

10¢

CRACK DETECTIVE

NOV.

STORIES



7

DOORWAYS TO DEATH

By
RUSSELL GRAY

also

T. W. FORD
MARVIN RYERSON

EXHIBIT A



FREE FALSE TEETH

OFFER
for
users
of

JIM WON'T EAT OUT BECAUSE HE LOSES HIS FALSE TEETH

BOB NEVER HAS PLATE TROUBLE

RUTH SAYS BOB NEVER HAS PLATE TROUBLE

I'LL ASK HIM FOR HIS SECRET

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10 CRACK DETECTIVE

STORIES

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Contents for November, 1943 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

UNUSUAL MYSTERY NOVEL

7 DOORWAYS TO DEATH.....By Russell Gray 10

Esther Hull was on trial for her life when the parade of little murder men came seeking her and her husband. And no one could answer the riddle of these cadaverous killers who did not fear death themselves!

TWO SUSPENSEFUL NOVELETS

HOMICIDE PLATE.....By Marvin Ryerson 35

When a bullet between the eyes struck out Steve Walker, hated manager of the Purple Caps, Chip Hawley found himself at bot, trying to make a home run against a murder-tap delivery!

MURDER ON THE MENU.....By Lee E. Wells 62

Dayn Keith had death for dessert one night, and the entire police department seemed to be under pressure to close the case. So Dan O'Mara had to make the killer come back for a second helping!

CRACK SHORT STORIES

THE GENTLE HOST.....By T. W. Ford 29

Someone in this lonely old house was a homicidal maniac... but how were the others to find out in time?

KILLER'S FINAL CURTAIN...By Willbur S. Peacock 59

Curtis Drexler's final performance was to be a lulu... only he hadn't counted on an overzealous stage hand!

I'LL MOIDER THA BUM!.....By Henry Norton 79

Too many witnesses to Barney Morris' murder added up to total confusion as to how and why he was killed!

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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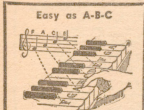
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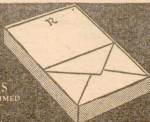
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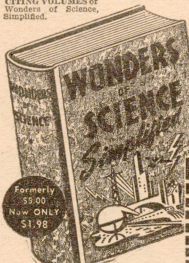
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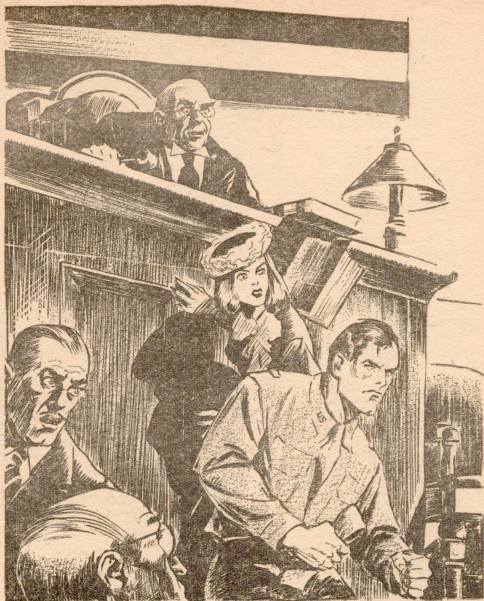
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The gaunt man squeezed the trigger as Hull moved . . .

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CHAPTER I

The First Doorway

WHEN I got off the train at Mandale, a couple of reporters were waiting for me at the station.

"Lieutenant Hull?" one of them asked.

Impatiently I nodded as I looked up and down the platform for Esther. The prospect of newspaper space didn't flatter me. I had done no more than tens of thousands of

other soldiers, but I happened to be the first of the local boys to return from service in North Africa. At that, it had been nothing more heroic than a severe fever which had caused me to be sent home for a rest.

"Ask your questions," I said, "but hurry them. I'm expecting somebody."

Olcott looked me over solemnly. He still hadn't smiled or even shaken my hand, though he and my father had been firm friends and he had known me since I was a kid.

"You don't look bad, Chuck," he said. "A trifle peaked, but that's all."

"I feel fine, sir."

The major's eyes widened a little

Unfeeling, fearless, the little men of doom came stalking, and death's doorways yawned for Lt. Hull and his lovely wife, on trial for murder!

The other passengers had drifted off; the platform was almost deserted now. Why wasn't Esther here? It's true she was never on time for an appointment, but this was different. We hadn't seen each other for fifteen months. All the way from New York I had ridden with a vision of her eagerly waiting for me at the station.

"Would you care to make a statement on how you feel about the whole thing?" a reporter asked.

"Well, the war's pretty big to be covered by a statement," I said. "Anyway, I'm a soldier, not a politician. If you'll ask me specific questions—"

The reporters looked at each other. One said: "Sure, we'd like to write up your war experiences. But some other time. Of course you came back because of your wife?"

What were they getting at? "The Army doesn't send you across the ocean to visit your wife. I got a nasty fever."

"We know. But you're on your way to see your wife now, aren't you?"

"So what?" I was getting sore. "That's nobody's business. It's not even good copy for a scandal sheet."

Then I saw Major George Olcott. "Let Lieutenant Hull alone!" he ordered.

He stuck a hand through my arm and virtually dragged me off the platform.

"I can be trusted, sir," I said somewhat angrily. "I wouldn't have told them anything I shouldn't."

We had reached the street. Major

and then shifted away. "Fine?" he echoed. "Have you read any recent papers?"

"There were a couple of New York papers six weeks old on the ship. When I landed last night, I hadn't time or patience to look at a paper. Why do you—" I stopped, looking at him. "Is anything wrong? Why were those reporters so curious about my wife?"

"So you don't know?" he muttered.

"Know what? It's two months since I received a letter from Esther." My fingers dug into his sleeve. "Is she all right?"

He said quietly: "Esther is on trial for murder."

THERE was a silence. I suppose there was plenty of noise in the street, but I heard only my own breathing. I fumbled a cigaret out of my pocket and lit it without remembering to offer the major one.

"Of course there's a mistake," I said.

"I don't know. The district attorney is convinced that Esther is guilty. The trial started yesterday."

That was when I started to be afraid—more afraid than when I had led my men up a hillside through a crossfire of Nazi machine guns.

I said: "Has she a good lawyer?"

"Edgar Joslyn."

"He's a good man." The cigaret was straw in my mouth; I threw it from me. "Tell me about it, sir."

"You know Roy Bours?" he said.

"He and I went to school together. He inherited his father's chain store business. When I was sent abroad,

he gave Esther a job in his office to keep her from getting too lonely. Is he also helping Esther?"

"No. He is the man who was murdered."

I said nothing. What was there for me to say? I waited for Major Olcott to go on, and it was obvious that he hated to.

"Roy Bours lived in a swanky apartment house on Park Lane," he said. "One night a few weeks ago the neighbors heard a shot and called the police. Bours was lying dead in the living room, shot through the back of his head. Esther lay half on and half off the couch. She was dead drunk and had passed out."

"No!" I whispered. "Esther was never drunk in her life."

Major Olcott dropped his eyes. It was plain what he was thinking. Fifteen months is a long time for an attractive young woman to be separated from her husband. She got lonely and Roy Bours was a gay, handsome boss. Bours had always liked the bottle. She learned to drink from him. In her loneliness, she went up to his apartment, and then Bours got too fresh. . .

"I can take it, sir," I said. "What's the rest?"

"The Luger that killed Bours was found in Esther's hand."

"Bours' gun?"

"No. Recently Bours had bought a revolver, but it was a Smith & Wesson. This gun was a Luger. The prosecution contends that you captured it from a German and sent it to Esther as a souvenir."

"That's a lie!"

Major Olcott shrugged. "If you say so, Chuck, I believe you. But you must understand that the prosecution expects you to deny it."

"What does Esther have to say?"

"She says she never saw the Luger before and didn't murder Roy Bours. Her story is that she passed out while Bours was alive and well, and that the next thing she knew, the police were bringing her out of it."

There was a solid lead weight in the pit of my stomach. "She admits that she drank with Bours in his apartment?"

"She admits it was the third time in 10 days she was up there with him." The major cleared his throat nosily. "The trial is being held in the County courthouse in Center City. I'd go with you if I could, but I have official duties."

He shook my hand and mumbled something about luck and strode off.

Center City, the County seat, was only two stations farther up the line, but I learned from the ticket agent that the next train was an hour and twenty minutes off. Out in the street again, I found that the passengers who had gotten off the train with me had used up all available taxis. It seemed to me that I would go slowly mad if I had to wait.

I WAS standing at the curb, sweeping the street with my eyes for a possible returning taxi, when a battered coupe pulled up. The man leaned toward me.

"Taxi?"

"This isn't a hack," I said.

"I realize that, but I am in need of extra money, and if you are in a hurry—"

"I'm in a hell of a hurry," I said.

I opened the door and then hesitated without knowing why. It wasn't because the man was operating a taxi illegally. With my wife on trial for murder, I hadn't the time or the mood to let that stop me. And certainly there was nothing wrong with the man behind the wheel. He was rather small and timid-looking, and he wore glasses so thick that I couldn't see his eyes behind them.

"Okay," I said. "Center City."

I got in beside him and put my head against the seat and closed my eyes. When I opened them, I was within two blocks of the cottage where Esther and I had lived—the home I had thought I was coming back to for my sick leave. But Esther was now in a prison cell, and if she was found guilty, her lovely body would be strapped to an electric chair and the life would be burned out of her.

The coupe left the city and started to climb the rugged hill which separated Mandale from Center City.

Fortunately, the driver was not talkative; in fact, since I'd gotten in beside him, he had not uttered a word. Under the circumstances, that suited me.

The road across the hill was famous for its scenic beauty. On the right rose sheer rock formations studded by trees growing at insane angles; on the left the hill dropped abruptly for a good five hundred feet. Only a skimpy wooden rail ran along the edge of the cliff. In my high school days one of my classmates, driving his father's car, had gone over the edge. It had been horribly messy.

Something about the driver caused me to look sharply at him. He was hunched far over the wheel, gripping it so intensely that his knuckles were white. His head shifted toward me, his eyes leaving the winding road.

"Careful!" I warned.

His thin lips drew back over his teeth. Though it was not even a warm day, sweat glistened on his brow. And now, through the thick lenses of his glasses, I could see his eyes. His pupils had turned into weird pinpoints.

"Watch the road!" I yelled as the coupe wobbled toward the wrong side.

As if my words were a signal, he twisted the wheel. Not back to the right lane where the car belonged, but across the road straight toward the rail.

I think I screamed. He hunched farther over the wheel, watching the edge of the cliff come toward us and not trying to do anything to turn the car aside or stop it. I flung the door open. A section of the rail splintered, and then I felt the front wheels leave the ground and the nose of the car tilt downward. I jumped.

My feet landed on nothing at all, but my hips and chest hit firm ground. As I pulled myself away from the edge of the cliff, I heard a distant thumping, and I knew that it was the coupe knocking against the side of the cliff as it dropped five hundred feet.

On hands and knees I turned and looked down. Far below, the coupe

was a splotch darker than the vegetation. Suddenly there was a burst of flame — the coupe was burning. The driver was still in the car, if he hadn't been flung out when it hit. In either case, he wasn't alive.

My legs wobbled as I stood up. That hadn't been an accident. Deliberately the driver had run the car over the cliff, to kill me along with himself.

But why me? If he wanted to commit suicide, why take me along with him?

The answer which was no answer came. He had known that I would be at the railroad station and that I would want to rush to the courthouse, and he had been waiting for me. Conceivably, for some unknown reason, somebody wanted me dead. But why would this man, whom I had never seen before, try to murder me in such a way that his own death would be inevitable?

A car was coming. I scooted behind a shrub. I had no time for police red-tape.

When the car was past, I walked along the road toward Center City, until a truck came along and gave me a lift.

CHAPTER II

The Second Doorway

AFTER I had convinced the guard outside the courtroom door who I was, he let me in.

The courtroom was quiet and tense. A middle-aged man, who said he was office manager of Roy Bours' chain stores, was on the witness stand. Judge Anders was leaning toward him, and his bald pate was level with the bottom stripe of a large American flag on the wall behind him. The jurors—seven men and five women—were as motionless as a snapshot. I tried to see Esther, but the heads of the spectators blocked out those who sat at the two long tables.

The witness was telling District-Attorney Fordman that Roy Bours

had paid more attention to Esther than any of the other employees. Quite often they would closet themselves in Bours' office for long periods at a time.

"Did Bours do that with any of his other female employees?" Fordman asked.

"Well, with his secretary when he dictated to her."

Esther Hull was not his secretary?"

"No. She had charge of the payroll."

"So there was no reason for those long conferences?"

"Not that I know of."

As noiselessly as possible, I started down the aisle. When I had almost reached the rail, the judge looked up at me, and a couple of jurors seemed to find me of interest. Then a hand plucked my sleeve.

Harry Pollack had an aisle seat on the front bench. He shifted over to make room for me. I sat down beside him.

"Glad you're back, Chuck," he whispered. "Esther needs you."

Harry was my oldest and closest friend. A wife and two children kept him out of the Army. Although he was not yet thirty, he was one of Mandale's leading businessmen—proprietor of the largest food market.

"How does it look?" I asked.

"Bad. I'm sorry, Chuck."

Harry whispered something else, but I didn't hear him. From where I sat, I could see Esther on the other side of the rail. She was seated at a table with a short, dumpy man—Edgar Joslyn, her lawyer.

The sight of my wife was like a blow under my heart. She was blond and tall and very lovely. She seemed to have changed not at all in fifteen months, except for tired lines about her eyes and mouth.

Joslyn rose to question Roy Bours' office manager. He was brief, but he had no difficulty in establishing the point that Bours had been my friend and also Esther's, so that there was nothing unusual or suspicious in his friendliness with her.

As the witness stepped down, Esther turned wearily in her chair, and

her eyes met mine. She half-rose, staring as if I were a ghost, and what color was left in her cheeks faded. Then she turned to Joslyn and said something to him.

Joslyn spoke to Judge Anders, who nodded, and then the lawyer came over to my bench. Heartily, as if this were a party to which I'd just arrived, he pumped my hand. "You may sit at the table with us, Lieutenant."

An undercurrent of voices followed me to the table. Then I was seated beside Esther, and her hot, dry hand was in mine.

"Are you feeling all right, darling?" she said. "Were you very sick?"

That was like Esther—at a time like this worrying over me.

"Esther!" was all I could say.

Her eyes, very large and very grave, appealed to me. "Darling, I didn't murder Roy Bours."

"Of course not," I said.

The judge banged his gavel and I had to subside. A new witness was being sworn in—the elevator operator in the apartment house where Roy Bours lived. He had taken Esther up to Bours' apartment two or three times in the two weeks before his murder.

IN A SMALL black table nearby I noticed a heavy black Luger. A tag marked "Exhibit A" was attached to it. In North Africa I had seen numerous pistols like that on captured Nazi Officers. There were Lugers in this country, too, of course, but how would Esther have come into possession of one?"

Judge Anders leaned forward, staring at something behind me. And everybody else, jurors and guards and district attorney, following the lead of the judge, looked that way, too. Automatically I twisted my head.

A gaunt, unshaven man was hurrying up the aisle toward us. He swung the gate open and headed directly for the judge's bench.

"What is it?" the judge demanded.

"I have an urgent message," the gaunt man said.

At the last moment he turned aside and swept the Luger off the table.

Among the spectators a woman cried out. I saw a couple of jurors rise. The judge snapped: "What do you mean—" And then the gaunt man swung the muzzle of the Luger toward Esther.

He's crazy! I found myself thinking. That pistol can't be loaded. And his face was not that of a killer; it was calm, practically impassive.

Then I heard Esther moan. She was on her feet, cowering, her face twisted with terror. And I saw that bony hand squeeze the Luger.

I acted out of sheer instinct. I fell sideways off the chair and my shoulder hit Esther's hip, knocking her against the judge's bench. The gun roared then. A pane of glass in a window in line where Esther had stood shattered.

I straightened up, only part of my brain aware of the tumult in the courtroom. Before anybody could interfere, he would have time for a second shot. Esther was crouching on the floor; I could not again knock her out of the way, and he had a clear and easy shot.

Astonishingly, the gun swung away from Esther and focused on me. He was not going to try again to kill Esther. I was to be the victim.

I lunged at him, knowing that I couldn't possibly make it. Gunthunder drowned out the hundreds of frantic voices.

But the bullet hadn't come from the Luger. The bullet was in the gaunt man's back. He pitched forward on his face. Behind him I saw the burly form of a cop, and he had a smoking service revolver in his hand.

I had saved Esther's life and the cop had saved mine.

I spun toward Esther. At the foot of the judge's bench, she lay crumpled in a dead faint.

CHAPTER III

The Third Doorway

THERE were four of us with Judge Anders in his chamber—District-Attorney Ford-

man, Police Captain Cotter, Edgar Joslyn and myself. The judge fixed a stern gaze on the D. A.

"Were you mad, Fordman, to leave the bullets in that gun?"

The D. A. wiped his brow. "Naturally I didn't leave it loaded. The bullets were removed by Ballistics to match them up with the one found in Roy Bours' head. Since then the gun hasn't been out of the hands of the Property Clerk except during the trial.

"But the fact remains that the gun was loaded," the judge pointed out.

"The magazine was full, except for the two slugs fired," Captain Cotter said. "They were ordinary .38 Colt Long cartridges. They fit without trouble in a nine mm. Luger."

Edgar Joslyn rubbed his plump shoulders against the back of his chair. "Has the gunman been identified yet?"

"No, and I doubt if he will be," Cotter said ruefully. "There wasn't a thing in his pockets. Even his coat label had been ripped out to avoid identification. Of course we'll send his fingerprints to Washington, but I wouldn't be surprised if they're not on file."

Joslyn growled: "If your man had only wounded the gunman, we would be able to question him. It is always foolish to shoot a criminal dead."

"I'm sure we have no complaint to find with the officer for saving Lieutenant Hull's life," Judge Anders said. "Did you recognize the man, Lieutenant?"

I shook my head. "I never saw him before. Or the man who had tried to murder me an hour before that."

There was sudden tension in the room. All eyes were on me.

"What's the story?" Fordman demanded skeptically.

I told them about the man who had driven his coupe off the cliff and had tried to take me along with him.

"Wait a minute!" Captain Cotter exclaimed. "You mean to say the guy deliberately killed himself so that he could kill you? There's no sense to it."

"No, there's no sense to it," I said

slowly. "Any more sense than a man walking to the front of a crowded courtroom, picking up a gun that was supposed to be empty but wasn't, and trying to shoot either my wife or myself when he knew he hadn't a chance in the world of getting away. He couldn't have committed suicide easier if he had set out to do it. Yet that hadn't stopped him."

Joslyn's keen little eyes glittered. "Your Honor, don't you see it? It's obvious that these murder attempts were made only because Mrs. Hull is innocent."

"Obvious?" Judge Anders' eyebrows arched. "What is obvious is that Lieutenant Hull narrowly escaped with his life in an accident on the way to the trial. Under the circumstances, he doubtless misinterpreted what occurred. As for the individual who attempted murder in the courtroom, it is clear that he was a maniac."

"He had sense enough to cut out all marks of identification from his clothes," I said.

"Insanity takes many forms."

EDGAR JOSLYN'S reputation as a shrewd criminal lawyer was earned. Abruptly he seemed to change the subject. He said: "I noticed that Artie Dart, the notorious racketeer, attended every minute of the trial."

"I saw him," Fordman said. "He was occupying a back seat. Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do about him. Legally his skirts are clean."

"What about what happened last week?" Joslyn persisted. "His chief gungsel, Little Blue, shot down a man. It was Little Blue's hard luck that his victim also happened to be armed and killed Little Blue before he himself died."

"Or maybe it was the other way around," the D.A. muttered. "The fact is, we have nothing on Artie Dart."

"What about the fact that the gunman sat near Artie Dart?"

Fordman shrugged. "So did a lot of other people. What you're trying to do, Joslyn, is to confuse the issue."

Joslyn wasn't one to give up easily.

He appealed to the Judge. "It would appear, Your Honor, that somebody is trying to murder Lieutenant Hull or Mrs. Hull or both. We don't know why, but it must have some connection with the trial. In addition, a notorious gangster is taking an unusual interest in the trial. While I think I would be justified in requesting a mistrial in view of the occurrence in the courtroom, I ask at least for an indefinite postponement to clear up these mysteries."

"I don't see why," Judge Anders said. "You have not established even a remote connection with the trial and what you call mysteries." The judge rose and we all rose with him. "The trial will resume at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Good-day, gentlemen."

We straggled out of the chamber. Joslyn waddled at my side.

"What do you think, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"I wish I knew."

"So do I. I assume that you are anxious to see your wife. I've made arrangements."

"Thanks," I said.

In the County jail next block, a sleepy guard conducted me to Esther's cell. "Ten minutes," he said and locked me in.

Esther rose from her cot and a moment later she was in my arms. For fifteen months I had dreamed of the feel of her against me and of my mouth on hers—but her body was rigid and her mouth was cold.

I released her and we sat side by side on the cot. I took her hand in mine.

"Now tell me about it, Esther," I urged gently.

"There's little to tell. I went up to Roy Bours' apartment and suddenly everything went black."

"Did you have many drinks?"

"You know I hate the stuff," she said. "As far as I know, there wasn't even any liquor in the apartment."

"The police say there was liquor on your breath."

"But it's not true." Esther's hand tightened in mine. "You believe me, darling?"

I no longer knew what to believe or whom to believe.

"All right," I said. "Was Roy Bours near you when you passed out?"

"No. Just before that he had gone into another room. When I felt I was fainting, or whatever it was that was happening to me, I tried to call out to him, but I couldn't."

The next question was the hardest. With an effort I got it out. "What were you doing in Roy Bours' apartment?"

She dropped my hand and walked the few steps to the opposite wall of the cell and faced me. She was breathing heavily, and her cheeks were flushed with fever.

"I can't remember," she said.

A wave of anger swept over me. "You mean you don't want to remember!"

"Darling, wait!" She closed her eyes, swaying. "You have to trust me. There's a curtain I'm trying to pierce. I know that Roy Bours had some very urgent business to attend to that night. We were going to talk it over, come to some sort of decision—but what it was—" She pressed her knuckles against her temples. "I can't remember."

I sat on the cot looking up at her, and a numb fear possessed me. She wasn't that good an actress. Had something happened to her mind? Everything was mad—Esther murdering or being accused of murder, and the strange, impassive men who did not mind dying if they could take me along with them.

I said: "Esther, why does somebody want me dead?"

"You mean what happened in the courtroom this morning?"

"And before that." I told her about the car that had been driven over the cliff.

HER eyes went incredibly wide, as if staring at something beyond me, beyond the cell and the building. She muttered as if to herself: "There was something that happened a week before Roy Bours was shot. Our superintendent was killed

by a truck while he was making the rounds of the stores. It was very odd how it happened. There was a strange man in the car with him, also killed. Evidently the superintendent had picked him up to give him a lift. There were witnesses to the accident. They said the stranger grabbed the wheel and swung the car straight into the oncoming truck."

There it is! I thought. It's happened before. How many times before?

"The police called it an accident?" I said.

"Yes. But I remember that Roy Bours and I were sure it was deliberate murder. It seemed to mean much more than that our superintendent was murdered. We were very much excited. We—" A vague glimmering came into her eyes. "Yes, we knew why it happened. We knew everything. That was why—"

Then Esther screamed.

She was staring sideways at the barred cell door. A man in a guard's uniform stood there peering at us through the bars. He was not the one who had conducted me to the cell. He was a heavy-set man of sixty or more, and his face was strangely rigid, without a hint of any emotion of any kind.

We both knew why he was there. I watched his right hand dip down into his pocket. He would have a gun. Locked in the cell, there was no way I could stop him. There was nothing behind which to hide except a skimpy chair which would not stop a bullet.

In the corridor a sharp voice demanded: "Hey, what are you doing? Who the hell are you?"

The man at the door must have heard, but he paid no attention. His hand rose with a gun in it. Feet ran in the corridor, brought by Esther's screams and by the sight of a man in a guard's uniform who did not belong there.

"He's got a gun!" I yelled. "He's going to shoot us!"

I was sure then that the old man would defend himself from whoever was coming. But his gun continued

CHAPTER IV

The Fourth Doorway

to rise until the muzzle was pointed at me. Nothing in the world, no personal menace or desire to defend himself, seemed to exist for him but the terrible compulsion to murder me. I snatched up the chair and threw it at the door. It crashed against the bars, but it accomplished its purpose. The oncoming chair deflected the aim of his first shot.

He did not get in a second shot. Two guns clamored in the corridor. The old man sank to the floor.

Then Esther was again in my arms, weeping against my chest. I was as badly shaken as she, though I knew from experience that I was no more of a coward than most men. This had been the closest yet. Three attempts had been made to murder me. How many more would there be before one of these incredible, not human killers succeeded?

The cell door was flung open and a couple of prison guards with drawn guns entered.

"You all right?"

"You got him in time," I said.

"Who's the guy? Where did he get the uniform? How did he get in here?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," I said.

It was a small jail and those two guards were the only ones on duty. They went out of the cell, one to report what had happened and the other to mull over the corpse.

I said: "Tell me now, Esther."

She dug her face into my chest. "Tell you what?"

"You said that you and Roy Bours had learned everything."

Her eyes lifted to mine, and there was dull agony in them. "I don't remember, darling. It was as if a curtain started to part. But now it's closed again." Her voice was edged with hysteria. "I can't see through it!"

I took her back over everything that had happened, as far as I could know, but it did no good. She sat on the cot in a kind of stupor and kept shaking her head in utter hopelessness.

ARTIE DART lived in a modest suburban home like hundreds of others on the outskirts of Mandale; but it wasn't easy to get into. I hadn't gone halfway up the walk to the front porch before a burly shadow slipped out of the night.

"What are you after, soldier?" the shadow demanded. His right hand was in his pocket and thrust forward to show me that it held a gun.

"I want to see Artie Dart."

A thin flashlight beam leaped into my face. The man grunted. "That bar on your shoulder makes it okay. Artie said likely you'd be around. You walk ahead."

The gunman and the light followed me onto the porch. When I reached the door, he ordered me to stop. Pressing his gun into the small of my back, he frisked me.

"You're clean," he acknowledged, and reached around me to push open the door.

Artie Dart looked more like a tired worker spending a quiet evening at home than like the ruthless gangster he was. In his cozy living room, he was seated in front of an open fire and reading a newspaper. He wore a subdued dressing gown over silk pajamas. Even at that late hour his rugged jaw was blue with too-close shaving.

"Well, well, Lieutenant Hull," he greeted me affably. "Have a seat. Cigar?"

Wraithlike the bodyguard slipped out of the room, but I was sure he didn't go far. Probably he was out in the hall with his gun handy.

I refused Artie Dart's cigar and sat down and crossed my legs. "Why are you interested in my wife's trial?"

"I like to see how the law works." He followed his words with a chuckle, and I realized then that his nerves were raw. The chuckle was a failure.

"You're scared," I said. "That

means you're facing the same thing as my wife and I. There's a pattern in which certain unknown men murder, or try to murder, by giving their own lives. One of your men was shot dead that way. How do you know you're not next?"

He was trying to hide the fear that rode him, but I'd seen it in the eyes of too many men—brave men at that—not to be able to recognize it.

"What's up your sleeve?" he asked cautiously.

"Together we might be able to fight it. This way all of us intended victims are scattered. We haven't a chance."

For a long minute Artie Dart studied me. "You're not by any chance Army Intelligence?"

"No, infantry. Does the Army come into whatever's going on?"

"I don't think so. It's strictly civilian stuff."

"Such as?"

Artie Dart flipped his cigar into the fire. "Don't take me for a sucker, Lieutenant. I don't need the Army's help or the coppers' help or anybody's. I do my own fighting."

"Can you?" I said softly. "Perhaps against the gunsels of a rival gang. You can meet guns with guns; you can shoot it out with men who are as afraid as yourself to die. But this is different. This is against men who do not take possibility of death into account. In fact, they seem to want to die. How can you fight them? You kill one and there's another, taking any kind of risk to get at you, afraid of nothing and nobody, not giving a hang about the consequences."

Artie Dart was silent for a long time. He had it very bad. He was starting to sweat; a muscle in his cheek quivered.

