

CRACK DETECTIVE STORIES

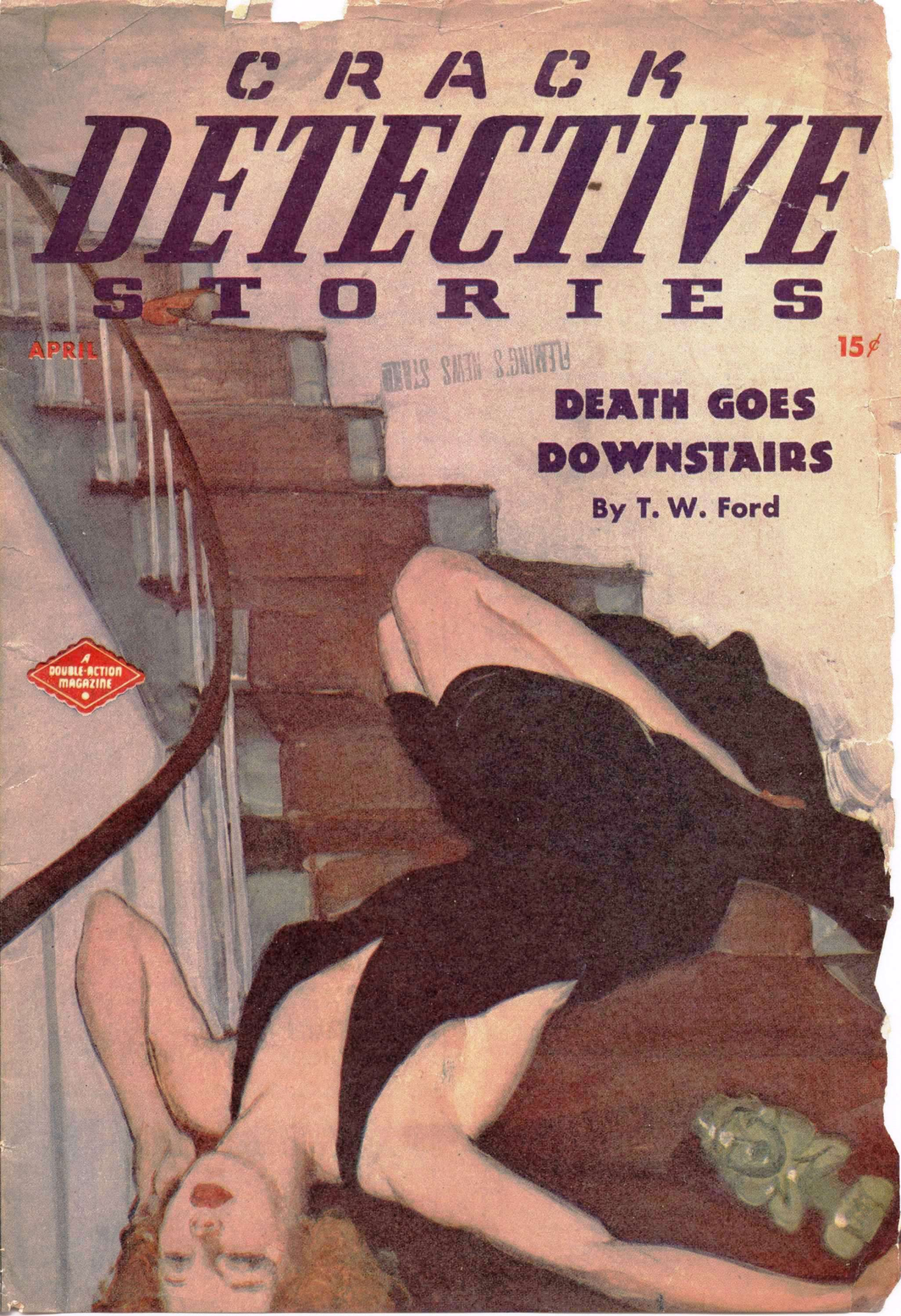
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DEATH GOES DOWNSTAIRS

By T. W. Ford



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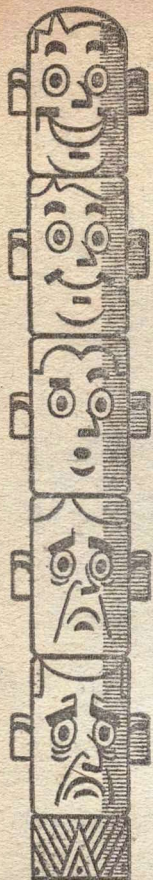
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Volume 8

April, 1947

Number 2

MURDER ON MY KEYBOARD By Jack Bradley 10

The kill-plot Mike Chandler found himself caught up in, was as thick and tightly-woven as any detective story he'd ever written. Only he didn't know the answers in advance to this mystery!

KILLER OF FIRE By Marcus Lyons 18

(Featuring Bicarbonate Johnny)

It was the frame, not the painting that the fuss was all about. And Bicarbonate Johnny found that there was another frame in the setup, besides the one around a picture.

DEATH GOES DOWNSTAIRS By T. W. Ford 28

To slip a joker into the deck when a killer deals the cards.

DARK HOLIDAY By John Lockhart 35

When you're facing the chair, there's nothing to lose by any venture!

THE CAT IN THE CANARY'S CAGE By Rex Whitechurch 38

It was a great song, the "Train Whistle Blues"; but it looked as if the song had railroaded the man who wrote it.

OH GARGIE By Ray Cummings 46

When monkey business is up, what's more natural than a monkey to help out

ONE BUCK TO HEAVEN By Leo Hoban 52

The Big Guy knew that his old time pals wouldn't be satisfied to split fifty grand between them: the triggerman knew that was what the Big Guy was counting on—but more than that, they knew he was entirely right!

DEATH'S GUITARS ARE SINGING By Hal K. Wells 60

And if you listen closely, you may hear the answer to Death's secret.

BIG KILLING (Complete Novelet) By Seymour Irving Richin 70

Line Castle wasn't ready to buy what might be a frame against a man everyone was eager to have found guilty—but, nonetheless, all the evidence pointed against this man, and Castle would do his duty however the chips fell.

ACCORDING TO THE BOOK (Department) By Georgie 88

Before you turn to page 96, see if you can figure out the answer yourself.

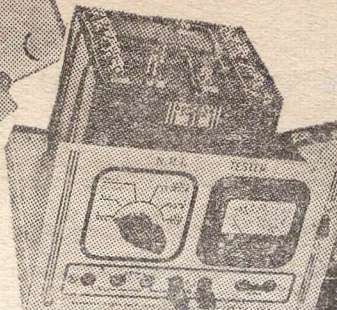
ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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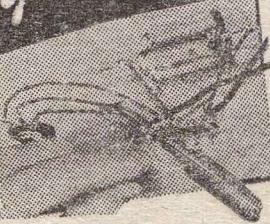


Be a RADIO Technician

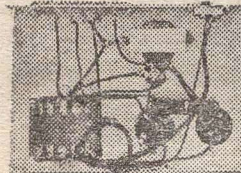
Learn by PRACTICING in Spare Time

KIT 3

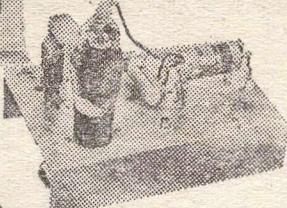
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4 You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



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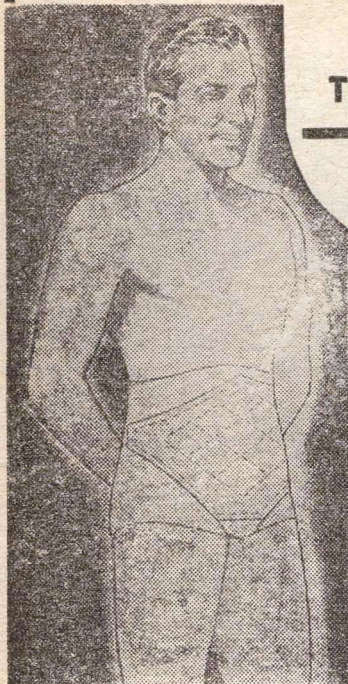
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"Enclosed find order for another belt. I wouldn't be without this supporter for ten times what it costs."

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J. C. McG.
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P. N.
Fort Knox, Ky.

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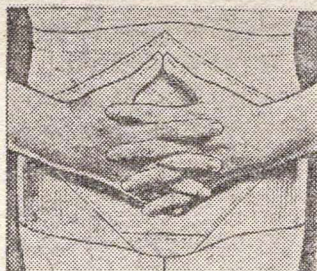
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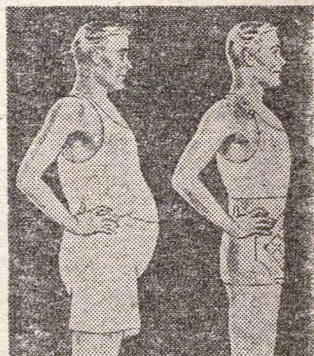
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*B. E. S.,
Lunenburg, Arks.

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*M. L. M.,
Tucson, Ariz.

*Pictures by professional models. Actual names on request.

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"My country 'tis of Thee, Sweet land of liberty"



Look at the music. The first note is "C." Follow the dotted line to the keyboard and locate "C" on the piano. Find other notes the same way. Strike the notes as indicated and you'll play the melody of America.

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who are suffering the miseries of

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Stop Worrying Now About Pimples and Blackheads

and other externally caused skin troubles

JUST FOLLOW SKIN DOCTOR'S
SIMPLE DIRECTIONS

SQUEEZING pimples or blackheads to get rid of them is a nasty, messy business—but that isn't the worst of it. Because doing so may also be injurious and leave your skin with unsightly, embarrassing blemishes. There is, now, a much easier, safer, cleaner way to help you rid your face of ugly, offensive, externally caused skin troubles. You merely follow a doctor's simple directions.

