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1945

CRACK DETECTIVE

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STORIES

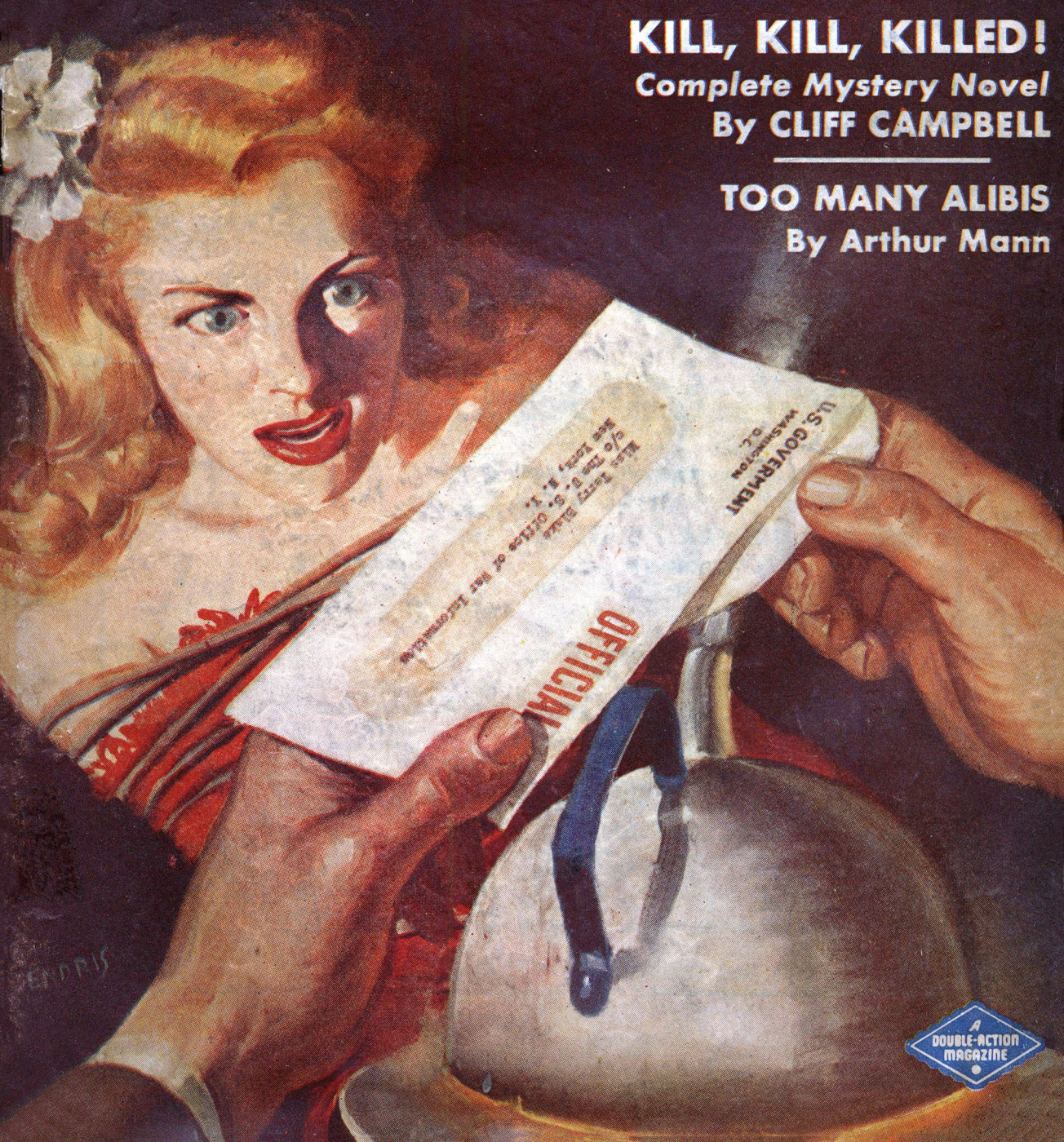
KILL, KILL, KILLED!

Complete Mystery Novel

By **CLIFF CAMPBELL**

TOO MANY ALIBIS

By **Arthur Mann**



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AMAZING INTRODUCTORY OFFER!

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CRACK DETECTIVE

No.
5

STORIES

Cover by Endris

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor



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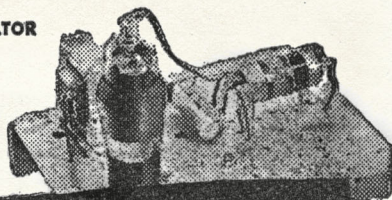
. . . even when it means letting down one of my own boys!

CRACK DETECTIVE STORIES, published every other month by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices, 241 Church St., New York, 13, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass. For advertising rates write DOUBLE ACTION GROUP, 241 Church Street, New York, 13, N. Y. Single copy 15c, yearly subscription 75c. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope to insure return if not accepted, and while reasonable care will be exercised in handling them, they are submitted at author's risk. Printed in the U. S. A.



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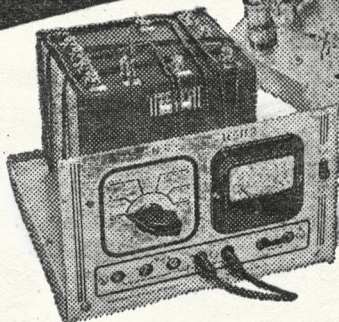
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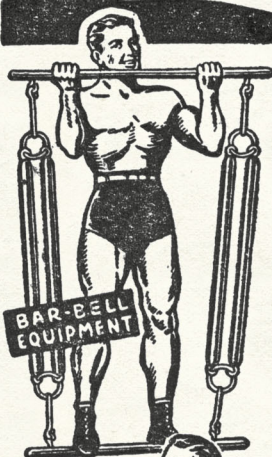
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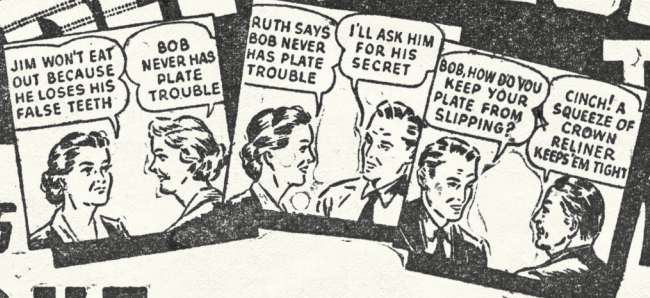
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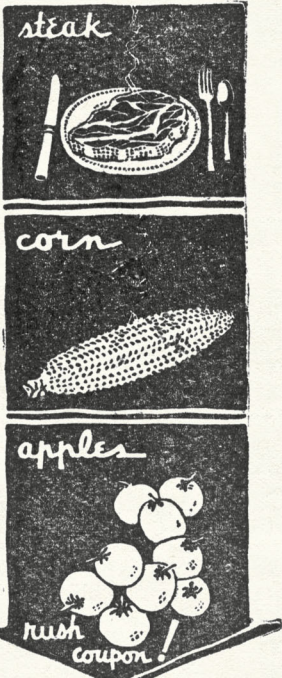
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(Author of "Cherchez La Frame-Up," etc.)

Complete Mystery Novelet



"Wait, Cheek! . . . I'll give
you twenty-five thou-
sand!"

*When a perfect murder plan
works out perfectly — be-
ware!*

GLARING at the face opposite him, Michael Cheek tossed off a drink of cheap whisky and cursed in a slow weary voice. "You dirty thief, Hoskins! If you don't pay me I'll get you yet and—"

The bartender padded down with a patronizing smile. "Take it easy now, Mr. Mainz! We don't allow no

language like that here. You want we should have ta put ya out like we did Wednesday night, huh?"

Cheek pushed back his crumpled felt hat over ragged, grayish hair and grimaced belligerently at his own reflection in the bar mirror. Then his shoulders slumped with a gesture of defeat under the shabby topcoat that was a size too big for him. "All right, Joe. All right. Gimme another shot. And get yourself a cigar, Joe." He detached a quarter from his little pile of change and pushed it over appeasingly. "But that damn Lambert Hoskins cheated me once and I swear—"

"Sure, sure," agreed the bartender with a bored air. "We heard all about it, Mainz. Ya only told us it a coupla hundred times."

"He's got the money to hire the high-priced lawyers, you see. And now I can't afford to go to court no more and—" But the barman had already retired to the other end of the counter. He mentioned the name "Mainz" sotto voice and there was a guffaw from the hangers-on down there. As he brooded over his drink, Michael Cheek seemed not to hear. At times he muttered incoherently. He finally tossed off that one and stood staring at the empty glass in his lean grubby fingers, lips working. What he said then was lost in the raucous jangle of the number on the juke box.

The weary baritone ended his lament about the amount of rainfall in each life with a final groan, then there was the sharp clatter of Cheek's dropped glass on the bar counter. When they looked around, the little man with the beard-stubbed face had a fist cocked awkwardly at his own reflection in the bar mirror. The loungers chuckled: "Old Mainz" was off again. But he seemed to come out of the fog and fumbled out his smelly pipe.

"Some day he'll end up in a padded cell," one of the loungers predicted, not troubling to keep his voice down much.

"Aw, he's harmless. For weeks now he's been threatening to do some-

thing to Hoskins, the one up on the hill in the old Prentiss place. But you notice the rich guy is still going 'round in good health!" There was another chorus of guffaws in the dingy small-town place.

Cheek pushed a hand in a pants pocket, after counting his change on the bar, as if to get it up for another drink. And he was drawing out the hand from his left pocket with a chunky roll of tens and twenties before he realized his mistake. As "Old Mainz" in this little town of Elwort, he wasn't supposed to have more than a small weekly income. In his right pocket he kept a few soiled singles for exhibition purposes.

JAMMING the bankroll back, his suddenly sharpened black eyes stabbed upward. There was only a couple on his left, a young fellow in the flashy clothes and a hard-mouthed girl, who'd seen. They looked away quickly and the girl began to talk. But they were out-of-towners; he'd seen them pull up in a car with Ohio license tags, so he didn't have to worry.

"'Nother drink, Mr. Mainz?" asked Joe, coming along.

Cheek pursed his lips, then dragged out an old-fashioned hunting-case watch. "Nope! Nope! I'm going up to see that Lambert Hoskins thief, right now. And this time," he thumped the bar to accentuate it, "I'm going to get some action! You'll see!"

Yanking down his hat, he shuffled out. He stood a moment indecisively on the sidewalk of the country town, rubbing his gloveless hands in the raw Spring day, looking around vaguely as if he weren't sure of his surroundings. He knew they were watching him from inside. He started hesitantly southward, head down as he carefully moved his shineless shoes around a puddle, and bumped into Gregory, proprietor of the town's sole restaurant. Cheek occasionally stopped in there for a meager meal, laboriously totalling his check for minutes; more than once he had given the proprietor a tin ear

as he whiningly related in redundant detail his vague story of how Lambert Hoskins, the wealthy man up on the hill, had mulcted him in some business deal in the dim past.

"Oh, hello, hello, Mr. Gregory." Cheek pulled himself erect with the conscious movements of a little, spent man about to assert himself. "Say, you know where I'm going? I'm going to see Hoskins! And I'm going to read him the riot act! Yes-sir. I'm going to tell him—"

The tall spare Gregory nodded with a knowing smile. "Yes, yes. Well, good luck, Mainz! I'll see you—" He tried to get by.

But Michael Cheek clutched at his lapels as he sidled around to get inside him. With his head he indicated the tubby figure of Erskine Fennel, the local banker, going along the other side of the street. Cheek smiled weakly.

"Don't want him to see me. . . I—I—well, I'm a little behind on my rent. And—say, Mr. Gregory, maybe you could spare a—"

"Sorry. Not today," snapped Gregory recoiling from the whiskyish breath. "I'm in a hurry right now, Mainz. G'day." He strode off.

Cheek's shoulders slumped and he went plodding on down to the corner, the mould of his face typical of a beaten man. But he was laughing inside: That spontaneous idea of trying to put the bite on Gregory for a loan was the final touch to complete his background for murder that he was building.

The sedan with Ohio license tags drew up abreast him to await the traffic light change. Cheek saw that the flashy guy and the girl were studying him furtively. His lips thinned as he recalled how they'd seen his roll. They'd better not get any crazy ideas though. He was an expert with the Police positive in the shoulder rig strapped under his suit coat. . . .

TWO BLOCKS down, the side street curved away from the sluggish tide water stream. A rut-cut dirt lane branched off from it

there. Cheek picked his way up it over damp leaves, allowing himself to reel slightly as he passed the house where the widow lived. With satisfaction he saw a curtain at a front window twitch. Then he was at the head of the lane and turning into the drive beside the old boarded-up mansion. Heavy, unpruned shrubbery quickly hid him from sight of anybody along the lane and he swung into a quick aggressive stride.

A hundred odd feet back he turned up the steps of the little paint-peeling cottage on the rear grounds of the place. It was redolent of dust and staleness inside, a veritable mare's nest of old furniture with yellowed anti-macassars, knick-knacks and jumbled bric-a-brac. Normally Mike Cheek would have raised holy Cain if he'd had to spend a night in such a hole; now he smiled around at it with satisfaction. It couldn't have been a better layout if he had designed it himself.

In the kitchen he poured himself a half tumbler of whisky and downed it in a swallow, then poured another dose. Eyeing it he laughed out loud. So the widow had seen him stumble coming up the lane. Soon the party wires of the phone line would be buzzing with the gossip that "Old Mainz" had come home half-drunk again. Which was one hell of a good joke: nobody had ever seen Mike Cheek drunk. They said he had a hollow leg. He could stand the night at a bar pouring them down. The only effect it had was to make his eyes contract to pinpoints, outwardly; inwardly it gave him a brittle, ruthless coldness.

He took the second slug of rye up to the bathroom and went to work with an electric razor. Coming back downstairs he redonned the shabby topcoat, deliberately selected a size too large to add to his sloppy feeble appearance. Then he went out to the garage, an old barn, at the end of the driveway twenty feet from his cottage. As he piled the starter of the dingy second-hand sedan, registered under the name of "Lester Mainz," he smiled with satisfaction again.

AS A ONE-TIME barn, the place had full-sized doors both at back and front. From the rear, under a tunnel of elms, a track led off over the side of the hill and joined with a little-used dirt back-road in a hollow. Some miles beyond town, the dirt road connected with the state highway. All of which meant he could depart unnoticed, particularly at night and return in equal secrecy. All he had to do was leave a couple of lights burning behind his drawn shades and a curious passer-by would take it for granted he was in.

Now he backed the car out and went down the lane, turning onto the river road. Two miles further on, he stopped and got some gas at the station at the intersection of the State highway. Again he did some bragging about how he was going up to have a showdown with Lambert Hoskins.

"Okay, Pop," the attendant kidded him along. "Leave him in one piece, though." He knew "Old Mainz'" tale of woe too. "Say, here's a tip for you if you're coming along here at night. That lousy county motor-cop is hanging around waiting to catch drivers jumping the traffic light here after dark. Okay."

Cheek crossed the highway and moved up the climbing cobblestone-and-macadam road that led to Hoskins' country place, whistling as he drove. He had tucked that last bit of information into one of the files of his orderly trap-sharp mind. Everything was going his way.

The place Lambert Hoskins had purchased up here in the sticks, since retiring from business, was a small rundown estate on the side of a low slope—a good mile-and-a-half from the nearest neighbor. Just before he turned up the ragged grass-grown drive to the fieldstone and clapboard house, Cheek stopped. Lifting off the wig of ragged gray hair, he deposited it in a door pocket. Then he carefully combed his precisely parted sleek brown hair that looked as if it were enameled on, shrugged out of the sleazy topcoat and pulled away

the soiled scarf to bare a stiff-bosomed, blue-hued shirt with an expensive flowered necktie. He ran an appreciative hand along his lean smooth jaw, whiffing the aroma of his after-shave lotion.

Then he drove up to the place. When he got out in his steel-gray, double-breasted suit to skip lightly up the steps, he had become a trim compact man of medium size, sharp and alert. He slapped a pair of pig gloves impatiently against a hand as he waited an answer to the old-fashioned pull-bell. There was a hint of caged strength in his quick decisive movements.

CHAPTER II

THE DOOR swung open to reveal the willowy form of Martha Proctor, Hoskins' young brunette secretary. Cheek gave her a familiar wink, but his voice was impersonal and a little bit harsh when he snapped, "Hoskins in? . . . Sure, I know he is. But maybe he's afraid to see me, eh?"

She raised a carefully plucked eyebrow that gave her gray-blue pupils a slightly Oriental look, but the darkly carmined lips of her pale oval of a face flashed a quick smile. The frigidity of her voice would have fooled any eavesdropper though.

"Mister Hoskins isn't in the habit of dodging callers, Mr. Cheek. . . . You may come in." Leaving him in the high-ceiled wainscoted hall, she went back to the closed door of the library with her unhurried stately stride, disappeared within.

From the rear Cheek followed the undulations of her body with satisfaction. He always did prefer them long in the thigh like that, and this dame had class in the bargain. She wasn't any ordinary piece of fluff grabbing at a quick make. She had brains—and poise; and that last meant plenty on a job like this.

She emerged, closing the library door behind her after clearly remarking, "Mr. Hoskins will see you in a few minutes, Mr. Cheek." With a

flashing look round, she came down the hall to him.

"That damn buzzard's going to make me cool my heels, eh. . . Hello, honey." He started to swing an arm around her but she evaded him with her supple body, whispering "the housekeeper." Cheek's lean face twisted into a weasel-like smile. "The old hag's practically stone deaf. Come on—"

"But she might be around, Mike. Why risk anything *now*?"

He scowled briefly, then nodded. "You mean you've got it? The combination to his safe?"

"Didn't I tell you I'd get it?" She looked down at him, cold face as impassive as ever. "Here." She passed him a small folded slip which he pocketed quickly.

Mentally he remembered that when the job was done and they were out of it and away together, he must get some of that new brand of elevator shoes. The kind that were said to raise your height without anybody detecting the means. He didn't like having to point his sharp chin up to look at a woman.

Marta suddenly turned. She was halfway up the flight of stairs from the hall when the library door opened and the burly Hoskins stuck out his iron-gray head and barked, "All right, Cheek!"

"DON'T know what you waste your time driving all the way up here from the city for, Cheek," Lambert Hoskins snorted, lounging on the corner of his desk as Cheek walked in. "Close the door!"

Cheek slammed it. "Don't order me around like a damn servant, Hoskins!" Cheek flared back. "I'm just the guy who's got your big red neck between my hands. Don't forget—"

Hoskins chuckled derisively as he selected a Havana cigar from a hammered metal case. He was a large thick-chested man, impressive with his leonine head and mane of wavy hair. He was the personification of the tycoon type the more expensive

business journals liked to feature on their covers. Muscular power radiated from every inch of his body garbed in the carefully-tailored loose tweeds.

"Forget that the day you try to choke that neck you are putting your own in a noose, Cheek?" he came back, raking the smaller man with his bulbous blue eyes.

"There's such a thing as turning State's evidence."

"Oh, bosh! You're rep is too smelly to begin with. Try that one and I'll swear you helped me do the job. That'll put you away for life, Cheek, and—"

Cheek smiled sleekly. "Life is one hell of a lot better than the hot squat. I mean, the chair, Hoskins."

Hoskins picked up a desk lighter and put it to the tip of his cigar. "You couldn't take a life term, a little rat like you, Cheek! You'd crack. You've got to have the flash of the bright lights and a smooth dame on your arm so you can impress people. Y'know it."

Cheek strode to the other side of the big desk by the side wall of the library. He made a sharp sweeping motion with the side of his hand, knife-fashion. "Let's cut the hot jive, Hoskins. I want money. Plenty."

"I paid you off once. That's all you get." He let the bulbous eyes drift down Cheek's deliberately unpressed suit, down to the unshined none-too-new shoes. Then he turned to glance through the window at the second-hand sedan in the drive. "Say, you're broke, aren't you, Cheek? Probably in a financial jam, too. . . Did that detective agency give you the bounce?" He smiled at the thought. "You look down at the heels, positively down at the heels."

Mike Cheek's pale hand went up to message the lapel of his coat, just inside from the heater in the shoulder rig. But now wasn't the time. He said calmly though his lips had a vulpine curl, "Look, Hoskins. I can spill. I get twenty five grand—or I do spill. And when I do—"

Plucking the cigar from his mouth,

Hoskins looked for a moment as if he would spit in Cheek's small face. Instead he said, "You—haven't—got—the—nerve!"

"This is your last chance, Hoskins." And Cheek alone knew how he meant that.

THE BIG man had started to walk down the room. He whirled at that, heavy shoulders hunching. "Get the hell outa here, Cheek! And if I break every damn bone in your body! You—" He broke off as the door at the other end of the room opened to admit the aged housekeeper with a bottle of brandy and a seltzer siphon on a tray.

For that moment alone Mike Cheek wished that housekeeper wasn't deaf. It would have been a clinching piece of evidence for this case, this background for murder, he was building. He turned on his heel and went out, slamming his car down the drive just in case a passer-by might remember seeing him afterward. A few yards down from the gate at the road, he drew up again. With a grimace of distaste, he pulled on the wig of gray and redonned the seedy-looking topcoat. Then, after carefully checking the straight stretch of road in each direction, he tapped the horn button twice. Counted to five and gave it another double tap. Marta stepped from behind a boulder up among the trees and slipped down to the side of the car.

"What did he say, Mike?"

"Same as ever: not another cent. Which is all right with me. He—" Cheek's eyes hardened, contracting as they ran slowly over her mouton beaver swagger coat. "That's new."

"Nice of you to notice. . . Mr. Hoskins is a very appreciative employer." But her bland mask dropped and she reached through the car window to grasp Cheek's arm as anger jerked his suddenly paled lips. "Don't be a stupid ass, Mike. If the old fool wants to shell out, let him. It's just one you won't have to buy!"

"I still don't like it. You—" His voice was ugly.

"Keep your head! Now, when do we do it? Tonight?"

He plucked the cigaret from her hand, sucking on it hard, and shook his head. "I want to build up the picture a little more. Not tonight. . . Maybe tomorrow night, I think. I'll phone tomorrow afternoon. What's the best time to figure on him being out?"

Her eyes lidded. She shrugged. "It'll be all right. Call any time. . . Yes, any time." She seemed to have lost interest.

Cheek's nostrils darted cigaret smoke impatiently and he shook her forearm. "Come outa the daze, honey! This is the last lap. We don't wanta get careless now. Tell me what time to—"

SHE PULLED her arm back through the window, seeming to withdraw behind the shell of her glacial poise. "Any time in the afternoon. I'll take care of it. He— Oh, here comes a car!" She was looking down past the rear of the sedan. The next moment she had turned and run back into the woods.

Cheek rolled the sedan away unhurriedly. Before he hit the State highway intersection, he drew up again. He balled a hand into a fist, studied his face carefully in the rear view mirror. A thin trickle of blood wormed from the lower lip. Satisfied, he moved on. It wasn't till after he had made the crossing that he realized no car had come up from the rear to pass him back there despite the fact he had driven slowly. It made him frown baffledly.

At eight-thirty that evening, he shuffled into Joe's bar with a beaten sullen look on his face. He avoided Joe's eyes as he ordered a shot.

"Well, Mr. Mainz, did ya tell Hoskins off?" Joe asked.

Cheek growled some oaths, looking sheepish. He threw down the whisky, then pointed to his swollen lips. "Looka that! See? The dirty son— All right, Joe. But that dirty thief threw me off the place! Imagine that? Threw me out himself like I was a—a tramp!"

He glared around at the guffaw from the loafers in the back. "But, I'll fix him *good*—next time. You'll see. . . I'll get even!"

CHAPTER III

HOSKINS' last night alive. It amused Mike Cheek to put it that way as he sipped rye in the musty little cottage back from the lane, because he had already decided. Tomorrow night would be the night. He had completed the background for his murder today; tomorrow there would be just a few routine moves, then the big strike. And when the heat cooled, it would be a sizable chunk of fortune and Marta for him—without a chance of ever being apprehended either. The coppers couldn't grab a murderer who didn't exist, and after tomorrow night, there would be no more "Mr. Mainz."

"A masterpiece," Cheek said softly, almost purring with self-satisfaction. He leaned back on the ancient sofa with the stuffing bulging in worn spots. Outside, barrages of wind-lashed rain flung themselves at the window panes; storm-tossed trees rocked and groaned with a gnashing of limbs. The house itself creaked under the impact of the gale. It was a good night to be inside, especially with the pleasant thoughts Mike Cheek entertained.

He went back to the very beginning of the thing, some nine months ago, when Lambert Hoskins was still and officer of Chemical Research Institute, Inc. . . An unimportant member of the laboratory staff, a Polish refugee recently employed by the firm, had been slain in his modest two-room apartment. Police had put it down to a prowler who had choked the victim to death when interrupted in his looting. The fact that a couple of hundred dollars, kept in a locked desk, had been gone made it seem logical enough. The FBI was said to have made a routine check on the circumstances and pronounced themselves satisfied. But the firm itself

had some doubts, and they had hired the Paragon Investigation Agency to make a check, *sub rosa*.

That was where he, Mike Cheek, entered the picture. He was the operative Paragon had sent out to the Institute. At first it had seemed like a routine job, just an assignment on which he had to go through the motions. And then, grabbing a cup of java at a lunchroom near the plant, he had heard an employee remark that Hoskins was the man who had brought Waslinski, the murdered man, into the company.

CCHEEK had smelled smoke. A little more nosing around, particularly in a neighborhood barroom where the laboratory staff was wont to drop in for a quick one, and he learned that Waslinski had been experimenting with a new explosive ingredient. Cheek could put two and two together. A little shadowing of Hoskins showed that the man was a skirt-chaser; Cheek had had Marta, whom he had used in such capacities before, put on the office staff. The regular secretary had been given an unexpected vacation, and Don Juan Hoskins had fallen quickly for Marta with her smooth s. a.

And, during outside-the-office rendez-vous, he had let a few things drop. There was nothing exactly incriminating: just that, Hoskins once admitted, he had been up to the late Waslinski's place several times. And that the experiments Waslinski had been conducting—which he was not supposed to have completed—had to do with a new type of explosive far superior to anything then in use in the war effort. Though only usable in small projectiles or grenades, the new element followed its own detonation with a liquid fire that would reduce anything in the immediate area to cinders in the space of a few minutes.

There was nothing to prove a crime on Hoskins' part, but Mike Cheek always boasted he could smell the sweet aroma of homicide at a distance of two miles, wind or no wind. For one thing, the eminently respect-

able Lambert Hoskins, whose position was purely business administrative, was too familiar with the details of the late Waslinski's formula. Cheek had little real evidence to go on, but he knew how to play his cards. On the excuse that he had unearthed some new evidence about Walinski's death, he made a dinner engagement with Hoskins. After hinting around that perhaps Hoskins' alibi for his whereabouts the night of the killing wasn't exactly air-tight, Cheek claimed to know that the dead man had completed his experiments on the new explosive ingredient successfully.