"They're not human," he said hoarsely. "They're fiends out of hell. They—"

Outside on the porch somebody spoke in a low voice. The gangster stiffened. His hand crawled down to the pocket of his dressing gown.

Feet moved into the house. The bodyguard entered the room with a mild, middle-aged man. The newcomer had a face like a rabbit, but

he did not look scared. His face was a blank. Under his arm he carried an unwrapped shoebox.

"He says Jeff sent him," the bodyguard reported. "He's got Jeff's records in that box."

Artie Dart rose from the chair in a crouch. "You fool! I never saw this guy before. Jeff wouldn't send a stranger or anybody with the records. This guy's one of the—"

His gun finished the sentence. It came out of the gangster's dressing gown pocket—a small, flat, nickled pistol. It did not make much noise.

Expression now came into the newcomer's face. For a split-second after Artie Dart's gun spoke, he looked astonished. Then he started to sink.

The shoebox dropped from his hand. The cover flew off. Something tinkled, and almost at once a sluggish vapor rose from the floor.

I started to stand up and then got control of myself and sprawled flat on my stomach. Putting my nose against the floor, I reached into my pocket for a handkerchief. I heard the bodyguard cough wrackingly, and I heard Artie Dart gasp wildly: "For God's sake, open a window!"

Through the handkerchief pressed over my nose and mouth, I was getting strained wiffs of it. Artie Dart sent a chair crashing as he fought to reach a window. He did not know that this type of gas rises, that there is a pocket of breathable air close to the ground.

Keeping close to the floor, I wiggled across the carpet. In front of my eyes a pair of feet staggered weakly. I reached for an ankle to pull Artie Dart down to comparative safety, but he fell by his own power and rolled, making hideous sounds in his throat. Standing up, he hadn't had a chance of reaching a window.

I wiggled past him until my head touched the wall. A window, closed like all the others, was above me. As I primed myself to rise, I felt a blast of heat behind me. It could not have come from the fireplace. I took time for a quick look around. A furious sheet of flame blotted from sight the man who had brought the shoebox.

He had incendiaries as well as gas bombs in that shoebox.

The bodyguard lay motionless, though Artie Dart was still thrashing his arms. If the poison gas had not already killed them, the fire would.

Quickly I rose at the window and jabbed an elbow through the pane. The current of fresh air flowing through the opening was the sweetest smell on earth. I could drop the handkerchief from my face now. I pulled up the window and threw myself out into a bed of flowers.

I was sick then, but I could not afford to stay there. Incendiaries don't wait. Already the fire had reached the inside walls and was eating through them.

I stumbled a hundred feet from the house and dropped on a patch of grass. People were pouring out of neighboring houses. In a few minutes the firemen would be here, but it would be too late to do anything. Artie Dart and his bodyguard and the strange man, who like his fellows had given his life to murder, were dead. And I was alive only because, as a trained soldier, I knew what to do in case of gas attack.

Four times since this morning I had stood on the threshold of death. Each time I had been lucky, but I could not always be lucky.

CHAPTER V

The Fifth Doorway

HARRY POLLACK and Faye Wallace were waiting for me when I entered the neat little cottage where Esther and I had lived before I had entered the Army.

Faye Wallace was a plump red-head who was Esther's cousin and as close to her as a sister. She greeted me gravely and said that she had dropped in to see how I was getting on.

"Me too," Harry said. "I found Faye waiting for you and decided to wait too. You look bad, Chuck. Is the fever coming back?"

It wasn't fever. It was a dose of poison gas; it was strain and anxiety. But it wouldn't do any good talking about it.

"What I need is a drink," I said.

In the cabinet there was half a bottle of rye, there since before I had left. Faye said she would go into the kitchen for glasses.

When she was out of the room, I said: "Harry, what was Artie Dart's latest racket?"

Harry took time to light a cigaret—thinking his answer over, I knew. "Dart had his fingers in everything." "Including the black market in food?"

Carefully he dropped the charred match into an ashtray. "Might be."

"Cut it out, Harry!" I snapped. "You'd know. You own the biggest independent food market in town. Don't think because I've been abroad that I don't know how racketeers are organizing to control the black markets. Did you buy from Artie Dart?"

Harry Pollack shrugged. "If you didn't, you didn't get the stuff, and you lost your business to competitors who aren't so squeamish."

"Did Roy Bours buy from Artie Dart for his chain stores?"

"Not Roy. He had principles. It cost him a lot of business."

"So that's why Roy was murdered!" I said.

Harry stepped close to me. "Drop it, Chuck. You don't know what you're up against."

"I know what Esther is up against. Murder and frame-up are the weapons used. Roy Bours was killed with one; they're trying to kill Esther with the other. And it's not Artie Dart who is behind it."

"No," Harry agreed. "It's not Dart."

"Then who is it?"

Harry said: "Frankly, Chuck, I'm glad I don't know. That knowledge is very dangerous. This much I can tell you. About two months ago Artie Dart was shoved out of control of the local black market operations. We storekeepers don't know by whom. All we know is that there's a different control, and whoever is at the head is a hundred times deadlier

than Artie Dart. Dart is trying to get back in, but he hasn't a chance."

That's right, he didn't have a chance, I thought.

"And you take it lying down?" I said scornfully.

"That's why I'm alive now, and why a lot of other store owners are alive. It's no longer a matter of buying and selling black market produce. You do it because you're afraid not to."

FAYE WALLACE came in with three small glasses. She said breezily: "Did I hear you talking about black markets? Harry, I bought a chicken in your store yesterday way above ceiling price."

"Then don't eat chicken," Harry muttered. He turned away from her and became absorbed in a magazine on a table.

I poured rye into the three glasses and handed one to Faye and one to Harry.

Faye raised her glass. "To Esther, of course."

Just then the doorbell rang. Harry and I looked at each other, and I felt a chill crawl down my back. I put the glass on the table and went to the front door and looked out through the window.

Almost I expected a mild, impassive man I had never seen before to be standing there. Actually it was Police Captain Cotter with a couple of plain-clothes men.

When I opened the door, he strode past me into the living room without a word. He seemed disappointed at seeing nobody but Harry Pollack and Faye Wallace. Meanwhile, the plain-clothes men were going into other parts of the house.

"What are you looking for?" I demanded angrily.

"Your wife."

Faye uttered a short exclamation, but aside from that there was no sound for long seconds.

"She escaped from the county jail forty minutes ago," Captain Cotter said. "Three men came in. They shot the two guards dead and took your wife out."

The plain-clothes men returned to

the living room and shook their heads.

"You think she came here?" Harry said. "She couldn't have. Miss Wallace and I have been here for the last hour and a half."

Cotter looked at me. "I'm sure she'd try to get in touch with you."

I picked up my whisky glass and put it down again. "What makes you so sure she escaped? She could have been abducted."

"Nuts!" Cotter said. "You know what I think? The guy who was shot in the jail corridor at noon today wasn't after you, like you claim. I think he was there to help your wife break out."

"You're crazy!"

"Yeah?" The captain jabbed a thick forefinger at me. "All right, so you're an officer of the Army and you've been in Africa all along, so I give you credit that your skirts are clean. But Esther Hull is your wife. She got running with the wrong crowd while you were away. Now you're going to bat for her."

"I'll defend her to the end, if that's what you mean," I told him quietly.

Cotter turned as if to leave, then apparently changed his mind. "By the way, Artie Dart and a couple of his gunnels were burned to a crisp in his house earlier tonight. A couple of people say they saw a soldier jump out of the burning house."

Harry Pollack turned rather quickly toward the window. Faye, the drink still in her hand, gawked foolishly at me.

"So what?" I said. "I never knew the gangster."

"One witness said he thought the soldier was an officer."

"Thought?" I said. "The law doesn't consider that good enough."

"Where were you tonight?"

"Minding my own business."

Captain Cotter sighed and nodded to the plain-clothes men. The three of them left.

FAYE WALLACE noisily expelled her breath. "So Esther escaped! And the police believe that's a sure admission of guilt."

Harry Pollack swung from the win-

dow. "Esther is innocent!" he cried with surprising fury.

"Of course she is," Fay agreed. She lifted the whisky glass to her mouth and drained every drop.

I needed a drink even more than she did. My hand was an inch from the glass on the table when I heard Faye moan.

She was down on the floor, her teeth clenched, her face livid. Froth was forming on her mouth. Her pupils were dilating and her body was gripped in horrible paralysis.

"Prussic acid!" I said. "Harry, get peroxide. In the medicine chest."

While Harry was gone, I turned Faye over on her stomach and gave her artificial respiration. I didn't think it would help. The reaction was too quick and too violent, which meant a powerful dose. If it was prussic acid, and all the symptoms indicated that it was, a three per cent solution of ordinary household peroxide would help.

Harry came back unscrewing the cap off the bottle as he ran. But before we could force any of the peroxide down her throat, she was dead.

"God!" Harry moaned. His gaze swivelled about the room and stopped in horror at our untouched drinks.

I picked one up and smelled the usual bitter almond odor. "It was put into the bottle."

"Then all three of us would now be dead if Captain Cotter hadn't interrupted us!" Harry gasped.

Dully I nodded. The killers were utterly ruthless. They did not care how many they murdered, of their own number as well as others, to get at their victims. Once again I had stood in the doorway to death and had not gone through it. Faye Wallace was on the other side of the door, in my place.

CHAPTER VI

The Sixth Doorway

LOUIE'S was a private mansion converted into a snug drinking place. It had no entertainment, no vulgarity, very little

drunkenness. It was the place where people went when they wanted to sit down and make conversation over highballs.

I wanted to sit, and I could not stand the thought of being alone. It was the evening of my second day home on sick leave. All day the reporters and the police and the district attorney had been at me. All of them were convinced that I held the key to Esther's escape from jail, the poisoning of Faye Wallace, the burning of Artie Dart, the shootings and apparent accidents.

It might have been worse if Major George Olcott, militarily overpowering, had not appeared on the scene. All this might be civilian stuff, but the Army is vitally concerned in its own men.

They let me alone at last, but there was no place to go except Louie's. As I entered, a couple of fellow officers at the bar gave me stiff nods and eyed me curiously. Everybody had read the papers, and it seemed to me that everybody in Louie's was waiting for somebody to move unobtrusively to my table and put a bullet into me.

I was expecting the same thing. But this time I was ready. I had my gun on me, and the feel of it was greatly comforting. Though it wasn't my own safety that worried me.

After a while Edgar Joslyn and Harry Pollack came in and joined me at my table. Harry, his face dark with anger, spread out an evening paper.

"Have you seen these stories?" Harry growled. "They've practically tried Esther in their columns and found her guilty."

"Well, escape is generally considered an admission of guilt," Joslyn said.

Harry flashed him a black look. "You're a hell of a lawyer! Is that how you defend your client?"

"Naturally I don't believe she's guilty." Joslyn rolled his tall glass between fleshy palms. "Still, I had a very difficult time with her. Would you believe it, I, her lawyer, couldn't get a thing out of her except that

she didn't murder Roy Bours? She insisted she couldn't remember anything. In fact, she couldn't even state positively to me that she hadn't murdered Bours. She said that for all she knew she might have."

I SAID: "Something did happen to her memory. But it started coming back when I spoke to her in the cell. I think that's why she was abducted. They were afraid she'd remember too much."

"Ah!" Harry breathed. He leaned across the table. "Did she remember anything important, Chuck?"

"Yes," I said.

They waited for me to go on, and when I didn't, Joslyn made an impatient gesture. "I'm her attorney," he said. "It's my job to get her off. How can I if you won't cooperate?"

"You forget she's no longer in the hands of the law." I brooded into my drink. "What she told me yesterday will help me get her back—if it's not too late." ?

"My God!" Harry said. "You think they'll murder her?"

Joslyn answered for me. "Assuming she was really kidnapped, her abductors are intent on keeping her alive. For the time being, at any rate. Else they would have simply killed her in her prison cell."

I nodded and beckoned to the waiter for more drinks.

After my third or fourth drink, Major Olcott was standing at my table. He was simply there, coming from nowhere.

He said: "Don't you think you've had enough to drink?"

"I'll never have enough, sir," I said. "Not until I get Esther back."

He shrugged and was gone. I saw Joslyn glance anxiously at his watch and then he too was no longer there. Harry's face, across the table, watched me worriedly.

"Suppose they make another attempt at your life, Chuck? You'd be in no condition to defend yourself. I'd better take you home."

"All right," I said.

Harry had to support me out of Louie's. Because of the ban on pleasure driving, there were few cars in

the parking space. And only one taxicab. Harry led me to it.

The taxi was already occupied by a tall man whose face was in shadows. I wondered why Harry pulled me after him into the back seat even though the stranger was there. Then I saw the gun in the tall man's hand, and it came to me that Harry hadn't any choice. The tall man brushed a hand over my uniform and lifted my gun. Then the taxi started rolling.

Harry was talking in a thin, frantic voice, but nobody paid any attention to him. His words didn't make sense to me. I figured he was crazy with fright. I slumped low in the seat and looked at the tall man. In the semi-darkness, his face consisted of sharp planes, but I could distinguish enough of it now to see the smug triumph in it. He, unlike the other killers, was capable of emotion.

But not the driver of the taxi. Once, when we stopped for a taxi light, he turned in his seat, and I saw the dull, impassive eyes I had seen in other faces. Somehow I feared him more than the tall gunman.

The taxi stopped. We were in darkness as we got out and I could not tell where we were. The tall man sprayed a flashlight beam on us and ordered us forward. I staggered a few steps and fell.

"Drunk as an officer and a gentleman," the tall man chuckled. "Pick him up."

Harry helped me to my feet. Holding me, he guided me into a house. It was dark in there too. We started up a hall. Harry's voice again jabbered with terror, but it was receding, and all at once I realized that it was the tall man who was holding me now. Harry had vanished somewhere in the long hall.

Then I was in a room, dark also except for a white, blinding light at one end. I was thrust into a chair and forced to look at the light. The tall man stood at my side, his gun covering me. There was another man in that room, unseen in the darkness behind me.

Under the white light hung a large disk of many colors. As I looked at

it, it started to whirl. I tried to take my eyes from it, but could not. Remorselessly the disk held my gaze until its insane whirling seemed to enter my brain and possess it.

A soft, intimate voice started to speak to me. "Tell me everything she told you."

"Of course," I heard myself reply. "She said: 'Your men are all right. The colonel told me that the casualties were extremely light.' I said: 'No. Those mortars were blasting us to bits.' She said: 'It always seems worse than it is, Lieutenant. You took the position, didn't you? It'll be over in less than a week, they say.' I said: 'And I had to get this damn fever. If it had at least been a bullet.' She said: 'You've done enough talking for now, Lieutenant.'"

A harsh voice broke in: "What the hell's he batting about?"

"Shh!" the soft voice said. "Lieutenant Hull, where was this?"

"In an army hospital in Algiers."

"And the woman was a nurse?"

"Yes." I couldn't tear my eyes away from the whirling disks.

The soft voice said: "That's not the woman I mean. What did your wife tell you in the prison cell?"

"About the black market."

In the room somebody drew in his breath sharply.

"What about the black market?"

I said nothing.

The soft, intimate voice kept nagging at that question, approaching it from many angles, but always getting back to it. And several times I started again to tell him about the nurse in the Army hospital.

"Hell!" the harsh voice growled. "Let me beat it out of him."

"No, no!" the soft voice said. "Crudeness won't work. He is not yet completely recovered from the fever, which makes it difficult. Let's try giving him a rest."

The whirling of the disks stopped. Sighing, I closed my eyes. When I opened them, the white light was still there. I turned my head. I was seated at the outer fringe of light, and at my side the very tall man was a distorted shadow. The gun was

firm in his hand. The owner of the soft voice was lost in the darkness farther back.

SUDDENLY I threw myself sideways. The tall man was taken completely by surprise. My shoulder hit his stomach; my hands closed over his gun-wrist. He had inches over me in height, but he was thinner and weaker and he was not prepared for my attack. He shrieked as my hands twisted his wrist. His gun dropped to the floor.

Both of us dove for it, but he was off balance. I got to it first. As I scooped it up, the roar of another gun filled the room. The bullet did not come close; the owner of the soft voice shot too hurriedly. I spun with the tall man's gun and fired at the flash. I didn't hit anything either, but he hadn't the courage to stand up against another man's gun. A door opened and closed and he was gone.

I started after him and then checked myself, remembering that the tall man, having taken my gun from me in the taxi, had two of them on his person. And when I looked back, he was on his knees, with my heavy Army automatic lined at my heart. There wasn't enough distance between us for him to miss. For the sixth time since yesterday morning I had a foot through death's doorway.

The tall man was a professional killer, but so, in a different sense, was I. I had been trained to kill my country's enemies, and he was certainly one of them. I did not have to move my gun to snap a quick shot.

My bullet beat his by a fraction of a second. It was all that was necessary.

CHAPTER VII

The Seventh Doorway

ABRUPTLY the single white light at the end of the room went out. I was in black darkness. The two windows, I had noticed, were barred; the door through which the soft-voiced man

had fled was probably the only way out.

I strained to hear whether the door was opening. Somewhere far off and below me, a woman screamed. Esther? Who but Esther?

I crouched over the body of the tall man I had killed and faced the door. Suddenly it was wide open, and from the hall beyond light flowed through. A man stood there with a tommy-gun, ready to rake the room with slugs.

He was a sitting duck for me. I shot him dead with the gun I had taken from the tall man.

And then it was over for me. Out of the darkness behind me, two men hurled themselves at my back. There must have been another entrance to the room, and the man with the tommy-gun had been sacrificed to put me off guard. I had no chance. They tore the gun from my hand and beat me down to the floor.

Light snapped on overhead. The two men rose; both of them were armed. There was no menace in their eyes, no hostility; there was only that terrible blankness I had come to know so well. They would kill me without emotion, and they would kill themselves in the same way if they were told to.

Evidently I was not yet slated for death. One of them prodded me with his gun. Without a word, they forced me up the hall and down a flight of stairs. I could still hear the screaming, louder now, rasping in strident never-ending waves. Somewhere I found the self-control not to hurl myself at my two captors.

We were in a cellar. One of the men stepped around me and opened a door. The second thrust me through. Behind me the door slammed shut.

It was a large windowless room, and at the farther end of it Esther sat on her legs. He hands, covering her face, did not still her screams.

Harry Pollack was there too. It was because of what they had done to him that Esther was screaming. They had stuck a knife into his throat. He lay on his back, with the handle of the knife still protruding,

and his dead eyes were staring at Esther.

I was shaking with rage as I dropped down beside Esther. I pulled her hands from her face. I said: "It's me—Chuck. Look at me."

Her screams did not stop. I slapped her hard on each cheek, and it was as if I snapped a connection in her voice. She brushed her wild hair from her eyes and looked at me.

"Chuck, darling!" she said and fell into my arms.

She wasn't mad. Not yet, anyway, though I doubt if it would have taken much longer.

"They killed poor Harry in front of my eyes," she moaned. "They said they'd do the same to me if I didn't tell them what I had told you when you visited me in prison. They didn't believe me."

"Believe what?"

"That I couldn't tell you anything because I couldn't remember. I still can't remember what Roy Bours and I were doing. All I know is that it was terribly important."

THEN the soft voice spoke outside the door. "Well, Lieutenant, are you ready to tell me what you told your wife in prison? Did you repeat it to the police or to Major Olcott or to anybody?"

I was silent.

"Very well," the voice said. "Look at Harry Pollack and you can see what will happen to your wife. And to you also unless you cooperate."

I waited a few seconds before replying. "All right, Joslyn, I'll make a deal with you. But only if I can talk to you face to face."

"Joslyn!" Esther gasped.

I nodded and removed my arms from about her and stood up. The door opened and Edgar Joslyn, Esther's fat lawyer, entered. He remained on the threshold, keeping the full length of the room between us, and he had a gun.

"So she told you after all?" he said.

I shook my head. "Your identity is a complete surprise to her."

"But in Louie's you told Harry Pollack and me that she had told you."

"I lied," I admitted. "I wasn't sure that it was you. It might have been Harry or somebody else. But at any rate, it had to be somebody who could follow my movements closely: who knew exactly on which train I was coming home and when I was visiting Esther in her cell. And I recalled that you used to dabble in hypnotism as a hobby. The only way to get myself taken to Esther was to make the head criminal believe that she had told me everything. It worked. You had to find out how much information I had passed on to others so that you could know where you stood."

"You weren't drunk, of course."

"I was cold sober," I said.

At my feet Esther wailed: "Why did you do it, darling? Now he'll kill both of us."

Neither of us paid any attention to her. At the moment it was between Joslyn and myself, facing each other across Harry Pollack's body.

Joslyn said: "That's why I couldn't hypnotize you. You knew what was happening, so you were able to establish a resistance against it."

I nodded. "It became plain, after a while, what you had done to Esther. She and Roy Bours had the dirt on you as head of the black market racket. They were accumulating evidence. You could have had them murdered, the way you had the others, but the whole basis of your power was terror. You demonstrated by having only Roy Bours murdered and Esther framed for it. Many in the trade must have known the truth, including Harry Pollack, but they were afraid to say anything. The uncanny way you managed it increased their fear. Because the frame-up would have back-fired if Esther had told at her trial what she and Roy Bours had learned about and you and your racket. But she couldn't remember. Those damnable disks of yours did it. You hypnotized her into forgetting."

JOSLYN'S jowls seemed to drop. "I was afraid," he mumbled. "The sight of her husband she had

not seen for fifteen months might be dangerous."

"You were better than you thought," I said. "You feared that the mind of the man she loved was stronger than your post-hypnotic suggestion. She might have come out of it when I spoke to her. Maybe she would have, but I didn't have enough time with her. You took no chances, though. You tried to have me killed when I left the station and later in the courtroom. You were desperate. You sent one of your men into the jail to shoot me. And because you did not know how much she actually told me, you had to keep trying to eliminate me."

Esther rose at my side. Her eyes were very wide. She said slowly: "It's coming back—Edgar Joslyn and the black market. Roy Bours would buy only legitimate merchandise and meats. He learned that Joslyn was the one who had taken Artie Dart's place. I helped him whip his evidence into form. I went up to his apartment to make the final copy of the evidence to turn over to the district attorney. But there was one thing we couldn't understand—those weird men of his who willingly killed themselves in order to kill others."

"I couldn't understand it either," I told her. "Even when I realized that hypnotism was being used, I couldn't see it. Because it is impossible to hypnotize a person to do anything

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which violates his personal code. You could get professional killers who thought nothing of taking human lives; but to make men commit suicide under hypnotic suggestion didn't seem reasonable."

I turned back to Joslyn. "Then I saw it. There are drugs which will put people into an advanced state of depression, sapping them of the desire to live. In that state you hypnotized your killers. They carried out your orders to the letter, not afraid to die themselves because they wanted to die."

The lawyer gave me a pleased smile. "It's not easy, but I did it. I couldn't fight Artie Dart with just another gang of gunmen. He is too experienced in that type of warfare. But these gunmen of mine who did not mind dying—there was no fighting them. Their peculiar method of murder strikes special terror into people's hearts."

I knew. I thought of the raw nerves of a tough-fibered killer in his own right like Artie Dart. I thought of my own fear which had gone beyond anything I had experienced on a battlefield.

"But now it's over," I said.

Joslyn frowned, studying me cautiously. He was wondering what I had told him the very things that made our living useless to him.

"Do you think I will let you and your wife live now?" he said.

I shrugged. "Call in your killers. You haven't got the guts to do it yourself."

HIS THICK lips peeled back over his teeth. I watched the pudginess of his hand on the gun. The muzzle gaped widely at me—the seventh and final doorway to death.

At my side Esther moaned. I turned to her and whispered: "Drop to the floor." When I turned back to Joslyn, there was a gun in my hand.

I doubt if Joslyn had ever personally fired a gun in his life. Always before his hypnotized dupes had done his killing for him. And now, when he had to rely on himself, he was slow and awkward.

He never pulled that trigger. I shot once, carefully, and the slug entered his heart.

Like an echo to my shot, guns slammed elsewhere in the cellar. I had been moving away from Esther in order to draw fire exclusively on myself when the others came in. But they did not come and there was more shooting. Incredulously I stared at the open door, waiting.

Then a man plunged through it with a drawn automatic. My gun snapped up before my eyes took in the olive-drab uniform and the M. P. armband on the soldier's sleeve. "Here he is!" the M. P. yelled.

A second M. P. entered, followed by the severely erect figure of Major Olcott.

He looked down at the body of Edgar Joslyn, then at Harry Pollack, and finally across the room at Esther and myself.

"Well, it seems you were doing all right, Chuck," he said with only the mere trace of a smile.

"You didn't do so badly, sir," I told him. "What brought you?"

"You did. You've had too many close shaves and you're too valuable a soldier to be lost in a civilian rum-pus. I'm not sure yet what it's all about, but I'm glad I asked the Military Police to keep their eyes on your movements."

"So am I, sir."

I felt the pressure of Esther's body. She was staring in wonder at the gun in my hand.

"I—I was sure we were doomed. It doesn't seem possible that they didn't take the gun away from you."

"They did, but only one gun," I explained. "I'd taken my gun as well as his from the tall man while I waited upstairs in the darkness. They didn't think to search me because they couldn't think. Joslyn had made them into automatons. They were told to take a gun away from me and they did. They obeyed their orders exactly and literally."

Esther slid her hand through my arm. "Let's go home, darling," she said.

THE END



THE GENTLE HOST

Anyone in this strange house might be the escaped homicidal maniac, Death Mantas!

By T. W. Ford

(Author of "Blood on My Hands," "The Dead Man Deals in Death," etc.)

THE wind came down the valley like a drunken giant amok. It slashed a path as if in pure berserk fury. On it rode stinging, blinding sheets of rain. Over its gusts lightning sliced jagged scars in the black heavens. Over it all was the colliding crash of thunder with the pistol-like reports of snapped-off trees puncturing it. In short, it was one hell of a night. And Charley Fringle was right smack out in it looking at the flat tire on his left forward wheel.

Rain water used the brim of his hat as a gutter. His coat hung on him like a wet paper bag. Water

oozed from his shoes. His jack was jammed. And driving with that flat on the tortuous slick of high-crowned road was beyond all question. He hauled his pot-bellied body back to the rear door of the sedan and stuck his head in at his wife and sister-in-law.

"We're stuck, girls. I'll go up the line and see if I can find a telephone. Maybe a garage—" The wind stuffed the rest of it back down his throat. He sloshed off.

Luck was with him. A few hundred yards on the patch of woodland ended. Set back from the road in the clearing was a sprawling white house.

Even as Fringle wondered if anybody was at home, wan light seeped through the shade of a ground-floor window. He stumbled up the path hemmed in by wet shrubbery and onto the tiny porch like a cavern beneath the overhanging eaves. He pushed the bell twice with no response. A shutter on his right moaned and he almost jumped out of his skin. Lightning gashed the night and Fringle noted the window inside the shutter was broken.

He rang a third, a fourth time, then beat on the door with his fist. He took a couple of steps backward to call out, "Hey, is anybody home? Is anybody—" Then he realized the big front door was opening.

It was black as a pit inside beyond it. Fringle couldn't see anybody there but the door kept opening. A guarded voice said, "What do you want?"

"My car's stuck down the road and I'd like to use your telephone, if you—"

"Phone's out of order," snapped the unseen one at the door. "No phone." Then the lightning blasted away the rain-shot blackness again like a magnesium explosion to reveal the figure inside. He was a little shrunken piece of man with a long sawtooth face and big sad eyes. A wild shock of white hair capped his head. At first Fringle thought he had but one arm. The man stood sort of sideways, the rear arm twisted back behind his body. He stood too with his head out-thrust like a suspicious animal sniffing.

"Say," Fringle said in desperation. "I've got two women folks with me. Do you suppose we could come in for a little while?"

The guarded air fell away from the little man. "Women folk... Why sure, sure you can come in, mister. Get 'em and come right along. Welcome, welcome." His little creaking voice rose shrilly on the last.

Charley Fringle groped back down the path with relief, bent against the raking sheets of rain. He never saw the hulking figure coming the other way until they collided. Both grap-

pled blindly in the storm and almost crashed into the bushes.

"Why the hell don't you look where you're going?" the other bigger man snorted as he punched foliage out of his face. "See here, can you fix me up with a room and some dry clothes and something to eat? Charge what you like—I know what you natives are. I'll pay," he added pompously.

