to talk to me; I sent her alone to her room. I had got involved enough for one night riding elevators with that girl.

I drove slowly back to my place. The truth was that I was doing some fast thinking along with the slow driving. Jim Crawford had me worried. My objective guard had been lowered for a while; it hadn't occurred to me that my alibi for Clarice would be questioned. A lawyer can never view a situation as an interested party with the same perspective available to him as a professional consultant.

Too many people in Middle City knew I had a motive for lying for Clarice. Those first few weeks of our association a couple of years back had been very public indeed. I'd picked up Clarice at a cocktail lounge; she had worn no ring, given no hint of her marriage to Peter.

Then Peter had come back from an elevator installation job, and Clarice had calmly announced his arrival in town with the comment: "Of course you'll be too sensible to let this make a difference. He'll be sent away on a new job in a week or so."

Maybe Clarice would have been right if I hadn't met Peter and decided I couldn't wrong a guy that nice. But lots of people who knew the first chapter of the story had guessed that there were many more chapters, and they filled in

details to suit themselves. Jim Crawford would find those people if he hadn't already heard the gossip.

I PARKED my car in my garage, entered my house and snapped on the lights of my living room. Peter Hanaford sat comfortably in one of my chairs. He held a thirty-eight revolver in his hand with the greatest of carelessness.

"Hello, George, my friend." The sarcasm was obvious. "That was a nice love scene you and my wife put on tonight."

"I'm glad you liked it."

"And I refused to believe all the yarns people told me about you and Clarice!"

"And now you believe everything, don't you?"

"Why not? It was clever of you letting the word get around that you refused to take her divorce case against me. Too bad you couldn't have coached Sam Carter better."

"You're going off the deep end, Peter. Tonight was the first time I've seen Clarice in months. And believe me, it's the first time I've kissed her since I met you."

Peter sneered. He was cold sober. I recalled Clarice's statement that he had been cold sober the night before, when he had made the scene in front of the Flamingo.

"Why did you come here, Peter? To use that gun?"

"No. That's just protection. You're a husky guy, George, and I've been on the booze for too long. I just want to have it out with you about Martin Wainright."

I watched him, took a chair opposite him and lighted a cigarette. I didn't taste it.

"What about Wainright?"

"That's what I want to know. Last night I made a fool of myself in front

of the Flamingo when I saw Clarice with him. I suppose Clarice told you."

"She did."

"Today Wainright sent a guy to see me. I didn't even get his name. I take it the guy's a strong-arm character from Wainright's plywood plant. He came in to a saloon and sat down on a bar stool beside me. Then he told me something.

"He told me that his boss had paid me plenty to keep out of his way and that if I ever made another scene or even spoke to Wainright in public again, I'd have my head beaten in. Then the guy left. Now, what do you think of that?"

"I think Mr. Wainright had some very definite ideas about you, Peter. What *had* he paid you for keeping out of his way?"

Peter's already flushed face colored more deeply. If he had meant to use the gun in his hand, I think he would have used it then.

"You know me better than that, George."

"I think I do. I'll withdraw the question. It looks as if somebody has been doing business in your name, Peter."

He nodded grimly. "Now, isn't that funny? I had the same idea. Know who I thought of first?"

"Me, I suppose."

"No, I thought of Sam Carter. That shyster would do anything. But tonight after I saw you and Clarice together, I changed my mind. How much did you shake Wainright down for, George?"

"Do you seriously think I have to make money by chiseling?"

"No, you don't have to. But one thing I've noted about successful guys. The more dough they make, the more they got to have. And the less they worry about how they get it."

"I won't argue philosophy with you,

Peter. But I can give you my word that I didn't even know Wainright's name was connected with Clarice's till I heard some gossip two months ago. And I didn't know anything definite until she came here tonight."

Peter studied me for a full minute. Then: "I wouldn't believe you on a stack of Bibles, George."

"All right, don't. So where do we stand?"

"Right here: If ever you shake Wainright down again in my name, I'll use this gun. I mean it, George. I didn't mean it when I threatened Wainright last night, but I mean it now."

"Then you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Wainright is dead. Nobody can shake him down now."

Peter Hanaford sat up straight. He whistled softly.

"So that's why that cruiser stopped at the Belmont! I thought someone had reported me being there."

"Somebody did. I'm glad you saw us, Peter. You can tell Captain Crawford all about it."

A cagey look came into Peter's eyes. "So it's a homicide case!" He leaned forward. "I've got it! Wainright's body was in Clarice's apartment when you walked in! Are the cops holding her?"

"No. Wainright was shot at eleven-fifteen. We were just leaving here then. The police know that. Clarice is in the clear."

A sly smile came over Peter's face. "Because of your alibi. There's nobody but you to back her up on that. Nobody saw you with her but me!" He broke off into laughter.

"I thought you loved her, Peter."

A hard glint came into his eyes. "Love her? Sure I love her! Can't you appreciate the hell I've gone through, knowing she went with all sorts of men? But how many men can she kiss

if she goes to a reformatory for life? Not many, huh?"

"She might get the chair, Peter."

"Clarice? Not a chance! With you as her lawyer, she probably won't even get life. But manslaughter would put her away long enough to spoil her looks when she gets out. No, I don't see any men in her life—not when I tell the cops you and she were shaking Wainright down in my name. When I made a scene last night he began to think. He tumbled to the fact someone was working him. So he had to be stopped. Stopped dead. The cops will like that, George. They'll love it!"

I stamped out my consumed cigarette. "You know it didn't happen that way, Peter. You saw us come into the Belmont."

A gleam of triumph shone in Peter's eyes. "Sure! I know it—you know it and Charice knows it. But the cops won't. They'll have just what I tell them. And it'll be enough to nail Clarice—and maybe you!"

CHAPTER THREE

A Playgirl Buys In

ARGUING was useless. Nothing would stop him from giving his story to the police. But I wasn't going to let any alcoholic wreck walk into my home and hold me at the point of a gun.

Peter was disarmed by my apparent passiveness. He didn't have a chance to lift the thirty-eight before I catapulted out of my chair. I knocked his gun hand aside with the heel of my own right hand, and the gun went thudding to my rug. I threw a left jab that missed his jaw but caught his neck and forced a scream. I had my right ready by then, and a hook ended the argument. Peter lay back unconscious

in the chair. He'd keep quiet for a while.

I picked up the thirty-eight and thrust it under my belt at the left side, butt to the right. Then I grabbed Peter under the shoulders, lifted him up, stooped and pulled him over my shoulder. I carried him into my bedroom, flopped him on my bed. He lay perfectly still. I figured him to be good for a ten-hour sleep at least.

I went back into my living room, crossed it and reached the phone in the hall. I called the Mayfair and asked for Clarice Hanaford. There was a wait; then a clerk told me she had gone out.

"Did she say where?"

"No. She merely left her key."

I hung up. I thumbed through my phone book, found the name I wanted and dialed the number opposite it. I waited a couple of minutes, but there was no answer.

But Leo Tracey could be too busy this night to answer telephone calls.

I decided to pay Leo Tracey a visit. I walked into the kitchen—and stopped short.

Jackie Wainright, ravishing in an evening wrap and cape, stood there in the rear doorway. She was aiming one of those twenty-five calibre automatics that a man can get only one finger around.

"Hello, Jackie. How did you get in?"

"The same way somebody else must have. Your back door has been broken open. Didn't you know?"

"No."

"Well, I'd have plenty of burglar insurance if I were you. This place is kind of isolated. Nobody would hear this gun go off if I pulled the trigger."

"Now, wouldn't that be a silly thing to do? Why don't you put away the gadget and let me mix you a drink, Jackie?"

I had never addressed her by her first

name, actually her nickname, before tonight. Lots of things were puzzling me. Why would a playgirl use a man's back door to get at him with a gun when that man was almost a perfect stranger? But I thought I could fathom the gist of her motive.

"I'm sorry about your father, Jackie. I suppose you've come to see me about what's happened."

"That detective told me you were Clarice Hanaford's alibi. I'm going to break her alibi, Rand. She murdered my father, and you're going to admit you lied to the police."

"Or your dainty little finger will squeeze that trigger?"

"That's exactly what will happen."

"Don't be a fool, Jackie. A confession made under duress is never admissible in evidence. Besides, I'm tired of having guns pointed at me tonight. The last guy had a much bigger gun. Want to see it?"

I drew Peter Hanaford's thirty-eight from my belt and pointed it at Jackie. I grinned. She looked as if she were about the most startled girl in the world.

"No, Jackie, I wouldn't shoot you—any more than you would shoot me. You must have been drinking to have come here like this."

"I haven't had a thing. And what happened to Dad would have sobered me if I had been drinking! You've no right—"

She burst into tears. She put the little automatic into her handbag and got out a hanky. I watched her dry her eyes, replacing the thirty-eight under my belt.

"My alibi for Clarice Hanaford is on the level, Jackie. I may even have a line on who the killer is. I was setting out to check it when you charged in, hardware in hand."

Jackie had dried her eyes. If she used mascara, it was the kind that didn't run. The eyes regarded me thoughtfully

but they didn't completely trust me.

"If you're on the level about Clarice, who do you think did do it? I've got to know!"

"It's too early to say definitely. Just give me time. How about going home like a good little girl?"

"No, I'm going with you. I want to be in on this."

I studied her. She meant it. I don't think I had ever spoken a dozen words to her before tonight. I couldn't figure her because I simply didn't know her. Maybe she had begun to believe me; maybe she didn't believe me at all and wanted to pin me down by going along. I decided to string her along.

"O.K. Come with me."

She docilely followed. We got into my car, and I drove from my garage. Jackie's car was parked on the side of the road, perhaps a hundred feet from my drive. I hoped she had lifted the keys; it was a chartreuse convertible, nice pickings for a hot-car hand.

When we hit the city limits I cut across to Lonsdale Avenue.

"Where are we going?" Jackie wanted to know.

"The Flamingo Club. The guy I want to see is usually hanging around there about this time."

The time was getting on toward one. Things should be popping at the Flamingo. The late crowd of drunks made the place at about this time. But I hadn't the slightest idea that Clarice Hanaford would be there until I had checked my hat and escorted Jackie to the bar.

Jackie was getting a lot of critical stares. By this time the news of her father's murder had been on the air, and here she was, trotting around at a night club. Jackie ignored the stares. I ignored them, too. I was concentrating on Clarice at one of the tables near the wall.

SAM CARTER was with her. The divorce lawyer was in a tux; he wore one well. The gray at his temples and his fine-line mustache filled out the picture of a debonair *bon vivant*. He didn't see me, and neither did Clarice.

They were talking earnestly. When the bartender had served Jackie and me drinks, she asked:

"Well? Did you come here to keep an appointment with Clarice?"

"Don't be absurd. There's a lawyer with her now."

"A divorce lawyer. The Hanaford dish is too clever to trust Carter with a murder rap. Especially after he muffed her divorce case."

I shrugged.

Jackie persisted: "Why did you come here?"

I ignored her, motioned to the bartender and asked: "When did Carter show tonight?"

The bartender looked as if he were too busy to remember such trifles. The three dollars left from a five-dollar bill lay on the bar. I thrust it toward him.

He perked up and answered: "Carter got here about ten minutes ago, just ahead of the dame with him. Anybody can tell you that. Everybody knows what happened tonight."

The bartender finished with a disapproving glance at Jackie.

"Whatever it was," said Jackie, "it must have been important for her to have come out at this hour of the night. But why didn't she meet Carter where they wouldn't be seen?"

"Because there's no such place. The police have a tail on her. She may try to shake the tail here. If I have to leave suddenly, think nothing of it."

But she was thinking plenty of it—that was plain from the suspicion in her eyes. She'd probably guessed that I meant to lose her from the start. I

pretended to be interested in my drink as I faced the backbar and watched Clarice and the divorce lawyer in the mirror. I'd just finished the drink when Clarice arose and walked toward the powder room.

"Follow her there," I told Jackie. "I think this is it. Is there another door to that powder room?"

"No, but I remember a low window. But you don't seriously expect me to walk into the same room with that woman, do you?"

"You won't have to make a scene. Hurry it up."

She stubbornly shook her head. "Nothing doing. You'd be gone when I got back. I'm calling your bluff. If you have someone to see tonight, turn him up."

That was that. I shook off the bartender in the matter of another round and kept an eye on the powder-room door. It opened many times in the next fifteen minutes, but Clarice didn't come out. I looked reproachfully to Jackie.

"See? What did I tell you? She's used that low window. Better take a look."

Jackie was convinced, but not about me. She shook her head.

"If she's gone, you know where she's gone to, I'll bet."

I looked away from her as Sam Carter left his table and crossed to the check-room. A bare-legged girl turned to procure his hat from another bare-legged girl behind the counter. I slipped off my bar stool and crossed to him.

"Well, hello, Sam. Fancy meeting you here!"

Sam pretended to look pleased and surprised. He was neither.

"A terrible thing about Clarice," he said. "She's a scared little girl. Thinks the cops will try to nail the Wainwright thing on her. Wanted me to take the case. I told her I was just a divorce lawyer. Why don't you handle it?"

"And be the alibi witness at the same time?"

Sam shrugged. "You could hire a youngster to handle your own direct examination and conduct the rest of the case yourself. But I don't seriously think she'll ever be tried with you as the star witness. Jim Crawford knows better than to attempt anything like that."

"Maybe. Where'd Clarice get to, Sam?"

He shrugged. "Where'd your own date get to?"

I turned. Jackie was gone from the bar. This was the time for me to make a fast exit. I did.

Jackie was sitting in my car when I reached it in the parking lot. Her voice filled with sarcasm, she asked: "What kept you?"

"All right, Jackie—have it your own way. I wanted to spare you something very unpleasant. I think I know who killed your father and why. The motive is something I'm certain about. Peter Hanaford told me tonight that your father sent an emissary to him today—I mean yesterday and warned him not to bother your father again. There was something said about a shakedown purportedly paid to Peter. Peter thought I had been using his name and collecting from your father. He was pretty nasty about it.

"I know it wasn't me. My first choice was Leo Tracey, the gigolo Clarice used to be so thick with. He would be the kind to capitalize on a thing like that after Clarice had kicked him out to make room for your father. My second choice was Sam Carter, but now Sam's my first. The fact that Clarice met him tonight may mean that she's wise to him. Or it may mean I'm a bum guesser."

"How are you going to find out which choice is right?"

"By going to Tracey's apartment and

beating the truth out of him. Still want to deal yourself in?"

"I'll take five cards."

"You asked for it."

I drove from the lot and headed to the south side, where Leo Tracey lived in a swanky apartment house. Leo wouldn't ordinarily be at home this time of the night, but I had a hunch Clarice might meet him there.

My hunch was wrong. The night man at Leo's apartment house told me he had left at eight and hadn't returned. I went back to my car.

Jackie was still being sarcastic. "So Tracey's not home. What now?"

"I've a hunch I know where Tracey is. And Clarice, too."

"You and your hunches. Where to this time?"

"Clarice's apartment. Still want to ride with me?"

"I'm seeing you and raising you."

It was two-fifteen when I pulled up in front of the Belmont. I half-expected to find cops staked out in front, but none were visible, nor were there any in the foyer. I escorted Jackie to the automatic elevator. I pressed the No. 10 button, and the car rose smoothly.

It stopped, the door did not open. I pressed the No. 10 button again, but nothing happened. I tried the *Door Open* button, and nothing happened either.

"Of all the times to get stuck in an elevator!" I said impatiently. "It happened to me once before in a little hotel out West. The same kind of elevator. That time I got out by doing something they said was impossible. I got the fingers of both hands in the crack between the door and the frame—like this. Then I pulled—like this."