"And his formula, according to some of his laboratory associates, is missing, Mr. Hoskins," Cheek had casually uncorked his payoff punch. It was the last time he had ever called Hoskins "mister." "Of course," he had added, "I'd hate to present this evidence to the D. A.'s office and involve somebody who might only *appear* guilty," he had added.

Hoskins had been outbluffed. Sooner than "appear" involved, Hoskins had paid off to the tune of a cool ten grand. Mike Cheek had reported to his office that there was nothing on the case that the police hadn't uncovered.

Then, approximately six months later he had stumbled over a little item in the paper concerning the manufacture of a new explosive for war purposes by the famous Dumont Corporation. In the press story it was stated that the new product had been patented by Lamber Hoskins, retired officer of Chemical Research Institute. Mike Cheek could scent murder and money. He had done some private probing and learned that the retired Hoskins' royalties on his patent were due to run into several hundred thousand dollars.

THAT had been enough for Mike Cheek. He had taken the trail like a bloodhound on the spoor. On the basis of a doctor's certificate, he had obtained a prolonged leave of absence from the agency, after hav-

ing looked up Hoskins in his new rural residence. Then he had used Marta again. She had contacted Hoskins on the excuse of needing a personal reference for a new position. Mike had not under-rated Marta nor over-rated Hoskins' weakness for the female of the species. Hoskins had employed her as a private secretary, and it had only been a matter of weeks before Marta had learned that Lambert Hoskins, in order to offset any suspicion, was converting his royalty checks into cash immediately and keeping the cash in the house.

Mike had laughed long and loud when he heard that. Lambert, never knowing when the finger might be put on him, was prepared for a quick getaway. "A lead pipe cinch," was the way Cheek had described the game after that.

HE HAD moved into Elwort, establishing him as "Mr. Mainz" as he went through the gestures of a routine blackmailing attempt on the tough Hoskins. Of course, Hoskins didn't know he was "Mainz" and living in the town. Cheek had paid regular and repeated visits to his own bungalow in the suburbs back in the city to maintain the appearance of residing there. He was leading a double life, creating the fiction of "Old Mainz," the man who had a grudge against Hoskins, in Elwort. He had never expected Hoskins to pay off; the man was too hard-headed to be that kind of a fool, knowing that if he once came through, the bleeding game would never stop. Mike Cheek hadn't wanted him to pay off. What the hell was a picayune twenty-five grand compared to the better than a hundred thousand in cash Hoskins kept in his house safe?

Now, the background for murder was completed; the stage was set. Tomorrow night, late, he would call on Hoskins for a showdown. When he left the house on the hill, Lambert Hoskins would be dead, apparently killed by a marauder. And "Old Mainz," whose threats of vengeance had been heard all around town,

would disappear from the face of the earth. Michael Cheek would be in his suburban home, as usual; and within a few months, after things had cooled off, he and Marta would meet somewhere out on the West Coast. . . .

Cheek laughed out at the simplicity of the thing and adjusted his body more comfortably on the sofa. There was a sudden lull in the wind outside, and he caught a thin singing sound. As he slid a hand to the Police positive under his coat, he galvanized. Then he realized what it was, the bulb in the lamp on the side table at the head of the sofa. The bulb was burning out, due to go dead shortly. He'd have to replace it and—

But after tomorrow night, he, "Old Mainz," wouldn't be there any more. No need to worry about a new bulb. Again he chuckled as he swigged off the last of the rye highball. With a sigh of contentment he went back to contemplation of the life he would live after he had gotten hold of Hoskins' dough. . . .

CHAPTER IV

HE MUST have dozed off. Without stirring, Cheek came alertly awake, every sense on guard. Then he caught the sound that had galvanized him into consciousness. It was the creak of stairs under the weight of somebody ascending them furtively. Somebody was in his house!

Slipping the heater from the shoulder holster, he levered his body off the sofa cautiously. All other sound for the moment was swallowed in a great earth-shaking clap of thunder. Then he was moving through the archway into the little dining room of the cottage. From there he stepped into the kitchen and inched open the door leading to the back stairway. He could feel the hair like hackles rising on the back of his neck. Some animal-like instinct told him that somebody had come to kill him, and knowledge made him mad in a cold hard way. The idea of somebody intending to kill *him*!

He got to the top of the stairs, breathing guardedly. The wind was howling again so that it was impossible to hear any other sound. Lightning sliced the night outside, quivering vividly on the blackness for the space of a breath. And in that instant, Cheek saw that his bedroom door was open. Saw too, silhouetted against the white flash outside the window, the burly crouched figure in the doorway, facing inward.

Cheek sprang even as the other, seeing he wasn't in the bed, started to turn. At the last instant, the private detective decided to beat his man down with a blow of the barrel over the skull instead of shooting. After all, he was the last man who wanted to have the county police snooping around. The decision was his undoing.

He had to get close to bring down the revolver barrel. And just as he was chopping down with it, an unseen figure struck from the left, from over by the head of the front stairs. Sensing the blow at the last moment, Cheek thrust up a forearm. The second person's gun barrel deflected from his arm and caught him a glancing blow over the side of the skull. It sent him spilling sideward, crashing down over a small stand in the upper hall—and saved his life.

For the man just inside the bedroom had wheeled swiftly. His gun spat, the muzzle flash seeming to erupt almost in the toppling Cheek's face. But the bullet whipped by, fanning his cheek, passing where his head had just been. Head ringing, he went on over and let himself hit the floor, rolling behind a chair, but he still gripped his gun and waited, trying to get his senses cleared.

He was dimly aware of some whispering, then the stairs began to creak again. They were going down them. He inched up his head to see a pencil torch flash its beam across the downstairs hall. Cheek got his hands and feet under him, swearing beneath his breath. His head pulsed like a thin-skinned tortured rubber balloon, but though his legs were rubbery, he was able to navigate all right. Working

his way down the back stairs, he made sure the safety was off his gun, then pulled open the kitchen door and stepped out into the storm-rent night. The wind tore at him, jamming his breath back in his throat. He got around the back corner of the house and into the drive.

There was another lightning flash, prolonged in a quivering night-knifing aftermath. In it Cheek saw the pair fleeing up the driveway toward the lane, the long gray-trousered legs of the slimmer one flying. But the burly man, happening to glance backward, spotted Cheek too. As the darkness closed in again, the latter opened fire once more.

IT WAS plain blind luck, firing in the pitch-black night like that, but two of the slugs almost got Mike Cheek. One of them snapped off a bough on a piece of shrubbery so close the severed spray fell against Cheek. And the second actually nicked the cloth of his coat sleeve over the wrist. He threw himself sideward and went to his knees behind a stump.

Seconds ticked off with a fresh smash of thunder ricocheting around the sky. Again the wind broke off momentarily and Cheek heard a car start away out in the lane. He got down the end of the drive in time to see the faintly gleaming body of a sedan, lightless, turning onto the main road.

Coldly raging, for a moment he speculated on getting out his hack and going in pursuit, then realized the futility of it. He took a quick look around, but no light had gone on in any house nor were there any signs of anybody having been awakened along the lane. The gunfire had been swallowed in the storm. Swearing steadily he went back to the house and re-emerged with a flashlight to look for tracks.

What footprints there were were pretty blurred in the muddied ground. Then, down near the lane, the beam winked on a red leather moc in the rain. He had hardly

picked it up when he realized at once it was too small and narrow for a man's foot. The slim one in the slacks must have been a girl.

Another moment and Mike Cheek laughed in the rain as he rubbed his throbbing water-dripping head. The explanation now was obvious. It was the flashy guy and the girl who'd seen him showing the roll accidentally in Joe's place. He patted the bankroll; it was still in his trouser pocket. Even if they had gotten it, he wouldn't have called in the police; he didn't want them messing around at this stage of the game.

"They had a nerve, though, trying to jump me! The crazy half-baked kids! Lost their heads and were ready to murder for a coupla hundred. . . . Trying to jump me. . . ."

Before he found the woman's moc, he had been wondering if Hoskins had somehow learned he lived in the town, had penetrated his disguise, and made an attempt on his life. But now he knew better. "Hoskins is too smug and dumb to smell anything. . . ."

HE STAYED in the next day. A few minutes after nine that evening, he was pushing the sedan briskly along the State highway to the city. He had slipped the car out the back way from the stable, so nobody would be aware he had left town. Humming lightly he mused on how wealthy he would be in a few hours. One thing irritated him slightly. Marta had been very off-hand about the whole thing when he phoned her that afternoon and told her it would be that night.

He shrugged that off; at 10:12 he was sliding the sedan into a berth in an uptown parking lot in the city. He got a cab. When he left it at a midtown parking field, the gray wig was in his coat pocket. Presenting the stub for his regular car, a smart maroon convertible, he headed out for his suburban bungalow. His wrist-watch, donned after quitting Elwort, showed a few minutes short of 11:30 when he passed the corner of Bramp-

ton Road, the street on which his modest house stood. A lane running between the backyards of adjoining streets bisected the block. It gave access to the file of galvanized hutches that were garages in each identical backyard. Heralding himself with some lusty horning, he slid the convert into one of the hutches, banged the metal doors unnecessarily, and went up the brick walk alongside his own place.

Inside, with the shades drawn, he lighted all the lamps and turned the radio on full blast. He got a bottle of rye and half-filled two glasses, placing them in full sight on the living room table. The next move was to get a woman's cheap fur jacket from the closet and sling it over the arm of the chair beside the front door. He didn't have long to wait till an irate thumb outside held down the bell button hard.

Lighting a second cigaret, Cheek placed it in plain sight on the lip of an ashtray. When he went to the door, he was in shirt sleeves, necktie askew, hair rumbled. With hand on the knob, he shouted through the din of the radio, "Now stay back there in the dining room, babe! And no singing, ya un'erstand?" And then he yanked the door open, rocking slightly, with a foolish smirk on his sharp face.

It was Ditmars, the hen-pecked two-hundred pounder from next door. His horse jaw was poked out determinedly. "See here, Cheek! You gotta—" He paused to pull his overcoat closer about his collarless neck as he coughed. "Say, how do you expect folks to get any sleep an'—an'—" His watery eyes took in the woman's fur jacket, the cigaret smoking on the tray beside the one Cheek fumbled into his mouth, and the two glasses of whisky.

Cheek was all apologies. "Cripes, pal, I'm sorry. Just having a little party and I didn't realize—" Stumbling a little he hurried over to the radio and cut down the volume, then gestured none too stealthily to an imaginary party in the dining room.

"Just having a little drink with an old friend and—"

Middle-aged half-bald Ditmars was leering with lascivious envy when Cheek returned to the door. "Well, you know how it is. I had ta do something to satisfy the old woman. She—"

"Sure, sure, pal. I—I'd ask you in for a shot but my friend—well, she—uh—he's sorta shy." Cheek winked wisely. Ditmar's returned it in kind and went away. Cheek knew it would be common gossip on the commuter's train the next morning.

He sat around slugging down rye for about an hour, flaring up the radio briefly at intervals. Then he got into his coat, left the lights on, and slipped out the back way. The neighborhood was wrapped in sleep as he went down the unlit alleyway to the garages like a ghost.

CHAPTER V

CHEEK didn't take out the maroon job this time. Walking swiftly, he went almost a mile up the line to pick up the bus away from his home district. Leaving it in the next suburban community, he redonned the gray wig in the darkness, then went to the local hack stand. In a short while he was back in town, shifting to another cab, then getting the second-hand sedan out of the parking lot. It was shortly after two A. M. when he swung onto the river road outside of Elwort.

Lights still gleamed from the hall and library of Lambert Hoskins' place when he parked down at the bottom of the drive. Hoskins, as he knew, was a regular night owl. He went the rest of the way on foot and tugged imperatively on the pull bell. It was Hoskins himself who answered, his breath heavily laden with whisky as he peered out into the dimness.

Cheek's body was like a tight-coiled spring, quivering but ready to flash into action. He felt very cold and possessed as he stood with his hands slanted into the pockets of his

belted trench coat, one of them wrapped around his heater. He fully expected a little trouble and was ready.

"Y-you—it's you—y-you?" Hoskins said in a croaking voice. His protruding eyes shuttered, then opened and strained as if he couldn't believe what he saw was more than an apparition. "Why, you—h-how did y-you get here? I don't un-understand?"

Cheek laughed soundlessly as he walked in, backing the shaken Hoskins before him. The latter tried to pull himself together, scowling. Cheek wondered if he smelled danger. It made little difference to the private detective. Now they were inside, he would gun him any time.

They got down into the library where a radio played softly. The usually florid Hoskins was strangely gray, and he half stumbled as he edged to the corner of the desk and stemmed an arm on it as if for support. "What the devil do you mean coming here at this hour of the night?" he blurted, getting back into his old browbeating role.

"I'm in trouble, Hoskins. Got to get out of the city fast. So-o—I'll settle for another ten grand," Cheek said, enjoying the cat-and-mouse game with Hoskins. Cheek wondered where Marta was. According to their plans, she should appear on the scene. But nothing could go wrong now; he would kill Hoskins, rifle the safe, and get out. Marta, giving him a twenty minute head start, would report to the county police that there had been a shooting. She would feign hysteria, and due to her incoherency, they wouldn't be able to make a move until they had visited the house.

That would give him time to get back to the city, abandon the sedan on a quiet side street, then get back to the bungalow in the suburbs—back to the bungalow that nobody would know he had ever left, where there was evidence that he had been there all evening, just in case anything should happen.

HOSKINS was staring at him with a peculiar fixity. And Mike Cheek was watching him like a hawk lest he make a try for a gun in the desk. Hoskins said quietly:

"You'll get out of town? You're on the lam?"

Cheek nodded. "Yep. Give me ten grand—"

"First thing in the morning," Hoskins suddenly agreed. "Just as soon as I can get to the bank." He turned toward the side table where a bottle of brandy and a bottle of seltzer stood.

He had acceded too easily, the tough old buzzard. Cheek smelled something wrong. He said, "Hoskins!" in a sharp ragged voice. The other turned and was looking into the muzzle of Cheek's revolver. Cheek started to walk forward.

"Wait, Cheek! Wait. . . You don't know. I—I'll give you twenty-five thousand. Something—something's happened. You don't know. . . You don't know. . . ." Hoskins was panting as if he had run up a long high hill.

Once again Cheek laughed shortly. He was going to get a damned sight more than twenty-five grand. He pressured on the trigger, and the Police positive was kicking out lead. It kicked out two bullets at a four-foot distance into Hoskins; both of them smashed into his chest.

The soft music of the radio re-emerged as the crash of the shots waned, and Hoskins was crumpled over the big leather chair behind the desk, his tweed jacket pulled half off one shoulder. As cool as ever, Cheek was over him for a quick examination. The man was deader than a dried herring. There was a faint creek and he spun to see Marta in the doorway.

"Don't get excited," he threw at her quickly. A few more moves and "Old Mainz," wanted for murder, would disappear from the face of the earth. Vaguely he noticed that she said nothing.

It didn't bother him. Putting the smoke-drooling gun on the desk, he went quickly to the safe in the cor-

ner. Dropping down before it, he went to work on the dial with his gloved hands. He didn't need the copy of the combination; he had memorized it.

EVERYTHING worked to perfection. In a matter of moments, he had it open and was snatching out packages of neatly banded bills of large denominations. He stacked them on a nearby end table. Smiling like a cat, he turned to nod at Marta. Then he felt himself choking.

Marta had moved to the desk. She was just putting down his revolver that she had been handling in a handkerchief, and he saw the little pile of shells, removed from the gun, on the gleaming surface of the desk.

"Hey, what the hell is the—"

Her right hand came up from beside her woolen skirt. In it was a small automatic. "Leave the money right there," she said in a voice with icicles in it. "And don't try to jump me, Mike!"

"But what the hell is the idea of—" He was dumfounded, paralyzed with bewilderment as he smelled some kind of a double cross.

"And now get the devil out," she went on without emotion, the gun in her hand steady as a rock. "Or I can always shoot you as an intruder who killed Mr. Hoskins! . . . I'll give you the head-start we agreed on before I summon the police. Get going, Mike."

He came forward a few short steps, then spat at her. "Why you dirty double-crossing tramp! You want to grab off all the money for yourself, eh? You—"

She nodded. "And I'm going to."

"Why you—" She moved a foot as he leaned toward her. Lamplight glinted off her shoe. It was a red shoe, a moc like the one he had found in the drive of his place last night. Only this shoe was brand new, a pair that had been bought today. Slowly light dawned on him. He coughed as the fury churned up into his throat. "Like hell you will! I'll implicate you! I'll give myself up

and name you as an accomplice and—"

She shook her head. "No, you won't! I'd have no motive. Hoskins was going to marry me. We got the license over at the county seat this morning."

He made some kind of a sound that wasn't human as he failed to find words. She had been playing both ends against the middle, he saw. She had tipped Hoskins that he had been residing in town, masquerading as "Mr. Mainz." She had come with Hoskins last night when Hoskins tried to kill him to silence him. And now, now she planned to get all the money without having to marry old Hoskins. He heard her ordering him to get going again. He saw the icy flicker in her eyes and realized she would blast him down if forced to.

"You—you—I'll—" Then he broke off as the music on the radio suddenly broke off.

AN ANNOUNCER came on with a special news flash. Automatically he heard himself listening to the press statement from one of the city papers. "Police have just reported a mysterious explosion that completely demolished the suburban home of Michael Cheek, private investigator. Following the blast, the house was burnt to a crisped cinder in a matter of minutes by a type of liquid fire that has experts baffled. Police officials are already working on the basis that it might have been the work of foreign agents whom Mr. Cheek may have been investigating. The private investigator has definitely been ascertained to have been in the house at the time, but authorities have little hope of finding any slightest remains of the body due to the intensity of the blaze that ate up the wreckage. . . . We will now return to the musical program. . . ."

Cheek felt himself swaying in his tracks. An awful empty silence seemed to be shrieking in his ears. His senses seemed to be swirling downward into some bottomless pit. It was Hoskins' work, he realized.

(Continued On Page 96)

THEY'RE BETTER OFF DEAD!

By Seymour Irving Richin

(Author of "So Dead The Rose", "Fit To Kill")

Whoever garroted the Falangist official had to be a tall person—and the one tall suspect, Castle knew, couldn't have done it, because . . .

ALL FOUR of them were struggling to look elsewhere, anywhere, at anything in the hotel suite; it didn't matter. The ceiling, the neatly kept mahogany desk, the lone number 3 glowing on the elevator floor indicator—anything at all. Anything to cut their attention away from the dead man on the floor.

It was no good. The murdered man, his extraordinarily long body spread-eagled on the rug, had a macabre fascination, attracted them like moths to a flame. Their glances came back to the dead face.

It had been a handsome face, a round smooth face without lines or hollows, a face that had never reflected the rigors of labor beyond the lifting of too many highballs in an evening.

Don Francisco Serrano, late Foreign Minister of Franco Spain in Argentina, had been strangled—efficiently. A thin, livid crease encircled his throat in the shape of a bloated U, reaching from ear to ear. Just below the lobes, a red stain seeped from the ends of the U, hung there, quivering—twin earrings of blood. Death had relaxed Serrano, all except the hands, they were hooked stiffly like a hawk's claws, the fingertips raw, torn and bleeding.

Four pairs of eyes were nailed on his face.

Two men stood against the wall, flanking a trembling girl. A splash of yellow light, flowing from a large floor-based lamp before them, etched their faces starkly. It was the only light in the room. The short, squat Spaniard stared unblinkingly at the corpse, his thick-jawed face impassive.

The tall, lean American on the shaky girl's left stood, smiling sardonically, smiling with his lips only. His eyes were bleak, stony. At the elevator door, which opened directly into the dead man's lavish suite was the fourth—Miguel, Spanish born, uniformed operator. Miguel's dark eyes hung on the livid spotlight of face. He licked his lips.

"ALL of you, listen, This is a Headquarters case. I want your hands in sight." Standing alert and grimaced over the cadaver was the hotel detective, Quincy. The gun in his hand meant business. "*Any one of these babies could have killed him,*" the thought lay in his mind like a headline, "*and they damn well know I know it.*"

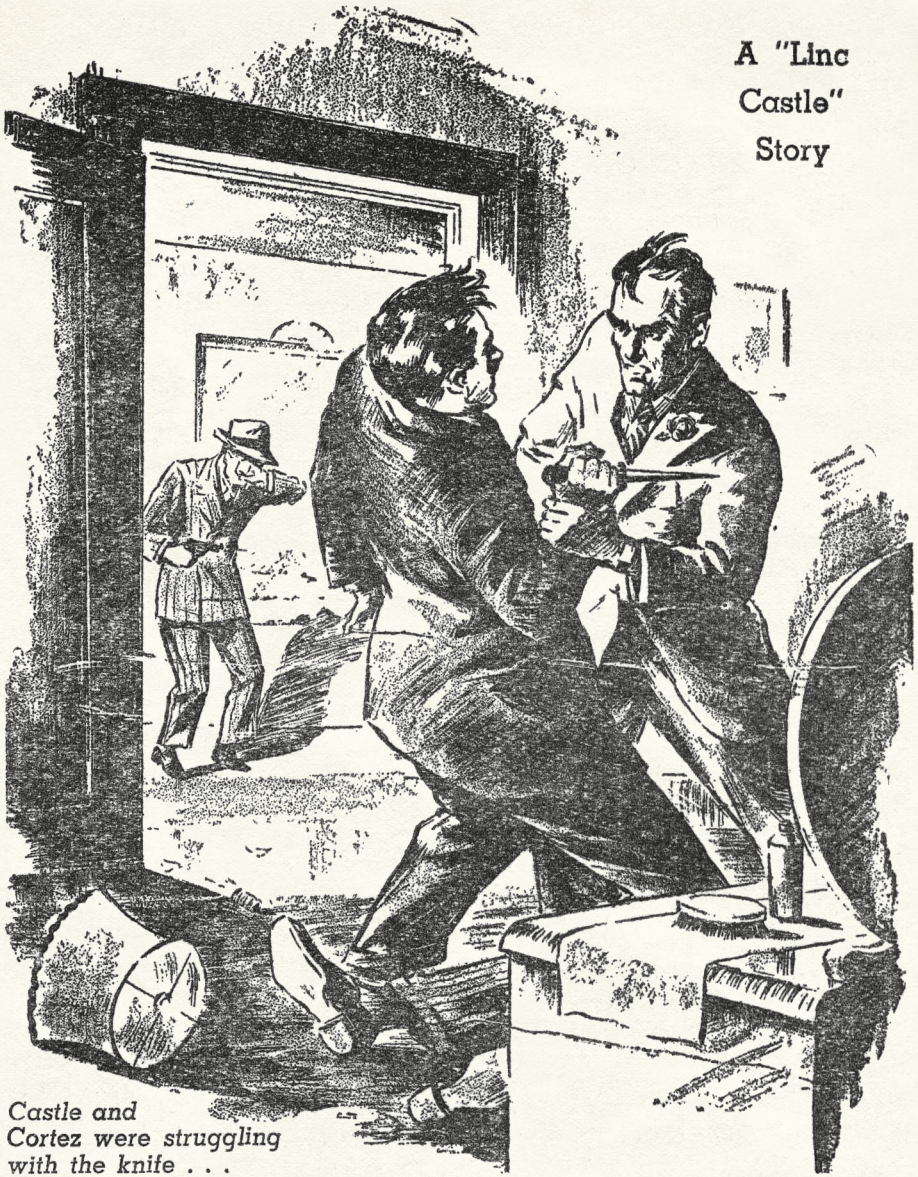
Quincy's face was fleshy, deeply lined. He was chewing gum, shifting the wad from side to side in his mouth, mechanically. He didn't know its taste, didn't know it was in his mouth. All his concentration was on the .38 in his fist leveled inflexibly at his suspects.

"I demand you arrest Steve Bendix for murdering my countryman!" The squat Spaniard made a wrathful gesture at the sardonically smiling American. "Everyone in the hotel knew his feelings toward Serrano. He'd just as soon kill a Fascist as spit—"

"Sooner," Bendix said, and he spat. He missed the dead face on the floor. "To me they're better off dead, no matter what flag they salute. And so's the world—"

Cortez muttered an unintelligible Spanish oath and plunged forward.

A "Linc
Castle"
Story



Castle and
Cortez were struggling
with the knife . . .

His hands, thick and hairy, coiled into fists. He got within two yards of Bendix when Quincy changed his mind for him. The detective's legs had pistoned forward on the instant. Down slashed the gun barrel, cutting darkly through the amber flow of lamplight.

The gun beat into one thick shoulder, beat stunningly, and Cortez reeled. His fist unfolded limply. The rug came alive under him, wrinkled under his twisting feet. His knees sank down, hit the wrinkled rug heavily. He kneeled there, rock-

ing, his right hand clasping his numbed left shoulder.

A scream was in him, in his tightly joined eyelids, his sucked-in cheeks. He didn't scream; he was not a man for screaming. He recovered. His marble faced impassivity returned, wiped the pain swiftly from his face like a tear in an eye.

He arose carefully, brushed his suit carefully, faced the detective, and said with careful, tight-lipped venom, "What do you expect after a man murders my comrade—?"

"Detective Linc Castle will point

the finger around here," Quincy let him know. "And nobody else."

"Did you say Castle? *Linc* Castle?" Bendix bounded forward, his eyes bright. "*Linc*, the millionaire detective who fought France back in '37? Son of the high society steel magnate?"

"That's him," Quincy said. "Only there's nothing high or society about *Linc*. Funny thing. His real name's Eric Jr. Must have had quite a feeling for the Lincoln Brigade to adopt its name. In his circle, then, anti-Fascists were as popular as a time-bomb—"

"*An enemy of the Falange investigating Serrano's murder!*" Cortez's impassivity faded—entirely. White lines broke around his lips. "I'll protest to the Spanish Embassy! I know this—this *Castle*—" he said the name like a curse. "He's donated thousands of dollars to Spanish Loyalists who fled Franco's revenge. We Falangists can expect no justice here!" He moved for the elevator.

"Hold it!" Quincy leveled the gun on a line with his head. "I'm telling you."

Cortez paled. "But—"

"No buts. American law is taking over here, Embassy or no Embassy." The gun didn't budge from his head. "Wait for *Linc* Castle; this won't go off like a melody."

Cortez muttered, "Lincoln Brigade" with venom again but fell silent.

"It's good for a change," Bendix said, staring at the corpse, "to hear of privileged men who rate people before property. Serrano didn't. A lot of little men with more money than brains didn't." His voice was bitter. "That's why plenty Americans aren't buried in America."

"Castle's an institutional case!" Cortez said acidly "A millionaire, a man of property betraying his superior class—!"

Footsteps whispered on the carpeted corridor outside the hall door, breaking him off. The door swung open, and a long shadow flung itself across the room, lamplight defining it sharply on the rug.