"I don't own the place," Charley Fringle said apologetically, awed by the other's manner and towering size. "I'm stuck up the road and just stopped here myself. But the owner seems like a nice little man. He's letting me come in. So—"

The other swore as the wind ripped open his rubber poncho and snorted again. "I guess he'll let me in. I'm J. G. Nordley—Nordley Plastic Process, you know."

Charley Fringle was really awed then. Everybody knew the Nordley Plastic outfit. Million dollar stuff, that outfit. Charley thought of how when he got home he would tell the boys in the office about meeting J. G. Nordley on his trip. He put out his hand hesitantly, starting to introduce himself. There was a clap of thunder as if something had bombed Heaven and Nordley wanted to know what the devil they were waiting for.

Charley Fringle told about his women down the road and led the way back to the car. Ella, his wife, stepped out and smack into six inches of puddle. "You would stop right here in a small lake!" she shrieked at Charley. She was a big-bosomed woman with the general air of a battleship at action stations.

Charley said, "Yes, dear," spat out half a gallon of rain water and searched a door pocket for his flashlight. When he found it the battery was so weak it couldn't throw a beam two feet.

Maisie, Ella's sister, had spotted the extra male and was hurriedly applying fresh war paint by the tonneau light. A downpour of brimstone and ashes would have held no terrors for Maisie with a loose male on the scene. She was a dyed blond, over thirty, and thought she was kitten-

ish. But when a crashing tree slapped the road a few yards behind, limbs brushing the car, she bolted out of it with a squeal like a speared pig and used some very strong language.

They slogged their way back to the house with Charley plodding ahead and locating the puddles for them by floundering into them.

"CHARLES!" declared Ella icily, "I think you might have selected a more inviting place! It's—it's got a sort of haunted look and—"

She choked. A yellow beam had shot out across the porch to their feet as they panted up the steps. It was the little man with a flashlight though he remained invisible. It might have been an unholy ray from the maw of a tomb.

"Come in, come in, ladies and gentlemen," his apparently disembodied voice carried weakly to them. Charley Fringle hesitated but Ella gave him a prod that sent him stumbling over the threshold. "Go right into the library. Into the library, down the hall to the left," said the little man with that dry echo of a voice. The hall was pitch black.

The four fumbled their way along and found their way into the library. It was a high-ceiled old-fashioned room, the walls panelled halfway up. The light from two small table lamps alone broke the dimness of it. The shades were drawn at all windows with heavy drapes pulled across as well. There was a constant drip-drip sound. It came from the fireplace where water drained down the chimney into the charred logs of a long-dead fire.

Nordley shed his poncho and hat and strode around in an expensive pair of slacks and a windbreaker, massaging his hands. They were huge big-knuckled things, those hands, furred with hair. He had been at a fishing camp way up at the head of the valley, he told all and sundry. Started out down the river with a guide in the boat. Late in the afternoon, the guide wanted to put into shore, insisting a big storm was coming up.

"I got tired of arguing with him,

put him ashore and fired him on the spot," Nordley announced importantly. He had come on alone. The storm hit him. He was capsized in a shallow spot and waded ashore. He had pushed up the side of the valley until he found Fringle and this house. "Which proves my point," he snorted. "If that damfool guide hadn't lost his nerve, with two men paddling we'd have made it through easily!"

"Of course, Mr. Nordley," yes-manned Charley Fringle.

"You outdoor men simply awe little me, Mr. Nordley," simpered sister-in-law Maisie.

"Nice night for a murder, isn't it?" Their host stood in the doorway, rubbing his long white hands together gently with a slithering sound. He wore baggy black clothes that seemed a couple of sizes too big for him.

"Nonsense," snorted Nordley, "no murderer would come out on a night like this!... My man, how about getting together some food for us and something to drink—something hot maybe."

The little man bowed his shock of white hair, closed his sad eyes. "I'm so sorry. But the servants are off to-night."

"Charley, I'm cold. This place is like a grave," announced Ella Fringle, huddled on the divan. She shuddered as the wind seemed to rock the house. Lightning licked at the windows, seeming to make the shades transparent.

"Yes, dear," said Charley. "Uh—Mister—uh—mis—"

"Reaper is the name," said the little man.

"Grim Reaper, eh? Ha-ha!" snorted Nordley.

"He-he," said Mr. Reaper. "I'll remember that."

"Could we have a fire, Mr. Reaper. Maybe if I helped you—uh—well—" Charley stumbled.

Mr. Reaper ran a sorrowful eye up the chimney. "I'm sorry—but—but there was some trouble with the chimney last week. It hasn't been fixed yet. But—maybe you'd like a drink, a nice stiff one." He winked

knowingly. "One to keep the worms out of the coffin. Yes." He moved across the room, picking up their wet coats en route, and went out a door leading to the rear. He didn't make any noise when he walked.

"What does he mean, keep the worms out of the coffin?" Nordley snorted. He tapped his forehead significantly. "Weak-minded, probably. A harmless old fool.... Say, this place is kind of creepy. I—"

"Let's have some music!" said Maisie, jumping up with feigned vivacity. "Let's have a party! Drinks and music. We'll probably shock the old coot out of his shoes. Let's cut a rug, boys and girls!" She undulated over to the radio. "I'll bet you shake a mean rhumba, Mr. Nordley."

She twisted the dials and found a swing band. A crooner was holding forth on "Black Magic." Pouting her over-carmined lips in what she thought was a provocative manner, Maisie held out her arms to Mr. Nordley.

"Sit down, Charley," snapped Ella Fringle. "You know you can't do anything but waltz like a sick cow. You—"

"One moment please, folks," said the station announced, interrupting the music. "A special news flash has just come in.... Warning to all residents in the Piscan Valley district. ... Warning—"

"That's right here where we are, Charley," said Ella.

"Yes, dear," said Charley.

"Warning," went on the radio. "Joseph 'Death' Mantas, homicidal maniac, escaped today while being taken to the State Insane Asylum when the car in which he and officers were riding struck a tree. Death Mantas dragged the unconscious officer, to whom he was handcuffed, off into the woods and killed him. The police of two counties and State officers have thrown out a dragnet but, as yet, have picked up no trace of the maniac killer. Mantas is well armed. I repeat that, ladies and gentlemen.... Death Mantas is well armed. He was nicknamed "Death" because he is prone to talk about it as he is about to strike down a victim. Now here

is an official police teletype description of Death Mantas. He—"

THAT bolt of lightning seemed to knife right through the sides of the houses. There was an ear-shattering crash of thunder that rattled the roof over them. And the lights went out. Just before they did, Charley Fringle saw Mr. Reaper standing in the doorway with a tray of drinks in one hand. He was standing twisted a little around with the rear arm out of sight behind him as he had been when Charley first came to the house.

Maisie screeched. Nordley roared, "Where's my leather jacket? I had a gun in it," forgetting that their host had taken their wet garments into the kitchen with him.

The lights flickered and then came on. Mr. Reaper was standing over by the radio. He stooped and fussed with the dials and nothing happened. Mr. Reaper made an impotent gesture. "I'm afraid that last bolt blew out something in the radio," he said sadly. "I'm so sorry. But, come now. We'll all have a nice drink. There's nothing to worry about. You know, folks, the old saying." He moved around, passing the drinks and smiling childishly. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." He-he."

Charley Fringle shuddered. They were just getting their glasses to their mouths when the pounding came at the front door. Ella Fringle gave a little gasp and fell back on the divan. Maisie grabbed Nordley's arm. Charley Fringle looked around wildly, and then grabbed up the poker from beside the fireplace. The pounding came again, with redoubled force above the wind. Mr. Reaper, rubbing his pale hands softly, had glided to the very back of the room.

There was a sudden lull in the storm and Nordley bellowed, "Who's out there?"

"It's me, Ed Purling, police officer from the town!" came from the porch. "Half drowned, too! I got—" The wind sucked away the rest.

Nobody moved for a moment. Nordley stood with his huge hands

working, fingers hooking up. Then Charley Fringle saw his wife nod and went out into the hall to the door.

PURLING came striding in, a big man in an olive-green slicker gleaming with rain. His face fell when he saw no fire in the hearth.

"Been out watching the roads for that escaped homicidal killer, Mantas," he said as he got out of his coat. He wasn't a tall man but was built like a bull with a heavy torso. He looked as if he could break a human being over his knee. He went on telling how a tree was down across the road and he couldn't get through to town. But the others in the room scarcely heard. Their eyes were locked on his armament as he unpeeled an undercoat. He had a gun in a hip holster, another rigged in a shoulder sling. The butt of a third protruded from a rear pocket.

He stared around slowly, studying them. Charley Fringle took a step backward instinctively when he was the target for those eyes. One of them had a cast in it that gave it a peculiarly wild look.

Purling said, "All strangers, eh... Well, don't worry. Like I said, I'm the police officer from Wakill. My badge—" He pulled his coat back from his flannel shirt to indicate it. The shirt was bare of ornament. Purling looked down and chuckled. That chuckle had a nasty cold ring

to it. "Heck of a policeman I am. Plumb forgot my badge...."

Ella Fringle caught her breath with a trembling gasp. Charley Fringle looked around to where he had laid down the poker six feet away.

"All strangers," said Purling again. "Say, where's Joe Bannard? The owner, I mean. I saw him take a train to the city this morning. But he said he'd be back tonight and—"

"He's drunk," said Mr. Reaper gently.

"He—what-t? Say, I never saw Joe take more'n one drink in my life. Why—"

MR. REAPER smiled in a vague way, tittering a little. "You've never been with Joe when he gets to the city, I guess, Officer. You should have heard him on the phone tonight—that was before it went out of commission...."

"Oh." Purling whistled with surprise. A fresh onslaught of rain hit the side of the house like machine-gun fire. "You're a friend of his, I reckon."

Mr. Reaper inclined his white head. "Speaking of drinks, I think you better have one to stave off a cold. A man has one foot in the grave when he catches a cold." He came forward, offering his own glass.

Maisie let out a little scream. "I thought I heard someone at the window," she half sobbed, on the verge of hysteria.

Nordley scowled at Mr. Reaper.

COMING UP!

A Lineup of Topnotch Mystery and Detective Yarns, Featuring

"HOW DEAD WAS MY VALET?"

By Henry Norton

"THE HOUSE THAT WASN'T THERE"

By Russell Gray

WATCH FOR THE JANUARY, 1944 ISSUE OF

CRACK DETECTIVE STORIES

TEN CENTS AT ALL STANDS

"We've got women here! Do you have to sound like an undertaker every time you open your mouth, man?"

Mr. Reaper said he was very sorry. Purling guffawed. "Don't worry, folks, I'm here even if I ain't got my badge. Or maybe some of you got me figured for that Mantas guy, huh? Har-har!"

Nordley had moved over beside the fire poker Charley Fringle had laid on the scuttle on the hearth. "Ha-ha! Why I could be Mantas, myself. I could have just said I was on a fishing trip. And, after all, I can't identify myself since I lost my wallet when the boat capsized. I—hey, Reaper, what was that noise in the kitchen? The back door locked?"

"Charley—do something!" sniffed Ella Fringle.

"Let us keep calm, everybody, please," said Mr. Reaper. "Perhaps if we all said a little prayer—"

Ella Fringle nodded eagerly. "Yes, yes. That's a good idea." She signed to Charley and he nodded.

Mr. Reaper laid a hand on his chest. "Dear Lord God above," he began. A long-drawn rumble of thunder blotted out his voice. "—and we who walk in the valley of death," his words came through as the thunder ebbed, "shall have no fear." He asked the Almighty to look over them for they were sinners who had sinned. They were not worthy but could God, in his great mercy, spare them from the destruction and damnation of His righteous anger, Mr. Reaper said. They were but the sons of mortals, doomed to return to the bowels of the earth when they had come, but would praise Him with their last breath, Mr. Reaper promised.

It was a nice prayer but a little depressing. "Ashes to ashes and dust to dust," Mr. Reaper concluded, "Thy will be done. We—"

There was a blow on the front door.

"S me, Joe Bannard, Ed!" the man at the door called as he stumbled in with a blast of wind on his heels. The door slammed. He came down the hall and into the room, a tall, gaunt man with rain sluicing from his clothes as he pulled off his gloves. "Saw your car, Ed, at the other side of the down tree that blocked me. Walked up the rest of the way. Some night. Whew!" He seemed very sober as he surveyed the rest of them. "You folks got stuck, too, eh? All right. But whoever busted that window on the porch to get in—he's got to reimburse me for it!" His thin lips pursed up. "Really tain't legal to bust into a man's house under any conditions or—"

"Don't think none of these folks broke the window, Joe," Ed Purling said. "Your friend, Mr. Reaper, let them in."

Charley Fringle had looked at Reaper before and seen him standing in that half-twisted-around way over by the radio. He had also noted subconsciously, without realizing what it meant at the moment, that the plug of the radio connection hung down from the wall socket.

"My friend, Mr. Reaper?" Bannard said, puzzled. "Why I don't know anybody by that—" He looked to where Purling pointed at the white-haired man.

They all looked. They looked right into the slow-swiveling muzzles of the .45 automatics in the co-called Mr. Reaper's hands. Mr. Reaper was snickering crazily and his sad eyes were suddenly glassy with a mad light.

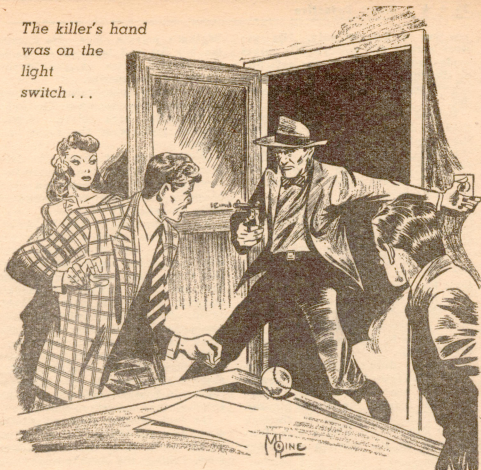
Purling choked. "Gawd help me, they said that Mantas was white-haired!"

Death Mantas' flaccid lips curled back from his teeth in the grin of a death's-head. "Ashes to ashes...dust to dust," he cackled. "You who are about to die...."

NORDLEY grabbed up the poker. Then they heard a key scrape, the rasp of the lock. "Who's there?" roared Purling, hand on a gun butt.

THE END

The killer's hand
was on the
light
switch . . .



HOMICIDE ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ PLATE

A Baseball Murder Novelet

By Marvin Ryerson

When Death struck out Steve Walker, manager of the Purple Caps, it left Chip Hawley holding the bag!

CHAPTER I

"Put Out"

CHIP HAWLEY walked through the gloomy shadows under the grandstand. His

jaw was set determinedly. His eyes were narrow and sultry. His spikes made cuppy sounds in the soft dirt of the runway that led to the dressing rooms—and to Steve Walker's office.

Behind Hawley, on the playing field, under a battery of arclights, the Purple Caps were just starting the eighth inning of one of those two-night games with the Sentinels. The roar of the crowd was loud in Hawley's ears.

For five years Chip Hawley had listened to that same crowd while he covered a lot of first base for the Purple Caps. Twice he had showed his heels to the rest of the team in the batting department. But now Chip Hawley was through!

At least that's what the slip of paper, clutched in his big right hand, said. Released, waived out of the big leagues to some obscure team in the Midwest.

Hawley didn't think Manager Steve Walker had given him a square deal. The least Walker could've done was hand Hawley the release himself. He didn't have to do it through Coach Ben Powell. That's why Hawley was on his way to see Steve Walker.

Past the empty dressing rooms Hawley went. He paused a moment at the sound of water splashing in the shower room. He nudged open the door and saw pitcher Jay Marriot's tow head above the door of one of the stalls.

Marriot was new with the Purple Caps. Came up during the summer from an industrial team. Showed a lot of promise, even if an inning ago he had been shelled off the mound via a barrage of Sentinel hits. That was just a few minutes before Steve Walker was thumbed out of the game for squawking about a close play at the plate.

Marriot hadn't liked the idea of being yanked. He thought he could pitch himself out of the hole. And he had told Walker so.

HAWLEY closed the door and continued around the bend in the passageway that led to Steve

Walker's private office. He knotted his big fist and bounced it against the frosted glass of the barrier. There was no answer.

He reached down, turned the knob and pushed the door open. The lights in the office were ablaze. Hawley entered and swept the room in a glance.

Walker was not there. At least Hawley did not see him as he walked toward the big green locker in which baseballs and other team paraphernalia was stored.

There was a slight limp in his left leg. Memento from a hunting trip last winter. One of his party accidentally exploded his gun at Hawley's left foot. Shot chipped a bone off the heel. A miracle of modern surgery made his foot walkable again. But it hadn't been definitely established yet, whether it had finished his career as a first baseman.

Hawley wondered as he crossed the office, whether it was possible that Walker could have changed from his baseball uniform into his street clothes and left so quickly.

He took another step toward the closet to see if Walker's clothes were on the rack. A spiked shoe poking from behind the desk stopped his eyes!

He hurled forward and around the desk. The impact of what he saw staggered him. He stood quite still for several moments. The blood sang in his ears.

Steve Walker was here—and he was dead! A stark fact etched out on the cold-gray concrete floor of the office. Shot through the heart, he lay sprawled at Hawley's feet. The purple-lettered words across the front of his white baseball uniform dyed crimson.

Hawley stood there a long time staring down at the corpse; wild-eyed; slack-jawed. In life Steve Walker had been rough, tough and surly. Death had smoothed none of the harshness out of his large featured face.

Hawley's gaze traveled to the desk. The drawers were open; ransacked as if someone had been searching through them, hurriedly.

Gray-faced, Hawley finally turned and crunched across the concrete floor of the office. He fumbled the knob in a sweaty paw, got the door open.

He was suddenly aware of the odor of perfume—sharp, exotic! He took a step across the threshold. Then it felt as if the grandstand had suddenly caved-in on his head, burying him in blackness under the debris.

Hawley lifted his head off the ground, squinted, looked around quizzically. It was several moments before he realized he was still just outside Steve Walker's office.

Climbing to one knee, groggily, he put his left hand to the throbbing spot at the back of his head. It hurt worse than when the bone had been shot away from his heel.

He stood up and saw, strewn at his feet, the contents of his pockets. Handkerchief, sun glasses, a half-package of gum, wallet and a wrinkled score card of today's game. Nothing had been taken—not even the wrinkled release that had been pried out of his hand.

His brows crawled together with a frown. What did the party who conked him think he had in his pockets? The same thing they'd been searching for through Walker's desk?

He thought suddenly of Jay Marriot. The resentment the kid pitcher showed when Walker lifted him out of the box in the sixth inning. Marriot had been under the stands alone with Walker.

Marriot could have easily slipped unnoticed into Walker's office and killed him. No one could've heard the shot through the thickness of the concrete walls and the din of the crowd in the stands.

But, on second thought, guys don't go around bumping off their managers just because they're taken out of the box. Yet—it might not be a bad idea to question Marriot . . .

There was a sudden rumble of boos from the fan-packed stands above him. He knew what that meant. Curfew had rung. The umps had called the game. Obviously Joe Fan did not like it.

Voices came to him from around the bend in the passageway. Purple Cap players filing into the dressing room.

As Hawley stooped quickly to pick up his belongings, his eyes fastened on a scramble of footprints in the soft dirt that had been tracked onto the concrete walk in front of the door. Marks of a woman's high-heeled shoes!

His thoughts flashed to the whiff of perfume he caught as he opened the door, just before he was sapped.

HAWLEY nailed Ben Powell and the other players just inside the dressing room door. White-faced, Hawley blurted: "Steve Walker's just been killed. He's on the floor in his office."

There was utter silence in the dressing room for about thirty seconds—then the full meaning of Hawley's words suddenly penetrated.

Players almost knocked him down as they charged through the doorway and raced around the bend to Walker's office.

Hawley took that moment to search the dressing room for Jay Marriot. But the rookie pitcher was not there.

Half an hour later Chip Hawley sat in one of the large leather chairs in Steve Walker's office. Inspector Crane, sandy-haired, with cold gray-green eyes and a voice that was "rough on rats," stood before him. The mild-looking man with the black bag, behind the desk, kneeling beside the corpse, was the medical examiner.

The inspector's accusing eyes were focused on the ball player's ruggedly handsome face. He rapped: "You didn't see a gun when you discovered the body?"

"No," Hawley replied. But his thoughts were again on young Marriot. He hadn't mentioned the kid pitcher to the inspector. Because the rookie flinger might know nothing about Walker's murder. So until he had a chance to talk to Marriot, why drag him into the mess?

The medical examiner straightened away from the body, came around the desk with his black bag.

"Well, Doc?" Creedmore asked.

"Bullet punctured the right ventricle of the heart. Death instantaneous. Looks like a .22," the medical examiner replied as he stuffed his shiny instruments into his black bag and closed it.

The inspector gave a brief order to the cop standing just inside the door. The cop opened the door, hollered something to those outside.

Two burly guys entered almost immediately. Without question they placed the body of Steve Walker into a long wicker basket.

As the basket was carried past him and out the door, Chip Hawley drew back in his chair, thankful for its solid support. Hawley was not used to the sight or smell of death. It made his flesh crawl.

After the door had closed on the wicker basket and the medical examiner, Creedmore took a long twisted black cigar out of his vest-pocket and stuck it in his liberal-lipped mouth. Around the stogie he said: "You were lugging around a grudge because Walker kept the seat of your pants glued to the bench."

"I wouldn't say it was a grudge," Hawley protested. "I just didn't think Walker gave me a square deal." Hawley broke off as the door opened.

The man who opened the door poked his head inside and said: "Hello, Inspector. Like me to sit in? Maybe I can help out in places. Sort of know my way around the team, since it's been my beat these past fifteen semesters."

Creedmore considered a moment, then said: "Okay, Crandall, come in."

ACE CRANDALL came into the office and shut the door. Crandall penned the popular sports pillar "Aces Up" and covered the daily doings of the Caps for the Daily Examiner. Rather foppishly dressed was he; dark, cynical and acidly ironic.

Crandall walked across the concrete floor, looking at Hawley without expression. The first baseman returned the gaze; wooden-faced. It was plain there was no great love between these two.

Crandall hoisted himself on the edge of the desk and listened to Creedmore address Hawley.

"So you don't think you got a square deal from Walker, eh, Hawley?" Creedmore asked.

"No," Hawley replied. "He never gave me a real chance to prove whether my foot was all right or not. He put Stretch Norman in at first base during spring training and all I got was an occasional chance to pinch hit."

"And your pinch hitting certainly don't give Walker any reason to believe your foot was okay," Crandall put in, as he toyed with an autographed baseball that stood on the desk. "One bingle in eighteen trips to the plate. While Norman was only pounding the ball at .325 and playing rings around you out there at first."

"I didn't say I thought I was better than Norman," Hawley retorted. "I just said Walker didn't give me a chance. He kept me on the bench—and gave off the impression I was washed up, so no other team would want me."

Creedmore cut in sharply. "I'm not interested in the ability of ball players. I'm here to get to the bottom of Walker's murder." He chewed on his cigar. "Hawley, you left the dugout at the start of the eighth inning. Came back here with a chip on your shoulder because you'd just been handed your release."

"Release?" Crandall bounced off the desk, came toward Hawley and demanded: "So Walker was letting you go? Where?"

"Someplace out West," Creedmore interceded. "The Raiders I think the name of the team was."

Crandall rounded his mouth and whistled. "Class D! Boy—that was burying you away; getting you out of his gray hair!"

"What are you driving at, Crandall?" Creedmore demanded.

"There's been some chatter making the rounds about Hawley succeeding Walker as manager of the Caps," Crandall explained. "Shipping Hawley off to a Class D bush league

would have cooked Hawley's goose—but to a crispy brown."

Hawley looked up hard at Crandall. "You couldn't be trying to pin a motive on me?"

"It's very becoming," Crandall returned tartly.

Hawley was out of his chair moving toward the sports reporter.

The inspector moved between them. "Cut it, both of you!"

Hawley's wide shoulders writhed under the white flannel of his baseball shirt. His face was a scowl. "He's been sour on me ever since I first joined the Purple Caps and edged his pet, Pete Turner, off first base. He's needled me from the start. Said I was a flash in the pan. A morning glory with two left feet. That I wasn't fit to carry Turner's mitt. But—made him eat his words in capital letters. That was over five years ago. Since then the only time my name's appeared in his column was when he wanted to pan me."

"A sorehead's squawk!" Crandall snapped.

HAWLEY'S face grew shades darker. He spun at the sports columnist. But Inspector Creedmore, anticipating the move, made a grab for the first baseman's arms and pinioned them close against his body.

"I said cut it!" the inspector stormed. "One more break like this—and I'll take you to HQ to finish my questioning."

After a moment of motionlessness Hawley's muscles relaxed. He said tight-lipped: "Then get him out of here while you're doing your questioning."

The inspector twisted his head and looked over his shoulder at Ace Crandall, reproachfully.

"You better beat it, Crandall," he advised.

The sports reporter placed the autographed baseball back on the desk, but kept looking at Hawley with a smirk on his face. Then he strode across the floor, said, "Well, boys, I hope I helped some," opened the door and went out.

Creedmore brought his arms away and stepped back.

"Kind of a warm temper, haven't you, Hawley?" Creedmore intimated.

Hawley was wily. "Not warm enough to kill a man."

The inspector took the black cigar out of his mouth and studied the wet end of it. "Why don't you be a nice guy, Hawley," he said, lifting his gaze to the first baseman's face. "Tell us what you did with the gun."

"I didn't see any gun!" Hawley persisted heatedly.

"Walker was killed with one."

"Then whoever killed him—and whoever hit me on the head—took it."

The inspector took a long drag on his cigar. He smiled depreciatively. "Still insist somebody hit you on the head, eh?"

"Think I put the egg there myself?"

"Could be. Been tried before. Or maybe it was that woman whose footprints we didn't find outside the door?"

Hawley scowled. "There were footprints out there!"

Creedmore said: "Sure," puffed on his cigar for a couple of moments while he studied Hawley. Then he shrugged and announced "Okay, Hawley, that'll be all for now."

Hawley stared for a moment, then tugged down the peak of his purple cap, pivoted and started toward the door.

"Oh, Hawley," Creedmore called after him. "Don't take the advice of that release you were handed. Don't report to those Raiders for awhile. You gotta stick around town for a spell."

"I had no intention of reporting to them—ever!" he said expressionlessly, then he opened the door and went out.

CHAPTER II

"Blond Surprise"

OUTSIDE the door a mob had gathered. Purple Caps, Sentinels, cops and reporters mixed in. Hawley could see why Inspector Creedmore scorned his story about a woman's footprints in the dirt on the walk outside the door.

With their over-sized dogs this mob had erased all trace of them.

Hawley said, "Sorry—nothing to say, fellers," to the barrage of questions the crowd hurled at him and hurried around the bend toward the dressing room.

He turned at someone's light touch on his uniform sleeve. It was Teddy the bat boy. Teddy was fourteen; under-developed; skinny and wild-haired. Right now he looked as if he was going to bawl.

"It—it ain't true what they're sayin' about you, is it, Chip?" he slobbered. "You—you didn't really kill Steve?"

"No, kid," Hawley assured him. "They're just taking their three swipes, hoping to catch hold of a lucky one and straighten it out."

The tragedy went out of the kid's face. He grinned up at the big first sacker like a miniature freckle-faced jack o'lantern. "I told 'em you couldn't do nothin' like that, Chip. Not you!"

Hawley rubbed his hand in the kid's wild hair and smiled. "Thanks, Teddy, at least I've one pal."

Teddy went back to the mob, contentedly.

Hawley went into the dressing room, walked to his locker and started to open the green-metal door.

Spikes crunched on the concrete floor behind him. He turned and saw Ben Powell. The thin-faced coach was a large-sized replica of what Teddy had looked like when he yanked Hawley's sleeve.

Powell threw the filled-up leather baseball bag he was carrying onto the wooden bench that stretched before the lockers, and he said sadly: "I'm sorry as the devil, Chip. If it hadn't been for me you wouldn't be in this jam. If I'd held onto the release and not given it to you until after the game like Steve said, somebody else would've found the body first."

Hawley zipped down the front of his shirt and pulled the tails out of his pants. "But that's how the breaks come sometimes."

Ben Powell flopped down on the wooden bench, heavily; took a plug

of tobacco out of his pocket and bit off a healthy chew. As his jaws worked up and down, he said: "Hope this doesn't have any effect on Rocksley—I hope he hands you the management of the team. Be swell working with you, Chip."