I grunted and tugged at the door with all my might. It had taken a lot of pulling that time out West—plus the anger of being locked in a car for

a solid hour. That time I had barely managed to open the door. This time I couldn't budge it. I realized suddenly that we were moving downward. My back had been to the push button and to Jackie. I turned.

"Did you push the down button?"

"I didn't push any button! We just started down, that's all!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Express to Oblivion

JACKIE was slightly pale. I felt cold sweat pour down my spine. Of course someone on some other floor could be summoning the car. But it was odd that it had stuck.

I pushed the fifth-floor button. I knew almost at once that we had gone past the fifth floor. Suddenly the car stopped with a terrific jar. Rather, it bounced a couple of times before it came to a complete stop.

I had my arms around Jackie. She looked up at me with frightened eyes.

"What happened?"

I was afraid to tell her what I thought. I was afraid to think it. Abruptly we started upward.

"Here we go again!" I laughed. "These fancy elevators play tricks with you."

I wasn't fooling her. I wasn't fooling myself. This car was no longer automatically operated. It was manually operated—from the control tower on the roof of the apartment house.

Peter Hanaford was up there. Peter Hanaford, the former elevator installation superintendent, who knew all there was to know about the operation of modern elevators. He could do anything with this car that he wanted to do.

I thought I knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to tease us a while. He would play with us as a cat plays with a mouse. Then he would kill us. He

would cause the car to drop ten floors to the basement below where even those bumpers couldn't guarantee hope.

I knew why Peter was plotting to do this thing, why he was teasing us now. He had watched Jackie and me enter from a window in the elevator tower ten stories above. In the dim light in front of the Belmont, Jackie's red hair had looked a smoky black. Peter had taken for granted that she was Clarice. He had recognized me, of course, and drawn the obvious conclusion that I was with his wife.

The elevator stopped. In a moment it would descend to the well. It was too bad for Jackie, too bad that her red hair looked black from a distance in dim light. . . .

I had certainly underestimated Peter's capacity for recovery. I had made every mistake possible this night. Plague on my hunches after this—if there ever were any afterwards.

The elevator plummeted downward at a rate so fast that it seemed the floor would give way in advance of our feet. Instinctively Jackie and I clutched each other. Her face was bloodless, but the look in her eyes was gone.

The crash came violently. Both of us were hurled to the floor, torn from each other's grasp. Jackie pulled her dress over nyloned legs, peered up solemnly.

"It isn't any accident, is it? Someone is doing this."

"Yes, Jackie. Someone is. Peter Hanaford. He mistook you for Clarice. He's insanely jealous—and trying to kill us both."

"And he will, won't he?"

"I don't think so. These elevators are equipped with bumpers. Remember the girl who fell eighty floors in an elevator when a crashing plane cut all the cables in the Empire State Building? The bumpers saved her."

Jackie slowly turned and looked at the center of the car floor.

"They didn't help this time. Look."

I looked. My blood seemed to turn into ice-water as I saw the bulge in the floor. Then I remembered that we had not bounced this last time. We had simply crashed, then eased upward a foot or so.

"What does it mean?"

I avoided her eyes. I hated to tell her. But she must know.

"It means, Jackie, that Peter Hanaford thought of the bumpers. He's put something in the elevator well for us to strike. The first time we didn't descend fast enough to reach it, and the bumpers bounced us back. This time we hit it, and the bumpers could only ease us back into position at their top."

Jackie crouched closer now. "Can he take us up and try again?"

"I think so. We didn't fall that time—we merely descended rapidly. He is only teasing us now."

"Can—can he make us fall?"

"I'm afraid so, Jackie."

"But—but aren't these things made so they can't fall? Haven't they safety devices?"

"Sure. But if the cables that operate them are cut, there's nothing to stop our fall."

It was horrible to have to tell her these things. But I knew them to be true. Peter had once showed me how he could make a supposedly fool-proof automatic elevator move like a puppet up and down its shaft. I could visualize him now, aloft in the tower, his features distorted into perverted craftiness, toying with us as a prelude to our doom.

The car was lifted with a suddenness and acceleration almost as rapid as that of our fall. At the top floor it stopped so abruptly that we were all but thrown into the air. Without really being aware of it now, we were clutching each other

tightly—so tightly that the barrel of the thirty-eight under my belt was jabbing into my side.

The pain made me aware of its existence. I thrust Jackie away, rose to my feet and drew out the gun. I motioned Jackie to get her legs out of the way, then aimed at the floor and fired. The roar of the gun was deafening in the confined space. Jackie looked at me as if I had gone out of my mind.

"Why did you do that? That lunatic's above us! Why don't you shoot up at him?"

"I couldn't hit him from here. If I shoot down through the shaft, maybe someone will hear it, and call the police."

I FIRED again three times. Certainly that blast should wake every occupant of the building. I decided to fire once more, then save the last round just in case. I fired the shot, making the fifth bullet hole in the floor. A worry beset me; I broke out the cylinder and saw that my worry had cause. I threw the gun to the floor.

Too late I remembered that many people load five rounds into a revolver, keeping the sixth chamber open for holding the hammer down. There was no last cartridge to save.

I remembered Jackie's gun. Her handbag lay in a corner. I reached for it, opened it and drew out the little automatic while she watched with uncomprehending eyes.

I drew out the automatic's magazine. It was empty. I drew back the slide. The chamber was empty. I tossed both articles in disgust into the corner with the handbag.

"You would carry an unloaded gun!"

"You don't think I'd carry any other kind?"

I laughed without mirth.

Jackie got to her knees. "What's he doing now? Why isn't he sending us

down again? What's he going to do next?"

"I think those shots have changed his plans. I—" The whole car trembled and fell perhaps a fraction of an inch. I knew my suspicion was right. I said hollowly: "He's cutting the cables, Jackie. It won't be long now."

I turned and ran the fingers of both hands into the door jamb. I tugged with all my might, but the door would not budge.

"Can I help?"

"No, Jackie. There isn't room."

I tugged so hard it seemed my fingers would break. The door would not move. Then Jackie did move. Jackie had retrieved the revolver that I had dropped. She crawled beneath me and began to attempt to force the muzzle into the door jamb. She wasn't having any luck.

I reached down and gently took the gun from her hands. I forced it into the door and pried. I knew from past experience that it took only a fraction of an inch of movement to free the great spring pressure on the door. The car lurched as I finally got the barrel all the way into the jamb. This time I

prried with all my strength. Once we sank below a certain level no human strength, aided even by lever, could free the door.

The door gave. Holding the gun as a lever with my left hand, I worked my free hand into the jamb. Jackie, too, got her small hands through. We both pulled; the door came back.

"Out, Jackie! Quick!"

I knelt and fairly dragged her by her armpits. Then we were on the firm, solid floor. We looked at each other in disbelief; then we both began to laugh a little hysterically.

Our laughter was abruptly broken off as the elevator car disappeared before our eyes. It simply dropped from sight, twisting, threshing steel cables screaming after it as the entire contents of the shaft fell to the well below.

The building shook as the mass crashed. Dust rose ten stories to issue from the yawning doorway. Then another door opened, and Peter Hanaford stepped from the stairway to the elevator tower. His eyes opened in incredulity as he saw me; then his right hand reached into his pocket and emerged

SLAYERS GO SOLO

A lovely Lorelei's phone call got Jim Bennett on the hook but good—with some strange dead-fellows.

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with a revolver pointing right at us.

"So you got out! A lot of good that will do you and Clarice!"

I realized that I was hiding Jackie from his view. I thrust her vigorously around so that he could see her.

"You stupid fool! Look who you almost killed! I don't even know where Clarice is. We were coming here to see her. I thought she might be keeping a date with Leo Tracey."

Astonishment paralyzed Peter Hanaford. Perspiration beaded on his forehead as he realized the enormity of his mistake. Then he turned as down the corridor another door was opened.

It was Clarice's door—she emerged with wide eyes. Doubtless she had returned a few seconds after Jackie and I had entered the building.

The too-handsome man who followed Clarice into the corridor was Leo Tracey. Both stopped short as they beheld, first us, then Peter Hanaford. They seemed fascinated by the revolver in his hand.

"What happened?" Clarice asked no one in particular. Then she saw the gaping doorway of the elevator shaft. She clutched Tracey for support, but the former bartender looked as if he needed support himself. He wasn't bright enough to fathom the fate he had missed, but the revolver in Peter's hand was something he could understand.

Peter lifted the revolver, aimed it at Tracey.

Tracey screamed: "Don't — don't — I'll tell the cops everything! You can't shoot an unarmed man! I threw away the gun I got Wainright with!"

He cracked completely when he realized what he had blurted out. "It—it was Clarice's idea! She said she'd get rid of both you and Wainright. Wainright tumbled she and I'd been shaking him down. If she framed you, she'd be a cinch to get a divorce even if you

didn't go to the chair. George Rand was to be her alibi—she went out to his house as bait while I did the job. Don't shoot—I'll tell the cops—I'll—"

Peter Hanaford shot him through the heart. Clarice stared unbelievably at his body at her feet.

Peter said: "Come here, darling. We're going down."

A gleam of triumph came into Clarice's eyes. She moved confidently to her husband. Grinning, he seized her hand and led her down the corridor. He led her past the fire stairs.

Clarice cringed. "The stairs! They're that way!"

Still grinning, Peter said: "But we're not going down that way!"

I realized then what was happening. I tried to lunge toward Peter's legs, but he side-stepped me, reached the open elevator doorway with his prisoner. Then Clarice knew.

"Peter! Have you gone crazy! If you throw me down there, they'll burn you in the chair!"

Peter's grin was like no human grin.

"No, Clarice, they won't burn me. We're going together—like those two poor devils in Denver, the guys we killed together."

Clarice tried to break away, and I tried to reach Peter again, but the struggle was over in seconds. Both bodies went together. Clarice's shrill scream endured almost interminably as the pair dropped in space. Then the scream ended. . . .

I helped Jackie to her feet. Without pausing to explain to the curious occupants of the corridor, I led Jackie to the stair door, and we walked down the nine flights to the ground.

All the way down neither of us had a word to say. Words weren't necessary. We had been through a hell of a lot together, Jackie and I.

That lovely voice out of the blue could threaten me till doomsday
—just so long as it didn't . . .

• • • MAKE WITH A WAKE

I'VE had my share of threats. In fact, I've had more than is decent for one man to have. To most of them I've paid scant attention. I figure that if a guy is set on murder he'll do it without any bragging. But I felt a decidedly unpleasant chill playing cops and robbers with my spine as I listened to the phone.

By JOHN
KRILL



*I knew why Andy had
been killed. He'd been
mistaken for me. . . .*

"Mr. Mike Trapper?"

The voice was low and sweet. My mind conjured up the image of a beautiful lass to fit such a voice. The picture was that of a lovely blonde. I'm partial to blondes.

The sweet voice got sweeter and I felt the first prickle of ice on my spine. "I just called to inform you that soon you'll be dead, Mr. Trapper. Very dead." There was a gentle sigh and the line went dead with a sharp click.

"Now what the hell?" I exclaimed.

It was the sweet sadness of that feminine voice that got under my hide. Those roaring with fury or trembling with hatred only made me cluck: "Tsk, tsk," to the aggrieved party before I hung up. I'm a private dick and all private dicks make enemies. Yet there was a deadly earnestness in that sweet unknown voice that awoke an instinctive fear in me.

For a long time I stared about my office. The battered and scratched flat-topped desk with its blue vase of artificial tea roses. The two windows overlooking Dean Street. The olive-green filing cabinets and the photos of fighters, wrestlers, and luscious movie queens on the cream-colored walls.

"Mary!" I bawled out. "Mary!"

The chill was leaving me but I retained an unpleasantly vivid recollection, like a kid remembers the taste of castor oil or a razor strop. I heard the wild screeching of a warped drawer being shoved back and then the sharp clack-clack of high heels.

"How many times, you uncouth baboon," Mary scolded as she came into the inner office, "have I told you that I'm not to be yelled at?"

My brother Andy followed her in with a grin on his face. He was a year younger than I, but he was built like me and his features were enough like mine to sometimes confuse people.

"Sorry," I muttered, but that didn't stop Mary.

Mary Yancey was a golden blonde of twenty-five. Not one of your fragile doll-baby kind. She stood five-eight and weighed just enough to fill out her chassis the way one should be filled out. Her eyes were so blue that other blues looked lifeless. She was shaking an indignant finger under my nose. I thought she looked wonderful when she was mad. I also liked the way her thick, soft, pale golden hair, done in a plain upsweep, crowned her oval face. But I didn't like Andy's grin of enjoyment.

"I'm a lady," Mary's voice was concluding a very unflattering opinion of me, "and you'd better remember that."

"Mary," I gasped in a voice much weaker than necessary, "a party just called and told me I'd soon be dead."

"Then they'd better hurry up before I cheat them of the pleasure!"

Andy roared heartily at this crack. Mary took him by the arm and said: "C'mon, Andy. Take your sister-in-law-to-be out to lunch." Without a backward glance they walked out, leaving me to await my fate alone. Heartless.

My heels scratched the desk some more as I tilted the chair backward to do some heavy concentrating. It was no use. That voice was new to me. Half an hour later the phone rang. A sudden premonition of evil filled me as I reached for it.

"Mike — Mike — come to the Commodore Grill!" It was Mary's voice frightened and tearful. "Andy's been shot—killed!"

"Killed!" I groaned the ugly word as I raced out of the building and headed for the Commodore Grill. I saw the crowd from two blocks away.

Andy was sprawled on the sidewalk just in front of the entrance. He was dead. A load of heavy shot had hit him in the back. My eyes burned fiercely

and a great grief swamped me so that I couldn't see. Andy, my happy-go-lucky brother, lay there murdered.

An ambulance drew up and removed his body, after Horace Gill, lieutenant of the homicide detail, gave the order.

Mary was clinging to me and nearly hysterical with sorrow and fear. Lieutenant Gill came over and tapped Mary on the shoulder.

"Get into the squad car, Mary. Looks like some of the pellets hit you."

I looked at Mary. A red stream was flowing thinly past the sleeve of her coat and staining her right hand.

"You better come with her," Gill told me. I followed numbly.

IN THE way to the hospital, Mary told me what happened in a scarcely audible voice. She and Andy came out of the grill when a blue sedan pulled away from the curb. A sudden blast of gunfire burst from the car and Andy fell. The car picked up speed and vanished. That was all. No one caught the license number because the tag had been bent.

A painful sob choked in my throat. I knew why Andy had been killed. Somebody had mistaken him for me. By rights, it was I who should be on the slab.

"The voice," I gritted to myself. "The voice on the phone."

A single pellet was removed from Mary's upper arm. Size three. I left her there to recover from the shock. Gill took me back to the office.

My mind was like a ball-bearing race. It sifted out every case I'd ever worked on. To help it I dragged out my files and studied them. Dead end. None of the ladies and gentlemen who had gone to prison lately because of my efforts had been released.

The two latest big cases concerned Count Josef Pillowski, a gent with a

bogus nobility title for sale, and one Eli J. Witler, a blackmailer. I had placed both of them in storage a few months ago.

Neither had threatened me, something unusual among these lower-crust citizens. But I had no trouble reading the fond hopes of homicide-to-be that ran through their minds. Pillowski had almost saddled his phony title on a nobility-mad dowager with more bucks than sense. A suspicious member of the family had engaged me to delve into the count's family tree. It didn't take long to find out that the tree had flourished lustily in the cool of numerous prisons both here and abroad. Count Pillowski was then rapped for signing a few checks of noble size with the name of his bride to be.

Eli J. Witler was a blackmailer of the rottenest type. I got him engineering a badger game. He gave me a cold sneer as the judge gave him a permanent address for the next ten years. But Witler didn't stay in the pen long. A landslide caught a crew of convicts working in a deep quarry at the foot of Sheer Canyon. Thousands of tons of rock and earth had engulfed the crew of ten men and two guards. No bodies had been recovered. Eli Witler had been a member of the unfortunate group.