Detective *Linc* Castle followed his

shadow inside, slowly. He stiffened slightly at the sight of Serrano, then moved toward the dead man with long, decisive steps.

He was astonishingly tall, well over six feet four, and in his lanky, loose-limbed height was strength if not grace. He was altogether astonishing in appearance. His dark, strongboned features bore an amazing likeness of Abraham Lincoln. With the same saturnine cast of expression, the same earnestness and simplicity, he struck the heart rather than the eye, warmly human though not handsome.

A bright red rose was pinned to the lapel of his conservative blue suit. He was never seen without that flower—always fresh, always an American Beauty, a new rose every day.

"I was down in the lobby when Serrano screamed," Quincy rapidly told *Linc* what had happened. "When I got here he was dead and these four were standing over his body. All investigating the scream—so they say. Miguel, the operator, came up with an empty elevator. The girl, Maria Fostello, had good reason to put him in the morgue. Serrano loved her up to a point—the point was marriage. Cortez was a political rival of Serrano. This dead guy beat him out for a Minister's post in Argentina. Bendix is a musician. Kinda poor for this hotel, too, I'd say. He got to Serrano first, he admits. He also admits hating Serrano's guts—"

"According to the register," Castle said, "Cortez, Bendix and Miss Fostello all have rooms on the second floor. Directly below Serrano's suite. Correct?"

"Check. And murder ain't the only angle here, Castle. Yesterday, Serrano told me he wanted to transfer ten grand and a large file of official papers from his desk to the office safe. I searched his desk and there's no sign of the dough or the file—"

"Hmmm." *Linc* stared speculatively at the carefully arranged desk. "Were his papers as neatly placed before you handled them?"—that sharply.

"Sure thing. I work that way," Quincy said with pride.

Good, Guard the elevator while I look around, will you? And keep your gun in your hand; things may get warm."

CASTLE moved away, stooped very low over the cadaver, gravely scrutinizing Serrano's clothing, his skull, face, throat—especially his throat where the livid crease curved upward under the ears. "A Spanish garrotte job," Linc muttered. Thoughtfully, he drew the rose from his lapel and twirled the stem, an unconscious habit while concentrating. "Wire bit deep. He died fast, this Fascist dog—" that last as only a man who has suffered under the lash of Fascism can be bitter.

He had no wish to hunt down the killer of a Fascist. Fascism was a way of life that needed killing, he knew. He said, "What the hell," softly, and his head tilted in the curious manner of the half-blind when they try very hard to see. Castle's right eye was glass—courtesy of a Franco rifle butt in Spain. His left eye, blue and quick, was glittering.

The rose flashed back, sent swiftly through his lapel. He found and carefully drew the murder instrument from under Serrano's jacket. It was an improvised garrotte, four-inch handle fastened to the ends of a loop of wire. The handle was blood-flecked.

Linc told them grimly that Serrano had bloodied his fingers fighting the noose. "Must have fought hard before—" He broke off suddenly, brought the wire close to his single eye like a woman threading a needle. He said, "I'll be damned." The wire was not a wire at all, he told them; it was a violin string. He studied their faces as he said it.

Bendix went ashen; Maria Fostello whispered "Madie de Dias!" Cortez recoiled visibly, and Miguel tore his glance from the tiny spotlight of face. He was pale.

"Can I go back to work?" he asked nervously. "There'll be complaints about the elevator service—"

"Strange," Linc remarked. "You have an excuse to break your dull routine, and you choose work." He

told Miguel curtly to remain until ordered otherwise. Then: "Was Bendix here when you brought the elevator up?"

Miguel nodded, swallowing. He said Bendix had been standing over the corpse and laughing. He pointed at the ashen-faced American.

"That right, Bendix?" Linc sucked in a breath. "Laughing? You find murder funny?"

"Can I see that violin string?" Bendix asked hoarsely.

"You're answering questions. Answer them."

"Funny as hell," Bendix said. "His murder anyway." He told Castle why, grinning, said he'd come to New York to murder Serrano. Bendix's his brother, a pro-Loyalist American newspaperman had been murdered in a Franco prison in '37; had been Serrano's private tea party at the time.

"Revenge," Linc muttered.

Bendix nodded violently. "I lived for it. I was out to kill him with my bare hands, but I didn't; I wasn't lucky enough. I took this room near him though the expense broke me. I thought of a million ways to kill him. I even had a key made to his door—"

"How'd you do that?"

"Sneaked his passkey from the desk clerk and had a duplicate made. Simple. Oh, I didn't miss a trick. Only I didn't kill him; somebody beat me to it. And that's what's funny as hell." He laughed uproariously. He pointed at the corpse and said, "They're better off dead, these Fascists. Franco will be seeing him in hell soon, too!" Again his explosive laughter boomed out.

GLASS shattered, the high pitched sound tearing off his laughter in the middle. Cortez plunged at him. One moment he'd stared, numbed, at the garrotte; the next saw him lunge for Bendix with the speed and impulsiveness of an arrow leaving a drawn bow. At the sweep of his arm, the heavy lamp was sent slanting at the elevator like a flung spear. A splash of light careened wildly on the rug. The girl screamed.

The lamp crashed, four feet off the

ground, the brittle glass shade and bulb exploding flush at the elevator entrance. Quincy staggered, his gun weaving helplessly for a target. A spray of glass splinters sent him reeling back, arms shielding his eyes. Around him the lamplight died in a white, aching burst. Total shadow swept in on him. He fell in the shadows, dodging the arrows of glass. He was yelling he couldn't see, he couldn't see. . .

Cortez dove for his man. His thick, short body, thrown into a flat dive, made a murky imprint against the sudden sweep of darkness. One crashing shoulder beat punishment into Bendix's middle. The lean American floundered, his legs tottering like a marionette with the strings cut. He sank down, stunned, whispering faintly.

Hot shards of glass were still pinging off the elevator walls when Linc was moving. He ran at sounds. The blackness oppressed his limited vision like a blindfold. Then a piece of light filtered through the fold of blackness, caught his eye like a signal.

The fragment of light was triangular. It was mobile. It was lifting in a glistering arc. . .

Linc's breath hissed. He raced over. Arms and legs threshed below him suddenly, beat at him in the shadows. Pain was in his ankles, he stumbled. He kept going, and his right hand stabbed for gleaming bit of light, below its base.

He caught Cortez's knife arm in the middle of a downward slash, trapped it at the wrist. The thrust had power and hate behind it. Their grips locked in a shuddery grasp, and Castle felt strain in his nerves, in the needling sweat on his face, in his sudden, awful effort to see out of his blind eye. He jarred the knife up inch over inch.

He whispered, "Drop it. I've got a gun. Stab him and I'll empty it into you." Cortez called him a Lincoln Brigade pig and wrestled tigerishly. Linc gave up talking. He fought, freed his left hand from Cortez's grasp, placed it carefully beside his

right, and wrenched Cortez's knife arm with all his strength.

Cortez shouted in agony. The dagger burst loose of his hand, thudded gleaming on the rug. Castle kept twisting his arm till the squat man came slowly, agonizingly erect, releasing Bendix who lay pinioned, half unconscious, below him. The lean man's face was gray. Cortez had worked his knees viciously into his groin.

"All right, you dished it out; now take it." Linc calmly whipped Cortez around and drilled two hard punches, right and left, into his solar plexis. Cortez folded like a hinge, gasping.

LINC flicked a wall switch, checked the girl and Miguel in the complete illumination streaming from the ceiling lights. They hadn't moved. Quincy was floundering in the elevator, kicking at the broken lamp, and squinting at the new burst of light. He saw Cortez, muttered, "Him. Another fast one, eh?"

Linc said, "Cover the elevator, Quincy. Outside."

Quincy kicked at glass bits, cursed Cortez, but did what he was told. "Too damn dusty inside, anyway. Don't they ever sweep an elevator—?"

Linc pocketed the dagger, assisted the groggy Bendix to his feet. "Step out of line once more, Cortez, and I'll be pulling a trigger instead of punches. This is no Franco prison camp; we'll see this out the American way even if it kills you." He added bleakly that it might at that.

"Why don't you pay attention to Bendix? He's the guilty man." Maria Fostello spoke up. A shapely brunette, her body had a graceful, swaying rhythm as she moved forward. Her eyes, large and dark, caressed the face of her dead lover as though Serano were alive. They glinted with bitterness, hated and loved him with the same connected, intense emotion. They would always hate and love him.

She said harshly, "Bendix is a musician, a violinist; often I have heard him play in his room. The violin

string would seem significant under the circumstances. And I am not a detective."

Linc replied that she herself had a pretty good reason for killing Serrano herself and how about that.

"Absurd." Her lips quivered. "A woman doesn't kill the man she loves—unless there is no hope—"

"You mean you had hopes of winning him back?"

She nodded. Her eyes were dead. "I thought we could marry, return to Spain as we planned." Then the black eyes flashed. "He loved me! He wasn't walking out on me! He was walking out on the *Falange*!"

"On the *Falange*." Linc's whole face lighted up. "Why?"

"Because he was afraid to die. He said Germany's collapse meant the death of Franco's government. He had nightmares. He feared the Republicans would remember the way he ran his prison camp before he became Minister." Again her dark eyes glittered. "I was in his way, he said. He was going to get some money, marry an American girl, become an American citizen. A silly American girl who'd properly appreciate a Spanish aristocrat. Those were his words—"

She was still. Linc studied her. Serrano knew a pretty face all right. He liked them small, too; Maria couldn't have been much over five feet. . .

Linc's single eye gleamed. A valuable observation, that. He glanced at the long body on the rug, at the upward curve the wire noose had drawn on Serrano's throat. He knew then that the girl couldn't have killed him. It would have been physically impossible for her to do so. Serrano had been garrotted from behind. Only a person taller than the dead man could have wielded the garrote. That was clear. . .

A TALLER person—Cortez? No. Out of the question: he was too short, far too short. Miguel, the elevator operator was even shorter. Bendix?

Within him was a kind of sadness such as he had never before known, staring at the tall, spare man. Bendix

was inches taller than the grotesquely sprawled figure on the rug.

"You were talking about a violin string before, Bendix." Linc drew the rose from his lapel, twisted the stem. "You play?"

"All my life." Bendix's face was pale. "I—I own a violin collection. It's been my hobby for years." He licked his lips. "That string—dammit, I'd like to see the thing—"

Linc said, "Quincy," sharply.

"Yeah?"

"I'll take over here. Check Bendix's room—particularly his violin collection. I guess you know what to look for."

Quincy knew what to look for. Soon after he returned, excitement lighting his eyes. His right hand was wrapped around the throat of a smashed violin. One string was missing, the other three hanging awry on the stained wood. A sheaf of crisp bills was in his left hand. "Found the busted violin in Bendix's closet," he said. "The dough was hidden inside some of his other fiddles. Shoved in through the side holes. His place is lousy with violins. Damn clever, that hiding place. Mostly heavy dough, this. Nothing under a C note. I picked out exactly ten grand."

"And the file?" Linc asked.

"No file. I gave the room the works but no file."

"Lord." Bendix stumbled over, ran his hands tenderly over the mangled instrument. "My Stradivarius. I turned down a fortune for it when I was eating once a day. Lord. Ruined." And he collapsed, gray-faced, in a chair.

Cortez remarked acidly that enough proof had been seen even for a Lincoln Brigadier to handcuff a radical. He said, "Probably he was working with other anti-Franco forces, passed the file to them and kept the money for himself—"

"I'm making the decisions here," Linc reminded him with heat.

"Then how about making some *just* ones!" retorted Cortez. "Por Dios! The man admits coming here with murderous intentions. He has a key to Serrano's room. Serrano's stolen money is located in one of his violins.

He collapses from shock at the sight of the instrument used to devise a murder weapon. And you do nothing! If you don't arrest this murdering radical I'll appeal for justice through the Spanish Embassy—"

They weren't watching Bendix. But he was watching them and listening, too. The Fascist was talking him right into a death cell, and Bendix wasn't waiting for any more talk. He galvanized out of the chair, raced for the door. Linc lunged for him, long legs cutting across the room. Quincy leaped forward, gun tilted, but he wasn't needed.

Bendix was trapped. He whirled at the door, facing Linc and throwing punches. Castle eluded his desperate fist flurry, hooked a timed, hard one at Bendix's jaw. He took no pleasure in it; his single eye was sick. Bendix's blows lost their steam. He crumpled, twisting. Linc caught his body, wound his arms around Bendix's neck and shoulders. Then, quite suddenly, he stopped moving. He stared at Bendix's head with a strange, fixed intensity. And when he'd finally placed him again in his chair, Linc's face was grave with thought.

"NICE punchin', Castle," Quincy said. "So he's the guy who rigged up the wire necktie."

"Maybe." He smiled a little. "Never mind our unconscious friend. Keep your gun out. Watch Cortez and Miguel."

"Damn you!" Cortez snapped, enraged. "I've had a gun at my head long enough. You've caught your man. When do I get a little peace?"

"Peace," Linc repeated. "Peace." He moved to the elevator, studied the interior. His single eye gleamed, noting the dust stains on the roof of the car. He moved to Serrano's desk, scanned the neat desk-set, the tidily filed papers in the cubby holes. "An interesting subject, Cortez. There are two kinds. Serrano's experiencing one kind now—resting in peace. And there's the other one—living in peace. Which way would Serrano be less dangerous to you, Cortez? Hmmm?"

"Eh?" Cortez stiffened haughtily. "What are you driving at?"

"You're sure Bendix murdered Serrano, aren't you?" Linc plucked loose the flower, idly twirled the rose. "One and one makes murder, eh? One violin string, one key. Right, Cortez?"

"I'm not telling you," Cortez said. "I'm merely suggesting the obvious. Murder is not my business."

Linc said that someone in the room was a pretty good amateur and he didn't mean Bendix. "No, not Bendix."

There was a silence.

Linc studied the rose. "Never in a million years. Murder with a violin string, Cortez. Think of it. We have here a man who loves and treasures his Stradivarius. Loves it so much he goes hungry but refuses to sell. He comes here to commit a *premeditated* murder." Linc slanted the rose carefully back into his lapel. He said softly, "A gun, yes; a knife, yes; with his bare hands, yes. *But Bendix destroy his Stradivarius?* Never in a million years."

Sarcastically, Cortez told him that nobody could fathom the mind of a murderer. "The money was hidden in his violins, wasn't it? How'd it get out of Serrano's desk—fly away and hide in Bendix's room?"

"It was stolen, all right," Linc agreed. "But not by Bendix." His eyes narrowed. "*Because whoever took the money and file from Serrano's desk must have known where they were. The desk is not at all disturbed, Cortez!* Ever see a desk after it's looted by a stranger? Papers all over the place. Drawers upset. *No stranger took that money, Cortez!*"

"You're crazy if you're pointing to me," Cortez snapped. "You're not so smart, Detective. Anybody with brains knows I couldn't have killed Serrano. Not me; not the girl; not Miguel. We are all too small, too short to have overcome him that way—"

Linc let him talk his head off. Then when he was quiet Castle spoke, looking at him steadily. "I learned something a minute ago, picking Bendix off the floor. I learned you don't have to stand behind a man to strangle him. You can

stand over him. And that goes for a short man, too, Cortez!"

"You, Miguel." Linc's hand slid for his shoulder holster. "How'd the dust get on the roof of your elevator? Out of order lately? Had the roof open, mechanics on top of the car, fixing the motor and cables?"

"He never complained about the elevator," Quincy said. "She's been running smooth." He paused, brow wrinkling. "Funny about all that dust, at that."

"What do you say, Miguel?" Linc snapped. "Tongue-tied?"

SWEAT glistened around Miguel's lips, his eyes, his temples. He was tense, every muscle of him; quivering like a plucked mandolin wire. He said nothing.

"No you didn't have any repair men, Miguel," Linc said. "But you had the top of the elevator open. Ser-ran wasn't killed in this room at all. He was strangled in your elevator! The man who handled the garrotte

was sitting on top of it, dropped his noose through the open roof! And that's when the dust from the shaft and cables got through!"

Linc spun on Cortez. "I thought that would put sweat on your face!"

The roar of Quincy's .38, mingling with the beat of footsteps broke them off. Linc whirled. He watched Miguel take lead in his chest, running for the elevator. The slight Spaniard staggered, reeled against the elevator floor register. Agony sucked the blood out of his face. A bright red stain was slipping through his hands, folded with awful care over his torn body. Red signal lights flickered around his sweating face, winking. The stain changed the color of his hands. He crumpled under the hop-pity, buzzing signal lights.

"I'll handle Miguel!" Castle broke for the elevator, throwing orders over his shoulder. "Keep an eye on Cortez, Quincy!"

Advancing too eagerly toward the fallen Spaniard, Quincy, moving past Cortez, heard the order late. Cortez

That Man's Here Again!

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N. Nickleby Dickens

drove a wicked rabbit blow at the back of his neck before he could whirl.

Linc spun around at his alarmed groan. His breath hissed. Quincy was staggering, badly hurt, blindly fighting Cortez's grip on his gun wrist. He lost the fight. Cortez wrenched the gun loose.

He was lining the .38 on Quincy's head when flame flashed from Castle's gun once, twice, like links in a chain. The slugs drove into the squat man's throat, sinking the carefully knotted tie. His tie clasp, clipped in two, vanished into the crimson flesh. Back stumbled Cortez, unseeingly. His heels jarred against Serrano's lifeless figure. He sprawled over the dead man, their bodies making a still X in the room.

"CORTEZ and Miguel were fanatical Falangists. They committed the murder together. We'd know that even if Miguel hadn't confessed before he died. They killed Serrano for deserting the Falange and betraying the cause."

Castle explained the killing to Quincy and Bendix after the room and elevator had been cleared of its ghastly occupants by a police detail. Maria Fostello had been removed to a hospital, suffering from shock.

In the elevator, Linc indicated the open roof of the car, revealing the dusty motor and cables and the murky shaft above. A metal file, dust covered, lay at his feet. "The stolen file was on top of the elevator, just as Miguel admitted. I expected as much. A neat idea, too. Cortez and Miguel were afraid of a search. What better place to conceal anything than the roof of an elevator?"

"Dammit, I should have been hep to the dustiness before," Quincy growled. "No wonder Miguel was in a hurry to get back to his job. He wanted to get the file out of harms way—"

"He died trying," Castle said. "The file's worth a fortune to the exiled Spanish Republican Government—contains evidence of the link between Fascist Spain and anti-American ac-

tivities in Argentina. The Falange got wind of Serrano's plans. They were afraid he'd sell them out to save his skin." Linc grimaced. "They stopped him cold—"

"Cold and dead," said Bendix without emotion. He was fully recovered from his ordeal. "Did Cortez kill him?"

LINC nodded. "With Miguel's help, of course. They were in this hotel to spy on him. Miguel took the elevator operator job to learn his habits. Serrano walked into a coffin when he entered the elevator tonight. Cortez was on the roof with the garrote. It was simple for Miguel to open the panel on top of the car, get the killer up there. Serrano probably never suspected, thought mechanics were fixing the motor—"

"Lord," Bendix whispered. "Cortez strangled him from above."

"Exactly. And it was simple for them to frame you," Linc said. "Miguel had access to the hotel pass key. It was as simple to plant the money in your room as it was to rip the violin string from one of your instruments."

Linc frowned, twisting the rose in his lapel. Dust from the elevator had marred its bright red beauty.

"Funny," Bendix said. "A man like you wearing a rose. How come?"

"Yeah," Quincy said. "For a guy with steel in his gut that's a funny one, all right. Do you go for them because they're easy on the eye?"

Linc smiled.

"Ever get to thinking about a flower? You can't keep it down. Step on it, crush it, and it's back next year, trying again. Snow, flood, earthquake—bombs—and it still comes back."

"Like people," said Bendix softly.

"Sure. Not as pretty as this American beauty—but with its spirit. I wear this flower and remember that there's still hope for people. See?"

Bendix asked Castle if he could shake his hand. He was glad when Linc stretched out an enthusiastic palm; the act was suddenly important to him, shaking this man's hand. It gave him a good feeling.

(THE END)

THIRTY PIECES OF LEAD

By Frank Kane

(Author of "Morgue Star Final," etc.)

Musico was willing to aid the enemy — for a price!

THE fat man behind the desk peered near sightedly through the monocle at his papers. He wore the insignia of a colonel on his Gestapo uniform.

"You were in the concentration camp at Palmo, Musico?" he addressed the unshaven man who stood, flanked by two guards, before him.

Musico shrugged. His gaze was fixed on the corner of the desk, and he did not raise his eyes to meet the glare of his interrogator. He resented the presence of a Nazi behind the desk in the Italian Palazzo de Justicia. Mussolini and his boys might call it Axis collaboration, but back in the Chicago of Musico's memory they had another name for it—muscling in.

The colonel referred again to the sheaf of papers in his hand.

"Your mother and your wife, they are in the camp at Napolo, no?" He tossed the paper on the desk and leaned back. "Your mother, she is getting old. You would like to see her once more?"

The prisoner's lips twisted as though he was about to speak. He had to fight back the words that would tell the fat man that he knew about his wife and mother. "Death by natural causes," the Underground grape vine had reported to him. Even the Underground accepted it as natural that you die when you are beaten and starved. The struggle was successful. No word passed his lips.

The man behind the desk tried a smile. It consisted mostly of a twitching of his upper lip that bared his teeth, but didn't travel far enough to cloud the cruelty in his eyes.

"It might be arranged, Musico" he said. He removed the monocle from his eye, polished it. "You would like that? You would like to see them again?"

Musico nodded. "Yes," he croaked. His voice sounded rusty, as though from lack of use. "I would like to see them."

The colonel returned the monocle to his eye, leaned forward. "You shall do what we ask of you, and then, I promise, you shall see them."

"What do I do?"

"Tonight a group of highly trained technicians will leave for America. They must be landed without the knowledge of the authorities. You will arrange that."

Musico smiled humorlessly. "Saboteurs, eh? Why pick on me for help? It's ten years since I left America to come back to my home."

The Gestapo colonel waved the argument aside impatiently. "You know how these things are done." He indicated the sheaf of papers. "You were what they called a rum runner, no? You landed large shipments of whisky along the American coastline. You can do this."

The prisoner shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"There is no maybe. You will carry out the landing of Dr Stratz and his technicians or you will never see your wife and mother again."

The slouching figure of the prisoner straightened. He blinked. "Dr Stratz?" he asked hoarsely.

"You may as well know," the figure behind the desk sneered. "You will have no chance to tell anyone. Dr Stratz will be in charge of Amer-

ican operations. You will see to it that he is landed."

Musico nodded. "I'll have to go along."

"Why?" Suspicion flared from the man behind the desk's narrowed eyes. "You can point out the spots on a map."

"No good," Musico grunted. "The Coast Guard's too active. Unless you know that shore like the back of your hand, you'll never find your way in. Me, I know it like the back of my hand." He scratched vigorously under his shoulder. "Best way's to send a couple of wires."

The suspicion returned to the hard eyes. "There will be no wires. This is a mission requiring the utmost secrecy."

MMUSICO shrugged. "Suit yourself. Only that ain't the way to do it. These guys'll be landed miles from noplac. They'll have to hoof it to get anywhere near civilization. That's a good way to get picked up. But, suit yourself."

"Who are these people you would wire?"

"Some of my old mob. And if you're worrying about them yelling copper, don't. They don't stand in too good with the cops, and they don't owe America nothing. Besides," he added softly. "You got my mother and wife in case anything was to go wrong, ain't you?"

The man behind the desk studied his prisoner's face carefully for a moment, then, failing to find any hidden meaning, acquiesced. "You will give me the names of these people. I will take care of notifying them." He picked up a pencil, looked up at the prisoner questioningly.

"Just reach Tommy Carrone in Chi—"

The Gestapo man scowled. "Chi? Where is this Chi?"

"Chicago, The Alamo Hotel. Just tell Tommy that Melody Musico is landing a valuable shipment at the usual place off Oyster Bay. Just mention the time and the date we'll be arriving."

The colonel grunted. "He will know it's authentic?"

"That's right," the prisoner nodded. "You better put in just a line. Remember Tony. Put that in. It's the old password."

The man behind the desk nodded, then gestured to the two guards. "Take him out and give him a bath and a shave. Have him ready to leave in three hours."

He watched as the prisoner shuffled painfully between the two guards, and as the door closed behind them, he punched a button on his desk telephone. "Dr Stratz," he growled into the mouthpiece.

A moment later the connection was made.

"How did it go, Colonel?" the metallic voice on the other end demanded.

"Good, Dr Stratz. Arrangements have been made. You will, of course, dispose of this man as soon as he has served his purpose."

"Of course, Colonel," the voice on the other end purred. "I have had some small experience as commandant of the Napolo Camp."

The colonel rocked with laughter. "Of course. I promised him that he would see his wife and mother. They were taken care of at Napolo. It is only fitting that you give him the passport to see them."

TWO heavy black sedans, lights out, motors humming softly were lost in the deep shadows off the beach.

Tommy Carrone squinted into the opaqueness of the night, consulted the luminous dial on his watch and grunted. "That wire said he'd be here at 12.10. It's 12.15. You think something went wrong?"

The beefy man at his right grunted. "Maybe it was a gag, that wire."

Tommy Carrone shook his head. "No. It said 'remember Tony.' Nobody but Melody Musico would have said that. I'll bet—" He paused, held his hand up. "You hear a put-put boat out there?"

Both men stiffened into attention. The beefy man nodded.

"That must be them," Tommy Carrone grunted. "Tell the other boys to get ready. We don't want to waste no time."

A few minutes later the trim nose of a motor launch knifed through the heavy mist that hung low over the water. It nosed into the sand, jarred to a stop.

Two men leaped across its bow onto the sand. Five more followed, then the motor was silent and a sixth joined them. The little group gathered on the beach. Its leader peered into the impenetrable blackness that surrounded them.

"Your friends, Musico," his voice was harsh, metallic. "Where are they?"

The familiar voice of Melody Musico cut through the blackness. "They'll be here Dr Stratz. You must be patient—like we learned to be at Palmo—and Napolo. You were there, weren't you?"

Stratz' figure stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"How were my mother and my wife when you saw them last, Doctor?" Musico's voice was harsh.

"Your friends?" Stratz' voice was urgent.

Musico laughed. "You'll be hearing from them any second now—"

Suddenly, from three sides the rhythmic chatter of sub-machine guns shattered the silence. The little group melted away. Stratz tried to

run, then unbuckled at the knees and sprawled forward on his face as a heavy blast tore through his back. Musico fell to his knees, tried to pull himself to his feet and was slammed back against the sand by a fusillade.

As suddenly as it began the tommyguns' cacophony of death ceased. In a matter of seconds the landing party lay sprawled about the beach.

The beefy man who stood with Tommy Carrone made for the motor launch and impatiently tore open several of the paper packages.

"Hey, Tommy," his disappointed voice cut through the darkness, "that ginzo musta blew his top. Know what he's trying to hustle in? A load of dynamite and nitro. As if we ain't got more'n enough of that now."