Hawley pushed aside the bulging baseball bag and sat down on the bench beside Powell. He couldn't help but compare that the last time he saw that leather-bag lying on the concrete floor of the dugout, empty, at the start of the sixth inning, things were a lot different. He had a job, Steve Walker was alive and he wasn't up to his ears in a murder mess.

Hawley said: "Maybe Rocksley'll give you the management of the team?"

Powell shook his grizzled head, paused to aim a squirt of tobacco juice in the corner behind the lockers, then said: "Not a chance. Rocksley may think I'm a good enough coach. But he much as told me to my face I'd never make a good manager." He shifted the wad of tobacco from one side of his mouth to the other. "If this killing doesn't blacken you too much, the job'll be yours. Rocksley likes you, Chip."

"That why he was shipping me off to the Raiders?" Hawley got up.

Powell froze in the act of squirting more juice, turned and eyed the first baseman quizzically. "Thought you knew? Rocksley's out of town. Went upstate to the mountains for a month or so. He had nothing to do with signing your release. Walker waited until he was gone, to get rid of you."

Hawley was stripped to his shorts now. He reached the large turkish towel hanging inside his locker.

Powell got rid of the juice, then said: "Walker was afraid of you, Chip. In the twenty years he's piloted the Caps, you're the first guy that ever came even close to threatening his job. The first guy that Rocksley might've been tempted to give a chance to, managing the team. I know, because I've been with the Caps ever since Rocksley first appointed Steve manager. Since he was

a second baseman and I was the top pitcher in this old league. That's why Walker wanted you out of the way, Chip. And he grabbed the first chance that came his way."

Hawley threw the towel over his naked left shoulder. "Why didn't Walker just trade me?"

Powell flashed a wise tobacco-stained grin. "Afraid you'd come back to haunt him."

Hawley frowned. "Swell! If Inspector Creedmore or the D.A. get their teeth into that—!"

He didn't finish. He just shivered, turned and went into the adjoining shower room.

A KNOT of morbid curious was on the sidewalk in front of the players exit when Chip Hawley issued into the street. Moving his wide shoulders uncomfortably under his dark gray suit, Hawley hurried past.

He walked east one block, crossed the street, walked another block, then turned the corner and walked two more blocks down a dark deserted side street that led to the Lion-Arms Hotel where Jay Marriot was stopping.

Hawley could not dislodge from his mind that Jay Marriot must fit somewhere into this jigsaw, else why had he ducked so quickly?

Hawley heard a car draw into the curb behind him. He paid no attention to it until the car-door opened and a feminine voice called his name. He halted and turned to see a shapely silk leg poke out of the car.

"Mr. Hawley!" the girl called. "May I speak to you a moment?"

Hawley hesitated a second, then advanced toward the car, slowly. The girl sat on the front seat of the car and she was alone. Her legs—skirt hiked above her knees—were out of the car; the rest of her was inside.

Halting a couple of feet away, Hawley squinted down at her. The light was bad. He could not make out her face distinctly from this distance. But he saw enough to know she was blond, pliantly slender and very restful on the orbs.

"Yes?" he asked.

Her right hand went into her handbag. Hawley figured she was reaching her cigarettes, powder, or lip-stick.

He suffered a start when a small compact flat black pistol leaped into view from her bag. Immediately he regained his composure. His eyes, holding no particular expression, focused on her white face.

She coughed, moved her red lips nervously; her dark eyes earnest.

"Please get into the car with me," she said. She slid over behind the steering wheel and kept the gun leveled at the big first baseman's chest.

Hawley smiled, said, "You hardly need a gun for that," ducked his head and slipped into the car beside her. The motor purred very softly.

"Close the door," she instructed. "And then clasp your hands behind your head."

Hawley pulled the door shut. Then he interlaced his fingers back of his neck. He sniffled. The perfume the girl wore brought a soft glow of understanding into his black eyes. He turned his head slightly to look at her.

"Eyes front!" she ordered tersely. "I don't want to shoot you, but I warn you I will if I have to. Now—what did you do with the formula?"

Hawley frowned quizzically. "Come again?"

"Hold still. I'm going to search you!"

"If you find it," Hawley said with a sad attempt at levity. "Would you mind letting me see it?"

The girl transferred the pistol from her right hand to her left. The snout of the gun close to Hawley's ribs, she put her right hand into his coat pocket.

He might have made a grab for the gun. But the way the girl's hand shook, he didn't think it advisable. She might accidentally pull the trigger and blow a "nice" hole in his side.

His eyes traveled to the gear-shift. It had a screw-on black ball knob on top—and it was in neutral.

Without letting her see him, he slyly worked his foot across the floor

of the car toward the shift-rod. Then suddenly he gave the rod a forward shove, with his knee, knocking it into reverse speed. The car gave a sudden backward lunge and stalled!

The girl let out a gasp of alarm. She tore the gun from Hawley's ribs and twisted to see what had happened.

A sharper gasp escaped her lips as Hawley's left hand clamped over her gun-wrist. With a quick snap he twisted the pistol out of her hand. She grabbed for it as it dropped to the floor. But the first baseman scooped it up first.

He looked down at the black pistol which seemed much smaller in his large right paw.

"Hmmm—.22," he observed. "Same caliber Walker was killed with." He slipped out the cartridge-clip. One bullet had been fired!

"I—I know what you're thinking," the girl croaked nervously. "But—but I didn't kill Steve Walker."

"But you won't deny that you sapped me?"

She swallowed and answered in a meek voice. "Yes—I did that. But I didn't kill Steve Walker."

Hawley showed her the gun. "Isn't this the pistol that killed him?"

"I—I suppose it is."

"Where did you get it?"

"In his office."

"You know who killed him?"

"No."

"Then how come you've got the murder gun? And what were you doing lurking in the shadows outside the office?"

THE girl mashed her handbag in her lap. Her eyes looked fearfully into Hawley's eyes, and she said: "I went to see Steve Walker. I was in the stands tonight. Saw him put out of the game by the umpire and figured it an excellent chance to get him alone—to talk to him. So I went down under the stands to his office. I didn't know exactly where it was located, so it took me a little while to find it."

"Walker wasn't there. At least I didn't see him. I decided to wait.

As I started toward one of the chairs, I spied that pistol on the floor. Without thinking I picked it up. Then—I saw his body—"

Tears welled in her eyes. Emotional tears. She waited a moment until she calmed down. Then blinking the tears out of her eyes, she went on: "I was afraid to put the gun down again because my finger prints were on it. And I didn't know how hard you had to rub to get them off. I put the gun in my handbag and hurried out of the office. As I got outside, I heard someone in spikes coming along the concrete walk. I ducked quickly behind one of the posts and waited to see who it was. It turned out to be you."

Hawley, stuffing the gun in his coat pocket, asked: "But why did you slug me?"

"I—I thought you were the murderer—returning for something—the gun maybe?" the girl told him.

"You could've called the police," Hawley inserted.

"I—I was afraid to call them. I thought maybe you were the only one who knew where the formula was. That's why you had to be free."

"And that's why you sapped me?" Hawley put in. "Because you thought I had the formula? What's the formula for?"

"I don't really know," the girl replied. "It isn't anything really important—that is, except to a chemist. It's for separating one atom from another atom or something. But it belongs to my sister's husband. He's a chemist."

Hawley frowned dubiously. "If it isn't very important, you're certainly going to a lot of trouble to get it back."

The girl swallowed and said low-toned: "It—it isn't easy to say about one's sister—but she's—well, not very discreet about some of the things she does. Especially when her husband's out of town. And it seems the last time he left, he entrusted the formula with her. She met Steve Walker. Walker got the formula away from her somehow. She must have showed it to him or something. Then like a

fool told him how much trouble it would cause if she didn't get it back before her husband found out."

"So Walker was blackmailing her?" Hawley interceded.

"Yes," the girl said.

Hawley knew that in spite of his gray hairs, Steve Walker was quite a ladies' man. Also more than once the rotund pilot of the Caps had trod the plush in the office of baseball's big boss. They frowned on his gambling and on some of his associates. They didn't think them in the best interest of the game.

Then, too, during the infamous Mole Cannon scandal more than a little of the muck had splashed on Walker. Mole Cannon was the Purple Caps' outfielder of some years ago, who took a piece of shady money to approach a player on an opposing team and try to bribe him to let a few balls dribble through his legs in an important game. The player naturally squawked, which was his duty, and Cannon was banished from organized baseball.

But before he went, Cannon vowed up and down that he was only the goat in the sad affair. That the order came through Steve Walker. Of course, Walker denied it flatly. The rat who paid Cannon said Walker had no part in it, and Owner Rockley stood behind the manager.

All of which meant Walker was no angel—but blackmail—!

"That's a little far-fetched," Hawley told the girl.

"You don't believe me?" she gasped.

Hawley shook his head. "Walker couldn't afford to go in for anything like that—even if he wanted to."

There was the sound of a car behind them. Hawley turned, looked over his left shoulder through the back window.

"Police car," he whispered to the girl.

She stuck her golden head out through the side window. As the prowling car drew alongside, she let out a wail like a banshee: "Help!"

Hawley's mouth dropped open with profound astonishment. It was the

last thing in the world he had expected her to do. He grabbed her right arm and rumbled: "Shut up!"

Again she screamed: "Help!"

The brakes of the police car squeaked as it came to sudden jolting halt alongside them. The blue-capped head of a cop poked from inside the prowler. "What's all the yellin' for?"

"This man," the girl blurted breathlessly. "He—he opened the door of my car and jumped in beside me."

Sweat beads were visible on Hawley's brow as his hand dropped over the gun in his coat-pocket. This was the murder-gun! If these blue-jackets frisked him and found the automatic, coupled with the suspicion already dumped on his doorstep—he would be a cooked pigeon!

Hawley's gaze shot to the small black ball atop the gear-shift rod. As one of the cops slammed open the door of the police car and leaped out, Hawley's left hand, unseen by the girl, unscrewed the black ball.

The cop came around behind the car, gun drawn.

Hawley weighed the little black ball in his hands, tentatively.

The cop took a step toward the car, gun leveled. He barked: "Come out—reaching! Move!"

Chip Hawley moved. But it was not the way the cop expected. Hawley brought his left hand up quickly. He made a short snap throw same as he had made so many times on the diamond. With a dull "whock!" the heavy black missile caught the cop smack between the eyes—where it would not do serious damage. The cop dropped like a beaned batter.

In a flash, Hawley had the door open. He leaped over the prostrate form of the cop and was sprinting down the dark street before the second cop could slide from behind the steering wheel and give chase.

Hawley turned the first corner and kept running. The limp in his left leg deterred his speed only slightly.

He did not stop running until he was half-a-dozen blocks away and was sure he had lost the bluecoats.

Then he paused to catch his breath and unscramble his thoughts.

He wondered if the girl would tell the cops who he was. He didn't think so. She'd probably stick to her yarn that he was just a stick-up artist. Because from all appearances she wasn't any more anxious to involve herself in the killing of Steve Walker, than he.

CHAPTER III

"Junior Rat"

IT WAS almost twelve midnight when Chip Hawley entered the Lion-Arms Hotel. He walked across the deep blue plush in the lobby toward the desk. The pallid-faced, bald-headed night clerk looked up from behind the desk with a smile and a cheery: "Good evening!"

Hawley nodded, leaned across the desk and asked: "Is Mr. Jay Marriot in?"

A frown furrowed the clerk's tall forehead. "Mr. Marriot checked out almost two hours ago, sir."

It was Hawley's turn to frown. "Checked out?" he echoed. "Did he leave any forwarding address?"

"No, sir."

Hawley's eyes darted to the key rack. "Would it be all right if I took a look around his room? I'm a friend of his—a teammate, Chip Hawley."

The clerk smiled again. "Yes, sir, I know. I recognized you when you first came in. As a rule celebrities don't like to be recognized—so we always wait." His eyes followed Hawley's eyes to the key rack. He shrugged and said: "It isn't exactly according to the rules, Mr. Hawley. But since the room's empty and I know you—"

A FEW minutes later Chip Hawley was standing on the broad blue runner in front of Room 802 on the eighth floor of the Lion-Arms Hotel. He inserted the key that the desk clerk had given him, into the lock and opened the door. Clicking on the lights, he entered.

No doubt about Jay Marriot having cleared out in a hurry. The closets were empty. The drawers of the desk and bureau open and cleaned out.

Hawley bent down beside the desk over the wastebasket. He took out two crumpled balls of white paper. He smoothed out one of them, examined it. It was an incompleted letter written on hotel stationery. It was dated today and began: "Dear Dad, I've made up my mind. Tonight I'm going to—" The rest was blank.

Hawley smoothed out the second ball. This was an envelope addressed in a scrawly, unsteady hand to "Mr. Jay Marriot, Lion-Arms Hotel, Empire City." And it was postmarked two days ago from Litchfield Plains, Georgia.

Hawley read the postmark again. Litchfield Plains seemed rather familiar to him. He felt he'd heard or read the name somewhere before—linked with something of vast importance.

He stuffed the envelope and the incompleted letter inside his coat pocket. Then from the desk he took a blank envelope and addressed it to himself. This he put in his pocket, also. Then with a final look around the room to make sure he hadn't overlooked anything of importance, he opened the door and left.

Fifteen minutes later, Chip Hawley sat in Sam's Hof Brau on Broadway around the corner from his hotel and had a quick light supper. When he paid his check, he asked Sam for a brown paper bag and a two-cent stamp. Sam obliged.

Hawley walked a couple of blocks to the subway. He went down into the kiosk, paid his nickel and entered the station. Walking to the row of individual lockers, he inserted a dime, turned the key and opened the locker.

Careful that no one was watching, he slid the gun out of his pocket. He wiped it clean of fingerprints, put it into the brown paper bag, twisted the top of the bag and stuffed the whole business into the locker.

Closing the door, he put the key

in the envelope addressed to himself and sealed it. Then he left the station. Into the first mail box he came to, he dropped the self-addressed, stamped envelope.

At least that took care of the murder gun in case the police got the bright idea to pick him up and search him.

HAWLEY unlocked the door of his apartment in the Hotel St. Michael. As he switched on the lights and closed the door, a man came out of the bedroom, slinky as a reptile.

He was a medium-sized, small-boned individual; dark, with drab olive skin and small slanted Jap-like eyes. He wore expensive clothes that were cut a little more extreme than was the current fashion. The brim of his black hat was pulled down on the right side; his right ear tucked underneath. He fingered an oversized clasp knife.

"I've had quite a wait for you, Mr. Hawley," the man with the knife said with a mock bow, leaning his left shoulder against the door-jamb.

Hawley scowled. "Who are you? What do you want?"

The man grimaced evilly and his Jap-eyes slanted narrowly as he touched a spring on the knife and a fat, dangerous-looking blade shot out. He said: "I'll ask the questions! Where's the paper you lifted off Steve Walker?"

Hawley's face showed no change, only the least flicker of light came into his eyes. "The formula?" he ex-acted.

The man with the knife straightened away from the door. "So you know about it? Then you must have it?"

Hawley shook his head. "Wrong guess!"

"We'll see," Jap-eyes muttered as he moved forward.

Hawley waited until the knifer was only a step away, until his livid hand was reaching out to frisk him. Then Hawley went into action. He spun at Jap-eyes quicker than he had ever spun to nab runner off first base. His left clicked solidly against the

man's jaw and Jap-eyes reeled across the room into the wall.

Jap-eyes shook his head groggily, blinked and straightened away from the wall. Murder stabbed out of his eyes. His face was a mask of fury.

Raising the knife, he took a couple of steps forward. Hawley stiffened, arose on his toes and lunged at the man. Jap-eyes brought the knife down in a sweeping, glittering arc... But Hawley was not there. In as neat a fadeaway slide as he ever executed on the diamond, Hawley hit the floor to the right of Jap-eyes, entangled his legs in the other's legs and Jap-eyes hit the floor with a jarring thud.

Hawley twisted and leaped at the man. His left fist closed around the knife-wrist and he drove his right fist against the man's chin. Jap-eyes' head snapped back as far as it could go. Hawley drove another right to the same spot. The struggle went out of the man. He closed his Jap-eyes and went to sleep....

Hawley picked up the knife; a wicked-looking weapon with a blade six or seven inches long. Hawley closed the knife and pocketed it. Then he bent over the prostrate form of Jap-eyes and emptied his pockets.

IN THE man's wallet was his Selective Service card which said his name was Kenneth Dimilian and told where he lived. Also in the wallet was a small business card with the name "Nails Getto, Meridian Apartments," scribbled on it, and several ragged-edged newspaper clippings. Hawley read one of them, date-lined June 2nd, 1942:

"EX-JANITOR ABSOLVED IN CASTNER MURDER

"Kenneth Dimilian, 34, ex-janitor at the chemical lab in which Godrich Castner was brutally slain, was today absolved of having any part in the murder.

"Dimilian was brought into the case by the defense in a vain attempt to save Martin Hood, Castner's assistant and accused slayer of the aged chemist, from the death penalty. Although it was discovered that Di-

milian had a former and lengthy police record, he established to the satisfaction of the court that he was in Los Angeles at the time Castner was murdered in San Francisco.

"Castner at the time of his murder was working on a secret process for making imitation silk. According to Hood, Castner had the formula for this silk completed and ready to be manufactured at the time he was slain. Although Hood claims he never saw the formula and does not know what it consists of, he did see a sample of the synthetic silk.

"He says it not only contains the high quality of real silk but is two to three times more durable than silk or nylon. The greatest advantage of this synthetic silk is that it requires no war materials to make.

"The formula, as yet, has not been found."

Hawley's eyes were bright with comprehension as he glanced at the other clippings. They all dealt with the same subject, how cleverly Dimilian had been cleared. One of the clippings contained pictures of Dimilian, the murdered chemist and his assistant, Martin Hood.

The way Hawley figured it, this must have been one of the few times Dimilian ever got his name spread across the front pages and, in his warped mind, must have been very proud of the fact. Therefore he carried these clippings around in his wallet to gaze upon.

Hawley put everything back into Dimilian's pockets and stood up as the ex-janitor's Jap-eyes began to flutter.

FINALLY Dimilian opened his orbs, blinked and looked around. It was several moments before he showed any sign of remembering where he was. Then he lifted his head off the floor and scrambled to one knee. He groped on the floor for the knife and when he did not find it, a look of alarm came into his eyes, his weak mouth drooling.

Hawley said: "The Castner formula ought to be worth a small fortune.

Bet the police'd like to know you're so interested in it."

Dimilian's astonishment was genuine as he got to his feet. He opened his mouth to speak, frowned with hurt and put his hand to the sore spot that Hawley's fist had left on his chin.

Hawley reached out and grabbed the lapels of Dimilian's coat. "How did Steve Walker get hold of the formula?" Hawley demanded.

Dimilian struggled to get free. "I don't know!"

Hawley studied Dimilian critically. He had an idea that Dimilian did know. But he not only had all the earmarks of a hermetically sealed clam—the San Francisco police must have given a guy with a record like his quite a going over in spite of his alibi. And if they couldn't make him sing, what chance would an amateur like Hawley have?

There wasn't much sense in turning Jap-eyes over to the police, either; even if Dimilian had come here with mayhem in his heart. Because Dimilian was plainly not alone in this thing. Nor was he the type to give the orders. He may have stolen the formula, maybe killed Castner and even Steve Walker. But he definitely was not the man who jiggled the strings.

If Hawley let Dimilian go, most likely the ex-janitor would scoot back to his boss and report what had happened. And if there remained even a semblance of suspicion in the Big Fry's mind that Hawley might have the formula, they'd surely strike again. And perhaps next time Mr. Big Fry himself would do the calling? At least it was worth a try.

He shoved Dimilian back into the door roughly and growled: "Okay, Rat, get out—and don't come around here again pulling any more knives—or I'll shove the next one down your throat."

Dimilian needed no second invitation to leave. He almost tore the door off its hinges, getting it open and rushing out.

AT TEN o'clock the next morning the door of suite 10-A at

the Claremont Hotel was opened by Louis Rocksley, owner of the Purple Caps Baseball Club.

Rocksley was a distinguished-looking man of medium stature, perhaps sixty years old, with black hair splashed with silver at the temples, aquiline features and grayish eyes behind black-ribboned pince-nez. When he held out his hand to Hawley and said, "Hello, Chip," his voice was tired but warm and friendly.

Hawley took his hand, smiled and said: "It's good to see you, Mr. Rocksley. I got the message you left at my hotel and hurried right over. Ben Powell told me you were up-state on vacation. Too bad you had to cut it short and come back."

Rocksley nodded wearily as he told Hawley to come in. They went into the study and sat down.

Rocksley took off his glasses, pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger and said regretfully: "Too bad about Steve Walker. Too bad."

Hawley wagged his head up and down. "Payoff is the police think I did it."

Rocksley shook his head, put his glasses back on his nose and discharged: "Absurd!" Then without ceremony he went on: "Chip, I want you to take over managing the team. I've had it in mind a long time. But I couldn't bring myself to get rid of Steve Walker after twenty years of service—especially with the team in the first division. Still a first division team isn't what I want, Chip. We've a darn good ball club. I've never stinted for one moment, when it came to buying any player, no matter how high his price ticket, if I thought it would help us to a pennant. Yet Walker hadn't given me one in ten years. And I want one! That's my interest in baseball, Chip. A champion's p. And with you leading the boys, I think we can have one."

Hawley frowned. "Didn't you hear that Walker gave me my release?"

"Absurd!" Rocksley replied. "Tear it up! Walker spoke to me about getting rid of you since the beginning of the season. I wouldn't listen

to it. He knew you were a threat to his job as long as you remained on the team and he was determined to get you out of the way. So the minute my back was turned—" He emitted a weary sigh. "But that's past history, Chip. I want you to manage the Caps."

HAWLEY placed his hands on the arms of his chair and met the club owner's gaze steadily. "Don't you think that'll sort of be putting me on the spot, Mr. Rocksley?"

"You mean until after Walker's murder is cleared up?" He thought a moment, then nodded his head. "Yes—maybe you're right. Maybe it would look bad in the eyes of some people. Suppose I appoint Ben Powell, temporarily, until the smoke clears?"

"Fine," Hawley said.

Rocksley smiled faintly. "But between you and I—you're the team's manager—as of right now."

As they were sealing it with a handshake, the doorbell rang.

Rocksley arose and said: "That's probably my luggage."

Hawley stood up, too. He said: "May as well let me out at the same time."

They walked to the door together. Rocksley laid his long, manicured hand on the first sacker's wide shoulder and said: "I'll see you at the ball park this afternoon, Chip. Meantime I'll speak to Ben Powell about temporarily handling the team—which I hope isn't too long."

He opened the door. A couple of denim-clad porters stood in the corridor. One of them said: "Morning, Mr. Rocksley. Your baggage is here."

"Bring it in," the club owner told them. He exchanged "goodbye" with Hawley and went back into his suite.

Hawley passing into the hallway and walking toward the elevator, glanced casually at the array of trunks and valises lined against the wall. His eyes glimpsed one of the tags. He stopped abruptly and, with wide eyes, read what the baggage-stub said:

"Shipped from Litchfield Plains, Georgia."

Hawley rode down in the elevator, his brain a swirl of confusion. What did it mean? Why had Rocksley told everyone he was upstate, when actually he was down south in Litchfield Plains, Georgia? That was the same place the envelope came from, the envelope Hawley found in Jay Marriot's wastebasket. What was in Litchfield Plains?

HAWLEY came out of the hotel and bought a copy of the "Daily Examiner" at the corner newsstand. He put it under his arm until he'd boarded the uptown bus which would take him to his hotel.

Seated in the bus, he unfolded the paper. His eyes fastened on the headline "PURPLE CAPS MANAGER SLAIN AT BALL PARK."

He saw that his nemesis, Ace Crandall, had been brought forward from the sports page to pen the featured front page story of the murder. In his popular breezy jargon, Crandall wrote:

"Baseball's stormy petrel, Steve Walker, manager of the Empire City Purple Caps, was thumbed out of the Big Game today, by that master of all arbitrators—the Grim Reaper—when a .22 bullet ended his life under the roaring, fan-packed stands at the Caps' Stadium...."

"Walker's violent end came as the worst shock to the great American pastime since the Mole Cannon scandal which drove the 'Mole' out of baseball into retirement on his 50-acre farm at Litchfield Plains, Georgia...."

Hawley's eyes almost bugged out of his head and his brain and his heart did a joint flip-flop as he read the last line again. Now he knew where he'd heard the name "Litchfield Plains" before. It was in all the papers at the time of Mole Cannon's disgrace. It was the Mole's home town.

But what was the tieup? It was fifteen years since Mole Cannon went down the long dark road into oblivion. Could it be possible that he had come out of the shadowy past

to conceive some master-plot for revenge against Steve Walker?

How was Louis Rocksley implicated? And why had young Marriot, a kid pitcher with a brilliant baseball future, risked that future to be part of foul murder—if he was a part of it?

And where did Dimilian, the ex-janitor, fit in? And the blond girl? And the missing formula for making synthetic silk?

CHAPTER IV

"Blind Justice"

AT THREE-FIFTEEN that afternoon, Chip Hawley came into the Purple Caps dugout. The Caps were engaged in the last few minutes of infield practice, prior to crossing bats with the Gray Dots in the first of a five-game series.

Ben Powell spotted Hawley, came over and laid his hand on the big first baseman's back just above the large purple "5." The grizzled, tobacco-chewing coach said: "Rocksley told me the story, that I was just fronting for you until the stew stops bubbling. So anything you want me to do, Chip—"

"Thanks, Ben," Hawley responded as he watched Stretch Norman gobble up a grounder, clothes-line it into the catcher's mitt, then lay down his mitt and come in. "Right now I think I'll try me a slice of first base."

Hawley picked up his own battle-scarred mitt, went up the concrete steps of the dugout and jogged out to the brown patch around the initial sack.

He stayed out there until the three umps made their appearance, then he took off his purple cap, wiped sweat from his heated brow and started toward the bench. Halfway, his gaze went up into the stands. He saw Rocksley seated in his field-box behind first base. He answered the club owner's wave with a nod.

He saw a lot of other people he knew and nodded to them, too. Then his eyes caught on a girl sitting in a

box a short distance away from the screen behind home plate. He stared hard, thinking at first he was mistaken. But it was no mistake! It was the same blond girl from whom he took the murder gun last night!

She was not alone this afternoon. A man, whom Hawley failed to recognize, sat in the box with her. He was a heavy-set, dark-jowled, beetle-browed gent. He wore a loud plaid sports jacket and a cocoanut hat.

The thin voice of Teddy the bat boy shattered Hawley's musings. "Gosh, Chip," the kid enthused. "You looked like a couple of million out there at first base. Just like old times. Sure nothin' wrong with that foot of yours that I can see!"

He took Hawley's gray mitt and carried it proudly toward the bench. Hawley walked alongside the kid, his brows gathered with a thoughtful frown.

Teddy looked up. "Somethin' wrong, Chip?"

Hawley glanced down at Teddy, then at the blond, and then back to Teddy. "You want to do me a big favor, Teddy?"

"Sure, Chip. Anything you name."

Hawley took Teddy to one side of the dugout, out of earshot of the other players and pointed to the blond and her plaid-coated escort in the field box. "See those two, Teddy?"

The bat boy nodded.

"I want you to get off your uniform, climb into your street clothes and go up into the grandstand and keep your eye on those two. When they leave, you follow them. Find out where the girl lives—and meet me later at my hotel."

"Got cha, pal," Teddy said with an outrageous wink and ducked through the door that led under the grandstand.

As the ground crew manicured the diamond and re-whitened the squares around home plate, Ben Powell sided to Hawley. With a fretful frown, the coach said: "Young Marriot hasn't shown up this afternoon, Chip. Wonder what happened to him? You know, come to think of it, he was under the stands last night

when Steve was bumped. You don't suppose—?"

Hawley interrupted with a faint grin. "Better leave the detective work to the police, Ben. Right now we've got ourselves a ball game to think about."

LEFTY Geisow started out for the Purple Caps and had a nice game up his left arm. Going into the last of the sixth inning it was deadlocked at 1-all.

As the Caps came in to bat for their half of the sixth, Hawley climbed out of the dugout and went out to the third base coaching box. Ben Powell took up coaching duties at first.

Hawley glanced up into the stands, as the first Purple Cap stepped into the batting square. The two seats that had been occupied by the blond and Plain-coat were now vacant. Teddy was gone, too.