Good-Looking Skin Is Not for Women Only

You—yes, you—can have the same healthy, normal complexion free from externally caused skin troubles simply by giving your skin the special care that handsome screen stars give theirs. There's almost nothing to it—it is just about as easy as washing your face. *The whole secret consists of washing your face in a way that thoroughly cleanses the pores of every last speck of dirt and grime*—something that ordinary cleansing may not do. In fact, examination after examination shows that, usually, it is not a case of "bad skin" so much as a case of incomplete or faulty cleansing. What you should use is a highly concentrated soap like Viderm Skin Cleanser which penetrates the pores and acts as an antiseptic. When followed by a quick application of Viderm Medicated Skin Cream, specks of irritating dirt and grime are quickly washed out; they dissolve and disappear, leaving your skin clean, clear and free of the specks that often bring out pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

It's Foolish to Take Bad Skin for Granted

It doesn't pay to risk marred skin, blotches, blemishes. Your very success in business, love and social life may depend upon your looks. *Handsome men and a good appearance usually start with the condition of your skin.* Nobody likes a skin that looks unhealthy, unclean, abused, and marked with blackheads or pimples. **WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO MEN WHO HAVE SMOOTH,**



CLEAR, ROBUST-LOOKING SKIN. Business executives don't choose men who have a poor-looking complexion. Don't take chances with your success in life when this inexpensive Viderm formula may help you.

Don't murder your skin! Here's all you have to do to keep it smooth and clear. Use Viderm Skin Cleanser when you wash your face. Rub the rich lather of this highly-concentrated soap on your face for just a few seconds and then rinse it off. Then apply a little Viderm Medicated Skin Cream and that's all there is to it. Viderm Medicated Skin Cream quickly disappears, leaving your skin nice and smooth. This simple treatment, used after shaving, helps heal tiny nicks and cuts, relieves razor-burn and smarting, besides conditioning your skin.

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Just mail your name and address to The New York Skin Laboratory, 206 Division Street, Dept. 43, New York City 2, New York. By return mail you will receive both

of the Viderm formulas, complete with full directions, and packed in a safety-sealed carton. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can save the postage fee by mailing the two dollars with your letter. Then, if you aren't thrilled with results, your money will be cheerfully refunded. Remember that both of the formulas you use have been fully tested and proven, and are reliable for you. If they don't help you, your treatments cost you nothing. After you have received your Viderm, if you have any questions to ask concerning abused skin, just send them in.

DON'T DO THIS!



Don't murder your skin by squeezing it. Skin is delicate. When you break it, you leave yourself wide open to miseries. It's far easier, far safer, to let the Double Viderm treatment help you enjoy a handsome, clear and blemish-free complexion.

Murder on



Warning to detective story writers: when a stranger comes to you to inquire about the intricate mechanics of murder—only wants to know how you work out your plots—BEWARE!

my Kenboard

by Jack Bradley



"Boss, it could have been a scene from any of the stories in your magazine!"

I'M sorry I failed to get my last story, *Murder on Eighth Street*, into the office in time to meet the deadline. And I'm even more sorry about getting the magazine mixed up in all those lurid newspaper stories. Actually, I was just an innocent bystander and I got what the innocent bystander nearly always gets—right where he gets it, too.

I guess you were sort of surprised to read about "...Mike Chandler, standing in the rain, swapping lead with all the chilled-steel nerve of one of those square-jawed detectives he writes about..."

Well, I was surprised, too, Boss. Because I wasn't standing there at all; I was galloping down that alley for all I was worth, with .38 slugs whistling right and left past my fat hips.

And when the papers said I "took up the case," that was another lie, Boss. I give you my word that I was dragged into it. As a matter of fact, when this insurance guy, James Melton, first came into my sweatshop I thought he was just another optimist, collecting accounts for the furniture company and I gave my daughter, Pat, the high sign to stall him. Pat—she was christened Patricia, though we've never called her that—can handle those things better than I can. The kid's not quite nineteen but she has a face and figure that could make the cover of any magazine you put out.

When Melton gave me his card with "Seaboard Insurance Co." in the corner, I felt better. He was carefully barbered and he wore a suit of imported tweeds that made me feel like drawing a blanket across my own baggy pants but he was still an insurance agent and I know how to handle those guys. I started to give him a quick brushoff.

He raised his hand hastily. "Oh, I'm not here to sell you insurance, Mr. Chandler. Business is the last thought in my mind, right now, I assure you. But I've read several of your stories and I want to know how your mind works when you figure out a murder plot."

I got it then. One of those, "I've-

always-wanted-to-be-a-writer" guys. I'd brushed off scores of them, back in my newspaper days. I opened the bottom drawer of my desk, reached under a mountainous pile of rejection slips and drew out a bottle of sinus remedy.

"Look, Mr. Melton," I said grimly, "I think you have the penthouse-and-glamour idea that most people have about authors. But I'm not an author—I'm just a plain, ordinary hack writer. One of those guys that grind out the murder mysteries you read going home on the subway. A bald-headed, fat guy, with a wife and three kids, working at a trade that has plenty of headaches.

"If I had the time to do it, there's nothing in the world I'd like more than teaching you how to become a writer in one easy lesson. But when you're a family man you simply can't take time out for things like that. Now then, you're one of my customers, sir, so I'll buy a drink, just to show that there's no hard feelings. And then—sorry, but you'll have to excuse me."

I SET a fairly clean glass in front of him and started opening the bottle. James Melton drew out an expensive pigskin wallet and slowly counted out five twenty dollar bills.

"Mr. Chandler," he said quietly, "I know your time is valuable. So I am offering you one hundred dollars if you will take the time to explain just how you plan a murder and arrange an alibi for the killer. I don't mean the plot of the story—I'm not a writer and don't want to be one. All I'm interested in is mechanics of the murder, itself."

He shoved the five twenties toward me and I sat there staring like a dope. And why wouldn't I? You know how it is in our rack—in our profession, Boss. We send the square-jawed detective out on page three and on page twenty he comes back with the twenty thousand dollars the grateful heiress has given him, and that's that.

But you've known me since I was a leg man for the old Sphere and you know I've never had more than a couple of hundred dollars in actual

cash at one time in my whole life. So I just sat there and stared, while Melton went on talking in that same quiet voice.

"The plain truth is, Mr. Chandler, that unless I can learn how a professional writer works out a murder plot, I'm going to lose my own life. And lose it soon."

I spilled half a glass of rye on the first draft of *Murder On Eighth Street* and took a deep breath. "Maybe we'd better just begin at the beginning, Mr. Melton," I said. I looked at the twenties, again; yes, they were still there.

"Well," he began uncertainly, "I go out quite a bit. Have to in my line of business. And I meet quite a few women. When one of them makes an open pass at me I'm human enough to—well—to take her up on it."

"That's about what happened in this case. I'd called on a prospect and finally sold him a big policy—fifty thousand dollars, double indemnity. And he was a writer, too. Does murder mysteries. His name is Joseph Murdock."

I whistled softly. "Whew! Murdock must be getting top rates, lately. Though, of course, he turns out about five times as much stuff as I do." I made a mental note to mention that fifty thousand dollar policy, the next time I had an argument with you, Boss.

(Oh! You did, did you? Well, you'd better wait until you're turning out stuff like Murdock's before you start any arguments. Yes, and you'd better learn to meet deadlines, too!—Ed.)

"I had to call on Murdock several times before the policy was signed," Melton went on, "and I suppose his wife, Rita, more or less took a fancy to me. She's quite impulsive; used to be a dancer, you know."

I nodded. "I know her quite well, Mr. Melton—used to, rather. I interviewed her a number of times, back in my newspaper days. She was dancing at the old Ivory Club, then. A beautiful girl."

"She's still a very beautiful. So beautiful, in fact, that one day when

we were alone I—well—I lost my head—and—and—"

"And Joe Murdock came in at the wrong moment," I finished for him. "We've all had those things happen, Mr. Melton. I have, myself." Yeah, I added mentally—twenty years ago.

"Thank you. You're very understanding. Well, there was a rather disgusting brawl and, to make it worse, the servants heard most of it. But I had the policy signed and I'd have thought nothing of it except for one thing."

"Just as I was leaving, Murdock grabbed my arm and said very coldly, 'Fella, I've killed over a thousand guys on paper. Now I'm going to kill one in real life. And I'm going to do it so cleverly that I'll never be caught. Fella, I'm going to work out the best murder plot ever written and I'm going to type it out on your dead body.'"

"AND that's all that's worrying you?" I asked incredulously.

"I only wish it was," he said. Just ten hours later, I was crossing the street and a truck missed me by inches. I thought it was a coincidence. But the next day I was calling on another client—a Mr. Howard Reynolds, the engineer, who is building the new Bar Office building—and somebody fired a bullet at me."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. The police found the bullet, later. It was a .38 pistol slug and it missed me by inches. I was standing right beside Mr. Reynolds, when it was fired."

"Mm. That does look serious," I admitted. "However, I don't think that knowing the technique of planning a murder story would help you. Besides, Joe Murdock's plots are lousy, although he does write fairly good English. He went to college and I didn't."

(Well, don't brag about it. Lord! The money this magazine has spent, translating your stuff into printable English!—Ed.)

I tried my best to look nonchalant, as I picked up the five twenties and stuffed them into my pocket. "Tell you what I'll do, Mr. Melton; I'll go

over and interview Rita Murdock and find out what this is all about. You'll hear from me sometime tomorrow."

Pat was industriously rubbing the door of my sweatshop, as I ushered him out and when I returned I faced her squarely. We were alone, her mother and the two youngsters having gone to a movie.

"Listen, Pat!" I said firmly. "In all your eighteen-and-three-quarter years, you've never yet swung a dust cloth until you were forced to it at bayonet point. You were eavesdropping!"

She didn't even bother denying it. "Look, Pop, don't you think you're a little bit past the age to go out chasing killers? It's all right to send one of your story detectives into trouble—he's usually a young guy that can take it. But, Pop! You're past forty. Mother's not going to like this."