Tommy Carrone walked over to the riddled body of Melody Musico and turned it over with the tip of his toe.

"Of course he was nuts. He shoulda knew I'd get him for putting my kid brother on the spot—even if it did take me ten years to catch up with him. And then he has the nerve to rub it in by sending me a wire telling me to 'remember Tony.' As if I could forget."

(THE END)

Meet a Clean-up Specialist!

When Red Hamilton got a letter from his old pard, Black Jack Driscoll, he figured there was more wolf-killing afoot. And he was both right and wrong when he accepted the invitation and rode into

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REAL WESTERN



TOO MANY

ALIBIS

By Arthur Mann

*Whether a guy deserved shooting or not, a killing's
still a killing!*

A SUSPICIOUS silence hung over Police Headquarters like an ominous pall as Lew Curry, of the *Daily Star*, returned from a late afternoon bite in a nearby beanery. He hadn't been gone from the district office long—perhaps an hour—and it seemed unlikely that anything important could have happened.

But of course, it always does happen like that, he reflected, and dashed up the rickety stairs to consult other headquarters reporters in the newspaper cubicles.

Consultation was an excellent idea, except that none of the little offices was occupied. Potter of the *Standard*, usually in drunken stupor, wasn't even around. Nor was the Gazette's veteran, Martin Thentic. Lew yanked his Fedora down over his red head, raced down the stairs and across the street to headquarters, bumping violently into a stocky figure as he entered the door.

"Tony Mascheri!" He exclaimed. "Where's ev—"

"I phoned the desk," the slip boy panted. "Tol' 'em you'd gone over. I was just comin' to get you."

"Gone over where?" Lew demanded. "What's up?"

"Everybody's gone over to Madison street," Tony said, holding up a copy of the slip on the case. "Two-twenty. Jake Bonner was found in his own place. . . shot—"

Lew left on the double, for the Madison Street address was within quicker reach by foot-hustle than waiting for a taxi. And it was something well worth hustling to, because of Jake Bonner—one of those borderline cases the cops are always trying

to pin something on. Bonner had been raided at the Madison Street apartment-office, questioned, held on suspicion and picked up at the oddest intervals, only to be discharged in court for lack of evidence, or even at preliminary hearings. And now here he was, plugged without question by a law—or the lack of it—that had sharper claws than the cops could fasten on him.

But it was murder, Lew reflected, unlawful manslaughter, and probably premeditated. Regardless of the victim's character, such as it was, the police had to ferret out the killer, or killers, because it was the law. No doubt he deserved more than he got; he was that kind of heel. Hundreds of people owed him money for all kinds of shady gambling; he dealt in penny-policy among the neighborhood kids, race-horse bets, and dice games, extending from juvenile huddles to the big blanket games which Bonner sponsored from one hotel to another, changing locale as fast as he heard the cry of "Cops!"

TWO-TWENTY was an old-fashioned stoop-and-area-way affair, one of many that had been modernized in the neighborhood. Bonner lived in a set-up comprising a kitchenette, a living room-office and a sleeping alcove. Lew flashed his police card to the patrolman on guard at the street entrance and raced up the flight of stairs to the rear. He threaded through the crowded room and saw the *corpus delicti*, still slumped forward on the desk at which he had been sitting and telephoning. The desk blotter had soaked up a small

A "Lew
Curry"
Murder
Mystery



*"We redheads have
to stick together, Bucky."*

puddle of darkening crimson from a bulletwound in the temple. The coroner was still taking pictures and nothing had been moved.

Though it was in the Third precinct, Inspector Wolfe, of Headquar-

ters, had taken supervisory charge, which was okay with the precinct cops, for it relieved them of responsibility. Already the Inspector seemed to have settled matters to his own satisfaction with two suspects. Lew

passed up the assembled reporters to question Costigan, his Headquarters confidante, now back on a plain-clothes beat after "uniform punishment."

"Those two?" Le wwhispered. "Is Wolfe cuffing those two on a thing like this?"

"Those two" happened to be a middle-aged couple, Mr. and Mrs. Steve Johnson, superintendents of the double-building. Steve still bore signs of the morning's tussle with ashes.

"Don't look so good for either of 'em," Costigan confided as the assorted humans milled about them. "Steve was into Bonner for quite a bundle—race-track bets—"

"But there's no more racing," Lew reminded.

"That's probably what brought it to a head," the detective said. "Steve can't get even and Bonner's probably been puttin' the heat on him."

"And where does Mrs. Johnson come in?"

"Evidently she came in the door about an hour ago," Costigan said with a snort, "an' drilled Bonner. That's what she claims. Said she couldn't stand seein' Steve worry an' fret over what was a trap all the time. It's a confession."

"A cover-up," Lew sighed. "Who's the synthetic blonde in tears? Bonner's heart of hearts, I suppose."

"Yes, she rushed over after failin' to get Bonner on the phone, an' got the real news downstairs from the Johnsons."

"Nice coincidence, huh?" Lew muttered.

"Maybe," Costigan said with a shrug. "Lot of angles to this, kid. They're out pickin' up the daughter too."

"Bonner's? I didn't know he had—"

"No, the Johnsons'. Mink-coat type and said to be quite friendly with Bonner. She's in his book, at least, an' the Inspector says that sort of provides Mrs Johnson with a double motive."

THE CORONER had finished taking the pictures, and the ambulance internes had crowded through

with their stretcher. Inspector Wolfe, acting with all the authority that his gold-braid indicated, ordered the couple taken to Headquarters for booking. He then issued statements which Martin Thentic, Dave Potter, Lew and two precinct district men copied with care.

"Mrs. Steve Johnson is booked on a murder charge," the officer said. "She will sign a confession. Her husband will be held as a material witness, and possibly an accessory, if not charged with actual complicity. Then we'll go to work. Miss Fay Harris, the deceased's fiancée, will be held as a material witness, as will Miss Eva Strand, step-daughter of the Johnsons. This book," and Inspector Wolfe held up Bonner's ledger-diary, "will provide additional witnesses, as well as proof of motive. That's all."

Flanked by Sgt Raymer and a cordon of patrolmen, both Mr. and Mrs. Steve Johnson were cloaked, hatted and bundled off to Headquarters for booking and detention until some kind of legal order could be brought to their aid. Johnson complained about his furnace duties, but the landlord was notified, and he arranged for a substitute who had never bet on the horses. Lew made a quick call to the office, then rejoined Costigan.

"Who done it?" Lew asked bluntly.

Costigan shrugged a set of broad shoulders. "Dunno," he sighed, "but I can tell you who didn't."

"Mrs Johnson."

"Nor Steve," the detective muttered. "I don't know whether the Inspector's kiddin' himself or us, but he sure seems serious about pinnin' it on those two janitors."

"That's crazy," Lew muttered. "Jobs like this don't solve so easy. Personally I'd rather suspect the blonde. Fay Harris."

"Why?"

"Oh. . ." Lew chuckled. "Sashay the femme."

"Then why not the Johnson's step-daughter, Eva Strand?"

"I don't know. Maybe the blonde babe seems less remote. How did she get there so soon?"

"She was trying to get Bonner on the phone," Costigan said. "I told you that. When he didn't answer, she came over, an' learned about it from the Johnsons. Maybe she bumped him off. I dunno."

"Where you going now?" Lew puzzled.

"To check a few of these names." The detective flashed the small ledger-diary. "There's a joint near here. . . Pelky's—"

'Pelky's Pool Parlor,' Lew finished. "Two and a half cents a cue. Full of loafing four-F's, punks and no-accounts."

"A few, yes," Costigan sighed. "They're in the book, some for some, some for plenty, by comparison to their income—"

"Which is nothing."

"Precisely." Costigan read some names. "Mike, Lefty, Shrimp, Goon. Louis, Bucky. . . they're all jail-fodder, except maybe Bucky."

PELKY'S WAS in a semi-basement, surrounded by soiled walls and a low, corrugated ceiling. The place was redolent with the lingering odors of stale cigaret smoke and a neglected lavatory. Most of the pool tables were idle, but the ever-active Kelly-pool game, characteristically located in the farthest corner, was alive with the zest of chance: quarter a pill.

"There they are," Costigan muttered. "The flower of American uselessness. Sing-Singers of the future."

"They've got a quorum, all right" Lew said, as they crossed over to the game. "Everybody seems to be present."

"All. . . but Lefty," Costigan whispered.

Pelky, a former middleweight wrestler with a mangled left ear and a drooping eyelid, resented the intrusion, but didn't say so. He wore a canvass apron to protect his clothes from chalk and the rigors of ball-racking. He and the players looked up sourly at the visitors, but the game went on. Monk happened to be shooting a combination in an effort to pocket his 4-ball. Costigan tapped Bucky on the shoulder.

"Where's Lefty?" the detective asked.

The boy turned a red head and then shrugged. "Pitchers," he said. "Movie, I guess. Roy Rogers is there."

"What time did he go?"

"I dunno." Monk came over, slamming his cue-butt against the bare wooden floor and cursing. Bucky said, "Hey, Monk, what time did Lefty go to the Bijou?"

"What's it to-ya?" Monk grinned. He turned to Costigan. "Who wants t'know?"

"I do," Costigan said quietly. "Jake Bonner's been murdered, and I think Lefty did it!"

That stopped the game. A cigaret-butt dropped from Pelky's thickened lips, and he brushed it from the chalky green cloth quickly. There followed a chorus of assorted protests. They ranged from Lefty's "pacifist" nature, to the fact that Lefty had no heater, and even if anybody did, where could you get ammunition?

"Well, you might as well know—all of you," Costigan warned, "that you're under suspicion of some kind. It's no joke. If anybody knows somethin' he better show up at Headquarters an' spill it. We got to clean up this mess in a hurry."

The detective turned abruptly and stalked through the idle tables to the door. Lew was at his heels and as they reached the street, the reporter tossed a "what next?" at the stoical dick.

"Down to the Bijou to haul out Lefty. See you later."

Lew considered going with the detective to confront Lefty, but he felt that things weren't quite airtight in that direction. A killer doesn't simply go to the movies. . . yet, everybody at the pool hall seemed to know where Lefty had gone. Killers are always careful to establish alibis, especially when a murder is planned, as this one probably had been.

Lew paused before a small stationery store. . . newsstand at the door, tobacco displays in one window and soft-drink displays in the other. . . novelties, odds and ends to eke out

a living. He entered and received a nod from a German behind the cigar counter. The place smelled of stewing chicken, for the family lived in a small apartment at the rear.

"Hello, Mr. Harsch," Lew greeted. He waited for the grunt of reply and said. "Where's Bucky?"

The father shrugged his fleshy shoulders. "I dunno. . . probably down at the pool place. . . wastin' his time an' my money—"

"He went to the pictures," a mother's defensive voice called. She appeared in the rear doorway wiping her hands on a clean apron. "To the Bijou. I gave him money for the ticket."

She shot a glance of disapproval at her husband, for here was once when the boy was not exactly wasting his time, even though he might have been putting it to better advantage.

"It was a Roy Rogers picture, he said." She smiled. "He likes the westerns. Me, I'd rather see Greer Garson. . ."

Lew laughed. "Thanks, Mrs. Harsch. . ."

"There's trouble, maybe?" The father asked anxiously.

"Not much," Lew said and opened the door. "Tell him to stay home for a while. Do him good, anyway."

OUTSIDE THE store he wiped a nervous sweat from his forehead, because this implicated Bucky, if Lefty turned out to be—

"But he's not!" Lew exclaimed half-aloud. "These kids might kill some day, but I can't believe. . . at least, I won't believe it till Costigan comes up with a confession."

It would take Costigan a little while to come up with Lefty, which would allow time to beat it over to East 36th Street where the curvacious Fay Harris lived in solitary splendor. Somehow Lew couldn't rid his system of the hunch that this dame had pulled the trigger. Of course, it was more than a hunch; it was an unshakable belief, based on the fact that her morning and movements and even her arrival had dove-tailed with the killing. Why wasn't she shopping

that morning? Or having a hair-do? Or anything that such women always manage to fill their next day with?

FAY HARRIS lived in the rear apartment of a very modern building, and she answered Lew's ring.

"I'm from headquarters," he began, and that was enough to gain admittance.

"When is the woman's trial?" she asked, and wiped her eyes.

"What woman?" Lew parried.

"Why, the superintendent," she replied. "She confessed, didn't she? I heard her say she shot poor Jake. Oh-h-h. . ."

"I'm sorry, Miss Harris," Lew apologized. "Takes more than a mere confession to incriminate a person. A confession can't be used in court, because a person can't testify against himself."

"Well, there's plenty of motive," she argued, and dabbed carefully at her eyes. "Though I'm sure Jake had nothing to do with Eva Strand."

"What makes you so sure?"

The woman stiffened haughtily. "I'm sure, that's all."

Lew shrugged. "Your movements have to be checked, Miss Harris," he said. "Beginning at noon."

"I was here," she said quickly.

"No shopping. . . no beauty parlor?"

"No. I was telephoning people. In fact, I tried to get Jake several times, and when he didn't answer, I. . . I . . . went over. . ."

"What about two-thirty?" Lew puzzled. "Were you telephoning then. . . here?"

"Yes, because the beauty parlor phoned," she explained. "That's the Les Chic on thirty-third. I wanted an appointment for later in the day. They tried to get me, I learned later, and couldn't. They had a machine open for four, but I lost it."

"Pretty busy, these hairdressers," Lew murmured. "Probably the comb shortage. Well, that seems good enough." He started for the door. "Now, if Eva Strand can do as well with her alibi as you have, the case'll be just about sewed up against that poor superintendent."

"I don't know about Eva," Miss

Harris said coolly. "Nor her mother, Whoever killed Jake doesn't deserve sympathy, and I'm surprised at seeing a cop show any."

"I'm not a cop, Miss Harris."

"But you're from Police Headquarters," she gasped. "You said it!"

"That's true," Lew smiled. "But I'm not a cop there; I'm a reporter. Thanks for the interview. Good day."

LEW HURRIED to the street and hailed a taxi.

"Two-twenty Madison," he said. "Fast as you can."

His eye never left the face of his wrist-watch as he clocked the journey, and it took exactly eight minutes and two seconds.

"Could be," he muttered, then. Okay, drive to the nearest drug store."

Two blocks away he entered a bustling pharmacy, sought one of four phone booths and dialed the telephone at his Police Headquarters office. It was an outside phone, separate from the switchboard extension for direct city-room calls. That done, he left the receiver hanging and scribbled an "out-of-order" sign on a blank envelope, which he pasted against the glass of the boothdoor. After a five-minute wait he entered the adjoining booth and called the Daily Star, to be greeted by fireworks.

"Where've you been?" the city editor stormed. "There's a story at Headquarters. Mrs. Johnson sticks to her confession. They've rounded up Eva, and they have proof that she threatened to kill Jake Bonner. And Costigan has brought in a kid named Lefty Bersner who has a gun home, and who admits that several of the gang were after Bonner."

"So here's what you do," Lew said.

"Wait a minute!" the CE shouted.

"Where are you, anyway? We've called you on the extension, and no answer, but your outside line is busy."

"I'm working," Lew protested.

"And, if you'll give me a chance, we can do a little fast-pulling on the boys.

I'm pretty sure I've got the killer. . it's Fay Harris, Bonner's sweetie."

"You're outa your mind!" was the telephonic retort. "Inspector Wolfe has admitted that it's one of the three Johnsons."

"Fine, but will you do this, please?" Lew persisted. "Write a lead on Fay Harris, thirty-one, dyed blonde hair, big blue eyes, and all that. She's a former telephone operator. Lives in style, thanks to Bonner. So she killed him today—"

"In a fit of jealous rage, I suppose!" the CE exclaimed.

"No, it wasn't a fit," Lew corrected. "It was a pretty well-planned scheme, and she was lucky. The motive is jealousy, which will be explained when she's arrested."

"Does Inspector Wolfe know about this?"

"Nobody knows about it but me, boss," Lew whispered. "Will you do as I say, and write the lead? Get a banner ready and you can shove off soon as I call you again."

LEW HUNG up quickly, for there was no sense to further argument. They couldn't call him back, because he didn't answer the extension-phone and the outside number—

He dropped a nickel into the slot and dialed it.

Sure enough, it was still busy.

He hurried around to Pelky's Pool Parlor. The Kelly game was still in progress. Bucky Harsch was after the orange 5-ball. Lew waited until he had failed to pocket it, and beckoned him from the table. The kid had a nice face, too nice for the mess into which he had been drawn.

"You better come with me, Bucky," Lew said quietly. "Don't talk about it here. I'd like to help you, and I think I can. But don't argue or protest, and we'll be all right. We redheads have to stick together."

"Or get stuck together," Bucky muttered cynically. "Wait'll I rack my cue, an' wash."

"Never mind washing. Get your hat. We've got to hurry. Costigan grabbed Lefty from the movies and he's talking."

Outside Bucky punctured that feeler.

"If Lefty's talkin', there's nothin' of importance he can say. If he knows anything about Bonner's murder, Lefty wouldn't talk, so don't fumble around like a cop."

"Okay, Bucky," Lew sighed. "You win that one."

* * *

Activity in the region of Inspector Wolfe's office was accelerating as developments in the Bonner case increased, and as the material witnesses began to complicate matters by protesting too much. As Lew reached the building with young Harsch, the girl, Eva, was cornered in Wolfe's "grill room" adjacent to his office. The officer had opened the door and was admitting the press.

"Miss Strand admits. . . well, compromising herself," Wolfe said with a shrug. "That is, with Bonner. She's wearing the result."

The girl, wide-eyed and a brunette, sat huddled in a large batch of expensive minks. A pert hat was askew atop a page-bob.

"I've told all there is," she said. "Bonner wanted me to wear this coat. . . I took it, because he promised to give Papa a break so he could get square in the book."

"You mean," Lew puzzled, "that Bonner gave you a coupla thousand bucks worth of mink for the privilege of losing money on your step-father?"

She nodded. "I can't help how you interpret it," she protested. "That's all there was. But he crossed me, and kept hounding Papa."

"Because you probably crossed Bonner," Inspector Wolfe added. "By not coming across. . . or something. Who's this boy, Curry?"

"Friend of mine," Lew replied. "Where's Costigan?"

"He'll be back with Lefty Bersner," the inspector said. He turned to the other reporters. "I guess that's about all. Lefty's alibi is all right. He was at the movies from one-thirty or quarter to two on. . . about an hour before the murder, and Costigan

found him there a few minutes ago. He described the picture."

"What about Miss Harris?" Martin Thentic asked.

"They're going to pick her up right away," Lew said. "So they told me downstairs. When is the indictment going to be handed up. . . or down. . . Inspector?"

INSPECTOR WOLFE scowled, for nothing had been said officially about picking up Miss Harris. "Tonight," he growled. "After we get a few more facts assembled. Curry, take that boy out of here."

"He's a friend of Lefty's," Lew said. "He's okay."

The pat on the back was reassuring to Bucky, whose freckled face lighted up when Costigan entered the room with Lefty. The two loafers greeted each other with a casual wave of recognition. As the room cleared of reporters, Lew closed the door.

"Now, Lefty," he said, "tell us what you know. Quick!"

"Me?" Lefty sneered. "It was the same kinda pitcher, 'cept Rogers got oil-lease racketeers 'stead of cattle rustlers."

"I don't mean the picture," Lew said sternly. "I mean about two-thirty. . . about Bonner's murder. Speak up!"

"I was at the movies!" Lefty protested. "The flat-foot foun' me there."

"What's the matter with you, Curry," Inspector Wolfe scolded.

"I picked the kid up there," Costigan said. "He described the picture okay. Here's his stub. . . Number eight-six-three-three-two. I checked with the box office. It was sold between one-fifteen an' one-thirty."

"But not to Lefty," Lew said. "It was bought by somebody else who gave it to Lefty after the murder."

"Why, you mug!" Lefty exclaimed through a twisted mouth. "There'll be anudda moida aroun' here, if you ain't careful."

"None of that, Lefty," Costigan cautioned. "Lew, stop fishin' an' say what you mean."

"I mean that Lefty knows about

the murder," Lew persisted. "I say that Bucky here went to the Bijou, bought a ticket at about one-twenty, and watched the picture till Lefty showed up. Then he described the show in detail, so that Lefty could say he'd been there all the time. The ticket-stub was concrete proof."

"I didn't kill Bonner!" Lefty roared.

"Nobody said you did," Lew roared back. "I merely asked you to tell what you knew."

"Wait a minute," Inspector Wolfe ordered. He shook Bucky's shoulder. "Did you buy a ticket and give it to Lefty?"

"Take it easy, Inspector," Lew cautioned. "These kids haven't done anything." To Bucky, he said. "Tell him the truth, Bucky. I told you we had to stick together."

"An' I said we'd get stuck together," the boy muttered. He looked at Lefty, then at Inspector Wolfe. "Okay, it's like he said. I went to the movies. Then I went back to Pelky's."

"At Pelky's," Lew reminded, "you said you guessed Lefty was at the pictures. Then you asked Monk what time Lefty went to the *Bijou*. You

even knew Roy Rogers was at the theater Lefty attended. It was too clumsy for me, so I checked up with your mother and father. They told me what time you went and where. So..."

Bucky shrugged and shifted his position. "Okay, so I gave my stub to Lefty. I don't know nothin' else."

"So Lefty wasn't at the movies all the time," Lew sighed. "Now, where was he and what does he know?"

"You guys're tryin' t'frame me!" Lefty protested.

"No they're not, kid," Lew assured him. "I phoned the third precinct, and they're bringing in Fay Harris."

"You what?" Inspector Wolfe gasped.

"What I said. Phoned the Third, and they're picking up Miss Harris. I was afraid she might take a powder."

"Now, wait a minute," Costigan interrupted. "We found a rod back at Lefty's house. If he wasn't at the movies—"

"*Cherchez la femme*," Lew quoted and laughed. "Sh-h-h-h. . . I think we got the thing ready for the laundry right now. Here comes Miss Harris."

THE BLONDE arrived as prophesied, and wore a mask of thor-



One-Eyed Ezra Is Back!

Yup, Ezra and Pat Stevens are together again, leaving Powder Valley for a little cattle-buying expedition—which is just a blind for

THE SMOKING IRON

Don't Miss This Complete Book-Length Novel by

PETER FIELD

in the August Issue of

WESTERN ACTION

ough indignation. Rage steeped toward the boiling point within her as she spied Eva Strand. Yanking her arm free from a plainclothesman's light grasp, Miss Harris rushed across the room and snatched up the mink coat.

"That's mine!" she exclaimed.

Inspector Wolfe snatched it back and tossed it to Miss Strand.

"There's your murder motive," Lew exclaimed. "Acute jealousy."

"What do you mean?" Fay Harris said indignantly. "Inspector, this fugitive from the battle-front was at my place a while ago impersonating an officer. I demand his arrest."

"What is this, Curry? First you implicate her in the murder, and then impersonate an officer."

"The other way around, Inspector," Lew muttered. "Just a minute till I call the office."

The reporter dialed his office and asked for the city editor quick.

"Got that lead and the banner-line?" he asked anxiously and then grinned. "Well, here's the dope. They just brought in Miss Fay Harris, and Inspector Wolfe is ready to make a formal charge of first degree murder. . . yes, Jake Bonner."

"Curry!" Inspector Wolfe roared.

"That was the Inspector himself," Lew laughed. "What? . . . Sure my outside phone's still busy. It'll be busy for a few more minutes. That's part of the story, which goes like this:

"Bonner went on the make for Eva Strand, but she wouldn't take the bait. . . a fur coat, which Bonner evidently had promised to Fay Harris. But the Strand girl made a deal to take the coat and be Bonner's girl, provided Bonner cancelled her father's debts for horse-racing, now that he couldn't play the nags any more.

"I don't know which reneged first—Bonner on the debts or the girl on the promised affection—but Fay Harris didn't like the brush-off, so after failing to get Bonner back, she plans to kill him. . . "

"That's a dirty lie!" Fay Harris screamed and started for Lew. He held up a hand protectively and continued.

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks," he grinned. "Anyway, here's how it went. She rigged up a batch of telephone calls for alibis to indicate that she was at her apartment. But she's an old telephone operator and knows that if you dial a number, it'll give you a busy signal, provided the receiver, where you dial, is left off the hook. . . What? . . . Sure, that's why my outside phone is still busy. Or maybe it's not. The busy signal only lasts for a half-hour, and I timed it from her apartment to Two-twenty Madison. Takes about eight minutes, so she could've got to her place from the murder scene in plenty of time. . . "

Broken sobs interrupted Lew's graphic explanation. He turned to look, and yelled, "Hold the phone!"

In a single lunge he reached the weeping woman's side and brushed her handbag to the floor. He whisked it up and handed it to Costigan.

"Hello, boss?" he called. "She was just fumbling in her handbag for a Kleenex, which turned out to be a gun. Yes! Carrying it right in Police Headquarters. Now, here's the payoff: All the evidence is circumstantial, except for one witness. A kid named Lefty Bersner. He went over to shoot Bonner, but ran into Fay Harris who had done the job. They're all here. Let 'er roll for the Wall Street Final, and I'll call you back for a replat."

Lew replaced the instrument and winked at Costigan.

The detective was examining a small, pearl-handled revolver, which he had found in the handbag.

"Loaded," Costigan muttered, "but it's the same size."

Lew shrugged. "We ought to keep this thing quiet till a guy's paper gets out on the street, shouldn't we, Inspector?"

Inspector Wolfe snorted and yanked at the bottom of his coat.

"This is an instrument of the law," he muttered. "Not a newspaper office. Go on across the street, and we'll call all of you when there's a statement. And a . . . thanks."

(THE END)

THE STRANGE STORY OF TWO AMERICAN BOYS

A Fact Feature
As Told To Nat Schacner

The little town of Niantic, Conn. is as typically American a community as any in the land. The men sail down Niantic Bay and out upon the sea for fish as did Niantic men for many generations before them. They like to brag of the grand old whaling days and of the older days when swift American privateers darted from Connecticut harbors to harass enemy shipping and strike terror in enemy hearts.

The little town of Hancock Point, Me., is just as typically American. Here, too, the people fish the populous ocean as did their forefathers before them. They are "Downeasters" and proud of their traditions, their independence and their fiercely-held individuality.

Two American towns, both fronting the same grim sea, inhabited by the same sturdy breed of men, following the same perilous trade. Yet today heads hang heavily in Niantic and hearts are filled with mingled shame and rage; while up in Hancock Point the bands blare, men walk with lifted faces, clap each other on the back, and young lads are filled with strange ardors and high resolves.

What happened to occasion such startling transformations in two hitherto so similar towns? Here is the story.