"Who could have done it? Who could have done it?" I asked myself ceaselessly. I shook my head and answered, "I don't know. I don't know." If only I knew the owner of that sweet voice.

Next morning I jockeyed my faithful car to the curb in front of St. John's Hospital and went in to see my golden girl. She was happy to see me and appeared normal except for her bandaged arm.

I shook my head to the question in her worried blue eyes. "No leads, dear. Don't know who or why."

"Be careful, Mike." Her whisper car-

ried a low undertone of desperate fear. "Sure, honey, sure."

My hand patted my hip as I left her. But the other party carried the same kind of medicine and was in a position to use it first.

Robins warbled cheerfully in the green maple fronting the lawn. Little kids were having a circus chasing about the tiny playground. Everything and everybody was happy but me.

It's a helluva feeling to walk down the street and wonder if the guy or jane approaching you is ready to let you have it. You get the same idea when a car slows down. That's what it is when you don't know who's out to kill you.

I called Lieutenant Gill from my office. No, Homicide had nothing new. Just the wad from the shotgun shell that had killed Andy. A twelve-gauge loaded with number three shot.

Flopping wearily back in my swivel chair, I let my brain start on a mental merry-go-round. The phone rang and I swore at it.

"Hullo." Then I was suddenly tense. It was the voice.

"Sorry about yesterday, Mr. Trapper," it purred with honeyed sadness. "But we'll make no mistake next time."

A hard click killed the wire. But I heard more than just the voice this time. I'd heard the same thing the first time only it hadn't registered in my thick skull. The sharp drumming of riveting guns had come clearly over the wire.

Damn near breaking my neck, I ran out of the building and hopped into my car.

A building project in our small industrial town is cause for public rejoicing. The newspaper plays the event up big and starts printing expansion graphs. There was only one structure being built at present that required extensive riveting. That was a slaughterhouse on

the eastern outskirts of town. The section was mostly swampland with a dozen or so little cottages along the road.

I had something to go on now. The phone call had come from the vicinity of the new meat packing plant. Also the caller had said "we." That meant more than one. I smiled grimly. The trail was still cold, but soon it would warm up—provided I didn't catch a permanent chill.

I SLOWED down as the skeleton framework of steel beams met my sight. The air vibrated with the drone of riveting guns and I saw tiny figures moving over the steel ribs of the structure. Cat-tails showed their brown batons for a huge area around. Red-wings flew about or rested on the wires running from the utility poles. Great patches of swamp sumach dotted the landscape on both sides of the gravel road. Then the sparsely-spaced cottages appeared on small elevations of dry ground.

The call, I had no doubt, came from one of those houses. Which one? Who lived in it? Since the murderer knew me by sight and was unknown to me, it would be sheer stupidity to show myself in the neighborhood. I pulled my car behind a concealing clump of elderberry shrubs and sat down on the running board. I'd have to do some waiting.

About five o'clock I spotted whom I was waiting for. A kid of about fourteen pulling a wagon loaded with newspapers. I left my concealment and pretended that I was strolling down the dusty road.

"Hi, son." I said, smiling at him.

"Hi." He grinned back, freckled and slightly pug-nosed.

"Can you give me a list of all the people who live around the new building, son?" My hand twisted a dollar bill.

"Sure, mister." The kid's eyes were glued on the bill. He yanked out his route list and started copying it on a grimy bit of ruled tablet paper. "Gee, thanks," he cried happily as I gave him the buck.

I pulled out after he was gone from sight.

Back in my room at the YMCA, I phoned the hospital.

"Hi, Sugar."

"Oh, Mike! I'm so glad to hear from you."

"I'm happy to hear you say that, baby," I returned softly. "The ball is ready to start rolling in the morning. Just a little scheme I thought up."

"Tell me, darling."

"Not now, hon. Let you know when I visit you. Tomorrow."

To my surprise, my Mary was at her desk next morning.

"Honey!" I exclaimed, "why aren't you still in the hospital?"

Right away I wrapped a morale-stimulating hug around her. She couldn't put up much of a struggle because her arm was still hung in a linen sling.

"I'd hate to think of what'd happen to me if both my arms were out of commission, you big ape." She closed her eyes and cooperated in a long kiss of lingering sweetness.

Thinking of Andy sobered us both. I pulled out the list of names the kid had given me.

"Copy this list on the typewriter, sweetheart. With a carbon."

Her left hand did it a lot faster and neater than I could with my one-finger system. I took the carbon, leaving her the original.

"Now, babe," I said with rising anticipation, "get the phone directory and get the telephone numbers for each of the names. They all live on the same road, Parkhill Extension. Then ring each party and say you're selling magazine

subscriptions. Get them to talk about a minute. I'll be listening in on the extension phone."

Mary's eyes began to shine. I didn't have to tell her what I was after.

The receiver of the extension phone was against my ear the moment she got the first number. No soap. On the fourth call, damned if the party didn't want to subscribe to the magazines Mary mentioned. Mary kept ringing the numbers and the remaining names grew fewer. I was becoming worried now. Then the tenth call had me alert in my chair. It was the voice!

"Yes, this is the Milford residence," a sweet-sad voice enunciated. "Magazine subscriptions? No—no. We already take those you've mentioned. I'm sorry."

I hugged Mary from sheer joy. "That's the party I want!" It was on the list as Mr. Elmer Milford, R.F.D. No. 1, Parkhill Extension. "Take the rest of the day off, hon. I got business."

I was gone before she could protest.

Nor did it take long to rent a panel truck and borrow a pair of greasy overalls. My face was smudged with grime, and the brim of a sadly battered black hat covered my forehead.

I don't smoke, but a cigarette was between my lips as I drove the panel truck past the slaughterhouse. The workmen were scattered around eating lunch. The first house appeared and I slowed down to ten miles an hour. My eyes were searching the mailboxes. "Bond," I read them off, "March—Tadaroff—Kyle."

Then at a box well separated from the rest, I found the name of Elmer Milford.

"Things will be even now," I said harshly to myself.

I looked at the small green and white cottage set well back from the gravel road. The lawn was overgrown with tough clumps of crab grass. A clothes-

line sagged listlessly under the weight of dull gray bed sheets, flesh-colored woman's lingerie of decidedly ample size, and three man's shirts about size fifteen.

"Must be a little guy," I figured from the shirts.

The truck made it possible to drive slowly without arousing suspicion. Just a deliveryman looking for an address. Going past the house and into a slight dip, I pulled off into a dusty, rutted lane out of sight of the road.

THE carroty perfume of Queen Anne's lace filled the warm air as I stole past patches of reddening blackberries toward the little cottage. A whistled tune struck my tense ears. Somebody was coming down the road.

A break in the feathery sumacs revealed a little guy in a straw hat, blue rayon shirt and white slacks heading for the house. He was whistling the *Poet and Peasant Overture* with great animation. His face was unrecognizable in the distance but I liked the rendition of the overture. It was true in key and flowed like a soothing rivulet.

It wasn't hard to work my way closer. The whistler turned into the walk and entered the front door of the cottage without knocking. My pulse began to pound. Was that the guy who murdered Andy?

Mosquitos came in clouds to welcome me. Biting flies and gnats started to drill for blood on my exposed face and hands. A helluva position.

Pretty soon a big florid woman with peroxide hair, a jutting chin, and a heavy muscular build came out at the rear of the house. She wore shapeless blue slacks and a sweater. A big kettle of steaming water was in her strong, thick-fingered hands. She set the kettle down gently and entered the chicken pen crowded with Buff Orpingtons.

A terrified squawking rose from the big rooster she neatly caught inside the roost. One capable hand seized the bird by the head. She gave it a twirl and the rooster flapped headless to the ground. It fluttered briefly while the blood ran redly from the stump of the neck. Then she picked it up and dunked it in the big kettle of steaming water.

Glancing toward the house, she called: "Elmer!"

I got a powerful shock. The voice was sweetly-sad—musical. It was the one I'd heard over the phone.

I shuddered. That dame certainly looked capable of doing me in. But I didn't know her. I had never seen her before.

The little guy came out. I could see him clearly now. His eyes were shifty and black, his skin dark. The fingers were long and slim like those of a musician—or safe cracker. A foxy chin, clean shaven, hung in a slight upsweep beneath a long and sharp nose. I didn't know him either. He was about forty-nine or fifty.

What the hell was all this? I was irritated now. There had been little doubt in my mind that I'd find somebody I knew hiding out here. This couple awoke not the faintest recollection. Was I all wet in tracing the phone call? But no. The woman was talking again and there was no mistaking that voice. I was puzzled. I crept up closer and lay flat behind a thick lilac bush.

The woman was evidently becoming angry as she dressed the rooster. "Quit stalling and get Trapper," she snapped.

"Yeah, yeah, Rose," the little guy whined.

He went into the house after her, and I beat it back to the concealed truck.

I planned to return that same night for a bit of real work. The whole thing looked screwy to me. And I couldn't do a thing about it legally. No tangible

proof that they'd killed Andy. No motive. I drove back to town.

It was already dark when I left my room at the YMCA and hurried toward the parking lot where I kept my car. A storm was due to break any minute. The streets were deserted and a strong wind cried between the buildings. In the gloom I could hear the crunch-crunch of the lot attendant walking from the end of parking lot.

Then I heard him break into a whistle. My blood froze. He was whistling the *Poet and Peasant Overture*. The melody soared on velvet wings, sweetly, exquisitely. The whistler could be but one person—Elmer Milford.

Too late for me to retreat. I went on in seeming unconcern. My Savage was ready for action. My hands started to sweat as the attendant came closer. It was Milford, all right.

I said: "Where's the other attendant—Al Radski?"

"Gone to see a movie, sir."

But I knew different. Milford had found out where I kept my car. He knew that I would come for it. He must have put Al Radski out of the way, probably with a sock on the head.

We walked toward my car and I made sure that Milford didn't get behind me.

Milford said: "It's going to be a mean night." I knew he wasn't referring to the muttering storm.

When we reached the car, he stuck his hand into his hip pocket as if to pull out a rag to wipe off my windshield. My .38 Savage filled my hand so fast that the guy froze like stone. My hand dipped into his pocket and pulled out a cheap Spanish automatic of .25 caliber. In a surge of rage I slapped him twice across the face. His cap flew off, showing intense surprise in the foxy features.

"Get moving, Milford!" My voice rattled like a can full of pebbles.

I prodded him into the attendant's

shanty. Radski's cap lay on the floor, but Radski was nowhere in sight. I batted Milford on the jaw. He went out cold.

I found Radski inside of a battered car. He was unconscious from a blow on the head. Returning to the shanty, I picked Milford up and tossed him into my car. Then I phoned the cops. They would take care of Radski.

RAIN pattered like liquid shot on the roof of the car. I had pulled up beside the new slaughterhouse and waited for my friend to come to. A little rainwater judiciously applied helped. It was pitch black and the wind snarled and yelped in the dreary night.

"Start talking, Mister," I snapped at the groaning man.

"Don't know whatcha mean."

"Suit y'self, bud." The Savage made a mean sound as I cocked it. "You murdered my brother with a shotgun. I ain't got the kind of evidence that'll hold up in court. So I'm just gonna shoot you now and roll you out into the ditch. Nobody will know who did it." Opening the car door, I squeezed out first. "Outside, punk!"

His thin face was drawn and white in the faint glow of the panel light. The dripping of the rain and the moaning of the wet wind had the psychological effect I hoped for.

"I'll—I'll talk, Trapper!"

"That's better," I grunted and got back in. "My brother was killed by mistake, wasn't he?"

"Yeah. You see—"

"Why are you so damned anxious to kill me? I don't know you or your wife."

He licked his thin lips. "We was forced into it, Trapper." I listened in stony silence. "A party has something on me. Blackmailing me and my wife to do this thing. Honest, we didn't want to do it." He was pleading now.

"But neither Rose or I had anything to do with your brother's killing."

"Then who did?"

"Can't you let me go, Trapper?" There was genuine fear in the staring black eyes. "We'll go away an'—"

"Maybe. But what's to keep the blackmailer from doing me in? What about my brother? I got to know."

"It'll mean curtains if he finds out."

"You didn't worry about it meaning curtains for me, rat. I'm tired of talking. Get outside."

"Wait!" There was cringing terror now. "It—it's Eli Witler. He—"

"What are you handing me? Witler died a few months back in a landslide."

"No—no! He escaped. He went for a drink of water and the slide missed him. Then he made his way to me. I—I escaped from Stockton Penitentiary. I'd served two years of a twenty-year rap. Witler threatened to turn me in if I didn't help him get you."

"Where is Witler now?"

"He's at the house with my wife. He shot your brother by mistake. The phone calls were intended to scare you outa your pants first. Neither my wife nor I knew he intended to pull a killing until after he shot your brother. He said he'd turn us both in as accessories if he was caught. So we had to do what he ordered."

It sounded like Witler, all right.

I nodded gravely. "Okay, Milford. C'mon. We're gonna pay him a little visit."

Above the patter and swish of the rain I could hear the chattering of Milford's teeth. A quarter of a mile from the house, I hung another one on Milford's jaw. He folded up like a road map. I had him tied in a jiffy, then left him in the car.

I was glad for the wind and rain. It was impossible to hear me moving about outside. An inch of clear space between

the blind and sash permitted me to peek into the kitchen.

I swore under my breath. There sat Eli Witler at a porcelain-top table. He was drinking beer. Milford's big wife was weepy-eyed by the range.

Edging up to the kitchen door, I gently grasped the knob and tried it. It turned. With my Savage in my hand I suddenly thrust the door open.

Eli Witler, surprise written all over his pock-marked face, acted fast. The glass of beer he'd been drinking came flying at me, splashing my face. The Savage cracked once as I tried to connect. But the beer had blinded me.

"Stop, Witler!" I roared. The slamming of a door answered me.

"Come and get me, shamus!"

Rose was screaming shrilly.

"Shut up!" I shouted at her. She collapsed into a chair.

Witler was in one of the bedrooms. I snapped off the kitchen light. Pitch black. Holding my breath I listened for the sound of a window being raised. It came. I pounded for the kitchen door, tore it wide open, then slammed it shut. But I stayed inside of the kitchen.

The ruse worked. Thinking I'd run outside to intercept him, Witler rushed back into the kitchen from the bedroom. My automatic began to pump bullets as I snapped the light on. He shot back once and dropped helplessly to the floor. His slug laid my left cheek open.

"Too bad it wasn't over a bit farther," he snarled at me. Five red spots appeared over his white shirt and merged into one great crimson one. The hate was still in his eyes when he died.

The hefty blonde was in a dead faint. I phoned the law from the living room and flopped on the sofa. Then I reached for the phone once more.

"Sugar," I said huskily, "the job is done." Then I lay back to wait for the cops.

CRIME WAITS FOR NO MAN

By EDWARD
VAN DER RHOER



Joe twisted when he heard the noise.

Helpless in a locked closet, watchman Strang had to plan a hot finish for the metal robbers.

JOE STRANG punched the time clock, checking with his wrist watch to make sure that he was on schedule, and moved off again on his rounds. He went through the darkened

and empty administration office, with its long, vacant rows of desks, and stopped at the water cooler for a drink.

The wide plate-glass windows revealed the deserted, wind-swept street, lashed

by sheets of rain that rebounded off the cobblestones like waves pounding a rocky shore. The arc-light on the corner was a lighthouse in a sea of darkness.

Beneath the street lamp a man stood huddled in a dripping slicker, a soaked fedora pulled down over his face to keep off the rain.