She rubbed her pert nose thoughtfully. "I've read a lot about this Rita Murdock," she went on, "and, as near as I can make out, she's the modern version of The Lady That Was Known As Lou. Furthermore, that 4-F Romeo that just went out doesn't strike me as the kind that would pass out a hundred bucks unless he had to. Pop, that guy's in some kind of a jam. I'm worried!"

"Stop using that word, 'guy,'" I said sternly. "You've been reading my stuff, again. As to Mr. Melton's call, it might be best not to mention the matter to your mother, at all. That is, if you still want that new dress for the Junior Prom."

I put on my hat and went out, without waiting for an answer. When you've raised three kids, as I have, Boss, you know just what to say—and when to say it.

THE MURDOCKS lived on the ground floor of a swanky apartment house, way over on Sutton Place. Rita herself, answered my ring and I swear that there was something about this woman that set my aged arteries pounding even now, after a lapse of fifteen years.

We chatted about old times a bit and then I came to the point.

"What's all this about James Melton, Rita? The guy's scared stiff. What gives, babe?"

Before she could answer, a cold very precise voice back of me said, "And just what is that to you, you potbellied hack?"

I whirled around. Joseph Murdock had come in and was standing right back of me. He was a short, stocky man, dressed in a too-smart, belted gaberdine suit. He had the bleak, slaty eyes of one of his fictitious killers and, looking into those bleak eyes, I could understand why Jame Melton was worried.

"Oh, calm down, Murdock," I said gayly. "You've been reading too much of your own stuff. When it comes to threatening a man's life over a trivial matter like this, you're going too far."

Murdock snarled a word he would never dare use in one of his stories and leaped forward, tugging at his pocket. His hand came out holding a gold handled .38 pistol. Every hack writer in New York knew the history of that gun. It had been given for some publicity work he had once done.

That gold handled gun flashed up and then chopped down viciously, missing my skull by inches and slamming into my shoulder. For a moment I felt like the roof had dropped on me and Murdock's angry face was a blur before my eyes.

And then I done it! Boss, I done it—whether that's good English or not. I hauled off and knocked that damned, overpaid author clear across the room!

I was so astonished at what I had done that, for a moment, I just stood there looking down at him. Then I saw that he still held that confounded gun and, rather than continue a vulgar brawl, I left. And it may be that I even hurried a bit, going out.

A taxicab raced up alongside me and I heard Pat's voice calling, "Jump in here, Pop! Jump in!"

I leaped in beside her and she started dabbing at my skinned knuckles with a dainty wisp of a handkerchief. "Oh, Pop!" she cried

softly, "you've been fighting. Mother's going to be worried sick."

"Shut up! Your mother's not going to know anything about this. We're now on our way to interview Mr. Howard Reynolds, over at the new Bar Office Building. I'm a reporter and you're a sob sister, just breaking into newspaper work. Or would you rather go on back home and stop bothering your old man?"

"Okay, Pop," she sighed. "I'm a sob sister. But I don't think mother's going to like it. I don't think she's going to like it."

HOWARD REYNOLDS was a nice kid, clean and young and very shy. He was quite willing to tell us all he knew about the shooting but there was nothing he knew.

He had recently taken out an insurance policy from Mr. Melton and was standing beside him, talking, when the shot was fired. He really thought it was an accident but then he knew very little about Mr. Melton. So little that he had hesitated to introduce the agent to the Murdocks.

Eh? Oh, yes, he knew the Murdocks quite well. Called at their home often. His boyish face lighted up as he spoke of Rita Murdock's dancing. I took a quick look at the kid and figured he was about twelve or fourteen years younger than Rita.

I nodded my head from time to time, as young Reynolds raved on about Rita and watched a man climbing a ladder. The man was up to the first platform before I realized what was wrong. He was wearing a belted gaberdine suit, instead of a workman's overalls. There was a heavy wrench sticking out of his coat pocket.

I yelled loudly as I suddenly remembered where I had seen that gaberdine suit before and pushed Pat to one side, as I leaped back. I hadn't woke up any too soon.

The heavy wrench flashed down, striking Reynolds squarely at the base of the neck. He went down like a poled ox. His legs kicked out once, as I bent over him. Then his head lolled back grotesquely. His neck had been broken by that terrific blow.

I went over in a corner and was very, very sick.

The police were courteous, when they came, but they were also thorough and it was way after dark before Pat and I were allowed to go. One of the detectives—a dour-faced guy named Walsh—had questioned me about my newspaper connections until I became uneasy. But I stuck to my story and he finally gave up.

"Pop?" Pat asked me when we were finally released, "Why didn't you tell those officers the truth? This is murder, Pop!" The kid's face was white. It was, I reflected, the first time I had ever seen Pat scared.

"I didn't tell them the truth because they wouldn't have believed me," I explained. "Also, because I want to interview an author named Joseph Murdock. The only guy in New York who wears a gaberdine suit like that. As for you, you're going home. And no arguments, this time, young lady!"

THE long, dark alley that ran alongside the Murdock apartment seemed to me the coldest spot in New York, as I crouched down beside their living room window. A drizzling rain had begun to fall and I was chilled to the bone. I'd have given ten bucks for a snort of my sinus remedy, just then.

Worst of all, I was worried sick for fear some cop would come along and arrest me as a Peeping Tom. I tried to imagine what one of my square-jawed story detectives would do in such a case. Why, he'd knock the cop unconscious and scam, of course. Then I thought of what would happen if I ever was fool enough to sock a New York cop and I gave that idea up, right away. I had no typewriter in that alley.

There was a gap of an inch or two below the Venetian blinds and through it I could see Rita Murdock moving about. Once she glanced toward the window and I thought she had seen me. But she merely turned and opened a closet door; taking out her hat and coat, she started toward the front door.

I slipped back deeper into the shadows of the alley, meaning to follow her as soon as she had passed. Then she turned squarely into that alley, peering about alertly, and I knew she had seen me at that window. I started pussyfooting back down the alley, looking for a place to hide.

Suddenly there was a blasting roar behind me and I heard the angry whine of a bullet going past my left ear. I quit pussyfooting then, and started down that alley at a dead gallop. Another slug whined past me, on my right, this time, and I really stepped on the gas. As I ran, I looked back over my shoulder.

In the dim light of the alley, I saw Rita Murdock standing spread-legged, holding out that gold handled .38 and pumping lead at me like I was something in a shooting gallery. I cursed the grateful police of New York for giving that damned gun to Murdock, in the first place, and then threw in my last ounce of speed.

Just as I reached the street, I felt something like a swift kick in the pants and I knew she'd got me, Boss. Yep, and right in the hip pocket, too. Then I was out on the street and, for once, I found a taxicab when I needed one.

I gave the driver my home address and pulled my coat down so he wouldn't see the blood from my wound. My heart was pounding from that race down the alley but, at least, I knew what I was going to do, now.

I was going home to dress my wound and get just one snort of that sinus remedy. Then I was going to take a cop over to the Murdock's and put the arm on both of those guys—Joe for the murder of young Reynolds and darling Rita for shooting writers out of season. Yes, and after that, I rather thought I'd wind up by punching hell out of James Melton for getting me mixed up in this, in the first place.

I was through horsing around.

THE lights were out in the lower hallway of my home and I had to grope my way toward the stairs, warm blood trickling down my leg. Suddenly one of the shadows leaped

forward. I had a flashing glimpse of him in the darkness—just enough to see that belted jacket. Then he chopped down at me with a blackjack and I felt that sore shoulder go numb again.

Somehow I managed to stay on my feet and, as he bored in again, I sent a right hook to his jaw that sent him against the stairway with a crash of breaking bannisters.

"Get up and get the rest of it, Murdock!" I panted.

I stepped forward to plant another haymaker on him when he got up and suddenly I saw a woman's form loom up. She was raising a gleaming cylinder in her hand and I didn't hesitate one moment.

"For you, Rita, darling," I said and hung a neat left on her jaw, just as she let fly with the cylinder. I tried to duck but it was too late and that cylinder landed squarely on my bald dome. I went to sleep right away.

When I came to again, the hall lights were blazing and the first thing I saw was the Little Woman. She was holding a dough roller in one hand and with the other she was trying to pull a man out of the bannisters of my mortgaged home. A man dressed in a belted gaberdine suit. I went over to help her and honest Boss, I damned near dropped!

The guy in Joe Murdock's suit was none other than my old pal James Melton! He had one of my bannisters sticking out of his collar and there was a lump the size of an egg on his head. He didn't look one bit romantic, now.

I heard a weak groan and looked around. My darling daughter, Pat, was just lifting her head, rubbing her jaw tenderly. "Gee! You conked me, Pop," she said reproachfully. Dazedly I looked down and saw the cylindrical object that had hit me. It was a large cold cream jar.

"Did you hit me with that thing, Pat?"

"I—I guess I did, Pop. I was aiming at him." She pointed to James Melton who was trying to rise to his feet.

"And then the Missus barges into the shindig and floors this Melton

guy," a voice back of me said dreamily. "Lord! Lord! What a family!"

I looked around. Detective Walsh was leaning against the door jamb. He straightened up and came forward.

"Now then," he said pleadingly, "won't somebody please tell me what this merry-go-round is all about? Remember, I'm only a cop, so tell me in simple words. Then I'll go away and not bother anybody any more. Come, come, now, kiddies. Let's have it."

Pat scrambled to her feet with a flash of silken hoisery. "It would be simple enough," she snapped, "if you'd stop thinking about it like it was one of Pop's stories."

She told Walsh, very briefly, what had happened. "Then, the very first thing that occurred to me was that a veteran Romeo and a post-graduate glamour girl wouldn't be caught by a mere husband. Why, they'd lock the door just from force of habit. They meant for Joe Murdock to come in and catch them—uh—uh—that way," she finished with a blush.

"Sounds reasonable," Walsh admitted. "Go on, Miss."

"When we interviewed Howard Reynolds, I saw that that boy was so hopelessly, madly infatuated with Rita Murdock that he'd do anything she asked him to do. If, for example, she told him that she would leave her husband for him, he'd never hesitate when she asked him to take out a heavy insurance policy, naming her as beneficiary."