TWENTY-SIX years ago William Curtis Colepaugh was born on Old Black Point, that stretches like a pointing finger out of Niantic town. His parents were oldline average Americans, in no wise different from their neighbors. Young Colepaugh passed his childhood in the same environment as all the other growing youngsters of Niantic. He played in the same fields, watched the same boats go sailing down the bay, at-

tended the same church and public school. He was thin and frail and given to moods. An old Selectman of the village recalls him as a peculiar youngster with funny ideas." But lots of children seem peculiar to their elders and have funny ideas. His face was twisted sideways a little; but the physical twist of a countenance certainly does not connote a similar deformity of mind.

From the public schools of Niantic and New London young Colepaugh went to the Admiral Farragut School, a prep school with naval leanings at Toms River in New Jersey. A splendid school, and a splendid, normal American environment, without any doubt.

But here something happened. Unknowing to his teachers, perhaps even to his fellow students, young Colepaugh developed a mental twist as well as a physical one. What was responsible for the twist? Adolph Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. By some chance the book fell into his hands, and he devoured it in huge, uncritical gulps. The thin, peculiar youngster with the "funny ideas" found in this hate-filled garbage-laden volume more "funny ideas." No lie it contained was too big for him to swallow. "The Aryans are the master race. All others are inferior," he read with rapt attention. Or, inconsistently, "The Jews are running the world!" He proved to the hilt Hitler's boast that "the bigger the lie, the more people would believe in it."

Now in Niantic, in his schools, in his private life, Colepaugh had met few Jews or none. He knew nothing of them, except by report. But by the time he was ready, in 1938, to enter the Massachusetts Institute of Technology he had absorbed Hitler's poison so thoroughly that he ate,

breathed and lived in an emotional fury of anti-Semitism. He did not know then—though he ought to know now—that fomenting religious prejudice was part and parcel of the Nazi scheme to divide the world and conquer.

AT MIT he joined a great national fraternity. It took a little while before his frat brothers perceived the full drift of their new member's obsession. It burst all bounds that fateful day in September, 1939 when Nazi Germany started on that long career of conquest and brutality which *Mein Kampf* had already prophesied to an unheeding world. "Beautiful Germany!" he cried exultantly. "How I admire you!" He threw his former caution to the winds. He made long, ranting speeches to his brothers. When one of them tried to put in a favorable word for any fellow-student of the Jewish faith, Colepaugh flew into a rag .. and dished out all the propaganda poisons concocted by the Nazis.

After a while the boys of the fraternity avoided him and left him to his own devices. Moody, violent, obsessed, he began to drink. He alternated between drunken stupors, ravings against the Jews, and worshipful praise of Nazi Germany. Even in his school work his obsessions showed. He wrote a theme for college English on anti-Semitism. The arguments were straight out of *Mein Kampf*. What his instructor said is unknown, but Colepaugh was shortly thereafter dropped from MIT for "unsatisfactory work."

The next semester he was readmitted on probation, and dropped again in 1940—this time for good.

His career as an engineer thus untimely ended, he took to the sea and knocked about for over a year. Then came Pearl Harbor and war with Germany. By this time, however, Colepaugh was so thoroughly indoctrinated with Nazi propaganda that he hated his own country for daring to stand in the conquering path of the "Supermen." He tried to avoid the draft—giving false evidence be-

fore his Selective Service Board in Boston. In July, 1942, the FBI arrested him for perjury. The United States Attorney in charge of his case was lenient. "If you will enlist in the Navy," he told Colepaugh, "I'll drop the matter." Colepaugh accepted eagerly.

He was sent to the Great Lakes Naval Training Station. Less than three months later he was "honorably" discharged. What the cause of his discharge was officials at the Station were reluctant to tell, but they hinted at suspicions of his loyalty.

Colepaugh returned to the sea. Here, among the toiling, danger-ridden seamen who manned the vital cargo ships, he might be able to stir up discontent and trouble. Anti-Semitism was his constant theme.

EVIDENTLY, HE met with no success; American seamen were proof against his wiles. He determined, therefore, on more direct action. Back in port again he sought and obtained a berth as mess boy on the *Gripsholm*, international exchange liner. On January 12, 1944 he sailed for Lisbon. The day they anchored in that neutral port he jumped ship and went immediately to the German Consul. He gave the Nazi Salute. "Heil Hitler!" he said. "I want to join the Elite Guard and work for the glory of *Der Fuehrer*."

The Nazi Consul stared at this obvious American, examined his papers. Not even a trace of German ancestry in his background! He was suspicious. Maybe these dumb Americans were getting to be as clever as his own Gestapo.

"Why do you, an *Amerikaner*, want to fight against your own country?" he asked.

"I agree with Herr Hitler. He showed me the light. All democracies are decadent and are run by the Jews."

"Ja," nodded the Consul. That explained everything. The Nazi propaganda was working well in America. *Der Fuehrer* had been right. He was always right. He had been extremely clever in pulling this stuff about democracy and the Jews. The Consul

sat down and wrote off a note that sent Colepaugh to Berlin.

Enrolled in the Elite Guard, the Nazis decided Colepaugh would be far more valuable as a saboteur in America than he was in Germany. He went to school again—not, as in MIT, for purposes of peace and civilization—this time he studied the arts of destruction, disruption, group-hatred and division. In Berlin, in Dresden, at The Hague—former temple of peace—he learned how to assemble a short-wave transmitter, how to photograph vital fortifications and war industries, how to dynamite railroads, bridges, factories, how to foment disunity. The Germans are thorough at these things, and they made him expert.

At The Hague he was introduced to Erich Gimpel, fanatical Nazi. "Here is your comrade when you go to America," they told him. "He came back to the *Vaterland* from an American internment camp in Texas." They grinned. "Americans are dumb. Just because Erich is a civilian they exchange him. They don't know a civilian like Erich is more important to our cause than a dozen cannon-fodder soldiers. He's a radio-engineer and worked for our Telefunken in Peru before they interned him. He knows sabotage, *ja*, he knows it thoroughly." They chuckled again. "*We Nazis* never would send back an American civilian like Erich. That's why we'll rule the world."

Gimpel was over six feet, fair-haired, blue-eyed, well-built; he spoke English with a mere trace of accent. Colepaugh was short, thin, dark, twisted and filled with hate.

ON SEPTEMBER 26, 1944, U-Boat 1230 slipped quietly out of Kiel Harbor. On board were two important passengers—William C. Colepaugh and Erich Gimpel. In small prepared bags they carried the following: sixty thousand dollars in American cash, loose diamonds, .32 caliber automatic revolvers, TNT, dynamite detonators, fuses, secret inks, a camera, a compass, and forged papers. The papers were made out in

the names of William C. Caldwell (Colepaugh) and Edward G. Green (Gimpel).

For fifty-four days the submarine submerged by day and surfaced by night to avoid vigilant Allied patrols. Its destination was Hancock Point, at the head of Frenchmen's Bay, on the coast of Maine. Guarding the narrow entrance to the bay are Bar Harbor and Winter Harbor. In pre-war days they were famous resorts; now, especially in November, they are silent and grim.

The U-Boat cruised outside the bay until the moon was full—a proper time for landing deadly freight. Full moon flooded shore and water on the night of November 29th, and the undersea craft slipped through the narrows into Frenchmen's Bay toward Hancock Point. To Colepaugh the thin finger of the Point in the moonlight must have seemed strangely like Old Black Point where he was born; but now he hated one as much as the other. Niantic or Hancock—both were American; and therefore he cursed them.

At 11 p. m. on a silver-shining sea, the U-Boat surfaced and put out a rubber boat. Hastily the two Nazi agents got aboard with their precious bags, and were rowed ashore. A last straight-arm salute, a final "*Heil Hitler*," and Colepaugh and Gimpel scrambled up the rocky headland. The boat went back to the sub; the sub submerged and departed.

IT WAS a wild and desolate shore, shadowed with pines, murmurous with the incoming tide. No house was there, no sign of road or human form. But Colepaugh knew that Route 1 lay three miles inland, arrowing its way toward Bangor, Boston and their goal—New York.

There was fresh, deep snow on the ground, and the woods loomed thick, but the compass pointed the path and they trudged with their bags through underbrush and drifts, cursing the lack of foresight which had clothed them in light topcoats through which the keen Maine wind cut to the bone.

Finally they broke out of the trees and saw Route 1. They turned south

on the great highway, their feet crunching into the clean surface of the snow. By dawn, they figured, they'd find a bus or railroad—then on to Boston and New York.

The headlights of an approaching car flashed up the road, caught and held them in its angled beam. Colepaugh muttered quickly to Gimpel, "Over to the side, Erich, and hide your face in your coat collar."

The car swerved wide to avoid them and passed on. Colepaugh caught a glimpse of the driver. "Bah!" he said, "It's a young boy, hardly seventeen. He's alone—maybe coming home from a dance. All these damn kids think of are dances. We don't have to worry about him."

"Ja!" Gimpel agreed. "Our Nazi youth are grown men at seventeen. They have no time for foolishness like silly—what do you Americans call it—jittering?"

"Jitterbugging," snapped Colepaugh. "And don't call me an American."

Had they troubled to look back, they would have noticed that the car had slowed its rapid pace, and was moving steadily, methodically. But they didn't look back.

In Boston they stopped at the finest hotel. "Always stop in the best hotels," the Gestapo had told them. "In America it's the safest hiding place. Americans worship money."

Then on to New York. Again the best, most lavish hotels. Here they separated, each to a different hotel, meeting by appointment. They bought New York clothes, fitted for the season and for anonymity. They bought parts to build a radio transmitter—a part here and a part there, to avoid suspicion. They started to build it, to establish code communication with lurking U-Boats for transmission to Germany. They established contacts. They frequented bars to pick up unguarded bits of information.

Just as they were congratulating themselves on their complete security, simultaneously and separately, grim-faced men stepped up to them, tapped them on the shoulder.

"Colepaugh!"

"Gimpel!"

"Come along quietly. Federal Bureau of Investigation."

They had come to the end of the road.

HOW HAD they been captured? What had sent the FBI hot on their trail? The FBI does not give out all its secrets—but one phase of the story at least may be told. Go back to midnight Route 1 and the young American boy "who thought only of jitterbugging."

Harvard Merrill Hodgkins was born in Hancock Point, Me., seventeen years ago. He grew up in an environment remarkably like that of that other boy in Niantic. He played with his comrades, watched the fishing boats come up Frenchmen's Bay with their flopping harvests of the sea, ate "Ma's" cookies with gusto and went to public school. At an early age, however, he joined the Boy Scouts, and vowed solemnly that he would never disgrace their tenets. *On my honor I will do my best: To do my duty to God and my country, and to obey the Scout law; to help other people at all times, to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.* His father, Dana Hodgkins, had taught him the value of an oath. Dana was Deputy Sheriff of Hancock County.

From the district schoolhouse the boy went on to Ellsworth High School. He was a good athlete and made the teams. He kept up his Scout work and hoped some day to become an Eagle. Everyone liked him, and he liked everyone. Scout studies, athletics, scouting, parties, kept him pretty busy.

On the fateful evening of November 29th, young Harvard Hodgkins attended a dance some seventeen miles away from home. Like most American boys he borrowed "Pa's" car and went his way rejoicing. As the evening waned it began to snow, and young Harvard quit before the dance broke up to start for home. It was past midnight as he toolled the car along Route 1 toward Hancock Point. The storm had stopped some time be-

fore, a full moon flooded the road, and the highway stretched clean and white before him.

He was humming the last tune the band had played when, caught in his headlights, he saw two men trudging along the road toward him, heads down, collars up, and heavy bags in their hands. Something about them struck him as queer as he swung out toward the middle of the road to pass them by. It was late at night, the nearest town was a distance away, and they shrank to the edge of the woods, averting their faces as he went by. But there was something else—and he had already left them behind, when it flashed upon him. *They were wearing light top coats.* Now no one in Maine who isn't plumb crazy will wear a light Spring coat in late November. Therefore they weren't natives. Who then were they?

Young Harvard's pulses began to pound as he unconsciously slowed his car.

Suppose these men were—!

THEIR BACK tracks showed plain and sharp in the deep snow. He slowed his car down to a walking pace, watching the deep tracks carefully. Ah! There they angled and disappeared into the bordering trees. These men had come out of the woods, walking, carrying bags, at midnight! Young Harvard knew the lay of the land well. There was nothing behind those woods—except the sea!

Parking his car by the side, he got out and plunged into the forest. The waning moon and a providential flash helped him pick up the trail. It led back—and back—until—the snow prints ended on the very verge of the Point. Beyond lay Frenchmen's Bay.

The lad turned and stumbled back to his car, started the motor and raced for home. "Pa" was Deputy Sheriff, but had gone on an overnight hunting trip; so the boy told his tale to "Ma."

She listened gravely. It was very late now. "We'd better wait for Pa to come back," she finally decided.

"Pa" on his return found his son already past the bursting point. "Maybe they're burglars," he meditated, after hearing the story. "There're some summer cottages around the Point, boarded up for the Winter. Those fellows may have bust in and stolen whatever they could carry in those bags o'theirs. We'll go over first thing tomorrow and look around."

When "Pa" got back from his trip to the Point his face was serious and set. "I'm beginning to think you were right, son," He said. "The cottages ain't been touched." He called Bangor. Young Harvard could hear him talking to someone who was obviously FBI.

"They'll be here right away," said "Pa" as he hung up the phone. And they were. In the space of a few hours, quiet, soft-spoken agents swarmed in Hancock Point, listened to Harvard's tale, looked for themselves. Unfortunately rain had washed away all signs. Before they left, they shook the boy's hand and warned him not to talk. "We've been working on this for some time," they said mysteriously.

The next thing Harvard Hodgkins heard of it was when he read the headlines in the papers. NAZI AGENTS NABBED IN NEW YORK. LANDED FROM U-BOAT ON MAINE COAST.

That was all. But it was enough. The same day little Hancock Point swarmed with reporters, photographers, important dignitaries, all converging on a flustered household and a flustered, seventeen-year-old boy.

"What do you expect to be when you grow up?" he was asked.

"Well, first, there's a war on. As soon as I'm old enough—"

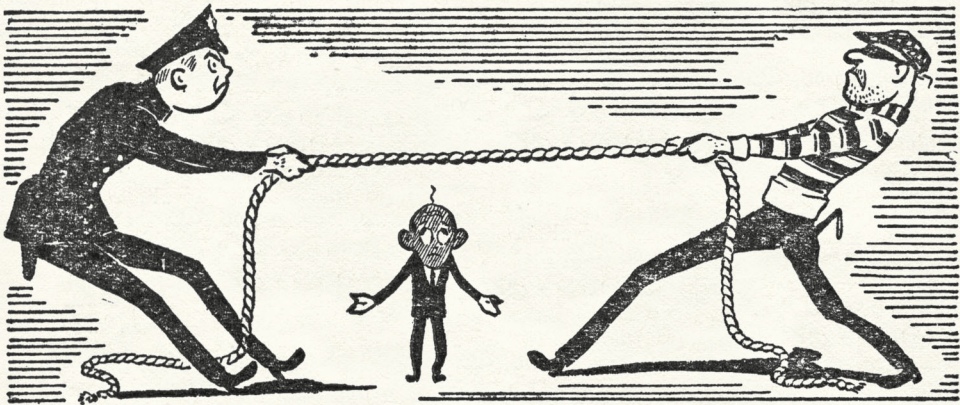
"And after the war."

"Gee, I'd like to be a G-man!"

Two American boys—in two American towns. Yet one turned traitor and the other followed the American tradition.

(THE END)

Law and Disorder



FACTS AND FUN

By Wilcey Earle

HE DESERVED IT

About a week before Christmas, Pert Kelton, the saucy star of stage, screen and radio, was discussing the shopping problem with Johnny Morgan, the night club funster who has scored so handsomely in radio.

Pert ventured—"My husband is a very busy man, but after considerable prodding, I finally got him out to do his Christmas shop-lifting."

"Is that so?" returned Morgan—"what did he get?"

"Thirty days!"

BUT HE WASN'T KIDDING, EITHER

As the condemned man walked up the gallows steps, he looked at the hangman and said—"You slay me."

"That" replied the hangman—"is noose to me."

HE WASN'T SO NUTTY

It is supposed to have happened at a murder trial in a Western city. A gent charged with a particularly heinous homicide was on trial for his life.

The courtroom was jammed with psychologists, alienists, psychiatrists and medicos because of a sharp medical division of opinion as to the man's sanity.

After a long parade of witnesses, the accused finally mounted the stand. The defense attorney who had just finished cupping an attentive ear to the mouthings of the alienists who were to be called by him in an effort to prove his client was nutty, asked a couple of routine questions, and then suddenly shot at the man on the stand—"Quick, now, who killed Cock Robin?"

"What?" replied the defendant, to the accompaniment of guffaws—"Is that all you have to think about? I *must* be crazy to hire a lawyer who asks such dopey questions!"

THAT SHOULD TAKE CARE OF IT

Not so long ago, an attorney in a small Southern town was told by his client—"I'm writing my bill in equity on some very rough paper."

"Pay no mind to it," soothed the barrister—"it must be filed before it comes into court."

A GENTLEMAN TO THE LAST

Then there was the young fellow who had just sat down in the electric chair. Before they pulled the switch, he was asked if he had any last words to say.

"Yes," he replied, "all my life I

have been a gentleman. If there is a lady present—I would like to give her my seat!"

SHE TALKED TOO MUCH

The judge gave the prisoner before the bar a suspended sentence on condition that he didn't beat up his wife again.

One morning a few weeks later, the defendant was sitting on his porch peaceful-like, reading the Sunday papers, when his wife riled him with—"I know why you're behaving yourself lately. It's because you're afraid of that damned, no-good, dried-up old shrimp of a judge."

He walloped her again.

When she hauled him before the judge again, the husband's defense was—"Judge, there I was sitting and minding me own bizness, but when my wife called Your Honour those names, I simply had to let 'er have it!"

Case dismissed.

HE'S VERSATILE

George Sanders, whose cinemacting is out of this world, says he has been on both sides of the crime fence—"I played so many crooks that I know all the questions. I have also played so many detectives—that I know all the answers."

IT'S A WONDER SHE DIDN'T GET LIFE

The judge was hearing a disorderly conduct case. A man and his wife had had a bit of a rumpus.

"What happened?" the magistrate asked the man.

The husband replied—"We were married two days and had a minor argument. All of a sudden, she picked up a piece of chocolate cake with whipped cream that she had just baked and threw it at me, hitting me right in the eye."

The judge barked at the woman—"You are guilty of disorderly conduct. The fine will be \$15."

"But Your Honor," protested the husband looking for a stiffer sentence—"she baked that cake herself."

"Oh!" roared the judge. "Assault with a deadly weapon!" He turned to the quavering woman and said—"I'm changing my verdict—one year in the County Jail."

HOW TRUE

It actually happened in an eastern courtroom. The judge interviewed the alleged murderer, who, to all intents and purposes, was guilty of a particularly vicious murder, in his chambers, and said—"Life is precious—see how you are fighting for yours."

HE TOOK HIM TOO LITERALLY

Mr. Jones, whose son's house had just been robbed, rushed excitedly up to his friend, Mr. Smith, and cried—"Mr. Smith, did you hear about my son's robbery?"

"No," replied Mr. Smith—"I knew he would get in trouble some day—whom has he robbed?"

INDEED HE HAD

A few hours after a bombing 'n England, Sir Randolph Tremaine remarked to Sir Ian Treverton-Swansea—"My dear fellow, our very, very good friend, Sir Ronald Cortwright, the barrister, has been killed and has left very few effects."

"How could it be otherwise?" replied Sir Randolph Tremaine—"he had so very few causes."

JOHN WAS ALWAYS FRANK

Many years ago John Barrymore was playing the prison death scene in "Peter Ibbetsen."

Every time he "died," a buxom, ruddy-faced woman, evidently a staunch Barrymore admirer, would stand up and cry "Oh, dear." This happened steadily for a week, with Barrymore getting madder and madder.

He had just died again in the prison scene when the woman again got up and sighed "Oh, dear."

Barrymore fixed her with a baleful eye and brought the house down when he looked at her and roared—"Oh, nuts."

HEY, KIDS, HERE'S TERRIFIC

NEWS!

Archie

AND HIS GANG are
on the AIR

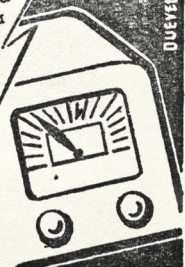


You SEE them in your favorite comics
Now HEAR them on your

FAVORITE NBC STATION
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NATIONAL BROADCASTING COMPANY
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What a treat! Now you can hear the whole gang
IN PERSON — Archie, Jughead, Betty, Veronica
and the Andrews Family. Look up your local
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ADVENTURES! SOME FUN! And
say, will you do Archie a
real favor? Write and tell
him how you like him and
his gang on the air—
will you? Thank!



DUVELL

SURE, I KEEP MY WORD

By Walter A. Luce

Every mob has its own, particular code . . .

WE WERE hiding out at the old Seaside Inn, which had been closed for a couple of years, waiting for the heat to be turned off, from that last job in the big town.

Me; I'm the boss of the mob, 'cause I got more on the ball than any of the rest of the boys, and I don't take anything from any of them. I can and do take care of my men, too; all but this time. The reason I don't do anything this time is the fact that the mob does have a certain code.

I was cleaning my rod and Joe was kibitzing about me not knowing how. Bill Chevers was playing solitaire, and Jinks Maddox and Mile-A-Way Williams were playing cribbage when we heard the car come up the driveway and stop in front of the Inn.

Quick like, I give orders, "Jinks, you and Mile-A-Way get in the next room, and Bill, you get in the closet. Joe and me'll see who it is."

The boys had no more than got to their places before a rap came on the door. I yelled, "Come in, with your hands up. We've got you covered from the windows." Of course we didn't have, but the guy outside couldn't know that. He came in with his hands up high.

The stranger was a tall, slim guy with blond hair and a square-cut face, which was very familiar to me, but I couldn't place him right off. He had a killer look about him and you could see a rod, 'neath his loose fitting, short sport jacket, in a clip fastened under his arm.

He looked around and asked, "Where are the other three boys, Roscoe?" Roscoe Miller, that's me.

"Huh!" He sure fooled me with

that. "How did you know who I am?"

"Why Roscoe, don't tell me you have forgotten the guy that showed you the ropes in this racket?"

You could have knocked me over with a feather, I'm so flabbergasted. "You don't mean Killer Rogers?" But I can see it is. "Where have you been the last ten years? I thought you got yours in Chicago."

He answered with, "Oh! I've been in retirement and let that story out so I wouldn't have to dodge coppers all my life. I've been going straight for ten years now."

"Well, whatta you know," I says, "and what brings you outta retirement now?"

"Well, I have one more job to do, and then I'm going back."

"Yeah! What's the job, 'cause maybe you'll need more help on it, and I've got four good boys. I think you know Mile-A-Way here, and Joe. And there's Jinks Maddox and Bill Chevers who have been with me for four years." This after the boys come out of their hiding places.

"Hi-ya boys."

Jinks said, "Ya know, Killer, I've heard a lot about you and if you need any help, count me in."

"I'll let you know later if I need any help from you. But right now, let's talk about the old days."

SO THEY all set down and I go into the kitchen and got out some ice, soda and a quart of Scotch, then went back into the room where they are.

After taking a chair by the window, I looked over at the Killer and he asked, "Say Roscoe, have you forgotten about what I told you about killing when you do a job?"

You see, when I hooked up with the Killer years back, the first thing he told me was that he would have no killing. If anyone did that against his wishes, he might find himself in the river with a tub of concrete on his feet. No, I don't know where he got the name of Killer, 'cause I don't know he had ever killed.

Anyway, I run my bunch by the same rules, so I answered, "No, I haven't forgotten. We haven't put the slug on anyone yet, and if one of the boys does, he'll have me to answer to."

"Well, I was just wondering about the Sparkle Jewelry Company job about a month ago. You know a young cop got it that night."

"Naw," I said, "that wasn't us, 'cause it was a one man job."

"That's what I heard, but I just wanted to see what you thought about it. Roscoe, you didn't know I had a kid brother, did you? Yes, I did, and I thought the world of him. Gave him things I never had. I sent him to a private military school and then to State University. Now he's dead. That young cop, killed on the jewelry job, was my brother and I want the rat that got him."

"Yeah, Killer, but that has nothing to do with my outfit."

"Maybe the guy who killed my brother doesn't know it, but the police knows who it was, but hasn't been able to pick him up. At least, the police knows what he is called. You see, before my brother died he told his partner the guy's name. Now, I want him."

"Sure and we'll help you, Killer. Just tell me who it was and we'll get him for you."

"I don't want you to get him for me, 'cause I'll do my own getting. All I want from you is your word that you'll just leave me be when I get him, 'cause I've been knowing you an awful long time, and I don't want any trouble with you."

"O. K. Killer, that's the least I can do." I answered. "You got my word that you won't be bothered by my bunch. But you're rusty with a rod now and you'd better let me do it."

IT WAS finally dawning on me that the Killer was looking for one of my own boys. I liked the Killer, so I hoped it wasn't Joe, 'cause Joe could out-draw and out-shoot the Killer any day of the week.

The Killer sighed and turned to Mile-A-Way Williams, and said, "O. K. Mile-A-Way, it's your hand, so play it out. I'll give you just five seconds and then I'm gonna gut-shoot you, just like Bud got it."

Mile-A-Way screamed, "Roscoe, stop him," and looked at me, but I just shook my head no.

Mile-A-Way was fast, but not fast enough. His hand dove for his rear pocket for the .38 he carried there. From where I was it looked as tho' the Killer's hand moved not one inch. His gun, a light .32, seemed to jump into his hand and start blasting of its own accord. He poured three slugs into Mile-A-Way and waited for him to fall.

After it was over, Killer turned to me and said, "Thanks Roscoe, for keeping your word, like you said you would. If any of you ever need help, look me up."

He stuck out his hand to me, but I shook my head and said, "I think you'd better go, Killer. I gave you my word and I'll keep it, but you get out."

The Killer walked out, got in his car and drove away.

Joe said, "What are you gonna do, Boss?"

"Nothing."

You see, we do have a certain code. Sure, I keep my word. I gave it and I'll keep it. But you see, Mile-A-Way's real name was not Williams, but Miller. Do you expect me to shake hands with the guy who had just killed my brother?

(THE END)

IT'S NOT OVER YET!

And the Red Cross
Still Needs Blood Donors

MAKE AN APPOINTMENT TODAY



Simon Pole, newshawk, covers a feature story where too much money leads to too much murder!

A COMPLETE MYSTERY NOVEL

CHAPTER I

THE DRIVER of the station taxi guided it around a curve before he deigned to answer Simon Pole's question. "Nope, couldn't say whether Martha Gellert is a looker or homely as the hind side of a mud fence, mister. As far as we down in Dalyville are concerned, she's the invisible woman. Maybe she don't exist, for all we know!"

Pole let his flat, boyish body slump deeper in the seat, brushing cigaret ask from his baggy Oxford gray suit. He shoved the snapbrim hat halfway back on his loose black hair. His snub-nosed face with the bland babyish expression was disarming though; actually, he questioned the whole cockeyed world as to its reason for existence. The lazy way he dropped another question was misleading too. "Well, I don't suppose you get many calls up to the Gellert place anyway, eh?"