Hell of a night for anyone to be out, Joe thought. If it was him, he wouldn't be standing on any street corner in the rain. No sir—not little old Joe! He had a vision of how cozy it would be on such a night in the one-room apartment, Margie sitting across from him with her sewing and the kid playing with his new red fire engine on the rug.

The picture of Margie, wistful face framed by shoulder-length chestnut hair with firelight glints in it, head bent over the socks she was mending, brought a smile to Joe's lips.

He left the administration office, limping down a long dark corridor, his lamp picking out the way ahead of him. The leg was hurting again—it always did in wet weather. His limp became more pronounced, reminding him, against his will, of the part of his leg that had been left behind in Europe. That damned artificial leg, that damned, lousy leg!

Joe fished for his bunch of keys, found the right one, and unlocked the door at the end of the corridor. The beam of his lamp picked out a narrow stairway. He stopped abruptly and listened. Was that a noise he heard?

He listened but heard nothing other than the gurgle of water in the rain-spouts. That's how it was sometimes, a man got so he was afraid of his own shadow, hearing funny noises where there were no noises, seeing danger where there was no danger!

Joe climbed the steep stairs. It was hard on his leg, going up and down stairs, but he gritted his teeth and ignored the pain. He'd show Denny! In

his mind's eye, he conjured up a vision of Pat Denny, the head watchman—red-headed, brawny, two-fisted, but scared of any man who was near his size and would stand up to him.

Denny watched him constantly, looking for the slightest mistake or sign of weakness on his part, and thought that Joe was not aware of his scrutiny.

Denny didn't talk much to Joe, but Joe heard what he said to the other men. "This is no job for a gimp! We need a *whole* man to protect the property around here—not a cripple like Strang!"

But the others didn't see it Denny's way. "Joe has guts," they said. "Don't you worry about him. He'll hold up *his* end!"

I'll show that bum! Joe thought angrily, recollecting what Denny said about him. He climbed the steps doggedly, ignoring the stabbing pains in his leg.

There was a skylight at the very top. Joe checked to see that it was firmly bolted. The drumming of rain against the thick glass was very loud, almost deafening. Wearily, he moved down again—two hundred steps to the bottom of the circular staircase. He had climbed these steps so many times that he knew their number exactly.

Retracing his route, Joe went back along the dark corridor, locking the hall door behind him. Passing through the administration office in the opposite direction, he noted that it was still raining without any sign of a letup. The man had disappeared from under the street light on the corner.

BYOND the administration office he came to a stairway which gave access to the upper floors. When he reached the second floor landing, a trifle out of breath, he thought for an instant that he heard quick, light footsteps in the hall. His hand crept to his gun, and, extinguishing his lamp, he

stood motionless a moment, listening.

After a brief interval, he found the light button in the dark and snapped it on. The hall was abruptly flooded with light, and, to Joe's disgust, he saw the gray shape and long tail of a rat scurrying around a corner at the far end of the corridor.

Joe snorted indignantly to himself. It's funny what tricks imagination will play on a guy. As long as he had been on the job, he could never get used to the noises rats make in the dark.

He found the right key on his chain and unlocked the first door on the left. It was a storeroom filled with neat stacks of copper ingots. Flashing the light about the storeroom, he assured himself that everything was in order and withdrew, listening for the click of the spring lock as the door snapped shut behind him.

His next stop was the photo-engraving lab. The pungent odor of chemicals immediately assailed him, and he wrinkled his nose with distaste. He noticed nothing wrong in the lab, so he limped along the line of high benches to the darkroom in the rear.

There had been a damaging fire that originated in the darkroom the year before, and the watchman who failed to detect the fire in time had gotten his pink slip.

Joe inspected the darkroom with special care. He checked it once and then, still not satisfied, checked it over again. If there was any fire, little old Joe wouldn't get caught napping, so Denny could have the pleasure of giving him the gate. Not on your life!

It was funny how a guy got hunches sometimes. Like when you get a hunch on a horse, and it comes in at a hundred to one, but you don't get a bet down on it. Joe felt that way now. He had the same feeling he'd had that day at Montefiore when his leg was shot.

But he looked everywhere and couldn't find anything wrong. The darkroom was in apple-pie order. He went out, feeling that he must have missed something, but he couldn't tell what. Just before he reached the door, he stopped short. He knew suddenly what he had missed—the windows! The black shades were drawn, as usual, but he was conscious of a faint draft of air.

Joe rushed to the windows. The first two were securely locked, but the third had a neat, rectangular hole in the lower pane of glass, through which the air was entering. The screen enclosing this window on the outside had been ripped off and was hanging loose, blown by fitful gusts of wind against the side of the building. Six feet below this window was the roof of the power plant.

Joe, drawing his gun, silently cursed the company for not having heeded the advice of the watchmen to install burglar alarms on the second floor. In the presence of danger, Joe was thinking more clearly than he had ever thought at any time in his life before.

There was no doubt in his mind that one or more intruders had come into the building through this window. Somewhere in the darkness, they were waiting for him.

Slowly and stealthily, Joe inched toward the door. Just as he reached it, the light in the hall went out. Joe leaped through the door and snapped two shots in the direction of the light switch. He heard the sound of shattering glass, but no answering thud.

Joe crouched in the darkness, his throat tightened into knots, his breath coming in short, jerky gasps. This wasn't good—this wasn't good at all! His ears, sharpened by darkness, listened for any tell-tale sound that might warn him in time.

Behind him, suddenly, there came the scrape of a shoe. Joe whirled to face a

shadow descending upon him. He came to grips with it, and felt a solid, muscular body twisting away from his frantically grappling arms. In this struggle, Joe lost his gun, heard it strike the floor and skitter away from him.

He struck at the shadow with all his might. His hand crunched against a hard head, and he felt a sharp twinge of pain all the way up to his shoulder. He struck again with his left hand, and this time there was a satisfying solid impact, and a gasp torn from the lips of his unknown adversary. The shadow disappeared.

Joe crouched on the floor, groping for the gun. Too late, he became aware of a movement behind him. He attempted to swing around, but his bad leg buckled under him, and he sprawled on the floor.

Before the raised gun barrel descended on his head, Joe had a momentary vision of Margie, her eyes dark with foreboding, bidding him goodbye at the door of the apartment. "Joe, be careful!" And Joe, laughing as he said, "Careful! What have I to worry about?"

Then the star-shells exploded. They were from the German batteries up in the hills, above the valley—

When the fog lifted and the dull pain ebbed away, Joe came to himself again, seated on the floor, holding his throbbing head between his hands.

"He's comin' to, Davey."

Joe looked up, but his eyes refused to focus for a moment. Then he saw three men standing over him—two nattily dressed in dark business suits, the other a sallow-complexioned, hatchet-faced fellow in a dripping yellow slicker.

"He don't feel so good now—too bad!" growled the man in the slicker, rubbing an ugly welt that was turning from red to blue over one eye.

"What'll we do with th' bum, Davey?"

Davey, the man in the slicker, rubbed his pointed chin thoughtfully.

"Should I slug him again?"

"Naw, don't bother," said Davey, more coolly. "Get his keys, an' Rocky an' me will dump him in that empty storeroom over there. One of his keys oughta lock the door. Then we can start loadin' them copper bars on the truck."

Joe lay stunned on the storeroom floor where he was thrown like a sack of meal. He was only vaguely conscious of the grating noise of the key turning.

AFTER what seemed like a long time, he crawled to his feet and staggered groggily over to the door. He yanked on the knob, but it did not give. Then he backed off several feet and hurled himself against the solid oak. His body slammed hard against the unyielding wood, and the breath went out of him for a moment.

When he got to his feet again, he knew it was no use.

It occurred to him to search his pockets. He found a package of matches, but nothing else of use. He struck a match. The tiny flame barely illuminated four bare walls. There was no window. Then the match sputtered and went out. Dizziness overwhelmed him suddenly, and he sat down, his back propped against the wall.

Outside, in a dark courtyard, shadowy figures were loading copper ingots on a truck backed up to the delivery platform. A man in a slicker stood in the shelter of the building, rain pattering softly around him. "All loaded on?" he yelled, cupping his hands to his mouth.

Another man came out and stood in the rectangle of light outlined by the doorway. "Not yet, Davey. There's a little more on the way."

"What's that?" Davey said suddenly. He held up a hand for silence, and the men on the truck stopped working. Far away there was clearly audible the high-pitched shriek of a siren.

"Cops?" said the man in the doorway. Davey listened. "I think it's all right," he said. "Sounds like fire-engines."

Gradually, the sound of the siren grew louder and louder. Soon it was possible to distinguish other sirens. They seemed to be coming closer.

"Take it away!" yelled Davey, leaping on the running-board of the truck.

The truck rumbled over cobblestones, through a narrow alley and out into the street. At that instant, a hook-and-ladder fire truck, approaching at high speed, drew across the path of the other vehicle. There was the horrible, squealing noise of skidding tires, and finally an ear-shattering crash.

When a police patrol car arrived at the scene a few minutes later, Davey was just dragging himself away from the flaming wreckage of the truck, which had crashed into a brick wall, missing the hook-and-ladder. Two curious policemen were interested in asking him a number of pertinent questions. . . .

"If there hadn't been a fire," remarked Pat Denny, with a sneer, "those crooks would have gotten away with

nearly ten thousand bucks' worth of copper bars!"

Joe Strang didn't answer.

"How come you didn't discover the fire, Strang?" Denny demanded nastily.

"What fire?" Joe asked quietly, watching the face of Foster, the plant superintendent.

"What fire?" bellowed Denny, the red veins swelling in his bull-like neck. "What fire do you think? What's the Fire Department doing here?"

"It's very simple," Joe said, speaking louder than necessary for Foster's benefit. "When they locked me in that storeroom, they knew there were no windows in there and the door was solid enough so I couldn't break it down. But they forgot about one thing—the sprinkler system.

"If you climb up and hold a lighted match against the sprinkler head, the wax melts and the sprinklers go off. Also an alarm is set off at the firehouse."

Joe didn't have to say any more. He saw the look of baffled rage on Denny's face, and the smile that turned up the corners of Foster's mouth.



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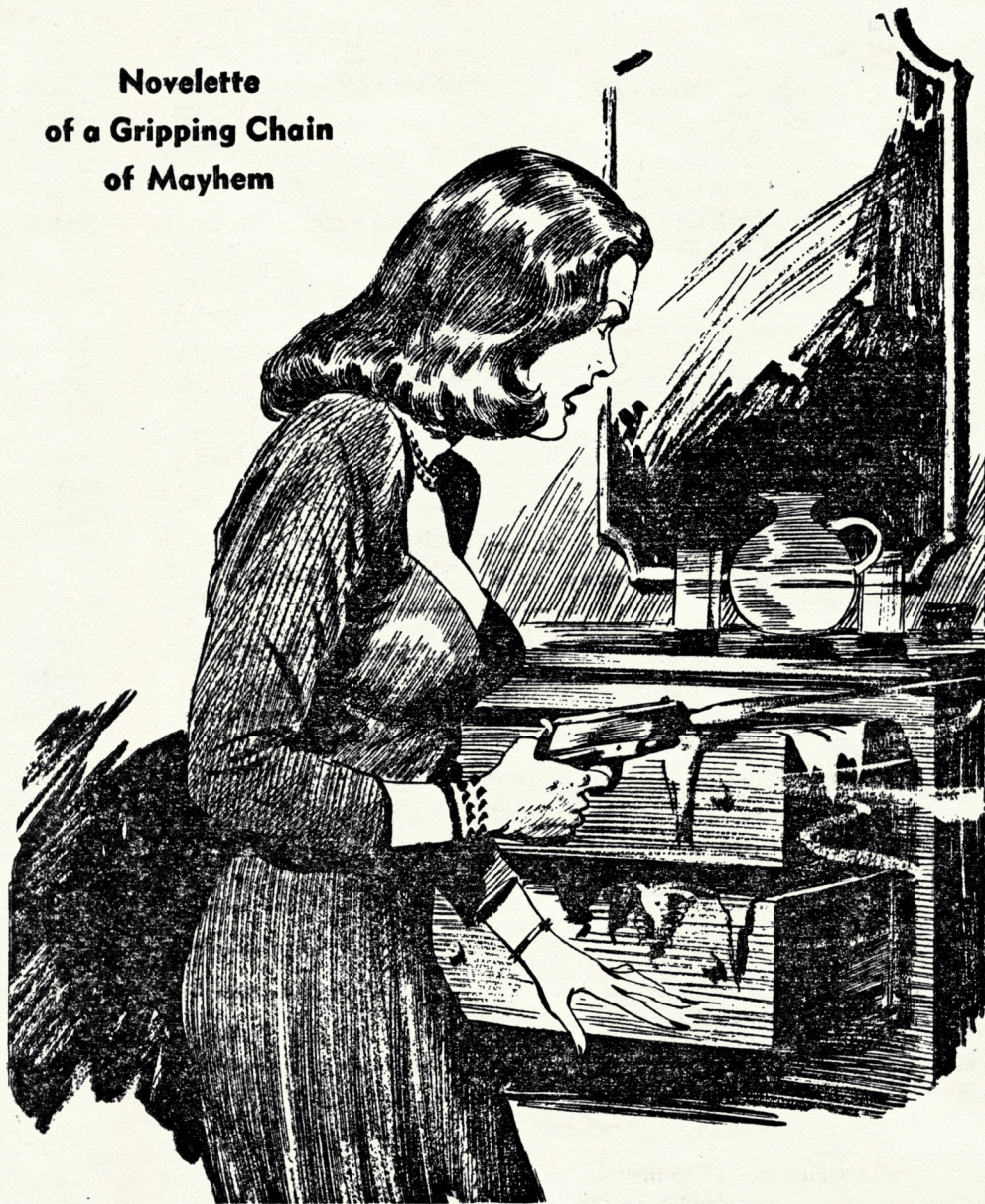
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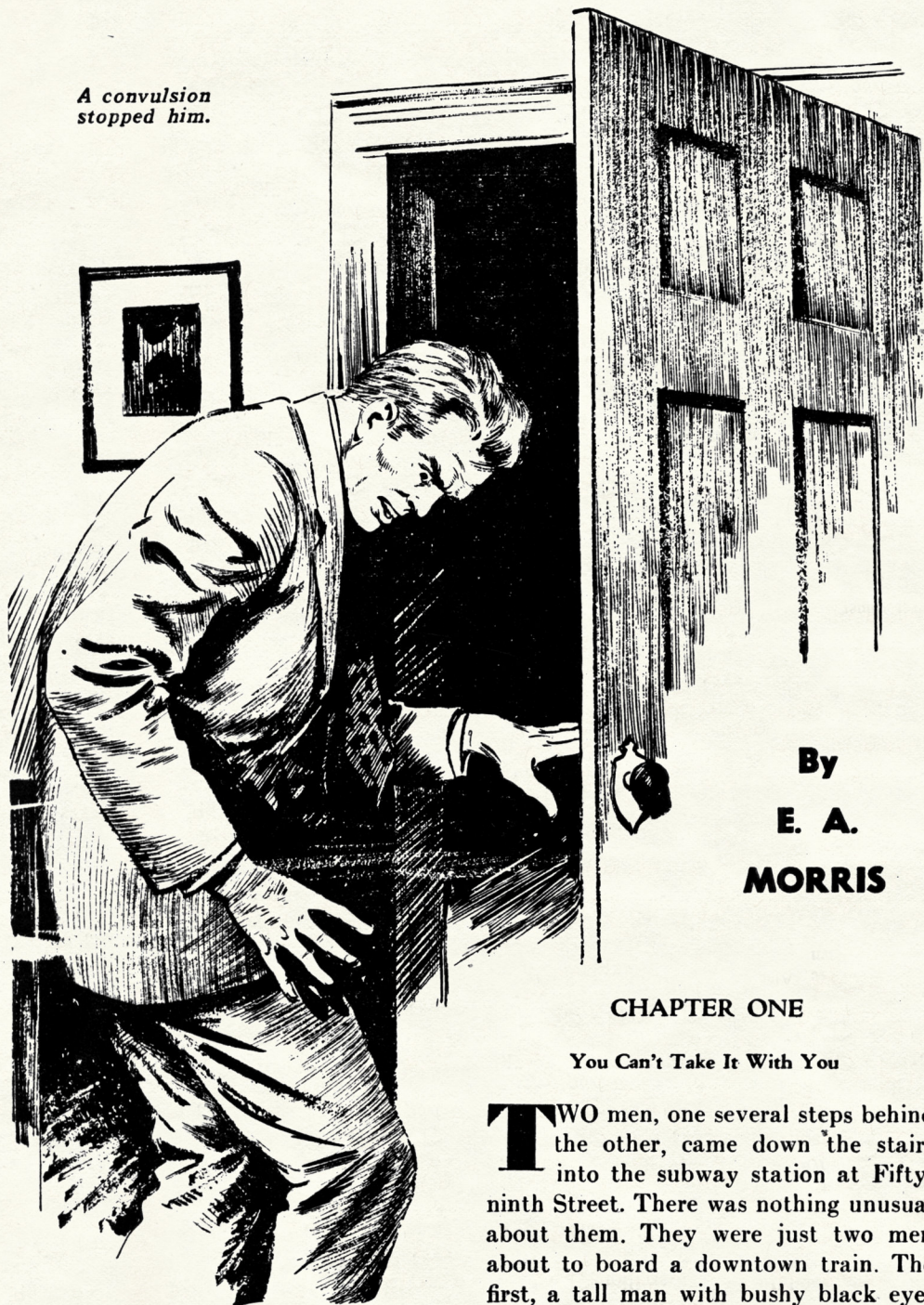
Harpie got himself a shroud
When he pocketed the dough,
For everywhere the two grand went—
A corpse was sure to show!