"But where does Romeo, here, come in?" I asked. "What was the idea of his wacky call on me this morning?"

"Oh, Pop! Do you just have to be dumb? Can't you see it, yet? Rita and James Melton were working together. They let Murdock catch them together, knowing he'd make threats against Melton. Knowing that if Howard Reynolds was killed while standing close to Melton it would be taken as an attempt on Melton's life by Joe Murdock. Ballistics experts would find that the bullet had been fired from Murdock's registered gun and Murdock would pay."

She turned excitedly to Walsh. "Pop, here, was originally just meant to be a witness to the fact that Melton was afraid of being murdered. Then Pop had that fight with Murdock so Rita and Melton changed their plans a little. It didn't matter too much whether Reynolds was killed while standing next to Melton or next to Pop—Murdock had had trouble with both of them."

JAMES MELTON got to his feet and pulled one of my bannisters out of his collar. "It's a good story, kid," he said lightly. "Better than any your Old Man could dream up, I'm sure. But what are you going to use for proof?"

Detective Walsh stepped forward and pulled a set of handcuffs from under his coat. "Oh, that?" he asked lazily. "Well, to begin with, you're going to have a pretty hard time explaining why you're wearing Joe Murdock's suit. Then there's the insurance policy to explain and, I imagine, some of those construction workers must have seen you going up that ladder. However, if that isn't enough, we still have a trump card to play. That wrench you used to kill Reynolds is down at the station house, now, and I'll bet a nickel your fingerprints are all over it, pal."

James Melton smiled and shrugged his shoulders as he stepped forward. Suddenly he lashed out with the bannister, he still held, and charged for the door. But I guess Walsh must have been expecting something like that. In all my life, I've never heard a sweeter sound than those handcuffs banging against Melton's pretty, white teeth!

I was still grinning happily when I limped upstairs. Hobbling into my sweatshop, I reached under the pile of rejection slips. My happy grin faded out, right away.

My bottle of sinus remedy was gone!

I straightened up slowly. Pat was standing in the door way, holding bandages and iodine. And right back of her was the Little Woman, staring grimly at me. Boss, I knew then and

(Continued on Page 92)

KILLER OF FIRE

By MARCUS LYONS

Wherein Bicarbonate Johnny deals with a painting that may be phony, a Cellini frame which is also doubtful, an ex-Mussolini man whose conversion is questionable, and one hundred percent genuine arson and bullets!

IT WAS a cinch the road to the house was too long to walk; anybody living on a property this size would need a chauffeur just to get to meals. Besides, a sign on the gatepost said "Beware of the Dogs."

Under the sign was a bell-button and a speaking grid. Bicarbonate Johnny punched the button.

"Hello?"

"Police."

"Yessir, Mr. MacDonald's expecting you. We'll send a car down at once."

The ride did not take quite as long as Johnny expected. The white, quasi-Colonial house popped up behind a clump of trees only five minutes away from the gate. He had expected to have to explain his visit to anywhere from two to ten flunkies, but everyone he met seemed to know all about him. He was passed from hand to hand faster than an aluminum dime.

MacDonald himself finally took Johnny out of circulation and he was allowed to sit down. "Quite a country you govern," he said. "Ever have any disturbances along the border?"

The gas-and-electric king's pink cheeks developed dimples. "Ah-ha-ha," he said appreciatively. "I like a man with a sense of humor; means he's alert. It takes an acute eye to see the incongruous—and isn't that the essence of humor?"

"I wouldn't know," Johnny shrugged. "Most of the incongruities I see in my business aren't exactly funny—more anatomical, if you follow me. The Chief tells me you need protection of some sort...?"

"Of a rather peculiar sort," agreed MacDonald. "I suppose you're familiar with Customs procedure, since I asked Chief Enright—"

"I'm not a specialist. Any detec-

tive in a port city has to know the docks, though. And the Customs officials themselves are a pretty sharp-eyed bunch. Have to be, considering what gets tried on them one time or another."

The power trust magnate shook his head. "That's not quite what I mean. Let me show you the whole picture. Six years ago I was in Italy on my usual summer vacation—"

"I remember," Johnny said drily, "your usual magazine article afterwards, about the wonders of the Mussolini 'reforms.'"

The plump pink face lost some of its affability. "I wasn't the only one to be mistaken about him—and I've freely admitted the mistake. Anyhow that has no bearing. What is important is that I arranged with the Museum in Turin for the purchase of a painting—Cosimo Visala's Death of Adonis, to be specific. It was a fairly sizable canvas and the Fascist Ministry of Arts at first wouldn't give permission; but the Turin collection was, is still, magnificent, and they finally agreed that they wouldn't miss one minor Renaissance picture in all that splendour. The price I offered was no small argument in itself, I suppose."

"I not only don't know much about art, I don't even know what I like," Johnny said. "But I can't see why you'd offer a whopping price for something you yourself describe as 'minor.'"

MACDONALD nodded approvingly. "If they hadn't had a dangerously small treasury that might have occurred to them also. The picture is good but nothing very priceless in itself. What hit me the first time I saw it was that it was surrounded by a Cellini frame."

"Even I know that name. And the



Museum authorities didn't know this?"

"No. Cellini made only a few frames, exactly how many nobody knows.

As for the authorities, even the best of them seldom stop to think that a frame might be valuable, when they work surrounded by pictures worth hundreds of thousands. Finally, the head man at Turin was just an amateur, who got his job through Party patronage; he wouldn't have known the painting itself to be a Visala if he hadn't the catalogue under his nose."

Johnny felt in his pocket for his soda-mint bottle. "Okay. Go on."

"Well, the deal was closed and I left with the understanding that the painting, frame and all, was to be

shipped after me. I paid only half the purchase price to make sure. But I got a bad break; the war started almost immediately afterward, and I couldn't get delivery."

"Tough," said Johnny expressionlessly.

"Annoying, anyhow. As soon as the scrap was over I sent a representative to Turin, and found that the new Republic is quite as short of cash as the Fascists were, and is quite as willing to part with the painting for the other thousand. But they don't know now whether the painting is genuine." He leaned forward earnestly. "During the bombings by the American Air Force, the Nazis carted it off, and the new museum directors believe a copy was made of it while it was up north.

They *think* the one the Allies returned to them is the real one. My representative says that if it's a copy, it's good enough to fool him. But I can't be sure."

"Where do I come in to all this?"

"I'm coming to that. I've had an offer from the copyists."

Johnny looked puzzled.

"The FBI already has the details of how I got it. Enough for now that I've had an offer through a sort of underground, presenting what I think to be sure proof that they were the ones who had the painting, and the ones that made the copy. They claim the picture at Turin that I'm shelling out so much money for is the copy, and that they still have the real one."

"What about the frame?"

"That's what I wish I knew. I don't know whether the copyists knew the value of the frame any more than the Fascists did. If the present Turin painting is a copy, but with the original frame, I'll take it. If it's the real thing without the original frame, I don't give a damn about it. Ditto the offer from the Germans. Are they trying to fob the copy off on me, knowing I want the frame around it? Or do they actually have the original and don't know about the frame? Or did they keep the original and send the frame back, hoping I'd think they were still together? Or—"

Johnny burped despairingly. "Stop! You've mixed me up enough already. I can see you're in a quandry, Mr. MacDonald, but it's not a police matter." He stood up. "If the FBI have the data on the Germans, the rest is your personal problem."

MacDonald waved a plump, molting hand. "Please sit down. All this is just background, as I said. The heart of the matter is that I must see the Turin painting, frame and all—I have no other way to be sure. And to do that I have to have police help, because it has to be smuggled in."

"Smuggled in? Why?"

"Because if the Germans don't

know about the frame, they may still have it. If they hear that I've had the Turin picture—mind you, the original, but in a copied frame—shipped to me, they may simply conclude that the game is up and destroy their copy, real frame and all. I'll be the owner of a real Cosimo Visala worth maybe \$3,000; they'll shrug their shoulders and burn \$25,000 worth of Cellini frame."

"I see," Johnny said. "Then you want us to arrange with the Customs officials that the painting is passed into this country without going through the regular channels, so that the German representatives here won't be tipped off that you have it. Then, if the frame isn't the one you want, you can pay the Turin people for their painting in secret, and open negotiations with the copyists."

HE SUCKED abstractedly at a mint, ignoring MacDonald's pleased nod. "We could do that much legally, I think. I'll ask the boys on the Commissioner's staff to make sure, but it seems possible enough to me. What I don't figure, though, is how we're going to keep from tipping our hands. If you try to have the Turin painting smuggled in, there's about a 95 per cent chance that the Germans will hear about it despite everything and try to substitute their copy—if it is a copy. Customs couldn't possibly protect the Turin shipment strongly enough to prevent that without tipping them off."

MacDonald kneaded his palms nervously. "If the Turin shipment is secret enough—"

"We'll do our best at that—but don't depend on it. Your copyists are Nazis." It was a statement, not a question, and MacDonald didn't deny it. "If they're smart enough to escape the fine-comb delousing that's going on in Germany now, they must have a pretty good organization, with a damn efficient spy system. The Gestapo was one of the finest ever at one time—it had to be to keep the Nazis in power."

He got up again, and MacDonald made no move to detain him this time. At the door Johnny turned

briefly, smiling at one corner of his mouth.

"We'll be as quiet as we can about it, Mr. MacDonald. But if we have to pit flatfeet and baggage inspectors against a crack espionage system, or even the remains of one—well, don't expect too much."

WHEN JOHNNY left the library it was time for his afternoon milk. He hated the stuff, but the sawbones insisted on two glasses a day, between meals, to keep his innards from digesting themselves. He kept his mind off what he was drinking as best he could by drinking it in a bar, an old hangout of his newspaper days where the barkeep would supply him in a booth without having to be asked.

He came in through the Family Entrance and rang his signal on the buzzer. As the barkeep brought out the bottle, a lush young lady perched on a stool at the front eyed it knowingly, stood up, and walked down the line of booths.