The driver took his time about expectorating through the side window before answering this time. "I get up to Windy Acres quite occasional, mister. . . . Made two trips up here yesterday. Took quite a batch. . . . They was private guards . . . from a detective agency down in the city."

Simon Pole didn't give a flicker. "That so? . . . Probably staging a party. Doubtless doesn't mean anything else," he prodded. He was eager for local gossip and opinion concerning Miss Martha Gellert, mystery heiress to one of the nation's large fortunes and practically a recluse in the bargain. The more he learned in advance the more background he would have to use for his magazine article.

"A party? Not unless it's a shooting party. And they had some shooting up here to Windy Acres; I know that, mister!"

Pole had been dreamily speculating on what it would feel like to shake hands with approximately twenty seven million dollars. She doubtless-

ly had five fingers and flesh like anybody else. It was Marion back at the office who gave you that different feeling when you brushed her hand or perhaps her cheek. She—Then the significance of the Dalyville hackie's words hit him. He came up off the seat quickly but maintained his drawl.

"Some crank or camera man lurking around, eh?"

"Never heard of either one of them kind trying to shoot their way in, did you?"

Pole shrugged, playing the unimpressed role. "Shoot his way in? It was probably just a blowout heard by some gent with a lively imagination."

THE TAXI driver was really roused then. He said bluntly that it was Harley, the town postman, coming home from Honeyeye Falls who'd seen the flashes of the guns night before last. And when the police chief stopped at Windy Acres, he was told it was a carekeeper shooting at a prowler around the chicken house.

"And maybe it wasn't that either," he went on loudly as he read the skepticism on Pole's face. "Because the county vet was spending the night in the barn with a sick colt and claims somebody almost blowed off the head of Culbone, the superintendent. . . . Somebody shooting outa the dark. And now they imported a small army of city guards for the place, so figure it out!"

Pole had an uneasy feeling along the backbone of his five-foot-six carcass. He had come up here to do an article on the private life of Martha Gellert, the "mystery millionairess." From a distance, it had promised to be a two-three day loaf in the lap of luxury. But now, if the place had been converted into an armed camp with the usual Gellert wall raised against publicity, the whole thing would be a washout.

Again that jab of doubt about the advisability of accepting the assign-

ment pricked him. It had been damned strange that old slick-eared Hap Pitman, his managing editor, hadn't hogged such a fat assignment for himself. Perhaps that twenty-four-hour-per-day wolf had sent him off on a wild goose chase just to have an inside track with the lush Marion for a few days.

His thoughts broke off as they lurched onto a tree-fringed side dirt road. A sign proclaimed these were the private grounds of Windy Acres. Five minutes later they emerged from a patch of woods with a wide patch of field stretching before them. Beyond it, on a low rise of lawn, stood the Gellert farm. It was a pure white place sprawling under a green shingle roof. To each end of the original building had been tacked wings at right angles. It gave the whole place the look of a capital "I" from an air view. It was far from ostentatious. Then the village hackie was drawing up, and two of the private guards, huskies with guns in holsters on full view on their hips, came striding from a shack screened by the foliage of the woods.

They recognized the driver and asked Pole for his credentials. It was very like being halted at some European border by custom officials. Pole passed over his official invitation to Windy Acres. A white rectangle, it stated that one Simon Pole, accredited representative of the magazine, *News Names*, was invited to Windy Acres at two P. M. that day. The two of them gave it everything but the smell test. The taller one re-entered the shack and Pole could see him phoning the main house.

WHEN he returned to the taxi, Pole was ordered out. One opened and inspected Pole's overnight bag while the other ran an expert hand over him to see if he carried any weapons. Only then were they allowed to proceed along the road flanking the field. They turned into the bluestone drive by the south wing. The driver gestured toward a tall black-headed man striding across the grounds. He was coming from

a guest cottage dimly seen through the shubbery up the slope behind the house.

"Dr. Mackleberry, Miss Gellert's physician," said the driver. "And for my money he needs a doctor himself!" Then the car was jolting up before the main door. The driver swung out Pole's bag, snapped up the money, and was wheeling off before the writer quite realized it.

Pole glanced around, half expecting a liveried butler to materialize. None did. He whistled softly. "Something about this assignment has that phoney smell. And why should a healthy, twenty-two year old wench like Martha Gellert need a private doctor. . . ." He walked up onto the roofless flagstone stoop and pushed the bell. He gave it a triple ring when nothing happened after two minutes. Then he saw the door was ajar and shouldered it into a big dim vestibule. A large figure was entering it from the main hall, drawing on a checkered sports jacket. He was tucking something into a sheath beneath one armpit. At sight of Pole, he jerked the hand down and came to attention.

"Mr. Pole, I believe! Delighted to have you at Windy Acres. I am Adam Culbone, superintendent." He beamed from a large-boned face extremely wide across the cheekbones and running down to a sharp-tipped but heavy jaw. His light blue eyes were wide in a weathered healthy face, wide and guileless. "Delighted," he said again.

But Simon Pole had seen what he was tucking under his left armpit. It had been an automatic going into a shoulder sling. . . .

CHAPTER II

CULBONE was one of those men who made a business of keeping himself physically fit, his body as clean of excess weight as a hound's tooth. But it wasn't for the sake of fitness itself, for the benefit of his body. It was to have that body ready for use. Pole sensed that; every inch of the superintendent's frame radiated a veiled

leashed belligerence despite his toothy smile.

"Your health, Mr. Pole," Culbone said, lifting his Scotch and soda.

They were in the card room just to one side of the front door before entering the library, Culbone behind the small bar, Simon Pole opposite him across the counter. Pole decided that the person who had tried to get Culbone night before last, according to the story, had been smart; he had used a gun. Tackling Culbone with anything less would be a left-handed attempt at suicide. Pole lifted his glass, the liquid a much darker shade than that in the other man's. Culbone had put barely a splash of whisky in his. "Same to you."

Then Culbone's light eyes sliced past Pole to somebody out in the dimness of the big hall. It was a woman. Pole saw her head jerk back from the inclination of a nod. There was a flash of spectacle lens, and she was gone. But she wasn't the white-haired maid who had taken his bag upstairs, Pole knew. The maid hadn't worn glasses.

A door over in the other corner of the room was slapped open so forcibly it banged twice against the wall. "Lafayette, we have come." And how the hell are everybody's ancestors today?" And Dr. Hugo Mackleberry bounced in.

He was tall, flat-bodied, bony without being lank. His forehead was so high he seemed half bald. Above it long thin crinkly black hair stood up like upholstery springs. From behind thick-lensed glasses, buglike eyes, constantly flickering about, surveyed the universe with a surprised gleam. An eighteen carat whack, Pole appraised him at once. And a phoney, in the bargain; that hair was dyed to hide his age. The fellow doubtlessly specialized in a bedside manner, Pole decided. Then he was shaking hands, conscious briefly of the physician's surprisingly powerful grip, as Culbone introduced them.

"Dr. Livingston, I presume," quipped Mackleberry as the restless eyes rolled over Pole once. "So nice

having you here. Do come back soon. . . . Mine's brandy, Adam, as usual. Hey—" The move was so quick Pole was amazed. Mackleberry was across to the small bar and, apparently without effort, snatching the Courvoisier bottle from Culbone's hand. He tripled the amount the estate superintendent had in the glass. "I detest having my liquor drowned, Culbone, and you know it!"

ADAM CULBONE'S answer was in a whisper as he seized the doctor by the lapels of his black broadcloth suit. But Simon Pole was fairly adept at lip-reading and he got it without hearing. "You drunken sot!" Culbone said to the doctor. "Get a grip on your big mouth. . . . We're all skating on very, very thin ice now, fool. You, included!" Then Culbone was beaming over at Simon Pole. "The doctor, he treats brandy as medicine, you know."

"Don't make me sound like a damned ass, Adam!" Mackleberry emptied the glass with a lusty, gargling effect, sputtered, then began to do a series of rapid knee bends. He ended up in an unsteady crouch to careen against a red leather chair. "Hah! Brandy makes the heart pound, they say. So I help it along with a head start. Hate to strain my—uh—brandy. Hah!"

Culbone chuckled, but he looked as if he regretted the fact that Mackleberry's parents did not eat their young. Simon Pole was beginning to wonder if he had stumbled into an asylum. He said:

"I hope I'm not intruding too much. We weren't aware that Miss Gellert was ill."

Culbone parted his jaws but the bouncing doctor beat him to words. "Not at all, not at all. She's in the best of health. The very best! I just hang around here getting paid for nothing. Nice feeling, too." He grimaced drunkenly. "That's what the girl said when—"

"Doctor, please!" A slim, efficient-looking girl with horn-rimmed glasses came into the room, marched would have described it better. She

wore a severe tailored gray suit several inches longer in the skirt than the current style; it hid legs that positively exuded glamor. Her dark hair, parted in the center, was drawn severely back to a Psyche knot. She seemed to be trying to look older and far less attractive than she actually was. It fitted the mental picture Simon Pole had of the mysterious orphaned heiress, Martha Gellert.

Then Culbone was saying, "And this is Miss Seemone, Miss Gellert's private secretary. Mr. Pole of *News Names*, my dear."

"Hiya, Bette!" crowed Mackleberry. "See-mone—sounds like the name of a foghorn, doesn't it, Pole? Hah! Someday I'm going to have my own private foghorn and only sound it on clear, sunny days! Won't folks be baffled? Hah!"

"Don't be a fool, Hugo," Bette Seemone said caustically. "Or perhaps I should say, don't be yourself, dear doctor. For once!"

"Hah! Love to see people baffled. Their lower jaws drop and you can get such a beautiful view of their tonsils. Why—"

"Shall we go into the library, Mr. Pole? Miss Gellert will be down in a few minutes." The secretary led the way out the corner door and down the two flat steps to the library-living room that formed the south wing. A little thought was revolving in the magazine feature-writer's mind. Why would a practical hermit like Martha Gellert, famous for the cloistered life she led more than anything else, need a private secretary? The glow of the horizon-crowding sun stained the long cheerful room and tinged the lens of Bette Seemone's glasses. And then Pole knew she was the woman in the hall who had given some kind of a signal to Culbone before.

FAR behind in the card room, as the double swinging doors flipped back and forth, came Culbone's hard controlled tones as he berated the doctor. Then Mackleberry broke in and his voice was not subdued.

"By the way, Adam, did you check on his bags?"

"Yes, yes. Of course. Bette did. And keep your damn voice down or . . ." Then Culbone's own voice dropped.

Bette Seemone was studying Pole as he jerked his head back forward too late, betraying the fact that he had overheard. She smiled with a mouth lush despite the complete absence of lipstick.

"No, it isn't ten-twenty-thirty melodrama, Mr. Pole. I did examine your bag, of course. We have to be very careful. No photographs of Miss Gellert are ever permitted, of course. You understand? I was just making certain you were not carrying a camera."

Pole mumbled something as they moved across the big room. It was spacious without being vaultlike, French windows, giving onto a terrace overlooking the rear of the grounds, running across one end. Solidly filled bookshelves comprised one wall. The furniture was good if slightly on the massive side. It was what one would have expected in the country home of a well-to-do family. The Orientals were old, the kind that have been handed down from one generation to another. In a prim clipped voice, Miss Seemone was saying something about how much time the heiress spent in this room.

Pole's mind had gone back to the photograph angle. It was well known that no photographs for publication were permitted. Martha Gellert was the girl who was faceless to the outside world. People, aside from her intimate staff, did not know what she looked like. He himself had seen Editor Pitman's letter to Donald Salvin, her business manager solemnly affirming no attempts to take pictures of Miss Gellert would be made. Strange they felt they'd had to search his bag to—Then it came to him, worming into his mind. Had they been searching for a camera—or something else. . . .

HE LOOKED back over his shoulder at the card room he had just quitted. Dr Hugo Mackleberry stood with a foot blocking open one of the swing doors. A coin he kept tossing glittered. The way he

did it was very neat, flipping it up off his thumbnail, then twisting his hand around to catch it behind his arm as it descended behind his shoulder. He did it repeatedly without looking, smiling down at Pole and Miss Seemone. It was a matter of co-ordinated timing and manual dexterity strange for a man who appeared half intoxicated and unable to keep his voice down when mentioning a secret.

Before Pole could figure it, a brown-haired skull appeared rising a foot from his left side. It was a slight dapper man coming out of a heavily-upholstered high-backed chair facing in the other direction. He turned to the visitor with a courteous half-questioning smile. Pole knew right away this was Salvin, formerly secretary to Martha Gellert's father, now manager of her affairs. He was in his late thirties, perfectly groomed in a conservative business suit, with muddy brown eyes set in a mild face that looked fresh from a barber's ministrations. Pole had seen his picture in the papers.

"Ah, yes, Mr Pole. . . ." He released his limp grip on Pole's hand and walked over to the long refectory table. Shuffling aside some papers there before another of the large high-backed chairs like the one he had seemed to materialize out of thin air from, he picked up a photograph. Pole's deceptively lazy glance showed him it was a picture of himself. They certain did not overlook any angles up here at Windy Acres. "Yes, you're the man all right." Salvin walked back and shook hands again. He might have just stepped out of a corporation directors board meeting. "Yes, you're the man."

"Nice to know I am who I thought I was," Pole gave him back, babyish face creasing in the slow smile. He liked Salvin if only because the man seemed completely normal and businesslike. He reminded Pole of a knife edge, to the point, clean, efficient.

"You come out of the ground in the strangest places," said Culbone as he strode in after the doctor. "You're like something that lives under a rock, D. J. Always bobbing up out

of nowhere." He seemed irritated that Salvin had taken over charge.

Regarding him without a flicker of emotion, Salvin ran a hand unhurriedly over his glossy meticulously parted hair. "I thought I gave instructions, Culbone, that Mr. Pole was to be brought to me as soon as he arrived."

"I'm not your flunky," Culbone came back. "I am—"

"And I, apparently, am the least important member of this menage!" It was Martha Gellert herself, entering from the hall beneath the heavy arched woodwork of the wide doorway.

CHAPTER III

SHE WAS a petite figure in navy slacks and a maroon turtle neck sweater, flat-hipped. The long brown-haired bob, swept to one side of her head and touching a shoulder, gave her a gamin quality. She wasn't beautiful, but dark blue, sloe eyes that took in a man with the unhurried sweep of perfect poise made Simon Pole's pulse-rate rocket.

Then she was over before him, extending a hand in a natural gesture of comradeship, looking up as she impatiently shook the hair back from her cheek. "Nice to see you, Mr. Pole. So you've come to bare the secret life of the mystery heiress to the Turkish towel millions, eh . . . I hope you won't find it too dull—I know I do." She sniffed, looking around as she smiled. "Somebody here smells like a brewery, and I'm dying of thirst."

Mackleberry said he'd be delighted to fix another round of drinks. The Gellert heiress said she only wanted some charged water. Pole seconded that, explaining he wasn't used to strong stuff. It was part of the naive role Pitman had ordered him to adopt—improved the chances of getting a more intimate picture of the private life of the heiress; they wouldn't be apt to be on guard so much with an apparently ingenuous cub on the scene. Recalling the instructions brought back Hap Pitman and his wolfing ways. And that made Pole think of Marion Lake again.

"—so it's really a very simple life we lead here, Mr. Pole," Martha Gellert was saying. "And I believe you're getting bored already."

He caught himself back to the present and put on a grin, added something complimentary. Martha Gellert was young and attractive in a striking simple way. He had heard she was brown-haired and small—but there was something else. She had a cold poise for a girl who had been a recluse for almost two years. And there was a certain intangible hard aura about her, it didn't fit, somehow.

Then Mackleberry came prancing back with a trayload of drinks. When he'd passed them, he sloshed his down with the gargling sound effect, whacked Bette Seemone over the back so her glasses almost jumped off, then barged practically between Pole and the heiress.

"Martha," he said very clearly, "my dear, you are looking much better today. Much, much better, better than yesterday. You'll be as fit as ever in another week. Well, got to run along now." And he did, making a short sprint and sliding precariously on the waxed floor beside one of the Orientals as he headed for the doorway.

CULBONE'S lips flattened across his big teeth. "If that idiot doesn't stay away from the bottle, I'll—"

Salvin opened a metal cigaret case with a loud snap. "I believe you had a matter to attend to out on the grounds, Culbone." Salvin passed the case. Martha refused, saying "Ugh-h-no,—not cork tips." They were cork tipped cigarets, Pole saw, as he accepted one.

Culbone's eyes were fencing with the level stare of the business manager's. Those two, plainly, were duelling for dominance. "There is a matter—a matter I'd like to take up with you, in your office, Salvin," he came back.

"Miss Seemone and I have to check over some figures. Sorry, Culbone."

The superintendent strode out after nodding to Martha Gellert. The way Culbone's leather heels spat

against the bare floor bespoke his boiling feelings. Salvin smiled smugly and said something about the news report as he started for the radio.

"I thought you and Bette had some figures to go over!" There was a sharpness to the heiress' voice that seemed to jump like an electric spark through the atmosphere. "Didn't you, D. J.? Or—are you afraid to let Mr. Pole question me alone?" A corner of her mouth quirked in a smile; but it was sham nice acting. There was a veiled challenge beneath the words. She added, with a coquettish lift of the eyebrows, "Or perhaps Mr. Pole is afraid to be alone with me!"

Salvin inclined his head, blandness personified. He and Bette Seemone went out of the library, the secretary striding along mannishly. Martha Gellert slowly stubbed out the cork tipped cigaret Salvin had left in the ashtray. A soft sigh escaped from her parted lips.

"Really, Mr. Pole, I'm afraid you've made this trip for nothing. I'll do my best to co-operate, but there just is no story." She spoke steadily, without emphasis, and without looking his way. "It's the familiar refrain, of the bird in the gilded cage. You see how they hedge me in, guard me, practically strangle me with their good intentions."

"But, Miss Gellert, you've chosen the life—or shall I say, the career—of a recluse," Pole inserted gently.

HER slim shoulders in the maroon sweater shrugged wearily. It was a pitiful gesture, touching the chord of protectiveness in any normal male. "What choice? How would I ever know whether people were interested in me, just me—or my money."

"I see." Pole put plenty of sympathetic into the words. But he was telling himself, "The old corny jive. Even on ice, it's stale."

"You have no idea, my dear man, what it's like to be a walking dollar sign—to have people whisper and point and gape everywhere you turn

and—" It was the strains of a dance orchestra, over the radio she had turned on, that cut off her voice. She was back beside Pole in a few quick-swinging strides. "I'm sure you'd like to see the greenhouse. It will give you background for your article, Simon Pole." Her eyes cut toward the dim hall. And there was a quick catch of her breath. "Come with me—quickly."

Then she was hurrying the length of the room and throwing open one of the French windows giving onto the flagstoned terrace. He went out after her into the early dusk of the waning day. They stepped onto the velvety turf of the lawn back of the big place and moved up the gentle slope. Once she cast a look forward at the windows along the rear of the house, little brackets of griminess outlining the corners of her mouth. They cut over to a brick pathway leading toward a row of young poplars that ran at right angles. Beyond the poplars stood the big greenhouse, its glass-paned sides and roof dull russet in the ebbing light. Pole had already guessed there was something she wanted to tell him, something she wanted nobody else to overhear.

She led the way through a door at one end of the structure built in the form of a right angle, stepped into the work shed. An aged gardener appeared out of the gloom, tugging at his cap.

"Evening, Miss Gellert. Shall I turn on the lights?"

"N-no—no, thank you, Claude. It—it seems less artificial this way. I can turn on the individual lights wherever I please. You're leaving now?" Her smile was one of relief when the man nodded. She led the way into the greenhouse proper as he closed the outer door after him.

Moist warm air redolent with an almost sickening perfume, like a breath from the tropics, gently fanned Pole's face. He scowled as he raked his loose dark hair. The heavy incense produced by many flowers in a confined space always

reminded him of funerals. The fronds of a dwarfed palm tree brushed his arm. Ahead, Martha Gellert pointed out various blooms as she passed along, identifying them in an absent-mindedly voice. But her head kept jerking from side to side as she peered through the glass as if watching for some Peeping Tom on the outside. The hard blood-red buds of roses poked up out of the gloom at Pole.

THERE were two aisles running along either side of a center section. Martha had led the way up the one on the right side. As they approached the turn of the L-shaped structure where one wing bent away from the main house, Pole made out the trunk of a giant vine that, gnarled and twisted in loops, finally made its way out through a vent in the roof.

"Wisteria," Martha mentioned. "Father planted it when he was just a lad. It's practically a family heirloom now. The trunk is formed to make a natural seat on the other side." She pointed. But lush tropical ferns, rising to several feet around the base, hide the view from that angle. She turned left up the other wing of the place, walking still faster. Outside, the wind, rising with the sunset, sighed about the glass canopy.

They reached the end of that part of the "L." Martha whipped around abruptly a few yards beyond the wooden platform in the aisle. She opened her mouth to speak when a puff of chill air fanned them faintly. Leaves around them stirred a little. Her face stiffened.

"Mr. Pole, please see if anybody just came in. Please."

As he turned and strode down the other aisle, he was aware of the tense, slightly panicked note in her voice. He stumbled just as he reached the turn and had passed the huge wisteria before he recalled the natural formed seat she'd said was there. Glancing back, he blinked in the gloom, then recognized the figure in the seat by the gray suit.

Bette Seemone, the social secretary. "Hello, Miss Seemone." He was moving on when he wondered if the Seemone woman might be the very one Martha feared for some reason. Pausing, he looked back and added, "Nice here, isn't it Peaceful and—"

Then he realized she had not responded to his first greeting, and there was something unnatural about the tilt of her bent head, as if she were studying something on her lap. Only there was nothing on her lap. As an uneasiness flooded him, he backed two steps awkwardly and bent, repeating her name in a voice hushed instinctively. There was no response again. Then he was down so he could see the averted face, the glassily-staring eyeballs, and the one hand shoved through the ropelike loops of the vine and clutching a broken-off fern frond. He found himself with his cigaret lighter out. He snapped it on for illumination. In the glow was revealed the white ascot ripped down from one side of her neck. Around her throat were the purplish bruises left by strong fingers. There were bruises from blows on her face, too.

Bette Seemone was quite dead . . . strangled . . .

CHAPTER IV

THE gust of his pent-up breath when he released it extinguished the lighter. Pole heard one of his knee joints creak as he straightened. She must have been there, just like that, dead, when they passed by on the other side of the seat. He flashed a glance over his shoulder. Up there in the dimness at the end of the greenhouse, Martha Gellert had her back to him as he stared out into the descending night.

A faint sound as of a moving object brushing against something soft and pliable came to him like the echo of a whisper. He remembered how the lush plants, overhanging the aisle, had rubbed against him on his way in. The next moment he had faded silently back from the corpse

into the ell that right-angled off from the part leading from the entrance.

Seconds were sore-footed snails moving through molasses as he waited, hardly breathing. Something metallic caught his roving eyes as it gleamed faintly at the dead woman's feet. He finally distinguished it as a vanity that had fallen from the girl's bag, a black antelope envelope-style affair, that lay across one of her shoes. Then he heard the soft slither of other shoes, cautious, stealthy, as they crept up the brick-paved aisle from the entrance to the greenhouse.

A swirling nausea had Pole's stomach tilting as the fact of the death, the murder, settled into him; his teeth locked hard against the fear mounting with the approach of this intruder. Then he could stand the suspense no longer. Carefully, inch by inch, he edged his head around the corner of the raised shelf of flower bed built against the side wall.

Pole made out the tall large form of the man in the aisle a few yards off. A short length of metal, protruding from one of the man's hands, glimmered faintly. A gun. Pole was unable to make out his features.

Something warned the other. Soundlessly he whirled and was running almost silently back down the aisle. Pole flung out from the corner, crouched, hesitating a moment. His right hand gripped the raised wooden sideboard of the flower bed tensely. The fleeing one passed a lighter space where some sprouting bulbs replaced the plants lining the glassed sides and cutting off the faint grayish glow left of the day. In that moment, Pole was certain he recognized the checkered sports jacket of Adam Culbone, the superintendent. Pole was thinking of the fact the man carried a gun as he tried to decide about following.

THE FINGERS clawed over the sideboard touched chill metal. Pole's eyes sliced over and he saw

the snub-nosed .32 crouched in the black moist earth beneath the fan-like leaves of the geraniums. He had it and was going down the path after the fugitive. Running crouched, he got into the heavy blackness of the shed and saw the door gaping open. When he rushed through, crouched over, the night wind smote him like a veritable blow, pushing him off balance a moment. Leaves, invisible in the darkness, danced wantonly across the grass with a steady noisy crackle. Overhead the tree branches clashed and clicked like rattling bones. Occasionally, in a fresh gust, a dead one would snap off with a pistol-like report. It seemed as if Nature itself were out to drown the sounds of the fugitive's flight.

Head swivelling, Pole looked to his right and saw what had seemed a bush move, move further, then progress swiftly several yards. As he ran for it, he cried out something. The other raced up the slope away from the rear of the house.

Pole had gone about fifty yards. He was just wondering if he had lost his man when he saw a pair of legs scissor through a faint beam of light from the guest cottage in the little arbor of trees off to the left. Pole went up on his toes and turned on the speed, the wind whistling out of his straining lungs. Then he was standing in the darkness beyond the light ray, staring around blindly. In a lull in the gusts he caught the scrape of a shoe on stone.

"Hey, Culbone!" he sang out, bluffing. "I see you! Yep! Come back—or I'll shoot! Come back—"

The answer was curt and deadly. It was the sharp spat of a gun some yards off ahead and a little to the right. When Pole saw the livid dagger of flame on the black background he was aware that the bullet had already passed inches from his head with a snarling whisper. Doubled over, his own extended weapon wobbling, he was backing before he knew it.

He thought he distinguished a

heavier blob in the night and triggered the .32. Occasional drilling at the rifle range where he had taken a Small Arms Basic Instruction course had made him a fair shot. But a crack shot can't hit what isn't there. Pole gathered that two seconds later when lead chunked into a tree trunk a foot from his shoulder. This time the muzzle flash came from upgrade and off to his left. Butterflies with spongy wings began to play tag in his stomach. The one out there—whom he couldn't see—*knew where he was though*.

Half wheeling as he retreated, Pole backed into the trees girding the guest cottage. But he was careful to keep away from the wan light seeping through the drawn curtains at a window. A few feet from the little porch, he stopped and waited, crouched on a knee behind a bush.

SOFTLY a door opened in the cottage. The room behind it was dark but Simon Pole could make out the form of a slim girl. He called to her to get back inside, in a hushed voice.

"Somebody's shooting," he added.

Something like a dry sob came from her. "But I—I haven't shot anybody now. Not now! I—I'm sure of it!"