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of Mayhem**



OWN GRAVE

*A convulsion
stopped him.*



**By
E. A.
MORRIS**

CHAPTER ONE

You Can't Take It With You

TWO men, one several steps behind the other, came down the stairs into the subway station at Fifty-ninth Street. There was nothing unusual about them. They were just two men about to board a downtown train. The first, a tall man with bushy black eye-

brows, took long strides to the change booth. The other, shorter, not so slender, fingered a dime into a slot and pushed through the turnstile. Then he stopped, as though waiting for someone to join him. Two men intent on taking a short, jarring, noisy ride under the city.

The tall one came through, strode by the other toward the end of the platform at which the last car would stop. The little fat one seemed suddenly to decide that that end would be a good place for him to board the train, too, and eased his way through the crowd in that direction.

Neither of them were aware of Harpie Gordon, leaning against the wall between two posters. Harpie, though, was very much aware of the tall man—and of the bulge under the man's coat just about where the rear left trouser pocket was. It was a nice coat, Harpie thought, and a nice guy to leave it unbuttoned like that. He waited and watched.

The yellow-eyed roaring monster stormed out of its tunnel, screeched agonizingly to a stop and opened its many mouths.

Harpie was just another man edging his way up to the safety line with all the insolent anxiety of the rest of the evening rush-hour crowd. He stood just behind the tall man, then seemed to suddenly change his mind, turning away as the monster's mouths slid sibilantly open. In his retreat he had to brush by a small, fat man with glasses. When the man put out his hand to stay him, Harpie knocked it aside and sped with the discharged crowd toward the exit. The little man followed.

The door-mouth hissed as it shut on the tall one who, until a moment ago, had a bulge in his coat about where the rear left trouser pocket was.

Harpie scurried along Fifty-eighth and turned South at Third Avenue. No one was calling after him, no one pur-

sued. He knew because he watched his rear by glancing into the slanted store windows as he went by. They were good reflectors. He made good time without hurrying enough to catch looks of wonder and suspicion. It wasn't until he reached Forty-second, sixteen blocks away, that he relaxed into a slower gait.

A small, white-fronted diner swallowed him and he made his way to the last stool, ordering a cup of coffee as he eased himself onto it. From his brown shabby coat he removed a wallet. It was initialed *J.B.*

Holding it below counter level, he spread it open. His eyes widened imperceptibly as he thumbed through the sheaf of bills. Most of them had three numerals in the corners. A few were singles, two were fives. He jammed it all back into its leather sheath when the counterman came over with the coffee.

"Anything else?"

Harpie shook his head.

"Okay, ten cents."

Harpie's fingers came up over the counter, clapped a bill down. He said, "What's the matter? Think I can't pay?"

"I don't think nothing. I just want the ten cents."

It didn't hurt any more. It used to, but not any more. Harpie had long since become used to paying for his food as it was served, if he paid for it at all. He didn't blame the counterman much. He'd do the same if he was on that side of the counter looking over at himself. Unshaven, tieless, hat rumpled, coat and trousers filthy and wrinkled. Yeah, he'd do the same.

Hunched over the counter, he gulped the coffee and to hell with the drops wetting his soiled shirt. He'd buy a new one, one nobody else had worn. He wiped his mouth and chin along one sleeve of his coat and walked out, scooping his change along with him.

He continued along Third, patting the pocket with the new bulge. It had a comfortable feel. His walk was abrupt and straight, not the aimless shuffle it used to be. A head that normally drooped was held erect. He was born again. It was a new, clean, happy birth—about two thousand dollars worth of birth.

The squalid, El-shadowed street took on a brightness for Harpie. Bright thoughts found their way to his throat, emerging as inarticulate mutterings. "Knew my luck would change some day . . . chance to start over . . . two thousand . . . need clothes . . . new and sharp and clean . . . gotta be sharp to start over in my business."

He thumbed a match into flame and lifted it to the half cigarette he dug out of the coat. No sense in wasting it now he had it, even if he could buy a fresh pack.

Lungs full of stale smoke, he walked on, never glancing to either side. He stared full ahead, farther ahead than one can see with eyes alone. He looked into a daydream and it was a rich daydream. A daydream that started at two thousand dollars and spiraled itself into higher brackets.

A SIGN on a lamppost brought him to a halt. His dream and he had come as far as Twenty-fourth. He crossed against the light, unmindful of the bleating horn behind him, and continued for another three blocks. For the first time in years he knew where he was going.

The smell of the place, as he came abreast of it, hastened him. It had a cool, drunken smell. Inside, he flipantly tossed a bill on the bar and called for two whiskeys; one for himself and one for the brutish hulk of a man sitting at a table in the rear.

Drawing a chair out at the table, he

sat opposite the man. "Hi, Dumbo," he said. "Have a drink on me?"

Dumbo nodded acceptance, planted a hairy fist on the table and mumbled through thick, wet lips, "You got money, huh?"

"Yeah, Dumbo. I could buy enough whiskey for you to float 'in!"

The drinks arrived. The drinks disappeared. Two more were ordered and Dumbo grinned his thanks.

His name was apt. He was a pachyderm in size and strength, a mouse in intelligence. Just the man for what Harpie had in mind. Just the man, with those enormous hands; hands that could snap a neck like a matchstick.

One of those hands was curled around a fresh drink. The glass was raised toward Harpie in silent salute, then drained.

"That's it, drink up."

"I like you, Harpie. You're my friend."

"Sure I am, Dumbo. That's why I want you with me when I'm rich."

"You got money now, ain'tcha?"

"What's the matter with you? Having money for whiskey isn't being rich. I mean really rich. Rich enough for all the drinks you want, rich enough for new clothes and stepping out with the girls. You like girls, don't you?"

"Yeah. I like girls."

"You want money, don't you?" He signaled for two more drinks and brought out the wallet. He dropped a fiver on the table carelessly and shoved the rest back into his pocket.

"Yeah," Dumbo said, "I want money. Who don't?" His eyes had followed the wallet into the dirty folds of its hiding place. "How come you got so much money?"

Harpie tapped his pocket. "This is nothing. I'm talking about lots of money."

He waited until the drinks were set

down and the change brought back before he continued. "Look, I've got a neat little racket all figured out. All you hafta do is take care of trouble makers. It's a cinch. What do you say?"

"Can't. Phil won't let me." He shook his head and his long, uncut hair flopped about his ears.

Harpie squirmed in his chair, an impatient frown knotting his face. "Don't be a sucker," he said. "What Phil gives you is peanuts. You do all his dirty jobs. And what do you get for it? Peanuts! His hands are clean but yours aren't. If the cops ever put the arm on anybody, you can bet it won't be Phil Muraco. It'll be you!"

"Nobody's gonna get me for nothing." He stared at his huge hands, seemed to be looking for the dirt.

"Throw in with me and you can make a pile of dough with those hands. And they won't hafta do any dirty work. C'mon, Dumbo, how about it?"

"I said I can't."

"What's he got over you? How come you hafta be his slave all the time?"

"Don't talk like that, Harpie. Not if you and me wanna stay friends."

"Aaah." Harpie waved at him with disgust. This lunkhead was going to take some convincing. "You're afraid of him, that's it."

The long uncombed hair swished again as it shook over Dumbo's neck. His thick knuckles flexed over the table. "I'm telling you, don't talk like that."

"Okay, okay. How about another drink?" Harpie's finger went up.


"No more!" Dumbo plodded out into the street as the El rattled by up above the door.

Harpie swore and told the bartender to bring both drinks over, but make them doubles. He sat there a long time, stewing. There was a human curtain shielding the bar when he finally pushed himself to his feet and shuffling again,

went out into the fresh night air.

The curb got in his way and he stumbled over it, cursing the darkness, the darkness that hid things from a man's sight. Halfway down the block he pressed his nose against a store window and peered up at the wall. An obtuse angle in the lighted circle there told him it was nearing two-forty.

Cigarette glowing, he sauntered on toward the next corner with visions of homburgs and shiny patent leather shoes, soft girls and cushy sofas, bowing waiters and hurrying bell hops. It was going to be so good for Harpie. He wouldn't be Harpie Gordon walking along Third Avenue blowing smoke into the street light's yellow cone for long.

 CROSSING the street, he climbed the stairs at Twenty-third and pushed through onto the El platform just as a downtown train squealed into the station. He had a choice of seats, took the one nearest the door and facing the station. Glancing to the other end of the car he found another passenger just boarding. Probably just made it through the turnstile as the train came in.

He kept looking at the man, sensing rather than knowing that he had seen him somewhere before. To Harpie, he was a funny man. He carried an umbrella and it wasn't even raining. Just a funny little fat man with an umbrella, something you'd see any day. It wasn't the man he'd seen before, he told himself. It was just the same type of man.

Eighteenth Street went by and as the train slowed for the next stop, his stop, Harpie stood on the little platform at his end of the car and waited. The door opened and he stepped from the car, headed home. Home was a grimy, dusty building about a block away, a buck-a-night residential hotel.

The block was one of squalor, few

lights and many shadows. Mostly shadows. The noise of the train dug away into the night. The street was almost deserted. There was a form curled up at the base of a building, but he was quiet. The only noise was that of Harpie's feet on the pavement; a hard, unsympathetic pavement.

Passing out of range of the corner street light into the darker part of the street, he halted abruptly. It seemed that a shadow just over his shoulder to the rear had moved. He peered around slowly and saw nothing.

He moved on, shuffled past the darkened doorway that marked approximately the middle of the block. Again he had the impression that something moved nearby. This time he whirled quickly. There was only the stark, shadowed street: some stores, some windows and El pillars, the dimmed marquee of a movie house. Nothing moved.

He felt in his pocket for a cigarette and match. He tried to thumb it but his nerves were too unsteady, too drink-worn, and he had to walk over to the wall of a building to light it.

It was a coincidence that wouldn't have occurred again in a hundred such nights. The flame flickered, then bloomed, casting a yellowish wavy light into the shadows of a doorway. He looked up and the cigarette dropped from his lips. The match shook in his fingers and his eyes and mouth made three wide O's in the dark.

"W—what," he gasped, "are you doing here?"

"I been waiting for you," a voice from the doorway answered.

"For me!" An incredulous look replaced the initial look of fear now that the man in the doorway was recognized. "What the hell for?"

"Wanna talk some more about it. I been thinking it over."

"Oh. Well—uh—walk the rest of the way home with me and we'll talk it over. C'mon." Suddenly he flung the match to the pavement and hooked his fingers to his mouth, cursing and sucking the burn.

They started down the street, Harpie on the inside and a little ahead of the other man, the bigger one. Harpie said, "Well, what do you think of the idea now? You know what I was talking about?"

It seemed to Harpie that he was being edged in closer to the walls, to the shadowy doorways. Shouldn't have had that last one, he thought. They crossed Thirteenth. The other man put a hand on his shoulder as friends often do and answered: "I got a better idea, Harpie."

"Yeah? Let's hear it." He fidgeted in his pocket for another cigarette, struck a match against a wall in passing and thought his friend's hand was unusually heavy on his shoulder. It was as if the hand were trying to retard his steps, slow him, stop him. Without looking up, Harpie said nervously, "Well, let's hear it, willya!"

He was breathing hard, though he told himself he had no reason to. Why should he be afraid? This man beside him was just—was just leaning over his shoulder and blowing the match out, just edging him with his hip gently into a doorway, just slipping a hand from his shoulder to his neck!

He had time to sweat, time to fling an arm around futilely, time to start a scream.

It was choked off at his throat by a giant, hairy hand with knobby knuckles that squeezed at his windpipe and drew him into the doorway. There, the hand met another and they squeezed together for a time, silently. Silently, except for the strangled, gargled groans of a man slipping to the floor.

There was a sharp snapping sound

and Harpie Gordon fell in a limp knot. Large, clumsy hands went to a pocket and came out with a wallet that contained two thousand dollars. They were hands that passed familiarly over him, that seemed to know just where to find what they wanted.

Then the big man went out into the street. It was the second time that night he had walked out on Harpie.

CHAPTER TWO

Dumbo's Dilemma

THE detective's name was McCardle. He was thin, with a wan skin; his features were a mask of hard, unrelenting angles that belied the fragility of his frame. One thumb hooked in a trouser pocket, he looked down from a six foot height at the back of the patrolman bent over Harpie Gordon.

The grotesque scene was bathed in unfriendly light from the spot on a patrol car. A cluster of four official men and a few curious early morning wanderers milled about a still form. Squares of light silhouetted the heads that peered over window sills. Death in the night.

"Find anything?" McCardle asked.

"Not a thing could be used for identification," the patrolman answered up.

"Neck broken?"

"Yeah. Snapped like a twig. Guy that done it must be strong as a bull." He rose from the twisted thing at his feet.

A flashbulb popped. Two more squares facing the street came alight.

"You find him?" said the detective.

"No. This guy did." He pointed with his night stick at one of those standing around gaping; a man wearing a peaked cap and loose sweater tied at the throat with string.

McCardle faced the man. "Okay. Let's hear it."

The man's feet shifted on the pavement. "Well, I was coming down from Fourteenth, minding my own business, when I see a guy scrambling up this block and around the corner at Twelfth. I don't pay no attention to him 'cause I'm worrying where I'm gonna flop for the night. But when I get here—I'm walking on the inside—I almost trip over that."

McCardle's eyes flashed grimly toward the corpse. "Then what?"

"Well, I been around here a long time, so I know about where to find the cop on this beat." He glanced apologetically at the patrolman, who scowled back. "So I go get him. And that's it."

"This man you saw—the one who was hurrying away—what did he look like?"

"I don't know, mister. Like I said, I wasn't paying no attention to him."

"You must have noticed if he was big, medium, thin—something."

"Well, I can give you that much. He was small. Smaller than me and I'm only five and a half. And he looked kinda fat and was carrying something. A cane or umbrella or something like that."