"Hi, Johnny."

"Well, I'll be damned. Hello, Rita. How'd you track me down here?"

"I followed the cow, of course. Mind if I crouch?"

Johnny nodded across the table to the empty bench and pushed the buzzer again. "I haven't seen you since Robin Wyckoff got canned. I thought you'd be mad with me for that. (No, stupid, not more milk—some Scotch for the lady.)"

"Why should I be?" she countered. "Who told you the Hood's hideout was in Bendix Ford in the first place?"

"You did, of course—I never thought of that. So that's why you weren't on tap when we pulled the raid. Now I remember—you said Robin was giving you the dirty end of the stick." He looked at her sharply. "What are you doing now, if it's any of my business?"

She looked down demurely into her drink. Johnny noted with a start that her right hand, resting quietly palm down on the table top, held a silver dollar which was "travelling"

from thumb to pinky and back again apparently of its own volition. "I've got a job, one that give me a chance to use my talents now and again."

"Talent," said Johnny, "is a synonym for bosom in some circles."

"I mean what Black Hermann taught me. Besides being crooked, he was a pretty rinky-dink sort of magician as far as big effects and apparatus went. But on sleight-of-hand he was good. He could handle anything smaller than he was." At this point the cartwheel whiffed out of existence, though her fingers did not seem to move.

"So I see," said Johnny drily. "I'm not sure but what I would have preferred my first definition. Don't forget I won't be able to pull you out of another jam like the last one, next time your sleight-of-hand overcomes you. I fall off the strait-and-narrow only once in any given field nowadays—it's not like the newspaper game."

Rita looked pained. "Whatever deal you're working on now, I'll lay money it's not as honest as what I'm doing."

Now it was Johnny's turn to look down into his glass. He looked away again in a hurry. "You're probably right," he admitted finally. "I've got official sanction from the FBI, but it amounts to just plain smuggling all the same." Quickly he outlined the situation as MacDonald had presented it to him.

"The painting's to go to an address in the Village the moment it comes ashore," he finished. "MacDonald's taking no chances on its being hijacked on the way to his estate if it does have the real frame. The address is owned by a young painter friend of his, that he's been helping along with checks here and there. The kid is poor enough to be impressed with having \$3,000 worth of oily canvas in his joint, and isn't likely to give the frame much thought. It seems the frame needs a good shave, shower, shine and shampoo to look like anything much, anyhow, except to an expert."

The girl swizzled her drink idly. "Brother MacDonald isn't long on

faith and trust, I see. Has he any reason to suspect the kid?"

"None that I know of. I'm on my way down there to see if I have any reason."

"Sounds like fun. I haven't been in the Village since Hermann got hired for that V-J block party. I'll tag along."

"Nothing doing," Johnny said flatly. "I'm confused enough by this whole business, without your perfuming it dizzy and...ah..." He patted his pockets and then investigated each one with a puzzled forefinger. "Damn. Ah, Rita, I seem to be out of dough. Could I—"

"Do I get to go along?"

Johnny glared at her, but he never much wanted to be good at staring at a pretty woman down. Especially not this one. He collapsed abruptly. "All right," he agreed, shifting his glass nervously.

The cartwheel was under it.

902 Huygens Avenue was a dismal railroad tenement, unheated and rickety; but Johnny was surprised to find the inside of Martin Camp's apartment comfortable and warm.

"I DON'T hit these parts much since my legman days," he said. "But I kind of miss the legless furniture and the empty wine bottles with candles stuck in them."

Camp laughed. "That's tourist bait," he replied. "The Village is crammed with fakes, of course. But a lot of serious people live down here, for the low rentals. I've even got a fireplace, though it doesn't give out much heat."

"Seems warm enough."

"Courtesy of the kitchen stove and a kerosene burner. The fireplace has a tin floor—wasn't really meant for wood fires at all, but just as a flue for a Franklin. I don't chance a real blaze in it, just a few decorative flames and cracklings." He smiled at Rita; she smiled back appreciatively.

"Urp," said Johnny. "About this painting. You're sure you have everything straight."

"Yes, pretty sure. It comes in the night of the 14th. I'm to leave the

place about six or seven in the afternoon and go out to MacDonald's. You'll take my key this afternoon and get a duplicate made. I'm to come home after midnight."

"That's right. When you leave here, don't take a cab. Go by subway, and change trains often in both directions. You might get off midway and take a cab back a few stations, at that. MacDonald will have a chauffeur to meet you at the far end. When you get back the painting will be here."

Camp nodded reflectively. "Suppose somebody follows the painting instead of me?"

"That'll take a genius, the way we've got it rigged; but you'll be armed just on that long chance. We know about everyone in this building and who their likely visitors are. If we see a stranger enter your apartment he'll be nabbed. All you have to do is take care of the picture after it's here."

The painter got up and poked at the miniature fire. "I still think the whole business can't fail to attract attention," he said. "If people around here have been questioned, and the building will be watched on the crucial night, and your visit here, and so on—anybody who really wants to pinch the painting has a hundred signposts to where it is."

"Scared?"

"No," said Camp, flushing. "As a matter of fact, I rather enjoy being a partner to all this. But so much surveillance does seem to defeat itself."

Johnny smiled. "Don't you worry about that. If you have any radio-show ideas about clumsy cops in your head, forget them. The city police are set up specifically to keep several jumps ahead of the cleverest crooks. If you have any trouble here, it'll be because the guy who makes it already knows you're to receive the painting—not because he's seen a 200-pound policeman crouching in your garbage can in a bright blue coat."

He got up and put on his hat. "Coming, Rita?"

In the car he allowed himself to look faintly, worried.

"What's the matter, Johnny?"

"Nothing I can put my finger on. The kid seems to be all right. I'm just afraid he's right about our tipping our hands. If it weren't that this business seems to involve a skillful spy-ring, I'd forget about it."

Rita settled herself deeper into the cushions. "He can take care of himself, I guess. He has nice shoulders. By the way, what do you suppose this is?"

Johnny jockeyed the car out of an incipient game of crinkle-fender and glanced sidewise. The girl held a large, knife-like object with a rounded tip.

"Crisake. Did you pinch that from Camp? It's only a spatula or a palette-knife or something. Now he'll have to buy another one."

"I'm going to give it to you," she announced firmly. "It's got gold paint on it. I owe you that much for the trip."

The car bumped into the tail of an ice-truck. Johnny became unprintable.

THE night of the 14th was for Johnny the most maddening one of his life. It was not that there was any trouble, but just that all the knots were square ones. The complexities of the case, the most ambiguous one to which he'd ever been assigned, made him a sort of general instead of a detective, and he shuttled nervously back and forth between the pier and the phone booth in the nearby bar.

"The kid left on schedule, Johnny. Nothing going on around his place yet."

"Coast Guard reports the Tampico on schedule."

"Nothing at MacDonald's. The chauffeur left for the station about ten minutes ago."

"We've got a cargo assay from the Tampico, just in by radio at Customs. Routine stuff, agrees with ours to the last decimal."

"Port Authority says they've sent tugs, she's entering the harbor."

"This is Quarantine, detective.

Your mystery ship has a clean bill of health."

"Camp just arrived at MacDonald's. The two of 'em are drinking in the big front room. Nobody's phoned from his place yet."

"Headquarters. The prowler car says the waterfront's quiet."

"Nothing suspicious in the Village, Johnny. Sean's got your car if you need it."

Johnny rumbled discontentedly and went back onto the dock. Its brightly-lit, barn-like interior was in a state of suspension, the Customs men at their posts waiting for their work to begin. The lights of the Tampico burned clear and bright on the river as the tugs warped her toward her berth. A small motor launch purred in alongside and a plain-clothesman got out.

"Harbor Patrol," he introduced himself. "The pilot gives us the all-clear-aboard. None of our launches have seen any boats put off from her or anything else out of the way. Are you sure you've got the right ship?" "Anything I'm sure of in this deal is a cinch to be dead wrong," Johnny gloomed. "I'm not used to operating in six places at once—I keep thinking people are whispering behind my back, like in the halitosis ads."

Vroom, vroom, the Tampico's whistle announced fatuously. The tugs fussed around her like nurses around a fat idiot. Her sharp nose turned in beside the pier. There was a gentle thump which swayed the boards under Johnny's feet.

At once everybody was in action. Amid the usual confusion—augmented a little at Johnny's orders by the Customs men, who took pains to do a number of useless things in purposeful fashion—the long-planned machinery began to operate.

The big cranes unloaded crate after crate from the ship's hold, and dropped them in chalked-out spots. Fifth crate out fell accurately near the checker's booth. Nobody paid any attention to it. It was soon buried, like the rest, under a high stack of identical boxes. The ship's few passengers filed out, had their baggage inspected. The Customs

agents were unusually stinking about unimportant items of contraband that night, and no amount of bribery seemed to help. There was a great deal of loud haggling and of subdued muttering about the gawdam bureaucracy. In the midst of it one of the crane operators lost hold of a crate twenty feet above the dock, which made quite a mess. Several people gathered interestedly while he was bawled out for drinking on the job.

During the uproar, a series of trucks bearing the signs of the most diverse businesses drove in and out again, steadily reducing the pile which had buried Crate 5. Eventually that stack, and Crate 5, were gone. Twenty trucks headed for wildly divergent parts of the city. One of them, ostensibly belonging to an obscure hide-tanning firm on the waterfront, pulled up at 902 Huygens, about four doors down from the firm's receiving office.

"Johnny? We unpacked it en route and rewrapped it like you ordered. Nobody in the kid's flat. It's hung in the middle room on the second nail."

"Camp left MacDonald's all right. No prowlers or any other trouble."

"No duplicate crates but ours show in the Tampico's inventory."

"Passengers all gone to the homes they listed in the ship's log."

"Sean says all quiet in the Village. If you need the car there, holler."

"The ship's empty, and been put under seal. Nobody's attempted to board it."

"Headquarters. Camp just arrived and made the okay signal at his window. Light's out. Nobody in or out of the building except the regulars all night."