The Caps' leadoff laced the first ball pitched to him for a line-drive single over second. He scampered up the base line to first base.

As the next batter moved toward the plate, one of the utilities trotted out to the first base coaching line and handed Ben Powell a telegram. Powell read it, smiled and stuffed it into his back pocket.

The next three Purple Caps went down in one-two-three order. Hawley cut across the diamond and walked toward the dugout with Ben Powell.

"Looks like you sort of got good news," Hawley remarked.

Powell frowned, then grinned as he realized what Hawley was talking about. "You mean the telegram? Yeh, sister of mine's gettin' married. Wants me to come to her weddin'. Ha—I'll finance the blamed thing. Means one less dependent I'll have to support." His face clouded and he corrected: "Or maybe it means I'm taking a new one on?"

Hawley laughed, took a drink from the bubbler and sat down.

Teddy was sitting on a divan reading a comic book in the Hotel St Michael lobby when Chip Hawley came in at six-thirty that evening. Hawley walked to the divan and sat

down beside the kid. Teddy stuffed the comic book into his pocket and asked eagerly: "Who won, Chip?"

Hawley smiled. "We did, Teddy. Tug Hamilton hit one over the wall in the ninth with a man on."

Teddy beamed. The Purple Caps were the kid's life blood.

Hawley asked: "Now what kind of luck did you have?"

"Oh," Teddy got out excitedly. "I followed 'em like you said. The man took the girl to her apartment. The—the Resinol. I pumped the doorman, found her name's Myra Forsythe. And do you know who that guy with her was—Nails Getto!"

"Nails Getto?" That was the name written on one of the cards in Dimilian's pocket, Hawley recalled.

Teddy said: "Nails is a big shot gambler. I recognized him the minute I got a closeup. Once I caught him gabbin' with Steve Walker. Walker told me if I ever breathed it to a soul, I'd be looking for a new job."

Hawley took a five spot and pressed it into Teddy's small hand.

Teddy looked down at it with a frown. "Gosh, Chip, I didn't do what I did for money. I did it cause we're pals."

Hawley grinned warmly. "Then because we're pals, you keep it!"

Chip Hawley was standing in the vestibule of the Resinol Apartments at nine o'clock that night, scanning the names over the row of bells. He found the one he sought "Myra Forsythe, Apartment 605" and put his finger on the black button; no answer. He pressed several others and the street-door-buzzer clicked.

He entered the lobby, strode to the self-service elevator and rode to the sixth floor. Before door "605" he halted, thumbed the bell. He heard it re-echo through the apartment; but no one came.

He went back to the elevator, rode to the roof. It was very dark. The wind, for late-June, was cool. There was no moon. The sky was a misty red-gray as if fixing to rain.

Across the tar-and-pebbles, Hawley walked to the fire-escape. He slipped over the parapet and went down the

iron rungs, gingerly. At the sixth floor landing he tried the window to the girl's apartment. It was unlocked.

He opened it, noiselessly, slipped across the sill into the dark room and waited until he was sure he was alone. Then from his pocket he withdrew a match, struck it and found the wall-switch. He snapped it on and discovered he was in the kitchen.

Through the rooms he went, stealthily, snapping on the lights. He rummaged through the desk drawers, the pockets of the girl's coats, suits and dresses; the closets; even searched through her empty valises. He found nothing of importance. Then he tackled the bureau.

In the bottom drawer, under a neat pile of carefully ironed lingerie, he came across a black-covered photo album. The black pages of the book were crowded with pictures of the girl and her friends during all the phases of her life. Under each picture was a white-inked saying.

Halfway through the book a small snapshot stopped Hawley's eyes. A picture of the girl and a man standing before a two-car garage. The man was middle-aged with dark-rimmed glasses, a thin face and sparse hair.

Hawley had seen this man before. Rather he had seen another picture of the man—on the clipping in ex-Janitor Dimilian's wallet. The man was Martin Hood, the man accused of killing Godrich Castner the scientist.

Hawley read the words below the snapshot with interest. They were: "Dad and me—after a lot of coaxing by yours truly—August, 1940."

Hawley closed the black-paged photo album, placed it back carefully under the lingerie and shut the drawer. There was a dawning brightness in his eyes as he put out the lights and left the apartment.

ACE CRANDALL looked up at Hawley from behind a desk that was piled high with papers, as the big first baseman came into his

office at the Daily Examiner about half-an-hour later.

"Well-well-well!" Crandall ejaculated. "You're the last person, outside of Hitler and Hirohito, I ever expected to see walk through that door."

Hawley frowned, cleared his throat and said: "I want to talk to you, Crandall."

Crandall grinned and said sarcastically: "Maybe you better go back to the reception desk first, and check your artillery."

Hawley didn't say anything.

Crandall waved him to a chair, took an ornate cigarette case off the desk and held it across to Hawley. The first sacker shook his head.

Crandall took one, mouthed it and lighted it. Then he leaned far back in his swivel chair, clasped his hands behind his head and blew out smoke. "Okay, Hawley, what's the beef?" he asked finally.

Hawley looked at the sports columnist cold-eyed and said with brutal frankness: "We don't like each other, Crandall, so let's not sugar-coat this visit. But it so happens you're the one person who can set me straight on a few things—even better than the police."

Crandall inhaled deeply, then blew out a long slanting blue-gray cloud over the first baseman's black-thatched head. "What makes you think I won't tell you to go scratch your Aunt Minnie's back?"

"Because it might find Steve Walker's murderer and give you the inside on a story before anyone else," Hawley informed him. "And I have an idea you're enough of a newspaper man to forget a grudge for something like that."

The cigarette dangling from one corner of his mouth, Crandall said drily: "Last time I tuned in, the police had the finger on you."

"Which is exactly why I've got to turn up the real murderer," Hawley returned. "You know the case history of the Caps since away back when. You know the background of every player that ever wore one of its monkey-suits. What I want to know—did Mole Cannon ever have a son?"

The smile went out of Crandall's sharply etched face. He looked across the desk at Hawley with sudden attentiveness. "What's Mole Cannon got to do with Steve Walker's murder?"

"I'm not sure yet. I want to know if he had a son?"

Crandall took the cigarette out of his mouth and crushed it out in a tray on the desk. But his eyes did not leave Hawley's face. He said: "Yes, I think he did have one."

"Know how old the kid was when Cannon was black-listed?"

"About five."

Hawley frowned. "That would make him twenty now. Just Marriot's age."

CRANDALL'S face was a question mark. "Marriot? Jay Marriot?"

Hawley met the reporter's quizzical gaze, unblinkingly. He said: "Crandall, I'll give you a story no reporter even dreams exists. But I've got to have your promise you won't break the yarn until I say so."

Crandall kept staring at Hawley, his right eyebrow lifted questioningly. Finally he said: "Okay, Hawley, I'll play ball. What's the dirt?"

Hawley told the sports columnist about Jay Marriot being under the stands at the time Steve Walker got the "big one." How the kid pitcher had checked out of his hotel. And showed Crandall the envelope he found crumpled in Marriot's wastebasket.

"Litchfield Plains?" Crandall exclaimed. "Why that's where Mole Cannon went when he retired. He's got a fifty-acre farm down there."

Hawley nodded and showed Crandall the unfinished letter that was with the envelope.

"Which gives you an idea why I think Marriot might be Cannon's son," Hawley concluded.

"Wow—what a story!" Crandall shouted and reached for the phone.

Hawley smothered it. "You made a promise, Crandall!"

"But this is news!"

"And this is my neck!" Hawley reminded emphatically. "Which will be

stretched—but good!—if I don't turn up the guilty party."

"But you've got him," Crandall argued vigorously. "Jay Marriot! If he really is Cannon's son and he was under the stands with Walker as you said—! Cannon accused Walker of double-crossing him. Said Walker left him holding the sack to be banished from baseball for life. Man, what more do you want?"

"Positive proof!" was Hawley's stubborn rejoinder. "Besides there's another angle you haven't heard yet."

Crandall moved forward, eagerly, until the desk against his stomach stopped him. His jet black eyes were alive with interest.

Briefly Hawley told the columnist about Dimilian's hostile visit, the clippings found in the ex-janitor's wallet, the missing formula that everyone seemed to be looking for, and the name of "Nails Getto" on the card.

"Nails Getto?" Crandall echoed, then emitted a low whistle. "It was one of Getto's stooges that gave Mole Cannon the greenbacks to talk Page of the Braves into throwing that ball game. And when the call came and everybody laid their cards face-up on the table, and Cannon stabbed the accusing finger at Walker, this stooge of Getto's sallied forth and denied Walker had any hand in it! Which whitewashed Walker and nailed ol' dumb Mole Cannon to the cross."

"Then all this must tie in together somewhere," Hawley said. "But the job is finding out how!"

HAWLEY went back to his apartment after he left the Daily Examiner building. The Caps had a tough double-header scheduled with the Gray Dots tomorrow and Hawley figured a good night's sleep would do him lots of good. Especially since he seemed to have run up against a brick wall as far as his investigation was concerned. Maybe with a little sleep under his belt, he could tackle everything with a fresh mind in the morning.

He undressed, climbed into a pair of bright-striped pajamas. He turned

out the light, pulled up the shade and got into bed. It was very dark and a cool damp breeze wafted in through the open window, making him draw up the covers. Maybe rain would wash out that double-header with the Dots tomorrow?

He couldn't sleep. He lay there in bed for the fattest part of an hour, reviewing all that had happened. There certainly were a lot of loose ends. Nails Getto. The girl who called herself "Myra Forsythe." Her father, Martin Hood. The ex-janitor, Dimilian. Louis Rocksley. Mole Cannon. Jay Marriot. The missing formula. It was all very complex—especially to a man unfamiliar with murder and intrigue.

He was just starting to doze—when there was a sound in the next room! A footstep soft and padded.

Hawley shook away the sleep-webs that had started to weave across his brain. He sat up abruptly in bed and listened. There was absolute silence for about thirty seconds. Then the sound came again—someone was moving through the next room!

Hawley bounced out of the far side of the bed. He grabbed his robe, trousers and a pillow and stuffed them under the bed-covers, an effigy of himself.

The silhouetted form of a man appeared in the doorway. In the darkness, Hawley could not make him out.

Stealthily the figure moved toward the bed. Hawley pressed back against the wall and glimpsed the up-raised blade in the man's right hand. Hawley's mind flashed to Dimilian and the wicked-looking jackknife he took away from the ex-janitor. Could this be Dimilian back for another visit?

Hawley, weight distributed on the balls of his feet, muscles tight, held his breath. Sweat stood out all over his large body. He thought surely the mysterious figure would hear the thump of his heart in the silence. If only he had some weapon with which to strike back—!

The figure stopped beside the bed, straightened and without sound, drove the blade down viciously into

the figure on the bed. Hawley, at the same time, hurled forward across the bed, swinging his left fist through the darkness like a loaded sling-shot.

The man let out a surprised gasp as Hawley's fist smashed against the man's jaw and drove him staggering back across the room. Hawley was over the bed and after the man. He seized the man by the coat as the man was starting through the doorway into the next room.

The man wheeled and planted his fist against Hawley's liberal chin. It was no light touch. It shook the big first baseman clear down to the soles of his bare feet.

Hawley grabbed the man by the throat, backed him into the wall. The man struggled for breath.

"Now," Hawley said, panting, spacing his words. "We'll find out—who you are—"

As the ball player's hand reached toward the light switch—something moist splashed in his eyes. Hawley didn't notice it for an instant, then it began to smart and cloud his eyes so he couldn't see.

THE man brought up his knee and caught Hawley viciously in the groin. Hawley clung to the man tenaciously. A hard fist belted Hawley in the pit of the stomach; another exploded against his jaw.

Hawley was forced to let go of his assailant and tried to wipe the burning substance from his eyes. The man took that moment to turn and flee through the rooms.

Hawley made a vain attempt to follow, hands rubbing his eyes. But halfway through the living room, he tangled with a chair that his attacker had thrown in his path. Down onto the floor Hawley went, heavily.

The next moment the corridor-door slammed and the mysterious would-be assassin was gone.

Hawley climbed to his feet and groped his way to the bathroom. He clicked on the light, fumbled the faucet and turned it on.

He still could not see. What had the man thrown into his eyes? Hawley had heard about chemicals, like

tear gas, that temporarily blinded people. He had seen fountain pens filled with the stuff, advertised in magazines for the purpose of warding off stickup men and mad dogs.

Or was it something more deadly? Suppose the man in the darkness had been Dimilian? Dimilian had worked around chemical labs. Maybe he'd gotten his hands on something that would cause permanent blindness. Maybe that's what had been thrown into Hawley's eyes.

That last thought brought icy shivers to Hawley's spine and he could feel the perspiration roll down his face.

He cupped his hands, filled them with water and washed his eyes. Again and again he did it. Gradually the smarting went away and he could see himself, dimly, in the mirror that hung over the sink. His eyes were bloodshot and red-rimmed.

He rubbed his finger under the lid of one of his eyes, then put the finger to his nose and sniffed. His mouth twisted with a faint grin as he looked at his finger.

It was not tear gas that had been thrown in his eyes. It was not the "fountain pen" stuff advertised in magazines. In fact, it hadn't even been thrown. But it gave him a new lead to follow — a very important lead!

He turned off the water, dried his face in a towel and went to the telephone in the living room. He dialed Teddy's number. The bat boy, his mother said, was in bed. Hawley told her it was very important that he speak to Teddy. After a few moments, Teddy's squeaky voice came over the wire.

"Teddy," Hawley said into the mouthpiece. "Last night at the start of the sixth inning the leather baseball bag was empty, yet when Ben Powell brought it into the dressing room after the game, it was filled. The only place new baseballs are kept are in the locker in Steve Walker's office. . . Did you go back there and get them? . . . Oh—oh, I see. . . Thanks, Teddy. Now you hustle back to bed and forget I even called."

He hung up with a thoughtful

frown between his eyes. He waited a moment then called Postal Telegraph. When that call was completed he phoned Inspector Creedmore at Police Headquarters.

"Inspector, you'd like to nab Steve Walker's murderer, wouldn't you? Okay, I'll deliver that guilty party to you if you'll string along with me and do exactly as I say." Chip Hawley rattled off instructions. Then he cradled the handpiece and proceeded to dress rapidly.

CHAPTER V

"On the Inside"

HALF an hour later Chip Hawley was one of eleven people in Steve Walker's office under the grandstand at the Purple Caps' Stadium. By invitation and deception they had been gathered here. Ace Crandall, Louis Rocksley, "Myra Forsythe", Ben Powell, Nails Getto, Kenneth Dimilian, Inspector Creedmore and three harnessed bulls.

There had been the usual squawks and threats about the injustice of dragging them here in the middle of the night. But when they were informed that one of them was the murderer of Steve Walker, they soft-pedaled their belly-aching, for fear of being suspected as the guilty one.

"Well, Hawley," Creedmore said impatiently after the last of the suspects had arrived and the office-door was closed, "you said if I helped you round 'em up, you'd hand over the killer. And believe me, you better keep your word—or your days of breathing FREE air'll be over."

Hawley nodded that he understood the agreement. Then without wasting words he began. He turned to "Myra Forsythe" and asked bluntly: "You're Martin Hood's daughter, aren't you?"

She paled and tried to meet his eyes without wavering. "I—I don't know what you're talking about," she stammered.

Hawley smiled faintly. "Maybe it'll restore your memory if I tell you

that I found the photo album in the bottom drawer of your dresser and saw the snapshot you had such a job getting your father to pose for."

The girl looked at him a moment, aghast. Then apparently convinced that he had her "dead to rights," she lowered her eyes and said almost in a whisper: "Yes—I'm Myra Hood."

Nails Getto moved his shoulders uneasily under his plaid sports jacket. His eyes were fireballs looking at the girl.

Dimilian's Jap-eyed face was the color of saffron.

"Your father's in prison waiting to pay the death penalty for the murder of Castner, the scientist," Hawley went on.

Quickly the girl looked up. There were unrestrained tears of emotion in her eyes. "My father didn't kill Godrich Castner! My father's innocent. He did it! He killed Godrich Castner!" She pointed an accusing finger at Kenneth Dimilian.

Dimilian scowled blackly. "She's nuts," he protested. "I was in Los Angeles at the time Castner was murdered. I proved it at the trial. She's trying to frame me to save her old man!"

He took a menacing step toward the girl. But Hawley, standing between them, took the natty-dressed ex-janitor's face in his hand and shoved Dimilian against the wall. Dimilian's right hand crawled toward the inside of his coat, hesitated, then dropped white-knuckled at his side.

Hawley turned his gaze back to the girl as she went on: "Dimilian stole the formula and came East with it. My father tried to tell the police that Dimilian killed Castner and had the formula. They brought Dimilian back to San Francisco for the trial. But Nails Getto and his stooges framed a rock-bound alibi. They testified that Dimilian was in Los Angeles at the time of the killing."

Nails Getto pushed into the discussion. "That's a dirty lie!"

"Shut up!" Creedmore barked. Then added softly to the girl: "Go on, Miss Hood."

"My father insisted I keep out of the case," the girl continued. "Be-

cause I couldn't help him and the notoriety wouldn't do me any good. So Dimilian and Getto never knew Martin Hood even had a daughter. Then when I saw how bad things were going for Dad, I decided to see if I couldn't do something to save him. So I followed Dimilian East, trying to find what he'd done with the formula. . . and at the same time, try to prove his alibi false.

“**A**NYTHING in skirts could make Nails Getto fall, so I got into his confidence—learned the alibi was faked but couldn't prove it. Dimilian was in San Francisco at the time of the murder. Getto agreed to go to the front for Dimilian providing Dimilian turned over all but a small percentage of the formula to him. It was Getto's intention to manufacture the synthetic silk himself. But it required a little more money than he had on hand.”

“So he must have gone to his old pal Steve Walker, whom he'd helped out of the Mole Cannon scrap,” Hawley put in.

“This is a frameup!” Getto cried out fiercely, his black beetle brows drawn together in a scowl over his large nose. “They're tryin' to twist it around and pin the Walker murder rap on me.”

“Maybe we won't try to pin it on you, Getto, providing you tell the truth,” Inspector Creedmore voiced.

Hawley tacked on: “Help us collar the real murderer, Getto, and it'll exonerate you.”

“They can't fry you for perjury, Getto, but they can for murder!” Creedmore hammered at him.

Getto licked his thick lips. His shiny black eyes, dangerous as a cobra's eyes, darted around the room, looking at each face until they settled on Inspector Creedmore's hard-rock physiognomy.

Dimilian, meantime, shivering in an ecstasy of fear, made frantic pleading gestures with his mouth and Jap-eyes for Getto not to speak.

But Getto ignored him and said: “Okay, I'll sing my piece.”

“No, Nails!” Dimilian shrieked.

“Shuttup!” Getto spit at him dis-

dainfully. “I should fry for a penny-ante rat like you.” His eyes went again to the Inspector. “Yeh, I went to Walker with a proposition to finance the phony silk. And he gave me the okay. So I let him hang onto the formula for safe-keeping. But I didn't kill him. Givin' him the formula, trustin' him with somethin' as valuable as that, proves me and him was bosom pals.”

“Dimilian wasn't in Los Angeles at the time Castner was murdered then?” Creedmore wanted cleared up.

“No, the rat was right where Hood said he was—in San Francisco,” Getto replied.

Jap-eyed Dimilian's hand flew beneath his coat. He whipped out another savage-looking blade like the one he flashed in Hawley's apartment. With a yell he sprang at Getto.

Hawley drove out his left fist as Dimilian sailed past him. It clipped Dimilian on the side of the jaw. Dimilian stumbled sideways across the concrete floor of the office, dropping on one knee. Before he could regain his feet, one of the cops grabbed him, disarmed him and held him safely at bay.

“Did Dimilian kill Steve Walker, too?” Inspector Creedmore was anxious to know.

Getto mopped sweat from his face and answered: “No. Dimilian didn't even know Walker had the formula until after Walker was dead—and I told him.”

“Then you sent him to my apartment because you thought I'd lifted it,” Hawley wedged in.

Getto nodded and didn't say anything.

“Well, if Dimilian didn't kill Walker, who did?” Creedmore demanded. “And where's the formula now?”

Hawley's eyes traveled slowly around the room—past the girl, Getto, Crandall, Rocksley—and settled on the thin, drawn tobacco-stained face of Ben Powell!

“Ask Ben where the formula is,” Hawley announced softly.

The grizzled coach shrank back against the concrete wall. His face

was a livid mask. "Me? You're—you're joking, Chip!"

Hawley shook his head very slowly. He said: "No, Ben, you have the formula and you killed Steve Walker!"

"That's crazy," Powell denied, his lips moving convulsively, his eyes crowded with fear. "Steve was my pal. Why, we worked together on the same team for twenty years. Why should I want to kill a man who gave me a job coaching after my arm went dead?"

"Because Walker was the reason it was necessary for you to take a job coaching at the end of your pitching days," Hawley pointed out.

ACE CRANDALL dipped in an oar. "Hawley's right. Powell should've retired a rich man. Because he made quite a heap of frogskins during his top pitching years—and took miserly care that none of them hopped away. Which made him a juicy hunk of red meat for Walker to sink his bicuspid into. Walker got him to invest his 'sock' in what Walker promised was as safe as government bonds. Powell trusted him, since they were teammates. Powell, on Walker's say-so, bought acres and acres of ocean-front property during the Florida land boom some years ago.

"Later Powell found out the property was under three feet of water and every penny he had in the world was lost. Unfortunately that came near the tail-end of his pitching years. Gave him no chance to recoup his losses."

Hawley took up again. "Taking the coaching job afforded you the chance you wanted, Ben. To be near Walker. Because someday in some way you must have figured to get square with him. But not until it would pay you back dividends. I haven't any way of knowing how you found out about the formula. But that shouldn't have been hard, because you and Walker were pretty thick these past few years—and Walker, I guess, considered you harmless as an old hound dog. Maybe he told you about it, bragged how rich it was going to

make him? Or maybe you just used your rabbit-ears at the right time. At any rate, the formula was the chance you'd waited for. A chance to get rich—and get Walker at the same time. So last night you followed him to his office and killed him."

"That's just a lot of supposin'," Ben Powell said desperately. "You're just guessin'. You can't prove a thing."

"Oh yes I can, Ben," Hawley informed him without raising his voice. "You made several slip-ups. I recalled that last night at the start of the sixth inning the baseball bag was empty. Yet when you came into the locker room it was full. That meant someone went to Walker's office between the sixth inning and the start of the ninth to fill the bag. So just before coming here tonight, I called Teddy. He said you left the dugout during our half of the seventh inning—right after Walker was put out of the game for arguing—and went under the stands for new baseballs. No one noticed you were gone because we were in the midst of a mild rally at the time.

"Going for the balls was just an excuse to get Walker alone. Actually you went there to kill him. Then you left the gun on the floor, went back to the dugout and handed me my release. You knew I'd be hot under the collar and go right back to have it out with Walker. Then the police would nab me with the gun and you'd be in the clear. But someone else got there before me and picked up the pistol." He took a moment to inform Inspector Creedmore where he could find the murder-gun. Then he went on: "Another thing, Ben, you told me that the telegram you received at the ball park this afternoon was from your sister who was getting married. But I checked with the telegraph office. I found out it was from the Acme Chemical Works, acknowledging the formula you sent to them for synthetic silk. It seems you were selling them the formula outright. . . as your own invention."

"But those sound like stabs in the

dark," Creedmore cut in. "Calling the telegraph office. Asking Teddy here tonight."

"No," Hawley responded. "Ben came to my apartment tonight to kill me. Must have followed me to Crandall's office and feared I was getting too close to the solution. So he decided to finish me off. I would have found out who he was—but as I was reaching for the light-switch, he blinded me with a very ingenious method—tobacco juice!"

Powell, as Hawley spoke, had sidled toward the frosted glass door that led outside. All at once his hand tore a pistol from his coat pocket.

Hawley figured that Powell must have surmised something was cooking when he was summoned to Walker's office in the middle of the night. But Powell couldn't have refused to come without condemning himself. So he must have brought along this revolver just in case—

"ONE move," Powell menaced as he moved nearer the door, "and I'll blast the person who makes the move. I can die only once for murder."

Hawley's eyes were on the shiny white baseball atop the desk. The same baseball that Ace Crandall had been toying with last night during Creedmore's quiz-session. It was an autographed memento from the last World Series in which the Caps had participated. Slyly, Hawley worked his way toward the desk.

Powell got his left hand on the knob of the door, the gun in his right hand leveled at those in the office. Then suddenly with the same continuous motion, he swung open the door, snapped out the lights. As the room plunged into darkness, he hurled headlong through the doorway.

Hawley snatched the baseball off the desk in his left hand. As the door slammed behind the fleeing coach, Hawley fired the ball at Powell's silhouette visible through the frosted glass. There was a clastic crash, a dull soggy "whock!" and the

silhouette of Ben Powell fell forward as a tree falls. . .

After Inspector Creedmore and the police officers had taken Powell, Dimilian and Nails Getto out to the police cars, only Hawley, Crandall, Rocksley and the girl remained.

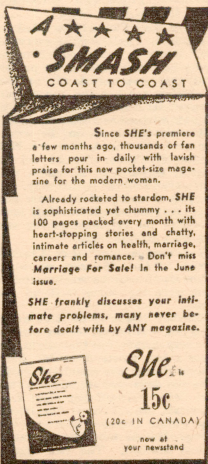
"There's still something I don't savvy," the sports reporter said bewilderedly. "Where does Jay Mar-

"The Tornado Twins"

By William A.
Jones

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riot and Mole Cannon fit into this puzzle? Why did Marriot take a runout and where's he holed up?"

Hawley looked sidewise at Rocksley.

Rocksley coughed nervously and said: "I suppose I may as well confess — although for Jay Marriot's sake I'd appreciate it if you don't mention it in your column, Crandall. Jay Marriot is Mole Cannon's son. When Marriot learned that Walker had been killed, he got panicky. He never stopped to think how it would look if he ran away. He thought only of what was in store for him if it was discovered he was Cannon's son. So he packed his things and beat a hasty retreat to the shelter of his father's farm—where he's now hiding."

Crandall frowned quizzically. "How do you know that?"

"After Mole Cannon was ruled out of baseball, I felt a little sorry for him," Rocksley confessed. "I'm not saying he didn't deserve the punishment that was meted out to him. Baseball is too big and too clean a game to let anything like what he did pass without punishment. But I still couldn't help feeling he was in sore need of a friend. You see, Mole Cannon didn't do what he did because it was bad or dishonest. He didn't even look at it that way. He was just thinking of his team winning. Anyone who knew Mole knew he wasn't the brightest person who ever wore spiked shoes."

"I remember him," Ace Crandall agreed. "An 18-carat screwball. Maybe that's why he was selected to hand onto the dirty end of the stick?"

"Maybe," Rocksley the club owner shrugged. "Anyway, feeling more or less responsible for his plight, because I had to stand behind Steve Walker during the scandal, I decided to run down and see him one summer. We hit it off fine right from the start. Struck up a fine friendship. Mole knows now he did wrong. But he holds no grievances against baseball. The fact that he groomed his son to be a big leaguer

proves that. But he knew the kid would never get very far with the stigma of 'Mole Cannon' on him. So the kid changed his name to Jay Marriot.

"I touted him to our scouts while he was knocking around with a semi-pro outfit. They, not knowing he was Mole's son, recommended him for a tryout. You know the rest. Except that, every once in a while, whenever I feel the urge, I run down to Litchfield Plains and spend a few weeks with Mole. The hunting and fishing there are perfect. But for the best interests of all concerned, I didn't think it was the sort of thing that should be advertised. That's why I've kept it a secret all this while."

ACE CRANDALL smiled understandingly and said: "You've still got yourself a secret, Mr. Rocksley."

"Thanks," the club owner said sincerely. Then with a glance at Chip Hawley who stood near the girl, he added: "But there is one thing you can print. You can tell your readers that Chip Hawley's the new manager of the Purple Caps."

Ace Crandall tilted his head and said: "And from what I've seen of the guy he oughta do okay."

Hawley with a dubious expression, watched Crandall light a cigarette and asked: "Don't tell me you've changed your mind about my ability?"

Crandall exhaled smoke slowly, shook his head in a negative and retorted. "No—I still think you're a lousy first baseman." He turned his attention to the girl. "I have my car outside, Miss Hood. If you'd care to have me—"

Hawley interrupted. "Miss Hood has her own car. And I happen to be going to see her home."