"That all?" McCardle shoved his fedora back a little on his black hair.

"That's all."

McCardle's brows converged on his nose and he looked like a thing of stone, unwaveringly hard and cold. "You mean to tell me," he spat, "that a little fat man killed him, broke his neck? Someone a head shorter?"

"I'm only telling you what I saw."

"Sure you didn't see a lot of little men with umbrellas?"

"I ain't had a drink all night. I can't even afford a drink. I got no dough. Honest."

McCardle said, "Can it. We're not social workers." Another flashbulb went off. To the cop he said, "Take this man's name and whatever address you can work out."

Burns, the other detective, had been leaning over Harpie. When he stood again he eased up to McCardle and said, "Smells like a still. Don't look like he could afford it, either."

"We'll work along that line, then. Check all the joints within blocks. I don't believe any pudgy little guy could have done this, but we'll see if anything turns up on him, too." He leaned his head toward Harpie. "Motive's another thing. Why in hell would anyone kill a broken bum?"

A siren whined. When it stopped two men and a long basket were on the sidewalk.

"Okay?" one of them asked McCardle.

"Yeah. Okay." He and Burns strode off to their car.

The others cleaned it up. Death always has to be cleaned up by somebody. . . .

IN A cellar room lit by a cold, glaring incandescence, Dumbo looked at the wallet. He sat on the edge of a lumpy mattress and turned it over in his hands a few times. His fingers were clumsy, nervous, and the only way he could empty it was to hold it over the bed and shake the bills out. They fell in an untidy heap on the frayed, spotted blanket.

It was there, all of it. Except what had gone into drinks. He knew it was all there, but had to see it to reassure himself, to know the glow of confidence and independence that comes with money.

It was freedom. No longer do this for Phil, do that for Phil. Now he could *be* Phil, almost. He knew how to act with money. He'd watched Phil often enough.

It was a pleasant thought to sleep on. A slit of smile crossed his face as he stuffed the bills back into place, put the wallet beneath his pillow and pulled the light cord. In the shadows he tossed his pants and torn shirt onto the chair.

He was still grinning when he creaked into the bed and pulled the blanket up over his body. Rolling onto his side, he slid a hand under the pillow and, clutching the wallet, slept.

He thrashed as in a nightmare, tossed and turned. He kicked the blanket to the floor, mumbled and angled upright. The iron bedstead rocked and creaked in the morning stillness like a rusty hinge. He was awake. He circled the room with sleepy eyes, blinking and uncertain.

Then his hand shot under the pillow, hesitated. It moved to one side, then the other, rubbing the space under the pillow with searching, anxious fingers. It found nothing.

He flung the pillow against the far wall. Nothing to be seen on the mattress. He rolled the mattress toward the foot of the bed and a gasp of relieved tension wheezed through his lips. There it was on the floor near the wall. It had fallen during the night. He bent beneath the bare spring and retrieved it in a furious clutch.

Placing it on a scratched wooden chest, where he could see it all the time, he went about dressing. At the sink in the corner he splashed his face with water and dried himself with a rag towel.

There was an exuberance in these daily ablutions, a certain energy that had not been there before. He felt an elation new to him. Why not? It was the day. The day of release from the obligation to Phil Muraco, from the fear of his wrath when things went wrong, from the shadowed, restrained existence that had been his.

The consequences of the deed of the previous night found no niche in the caverns of his thought. There just was not room for anything but this new day. He was elemental, direct.

With the wallet in his pocket he

stamped out of his room, down the short, damp passageway to the door. He came out beneath the steps leading up from the sidewalk to the main entrance. Great hands swinging at his sides, he came up from the cellar into the feeble sunlight. His feet clumped down the sidewalk to the corner where he turned and made for an eatery a short distance down the block.

He shouldered aside another man coming out of the place. The man spat a curse and hustled down the street. Dumbo, unmindful of the abuse, hoisted himself up onto a white stool and said, "Coffee. And eggs!"

The counterman, in a grimy white uniform, shouted into a hole in the wall, "Draw one! Two up!"

Dumbo laid a five-dollar bill on the counter and stuck a toothpick between his teeth. The coffee was too hot to drink. He stirred, focused his gaze on the center of the little whirlpool he had created with his spoon. He was seeing things there, things he'd never dared dream about before.

He was brought up from the depths of his stupor by the grating scrape of the dish sliding down the counter toward him. He stopped it with his forefinger and plunged a fork into one of the yellow bubbles. The yolk burst and gushed and seemed to delight him. A grin crept over his still unshaven face.

A few mouthfuls later he was wiping the plate with a piece of bread and washing it down with the last sip of coffee. He crooked his finger at the counterman and mumbled through his full mouth, "Hey, bud. C'mere."

The man in white moved slowly down the counter toward him, wiping spilled coffee and crumbs to the floor as he moved. "What's the trouble?"

"No trouble," Dumbo answered, pocketing his change. "Abe Alexander been here?"

"Who?" the counterman asked stupidly.

"Abe Alexander." Dumbo scowled.

"Never heard of him."

"Yeah, you did. Abe. Comes here in the morning."

"Honest, pal, I don't know the guy." He started down to the other end of the counter. Before he had gone two steps Dumbo was leaning over the counter and had his shirt clutched in a massive fist.

He yanked the man forward so the edge of the counter cut into his stomach. "You ain't so smart! You wanna stay healthy, you tell me was he here yet!"

"Okay, okay. You mean Abe? I didn't know you meant him. Honest. No, he wasn't here yet. Not yet."

With a grunt, Dumbo pushed the man away from him and settled back on his stool to wait.

HE WAS lounging over his fourth cup of coffee when a man with a mustache, gaudily dressed, entered. He gave his order before he noticed Dumbo. "H'ya, Dumbo. What you doing around here this early?"

"I been waiting for you."

"Got something from Phil?" He sat beside him and began to drain his cup.

"Naw, I wanna see you myself. I got some money to bet today. On a horse."

"You know I don't handle piker bets, Dumbo. How much you got, fifty cents?" A snicker twitched his mustache.

Dumbo drew himself up and leaned toward the man. "Listen, I said money. See?" He drew the wallet out and spread it to show the bills. "I'll bet a hundred dollars on a horse. That ain't no piker bet!"

Abe whistled low and shoved a finger tentatively against the exposed money. "Where'd you get all that dough?"

"You taking my bet or not?" Dumbo asked, quickly withdrawing the wallet from Abe's prodding finger. Holding it

close to his chest he fumblingly took out the hundred and put it between them on the counter. His palm rested over it and his eyes burned into Abe's.

"Lucky Phil know you got all this dough? He know you're betting the ponies?"

"He don't know nothing. You want trouble, Abe?" Dumbo's mouth was a grim, tight slit.

"Me? No, no. Sure, I'll take the bet. What's your choice?" He took a little pad out of his coat pocket, and a pencil. The awed counterman moved closer. It wasn't every day he saw a hundred-dollar bet laid down in his joint.

"Choice?" Dumbo said. Then after a thoughtful pause, "I don't know. I don't know nothing about horses. I mean which one is good. You pick one for me."

"Let's see." Abe's eyes squinted. "There's Lady Lu and there's—"

"That's the one!"

"Which?"

"Lady Lu. Sounds nice."

"Fifteen to one in the third. Sure you like that one?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I like it."

"Well, okay," Abe said, like a man resigned.

The counterman's mouth hung slack in wonder and sheer disbelief. It looked as though he was about to say something, when a quick, hard glance from Abe's hat-shaded eyes stopped him.

When Abe reached for the money, Dumbo's firm hand wadded it and shoved it deep into his own pocket. "You look like you think something's funny," he growled.

"Now, listen. If you want the bet you better give me the dough. I don't give credit to nobody."

"I'll hold the hundred until the race is over. I'll hold it, see!" He moved a menacing step closer to Abe, who shrunk from his bulk.

Abe piped, "Okay. Let's you and me listen to the results together and when it's over one of us will pay off. How about it?"

"Where do I meet you?"

Abe leaned up confidentially and whispered something into his ear. Then they walked out and went separate ways. . . .

The room was small, bare, poorly lighted by a shielded bulb hanging just over their heads. There were five of them sitting in the smoke-clouded room. Abe, Dumbo and three others.

One sat at a table with sheets and pencils before him. All were listening to the radio, tuned down low so anyone in the store on the other side of the door wouldn't be able to hear it. The third race was being broadcast.

All through the race, Dumbo stared at a wall and Abe frequently looked up from the radio to cast nervous glances at him! When it was over, Lady Lu had finished out of the money.

Abe rose and stepped over to the great figure of Dumbo sitting there, frowning. "Well," he said, "that's that. Let's have the dough."

Dumbo looked up at him, fixed him with a frightening stare. His mouth was drawn back against his teeth in an angry grimace. He didn't like losing his hundred dollars. Now he realized what Abe had thought so terribly funny earlier in the day.

He said, "You gimme a bad horse, Abe. You gimme a bad horse and you knew it. You don't get a cent!"

"I asked you if that was the horse you wanted and you said sure. So hand it over and don't try to be funny."

The two men against the wall lost interest in their conversation. The one at the table put aside his sheets. Their eyes were all on Dumbo. They faced him all at once.

So that's the way it was going to be.

DUMBO started to come up out of his chair, ducked suddenly and threw his shoulder into Abe's stomach, driving with his legs. The bookie went sprawling against the two men moving in from their position near the wall. In the same motion, Dumbo carried himself over to the radio on the little shelf. He tore it up and heaved it at the man at the table. It caught him full on the face, toppling him and making him drop the pistol that had suddenly popped into his hand.

Then Dumbo was through the door and away in a run. *They didn't get my money!* The thought chased him down the block. *I still got my money!*

Every dozen or so strides he would throw a hurried look behind to see how close they were. Each time he looked he saw nothing, no one in pursuit. By the time he reached the corner he knew that they had not bothered to give chase at all.

Something told him they wouldn't. They don't chase you in broad daylight when other people can see them. They wait. The nights are dark and lonely and more suited to collecting a debt.

The realization came to him as he hurriedly walked down the next street, feet pushed homeward by fear. Fear of night. Fear of waiting for night while others looked forward to its pleasures. Others would be able to go abroad on the streets, laughing, living, searching.

Some of them searching for him. He'd have to stay in his room, out of sight in the dark where he couldn't be seen. Hide, hide in the damp darkness of a cellar room until they came. Then—then there would be no running. But now, hurry to shelter.

He sat there on the edge of the bed, listening. Sounds of the night-time street filtered down through his closed window. Occasionally a taxi whizzed past, tires humming a violent city song. A stew

lurched by, hurling epithets in a stage whisper. A boy and a girl strolled by the window and their giggling reached his ears through the window and the drawn shade.

For much more than an hour he had been sitting there, listening, waiting expectantly. Fearfully. His face, cheeks and chin, was cradled in two great, strong hands. Hands that caressed his unshaven face, that could grip a life around the throat and stop its breath, but that could not grip, caress or halt a bullet. In the corner the faucet dripped, and each drop was a measure of the time left; a monotonous, hypnotic reminder of what was to come. *Blip, blop, less time, blip, blop . . .*

Once, footsteps sounded outside and came to a halt in front of the building. He pushed himself slowly from the bed with moist palms and crept over to the window. Peering through a small rent in the shade he saw a man look toward his window, then up at the face of the building.

He felt relief even before the man turned away and strolled on. They would never send a man like that to do the job. They weren't so foolish as to pit a little fat man, armed with an umbrella, against the big mitts of Dumbo. He turned from the shade and faced back into the room. A room of brooding darkness, a room that could be his tomb.

He didn't know how long he had been standing there, searching the bare walls, before the noise registered in his ears. It wasn't loud; a scuffing sound somewhere on the other side of his door. Then it stopped and there was only his breathing in the silence.

Then, the knock. Light but determined. He didn't answer, didn't acknowledge the rap. It came again and again, the insistent, unrelenting tap of a knuckle. There was no escape. The knocker knew he was there.

Dumbo flexed and stretched his fingers, hoarsely whispered, "Who-who's there?"

Two knocks echoed his words.

"Who is it? Who's there?" he called aloud.

A crisp voice answered through the thin panel, "It's me, Phil. Open up. I want to talk to you."

He put his foot uncertainly toward the door. Phil. He took a step. Phil, his friend. Phil, who might save him. He crossed the rest of the way, turned the key and opened the door

CHAPTER THREE

Loaded With Death

THE light from a bare bulb fell upon the man standing at the threshold. He was clean-shaven, six inches shorter than Dumbo. He wore brown tweeds, tan shoes and a fedora. He scowled over narrow eyes and slid by Dumbo, muttering two words: "Bird-brain!"

Dumbo stood where he was. Here in the room with him was the only man he had ever feared until tonight. Yet he was the only man who could offer protection.

They stood regarding each other's shapes in the dark room. Finally, Phil said, "Let's have lights."

A dim incandescent glow stretched out for the walls and just about made it. Phil pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and dusted off the lone chair before he sat on it. He put a cigarette to his lips and stared at Dumbo over the flame of his lighter. Inhaling deeply, he let the smoke trickle out between his words. "Abe says you welshed on a bet today. That true?"

"Yeah, Phil, but he—"

"Shut up! He says you flashed a big wad of dough to back up the bet. He

only took it without collecting on the spot because he knew you're my boy, that I'd make good. I will make good—one way or another. Where'd you get that kind of dough?"

Dumbo had sidled over to the head of the bed, near where he'd hidden the wallet beneath the mattress. He stood there, uncertain, like an amateur with stage-fright before a great audience. He faltered his lines. "I got it—I got it like I get it for you sometimes."

He had thought himself free of Phil's will earlier in the day, but now, standing before him, the old servility returned to confuse him. Servility and a need for protection. His tongue flicked over his dry lips.

Phil leaned forward. "Why, you two-bit bum! You got a nerve pulling a job on your own, without my say-so! I got a notion to let the boys collect the hard way. Teach you a lesson. What you want to do, get picked up by the coppers? Blab all about me under the sweat lamp?"

"They won't get me."

"You're right, they won't. You're getting out of here and you're giving me that dough so if they pick you up they won't find it on you. Cough up."

Dumbo hesitated. He pondered. He said, "No." The money overshadowed all thoughts of personal safety now.

"No! Listen, you get that dough now, understand! Where is it?"

The large man glanced swiftly at the mattress, gave it away. He cried, "I don't work for you no more! I'm working for myself!"

Phil came out of the chair, wary, but determined. "Nobody quits on me. If it wasn't for me you wouldn't have a shirt on your back. That's my dough. I'm taking it, so stand away from that bed."

Dumbo didn't move. He clenched his fists, unclenched them and raised

himself off his heels slightly. He waited for Phil to make a move toward him.

Phil took a step, eyes narrowed under scowling brows, jaw tight. They eyed each other for a moment. Then, as if at a signal, both men moved at once—Phil toward the bed, Dumbo toward Phil.

They met head on and, toe to toe, the adagio of death began with street noises as the only accompaniment. Great hands reached out for a throat and a smaller hand darted into a coat pocket. Something silver flashed between them. But for their grunts, there was silence in the room. A little scraping noise just beyond the door went unheard by either. . . .

* * *

McCardle sat at the desk, punishing his pale, angular face with long, bony fingers. Trying to stretch his legs in the kneehole, he barked a shin on the edge of the desk and swore under his breath. The phone to his left cried out. He wrapped his fingers about it, lifting it from the cradle.

"Homicide. McCardle speaking."

The wire gave him a familiar voice: "Hello, Mac. Burns here. I been combing these Third Avenue joints like you said and I think I've found something."

"What's the scoop?"

"Place at Third and Twenty-first. Seems the one with the broken neck—Harpie Gordon his name is—came in here flashing a big roll last night. Bought drinks for a character named Dumbo."