Johnny collapsed in a booth, fumbled for a mint, and sighed wearily. One hell of a night. Now he knew what Eisenhower must have gone through. The barkeep deposited a glass of milk in front of him, sloshing it disgustedly. Having cops in the place all night scaring away his regulars was bad enough, but milk to boot—!

The phone rang. Johnny forced himself to his feet.

"Go away," he said. "Everything's through here."

"Oh, it is," the chief's voice said acidly. "That's great. Well, gallop your tail over to the Village as soon as Sean picks you up. Things are still going on there."

"Such as what?"

"902 is on fire."

"LEFT next corner," Johnny shouted above the keen of the siren. Sean nodded brusquely.

"I don't need no directions," the Sergeant bellowed, swivelling the wheel. "I'm bein' led by a pillar of fire, an' no kidding."

From the street Sean's description was just. The six-story tenement was not burning on the outside at all—but every window glared a sickly orange, and from the building's roof a single tall plume of flame howled skyward. Johnny vaulted from the running board as the car pulled up and elbowed his way through the knot of half-dressed tenants and neighbors toward the fire-chief.

"Can't hear a word," the chief holstered. "You mean how come it acts like that?"

Johnny nodded, jumping sidewise as a flat hose by his feet arched its back suddenly to an inrush of water.

"It's going up the airshaft. Planned that way, seems like."

"Why?"

"Basement windows all open, front and back doors open, airshaft windows in the basement and this Camp's apartment open. All the outside windows closed, that's normal for cold weather."

"Set up like a furnace under forced draught, eh?"

"Yep. Burn the heart right outa the place while we're trying to cut our way in to the source."

Inside there was a rending crash as a beam fell. The shining column of flame was spangled with sparks. Johnny spun on his heel and grabbed Sean.

"Get to the car. Radio for a drag-

net. All around this block and the uptown one. Fast!"

Sean snapped his mouth shut and ran. Johnny lit out in the other direction, toward the golden glare—

"Chief!"

"Johnny, look out—"

"Johnny!"

"Grab him, somebody—ah, the damned idiot—"

The waterfall-like roar of the fire shut out the confused shouts and screams. Johnny ran steadily down the hall, breathing as evenly and lightly as he could. Automatically his hand grasped the rail as he mounted the stairs, as automatically it was snatched away, seared. The walls of the narrow shaft smoldered, and he had to stop breathing altogether. Already he was baked beyond sweating.

About a minute and a half—to climb six stories to the roof.

By the fourth flight he was ready to give in. His lungs were twin sacs of acid, his eyes rasping in their sockets, his senses almost gone—

Five—

At six he fell, got up again. Below something collapsed and the stone treads quivered. The door to the roof grew in a hot haze—

AT THE top he learned something about fire. He pushed open the door and drew in a grateful breath. At the same second the long column of air in the stairwell, well above the ignition point and at last given an outlet, blasted into flame all at once.

Luckily, flash fires don't explode—they implode, sucking in air to feed themselves. Except for that simple fact, Johnny's deep breath would have been all heat. As it was, the muffled whroom nearly knocked him out; for a second he couldn't remember why he had climbed. A sharper sound and a smack in the tarpaper behind him brought him to. He threw himself down on the hot roof.

"Camp!" he bellowed hoarsely. "The block's surrounded! Give up, or you'll cook!"

The pistol cracked again. Then

the sound of running feet, retreating. Johnny rolled over and sat up, quickly but carefully. His clothing still smoked.

All the buildings on the block stood cheek to cheek. It was an easy matter to go from one roof to another; though the fire would follow. Against the blackness of the winter sky, the firelight picked out a leaping figure, then lost it.

Johnny pounded after it, glad enough to leave the deck of the furnace. As he leapt the first cornice the gun sounded again, and he ducked. This was bad—he was a prime target, silhouetted against the flames.

"Camp! Don't be a damn fool!"

For answer he saw the pink-lined back soaring again, a pink hand holding what looked like a stick. Then it vanished. There was a very loud thump. The next tenelement, Johnny remembered, was a floor lower than this one.

"The kid's got guts," he told himself.

He peered over. The next roof, in the total shadow of the fire, was ink-soaked. Its far edge was the brink of the alley. Before he could adjust his eyes, another shot made him yank his head back.

He edged one eye sidewise, infantry fashion, over the brick rim. There he was. He was running again—why—where—

At the brink of the alley the figure did not hesitate. Up it went, light against the darker sky. Unwillingly Johnny prayed he'd make it—

He did. The detective unhesitatingly vaulted the parapet and struck with a crash one flight down—picked himself up—ran. He didn't stop to think. If the kid could do it, so could he. He tensed his tired muscles and sprang.

The alley, a dim canyon, glided beneath his feet...The roof looked miles away—he was falling—

THUMP!

It was like being reprieved from the chair. He looked around for

Camp, half expecting another shot. All the tenements on this block were of equal height. In a moment he saw the leaping figure again, half-way down. His own gun was out now, but he didn't fire yet—it would be too much like aiming at a jumping-jack.

The street on the far end was wider and brighter. Even at this distance it made a perceptible yellow haze. Against it he saw a dark shape once more, and brought the big Police Positive to bear—

Wait—there was another man—and another—

Before he had time to realize what had happened, a blinding yellow eye blazed out, a yellow-white beam roved across the roof. Sean! For once he'd used his head—

The blazing finger fastened upon a slight form, clung to it. It dodged, half blinded, but the light followed it relentlessly.

"Sean! Don't shoot!"

Johnny ran forward. Camp got into the shadow of a chimney-pot, scuttled sideways along it, but Johnny could still see him. The young artist paused, raised his gun, lowered it. Then he was running again—jumped—

"Camp! My Gawd, Camp—stop—"

High over the broad cobbled expanse of Huygens Avenue the small shape soared—the light glinted dull gold from something in its hand—higher—

The searchlight snapped out as it began to fall. At 902 the flames laughed mercilessly.

AT THE bar two Scotches and a glass of milk fraternized sullenly. Rita travelled the cartwheel—or its twin—from knuckle to knuckle and listened.

"It was a sweet plan," the fire chief was saying. "Without evidence of some other crime, nobody could have charged him with arson in a million years. He just built a fire in his fireplace, that's all. Of course he built it too high for that single sheet of tin flooring the fireplace had, and the floor underneath

caught; but that's a common mistake. We get up to two hundred fires a year in this town from the same cause, most of 'em innocent accidents."

"Then why did he shoot at Johnny?" Rita demanded.

"Because," said Johnny, "he wanted to claim that the painting—and the frame—had been burnt up. He didn't expect anyone to climb after him. When I came up there he either had to get me or jettison the frame. He chose to pot me, thinking I'd be cremated right there on the roof."

He shuddered and grasped his milk in a bandaged paw. "I've never been deader so certainly and gotten out of it by a hair more often, I'll tell you that."

"So I'm stupid," Rita said. "I don't see why he didn't just drop the frame. He only had a quarter of it. That couldn't have been worth anything."

"It was the only side of it that was worth anything, and even that not as a work of art. You see, I found out at the library that there never was any Cosimo Visala called Death of Adonis, and that the only frames Cellini made are accounted for. That was why MacDonald insisted on a police detective instead of a specialist; he thought he could pull some slick talk about art, throw in a famous name like Cellini, and get away with it... Me, I'm ready to admit I don't know much about anything—but I know where to find out, and that's all I need to know."

He licked his lips unenthusiastically. "The Turin museum official was in cahoots with the Nazi group from the beginning. I knew that as soon as they answered my cable and told me they did have a Visala by that title. MacDonald in turn is still as friendly with Fascists as he ever was. The money he paid was earmarked for the Nazi underground. More was to be sent over, but the museum gag would only work once. The painting itself carried new instructions for forwarding more money."

"In the frame?"



"Right. Picture frames of that type are made of a stuff called incised gesso. They're carved in wood, then a layer of Plaster of Paris is put on, and then a layer of gold leaf on top. The message was written in the plaster before the gold leaf was applied, and then the whole thing was systematically dulled and dirtied to make it look authentic.

"If Fascists weren't so damn suspicious of everybody, including each other, it would have worked like a charm. Camp could have read the message, burned it along with the house, and we'd never have been able to prove a thing. But MacDonald never trusts anybody. The message was in a code known only to him."

"But how'd you guess the frame held the message, and not the fake painting?"

"I didn't at first," Johnny admitted. "I thought the business about

the frame was a blind to take my mind off the canvas itself. Otherwise I could have stopped the whole deal earlier. Then something turned up—" He stopped abruptly and looked unhappy. "I just sort of guessed," he finished lamely.

The chief got up. "Every professional has to have one secret," he said indulgently. "A good night's work, anyhow, Johnny." He grinned and left.

Johnny looked at Rita with reproach. "There you go, lousing me up again," he complained.

"I didn't! I mean, how did I?"

"The frame deal. That thing you stole from Camp turned out to be a gilder's knife. Used for nothing but handling gold leaf. And will you explain to me how I'm going to put that in a report without running you in?"

He arose and put his unbandaged hand into his pocket. "Urp," he said.

"What's wrong?"

"Ah, Rita—I seem to have lost my wallet on the roof—could I—that cartwheel—"

"Look under your glass," she said tranquilly.

THE END

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912 AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Crack Detective Stories published bi-monthly at Holyoke, Mass., for October 1, 1946.

State of New York
County of New York

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Crack Detective Stories and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Business Manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stocks. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc. 241 Church Street,

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3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is— (This information is required from daily publications only.)

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher.)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1946, Maurice Coyne. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) (SEAL)

Death Goes Downstairs

By T. W. FORD

To play a grisly trick upon the chosen instrument of Death's presence!