Crandall looked at the first sacker with a censorious frown and declared with a shrug: "Well, that was a short-lived friendship!"

THE END



KILLER'S FINAL CURTAIN

By **Wilbur S.
Peacock**

(Author of "Mr. Binger's
Murder Maze," etc.)

Curtis Drexler's efficient murder plans didn't take an over-efficient stage hand into consideration!

CURTIS DREXLER watched the wrinkles disappearing from his face beneath the protective screen of grease paint and powder, and there was a weariness in his heart that even the false elation could not lift. He knew then, as he had never known before, that he was too old to remain the matinee idol he had been for years. And the knowledge that the murder of James Stephen would make him wealthy within a year brought him no comfort at the moment. For he knew that wealth could never make up for the adulation in which he had basked all of his life.

He used the touch-up pencil on the streaks of white in his thick main of hair, cursed suddenly and bitterly, and whirled to where his dresser stood white-faced and fearful.

"This isn't my pencil!" he barked savagely.

"Look, Mr. Drexler," the dresser said nervously, "I thought the number two pencil would give better color, make better stage!"

Curtis Drexler slammed the pencil against the wall. "Who the hell cares what a young squirt like you thinks; get the hell out of here and don't come back! I knew what made good stage before you were born!"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Drexler; I'm sorry, Mr. Drexler!" the youth sidled through the door, closing it softly.

The actor grinned, stepped softly to the door and turned the key. Then he returned to the light-framed mirror, finished his make-up for the third and final act.

"Five minutes, Mr. Drexler," a voice called just outside the door, and light footsteps drifted down the hall.

Curtis Drexler stood, opened the right-hand drawer of the dressing table, slipped the revolver into the side pocket of his tweed coat. His face was suddenly hard, and his eyes bleak and piercing, beneath the mask of grease paint.

He had to work fast now, for he had less than five minutes to commit a murder and make his stage appearance for the final act. He smiled a bit when he saw the automatic on the top of the table.

He used that gun in the play; and later, when the police investigated the shooting of the producer, he would casually offer it for examination in the ballistics laboratory. They would never know that he had brought a revolver with him this evening.

His eyes flicked to the clock above the mirror, and he felt his breath catch in his throat. He had less than four and one-half minutes left.

He unbolted the small door at the rear of the room, slipped through into the property tunnel, raced lithe-ly toward the iron steps at the end.

His nerves crawled at the thought that some grip might spy him running down the dim hall.

He went up the iron steps swiftly but quietly, anxious now to finish what he had planned. The iron treads creaked and squealed a bit in protest, and he slowed so that there would be less noise.

He heard the dull murmur of the audience behind the balcony door at the first turn of the stairs, felt a dull glow of satisfaction. He knew what they were talking, could almost give their comments word for word. He had known for a week that the play would be a smash hit, and that knowledge had consolidated the vagrant plans he had nurtured in his mind for the past month.

He felt no animosity or hate against James Stephen; he was but an obstacle that had to be removed. With James Stephen's death, his fifty per cent interest in the play would revert to Curtis Drexler by virtue of a clause in the contract that they had drawn up before casting the play.

Drexler had written the drama three years before, but had been unable to find a backer. Then Stephen had put up most of the money necessary, for a fifty per cent interest. Drexler had retained twenty per cent, and the remaining interest had been sold to three men.

Because he and Stephen had known each other for twenty years, and to keep chisellers from gaining an interest in the play, the contract had been drawn so that the interest owned by either man reverted to the other in event one died during the play's run.

NOW, with the play a decided hit, James Stephen had to die, so that when the run was over, Curtis Drexler would not have to end his life as a hundred matinee idols had before him.

Drexler passed the balcony door, ran lightly up the remaining steps to the upper floor of the theater building. He cautiously opened the stairway door, made certain that no

one was in the hall, then slipped through.

He huddled at the producer's office door, listening intently for the sound of voices. Satisfied that the man was alone, he palmed the knob, carefully and quietly edged the panel open a crack.

The office was so tiny and cramped that the opening door almost touched the back of the chair in which Stephen was sitting. The producer was poring over a set of books, totally oblivious of the opening door, his white shirt gleaming in the dim light.

Curtis Drexler lifted the revolver in a hand that was rock-steady, tightened his finger on the trigger. The gun blasted again and again in the stillness of the tiny room, the reverberations almost deafening. Six dark spots sprang into high relief on the whiteness of the producer's back.

James Stephen came to his feet, his head turning toward the murderer, his face tight with agony and surprise. He tried to whirl, but his feet tangled, and he fell heavily to the cluttered floor.

Curtis Drexler caught his breath in horrified excitement, jerked the door shut, raced the few feet down the hall to the panel that led to the property tunnel.

He fled down the steps, remembering the terror and agony in the man's face, and he thought for a moment he would be ill. Then his face hardened and his eyes lost their look of fright. He turned the stair corner, took the last few steps in three leaps, scurried into the open door of the furnace room. He jerked open the door of the roaring furnace, tossed the murder weapon into the crackling flames.

Then he whirled, dashed down the tunnel until he came to the small door of his dressing room. He locked the door behind him, sat breathlessly at the dressing table. He smiled tautly when he saw that he still had thirty seconds before his entrance. He touched at his make-up with a powder puff, caught up the automatic, and left the room.

"Mr. Drexler?" his dresser said the

moment he appeared from the dressing room.

"Get to hell out of my sight!" The actor's nerves were still so taut he almost struck the youth.

And then he was on stage, coming in from the left, his resonant voice picking up his cue with the ease of long practice. He bowed slightly, acknowledging the muted applause of the audience, then played the part he had written for himself so many months before.

He spoke his lines with all of the skill he possessed, acting his part like an automaton that could do nothing less than excellent, but his mind was on those last hurried minutes before his entrance.

He could find no flaw that might trip him up. Should he be questioned about his footprints on the stairs, or his fingerprints scattered here and there in his hurry, he could almost laughingly explain that he had the run of the building since he was a co-producer. And should they make a nitrogen test of his hand, he had only to say that there would naturally be burned powder on his skin since he fired a gun during the play.

No, he could not find the slightest of flaws.

HE WAS making his next to the last speech, when he saw the men gathered in the wings. He staggered a bit, recognizing them, regained his poise almost immediately. He felt the wild gust of laughter beating at his throat, but his voice was even and unhurried.

He made his fifteen-second exit, right center, caught at the frightened arm of his dresser. His voice was harsh and strained, with an undercurrent such as the youth had never heard.

"You did it again, didn't you?" he

said, "You thought you'd prove that you know better staging than myself!"

The youth shrank back, tried to free his arm from the heavy hand.

Curtis Drexler laughed aloud, shrugged tiredly. "Forget it, lad," he said. "Maybe you're right. My day has already passed."

He heard his cue, stepped back upon the boards. He spoke then as he had never before in his career, giving each line the mocking cynical twist that it demanded, hearing none of it, conscious only of the shocked incredulous face of James Stephen who stood in the wings with three of the house detectives.

He took the automatic from his pocket, as the action demanded, laughed cynically as the actress flinched in simulated terror. He lined the gun on her, felt the mockery of his heart flooding his mind with regret because of the thing he had tried to do.

He looked once directly at the audience that sat so tensely, so breathlessly, in wait for the smashing climax. He heard the frightened cry of his dresser as he lifted the gun the youth had thought did not have the stage appeal of the blued revolver. He had known, when he saw James Stephen still alive, that the youth had switched the blanks and real bullets in the two guns with the intention of telling him before he took a gun on stage.

He lifted the squat automatic, as the action demanded, placed the muzzle squarely at his temple, and pulled the trigger.

He didn't see the final curtain come swooping down, but he would have been gratified to have heard the smashing applause that echoed for minutes after his last appearance.

THE END

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MURDER ★ ★ ★ ON THE MENU

When Dayn Keith had murder for dessert one night, it didn't take Dan O'Mara long to hit the answer — but proving it in face of official disapproval was another matter!

By Lee E. Wells

(Author of "The Lady in the Case")

CHAPTER I

Dan O'Mara

I CAME, I saw, and O'Mara conquered. I was sent by the editor to get a feature story on this ex-police reporter who now had a lot of dough and one good arm. The money came from his Indian mother, who had a tribal share in an Oklahoma oil well. The good arm was what was left after O'Mara ran afoul of a time bomb back in the good old days when racketeers were bold-o.

So Jim Weston went for a story, and ended as secretary and muscleman for a guy with a weird racket and a flair for finding trouble. Dan O'Mara had given it to me straight.

"I do things for people that want it kept quiet. I know gangsters and gunsels, police and policy kings, blue bloods and rats. I've never yet been outside the law, but I've stretched it sometimes. I got dough and I make more. I keep my mouth shut and forget what I hear. I can use you if you've got the guts to take the gaff."

O'Mara knew his psychology. That guts business was waving a red flag in front of a young punk with a lot of strange ideas about flying lead being romantic somehow. I'd

tried the Armed Forces just a month before. They liked my big ideas about killing Japs but shook their heads when they had a look at my twisted back. That was another idea of mine that a touchdown for Alma Mater was worth a vertebrae or two.

My feature story was my last assignment and I went to work for the world's ugliest man. Dan O'Mara was a little fellow, coming about to my shoulders. His face was dark, split down the middle by a hawk nose that might have been the gift of some raiding Comanche. His mouth was wide, his lips thick and always wrapped around a black cigar. His eyes were startlingly blue in that dark Indian face of his, and they told where he got the name O'Mara. He never shaved but his hollow ears waved out from the sides of his bald dome like a couple of admiral's pennants.

I soon learned that O'Mara's business was kept strictly in the head. There were no case files, and only a thin list of abbreviations and initials that was our record of clients. I had enough dope after the first two weeks to split the city wide open with front page news. We did jobs that had my hair standing on end and filled my nights with dreams of State Penn and Leavenworth. Not illegal, but extra-legal, and Dan

Suspenseful Novelet

O'Mara wouldn't touch an assignment where his client was a wrong guy. O'Mara had scruples, such as they were.

This night that murder struck, for instance. O'Mara and I had been returning a pack of letters to a judge who should have known better than to write them. I'd put the juice under O'Mara's instructions, to the safe of a blackmailing scandal sheet. When the can blew, we'd rifled the contents and made our escape the back way as coppers made loud, unpleasant noises up front.

Now we strolled along North Meridian Street and O'Mara was feeling pleased with himself. His cigar stuck at a cocky angle and his hat rested on one of his wide ears. I still felt shaky and my forehead was clammy.

Just outside our place, O'Mara stopped under a street light. He reached his good left hand in his pocket and pulled out the roll of bills, our fee.

"A good job, Jim. We've taught a judge to stay home nights and gave him an insight to the evils of emotions on paper. We've pulled the teeth of a rat." He held up the money. "And here is the reward of virtue."

"Reward for a job of safe-blowing," I growled in correction.

O'Mara chuckled. "You have no imagination, Jim."

I WENT up the walk, fishing for the key. "Too much imagination. I can see my fingerprints all over that safe and a whole flock of bars for the next twenty years."

I opened the door and flipped on the hall switch. O'Mara sailed his hat to a chair and his dome gleamed like another light. I closed the door, locked it and fished for a cigarette.

O'Mara worked himself out of his coat. "Blackmail this time, Jim. Extortion the case before that. I wonder what the next case will bring."

I unloaded the safe-cracking tools. "Murder, probably. Ours."

O'Mara shifted the cigar in his thick lips. "Now, Jim, we've never harmed a soul—"

We both listened. The sound had been muffled, but there had been a certain sharpness that had identified it. Pistol shots, either at a distance or close by and smothered. O'Mara's blue eyes circled to me and twinkled.

"Jim, I think you might be right. Let's go see."

He still had on his "Fighting Arm," an artificial affair ending in a murderous hook. I flipped out the hall light and opened the door. We both slipped out and stood listening in the darkness. In the street a few cars flashed by, their lights bright. Our lot was wide and so was the next one. I thought I heard bushes move and wheeled around.

The house over there was dark, except for a dim light in one of the upstairs rooms. O'Mara moved swiftly and silently. I envied him that Indian gift of getting places without noise. I followed him off the porch and around the house, keeping to the shadow of the bushes.

We saw nothing out of order. O'Mara used his good arm and that steel hook and went over the fence like a smudge of smoke. I was longer and noisier but I finally joined O'Mara. He stood in the shadow of a lilac bush and I swear he had turned every muscle to stone. I could nearly see that hawk nose of his sniffing the breeze.

He raised his hook in a quick, imperative gesture when I started to whisper a question. I choked it down and listened. There was nothing out of order. I looked up at the big house and the line of black windows. Somewhere down the block a dog started barking.

I turned to O'Mara. He was gone and I hadn't even heard the whisper of a movement. Sometimes his silent prowling gave me the unholy creeps. I jammed my hand in my pocket and wrapped my fingers around the automatic. I waited. O'Mara would rejoin me or I could back him if he got in trouble.

In a moment he was back. Just a flicker of a shadow and there he was. His voice was low. "We're going inside, Jim. I think we'll find something."

I made a protest. "That's Dayn Keith's place, O'Mara. That big shot would have our scalps if we did a second-story job."

O'Mara's voice held an edge of impatience. "Come along, Jim. I'll show you something."

I followed him around the side of the house. He stopped at a basement window and his pencil flash licked on. I saw that the window hung open and that the bottom frame was cracked. There were fresh tool scars in the wood of the sill.

"Mousebreaker!" I breathed.

O'Mara flicked out the light and I stumbled after him as he returned to the rear door. In a few minutes, his oustiti had grabbed the key on the inside of the door and turned it. We entered, our breaths held and our ears strained.

THIS was getting a little too much for me, two burglarous entries in one night. O'Mara slipped ahead in the darkness, avoiding furniture as though he had cat eyes. We prowled out of the kitchen to a long hallway and O'Mara stopped at the foot of the wide stairs that led upward. We saw a faint glow.

"A door open," O'Mara whispered and I nodded.

He had climbed three or four steps before I knew he had moved and I slipped up after him. I halted on the upstairs landing, but O'Mara was already standing in the lighted doorway. He turned and his thick lips made an unpleasant grimace.

"Here it is, Jim. You guessed right."

I came forward, more boldly now, to the doorway and stared inside the room. The man lay on the floor where he had fallen out of the bed. His blue eyes were blank and staring and his fingers clutched at his bloody pajama tops.

I turned to O'Mara. "That's Dayn Keith. This will make headlines."

He was scratching the side of his hawk nose with his good hand and his blue eyes darted around the room. He nodded, barely hearing me. I turned again to look. There was an upset serving tray on the bed.

The coffee cup and cream pitcher had spilled on the bed clothes, forming a deep stain. Keith's half-eaten sandwich lay on the floor.

"The prowler caught him at a midnight snack," I said softly.

O'Mara nodded. "Yes. Keith had murder for desert."

CHAPTER II

Official Motive

I TURNED to O'Mara. "So what do we do now? Call the police?"

O'Mara smiled briefly. "Of course, Jim. After all, we're law-abiding citizens."

I had my doubts about that and said so as I walked toward the bedside telephone. O'Mara's sharp order halted me. "Not there, Jim. Over home. Sometimes the police have a habit of tracing calls."

I saw the point and was anxious to get the job done. But O'Mara seemed fascinated by the murder scene. He slowly edged around the room, looking at the body from every angle. Finally he halted near a deep lounging chair, bent down and squinted up toward the pillow on which Keith had been lying. He straightened and walked toward the body.

"Two shots through the chest," he said. "That's what we heard, Jim."

I nodded. "The prowler came through the window downstairs and started ransacking. I suppose he thought the owner wouldn't be at home. He walked in here—"

O'Mara's chuckle cut me short. "You'd never make a good newsman, Jim. Too naive! Remember the light was on in this room. Can you picture a prowler walking into a lighted room? Besides, the shots were fired from that chair over there."

That shut me up and I looked around at the chair as though I'd never seen it before. O'Mara stepped delicately away from the body and the blood and bent over the bed. He studied the rumpled sheets. He studied the pillow propped up

against the headboard and then looked again at the chair.

He turned abruptly. "Keith raided the icebox. Let's go downstairs and take a look."

I was getting jittery. I didn't like the smell of death in the room and I didn't want to be accidentally caught at the scene of a murder. But O'Mara didn't seem to mind. There was a certain eager alertness to his hawk face and his blue eyes snapped. I took a last look at the blank face of the dead man and followed O'Mara back down the stairs.

WE DIDN'T turn on any lights and O'Mara used his pencil flash in the kitchen. We saw a loaf of bread half unwrapped, cheese in a wooden box with the foil shredded upwards. There was a cup of coffee sitting on the table.

O'Mara bent over it, sniffed, and then gently placed the back of his hand against the cup. "Lukewarm," he said.

"Keith must have liked his java," I said. "Two cups for a midnight snack means he must have been hoarding it."

O'Mara nodded. "Men like Keith hoard, Jim. The police will probably find the cache." He straightened and sent his flash around the room in a circle. "Messy. Keith was always like that ever since I've known him. I always felt his messiness would jam him up someday."

I didn't get it and O'Mara didn't give me a chance to ask questions. He found the basement entrance and skittered down the steps. I could hear him down there and then pretty soon he came up.

He stood in the center of that dark kitchen and the little flash made a small pool of light at his feet. I could dimly see his shoulders and bald head lined against the windows across the room. I saw him pull off his hat and then scratch his bald head with that steel hook of his. That gesture always gave me the screaming willies and it always meant something was cooking.

Abruptly the light snapped off. I didn't hear a sound until the back

door slowly opened. O'Mara's voice held impatience. "What are you waiting for, Jim? Let's call the police."

In a few moments we were back home again. I dialed the police and handed the telephone to O'Mara. He sat lolled back in his chair, grinning around that frayed cigar he always chewed. In a moment the connection went through and O'Mara asked for Lieutenant Brant of Homicide.

He grinned up at me. "Jim, like a bet of a hundred smackers on this?"

I was instantly suspicious. O'Mara always put the Indian sign on me when it came to bets. I couldn't win for losing.

"I'll bet I can forecast the way this case comes out. I'll—" He broke off and spoke into the phone. "Brant? How's the market on murders these days? Not so good, huh? Say, Brant, maybe I got something for you. Me'n Jim was sitting here at home playing tiddleywinks when we heard a couple of shots sound off next door."

O'Mara grinned at me over the top of the phone. "No, I'm not kidding, Brant. We looked around outside but there wasn't anything moving. But I know shots when I hear them and they came from the house next door. Dayn Keith lives there, you know."

He hung up the phone and grinned at me. "Dayn Keith is a name to conjure with, Jim. Brant will burn up the streets getting here. We'll be sitting out on the curb like a couple of innocent urchins for his benefit. Nothing like helping the police."

He pushed himself out of the chair and went into the little cubbyhole we call the library. He pulled out a sheet of paper and started writing with a pen in that upside-down way of a left-handed person. He read it over, took an envelope and folded the note. I still don't see how he does it, but he had the note sealed in the envelope.

"There's my bet, Jim. I wrote down what I thought the cause of the murder. I also wrote the findings of the police. If you bet one

hundred dollars, we'll put this envelope in the safe and break it open after the case is closed. If I'm wrong, you take the hundred."

I stared from the envelope to O'Mara's ugly face. I should have known better but that guy has something besides talk that forces you to follow his suggestions. I nodded agreement to the bet and we put the envelope in his safe.

We had just made the sidewalk when the police cars drove up. Lieutenant Brant was in the first one. He was a tall, lean man and his smile always left me feeling his mouth had about three too many teeth. He spread his coppers out to cover Keith's house and then came striding up to O'Mara.

"GIVE," he ordered, "or maybe you're keeping it a secret."

O'Mara looked hurt. He had changed to his "Company Arm," a contraption with a lifelike hand. "We just heard shots, Brant, and looked around. Seeing that it was Keith's house, we thought you might be interested."

Brant grunted and walked up to the front door. O'Mara and I followed. I felt foolish as hell waiting for an answer to Brant's ring that I knew wouldn't come. Brant leaned on the buzzer again.

A copper appeared around the corner of the house. "Basement window's jimmied, sir. Looks like burglars."

That's all Brant needed. The front door was bolted and Brant had one of his boys go through the basement. There was quite a crowd collected out front by now and a man came pushing across the yard. Even his walk was important.

It was Lawrence Roberts, a big lug with a flat nose set in the middle of a square face. His chin jutted out like a bulldog warming up for a scrap.

"What's the matter here?" he demanded.

Roberts could get away with that tone of voice. He had owned more city mayors than any political boss before him. Brant saluted very re-

spectfully, and explained what they had discovered. The policeman inside opened the front door and we streamed in. I gave O'Mara a quick look.

His blue eyes were bland but there was a slight quirk to the corner of his thick lips. Lawrence Roberts stood looking around the hallway, peering toward the doors. The police scattered over the house and it wasn't long before one of them found that upstairs bedroom. Brant took the steps two at a time and the rest of us followed.

O'Mara touched my arm. "Remember, Jim, this is Brant's discovery."

I nodded and we joined the bluecoats at the door. Brant knelt over Dayn Keith. Lawrence Roberts stood just inside the door, his eyes casting quick glances around the room and avoiding the bloody thing on the floor.

Brant gave orders that started a call for the coroner and sent the wheels of justice rolling. Then he came over to us and started throwing questions. I told him about hearing the shots and O'Mara took over from there.

His lean, dark face looked like a gargoyle's as he blithely skipped over our housebreaking and quick look-around. "We investigated the grounds, Lieutenant, and then decided that this was probably a police affair. We called you."

Brant's thick brows arched and he had that hard stare of a copper who doesn't quite believe what you say. "O'Mara, you're slipping. Generally you solve the cases in your own inimitable way and then call in the police."

O'Mara managed to screw his ugly face into a look of pained surprise. "Brant, you do us an injustice. Neither Jim nor myself would knowingly interfere."

Brant snorted, asked another question or two and then turned back to the room. He sniffed at the few drops of cold coffee left in the cup. He straightened and walked to a small desk in the corner and rummaged around in the drawers. He uncovered a few letters that seemed

innocent enough, some bills, and then a little leather-covered book. O'Mara managed to be close beside him.

I SLOUCHED against the wall by Lawrence Roberts. The big guy acted like he would rather have been somewhere 'se. I didn't blame him. Keith was no picture of beauty.

I lit a cigarette. "Messy business," I commented, low.

Roberts jumped as though I had touched him. He looked around at me and nodded. "Dam' messy. Poor Keith. I didn't know him very well but he seemed a decent sort of chap."

I inhaled deeply. "They tell me prowlers are dangerous when they're cornered. I believe it now."

Lawrence Roberts shrugged his big shoulders. "I think I could have prevented this if I'd realized what I'd seen. I saw the prowlers. There were two of them."

I gulped and managed to hold my cigarette steady. Roberts had seen O'Mara and me, probably watched us break in the kitchen door. I cut a quick look across the room where O'Mara was talking heatedly with Brant about the leather-covered book. O'Mara swung his good arm in a wide gesture.

Brant dropped the book and turned as a policeman tugged a folded cardboard from under the pillow on the bed. I got a glimpse of the colored printing. Brant took the thing and again O'Mara was right at his shoulder.

Brant opened the cardboard. "A menu. From Club 13."

O'Mara said dryly, "A good place to eat, and Keith seemed to like his food."

Brant nodded. His attention centered at the bottom of the square. "Someone wrote 'ten thousand' down here. Ten thousand what?"

O'Mara chuckled. "That's your question, friend. You answer it. Maybe it's ten thousand dollars, or ten thousand crepe suzettes, or ten thousand chorus girls."

Brant growled. "Don't be so damned helpful!" He dropped the menu on the desk and turned to face

Roberts and myself. Lawrence Roberts stepped forward.

"I think I saw the killers, Lieutenant."

All of them turned like puppets on a string. I saw O'Mara's blue eyes harden and his hawk face became uglier than ever. He edged toward the desk behind Brant.

The policeman's face lighted. "What did they look like?"

Roberts glanced at me. "One was this man's size and the other was smaller. I was in my bedroom and saw them come over the fence and up to the house. I had seen a light in Keith's bedroom so I thought probably he had visitors who didn't want to be seen."

Brant pounced on that statement. "That's irregular, isn't it? I mean usually visitors come up to the door and ring."

Roberts nodded his big head. "Usually, Lieutenant. But we don't have to pretend about Keith. He was a politician, one of the inside boys and he probably has had a hundred visitors who didn't want to be seen."

Brant stared hard at Roberts and slowly nodded. "Where do you live, Mr Roberts?"

"Just next door."

O'Mara stepped up beside Brant. "So you saw the prowlers? Two of them?"

"Two." Roberts stared at O'Mara and then swallowed. "I—I hate to say it, but you're about the size of one of them."

Brant whirled. "O'Mara, you haven't—"

O'Mara's Indian face took a look of righteous horror. "I wouldn't think of it. You saw the light in the house, Roberts?"

"Yes, so I wasn't too suspicious."

BRANT seemed willing to drop that line of questioning and that was all right by me. Brant made a listing of our names and addresses and then dismissed us, evidently glad to get us out from under his feet. O'Mara and I silently crossed the yard to our own porch after saying good night to Lawrence Roberts.

Back in our so-called library,

O'Mara fished in his pocket and pulled out the leather-bound book. I took one petrified look at it and came up out of my chair.

"Oh, no you don't" I choked. "We're in deep enough now. Roberts sees us prowling about and came close to recognizing us. Now you hook evidence."

O'Mara put it on the desk. "Get busy, Jim, and copy these names and addresses. I'll slip it back so Brant will find it. Make it fast, Jim."

I knew it would be useless to argue. I'd just waste time and Brant would miss that book, if he hadn't already. It took me a little over five minutes and then O'Mara was out of the house, and strolling over to Keith's. I waited at home, nervous as hell.

I wished I knew more about law so I'd have some idea how long I'd be in jail for stealing evidence. I wondered why I'd taken this job with O'Mara. I was getting a lot of experience, but it was all the wrong kind.

The front door opened and I was afraid to see who had come in. There was no sound, but O'Mara was suddenly beside me. He chuckled. "You worry too much, Jim. Brant mislaid the book and raised a nice batch of Cain. But they found it, down between the desk and the wall."

I heaved a deep sigh of relief. O'Mara worked himself out of his coat and sat down. "Brant wants us to hang around, Jim. I think he had ideas along Lawrence Robert's suggestions. By the way, Brant tells me the marks of the burglar are typical of a series of them all over town."

I looked up hopefully. "A professional?"

O'Mara nodded his shining skull. "Yes, but a professional with a new twist. So far, he has stolen nothing at all, though he has entered at least twenty homes."

I stared at O'Mara. "Maybe he doesn't like his work."

That dark hawk face had suddenly changed into the stoic, hard look of the Indian, the blue eyes vague and far away. He twisted around in his chair.

"Tomorrow, Jim, we have cocktails at the Club 13."

The phone rang and O'Mara grabbed it. He listened a moment, said a word or two and then hung up. He faced me. "Brant called, a favor to me. He has placed the motive as murder to escape in armed burglary. That's official."

There was something in O'Mara's tone that made me look up quickly. "Is it correct?"

O'Mara stuck a cigar in those thick lips of his. "Jim, we must bow to the greater wisdom of the police. In the meantime, there's Club 13."

CHAPTER III

Club 13

IT WAS five o'clock. Honest and patriotic men were coming home from defense plants and offices. O'Mara and I walked among the late evening rush up in town headed for the Club 13. O'Mara held back his thin shoulders and that hawk beak of his seemed to sniff up the spring air. His eyes sparkled and his hat sat at a jaunty angle resting on one of those mainsails he called his ears.

I wasn't so chipper. I felt that our smart move was to forget the Dayn Keith murder and stay in the back-ground. Roberts had seen us prowling around but hadn't identified us yet. The police were willing to call it a day, naming the unknown burglar as the murderer. But not O'Mara—that dried up scion of a Kiowa tepee. He had to not only wake the sleeping dog, but kick it around a little.

O'Mara slipped through the crowd and it was hard for me to keep up with his lithe stride. He finally slowed up and I saw the sign of the Club 13 ahead. It was in the basement of one of the big business buildings of the city. O'Mara worked a cigarette out of his pack and I struck a match for him.

He grinned impishly at me over the flame. "Did journalism school ever teach you anything about Club 13, Jim?"

I put the matches back in my pocket. "No that was in the seminar course."