"The character, was he big?"

"Like a locomotive, and just as powerful from what I hear. They left the place separately, the big one first. Sounds hot to me."

"Get his address?"

"Place on Stanton. Off the Bowery, in the cellar."

"Nice work. Get to that corner and wait for me. Don't scare him off before I get there, but if he leaves stick with him."

"Check."

McCardle dropped the phone, straightened out of his seat and jammed his hat on on the way out.

Twenty minutes later, he braked his car near the corner and slid from behind the wheel. Walking with habitually long, slow strides he approached the man on the corner. His coat collar was upturned to ward off the cold night breeze. He stopped beside Burns and lit a cigarette. "Anything doing?"

"Can't say, Mac. Just got here a minute ago. Nobody came or went since I arrived."

They talked without facing each other directly.

"Know if he's in?"

"Guess so. There's a light on in that cellar window."

"Let's go and let's not muff it."

THEY crossed the street and made for a certain house. Coming abreast of the stairs leading down to a closed cellar door, they halted momentarily. Then Burns walked a few steps on, turned to watch the window. McCardle jogged down the steps and pushed through the door.

Inside, he found another door to his left and knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again, harder and louder. No answering call came through to him. He waited silently, hoping to hear sounds of motion within the room. There were none. Wondering if his quarry had quitted the place earlier, he reached out with his left hand and twisted the knob. His other hand held a revolver.

The door yielded to his pressure. His cheekbones seemed to stand out; his face took on a granite hardness. He gave the door a shove. Nothing happened.

No bullets came whining through the aperture; no figure cast a shadow where he could see it. No one moved or spoke. He whirled, rolling his shoulder on the door frame and dropping to one knee all in the same motion.

Looking at the red-splotted man on the floor near the center of the room, he flushed a little at his dramatic caution. Holstering the pistol, he stepped through the outer door, told Burns to call the crew in and returned to his newest corpse.

It was a big corpse, the biggest he'd ever seen. Blood, red and fresh, oozed from five or six places on the dead man's shirt front and from one deep gash just under the jaw.

He looked around the room, walked over to the scratched dresser and picked up three small cards scattered beside a dirty undershirt. They held his attention until Burns returned, griping, "Of all the lousy luck!"

"Tough. Locate a killer and move in on him to find him dead. Gives us another murderer to look for."

"Unless the same man—"

"No. This is the baby we wanted. Look at the size of those mitts. My bet is this one took care of Gordon, then someone got him. Robbery, of course. Gordon had a roll when he was seen with this bird in the saloon. When we found him, he was clean. I don't see any money around the room. Robbery again. Two corpses, two killers.

"Found these." He shoved them at Burns. "Social security card, photostat of army discharge and an identification card. Most likely out of a wallet lifted yesterday by Gordon. All made out to Joseph P. Barnes. Look Barnes up, see if he lost a wallet with any real money in it. Enough to cause two murders."

"Check," Burns said, jamming them into a coat pocket.

"Better talk with the tenants, find out

if anyone heard or saw anything that could give us a lead."

Burns hurried from the room. He found nothing on his check. Two of the tenants were out. A woman on the third floor thought she heard a shot, but offered that it was probably a backfire from a passing car. An old lady on the fourth floor knew 'that big oaf would meet a sorry end.'

When Burns returned to the cellar, the flash and print men had almost finished and the boys with the basket were there. He reported his findings to McCardle.

Someone said, "Okay?"

"Yeah," McCardle answered, "Clean it up."

It was ten in the morning when the cop ushered a man into McCardle's office. The man was rounded and stooped in the shoulders and back. His hair was thick and curly, his skin sallow. He punished his hat with flexing, nervous fingers and bowed from the neck when McCardle offered him a chair.

Burns was standing over near the coat rack.

McCardle rubbed a hand over his pale features, hooked one thumb in a trouser pocket and leaned against the edge of the desk, facing his visitor. Gently, he said, 'Before you say anything, Mr. Tasso, be certain of your information. In a murder investigation misinformation can slow us up, even hurt an innocent man.'

"I make no mistake. I come here by myself. Nobody ask me." He turned to Burns with hurt pride straining his face.

"Okay, Mr. Tasso," McCardle said, "let's hear what you have."

"Well, last night I was going to work—I'm a night watchman—and I see this man. He stands near the stoop. I mind my own business and walk right by him, but I see he is looking at the window."

"Which window, Mr. Tasso?" asked McCardle.

Tasso flicked accusing eyes between the two detectives as though he were the butt of a humorless joke. "The window in the room where it happened. I read about the killing in the paper, and I think I better tell the cops about the man I see hanging around. So here I am and I told you."

MCCARDLE sighed patiently and looked at Burns who called out, "What did the man look like, Tasso? Describe him for us. Was he big?"

Burns had a notebook ready. McCardle watched Mr. Tasso with tired gray eyes as the man said:

"No, no. He is not big. He is small, this man. He is smaller than me. Also he is fat. Fatter than me."

McCardle rocked gently forward and put a long hand on Mr. Tasso's chair, leaned close to him. "Go on. He was short and fat. Did he carry an umbrella, Mr. Tasso?"

"Sure. You know him? An umbrella and a hat. The kind that does not turn down in the front."

Burns muttered as he wrote, "Homburg or derby."

A scowl V-d McCardle's drawn face. He was unhappy about this turn. "Are you sure you saw a fat little man?" he asked through tight lips. "Are you certain he wasn't tall and thin? How are your eyes, Mr. Tasso?"

"I got good eyes!" He all but crushed his hat in his hands. "You think I don't see this man, huh?"

McCardle gestured to the wall where Burns was standing. Burns nodded, moved away, revealing the sight-chart he had been concealing behind his back. There was a large black capital at the top and smaller letters below.

"Can you read the line third from the bottom, Mr. Tasso?"

Like a student reciting the alphabet in the normal sequence he rattled it off: "P,t,b,k,j,h,i,y,q,a. I got to have good eyes to be a watchman."

Burns grunted.

"Okay, Mr. Tasso," McCardle apologized, "go on with your description. What about his face?"

"His face was puffed out on the sides. Fat. The eyes were small. He had a mustache, just a little one."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing else. That isn't enough?"

McCardle said, "Thank you, Mr. Tasso. If we need you again you'll hear from us."

The man put his battered hat on as Burns let him through the door.

Back in his own chair, McCardle tapped the edge of the desk with an agitated, bony finger. His eyes stared hard at the just-closed door, not seeing Burns until he spoke.

"He's in again, Mac."

"What?"

"The little, fat one. Two guys get killed. Two times we hear about this same man. Could be this one's our man, Mac."

"Bully!" McCardle shouted. "He can't be strong enough to have done that to Gordon, let alone tangle with that brute we found last night. My dough still says last night's corpse killed Gordon for that money. Somebody in turn killed him for the same reason. This fat one is tied up in it some way. It won't be easy, but when we wrap this up we'll know where he fits in."

"You're right. It *won't* be easy."

"C'mon. Let's think about it over coffee."

* * *

The kitchen was small and square.

The walls were discolored with age, the floor bare of linoleum. The sharp, appetizing odor of coffee permeated the close air in the three-room flat. Eve stood at the kitchen range, staring pensively at the bubbles popping against the top of the percolator.

Turning off the gas she lifted the percolator from the range and brought it to the table, where she poured two cups. Without looking from the cups she called, "Coffee's on, Phil."

He didn't answer. In the bedroom, he sat on the edge of an unmade bed. Money passed through counting hands. He mumbled to himself, "Not bad. Still a good chunk left for me after I pay Abe the five yards."

"Phil! Before it gets cold!" she called again.

"I'm coming, I'm coming." He neatly stuffed the money back into the wallet and put that under some shirts in the bottom drawer of the dresser. It lay next to a seldom-used pistol. Then he walked into the kitchen and sat silently at the table.

Eve's hair was black and so were her eyes. Her lips were small, finely shaped, very red. Her skin was white. She gave the belt of her faded robe a hitch, pulling it tighter about her slender waist. Without looking across the table at him, she asked, "Where did you get that money, Phil?"

Nastily, he said, "Pretty smart, aren't you? Little spy!"

She raised hard eyes to his face. "You had the door open! I couldn't miss seeing you. What have you been up to this time? I don't want any cops coming around here asking me questions."

"Some wife you are! Never mind what happens to me, just so no cops bother you. Well, if they do, you better give the right answers. Understand?" He trapped her eyes with a hard, malevolent stare. His fingers curled about the

edge of the table, squeezing very hard.

She said she understood.

"Now fry me some eggs. I'm hungry."

They finished breakfast in silence. Then he rose, pulled his coat on and started out.

Turning from the sink, where she was rinsing the dishes, she asked him where he was going. He said he was going out. When would he be back? He said he didn't know. The door slammed behind him and she buried her face in her sympathetic hands.

Once, she had found sympathy from Phil. That had been the first year of marriage. Since then he had become calloused and quick to strike. In the brooding silence of lonely nights she longed for unobtainable things; things like kindness and love and a husband, a real husband.

She wiped her wet hands on a towel and trudged to the bedroom. She remembered when it had started. He used to make excuses for leaving her alone. Not any more. Now he hadn't even the decency to pretend, to lie, to try to keep her believing in him.

Usually it was just 'I got a deal on.' She had come to know the sort of deals he meant, and with the knowledge came the will to break away. Though the will had always been there the courage was slow in coming, starting somewhere deep within her and rising, swelling at a slow but insistent pace until, now, she was ready.

She had no friends, no living relatives, no money. No money? Rolling on her hips, she came to a sitting position, looked at the dresser.

She'd never seen him with that much money at one time before. Surely there was enough there for her to make her break—fast and neat. Enough for wanted but unknown luxuries. Enough to keep her in fine style until—until it became

necessary to find a means of providing for just the necessities. But until then!

In the dresser mirror, she caught her reflection grinning out at her. It had been a long time since she had smiled, even mirthlessly.

Dressed, she removed some of the bills from the wallet and primly tucked them into her purse. The rest of it went into the overnight case holding her few personal belongings. Before she closed the drawer she removed something else, something he kept for emergencies. She didn't think he'd ever find her, not in such a large, sheltering city. But she took it just in case.

CHAPTER FOUR

Umbrella Man

THE hotel room seemed like a palace. One room. Three had been a nightmarish hovel; this one was a place of warmth and comfort. The beginning of luxury for Eve. The bathroom was white and clean, a place to wash off the dust of an old life and step into the new.

The bath over, she dressed hurriedly. Passing the mirror she stopped. She knew she liked mirrors, knew they showed you what you wanted to see if you looked hard enough. She cocked her head toward one small shoulder and winked at herself. She was happy; she was hungry. But before food came clothes. She put all the money together in her purse and started for the stores.

The shopping spree lasted nearly three hours. She went without lunch, returned to her room and changed her clothes, all of them. The new garments lent her a look of luxurious living, a mood of gaiety. Money could do such wonderful things, she thought.

At dusk she went down in the elevator, looking forward to sumptuous feasting

and, perhaps, fulfillment of a pressing desire, an adventure. As she walked through the lobby the elevator boy stared at her. Without turning, she knew it. She liked it. She smiled for the second time that day.

She was wondering why she had waited so long to do this when he bumped into her near the doorway. Accidents happen, she thought, and returned the tip of his homburg with that same coquettish smile. A cute little man, but what a ridiculous mustache.

Dinner took more than an hour. Then she wanted a drink.

The neon above the bar held an aural significance for her. The very luminosity of the letters seemed to lend credence to the beginning of her new day. She walked airily beneath it and through the door. She strode boldly to the bar and slid onto a seat. The barman took her order without expression. A highball.

She drank, sitting rigid to calm an inner trembling. Uncertainty sat with her, brought by anticipation of an inchoate something. Where was it? What was it? Why didn't it happen?

He took the stool just to the right of her as she sipped the last drops in the glass. She asked for another. A voice beside her said, "Make it two. On me."

Brush him off? She wanted to live. She wanted someone to show her once more what happiness was like.

Turning to face him she said, "Thank you." Plain, simple, sweet.

Sandy-haired he was, under six feet. Eyes blue, piercing. Lips full and sensitive. She catalogued him so in the index of her mind.

Neither the barman, nor the table waiter, nor the few other patrons paid any attention to them. She looked for that in the mirror over the backbar. No one was interested. How easy, how fundamental it all was. Living.

He fumbled with the knot of his tie, seemed momentarily confused. It was as though he hadn't expected such cordiality at the start. Recovering, he said, "Would you—would you care to have dinner with me?"

"I've had dinner, thank you." She tipped the glass to her lips.

"Dancing, then? If you're not waiting for someone."

"I'd like to. Plenty of time and nothing to do with it." The smile on her lips broke for the raised glass. The smile on her heart remained.

"Particular about where?"

"Why, low on cash?"

Her understanding seemed to stun him. "Limited. Enough for most, but maybe not enough for a woman of class like yourself." He tossed off his drink.

"If you run short, let me know. I don't want to go to any dives."

"Well, thanks," he said, smiling. "This is my lucky night."

"It hasn't even begun!"

His grin spread and he tossed two bills on the bar. He handed her down from the stool and they left together.

All through the mad whirl that followed—dancing, drinking, laughing—her feeling of happiness persisted. She pulled him from bar to bar. Their last stop was a liquor store.

IN HER room it was cozy. He was mixing drinks, standing there coatless. It looked right to her. Tip-toeing up behind him from the window, she kissed him lightly on the neck and said, "Excuse me, honey."

"Take your time," he told her. The bathroom door closed on her and he turned to look about the room.

Several minutes later she emerged, quietly, looking for him at the spot where she had last seen him. He was not there. Alarmed, she flicked her head to the left. There she saw his back. The

slight movement of his shoulders from the rear gave away his anxiety. His hand came up from in front of him, carrying something to his pocket.

It couldn't be! He was such a gentleman! He was so nice! She blinked her eyes, hoping what she saw would go away.

It didn't. In the sooty dimness of the room she watched, horrified, as his hand appeared from somewhere on the bed, a spot blocked from her view. There was something square, something brown in his hand. It was the wallet. Her wallet! Her money; rightfully hers in payment of long-endured maltreatment by a man. And now a man was taking it from her.

"Stop!" she screeched. "What are you doing!"

He flung a hasty glance over his shoulder at her. A look of annoyance, nothing more. Then he returned to rifling her things.

Hands outstretched, fingers clawing, she threw herself at his back. Digging her nails into his neck she tried to pull him away. Her breath shot from her lungs in quick bursts. Anger left no room for words in her. She dug and tugged.

Suddenly she was moving, away from him. There was a piercing pain running along her lower ribs, where his back-swinging arm had caught her. Agonizing bolts of fire lashed through her back as she crashed against the rear wall, beside the dresser.

"Shut up and you won't get hurt!" he growled.

He was flinging things to both sides now in frenzied search for more money, more valuables. Satisfied that her overnight case and purse held nothing more for him, he bolted for the chair across the room. Pawing hurriedly at his coat, he finally got one arm through a sleeve. He paid no attention to Eve. He was confident she had had her fill of trying

to stop him from taking the money.

Panting, wracked with pain, Eve rolled from her sitting position toward the dresser. He was too sure of himself, the smart guy. If only he hadn't opened that certain drawer.

She yanked it open as he started for the door. Impatiently, she groped around in the drawer, came upon the hard cold metal. His hand was on the doorknob. Hers was around the butt of the pistol, steadied by her other hand.

She raised it before her face. One last chance he could have. One chance.

"Come back," she called. The door was swinging open.

Light from the corridor fell through. His back was a broad, dark silhouette—impossible to miss. Her eyes narrowed; her teeth bit into her lower lip.