IT WAS a beautiful staircase, flowing upward with a sweeping curve from the well of the hall. The spindles of the bending banister were of some thin white wood with the top of the railing a slender black track of metal, the whole thing weblike, fragile appearing as a delicate tracing. It arced over the hall ascending to vanish into the maw of the upstairs hallway between walls of roughened bisque plaster. But Nathalia Devron was oblivious to the perfection of it as her long shapely legs propelled her up the stairs, sliding in and out of the sheathe of her black velvet evening gown. The party was over, the tires of the last departing car crunching off on the gravel of the drive outside. She knew there were going to be repercussions to this night when the news of her secret engagement broke. And Rand Rollins, that wily Cafe Society reporter, had somehow wormed out the facts on it. Now she had this final unpleasant chore to perform, saying goodnight to her grandfather.

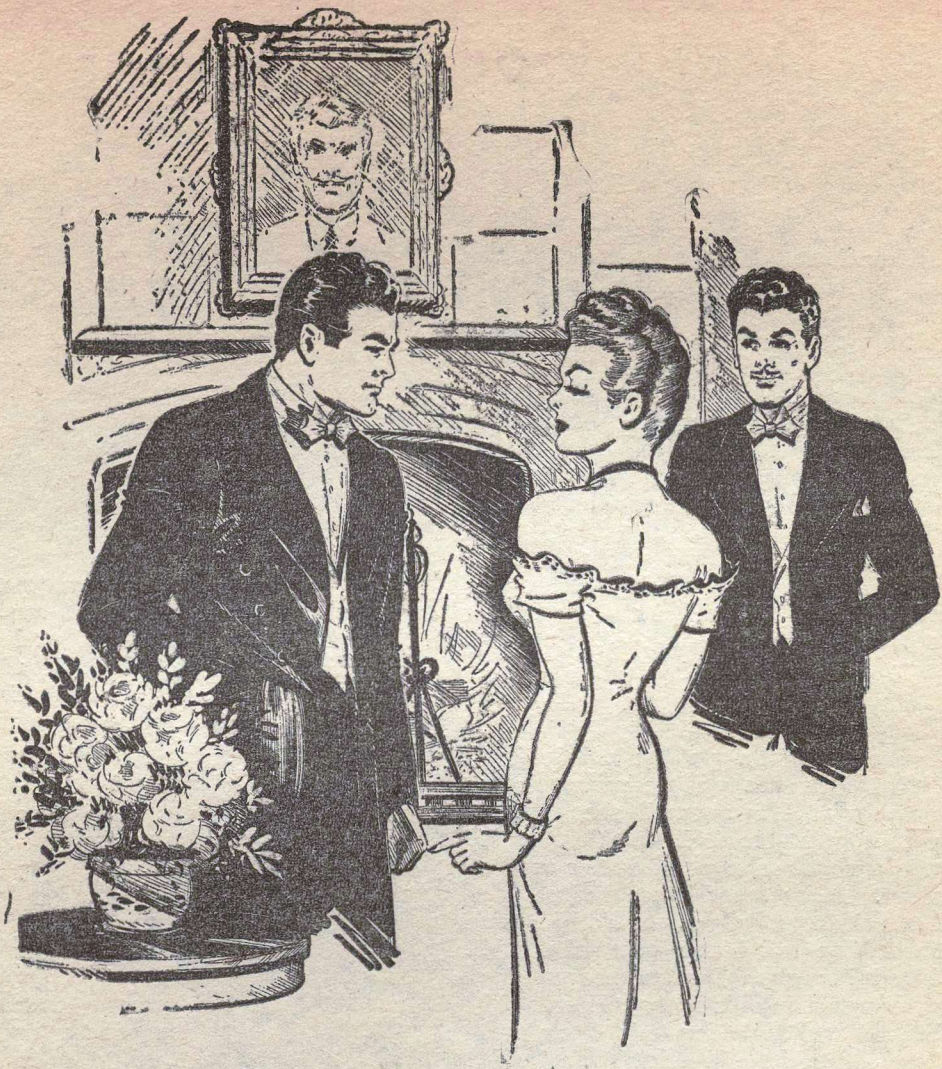
One of those musical horns spun its melodious three-note tune on the gathering silence of the night. Laughter like a forgotten echo floated back to the big house. Nathalia's soft, self-indulgent mouth curled momentarily. She wished she were going off with that horn and the easy laughter, away from this house and this grandfather who had grown to hate her.

She paused to glance across at the portrait of her dead mother hanging on the opposite wall of the hall, Evans Devron's daughter. The daughter he had cut off when she eloped with a second-rate actor who'd deserted her. The girl studied the hair as black as a raven's wing, the gray eyes, the ripe mouth with its eagerness to taste the sensations life

had to offer—the portrait she herself had come to resemble so in the last few years. This resemblance was what had caused her grandfather to turn away from her, to threaten to change his will and cut her off too when he was in one of his wild imperious rages. Nathalia shivered, fearing she possessed the same avid appetite for everything life had to offer, the appetite that had destroyed her mother.

One of her long nails tapped sharply on the cartridge of lipstick in her right hand. She looked out through the fan-shaped skylight above the front door. The lights were still on down at the pool. That would be Ronnie, her cousin; the child loved to swim. Nathalia sighed, wishing she were as simple and innocent as Ronnie. Then she thought of Ramon Garz, the man Ronnie was to marry and her gray eyes narrowed. She didn't trust the too-slick Garz.

She went on up the stairs, paused in the hall opposite her grandfather's apartment. She felt terribly sorry for him. Nine years ago a serious automobile accident had left him with withered legs and a dangerous heart ailment. He lived in a wheelchair, scarcely able to walk across a room, embittered and cantankerous. But when he had those maniacal fits of temper—the girl dug her spike of heel into the thick-pile broadloom carpeting of the dim hall. She almost wished he would make a new will and get it over with. But only this morning the attorney had told the family, her and Ronnie, that the drawing of a new one would only be an empty gesture. His heirs could raise the question of his sanity in court, using as evidence those wild fits of temper he had. The lawyer himself did not regard Evans Devron in his right mind when in one.



Pen Shumaker

SHE CROSSED the hallway to the door of her grandfather's apartment, girding herself, opened the door and stepped into its private foyer. Then she stopped in mid-stride in surprise.

"You—here? Why—" Then her eyes slanted beyond the other and glimpsed the age-yellowed hair of her grandfather. It lay flung in disorder over the Aubusson carpet of his private living room at the end of his awkwardly sprawled body. "Grandfather! Good Lord, what's happened? He—"

Too late she saw the hand coming

out from behind the figure blocking her path, the hand bearing an Italian stiletto. She threw up an arm, clawed for the other's wrist. The dark steel blade snaked by her hand and plunged deep into her body at the base of the left breast. Pain ripped open her lush mouth for a scream. A hand clamped off it and it simply became a long tortured sigh like the slow escape of hissing steam. The hand pushed her rearward. She stumbled and swayed out through the door, across the narrow upper hall. Poised at the head of the curving staircase, back to it.

Then she went down, pitching backward, bouncing horribly down the stairs. Her velvet-clad body twisted half over once, was thrown up against the beige-hued plaster of the inside wall. It left a reddish smear there. Then she was slipping on downward like some discarded falling doll, the speed of her descent slowing. Six steps from the bottom, she stopped, lying on her back, head downward and dangling, bent legs several steps higher, her skirt peeled halfway up her thighs. Her right arm was flung straight out across one of the risers, the hand, close to the side wall, still clutching that cartridge of lipstick. Her fingers twitched once around it. The blossomlike stain of blood on her black velvet bosom ceased to grow any larger....

VICTOR SPEAR, private eye, was out in the pantry comforting Evans Devron's private nurse. Her name was Nancy and she was a plump, pert-faced little blonde; it was a pleasure to comfort her as she wept. They stood there before the little barette. Spear smoothed his threadline of black mustache and lifted his glass for another sample of Evans Devron's sixty odd year old brandy and tightened his other arm around the little blonde's shoulder.

"Now, now, honey, take it easy. Take it easy," he purred. "When you get back to town, you look me up in my office. You won't have any trouble getting a job. Papa Vic will take care of everything, honey."

She snuggled closer against his well-tailored shoulder as she sobbed. "But—I put brandy in his milkshake. It was against the doctor's orders, but he insisted. So I did. I remember now measuring out the brandy and putting it in and—and then stepping into the kitchen for a tray. And then, when I got it upstairs, he tasted it and swore I'd put gin in it. He th-threw it at me and called me the most awful names and told me I was f-fired."

"There, there," Spear said gently, lowering his arm to her waist and

lifting her pert face by the chin. "You just look me up in town and everything will be all right." He smiled down at her. Spear was a small, dapper man with a chunk of round bold face and big half-smiling black eyes that were insolence incarnated. He had a trick of putting a sneer in his quick voice. In the precisely-tailored gray double-breasted suit with the meticulously black knit cravat over a salmon-hued shirt and the hair like patent leather, he looked like a sissified little dandy.

"There, honey, there now," he started again, stroking the blonde's cheek. Then he became aware of the slow repeated thumping off somewhere in the still house. He snapped fingers across the blonde's bee-stung lips to silence her as he tensed his senses. There was a break in the thumping sound. Then it came again, irregularly, slower. Experience told him that noise was that of a falling body.

Nancy had curled fingers about his coat lapel. He pushed her away brusquely, unconsciously made a face as he noted the wet tear stains on his coat, then stepped briskly from the pantry. He went down the corridor to the big studio living room and out the arched doorway at the end of it into the circular hall. And he looked into the upside-down face of Nathalia Devron on the stairs.

EVEN as he went through the routine of kneeling beside her to check for a heartbeat he knew she was gone. He had seen too many stiffs. That waxy pallor had started to creep up over and set the beautiful features. He made a soft whistling sound between his teeth, shaking his head, eyes sliding around swiftly to take in every detail of the picture. Low on the wall at the inside of the stairs were a few flecks of blood, a red smudge. Spear shook his sleek glistening head.

"Baby, how could anybody hate you that much?" he asked the corpse.