Pole risked another flashing glance back at her as he sought to drill the darkness with straining eyes. Culbone—or whoever was out there with that other gun—had better night eyes than he himself and was a crack shot in the bargain. But—but that remark of the girl's was the whackiest remark he had ever heard.

"I haven't shot anybody now," she repeated piteously.

"Nobody's dead—yet. Get inside," he whispered back.

Then a coquettish segment of moon winked over the treeline of the low ridge to the northeast. And its glow ran like a yellowish tide over the fields and across the grounds in the rear of the Gellert farm, unhurriedly lapping up the blackness and dissipating the long shadows. The yard lay bared, and Simon Pole saw that

nothing human stood out there in it.

There were a number of places where the other man might have ducked to. Straight across, at the end of the drive that curled about the other side of the house and rearward, was the closed-up three-car garage with living quarters above. Further up the slope was another cottage. Beyond that was a stand of forest. And over sharply to his left, beyond the guest house, was the shrub-screened swim pool, empty at this season of the year. By the time he had snuffed around any one of those spots, the fugitive could be a mile away, he realized.

Automatically he pocketed the gun before going toward the girl on the porch. In the moonlight, he saw that she was small and slight almost to the point of emaciation. A long brown bob hung down one side of a face wan and mirroring vague fright as a constant expression. She looked like an invalid. When he stepped nearer, she drew back, the blue eyes widening fearfully. There was something vaguely familiar about her but he couldn't place it.

"Who're you?" he asked instinctively.

She drew herself up a moment, eyes narrowed warily of a sudden. "I'm Mary, Martha Gellert's cousin," she said parrotlike. Then she turned quickly and slid in the doorway.

A TABLE lamp went on in the hallway behind her and Pole saw Dr. Hugo Mackleberry. The latter put a fatherly arm-around her shoulders. Pole heard her say something about "shooting." "Just your imagination, dear. What you need is to lie down and relax. There hasn't been any shooting in a long while now. I'll fix you something nice to drink and—" Then he spotted Pole standing out there in the moonlight.

Pole saw the doctor steer the girl into a room. Then Mackleberry reappeared, slamming the front door after him. "What the hell are you doing snooping around here?" he demanded truculently as he strode over.

"Trying not to get shot at," Pole

came back, ready to get mad at anybody now. Then he got a grip on himself and told the doctor about the dead woman in the greenhouse.

"Lord! Can't a man sneak a fast drink around here without somebody going and getting themselves knocked off?" It sounded brutal and unfeeling. He grabbed Pole's arm and cut off the pathway at an angle through the trees toward the greenhouse. After a couple of prodigious leaping strides as he half dragged Pole along, he added, "You know, Adam Culbone is going to be sore as hell about this!" The remark didn't seem to make any sense.

Pole was about to say that he was certain it had been Culbone himself, whom he had chased, when his foot hit an obstacle and he went plunging headfirst. As he landed, a mound hit him in the mid section, thumping the wind out of him. His cheek was up against something hard and cold. When he turned, he saw it was a modest shiny gray headstone. And he was lying across the mound of a grave.

"Drunk again, eh, old boy," said Mackleberry, helping him up. He hauled him off once more. Somehow, Pole got the idea it was more to remove him from the immediate scene than any great hurry to reach the body of the deceased. It didn't make sense. But there was no time to evaluate the impression then.

"Holy Pete, w-was th-that a cemetery?" he gasped.

"Nothing, nothing, Pole. Just the grave of some old retainer of the family who wanted to be buried where he'd died in harness. Some old employee who was buried in Old Man Gellert's time, years ago. . . I do hope the gun reports didn't upset Mary too much."

Pole twisted his face up at the taller man's in the moonlight, exasperated. "Maybe you've forgotten—but we've got a corpse down here."

"And a corpse is no longer a patient. A doctor must put the welfare of a patient above everything else, young man. Miss Mary is an extremely nervous young woman. She is the victim of hallucinations

...sanity tottering in the balance, you know. Here we are."

Mackleberry pulled open the ajar door of the greenhouse. With the hand gripping Pole's arm, he swung the visitor over the sill first. Pole was almost lifted over by that powerful hand. Then Pole recalled the harsh strength in the man's grip when he had been introduced to him.

Powerful hands. . . And Bette Seemone had been strangled. . .

A MERE matter of seconds was all Mackleberry spent in an examination of the body. "Ummm. It's in the mortician's department now, not mine."

"Is that you, Simon Pole?" called Martha Gellert from the end of the greenhouse ell.

Pole had almost forgotten her. He stared down, unable to see her. A single glaring light bulb glared there. When he and Mackleberry went down, they finally made her out crouched back among the foliage of a dwarf tree beyond the unshaded light. She gripped a garden trowel in one hand, lips thinned across her teeth. She looked like a cornered animal.

Mackleberry took charge, coolly and smoothly. He seemed suddenly changed, soft-spoken and gently firm. He told the girl there had been an accident in the greenhouse. "It's Bette."

"She's dead." Martha spoke flatly, as if the emotion had been drained from her. It was neither a question nor a statement nor a guess. It was like somebody repeating last week's headline. When Mackleberry said she should return to the house at once through the tunnel, she dropped her head in acquiescence and allowed herself to be led along like a sleep walker.

They came to the platform Pole remembered crossing on the way up the outside aisle. When Mackleberry swung back the lid on its hinges and flicked a light switch on the nearby post, it revealed a flight of steep steps. They led down to a

well-illuminated concrete-walled tunnel. Martha Gellert entered it with a steady step.

"Built for the old man," Mackleberry mentioned, thumbing down at the tunnel after she had gone along it. "He was an invalid in his later years but loved flowers. Well. . ."

They went back and studied the seated corpse for some minutes. Then Mackleberry said they had better go in and acquaint "D. J.", Salvin, with the gristly details. He led the way down the lawn with his long bounding stride and in a rear door. It gave onto the back end of the hall that bisected the original main section of the house. When they got opposite the library, they could see Martha Gellert pacing the room in the shadows beyond the table lamp.

"Go in there and keep her company, Pole, please. It isn't good for her to be alone now. I'll speak to D. J. first. He'll probably go into a tizzy anyway." He turned to the door of a room at the back end of the hall. Pole had a glimpse of the sleek Salvin behind a meticulously orderly desk before the door closed.

WHEN he walked into the library, groping for something light and impersonal to talk about, Martha said, "Get me a drink. Double Scotch, single soda." She might have been addressing a servant. He brought it in from the card room bar and she took a sip and clattered the glass unsteadily onto the radio.

"Please don't try to talk, thank you." She went on pacing, suddenly a pitiful and helpless little figure in the slacks and sweater. Pole felt terribly sorry for her. Living the withdrawn sheltered life she had, she would be so soft in the face of this piece of brutality. She paused to snuff out her cigaret in an ashtray on the refectory table. Its cork tip remained perpendicular over the squashed end.

"Thought you couldn't stand cork tips," he said before he knew it.

She was already selecting another from a humidor. Frowning, she looked back at the ashtray, smiled

wanly. "Yes—yes, I do. That's one I picked up coming through the tunnel. I didn't notice—then."

His legs seemed to turn into rubber hinges as the reaction set in. The room tilted drunkenly a moment; he duelled off an urge to vomit. Then he turned carefully and picked his way up the steps—into the card room and gulped a slug of Scotch himself.

Mackleberry walked in, relieved him of the bottle, half filled a six-ounce glass, and absorbed it with that gargling sound. "D. J. wouldst have a word with you, scrivener. Hell, but corpses always make me cold. Remind me of some of my mistakes, medically speaking." He splashed another three fingers into the glass. Then he was going into the knee bends again. On the third descent, his legs gave out. He plopped down on the floor and remained seated there. "Just to tone up the circulation to throw off the toxic acid. Damned if D. J. isn't disappointed because he can't hang the corpse around my neck—yet, anyway."

POLE could hardly keep his baby face from writhing in disgust. He left by the doorway into the hall and started down it. Something like an icy-footed frog went hopping down his backbone and he wheeled. In the dimness of the large vestibule at the front of the house was Adam Culbone's large body. He took a slow step into the light of the hall, mouth parted like a man hungry for air. His face was bloodless and slick with sweat. And yet alight with an inner glow of cold fury.

"I just hear—from the quack—the news. It—it's awful, awful." He stood swaying slightly.

Pole swallowed, feeling his limbs tremble as, animal-like, they girded for self defense. This was the man, he was almost sure, who had been shooting at him back on the grounds, and shooting to kill. Outside, a piece of dead branch snapped like a gunshot as the buffeting gale broke

it off. Pole found himself screwed up on his tiptoes. Then he was aware of the comforting weight of the .32 in his side pocket. It would be a nice thing to have around with somebody like Adam Culbone in the same county. He nodded and went down to D. J.'s study.

Standing, Martha Gellert's business manager regarded Simon Pole through the feather of smoke climbing from one of his cork tipped cigarettes. "Pole, Dr. Mackleberry tells me you discovered the body." There was a subtle emphasis on the "you."

Pole told him what had occurred. "And then somebody came down the aisle toward the hidden corpse. Afterward, I was sure it was Culbone. I'm not accusing him—"

"Mr. Culbone says he was in his cottage. It's the house beyond the guest house," Salvin inserted drily.

"Well, I chased him. And he shot and—" Then it hit him, the obvious thing he had failed to comprehend at the moment under the stress of stumbling over a corpse. He swore softly, brushing back the loose black hair. "Hell, if it was Culbone slipping up on her with a gun—obvious intent, to kill—he couldn't have known she was *already* dead! He wouldn't have been creeping in, armed, and. . . ."

SALVIN nodded. Sweat beads dewed his forehead. He walked over and opened one of the casement windows a few inches. But he was only halfway back from it when a sucking draft of wind lifted papers from his desk and sent them rustling onto the floor. The stiff bond stationery made a scratching sound, dry, very like the rustle of leaves. Salvin reclosed the window.

"Did you find anything in particular about the body?" he said as he turned.

Pole shook his head. "No—nothing. Just her pocketbook with some of the contents spilled out. I didn't touch it."

"You didn't touch it. . . ." Salvin echoed it reflectively. "And there—there was nothing else."

"Say, when will the local police arrive?" Pole suddenly remembered he had come here to do a story. All chance of that would be washed out now. Salvin said he had already contacted the Gellert legal firm on long distance. They would handle everything, take the proper precautions against adverse publicity, and so forth. Pole nodded absently. "No. I guess it couldn't have been Culbone. A guy doesn't try to murder a corpse. He—"

"Thank you for being so interested in me as the potential murderer, Mr. Pole." Culbone stood in the open doorway. The wind that had sucked the papers from the desk had also drawn open the door. "Have you ever thought of where Dr. Mackleberry was at the time the crime was committed? He could have slipped back to the guest cottage easily—after it. His patient—the poor deranged thing—well, she lives in a dream world. She would not know actually whether he was there or not. Have you considered that?"

D. J. made a vague gesture. "I don't wish to judge anybody right now. I don't want to point the finger of guilt at anyone. . . . I think it's time we prepared for dinner. . . ."

CHAPTER V

POLE stood staring around his room, realizing it was the first time he had been in it. Things had happened fast on top of his arrival. It was the typical guest room, pleasantly furnished in Colonial maple with a hook rug on the floor. It was in the front of the main section of the house, overlooking the lawn that stretched down to the moon-dyed field beyond. A private bath ran off from the left side. He dropped his case of toilet articles on the bureau, then stood scowling as a little cloud of dust boiled up from around it. All the furniture had a heavy coating of dust. It was just another one of those things that didn't seem to fit in the menage of a millionaire heiress.

Something made him turn the key in the door before he stripped and showered. Then he donned a clean shirt and pulled on the baggy Oxford gray again. It was when he was going down the second floor hall and saw the extension phone on a table that he remembered Marion back at the office. They were closing up an issue, so would be working late all this week. At least, as the art editor, she should be if Pitman hadn't lured her out of his favorite bistro. . . . On impulse he picked up the receiver.

The local operator's voice had a hollow distant sound when she came through. He asked for long distance and had to repeat it at her request. With the receiver to his ear, the howling wind seemed strangely plainer, closer, as if he were standing by an open window. Then there was a new note, a quick scratching sound like the rustle of dry leaves. And Simon Pole remembered it.

He softly placed the receiver on the table without hanging up. Quickly he trotted down the stairs and to the rear and thrust open the door of D. J. Salvin's private study without knocking. Salvin's head jerked around with the receiver of his instrument pressed against his ear the while he restacked the papers he had again retrieved from the floor. That was the familiar rustling sound Pole had heard over the extension wire.

SIMON POLE put on a guileless grin. "Oh, pardon me. I was trying to make a long distance call on the upstairs extension and there seemed something wrong with the instrument. So-o—"

Salvin was bland. "Here, use this phone. My call isn't important." He left as Pole jiggled the hook and again requested long distance. But D. J. did not close the door after him.

When he got through to the New York office of *News Names*, he asked for Miss Marion Lake. While he waited, he pictured the chic, blonde little piece of man-bait. That way she had of cutting her eyes in

a lazy half-mocking way, a challenge in itself. And how she. . . It seemed to be taking extra long to reach her. He heard the long distance operator talking muffledly with somebody in New York. Then there was the click of a connection and Marion's voice came through. A wild suspicion leaped into Simon's mind as he wondered if the call had been passed on to another number. That came as he caught the muted strains of an orchestra in a South American samba.

They said hello to each other. "Hey, where the devil are you?" he blurted.

"Why, dahling, don't you know what number you called?"

"I hear music—dance music! And—say, that was a champagne cork popping, Marion! Now, see here, if you think—"

"Si-mon, please! You aren't appointed my keeper until the seventh Tuesday of next month. Or was it the eighth Wednesday? And dahling, I'm terribly, terribly expensive to keep. I mean—" Then masculine laughter close to the phone at the other end washed out her words.

Pole snorted as he dashed sweat from his upper lip. "See here, hussy, where is that big, well-girdled tramp, Pitman? If you're out with that perambulating woman's home companion in some sticky joint, I'll—"

"Mr. Pole, please!" She giggled. "Stop that—it tickles," she said to somebody at the other end. "Mr. Pole, I'm at the dreary sweatshop affectionately known as 'The Office' and—"

"Don't give me any of that jive, sister! I'll bet Fancy Pants Pitman is breathing down your neck in a hot rhumba right now and—"

"Simon Pole, you dirty-minded—" she shot back angrily.

A guffaw scratched over the wire. Pitman's guffaw. He said, "Hello, Babyface! We're sorta busy here right now. Want very nice hot story on heiress missy, chum. Get every move of her day. So-long, brother. No see long time—I hope!" And the line went dead as Pitman hung up.

D. J. Salvin spoke from beyond the doorway. "We're ready for dinner, Mr. Pole."

WHEN he stepped into the gloomy, dark-wainscoted dining room in the rear of the house, it was to realize everybody else was in evening dress. Martha Gellert, already seated, wore a Nile green gown, extremely décolleté. The smooth-smiling Salvin, Dr. Mackleberry, and even that big animal, Culbone, had on black ties and dinner jackets. Pole did a double take and wondered if this little hunk of the universe had gone crazy.

Less than an hour ago, one of the household had been found very nastily murdered. And here everybody was turned out as if for a party, smiling, with lively music flowing from the massive pianotrope in the corner. He sat down beside Salvin who was at the right of Miss Gellert at the head of the table. Across the way, Culbone, beside Dr. Mackleberry, was ladling up his soup hurriedly.

"This consomme is half cold, Mina," the superintendent snapped.

"Can't help it," said the serving maid sullenly. "One pair of hands can't do everything in this house, you know, cooking and all!"

Pole glanced up and saw it was the same white-haired woman who had taken his bag upstairs on his arrival. And she cooked and served table, too? It didn't make sense, one of America's richest heiresses operating her country home with a house staff of one. He watched the perpetually tired woman come in with a slightly charred roast. Something came to him.

"Say," he said to Salvin, "if it was some prowler or thief who maybe did it, those private guards around the place—"

"I never listen to those crime stories on the radio, Mr. Pole. I have enough problems in my own personal life," clipped in Salvin loudly. "Would you pass the salt, Adam?"

It was obvious he didn't want the servant to overhear. Pole felt like

spitting out that you couldn't keep a murder secret forever. But he saw the wan Martha's dark blue eyes fixed on him and bowed to the mute plea. There was a prolonged gargle as Mackleberry dumper down the brandy and soda he had brought to the table with him.

"Here's a problem for you? One in what you might call legal jurisprudence, I guess," he said with a ribald laugh. "Hah! A man standing in Jersey on the bank of the Hudson River—using a high-powered rifle with telescopic sights—shoots a man on the New York State bank of the river! See? We'll concede it is possible for the sake of the argument. Now—"

"Now will you shut up, Hugo?" Culbone barked.

MACKLEBERRY waved an admonishing finger at him as he brought up a bottle of brandy from the floor with his other hand. "Adam, I declare, you've got nerves. Something maladjusted in your life, I'll wager. Now, about the cross-river murder. The victim is shot dead on New York soil. So—which state has the legal right to prosecute, ladies and gentlemen?"

A fork clattered against china and Martha Gellert rose and left the dining room swiftly. Her heels pattered on the stairs.

"You're a swine, Hugo!" Culbone said.

"Hah! Throw me a pearl, Adam! Well, I'll settle for brandy, instead."

They finished the second-rate meal in silence, none of them taking more than a few sips of the coffee that tasted like scupper juice. Hardly had they filed silently into the library when the phone tinkled. Salvin beat Mackleberry to the extension in that room.

Salvin looked mildly interested as he gave out a series of "Yes's." "I representative of Miss Gellert will be done shortly, captain," he said and hung up. He made some "Tsk, tsks" sounds.

"What?" said Culbone.

"The police chief of Dalyville. . . Most unfortunate. It seems some farmer found Miss Seemone in one

of our cars on the road to town. Heart attack. She—she is dead."

Pole groped for a nearby chair, wondering if it could be some insane dream, perhaps a hallucination. But he very distinctly heard the measured slap of Culbone's heels as he strode from the room. The magazine writer pawed at his eyes. But it was real. There was Salvin plucking one of the cork tipped cigarets from his case.

"You'd better go down, doctor," he said. "I told them that."

Watching Mackleberry nod sadly, Simon Pole came out of the trance. "Hey—wait now. I mean—what the hell—say, Bette Seemone was murdered in the greenhouse! Are those local coppers crazy. You know she was—"

"Not murdered, Pole," said Hugo Mackleberry oilily. "No. That was an erroneous conclusion of yours. She expired from a fatal heart attack. She—"

A chair's legs scratched the floor raucously as Pole shoved it from him in temper. "Sure. A fatal heart attack! When some tough monkey gets you by the windpipe and shuts off the air—the heart stops! I know that. But—"

"Please, Pole. Nobody got Miss Seemone by the throat."

"But the marks there! Hell, somebody strangled—"

THERE were marks on her face, too. Remember? Very simply explained—so the police won't worry. Her car was found in the ditch, Pole. She was stricken with the fatal attack while driving. So, you see, she received the contusions when she went unconscious and fell over the wheel of the car as it went out of control. . . Miss Seemone was suffering from a coronary thrombosis. As her attending physician for a number of months, I should know, Mr. Pole." He was flipping the coin again, plucking it from the air with that backhand snatch. "And that is what I shall report to the police."

Pole spoke agitatedly. "But I saw somebody creeping up on her and—"

Kill-Kill-Killed!

"To murder a dead one?" Salvin cocked an eyebrow.

"Hell, you had no right to—good Heavens, you must have sneaked her out and planted her in the car down the highway."

Salvin sighed wearily. "Miss Gellert is a nationally famed figure. Because of her unique position, we cannot afford a sensation or anything smacking of scandal. . . How the filthy muck-raking tabloids would love to get hold of this! So-o. . ."

"We took the steps we deemed necessary—and wisest," Mackleberry finished for him

"I don't like this. It—it smells. The police, if they knew the facts, their coroner's report might differ and—"

Without raising it, Salvin inserted his cool voice. "And the police might be interested in you, Mr. Pole, too."

"What-t?"

"Yes, unfortunately. Not that I believe you harmed Miss Seemone in any way. But you were the first to find the body. And afterward, you swore to me you found nothing about the body."

Even as he nodded, Pole remembered the .32 in his side coat pocket. He had almost forgotten how he had come in possession of the gun.

"But," pursued Salvin, "I happen to know Miss Seemone carried a .32 revolver in her handbag at all times. It wasn't there—after you found her. . . No, Mr. Pole, I think it is in the best interests of all parties concerned that the case rest. The poor girl suffered a fatal heart attack. Where her corpse was found is an unimportant detail to her, now. . . And, may I add, this is the way Miss Gellert herself wishes it to be handled. . ."

CHAPTER VI

"I WAS railroaded. They high-pressured me. . . Swept me off my feet," Simon Pole muttered again and again to himself as he sat on the side of his bed. It wasn't clear to him exactly how they'd done it. The reference to Martha Gellert had been the clincher.



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Somehow, she seemed to need protection. And then, the fact that he had forgotten to mention finding the gun. It had been the sub-conscious functioning there, instinctively reacting in terms of self preservation, wanting him to retain possession of the weapon.

And the audacity of the whole thing, the act of moving out the body and planting it in a car down the road; that had figuratively taken his breath away. By the time Mackleberry returned from a conference with police in the village, with the news they were putting the death down to a heart attack, he had caught himself wondering. Perhaps Bette Seemone had not been murdered at all, really.

"Cripes!" he exploded in a hoarse whisper and began to pace the floor. Well, she *could* have died a natural death and— But he knew it wasn't so. The very fact the girl carried a gun proved she feared an attempt on her life or an attack, at least. Firing up a cigaret, he made himself halt at the window. Pacing was too Hollywoodish, but his mind was all tangled up.

"Let's go back to the beginning. . ." When Hap Pitman revealed he had arranged for the visit to do an article on the private life of the mystery orphan heiress, it had seemed unbelievable. When the maiden aunt who'd reared her had passed on two years ago, Martha Gellert had made a brief giddy splurge in society. But within a few months, she had suddenly retired from public view. Windy Acres, closed since her father's demise, had been reopened. And Martha Gellert had withdrawn to it like a monk to his ivory tower. No interviews were ever given, and photographers were never permitted on the scene.

But Pitman had an entree, had penetrated the veil. "Easy," he'd explained it. "During her fling in the Florida season, little Martha got very chummy with one Carl Bockman, a labor relations expert. In fact, the under-table rumors of cafe society had them secretly engaged. . . Well, brothers and sisters, Bockman has just turned up in Buenos Aires, ex-

(Continued On Page 74)

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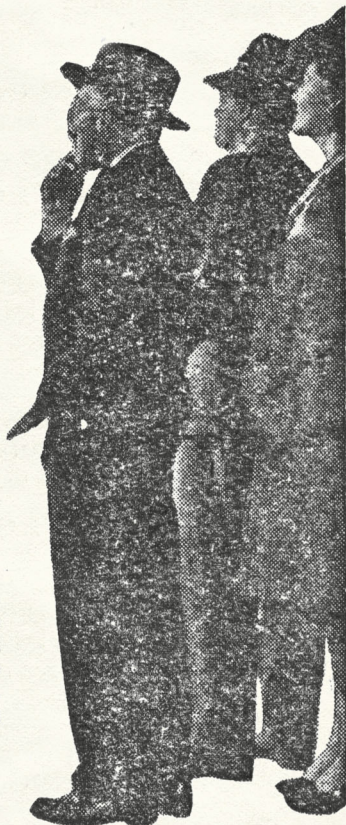
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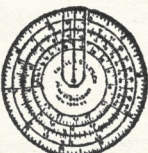
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Crack Detective Stories

(Continued From Page 72)

posed as a hired agent of the Nazis. When he was in this country, his real role was that of instigator of management-labor dissension to slow down America's war effort. And, as a few hints revealed, Miss Gellert and her staff would hate to have the one-time relationship aired now."

That was that. He, Simon Pole, had come up to do the story. He had been greeted by a superintendent who'd been shot at two nights before and who packed a gun. Then he had met Dr. Hugo Mackleberry, a man of many facets, who seemed like a besotted fool most of the time. Pole recalled Mackleberry's loud whisper about searching his bag. And how he had inquired about Martha's recovery despite the fact that, a few minutes before, he claimed she was in the best of health. Weighing it now, Mackleberry had acted like a bad boy at a party, a mischievous urchin trying to spoil the party, to give away the surprise.

AND then had come the discovery of Bette Seemone's body.

Pole expelled his breath in a soundless whistle. Perhaps sly Pitman had railroaded him up here on a dead-head assignment. But now it had developed into something that spelled flaring headlines perhaps. That is, if Bette Seemone was murdered.

There was a buzzing sound in the room. Pole swivelled his head as it persisted. It wasn't a telephone bell's jangle, exactly, fainter, for one thing. He moved ahead, then leftward as he sought out the source of the sound. Then he discovered it, a house phone on a small wall plaque that had been painted to match the beige shade of the plaster. It was hidden by the lamp on the bedside table. Beneath the French-style instrument was a row of little switches. Pole peered at the printed legends above each. One said, "Kitchen." Another, "Garage." "Guest House." "Superintendent." The instrument buzzed again.

When he removed it gently from the hook there was only the sound of somebody breathing on the other end,

Kill-Kill-Killed!

at first. Then a low muffled voice began to speak.

"Pole, get out. Don't hang around and try to solve something. Leave as soon as you can—for your own good. Try to slip through the guards and catch the next train. Be sensible."

"Who is this?"

"Dr Hugo Mackleberry, of course," said the voice at the other end so simply Pole was astonished. Then the connection went dead.

That clinched it. Pole knew then it had been murder, beyond any doubt. He stood rigid, arms akimbo, feet spread, cigaret tucked in a corner of his working mouth. That call sounded like a disguised threat, which meant it could have been Hugo Mackleberry who'd done it. The fact that Culbone apparently had been about to slay a woman already dead seemed to eliminate—

A new thought line opened in Pole's brain. Actually, it did not eliminate Adam Culbone at all. He still might have throttled Bette Seemone, then returned looking for something. . . perhaps the very gun he, Simon, had found. . . and been scared off when he detected another presence.

Mackleberry or Culbone. . . Which? Which? He began to draw on his coat purposefully and reached for his hat. One thing was certain. It has been murder.

AS HE put his hand on the door knob, the buzzer of the intrastate phone sounded again. But the wire was dead when Pole lifted it off the hook. He waited and in a few seconds, it buzzed angrily once more. Again the wire was silent. He fired up a fresh cigaret and waited five minutes by his wrist watch. Nothing happened. Killing the lights in the room, he left himself out into the gloom of the wide hall.

Halfway down it, he remembered the extension phone on the table. Probing, he located it and eased the receiver off the hook. What happened was no surprise to him. He might as well have put one end of a piece of string against his ear. Seconds of slow soundless working of

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the receiver hook brought on no operator. The wire had been cut, doubtless outside the house somewhere. Somebody was awfully afraid.