She squeezed with her fingers. The noise raced around the walls of the room and the flash blinded her momentarily.

A convulsion stopped him. He leaned against the door frame and moaned something unintelligible. Then he reeled out into the corridor, hitting the opposite wall. Supporting himself against that wall, he dragged his limping, bleeding body out of her sight.

Eve slumped to the floor and wept. It was so simple. So fundamental. Dying.

* * *

McCardle slammed the door marked *Captain of Detectives* and walked down the small, musty corridor. His thumbs were hooked into his trousers pockets. Dejection hung about his lean frame like a shroud, and smouldering anger colored his usually bland cheeks.

Burns was waiting for him, leaning against one wall. It was time to go home and sleep. He pointed to the door and said to McCardle, "Steaming, huh?"

McCardle gave him a tired scowl,

pushed his hat way back on his head.

Burns said, "Don't tell me. I know. Action! Results!" He mocked his Captain.

"Yeah, results! Gave me hell for not concentrating more on the little fat one. Cripes! How many fat men are there in this town?"

"What else do we know about it except somebody named Joe Barnes tells us he had his wallet lifted? Okay, Harpie got the wallet and Dumbo knocked him off for it. But who got to Dumbo? No prints, nobody seen near his place except that little man. Aah, when I find that guy!" He throttled the air with long, tense fingers.

"Let's go, Mac. Even the best dicks need sleep."

"You go ahead, Burns. I'm going to walk around awhile. Maybe something will come to me."

Ten minutes later McCardle jogged down the steps to the sidewalk. A brisk wind played with the nighttime streets. He saw few people until he turned west, trying to walk his way out of a dilemma. The breaks had all been against him. Even a detective needs a break once in a while. One break. Just one. He kept walking crosstown, vaguely aware that he was passing more people, more lights, more life in the night.

At Broadway a man brushed his arm on the way past. A short man, a fat man, running. Up ahead a uniformed cop was breaking out of a cluster of people grouped around something on the sidewalk. He was calling for someone to "Stop!"

JUST one break! McCardle whirled. His eyes narrowed, centering on the back of a man fleeing down the street. Without a word he shot into a sprint; head down, long bony arms and legs pumping the pavement away beneath him.

People turned to look after the fat man and got in McCardle's way. The middle of the block went by before he drew within a couple of yards of the man. Without hesitation, he lurched his lean frame into a flying tackle.

Bone thudded against flesh. The two sprawled to the pavement, hats flying. From one there came a futile, wheezing gasp. From the other, a satisfied grunt.

McCardle put a knee into the other's back and pushed the palm of one hand down on his neck. With his free hand he fished a leather folder out of his pocket and thrust it up into the face of the onrushing cop. "What's it all about?" he asked the cop.

"Some guy with a slug in him came staggering out of the hotel back there and fell." He was talking between pants. "When I got there I see this one yanking something from the corpse's pocket. I hollered and he ran."

"Okay, get him up." McCardle stood and let the cop pull the blustering prisoner to his feet.

The man adjusted his glasses. One lens was cracked and the frame was warped. Puffing, he picked up his battered homburg. A little mustache wiggled when he spoke. "Cops, always interfering! A man cannot make a living without interference."

McCardle put his palm out, said, "Give, Mister."

The man sighed, took a wallet out of his coat pocket and slapped it defiantly into McCardle's hand. "That money belongs to my client. There should be almost two thousand there."

"Client? What's your business?"

With pink, pudgy fingers the fat man withdrew a card from his coat. McCardle took it and read: *Criterion Collection & Investigation Agency.*

The cop, flashing scornful eyes over the man, grunted disdainfully, "A private."

McCardle inspected the wallet. In one corner were the initials J.B. Spreading it, he found the sheaf of bills. He flapped it shut and the three started back to where a man was sprawled on the sidewalk. . . .

They sat in McCardle's office, facing each other across the desk. McCardle's taut face was tired, determined. His hat was pushed back on his head. The other's features glowed with confidence. He had learned there was to be no rough stuff, no games with him as the ball.

"Quade, eh?"

"Yes. Wilbur Quade."

"All right. Let's start at the beginning, Quade. Tell it to me straight and I won't have to ring for the help. Understand?" He leaned forward, made a shelf of his hands for his chin.

"I understand perfectly. My client—nameless for now—was fleeced of two thousand dollars in a stock swindle. He is a reputable man. If the public were to learn of his gullibility in the deal he would be ruined, yet he could not afford to throw away two thousand dollars. So he came to me. I agreed to make the collection for suitable compensation."

Quade crossed his hands over the handle of his umbrella.

"This man, Barnes, was the swindler. I located him and followed, determined to collect."

"So determined you'd kill him for it?"

"No. An intelligent man need not resort to violence. I would have used any other method, however. On a subway platform some derelict picked his pocket. Fortunately I saw that, but I could not stop the pickpocket. So I followed him. Barnes, without the money, was of no use to me."

"Did you follow the dip to the bar where he met his friend?"

"Yes. I am not a cowardly man. Detective, but I wanted to get the money

and escape unhurt. I waited until he left, stayed behind him. I don't know just what I was going to do. Before I could hatch a definite plan, we were on and off the elevated train. Then—"

"Yes?" McCardle's voice was hard, incisive.

"Then he was killed, by the same man he'd talked with in that bar. A giant of a man! Again it was a case of following the money. It changed hands again, as you probably know. Again, a man was killed for it. I was waiting for him to go to sleep. I was going to let myself into his room and take it. I was too late to do anything. It was distressing."

McCardle slid out of his chair, came around to the front of the desk. "You know who killed him?"

Quade nodded.

McCardle's mouth worked silently. The veins stood on his temples like jagged lightning bolts. He was pointing a finger at Quade.

THE fat man shifted in his chair, went on before McCardle could unleash the words crowding his throat. "I kept following the wallet and the man. All my thoughts were so futile, all my work in vain. The next day, his wife packed her things and moved to a hotel, taking the money with her. I watched them from the roof of an adjoining building."

He blushed and went on.

"I waited around the entrance. When she came out I went in to ransack her room while she was gone. I found only some clothes and a pistol. No money. She had taken it with her. Annoyed, I returned to the lobby to await her return. More difficulty. When she came back she had a man with her."

McCardle was pacing, hands jammed into his pockets, lips set in a grim granite line. He would wait the man out.

"Some minutes later I went up again. As I approached the door I heard her shouting at him. He shouted back. It sounded as though he hit her. I backed away down the corridor and the door opened. There was a shot from within the room. The man who had gone in with her staggered across the hall. I was hesitant. When I finally entered the room, she was slumped against a wall, sobbing. Her purse lay empty on the bed."

Quade settled back in his chair, thoughtful.

McCardle spread his feet, glared into the man's florid face. "Mr. Quade," he said. "I have never known a more inconsiderate, cowardly rat! I'd like to send you to the chair. Mr. Quade! Do you know that two murders could have been prevented if you'd come to the police as soon as you'd seen the first killing?"

"In the past, you detectives have been a hindrance. By the time you were through with me, I'd have lost all trace of the money. Questions! Questions! I had my client to consider and I couldn't waste the time!" He clenched his umbrella.

"You'll have plenty of time to waste! Do you know I'm going to have your license? Do you know I'm going to stack an accessory-after-the-fact charge against you? Do you know you're going to jail, Mr. Quade?"

Quade blinked behind his damaged glasses, managed a weak smile. Insolence in his voice, he asked, "Haven't you forgotten something, Detective?"

"No, Mr. Quade. I haven't." He spat the words angrily through his teeth. "Who killed Dumbo? The big one? Give!"

"I can be obstinate, but there's no need for it. A bargain, Detective."

"What?" McCardle reared upright.

"A bargain or you'll never get what

you want. You let me have my money, let me walk out of here, and I give you the name and address of the murderer you want. At the same time, the name and address of the woman who shot the man in the hotel room. She registered under an alias, you know. You didn't bring her in with me because she escaped. Be sensible. You get credit for apprehending two killers; you get two convictions. All I get is my fee. How about it, Detective?"

McCardle's hand shot out at Quade's puffy face. The echo of the slap bounced from the ceiling of the quiet, dim room.

Quade put trembling fingers to his cheek. "You're wasting your time getting tough!"

Swiftly running his fingers through his hair, McCardle paced some more. Abruptly, he tossed a tablet and pencil into Quade's lap. "Write it down."

"The money?"

He lifted the wallet thoughtfully, let it drop on the man's legs with a tired sigh. Quade scribbled something, gave it back to McCardle.

"Good-by, Mr. Quade."

"Good-by." He walked to the door. When he was halfway out, McCardle called:

"Mr. Quade!"

The fat man turned, raised his brows.

"Remember, Mr. Quade, you could have stopped two murders." His eyes burned with hatred. "You could have saved human life, but you chose your fee. Isn't it blood money? Don't you have two deaths in your hands in exchange for a crumby fee, Mr. Quade?"

The man's jaw dropped a bit; the color left his face. He looked a little sick.

McCardle said, "Good-by, Mr. Quade."

He was tired, tired as only a man who trods death's heels can be.

THE END

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CRAZY CRIMES

HAROLD HELFER

Apparently feeling they deserved something for their efforts, burglars who broke into a home in Elburn, Ill. and found no money, cooked themselves a meal of bacon and eggs.

* * *

The Missing Persons Bureau of the Washington, D.C., police department, reported that its automobile was missing.

* * *

A bobby in Walsall, England, counted five dummies in a store window, re-passed and counted six. He said to the sixth, "Come along now," and arrested a live dummy for burglary.

* * *

A man asked for \$10,518 damages from an Ohio cafe, charging that when he failed to drink beer fast enough to suit the owner the owner hurled the bottle to the floor, leaned over and bit his ear and then hit him on the head with a shotgun. The name of the place—Friendly Cafe.

* * *

After hours of deliberation on an alienation of affections suit, a Wood-

stock, Vt., jury awarded the plaintiff 50 cents.

* * *

A counterfeiter gave himself up to Houston police, explaining he couldn't go on counterfeiting half-dollar pieces because the overhead was too much.

* * *

In Lafayette, Ga., a man was acquitted of an assault and battery charge. His wife cried for joy—and was fined \$25 for contempt of court.

* * *

A man left \$11 in an envelope on a Roanoke, Vt., postoffice desk and it was promptly stolen. The next day he received a note from the thief which said: "Thanks, pally. You shouldn't be so careless. I am borrowing the \$11 to teach you a lesson. . . ."

* * *

A Dover, Del., man told police the reason he stabbed his wife was because of something she had said in her sleep, namely, "Have to hurry home now because my husband is waiting for me."

* * *

After relieving a store owner of \$480 at gunpoint in his Boston store, a hold-up man shook his head and observed, "This is a tough way to make a living."

* * *

The Beaver Falls, Pa. City Hall reported that someone had stolen the water cooler and drinking fountain—outside the mayor's office.

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An Atlanta taxi driver was so nervous at the line-up that he couldn't pick out the men who had robbed him. So the police put him under the lights and the thieves made the identification.

* * *

The detective assigned to investigate a burglary at the home of a doctor in Horsham, England, didn't solve the case but the other officers did. They arrested the detective for committing the burglary.

* * *

The village of Vaggeryd, Sweden, is hoping its citizens will behave. Because of the acute housing shortage, one of its policeman is occupying the jail.

* * *

After a neighbor counted barks (65 to the minute), authorities of Barnet, England decided that one of their resident's dog was a nuisance and fined her eight bucks.

* * *

A ministerial student of Huntingdon, Pa., hopes that his sermons will do a certain party some good. They were stolen by a thief.

* * *

Kittanning, Pa., police found why it was that the peg-legged man they had put in jail for intoxication was getting drunker by the minute in his cell. He had a bottle in the hollow of his wooden leg.

(Continued from page 62)

said. "What possible bearing can that have on—"

"It's just a detail, like I told you," Barr informed him gruffly. "Remember, walk at about the same speed you did the other day."

For the first time, a worried frown creased Henry's forehead. But he went out with Sergeant Jablonsky, and a moment later those sitting in the small apartment heard the engine of the squad car roar into action.

Minutes ticked by, the silence broken only by the quiet hissing of the steam radiator in the corner. Barr sat with his head leaning comfortably against the back of his chair. Once Bertha Ebbett moved restlessly and glanced at the window. She got up and started toward it.

Without opening his eyes, Barr said: "Better leave the window alone, Mrs. Ebbett."

Her lips trembled, but she went back to her chair and sank into it with a helpless little sigh. More minutes passed, then they heard the sound of the downstairs door opening.

Henry's rap on Mrs. Pettigrew's door was loud and distinct. "Just wanted to tell you I was back, Mrs. Pettigrew," he was saying. "Thank you very much for speaking up for me at the inquest. . . ."

Then they heard Henry's feet on the tread. The apartment door began to swing open.

Barr leaned forward intently.

Bertha Ebbett stifled a scream

For as Henry came into the warm room, he stopped and stood utterly still before them, blinded by the vapor which immediately condensed on the lenses of his thick horn-rimmed glasses. . . .

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(Continued from page 71)

gripped me. It was a foolhardy trick to try but I had nothing to lose now. I slammed Carol with my shoulder and dived under the table.

Farr's gun cracked out. I rose with the table over me and charged blindly. The place was a bedlam. A bullet hit the table and almost threw me back. It smashed through beside my ear and a splinter of wood lashed my face.

He shot again just as I hit him. The table was no lightweight and I was charging with every reserve of strength. It was like hitting a brick wall but Farr gave first. He went over like a weighted sack. His bullet smashed into the ceiling and a hunk of plaster hit my head.

There were two more shots and I waited for the angel to lead me away. Nothing seemed to happen. Maybe Scarface had misseed. I began to raise myself off the floor and a pair of strong arms grabbed me. I lashed out desperately.

"Hey," yelled a voice. "Is that any way to greet us?"

I looked up into a smiling face. A red, Irish-looking face. "Detective-In-spector Malloy," he said.

THERE were two more cops at the door. Another was standing over the winded Farr. A plainclothesman was busy snapping cuffs on a cursing Cuddles and Scarface was kneeling on the floor clutching his belly. His pal was flat on his face, lifeless fingers clutching a revolver. What a mess these cops can create in five minutes.

"Brother!" I said, hauling my voice back from the depths. "What kept you?"

Malloy laughed. "Missed this turning," he boomed. "First time we'd visited here."

I laughed weakly and slipped an arm

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around Carol who was beginning to weep softly.

"Chief," hollered a voice from the door. "Look what we found."

It was hero Stinout.

"Well, Sergeant," greeted Malloy. "Pleased to meet you. Always pleased to meet a sergeant who goes off alone without letting us know what's going on."

He turned to me with a wink and clamped a huge hand on my shoulder. "Boy," he said. "You've busted a gang we've been after for years."

"Naw," I said modestly, hoping Carol was as proud of me as I was.

"Hey," the re-born Rocky broke in, grasping Malloy's arm. "I can clear the Benstein murder for you, too. I can tell you lots of—"

Malloy fixed a fishy glare on him. "Campbell," he barked. "Take this guy in a corner and write down what he has to say."

He turned to me and coughed coily to break up the delectable buss job Carol and I were engaged in. "We could use men like you on our side."

I laughed. "Naw, Chief. I've got other plans. Going into the private-eye business."

Carol snapped back to reality. "Oh, no!" she said, stamping a pretty foot.

"But, baby, look at all the adventure I could give you."

"Johnny," she said, pouring herself into my willing arms, "I'm a fool and I know it. I've had enough adventure to last two lifetimes. Take me home and I'll make you some coffee."

I grinned happily at Melvin Stinout as we passed. And my grin split my face when Carol stuck her nose up at him.

"Night, Sergeant," I said.

I was going to drive that black limo-sine home—slowly this time.

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