O'Mara watched the lights flicker on and off on the big 13 in the red circle. "Club 13 is one spot where the upper crust of the underworld and the lower crust of the upper-world meet. In other words, host Donlevy calls criminals and magnates by their first names. It's a hangout for lawyers and educated thugs who have just made a nefarious profit. It is just the place for Dayn Keith."

I looked surprised. "Why Keith?" "Dayn Keith was a chiseler in high places. He once controlled one of the political parties in the city back when prohibition and heavy dough went hand in hand. He lost his political power, but he had a memory that was mighty good. He cashed in on that memory, forgetting certain questionable periods in the lives of our highly honored citizens for a highly lucrative price. Does it begin to make sense?"

I shrugged. "A little. Do you expect to find our housebreaker here?"

O'Mara chuckled. "Who knows? We'll drink Donlevy's liquor and probe Donlevy's mind. Let's go."

He pitched away his cigarette and soon we were descending the white marble stairs to the ornate doors that opened into the Club 13. An old fellow with more braid than Marshal Goering opened the door for us. He recognized O'Mara and smiled.

"It's been a long time, sir."

O'Mara smiled, nodded, and pressed a folded bill in the old man's hand. "It has, John. Busy these days?" He listened patiently while the doorman caught him up on the Club 13's take. "Any of the old gang around any more?"

John shook his head and his old gray eyes saddened. "Very few, Mr. O'Mara."

"How about Legs Patti?" O'Mara asked, "or Dayn Keith?"

The doorman brightened a little. "Mr. Keith has been regular, sir, particularly the last few months. Of course, now he's dead we won't be seeing much of him."

"No," O'Mara answered dryly. "Keith was quite the ladies' man in the old days."

"STILL was, sir. One of our girls—" He broke off and became frozen faced as more customers came down the stairs. O'Mara went into the foyer of the club. I checked our coats and hats and joined him at the bar. He was perched like an Indian gnome on one of the high stools and was already shooting the breeze with the bartender.

I had not more than joined him when Donlevy came up. He was a big man with a paunch and a scarred, dark face. His cold gray eyes looked startling under the bushy black brows. He radiated a powerful sort of pseudo-friendliness that somehow worked on you.

He acted glad to see O'Mara and pumped my hand as though he'd been waiting all his life to meet me. He wore a dark suit that fitted him like a store-window mannequin and sported a flashing diamond on the little finger of his left hand.

It sparkled when he gave a blond dame a wave as she went by. O'Mara squared around and watched the girl's slinky hip-swing. "Not bad," he said. "Donlevy, you can still pick 'em."

The big guy grinned. "She's four-O. That's our featured spot, Dawn Day."

O'Mara grinned. "She'd be a honey in a sweater."

Donlevy sat down on a stool. "We give her less than that in the show. Come around some night and waken your corpuses."

O'Mara sipped at his drink. "Now that's the kind of dame that Dayn Keith used to go for."

I caught the quick, startled look in Donlevy's eyes that he masked almost immediately. His voice became flat. "Yeah, but Keith won't worry about that no more."

O'Mara was not to be brushed off. "Now don't tell me Keith didn't know her?"

Donlevy squared around. "Sure he did. But Dawn's big time, O'Mara, so big that Keith wouldn't dare

tangle with the boy friend. You know how it is."

O'Mara nodded. He looked around the club. "Donlevy, you got a sweet place here. Make lots of dough, I bet, and get all the big shots."

Donlevy's flash grin came to life and he grew expansive. I saw the guy liked to build himself up and I lost interest. I craned my neck for another gander at the blonde and spotted her at a distant table. She had a brief skirt and a swell pair of legs and I was kept busy for awhile.

When I came out of the blonde interlude, Donlevy was still going strong. "Judge Winters is regular here, O'Mara, and so's the County Chairman. Lawrence Roberts has a regular reservation."

O'Mara looked around. "Roberts? That is big stuff."

They kicked vowels around between them for awhile and then O'Mara pulled away. We got our coats and came out on the street again. It was dark and all the store signs were going, doubly bright through a mist of rain. I didn't think we'd got very far or learned very much and said as much to O'Mara.

His dark face was clean of any emotion, blank as only an Indian can make it. "You might be right, Jim. When we get home, pull out that list of names we copied from Keith's book. I think I remember some were women."

I halted in surprise and then laughed at him. "You're barking wrong this time, O'Mara. There's some women listed but not Dawn Day. Anyhow, I can't see that bou-doir beauty scuttling down a coal chute to bump off a guy."

O'Mara looked around. "Neither can I, Jim. But who knows how things will work out? Hitler was a paperhanger and an empress of Rome started with nothing but a come-hither look to the right proconsuls. See what I mean?"

I shook my head. "You're still wrong. You scent jealousy as a motive. Don't forget the basement window was broken open in a quite professional manner."

"I'm not," O'Mara said softly.

CHAPTER IV

Gus the Gungel

THERE'S no routine, working for Dan O'Mara. We left the Club 13 and started toward home. Then this sliver off a Piute warclub spots a Donald Duck at one of the picture houses and we have to take it in. After that we had dinner, and finally got home after ten. O'Mara decided it was time to go to work.

First he dialed police headquarters and asked for the burglary squad. He used that Irish blarney he can tap on occasion and soon started firing a list of addresses at me as fast as I could scribble them down.

Suddenly his eyes lighted and I saw his fingers tighten around the phone. "What was that?" he demanded.

He listened awhile, nodding and chewing excitedly on the shredded cigar in his big mouth. He replaced the phone and looked at me. "Jim, our mysterious burglar got scared out. He hasn't operated since he hit Keith's house next door."

"So?" I asked. "Hell, I'd be scared, too, if I'd shot a man in a fit of absent-mindedness."

O'Mara chuckled. "Jim, you've yet to learn that two and two is not always four. It might be three and sometimes five. Get a map of the city."

I got the map and spread it out on the big table. Then I started sticking pins at the various addresses that I had copied down. I had quite a collection of them when I finished and O'Mara leaned eagerly over the map. He chewed viciously on his cigar and his blue eyes glinted excitedly.

He pointed to the pins. "Look at that picture, Jim. It should tell you something."

I nodded. "It does. Our burglar broke in a hell of a lot of places to get absolutely nothing."

"Sure, Jim. There's also something else. You'll notice the pins group in a rough circle that fan out from Dayn Keith's house."

My eyes widened and I looked more carefully. O'Mara was right. That one had me scratching my head. "It looks as though Keith was the center of operations. Then we find him shot and suddenly the burglaries stop."

O'Mara nodded and grinned. "You got something, Jim. There's one more point. Keith's was the first place our mysterious friend ever entered where anyone was at home. No one has seen him."

I snapped my fingers. "Keith did. So he's plugged twice through the brisket."

"Now that's an angle," O'Mara agreed. He walked away from the table and starting pacing the room in that panther stride of his that was as silent as a cat's tread. I watched him and then looked at the map again."

O'Mara stopped suddenly and swung on his heel. "Jim, we'll move in the circles of high finance tomorrow. You can close up for the night."

SO I MIXED our nightcap drink and a few minutes later left O'Mara buried deep in a detective novel. O'Mara said they gave him ideas and he wished he was half as smart at those typewriter punchers who plotted elaborate murders. For a time I lay in bed, staring up at the dark ceiling. This murder of Dayn Keith still looked to me like a small-time prowler got caught and shot his way out. These other angles coming in seemed to be solely on the part of Keith and didn't affect the logical conclusion that burglars sometimes shoot when caught.

I was up early in the morning and fixed our coffee, eggs and toast. I tapped O'Mara's door, lightly, and he immediately answered. I swear that guy sleeps with his big ears on an alert basis. A paleface would have a hell of a time slipping up on him.

We loafed around after breakfast until the banks were open and then we went downtown. O'Mara went right to the American National, strode into the president's office as

if he had a mortgage on the furniture.

Prentiss obviously didn't like it. He rubbed his glasses with a linen handkerchief, puffed out his fat lips. If fishes had voices, they'd sound like his.

"What can I do for you, O'Mara?" I gathered Prentiss was thinking of cyanide.

O'Mara sank down in a leather chair, his hawk face broken in a smile like a drunken nightmare. "A little information, Prentiss. I'd like to look at Dayn Keith's account."

Prentiss stopped cleaning his glasses and glared at O'Mara. "You know you can't get that information here."

O'Mara shrugged and didn't seem worried. "You handle his account." "Yes, but you won't see it."

O'Mara seemed to change the subject. "Been out in Edgewood lately, Prentiss?"

The fat guy jumped and his powdered jowls grew red. He blinked angrily and shook his head. "No. I never go out there."

O'Mara sighed. "I was, not long ago. Gladys was asking about you, Prentiss. Seems like she misses you and the old times—also a mink coat."

Prentiss lost his anger and became worried. He leaned over the desk. "Keep her quiet, O'Mara. You can do it."

O'Mara's brows arched. "Now who's asking favors? Do unto others, Prentiss—and do it good."

Prentiss stared at O'Mara a moment, then licked his fat lips. He pressed a button on his desk and spoke to his secretary. "Have the Dayn Keith account brought in here, Miss Jones."

That was that. We saw the account. We saw a lot of heavy deposits for a guy who had been kicked out of the political rake-off and apparently had no other visible means of support. O'Mara pointed to some heavy withdrawals on the account.

"I'd like to see those cancelled checks. You should have them since Keith died before he picked up the statement and cancels for this month."

PRENTISS mumbled something about things being irregular, but we saw the checks. They were made payable to Anne Holden and that didn't mean a thing to me. Prentiss could tell us nothing. He understood the Holden woman presented the checks, took the cash and walked out. Keith had told the bank she would present the checks for payment in that manner.

That was about all we learned. O'Mara thanked Prentiss and promised to take care of Gladys in Edge-wood and we left his office. As we went out the main door, we met Lawrence Roberts. The big man stared at us, surprised. Then O'Mara went completely out of character and had me guessing. He gave Roberts the old glad hand and started chatting like a wound-up magpie. He talked about the Keith killing and how he was working on it on his own, independent of the police.

He lit a cigar and tipped back on his heels, boasting like hell of the way O'Mara handled things. "We just found out about Keith's income and expenditures," O'Mara said complacently. "I tell you, Roberts, it's revealing what that man spent and the dough he took in."

Roberts nodded and looked around for a way of escape. "I can imagine, Mr O'Mara. Was there any light on the killing?"

O'Mara looked arch and laid his finger alongside that big nose of his. "Roberts, I can't tell you now. But I've got a lead that'll crack this wide open."

Lawrence Roberts nodded and forced a smile. He edged away. "That's interesting, O'Mara. Let me know how you come out."

He was gone and we left the bank. I gave O'Mara a disgusted look when we were out on the street. "How come?" I demanded. "You been bit by a radio commentator?"

O'Mara chuckled. "That, Jim, is something that puzzles even me. I seem to be a changed man this morning."

I growled at him and then had to run back. He'd silently turned into a building entrance leaving me to

walk along all by myself and talking to no one. I caught up with him at the elevator ban's. He grinned at me and said nothing.

WE LEFT the elevator and walked down the hall to the office of one of the national credit investigating houses. O'Mara was immediately admitted to the manager's office. This overgrown Pawnee papoose seemed to be able to get anything he wanted, and he certainly had the manager breaking company rules.

"Get me a report on Anne Holden, Bob," O'Mara suggested. "I don't know who she is or where she lives. I want to know all I can about what she does, who she does, and her character. I'd like to know where Donlevy of the Club 13 banks, his financial rating. Ditto on his club, for he may keep separate accounts."

Bob whistled. "Quite an order."

O'Mara chewed harder on his cigar. "More to come. I'd like to know about Lawrence Roberts. Dayn Keith is dead but I'd like a report on him like the Holden dope. Can do?"

The manager scratched his chin, looked uncertain a moment and then nodded. "You'll want more than our files show, O'Mara. I'll get some good men on the job. You'll have the report."

O'Mara arose. "Thanks, Bob. Send 'em to the house."

That was just the beginning of our leg work. We hit the morgues of all three city papers. I had dirty hands and three notebooks crammed with dope by the time we were through late in the afternoon. Then we took time off to eat.

I checked my notes over the coffee cups. I read them again. It was interesting and there certainly was the odor of political skunk about them, but I couldn't see where they got us. There was nothing to indicate a burglar in the whole deal. I said as much to O'Mara.

He took a sip of coffee. "Jim, we have added two and two. We are now arriving at five."

That's all he'd say. It didn't make sense, or it meant a hell of a lot—I

didn't know which. I got about half mad and O'Mara just grinned and let me grouse. He chewed his after dinner cigar, watched the customers of the restaurant for awhile, and then decided to go home.

We opened the door and heard the telephone ringing. I answered it, leaving O'Mara to struggle out of his coat. Lieutenant Brant had a note of ice to his voice.

"You've been messing around in police business," he accused. "I don't like it and I'm telling you to lay off."

I asked him to wait a minute and I told O'Mara what was up. That low man on a totem pole took the phone and sank down in the chair. "Brant, quit scaring people. I've only been asking questions and there's not a damned thing you can do about that."

I heard the phone crackle and O'Mara's eyes twinkled. He listened carefully and fished awkwardly with his false hand for a cigar out of the box on the desk. I got it for him and he was puffing contentedly and listening to Brant take off.

The copper must have run out of breath. O'Mara's voice held a slow drawl. "So there's no need to go further, is that it? It's a burglary and no one higher up gives a damn if the man's caught or not."

Brant replied something and I saw O'Mara's lips tighten angrily around the cigar. His blue eyes snapped. "Nuts to you, Brant. This whole thing is as false as an Axis broadcast. I'll play around the way I please."

The phone sputtered again and this time O'Mara laughed aloud. "So we were identified as the prowlers, were we? I'll tell Jim that. You've got to arrest us? Brant, count this as an engraved invitation to come right on up and arrest us. We'll be right here to make things easier for you. In the meantime, we'll keep plugging at the Keith case."

HE HUNG up and sat there, staring at the phone. He started rubbing that polished dome of his and I knew he was getting a brain wave. He looked around at me.

"You work for a damned muddling shamus, Jim, with the good principles of a Quisling. That's me, according to Brant. The police have closed the Keith case and I've been told to lay off. Somewhere along the line we've scared someone."

He pulled himself from the chair and told me to come along. We went upstairs and I helped him out of his coat, vest and shirt. I took off the company arm and gave him the fighting one. I strapped on the shoulder holster and checked the clip on his automatic. He made me get my own.

I didn't like the signs and told him as much. O'Mara shrugged. "According to Hoyle, we're next on the list. We'll either be scared off or shot and it's a good bet either way. Big Eagle takes no chances."

"Who's Big Eagle?" I asked.

"Me," he answered. "That's my Indian name."

I looked him over. "Your mother must have been disappointed. But I can see the eagle part, beak and bald head."

O'Mara chuckled. "What's in a name? I'd still smell sweet with any other."

We went downstairs and for once we didn't worry about cases. O'Mara read detectives while I went over the papers and then caught myself a radio program. Every once in a while, though, I'd think of what we'd done to date and wondered where it might lead. I thought once of talking it over with O'Mara and then decided against it. O'Mara would probably stall me with a lot of red herrings or just shut up like a lockjawed Choc-taw.

Out of the midst of a deep silence O'Mara suddenly spoke. "Roberts saw a light in Keith's bedroom."

I turned around, surprised. "Yeah. We saw it, too."

O'Mara nodded. "From our porch." He rustled his magazine and went back into it and didn't say another word until he was ready for bed. We hadn't any visitors, any sign of alarm. I wondered how long this armed waiting of ours would keep up.

We stepped out into the hall, ready to ascend the steps to the bedroom

above. O'Mara stopped short and I banged into him. His warning hiss was low and intense. I froze instantly.

There was no sound. I listened, straining every faculty. Nothing was wrong, apparently. I became aware that O'Mara had moved, a flitting shadow toward the stairs. I took a step into the hall and waited, protecting O'Mara's back until he had reached the head of the stairs.

There was nothing out of order. Finally I flipped on the hall light and led the way down the steps. Both of us were about half way down when I saw the lug.

He stood in the doorway to the kitchen. He held a big automatic trained right on us and his broad, course pan was creased in a very unpleasant grin.

I heard O'Mara's slight intake of breath. "Hello, Gus," he said casually. "Long time no see."

Gus grinned more widely. "Come on down, chums. You got a caller."

CHAPTER V

Truth and Consequences

I CAME down the rest of those steps like I was walking on eggs. That big gun fascinated me and I didn't like the way the guy's finger was tight around the trigger. O'Mara came right behind me. At the foot of the stairs, we stopped.

Gus frisked us, doing a swell job of handling two men with one rod. When he had both our weapons, he motioned us into the library and we obeyed orders.

Gus was gunsels, right enough, but with possibly a little more brain power than the others. Still, I could see the mark of the killer in his eyes, in the up-quirk of the thin lips.

O'Mara walked to the desk and very carefully got a cigar. He lit it and turned. "How's Legs Patti, Gus? Last I saw him, he was leaving town."

Gus shrugged. "The Boss is all right. He sent me around. He wants

what you guys should do what he asks."

O'Mara edged forward a little. "What's on his mind?"

Gus looked stern. "You birds should forget about this guy what was bumped off next door. Legs says maybe one of his boys made a slip-up, anyway he don't want what you should be getting ideas. Legs Patti takes care of his boys, even should he have to blast a guy what's his friend."

O'Mara's brows arched. "This is strictly the McCoy?"

Gus nodded. "Strictly from kosher."

O'Mara had shifted again, a careful process that was getting him closer. "Since when did Legs get housebreakers on his payroll? I thought he stuck to Numbers and the pinballs."

Gus looked puzzled. "Hell, I dunno! I just do what Legs says, and he sends me around to tell you guys."

O'Mara nodded. He pulled his cigar from h' mouth and stood looking at it. There was a red hot coal on the end. Suddenly O'Mara's fingers flicked and that cigar sailed straight at the gunsels' eyes.

Gus ducked and O'Mara jumped toward him. His steel hook glinted in the light as it flashed up. He cracked it along Gus' head and the gunsels staggered. I stepped in quick and had the man's gun. We'd worked too quick for his slow brain and he just stood there, blinking in surprise and rubbing the lump that was rising on his skull.

O'Mara grinned at me and sank into his chair. I kept Gus covered while O'Mara did the talking. "So Legs sent you, Gus. Who's behind Legs?"

The gunsels shook his head. "Ain't no one. The Boss always works alone."

O'Mara looked a little disappointed and then he brightened. "We got ways of making you talk, Gus."

The gunsels looked frightened but he shook his head. "You know Legs ain't telling me what he knows. He just gives me orders and I do it. Can a guy know more?"

O'Mara seemed to think it over

and finally sighed. "I guess you're right, Gus. Now I got something to send back to Legs. Tell him he backed a slow horse and that I had my finger on the killer of Dayn Keith before Legs even knew what it was all about. Tell Legs I don't want any more visitors like you and the next one I'll probably dump in the canal. Got that?"

GUS DIGESTED it for a moment and then nodded brightly. "Sure, I can tell him." His broad face looked dubious. "Jeez! I don't think Legs'll like that."

O'Mara shrugged. "That's up to Legs. He can come around and register his own complaint. Jim, show Gus outside and keep your eye on him."

Gus went without any trouble and he didn't linger around outside. I watched him out of sight, then bolted the door tightly and returned to the library. O'Mara was holding the phone. He replaced it when I entered.

"No one at home at the Roberts'," he said casually. Get your tools, camera and print kit. We'll pay him a visit."

I balked. "No dice. My neck's out a foot now and you still want me to ask for Michigan City."

O'Mara stood up. "We have to, Jim. Let's go."

I groused while I got the tools and I groused when we circled the house, O'Mara carrying the fingerprint and camera outfit. I groused right up to the Roberts property line and then I shut up. Getting in the house was no trouble at all but O'Mara was mighty choosy where he got his fingerprints. Finally it was over and we were outside again.

I stopped O'Mara on our own porch. "You're sure there's not a bank or two we could crack before we knock off?"

He smiled, a flash of his white teeth. "We'll do that tomorrow, Jim."

We had just finished breakfast late the next morning when a messenger came with the credit reports. O'Mara eagerly read them, jumped

up from the table and yelled for me to dial Lieutenant Brant. I did and O'Mara sounded excited.

"I'm sending over some film. Develop it. If the prints match those found on the coffee cup in the kitchen of Keith's house and on the door-knob of the bedroom, would you make the arrest?"

He listened while Brant talked, then laughed. "I'll have the rest of the dope for you. I'll send Jim over with the film and you can check it. Then I'll tell you the rest."

I didn't get a chance to read the credit reports, though I was burning with curiosity. O'Mara sent me packing to the police station and I spent a long time there waiting for the pictures to come out and trying to evade Brant's questions. For one thing, the officer wasn't any too pleased with O'Mara and me.

"You've been told to lay off," he grumbled. "Of course, if this is a lead to the killer, I'll be glad to get him. But, damn it, you're showing up the Force!"

I shook my head. "You know O'Mara better than that. You make the arrest, you get the credit."

Brant got a call from a laboratory. He listened, then banged down the phone. He turned and stared at me. "Okay, we'll see O'Mara. I don't know where he gets his leads, but it's good enough for me if he can support what he's already found."

The phone rang and Brant answered. He passed it to me. It was O'Mara. I was to go with Brant to pick up Donlevy and Anne Holden, and he gave me an address on Washington Boulevard for the Holden dame. O'Mara would have Roberts at his place.

Brant and I climbed into a police car. We roused Donlevy from his bed and the guy didn't much want to go. But Brant had a badge and the big man stopped arguing. We went to an apartment house on Washington Boulevard and I found Anne Holden listed in Number Three.

DAWN DAY answered the door in a sheer negligee that had Brant's eyes popping. Her language

wasn't any too good when Brant gave her orders and we had to stall around until she got dressed. But at last we were on our way and we wasted no time getting home.

O'Mara was in the library and I noticed he had his fighting arm. Lawrence Roberts paced back and forth, his face black with anger. He spotted Brant and came hustling forward.

"Knock some sense into this one-armed wonder, officer! He thinks he's a detective. I won't—"

Just then Dawn Day swung into the room and Roberts broke off short. He stared at her and then at Donlevy. His thick lips snapped shut and he threw a quick glance at O'Mara.

My boss was grinning. "I'm glad all of you came. We're about to find out who killed Dayn Keith, not that he didn't need it."

I brought up chairs and O'Mara had them all seated in a circle. He took his stand by the desk and I noticed that the credit reports lay close at hand. He started with Brant.

Brant nodded to his question. "Yes, the prints you sent undoubtedly match those we found at Keith's home the night of the murder. There were prints on the coffee cup downstairs, on the knob of the bedroom door and latent prints on the arm of the big chair by the bed."

I gasped. I knew who killed Keith, but I wondered how O'Mara would cinch the case. He didn't seem to be worried. He was grinning like a bloodthirsty Apache as Brant spoke. When the officer finished, O'Mara picked up the credit reports.

"Jim and I have uncovered some very interesting things. First, we know about the scene of the crime and I'll confess right now that I heard the shots and Jim and I investigated long before we called the police. The light was on in Keith's bedroom, the basement window was jimmied, yet nothing was taken and the killer had obviously sat in the chair before the bed when he fired the fatal shots. Two things are immediately clear from that. First, Keith knew the killer and had probably admitted him. Second, the bur-

glary angle was a red herring and all the unsuccessful entries in the neighborhood were no more than an elaborate build-up to give a false motive to the murder itself. In other words, Keith's murder was carefully planned and executed. I don't mean that the killer broke in all those houses, but I believe Legs Patti had one of his men do the work at the killer's order."

He gave me a quick look and picked up the sheaf of credit reports. "I have here some information that should be mighty interesting and gives clear motive for the killing, the true motive. First, Dayn Keith had been a political boss. His rule was broken by the present King of the city, Mr. Lawrence Roberts. Apparently Keith was completely broken and ruined, yet he managed to have a high income and spent a good deal of money. The bank reluctantly furnished that information, Lieutenant Brant, and you can get the records.

"Keith received large sums from a man named Donlevy who ran the Club 13. You're making money at the Club, Donlevy, but not enough to pay Keith as often as you did. Any explanation?"

Donlevy looked sick and his voice had a slight quiver. "I don't have to answer that. I didn't kill Dayn Keith."

O'Mara shrugged those thin shoulders. "Then I'll answer it in due time. Keith had a lot of money coming in, and Keith was in love. He was trying to win your affections, Miss Holden. You were playing two ways for a clean-up and took his money, though your other friend certainly kept you in funds. As Dawn Day, you were doing all right at Club 13. You'd met your first lover there and that's where Dayn Keith fell for you."

SHE SAID nothing. Her eyes were hard and she licked her lips as though they were dry. Lawrence Roberts turned and stared at her long and hard.

O'Mara dropped the papers on the desk and I saw that his good hand

gripped his coat lapel close to the concealed shoulder holster. "Now comes the bit of information that ties the whole thing up in a neat bundle with a blue ribbon. Anne Holden, alias Dawn Day, is the sweetheart of Lawrence Roberts, prominent businessman and powerful official of the present political party in power."

Roberts jumped to his feet but Brant pulled him down. He sat there, nervous. O'Mara watched him closely. "Roberts is also secret owner of the Club 13. Dayn Keith knew of the setup so far as the woman was concerned and he lived off blackmail from Roberts, among others. At the same time, he was trying to get the girl away from his victim."

"Roberts, you couldn't stand for that. You had the idea of eliminating Keith. You paid Patti to start a series of mysterious burglaries. The night of the murder, you called on Keith, who was already in bed, to pay a ten thousand dollar hush installment. He let you in, poured you coffee and then led you upstairs where he had a lunch tray. After a while you deliberately shot him. You had eaten the sandwich so you took the coffee cup downstairs to the kitchen, feeling certain that it would be overlooked. You had already jimmied the basement window, so you went home to wait until Keith's murder was found. Apparently you were clear."

"But two small slips made me suspicious of you. The first was the fact that you stated Keith's bedroom light was on and at the same time said you had not left your house all evening. Keith's bedroom windows cannot be seen from your house. You were lying. The second slip was when you depended upon your power and prestige to prevent fingerprinting and to stop Brant's probing at the crime. As a consequence, you were careless. There were prints on the cup you handled. They have been compared with your own and they match."

O'Mara turned to Lieutenant Brant. "There you are. There's opportunity, method, motive and

proof. Ballistics on Roberts' gun should do the rest. You can—"

I YELLED. Roberts had jumped from his chair and plunged toward the door. His hand streaked into his pocket and his gun flashed out. I saw O'Mara dropping below the library table. I made a grab for Roberts but his heavy fist sent me sprawling backwards into Donlevy. Both of us went down into a blind tangle of arms and legs.

I heard gun blasts and the sound made my ears ring. I fought clear of Donlevy and struggled to my feet. O'Mara crouched by the table, his gun smoking. Roberts writhed on the floor by the door, his gun arm broken and his leg knocked out from under him. He was definitely no harm to anyone.

Brant grabbed the phone and dialed headquarters. Dawn Day sat tight-lipped and silent watching Roberts squirm. She looked around, her eyes hard, then picked up her purse.

"I won't be needed until the trial, I guess. O'Mara, you've sure played hell with my income."

Brant turned to O'Mara.

"How come you got so damned interested in the Keith case?"

O'Mara lit a cigar. "That was Roberts' fault. At first, he had an idea of putting Jim and me in a spot, claiming he saw us enter Keith's house. I didn't like it and wondered why Roberts had to lie about the windows."

Brant grunted and turned away. I wearily closed the door and walked to the library. O'Mara was fishing a sealed envelope out of the safe and he handed it to me. I recognized the thing. I wearily ripped it open and read O'Mara's backward scrawl.

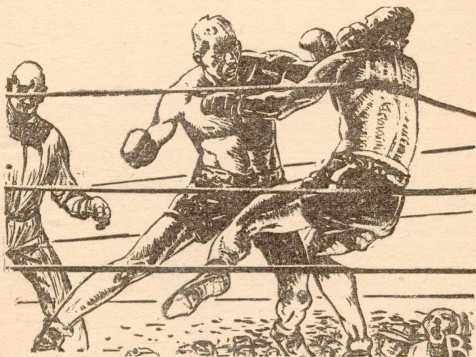
"Keith was murdered because he blackmailed someone high in political or financial circles. Through pressure, the police will say the murder was committed because a housebreaker was caught in the act."