He was almost at the bottom of the front stairs, treading with the softness of a cat, when he realized there was a low light in the library off to the right. It was a lamp on a side table, a single bulb illuminated. For a long moment he stood looking in before he saw the girl's hand trailing over the arm of one of the heavily upholstered high-backed chairs. The back of it was toward him as it stood facing the refectory table. Abruptly he switched plans, deciding to have it out with the girl. The harassed heiress surely didn't know what was going on.

"Miss Geliert. . . Martha Geliert. . ." But there was neither response nor movement of the hand, the only part of her in sight. Pole walked steadily toward her, as if drawn by an invisible tentacle. And something told what he would find before he got there: a corpse.

OVER the back of the chair he saw her brown head resting as if in sleep. She still wore the Nile green gown in which she had appeared for dinner. But when he passed the side of the chair to look down at her full view he saw something had been added. It was a glistening ruby patch over one breast, a patch of blood. One look at the waxy features told him the single shot had been fatal; the bullet hole was a ragged core in the crimson splotch.

He heard the sucking intake of his own breath. For a few seconds, his vision swam dizzily with the layers of cigaret smoke hanging in the still air apparently writhing like serpents. Then he had a grip on himself. The blood like a macabre blossom on her bosom was still bright, not having oxidized and turned brown. Which told him she must have been slain within a very few minutes. "A silencer on the gun," he heard himself say.

Then he was sliding the .32 up out of his own pocket and gliding quickly down to the French windows at

(Continued On Page 78)

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Crack Detective Stories

(Continued From Page 76)

the end of the room. It was just possible the killer had left that way. . . might still be crossing the moon-dyed yard. But through the panes the frigid-looking grounds were deserted, no human thing in sight.

A human sound came. It was a shoe faintly scraping on wood back by the entrance from the main hall. Pole faded between the floor-length drapes and the glass at one end of the line of French windows just in time. D. J. Salvin was entering the library stealthily. In the shadows back from the lone light his face was a grayish blotch as he crept up on the chair where Martha Gellert sat in death. But the gleaming blade of the knife in his hand was plain enough.

"Martha," he called softly a few feet from the chair. "Martha!" he repeated more loudly. "I just came to tell you I don't think that you are going to fire me in the morning. No-o, I don't think so, Martha. . . You accuse me of being a few thousand short in my accounts. Well, I had to have the money. And what does a few thousand mean to you, eh? What, Martha? You aren't going to fire—" His voice broke off as he sensed the girl wasn't listening.

He took two quick steps to poke his head around one side of the high-backed chair for a glimpse of her face. "Asleep, eh. . ." Then he recoiled, shuddering, as if the full significance of what he had been about to do struck him. "Lord! Am I insane?"

The next moment he had pocketed the knife. Turning quickly on a heel, he strode quickly from the room and was swallowed in the gloom of the hall. Thoughtfully Simon Pole edged from behind the drapery.

"That proves Salvin didn't do it. . . It deals him out," he muttered to himself. "He doesn't know yet that she is dead. . ." That left Culbone and Dr Mackleberry. Either one.

Quickly he unlocked one of the French windows and let himself out onto the wind-whipped terrace. A glance showed him nobody was out there on the rear grounds. Then he was running for the guest cottage. He swerved as he remembered the

Kill-Kill-Killed!

grave and the headstone. Even in the shadows beneath the foliage he could see the latter gleaming with its shiny newness.

IT CAUSED something to click in his brain. It was a tiny cog he had been seeking to dredge out of memory up in his room. The doctor had said it was an old grave of a servant laid to rest in Martha's father's time. Yet that grave marker was almost new, unweathered and untouched by lichen or greened by moss. Strange. . . Then he was up on the cottage porch and banging at the door, holding the gun down against his leg.

When his fist hit the door a third time it gave slightly under the pressure. He shouldered it open and blinked in the light of the hall lamp. It was two seconds before he saw the body of Mackleberry sprawled on the carpet at the foot of the stairs. Simon Pole was just beginning to wonder if he had an unsuspected genius for tripping over the late departed when he saw the doctor's chest stirring in rhythmic breathing. Beside him lay a broken malacca cane.

Even as Pole dropped to a knee beside him, Mackleberry stirred and pawed vaguely at a blood-encrusted gash over one ear. He had been beaten across the head with the cane evidently. He also sported a very fancy shiner on his left eye. Through his right, he goggled at Pole.

"Culbone w-was here—a little while ago. S-some water, please." He indicated a door on the left.

Pole went in there and found it was a bedroom. On a table was a thermos carafe. When he brought it out, the doctor slugged half of it down. Pole doused the head cut with the rest and Mackleberry got up and sat on the narrow stairs.

"A very irascible fellow, that Culbone. Especially when he is half drunk." He raised his open eye to Simon Pole. "He—"

"How long ago was he here, doc?"

Mackleberry shook his head to clear it and squinted at his wrist watch. "I looked at the time just before he came. Good heavens, it was all of an hour ago. Say, what are you—"

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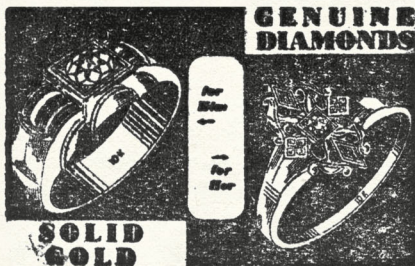
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Crack Detective Stories

Pole blinked as a fact clicked in his brain. This eliminated the doctor as a possible killer of Martha Gellert. "Miss Gellert just had a bad heart attack."

"Why Mary has no heart trouble. She—"

"Just what I wanted to know—so I wouldn't make any mistakes this time, doc. . . She's been shot dead."

With the aid of the bannister, Mackleberry levered himself to his feet. "Could Adam have gone mad?" he muttered, swaying.

CHAPTER VII

IN A couple of minutes he had steadied himself, and the two moved back across the lawn to the house, letting themselves in at the French doors. Everything was as Pole had left it. He whispered to Mackleberry how D. J. Salvin had come soft-footing it in with a knife behind the dead girl. Mackleberry nodded as he bent for an examination of the corpse. And again Simon Pole had that vague sensation that something in the room was amiss. Only it was a more sharply defined feeling this time. He sniffed the air laden with tobacco smoke; somebody in the library had been smoking cigaret after cigaret for quite a spell.

Mackleberry leaned against the end of the refectory table, twiddling nervously with the ashtray there. There was no hint of zaniness about him now. Pole told how Salvin, in talking to the woman he didn't seem to know was dead, had mentioned being discharged for a shortage in accounts.

Mackleberry looked puzzled. "N-no. Miss G-Gellert couldn't have fired him. No."

Simon Pole's eyes continued to rove restlessly. He was unsatisfied about something in this room yet he couldn't put the finger on it. The ashtray the doctor handled slipped to the table top with a loud click. And then Pole had it.

Somebody had been smoking heavily here. Most likely the girl, before she had been slain. Yet the ashtray on the table directly before her was absolutely empty. So was the one

(Continued On Page 82)

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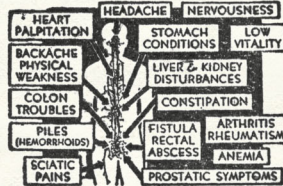
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Crack Detective Stories

(Continued From Page 80)

atop the radio, and also the hammered copper one at the end table beside the chair against the bookcase. Yet when he had left the room to retire, the table tray had been well filled with butts. In his mind's eye, Simon Pole could still see Martha stubbing out the cork tipped one just after she had come through the tunnel from the greenhouse.

Whoever had come in here and slain the girl had emptied the tray because some evidence in it might place him on the scene of the crime!

THEN the obvious thing popped into his mind. Martha Gellert was an incredibly rich girl. Rich people were often killed when certain parties stood to profit by their demise. "Would Salvin get anything in Martha's will?" he asked the doctor sharply.

Mackleberry's face jerked almost as if he would laugh. Then he shook his head. "Hardly. You have no idea how impossible that would be and—" He straightened, jaw hanging slack. "D. J. could profit by the death; according to Old Man Gellert's will, if Salvin stood by faithfully until the girl was twenty five and able to take care of her own affairs, Salvin would get a cool hundred thousand Gellert had left in trust for him. He—"

But Simon Pole was already scooting across the room and into the hall. He had the murderer tagged now. "It's Salvin—despite that act— I know," he whispered as the long-legged doctor overtook him on the stairs.

Mackleberry located a switch in the upstairs hall and the small creamy bulbs of the wall brackets strung along it flashed on. The doctor pointed out Salvin's room near the end by the closed off north wing.

"We may have to break in. He always keeps his door locked. He—" Then he pointed to the key protruding from the lock as they bore down on it. But it wasn't the key made for the door. It was a new gleaming skeleton key contrived to open any door.

The lithe Pole slid ahead of the medical man and turned the knob cautiously. The door gave. He opened

Kill-Kill-Killed!

it on the black rectangle of the room and stepped in with the .32 nosing before him. A gash of muzzle flame lanced the blackness from across the room. Pole felt the ugly breeze of the bullet fan his cheek and plunged for the floor with a yelp. Even as he hit he saw the man with the gun outlined as he moved across in front of the window. But it was not the slight D. J. Salvin, it was raw-boned Culbone.

And then the prone Pole saw the chair, heaved by the doctor, fly through the air. Its spinning legs seemed to enmesh big Culbone. He went down. Swearing softly, Mackleberry turned on a lamp. Adam Culbone lay sprawled beneath the chair which now had one of its legs broken. Blood spurted slowly from a gash in his scalp. He was out as cold as the proverbial mackerel.

"Now, we're even, Adam," Mackleberry said. He went over and plucked the other's loose gun from the floor and calmly tossed it through the window pane onto the front drive as Simon Pole clambered to his feet. "It looks like Culbone was the—"

BUT Pole had the pattern now. If Salvin wasn't here, there was but one other place he could be—to commit another murder. He was out and running back down the hall. "Culbone's cottage! Salvin will be up there—waiting," he panted to the doctor over his shoulder. "If he hasn't lit out yet, that is. . ."

The wind was whistling hoydenishly across the moonlit grass as they went up the slope. Taking the hurrying Pole's arm, Mackleberry steered a route out around the other side of the greenhouse and up beside a line of shrubbery toward the superintendent's cottage. It was to keep them out of the moonglow, to save them from becoming targets. They reached a clump of lilacs off from the rear corner of the neat white one-story place. Waited and watched it for some minutes. There was no sign of life about it.

Mackleberry swallowed audibly. "You've miscued someplace, Pole. . . After all, how could he get up here



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Crack Detective Stories

in the moonlight with you headed up to the guest house right after he left the room? I'm going—" And before Pole could halt him, he moved from cover and marched toward the front door.

It was a whisker short of murder again. The crackling of the wind-tortured branches of a huge apple tree overhead almost obliterated the sound of gunshot. Careening backward off the low steps of the cottage, the doctor plunged stiffly into some hollyhocks nearby to lie motionless.

"So, I got you at last, Adam," gloated Salvin as he opened the front door wider and stepped out. "You kept me waiting but—"

Closing in from the lilac bush, Pole extended his arm and squeezed the trigger of the pistol with the steady pressure of a well-trained marksman. There was the flat spat of it. Salvin was knocked sideward across the steps, clapping a hand to his head as he went. Then he doubled over to plunge into the grass.

"Very efficient piece of work, Pole," said Hugo Mackleberry as he rose unharmed from the hollyhocks. He moved over to the fallen business manager and inspected him. "Very nice. He is merely knocked out, not seriously wounded. A scalp gash. I've made patients look worse in my time. . ."

IN THE library, Simon Pole couldn't throw off the feeling they were a motley pack of mourners for a wake. The body still seated in the chair was under a shroud, a tablecloth from the dining room that the doctor had put over the girl. Culbone, scowling but looking slightly ridiculous with that lump like a little horn rising from a corner of his forehead, sat stiffly in a small wooden chair. Over beside the large console radio was D. J. Salvin, his face a blanched poker mask beneath the bandage ringing his head. He had refused to speak a word since they'd brought him in.

Lights glowed throughout the house, and out in the front drive, two of the private coppers stood on guard. Mackleberry had summoned

(Continued On Page 86)

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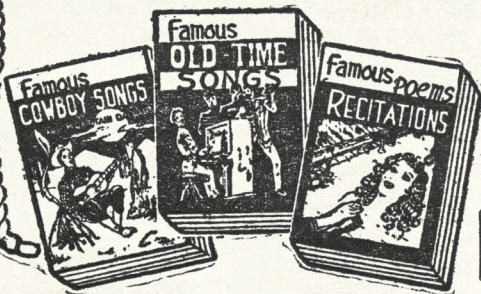


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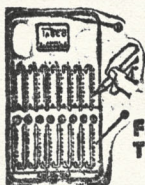
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Crack Detective Stories

(Continued From Page 84)

them from the woods some minutes before with his powerful voice. Dark clothes earth-stained, wiry mass of hair more mussed than usual, the doctor drew slowly on a cigaret as they awaited the arrival of the local police authorities.

This was murder, and with a capital "M." And nobody was trying to evade the fact now, Pole thought gratefully. The corpse wasn't going to be taken for any little ride, Macleberry spoke to him.

"Pole, you say it was D. J.—both times. And the gun our dear Mr. Culbone carried was a .45, too big a calibre for the wound in—in the girl's body, I'll swear before any court. But how do you add it?" He had a water tumbler of brandy. But he had only taken a few sips. And without benefit of that gargling sound like rainwater being sucked down a corroded drainpipe.

"Cigarets," Pole said succinctly. "When we came back here—when I brought you back—the room was thick with tobacco smoke. Yet the ashtray before Miss Gellert was bare—empty. Which meant the killer must have emptied it—because it contained some evidence against him."

"You mean he snuffed out a cigaret in it before he—"

"No. But one of his cork tipped cigarettes had been snuffed out in it." Pale himself, Simon Pole spoke quickly but evenly, without emotion. "You see—well, right after the first murder, and I mean murder—I came in here and talked with Martha. When she stubbed out her smoke, I noticed it was a cork tipped one. And she disliked them."

Macleberry nodded.

"WHEN I mentioned it, she said it was one she had picked up in the tunnel returning from the greenhouse. Now, we know there is one person who smokes cork tipped cigarettes." Pole nodded toward the silent Salvin. "Him. . . She found it in the tunnel. Which establishes Salvin's presence in the tunnel. H. made a rendezvous with Bette Seemone, went through the tunnel to

Kill-Kill-Killed!

keep it and slay her—and returned the same way, unseen. . . .”

“An ambulance chasing shyster could bust that wide open!” It was the first thing Salvin had said. “Get me another brandy!” He’d had one to revive him.

“When he killed Miss Gellert,” Pole continued, ignoring him, “he saw one of his cigarettes—the one she had put out earlier—in the ashtray. So he emptied the whole thing. . . . That’s the total, doctor.”

Salvin made a spitting sound. “A twenty-five buck per week, correspondence-school law clerk would tear that one apart.”

But Mackleberry shook his head and applied the clincher. “Ungh—ungh, D. J. . . . Not when they perform an autopsy and extract the bullet from her body. It’ll prove up to have been fired from the gun we took from you!”

“Sure. . . . and Salvin,” the nimble-witted Pole finished up, “meant to hang it on Culbone, I think. He wor’d have killed him, then made it look like suicide with the same weapon that killed Miss Gellert. Culbone, suspecting it was Salvin who had slain Miss Seemone, meant to get Salvin. He—”

“He didn’t have to half batter in my skull though.”

“Yes, he did. That would be his alibi when they found Salvin dead. Culbone intended to admit—as I guess it out—that he had attacked you and left you for dead because he believed you had killed Bette Seemone. That would make it appear as if he had no motive for killing Salvin. Though why he had to avenge Miss Seemone, I don’t see. Nor why he meant to kill her in the first place, either.”

“Because she’d fallen for Salvin,” the doctor said.

“Oh-h. . . . And when Salvin saw how the fact that Culbone had been seen creeping up with murderous intent on a dead woman eliminated him as a suspect—yeah, sure. Salvin killed Martha, then waited in the card room after ringing my buzzer. When I came down he moved in and staged an act like Culbone’s in the green-

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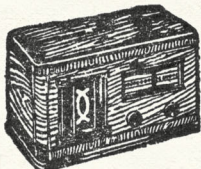
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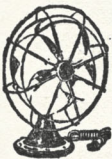


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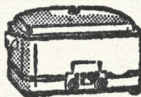
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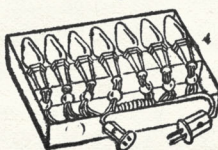


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Crack Detective Stories

house. Ye gods! Talk about cold-blooded stuff. . . .

"And Culbone," Mackleberry said slowly, "wanted to avenge Bette Seemone because she was his wife."

"She was—what the—say that again in first speed, Doc."

Mackleberry lowered his body against the end of the refectory table. "Bette Seemone was Mrs Culbone. . . And Martha Gellert isn't dead."

"Get me a brandy," snapped Salvin.

A GAIN Pole ignored him as he screwed his eyes around to the cloth covered chair where the body lay. Mackleberry shook his head.

"That isn't Martha Gellert. Her name is Mary Norris. Martha Gellert is the patient up in the guest cottage.

Simon Pole made a funny twisted face like a man about to sneeze after taking snuff. He motioned vaguely. "Now, look here. I—"

"Listen, please," said the doctor. His eyes stared at the design of the rug at his feet. There was a sad, tired look on his face and it gleamed with sweat film. "Listen. . . A terrific hoax has been perpetrated here. Perhaps you recall when Miss Gellert withdrew so abruptly from society down in Florida. Yes? Good. That was when we moved in on her. Salvin there is the only one of us who is genuine, and it was his scheme. He wanted to get his fingers on some of the Gellert money—plenty of it—without committing a crime.

"Listen, please, Mackleberry repeated. "It was a terrible thing, Pole. Terrible. . . Through Culbone, they got in touch with me, a disbarred doctor down at the heel. I was introduced to Miss Gellert—then became her physician when I diagnosed the shyness resulting from her cloistered life as a child—diagnosed it as a psychiatric fixation. Then we began to create—yes, create hallucinations for Miss Gellert."

He straightened to walk in a tight circle, then returned to rest against the table again. "I have an excuse for what I did—but a poor one. Martha Gellert's father had ruined my father

Kill-Kill-Killed!

in business so that he had died a broken, bankrupt man." His voice was lower as he went on to describe the procedure.

By the administration of certain opiates in Miss Gellert's food, they kept her in somnambulistic states for days at a time. The next step was to move her to a new etting—from a hotel to her yacht or from the yacht to the Palm Beach villa—while she was in that condition. Then they would permit her to regain her full sensibilities. And when she wondered how she had gotten at that new place, they would assure her that she had always been there, that she had not been aboard the boat or wherever their last spot had been.

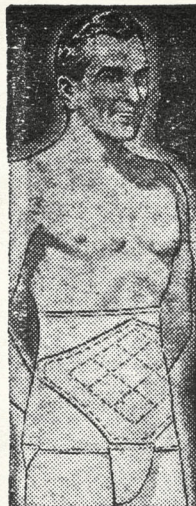
"She became convinced her reason was tottering, naturally," Mackleberry said as he bared his teeth in a grimace of self disgust. "It was brutal. I recommended complete withdrawal from the world and a prolonged rest to restore her. We came here. But we moved in a day before any help was brought in."

POLE nodded as he began to get the over-all picture. Now he understood why the place was run by the one aged servant. The fewer they had inside the house, the simpler it was.

"That night, Martha Gellert committed a murder. At least, we convinced her she had." He related how he had dosed her with a particularly heavy potion of drugs. In the morning, she awoke to find blood stains on her nightgown and a revolver on the table beside her bed. "And—and we told her a young gardener had been found shot to death out on the grounds. None had, of course."

That had been the clincher. Nervous system wrecked by the constant drugging, the girl had been a pitiful piece of putty in their hands. Posing as her friend, Mackleberry had moved her to the guest house and ordered to say she was Mary, a cousin of Martha Gellert's. They told her they would cover up the crime.

"That was the reason for the grave out there by the guest house," Mackleberry said huskily. It was a false



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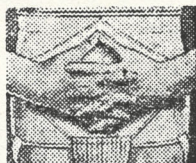
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grave, holding nobody. But the sight of it was intended to keep the heiress aware of what she had supposedly done. "Earlier tonight, I told her the truth about the grave," he added.

"The rest was easy. Mary Norris was brought in to impersonate Martha. Remember, nobody here had seen the real Martha Gellert. All the help on the place was newly hired. Mary seldom went out; and whenever we wanted a check signed, I administered opiates to get Martha in a dreamlike state—to put it simply—and she signed. Then. . ." He broke off a moment, fighting some emotion.

"Give me a brandy!" snapped Salvin. Sullen Adam Culbone sat without a word.

"Then—I guess I started the chain of murders, Pole."

"Now, wait, Doc. You—"

"They were milking Martha pretty heavily. . . But a month ago, she questioned a check of a large denomination. . . Ten days ago, she refused to sign a blank one. . . That was because I was tapering off on the administration of the drugs—secretly, of course. The rest of them got worried; they weren't cashing in fast enough. Then Salvin must have smelled danger, and he recalled, apparently, the clause in old Gellert's will about him. He saw how he could get the hundred thousand—by eliminating the girl known as Martha—namely, Mary Norris."

Pole frowned as he tried to understand. "But Miss Seemone, she—"

MACKLEBERRY nodded. "That shooting a couple of nights ago—it wasn't at Culbone, as we deliberately started the rumor. It was at Mary, the bogus Martha Gellert. That started the trouble. Bette Seemone, Adam's wife, she raised holy hell. She wasn't going to be wrapped up in any murder. She was threatening all kinds of things. So-so Salvin saw he would have to eliminate her first—which he did, as we now know. And he could sell even Adam himself on the necessity of removing the body from the scene and making it appear like a heart attack while driving—because we couldn't afford to

(Continued On Page 92)

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(Continued From Page 90)

have the police snooping around." He exhaled in a heavy sigh of relief, adding: "I staged the zany, intoxicated act to avert any suspicion toward me on their part. They thought I was too much of an alcoholic fool to dare do what I was doing."

There was a cold chuckle from Salvin. Pole spoke.

"You—you started to take her off the drugs, Doc. And to set her straight. You were bringing her back. Why?"

Salvin chuckled again before the bowed-headed doctor answered. "All right. You've got me. But I'm going to involve all of you in it. I'll turn State's evidence. I'll swear you were all accessories to the murders. Even you, Pole. I see a way to do it."

The doctor looked up, apparently not having heard Salvin. "I did it, Pole—it sounds crazy—but I did it because—"

"He fell in love with me!" The voice came from down by the French windows. Down there, wrapped in a lemon-hued polo coat, stood the wan faced but steady-eyed real Martha Gellert, the girl from the guest house.

Mackleberry jumped erect, then slumped. He nodded sadly. "Y-yes. I did. I—"

It was Pole who saw, from the tail of his eye, the little small calibre automatic Adam Culbone, coming out of his comatose state suddenly, jerked from inside his coat. It was Pole who sent the empty ashtray sailing half across the room. It caught Culbone over an eyebrow just as he triggered at Dr Hugo Mackleberry. The bullet went wild. Then Pole, leaping in behind his missile, was slugging the superintendent into submission as he wrenched the smoking weapon from him.

There was a chopped-off groan. Pole stepped back from the limp Culbone. Over on the divan beside the radio, D. J. Salvin had flopped over on his side. There was an ugly hole, welling fresh blood, in the bandage about his head. He would never turn any State's evidence this side of Hell.

Mackleberry stared at him for a long second. Then he waved to Pole.

(Continued On Page 94)

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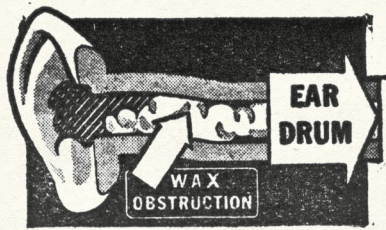
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Crack Detective Stories

(Continued From Page 92)

"You got yourself some story, feature writer." With the bounding stride, he whipped by the girl and out the door of the French window. "Martha, I'm going to borrow a car. Give me a little head start, will you?" Then he was gone.

A couple of minutes later, the siren of the Dalyville police car whined up the drive. Martha Gellert nodded to Pole. "A head start, yes." And he nodded back.

That was why they feigned ignorance of Dr Mackleberry's whereabouts at the end of the police questioning more than an hour later. . .

THE new day was a jaundiced-robed visitor silently leering through the windows with eyeless face when the announcement came the phone lines had been repaired. "Pardon me," Pole said as he rose opposite the real Martha Gellert in the card room and put down his coffee cup.

He went into the hall and down to the late D. J. Salvin's office. He got long distance and gave the home number of Marion Lake in the city. When her sleepy voice came through, he began to bark.

"Listen, wench. Tell that fancy-pants boy friend of yours—I mean the office passion flower—that I'll be in in a few hours with the biggest story he ever dreamed of. Tell Pitman I've got the inside on the private life of Martha Gellert. And what a private life that gal has had. And tell your boy friend I expect a bonus check of five hundred smackers and—"

Marion cut short a yawn. "Listen, Simon. What's all this about Pitman being my boy friend? I'll pick my own and—"

"You can fool me, Puss! I could hear the music and the popping champagne corks when I called you last night. My call was shifted to one of Pitman's favorite giggle-water dens and—"

"Shut up! That was the office. Of course you heard music and champagne corks. Remember that special color-photo feature on South America we've got for the next issue? Well, to get some publicity on it, we

(Continued On Page 96)



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Kill-Kill-Killed!

(Continued From Page 94)

gave a party—at the office—for the staffs of several of the consulates of South American countries. Natch, Hap had to bring in a samba band and provide some liquid cheer. And now, drip, as for pie-eyed monkeys who wake me before dawn to. . .

His ear was numb when he finally hung up. He sighed. It could be, of course, that office party. Then again—He would never know. . .

(THE END)

Slayer's Keepers

(Continued From Page 23)

Failing to shoot him last night, Hoskins had made up one of the secret bombs and blown up his place.

"Get going, Mike," the girl said again. "I hold the aces now."

Like somebody else moving in a dream he found himself stumbling past her, then tearing through the front door and down the drive. The shock to his brain was so severe he still couldn't quite comprehend what had been done to him yet. He got into the sedan and slammed it out onto the road, driving wildly.

When he came to the State highway, he swung southward toward the city. From behind came the shriek of the siren of a police car as it headed for Hoskins' place. Marta hadn't given him the promised head-start. But he had to make it to the city and get out home to establish his alibi as planned and—

Then he realized. He couldn't go home because he was supposed to be dead. There would be no way of explaining, especially with his own car still in the garage, how he didn't happen to be at home. Mike Cheek didn't exist any more. He was trapped in the role of "Old Mainz," the murderer of Lambert Hoskins. . . The murderer he had dressed himself up to be!

He had to keep running, and he knew there was no escape; he would be caught eventually. . .

(THE END)