I looked at O'Mara. That hawk nose of his flared and his thick lips grinned. That bald descendant of a Blackfoot scalp-lifter knew he had a hundred dollars cinched.

He'd used the Indian sign again.

I'LL MOIDER THA BUM

By Henry Norton



Crossi began to lose in the fourth round and he knew it . . .

Thirty thousand spectators saw Barney Morris roll over and die just before the sixth round; one man knew it was murder. But no one could figure out a logical motive for the killing!

"FIND ANYTHING?" Tom Daly asked.
"Nothing yet, Tom," Lieutenant Stern said.

Daly shoved his battered gray hat to the back of his head, and looked at the lieutenant of detectives with cold eyes. His lips set in a thin, bloodless line.

He said, "You better get the lead out."

"Have a heart, Tom," Stern said wearily. "It's only been fourteen

hours. It might take a week to crack this case."

"It better not!" old Tom said, suddenly furious. "What's the matter with you cops, anyway? My boy gets murdered in a prize ring with thirty thousand people watching, an' you want a week to catch the killer! By that time you'll never get him!"

"But that's it!" Stern said. "This thing was no ordinary crime. It was carefully planned. We've got to get an angle on it, Tom. We can't go off half-cocked."

Tom Daly jerked a short obscenity from his tight lips. "You know who did it," he said. "Why don't you pick up Dino Crossi an' beat the trick out of him?"

"We've questioned Crossi."

"An' kissed his foot while you were doin' it!"

It was Stern's turn to get angry. "Don't tell me how to run my department," he snapped.

Tom Daly stood on wide-planted feet and glared at Lieutenant Stern. "I'll tell you this," he said. "If you don't have Barney's killer behind bars by this time tomorrow, the papers'll run you out of town."

He stormed out. His attorney, Dewey Farr, tried to look properly threatening as he followed, but on the pudgy little lawyer, it wasn't convincing.

Tom Daly was different, Stern thought, and a frown creased his brows. Tom wasn't bluffing. He was the city's best loved sports figure, and a word from him would send the feature writers and sports scribes howling on the police trail. They'd make city hall ring like a brass gong. Then—the old buck, passed from mayor to chief to captain to lieutenant. And Dick Stern, being in charge of the case, would take the beating.

It was tough, coming from a friend. Oh, not an intimate friend, but certainly Tom had been cordial in their many contacts. Thinking back, Stern could hardly remember Tom Daly as anything but an old man. It seemed, curiously, a sort of eternal old age—a bright, vigorous, active autumn of life that persisted without change.

Stern had been twenty when he joined the force. He was thirty-five now. Yet Tom Daly seemed hardly a day older than he had when Stern was a rookie.

The old man had a few lean years till Barney Morris got into the money. But that was common to the fight game. Barney had been a willing, tough, awkward welter when Tom Daly found him in a local sawmill. Under Daly's shrewd handling, he'd developed into a smart, lethal heavyweight, with a crack at the title coming up. And then they'd signed him to fight Dino Crossi.

LAST NIGHT. The scene was still vivid in Stern's memory. He'd been in a ringside seat through five murderous, blood-spattered rounds. Don't think that fat-bellied bully of a Crossi couldn't fight! He came within a shade of trapping Barney against the ropes in the first, and one of his roundhouse swings clipped mist into the kid's eyes in the third.

But Crossi began losing in the fourth, and he knew it. His pig eyes were drenched in fear, and he cursed the kid in the clinches, babbling filth until Barney shoved him contemptuously away and rocked his fat face with smashing rights and lefts till Crossi was tottering, glassy-eyed.

Nobody expected Dino out for the sixth, but as it turned out, nobody noticed whether he was ready or not. For with five seconds left in the rest interval, Barney got to his feet, screamed hoarsely, and fell forward on the canvas. By the time Tom Daly reached him, he was dead, with a blueness about the lips. The doctor in attendance was only a step behind Daly, and Stern was in the ring almost as soon. The doctor said, "Poison!" in a shocked tone. Stern whirled and grabbed Barney's water bottle. And Dino Crossi set the seal on his own brutality with a booming laugh.

"I tole ya I'd moider tha bum!" he shouted.

DETECTIVE SAM PATTON interrupted the lieutenant's mem-

ories, thrusting his bristling head in through the anteroom door.

"There's a little screwball out here, says he owned Barney Morris. He wants to talk to you about the murder."

Stern considered. "Throw him out," he said.

"Okay," Patton said.

He closed the door, and in seconds excited voices drifted through. There was a shrill, high voice, broken by Patton's heavier tones. In the midst of the commotion Stern went to the door and jerked it open. Patton was in the act of ejecting a struggling little man in a derby hat. One red hand grasped the man by the seat of his striped trousers, the other had a punishing grip on the collar of his neat frock coat.

"Come on, come on," Patton said.

Stern snapped, "Hold it!"

Patton released his grip and turned. The little man straightened his tie, settled his coat, and gave Sam Patton a look that was meant to be withering.

"What's all this?" Stern demanded.

"My name is Weeks, Elton Weeks," the man said.

Stern said, "Tom Daly owned Morris."

"That's what everybody thought," Weeks said with a superior smile, "but I owned a half interest. But the important thing is, I saw the killer!"

He paused, as if waiting for some expression of surprise to show itself on the lieutenant's features. Stern looked at him calmly, his deeply tanned face smooth. Only the red around his direct hazel eyes showed strain.

"Well," Stern said finally. "Go on."

"It was during the fifth round," Elton Weeks said. "There was quite a little excitement in the ring, and I probably wouldn't have noticed him if he hadn't stepped on my feet. I have very tender feet."

Stern said, "Get to the point!"

"The man went over to Barney's corner, and reached down. Nobody was watching him. I didn't think anything about it till later, but he

must have switched the water bottles."

"Who was it?" Patton said.

Weeks said, "Shad Cates."

"Crossi's manager?"

"I saw him! He poisoned Barney."

"That's a serious charge," Stern said.

"Serious!" Weeks echoed. "Isn't it serious for me to lose an investment like Barney Morris?"

"In the first place," Stern said, "I don't think you owned so much as Barney's little finger. And in the second, there was no poison in the water bottle. However Barney got it, it wasn't in his water bottle. Okay, Sam."

The little man squealed as Patton grabbed him, kept on squealing while the chunky detective turkey-walked him out the door and sent him on his way with a final caress from a number eleven shoe.

PATTON came back in, grumbling. "If we ever have a murder in this town that don't have a dozen screwballs, I'll buy you a pint."

Stern said, "Did that man leave his address?"

"Someplace," Patton said, scrambling through the papers on the desk. "Here it is; Elton Weeks, 38 Finch road. Pretty fancy neighborhood."

"Put somebody on his tail, Sam."

Patton said, "Right," but his eyes questioned.

"He's probably a harmless crackpot," Stern said defensively. "But this case's slim enough, without our passing up any bets."

Patton mumbled something incomprehensible and went out. Stern sat in his office for a while, staring at the wall. Now that he was alone, his brows knotted themselves into a formidable scowl. Finally he got up, jerked a smart Homburg hat down over his crisp brown hair, and went out.

Thirty minutes of lawful driving brought him to the low, rambling white building that was Dino Crossi's Inn. It was set back from the highway in a sheltering grove of evergreens. There were about fifty cars



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Crack Detective

(Continued From Page 81)

parked in the lot to the left of the entrance. Stern got out and showed his shield to the attendant who came hurrying up.

"Leave it in front," he said.

He went into the inn, stopping for a second or two at the entrance hall while his eyes adjusted themselves to the dimly lighted interior. The big dance floor was deserted, but there was a milling crowd around the long bar. Crossi was back of the bar, a little drunk.

"Have another drink on the house!" he bawled as Stern approached. "We empty this keg, we'll open up another one. Crossi's buyin'!"

The man was perspiring heavily; little rivulets ran from his heavy neck to soak into his already soaking shirt. His dark, fat face was split in a ferocious smile.

"Give us the lowdown, champ," someone begged. "What really happened to Barney Morris?"

Crossi scowled and raised his big arms in a fighting stance. "I tell ya, I moidered him!" he shouted. "Don't pay no 'tention to th' malarkey about poison! I beat 'im to death with' my hands!"

Stern came around the end of the bar, close to Crossi. "I want to talk to you," he said.

Dino said, "Well! It's tha peeper!"

"Get Shad Cates and come on,"

Stern said.

"Wait a minute," Crossi said roughly. "You talked to me once, copper. This is outside your beat. So don't pull nothin' here!"

Stern waited, standing tall and composed in front of the squat, rotund Crossi. After a long moment in which the crowd around the bar became very still, the fighter flicked his eyes away from Stern's level gaze.

"Watch the joint, Tony," he said.

They went through a door behind the bar, into a sort of private office. On a scarred table in the middle of the room was Dino Crossi's famous drinking stein, a huge two-quart vessel he boasted he could empty without drawing a breath. There was a desk, and three straight chairs. Cros-

I'll Moider tha Bum

si perched on the table and looked at Stern. His drunkenness had vanished with the closing of the door.

"Okay," he said, "talk."

"It won't take long," said Dick Stern. "I'd like to know what Shad was doing in Barney's corner during the fifth round."

Shad said quickly, "Who says I was?"

"You were," Stern said.

Shad Cates shut his grim little eyes for a moment, then opened them to stare palely at Stern. In that time, Stern sensed, he had weighed the chances of a flat denial, and rejected it. A cool customer, this Cates.

"All right," Cates said. "So I was."

"Why?"

"Morris was comin' back too strong," said Shad Cates. "I couldn't figure it—I thought they were hoppin' him up. So I had me a look."

"Whattaya mean he was comin' back?" Crossi blustered. "I was moiderin' 'im!"

Cates twisted his mouth. "Oh, sure."

"What did you find?" Stern asked.

"They was givin' him vitamin pills, was all. Them high-powered B1 tablets. He was eatin' 'em like candy."

"Where was he getting them?"

"From Tom Daly."

CCROSSI said, "Now yuh take me. I get tha same results trainin' on beer."

"What did those pills look like?" Stern asked.

"Like big aspirin tablets," Shad Cates said.

Stern got up and crossed to the door. He turned and said, "Thanks, boys. That's all for now," and went out. He held the knob tight, keeping the latch retracted. He slammed the door, then quickly opened it a quarter inch, soundlessly, and stood listening.

Crossi's heavy voice boomed, "Okay, chiseler, just what the hell was yuh doin' in Morris' corner? An' don't gimme that vitamin routine."

(Continued On Page 84)



Seal of JUPITER

The Planet of MONEY·LUCK·PLENTY

For hundreds of years Astrologers and Occult Students have maintained that the planet Jupiter rules one's Fortune, Money Matters and a Full Purse. The Ancient Kabbalists believed that Jupiter's symbols upon a Talisman would create vibrations which would cause SUCCESS, GOOD LUCK and MONEY to come to them. No wonder that Merchants, Gamblers, Gamesters, Traders and others bought them and carried them to help them WIN AT GAMES of Skill and Chance, to help them put over a Good Deal or Hand. This GUARANTEED Genius Replica made of hard-as-stone Caterpillar is just what YOU want and it costs you only \$1.00. Order one today! Send no money... simply pay postman \$1.00 plus postage delivery.

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Crack Detective

(Continued From Page 83)

That's for dummies. Are yuh sellin' me out?"

"You damn' fool!" Cates snarled, and his footsteps came toward the door. Stern released the knob gently, and went out of the building.

Stern found a parking space by the Crobett Building, and stopped for a minute in the lobby, studying the index. Tom Daly's office was on the sixth floor, 619. Stern found Dewey Farr's name listed for 611-617. He scanned the other names on the register, found none that he recognized.

An elevator door grated open behind him, and he turned. Last one from the cage was a dapper little man in a derby hat. He looked quickly around him, and started out. Stern came up beside him, took his arm.

"Just a minute, Weeks," he said.

The little man turned, and for a second fear rode shimmering in his eyes. Then he brushed Stern's hand from his arm and said, "You must be mistaken."

"Been to see Daly?" Stern asked.

"You've got me confused with someone else," the man persisted. "My name isn't Weeks, and I don't know anybody named Daly. Now, please—"

Stern tightened his grip. "And I suppose you never heard of anyone named Barney Morris?"

"No, I haven't!" the name snapped.

"Now, that's peculiar," Stern said. He took the folded newspaper from the little man's hand and opened it. "Barney Morris Killing Still Unsolved," the headlines blared, crowding even the war news into second place.

"You're almost too innocent," Stern said.

The dapper man's eyes went quickly to right and left. There was desperation in them as they turned back to look at Stern.

He said, "Lieuten—ah, Mister, you've got the wrong man. Honest. I've got an important appointment, right away. I've got to go."

Lieutenant Stern's smile was bleak. "Run along," he said. "We'll find you when we want you."

He watched the frightened little

man scuttle out of the building, and saw Tim Groves from the bureau move unobtrusively after him. Good man, Groves, Stern thought.

Tom Daly's office was locked. Stern went down the corridor to 617. The door said, "Dewey Farr, Attorney at Law, Entrance 611." Stern went past 615 and 613 to reach the indicated door. He wondered what Dewey Farr needed with so extensive a suite of offices. The door numbered 611 was chastely lettered, "Enter." He entered.

A buxom brunette in a sheer blouse hastily took her feet off the desk, closed a brightly colored magazine, and looked at him in surprise. As an afterthought she said, "Hello. Can I help you?"

"Farr in?" Stern asked.

The girl looked puzzled. "Business?"

Stern showed her the shield he carried in his vest pocket, and her face went greenish white. She got up and backed toward a door at the other side of the room, then turned and went through quickly. Stern got a momentary impression of angry voices beyond the door.

Dewey Farr came through the door, and the scared brunette poked her head around the jamb behind him. Farr's round little face smoothed at sight of Stern.

"Ah, Lieutenant," he said. "Come in."

STERN followed Farr into a room thick with smoke. There were three or four tables, each with a chair, and no other important furniture. Stern sat down and tilted one of the chairs back against the wall. "You might as well get Daly back in here," he said. "I want to talk to him too."

Farr flushed, and went to an opposite door, one connecting with the next office down the line. He nodded, and Daly came in, cigar clenched between his teeth.

"Find anything?" he demanded.

"Maybe," Stern said. "Where'd you get those B1 vitamin pills for Barney?"

"Different places," Daly said. "Ev-

(Continued On Page 86)

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Crack Detective

(Continued From Page 85)

ery drug and department store in town carries 'em."

"You buy 'em yourself?"

Daly said, "Sure. What are you drivin' at?"

Stern said, "When did you sell Barney?"

There was a sudden, complete silence through the little room, in which the noises drifted faintly, rising from the street six floors below. Tom Daly flickered an inquiring glance toward the little attorney, then shifted back to Dick Stern.

"Who says I did?" he asked.

Stern said, "A witness."

"Well," Daly said. "It's a damn lie."

"All right," said Stern. "Next, what did Shad Cates want when he came over to Barney's corner?"

"Aw, he claimed the kid was hittin' low," Daly said. "Said he was gonna protest the fight if we didn't watch it. Hell, the kid was clean as a marine's rifle."

"That isn't what Weeks told me," Stern said.

Tom looked puzzled. "Who's Weeks?"

Dewey Farr shook a cigarette from a pack, lighted it with the glowing butt of the last one. He sent a quick, bright-eyed glance toward the impassive detective, and made a tiny motion with his head.

"Okay, see you later," Stern said.

Daly said, "Remember about the newspapers!"

Dewey Farr followed the tall lieutenant to the front office, and took hold of his arm. "I hope you won't worry about what Tom says," he said confidingly. "He's pretty upset about losing the boy."

"Took it pretty hard, did he?"

"No wonder," said Dewey Farr. "Barney was just beginning to pay off. He was in line for the championship if he'd beaten this Crossi."

"Wounded Tom's bankroll, eh?"

"It wasn't just that. I think he was really fond of the lad, in his own way," Farr said. "But it must have hurt to lose a potential fortune too."

"It always annoys me," Stern said.

I'll Moider tha Bum

"Isn't that the way it is with you, sister?"

The brunette smiled beguilingly, then looked startled. "I beg ya podden?" she said, all in one word. Stern turned and went out of the office.

By the door of 613 he stopped to tie his shoelace. He knelt with his head close to the lock of the door. He heard Dewey Farr come back to the room, and heard Tom Daly complain, "What did that dumb dick mean I'd sold Barney?" The little attorney said something inaudible in a soothing tone, and Stern went down the hall to the elevator. For the first time that day there was the barest suspicion of a smile on his lean face.

There was a pale, cool sunset in the sky when Dick Stern returned to headquarters. Sam Patton was waiting for him in the lieutenant's office. Stern said mechanically, "Anything new?"

"The medical examiner confirmed his earlier report," Patton said. "Potassium cyanide. But there wasn't any trace in the guy's mouth or throat."

"Any prints on the water bottle?"

"Daly's," Patton said, "an' the smear from Barney's gloves. But there wasn't any poison in it, anyway."

"I was thinking about something else."

"Oh, yes," Patton said. "Groves called. The little screwball he's been tailin' is home, so Groves is grabbin' a bite to eat."

Stern snapped, "Who's watching Weeks?"

"Well," Patton said uneasily, "Tim figured the guy ought to be good for an hour at home anyway, so he figured he could—"

"God!" Stern said. "Come on!"

HE OPENED his siren and his throttle wide, in a driving run across town to Prospect Hill section. He burned rubber into Finch Road and pulled to a screaming stop in front of number 38. Stern ran to the door, and thrust it open without

(Continued On Page 88)



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Crack Detective

(Continued From Page 87)

stopping to ring. Patton followed.

They found Elton Weeks. They found him in the bedroom, where he had been in the process of changing from morning clothes to a dapper evening jacket. Someone had interrupted the process, decisively, by smashing in the back of his head with a blackjack. The weapon was still there, wicked, shot-filled, with a thong handle. And Weeks lay face downward in a pool of blood.

Lieutenant Stern turned away, and his lips were set in a grim straight line. His brown eyes smoldered with fury. He stared at a wall as he talked.

"This is the hell of murder," he said savagely. "It smacks over the little guys, the harmless guys, who aren't even ready to fight back. I can stand all day and cheer while a bunch of gangsters snipe at each other, Sam. They deserve to die, and expect to. But a game kid, in a prize ring, or a little bantam who never hurt anybody, dressing for a date. By God, I hate a killer!"

It was a long speech, but Sam knew better than to interrupt. He'd worked with Stern before. He knew the flaming, classic hatred the man carried into his fight against crime. He knew also, that when this fulmination of hate reached out, the end of the case was in sight.

Sam Patton said, "But this guy was just a whack; how does he fit into Barney's killing?"

"Even a whackpot can be right once," Stern said.

He phoned Dino Crossi's Inn, and got Shad Cates on the line. "Cates," he said, "I want you and that human beer barrel at Tom Daly's office in a half hour."

The receiver crackled.

"A half hour," Stern repeated, "because if you aren't there, I'll come for you. And you won't arrive in such good shape."

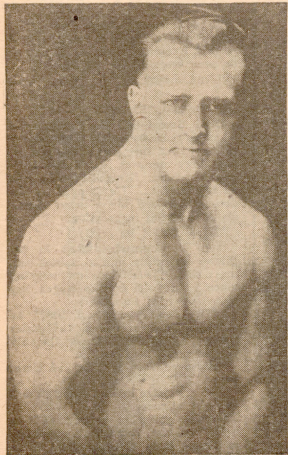
He hung up the phone and squinted at Patton.

"She's shaping up now," he said.

Tom Daly, Dewey Farr, and the bewildered brunette were waiting in

(Continued On Page 90)

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Crack Detective

(Continued From Page 88)

Daly's office when Stern arrived with Sam Patton. The brunette was in a revealing formal gown, obviously summoned away from a gay evening. Dewey Farr was in a resentful mood.

"I resent this!" he told Stern. "On behalf of Mr. Daly, Miss Jarvis and myself, I resent it deeply. Can't you do your work in the daytime?"

"Find anything?" rumbled Tom Daly.

Stern said, "Plenty."

Dino Crossi and his tough little manager must have driven like crazy to do it, but they came into the office three minutes inside the half-hour deadline. Dino had a silly grin on his fat face. He stopped by the door and raised his clasped hands above his head in greeting.

"Hiya, fans!" he said.

Tom Daly growled deep in his throat, an oddly animal sound, and Stern said, "Tom!" in a low, warning voice. The old fight manager was quivering with fury.

"Why don't you arrest him?" he snarled. "He threatened to murder Barney, an' he did it. It was the only way he could beat him!"

"Why, you old fool!" Shad Cates began.

The explosive lash of Stern's voice brought silence.

"We're going to settle this," he said, "and now. But there's somebody missing. Miss Jarvis, call Elton Weeks and tell him to get down here."

The brunette looked at him, and her lower lip began to shake uncontrollably. Farr said, "Give her the number, Lieutenant. She doesn't know this Weeks."

"It's in the directory," Stern said. They went into an adjoining office, and left Miss Jarvis at the phone. Stern watched the little attorney bring extra chairs from the next office.

"I've been wondering why your office ran up to connect with Daly's," he said. "Maybe it's because you don't want some of your clients to meet the others."

(Continued On Page 92)

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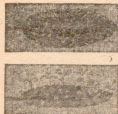
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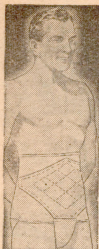
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Crack Defective

(Continued From Page 90)

FARR smiled. "Every attorney has professional confidences," he said.

Miss Jarvis stuck her head into the room. "Mr. Weeks said he'd be right down," she reported.

"What's he got to do with this?" Daly asked.

Stern said, "He killed Morris."

"Cripes!" Shad Cates burst out.

"Well," Stern said, "he did it quite indirectly. He didn't exactly administer the poison, but he was the cause of its being administered."

"I don't get this!" Tom Daly said. "To begin with, there was actually no one who could have benefited by Barney Morris being dead. So there was no one, so far as we could see, with a motive."

"There was Crossi," Daly said.

"Crossi lost by it," Stern said. "He had to have him alive to beat him. When Barney died, it ruined Dino's chance for a match with the champion."

"I could of moidered 'im, too," Crossi said.

"Certainly Tom Daly had no reason to want Barney murdered," Stern went on. "And for the same reason, neither would his attorney."

"Then it was Cates!" said Daly.

"Shad, it's about time you told the truth about your visit to Barney's corner," Stern said.

"I will, by hell!" Shad Cates exploded. "I went over to tell Daly I was half owner of Barney Morris, an' for him to make his boy lay off Dino!"

"I was killin' 'im!" Crossi shouted. "You was gettin' your fat brains knocked out!" Shad Cates said. "I was gonna tell Tom Daly to ease the boy up an' take a decision instead of a knockout."

"What do you mean, you were half owner of Barney, you gonoph!" Tom Daly screamed.

"You try to deny it!" said Cates.

He jerked a folded paper from his pocket, and whipped it open.

"You signed it yourself!" he said.

Tom Daly wilted, and turned an agonized look at Dewey Farr. "What goes on?" he said. "Dewey, what

(Continued On Page 94)

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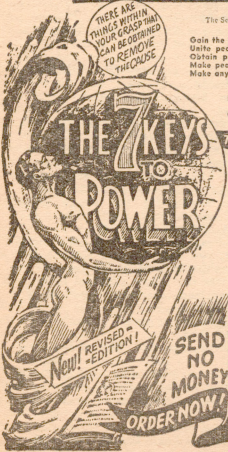
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Crack Detective

(Continued From Page 92)

goes on here? I sold that to you!"

Dewey Farr said, "Because you were short of money! Well, that's the reason I sold it to Cates! There's no crime in that, is there?"

"You're damn' right!" Daly said. "They find you got a piece of both boys in a fight, they bar both of 'em for life! Cates is on a spot!"

"Oh, no!" said Dewey Farr. "Because a clause in the contract says the deal is off if there's any public announcement."

From the door Miss Jarvis said, "Mr. Farr."

"Come in," Stern said. "Tell us all."

"After all, Lieutenant!" Farr said.

"Go ahead, babe," Stern said.

"There's a guy here says he's Weeks," she gasped.

"Do you doubt his word?" Stern asked.

"No, but—"

"But you know he isn't Weeks?"

She looked at him with pitiful eyes.

"How do you know?" Stern said inexorably.

"I—" She gulped, stopped.

"Yes, Miss Jarvis," Farr said smoothly, "where did you ever see Mr. Weeks before?"

Stern laughed. "Farr's ditched you, babe."

Her face reddened with anger and she glared at Dewey Farr. "I should be an actress for the dough you pay!" she snapped. "Weeks is a client, and you know it!"

"More than that," Stern said. "Farr, you had also sold him a half ownership in Barney Morris. And that was the reason you had to kill Barney, and the reason you had to kill Weeks!"

"You'd better prove that!" said Dewey Farr.

"There was the murder motive, Tom," Stern told the old manager. "Farr has sold so much stock in Barney that he had to dig up money every time the boy won. It was breaking him for the kid to be a champion."

"Lies, all lies!" Dewey Farr said.

"Think so?" Stern said. "Here's

(Continued On Page 96)

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Crack Defective

(Continued From Page 94)

the certificate you issued to Elton Weeks."

HHE UNFOLDED a piece of paper exactly like the one Shad Cates had shown. Farr's face went greenish. He said in a strangled voice. "It isn't! I got his certificate when I—"

"When you killed him?" Stern said gently.

Dewey Farr reached for his coat pocket, and Stern hit him in the legs in a diving tackle that doubled him against the wall. The gun fell free, and Farr collapsed.

Stern explained later. "If Weeks had told enough truth to be kill-worthy, it had to be on his contention that he owned part of Barney. That pointed to Dewey Farr. Tom Daly wouldn't have sold out to a rival manager."

"He sold stock to Farr," Patton said.

"It was security for a loan," Stern said. "But Farr saw a chance to clean up, and wasn't enough of a judge of fighters to see how he could lose out by it."

"If Weeks is dead, who's outside?" Shad asked.

"Tim Groves," Stern said. "But as long as Dewey didn't see him, the idea shook his nerve enough to break him down. And the dumb dame helped!"

"How'd he kill Barney?" Patton asked.

"Now that he's gone," Stern said, "I'll confess I don't know. Probably with poison in a heavy capsule before the fight. It'd hit Barney about the fifth round then. But I didn't care which murder I hung Dewey for, just so I hung him. And he's confessed to killing Weeks."

"Ya mean I'm in the clear?" Dino said.

Acidly, Shad Cates said, "Maybe you don't hit as hard as you think, chum!"

"I'll show ya!" Crossi said. "Gimme a crack at tha champeen! I'll moider tha—" He stopped, and his florid face paled. He said, "I'll try hard, Shad."

THE END

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Here, without a doubt, is positively the greatest Billfold and Pass Case Bargain ever offered. Through a fortunate purchase we have a limited quantity of fine leathers such as Calfskin, Morocco, Steerhide, etc., available. For a high quality Leather Billfold, beautifully engraved in gold, with your LODGE Emblem and Name, you would expect to pay up to \$4.50 and consider it a marvelous buy. If you take advantage of this sensational introductory offer you can get this superb genuine Leather Wallet and Pass Case for only \$1.98, and we will send you absolutely free a specially designed three color lifetime Identification Plate, which carries your Social Security Number, your Name and Address or your Army Draft Number. This fine grain Leather Billfold must actually be seen to be fully appreciated. Besides the spacious compartment at the back which can be used for currency, checks, papers, etc., it has four pockets

each protected by celluloid to prevent the soiling of your valuable membership and credit cards. When closed this Handsome Billfold has the soft velvety feel you find only in quality Leathers. Your choice of Emblems and Initials, are beautifully embossed in 23 karat gold on the face of the Billfold. Due to difficulty in obtaining choice leather because of war conditions, the supply of these Billfolds is limited. Remember if you send your order promptly, we will include absolutely FREE, a beautiful Identification Key Tag and Gift Chain to match, all hand engraved with your Name, Address, City and State. If after receiving your Billfold and Free Gift, you don't positively agree that this is the most outstanding bargain you have ever come across, return them to us and your money will be cheerfully refunded in full. Send your order today, without fail so you won't be disappointed.

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My Full Name.....
(Please print clearly)
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City..... State.....
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Name.....

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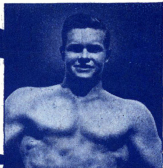
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