He was just coming off his knees when the footsteps grated on the gravel beyond the big white front door that was open. Spear stepped

back to one side as he brought out a hammered silver cigaret case calmly. Little brown-haired Ronnie Devron stopped dead on the threshold, her mouth torn open but no sound issuing from it. A slow tear rolled down her cheek. It was the second one, Spear noted with his big buglike eyes.

Behind her, towering over her, was her fiance, Ramon Garz, dark and handsome in a white summer tuxedo jacket with a maroon cummerbund. With the hollow-cheeked face and the slashes of long blue eyes he had a certain picaresque look that made women crazy about him. His large white teeth snapped together audibly and he said clearly:

"Good Lord in heaven! What's happened here?"

"Maybe she didn't pay her bridge debts," Spear said sarcastically. "Somebody put a lot of steel in her where it would do the most harm."

Garz threw an arm about his fiancée who swayed as she moved slowly into the house. "Why you rotten dog!" he threw at Spear. "What a filthy thing to say!"

Spear made a casual gesture with his cigaret as he ran a palm over his lacquered head. "But not as stupid as what you said, friend." He wasn't impressed by Garz or his impressive manner. Or the fact that he called himself a Hollywood producer. He had made a check on Garz when he came on this job. That was when the cantankerous old Evans Devron seemed to have the hallucination somebody was trying to kill him and demanded protection. Nathalia had come to Spear's detective agency and hired him. It had been agreed he would be passed off as a house guest to avoid unnecessary publicity. It had seemed like a nice sinecure at the time. Nothing to do but lie around and eat and drink, sleep in the room adjoining old Evans' apartment, and drop in to see the old guy a few times a day.

But he had checked on Garz, engaged to Ronnie Devron, as a matter of routine. The bird was a bit too oily to suit Spear. Garz had been clean though. Been in the game out

in Hollywood and turned out a couple of quickies. That was all. His story was that he was East to dig up fresh capital for an epic he had lined up. The guy seemed to be a bit of a phoney; that was all there was against him.

SPEAR switched his eyes to Ronnie. She had a blue Terry cloth robe belted over her bathing suit. It made a nice contrast with her brown hair and girlish face. She looked very like a Dresden china doll as she stood, pale and frowning slightly, in the absurd wedgies with their preposterously thick cork soles. She wasn't gorgeous as was the late Nathalia, but she had a deep serene beauty in the well-moulded features of her round face. She was the type that would wear well, Spear had decided from the first. Then she spoke for the first time.

"Grandfather." The single word dropped coldly from her mouth. And her eyes were cold, almost savage, suddenly, with a venom nobody would have suspected in her.

Spear knew what she meant; Evans Devron, in one of his rages, had struck down this girl who reminded him so much of the daughter he had hated. Spear was back beside the body again, kneeling. But his eyes, hidden from the others, twisted to the right, to the wall with the red marks on it. He looked down at the hand that still clutched the lipstick in death. Its cap had rolled a couple of steps down.

"We must do something. We must do something," Ramon Garz said stupidly, puttering at the three points of the maroon handkerchief in the breast pocket of his tuxedo jacket.

"Stay right here, and don't touch anything," Spear ordered.

Garz took a step forward from the girl he was engaged to marry; scowling darkly. "Just who are you to tell us—" he began.

Spear had anticipated him, already flipping out a wallet. He fingered it open to his license to operate as a private detective and held it out. "A private eye, Garz, hired by old

Devron himself. I'm legal. This even gives me the right to pack a gun—which I've got up in my room now. So don't get too eager about anything!"

"What do you mean, Spear? If you're implying—"

"Nothing! Simple police routine. Stay here. I'll have a look at Evans Devron." He went up the stairs two at a time.

HE WASN'T surprised to find Evans Devron dead on the floor of his private apartment. Not too surprised, anyway. Spear bent low over the antique Italian dagger that lay a few inches from one of Devron's outstretched clawlike hands as if it had released it as the aged man fell. The hilt was chaste silver. Spear sneered at it. He knew damn well they'd find no fingerprints, at least none of any value, on it. He noted the lump on the back of the dead man's thin-haired skull.

"Clear as day and night," Spear muttered as the music from the radio down in the living room floated up the stairs in the stillness. "Evans Devron, in maniacal rage, knives grand-daughter whom he'd come to hate. Strain too great for his heart and he collapses, smashing his head against piece of furniture as he falls. That finishes him. Clear as day and night.... Only too damned clear," he finished, big eyes scornful as he straightened.

He checked the location of the late invalid's wheelchair, some twenty feet over in the far corner of the room beside the casement window. Near the other corner a set of French doors stood open on a small balcony. Spear moved toward it, passing the huge mahogany desk. Above it, mounted on a large plaque, were a collection of knives, daggers, stilettos, kris, cutlasses, dirks, poniards, bowies, a Philippine bolo, an ancient Chinese short sword. Before his accident had made a practical hermit of him, Evans Devron had been a world traveller, and one of his hobbies was the collection of knives.

There was an empty racket where the Italian cutter had been.

Spear sucked hard on his cigaret as he stepped onto the tiny balcony. The ground sloped up sharply behind the house. When he leaned over the iron rail, he saw it wasn't far down. And a vine-covered trellis ran up to the balcony. It would be simple for anybody, even a woman, to have scaled it and entered the room.

The radio orchestra was throbbing out a rhumba as Vic Spear trotted jauntily down the stairs. He went by Nathalia's body as if unaware of its existence. The housemaid, blanched as a freshly-laundered sheet, and the butler, his plump fat body twitching all over, had come into the hall now. Aside from the cook who had long since retired to her cottage out in the rear, that was all the help there was. Evans Devron hadn't liked a lot of people around him. They cluttered up the house, he used to say.

"Well?" said Garz impatiently.

SPEAR shrugged, motioned with his sleek head toward the upstairs. "Got a bad bump on the back of his head. Guess it brought on a heart attack. And you know how his heart was...." He told the rest with open extended palms as if to say, "What could you expect?" Then he moved toward the phone at the back of the two-storied hall.

He called county police headquarters of the smart New York suburb, asked for the Homicide Bureau, said, "Hello, Halleck? Then put Halleck on, please. And make it fast...." After a few moments, he went on, "Halleck? Victor Spear and no nasty cracks, please.... Uh-huh. I'm out at the Devron place. Yes. Somebody did some nasty killing out here. Maybe you'd like to have a little look, Halleck. And grab up a doctor on the way and rush him here. That's it.... I'll be seeing you, chum." He hung up and swung around on them and snapped just as Garz was about to speak, "Don't touch anything, you hear?"

"It seems awful to leave poor

Nathalia lying there like—like that," Ronnie Devron said in a hushed small childish voice.

"There's nothing nice about murder," Spear told her in a scornful voice. "Let's go in the living room—if you've had enough of your morbid staring."

Garz glared and his mouth formed a silent curse. Spear looked at him as if he were the kind of a guy who beat bills, told the butler to make up some stiff drinks, and waved them into the other room. He stepped back a moment for another look at the dead girl, frowning at the way the lipstick was smeared on her mouth....

THEY sat in the studio living room where so short a while before Nathalia had been the gayest one at the small party. Spear sipped his brandy and tapped the table he lounged against in time to the samba coming over the radio. Garz, sitting on the arm of the big chair where little Ronnie slumped, said it seemed pretty cut and dried.

"Evans had one of his half-insane fits again and—and, well, it's pretty obvious," Garz concluded.

"Is it?" Spear said with a bored air.

Ronnie lifted her head, looking like a wilted flower. "It seems too terrible, that even in a rage, grandfather could do—"

Spear snapped in icily, "Miss Devron, I ought to warn you anything you say can be used against you.... If I were you, I wouldn't speak till I'd engaged counsel."

The shocked silence was a gasping thing. Garz strode away from the chair, glaring over his glass. "What do you mean, Spear?"

"Just that the police will have some doubts whether a man in Evans Devron's condition, with his legs, could cross a room, spring on a woman, drive a dagger to the hilt in her so hard she was knocked out into the hall and fell down a flight of stairs." He glanced over at Nancy the nurse who stood in the doorway to the rear of the house, weeping more than ever now. "The police will look for

a motive. They always do." He patted back a yawn.

"Motive?" cried Garz.

"The young lady you're engaged to had one," Spear told him. "With Nathalia Devron dead, she becomes the only heir, the only relative left."

Ronnie straightened her little body in the Terry cloth robe. "I was in the pool when it happened. Ramon can testify to that. He was down there watching me swim."

"Yes, I was," said Garz smugly. "So Mr. Sherlock Holmes, I guess—"

SPEAR expelled smoke insolently. "Your testimony, Garz, a court would regard as prejudiced. After all, you're engaged to her. As her husband, too, you would share in the fortune. See? It looks nasty, doesn't it?" He was over, leaning above the seated girl, in a few quick strides. "You slip up from the pool, climb the trellis to the balcony of his room. You knock him out, then you let Nathalia have the works when she walks in. And you slip out and back into the water. Very simple, isn't it? You had the motive, lady. And Garz, like the chivalrous gent, is trying to save you, swearing he watched you in the pool. But it's no go, no go." He sneered as she shrivelled up before his storming words.

Garz was roaring a protest when Spear turned and neatly whipped the maroon handkerchief from the swarthy man's outer breast pocket. Spear snapped it open and the brighter shade of lipstick smudges could be seen on the fabric. "Doing a little necking, eh, Romeo?" Spear taunted.

Garz looked as if he would hit him. "I believe a man has the right to kiss the woman he intends to make his wife," he said stiffly.

Spear shook his head. "This lipstick is far redder than Miss Ronnie uses." He moved the handkerchief to his nose, whiffed. "And the perfume is far heavier; lotta musk in it." He flashed a glance toward the hall where the dead girl lay. "The lipstick on Nathalia's mouth has been smudged and blotted... Garz, we'll just let the police analyze what they find on this handkerchief and com-

pare it with the lipsticks used in this house."

A sharp gasp came from Ronnie as she stared at the maroon handkerchief. She saw Garz grab for it and miss. Her eyes sprang painfully wide and a slow horror began to crawl up in them. Spear flung back to her.

"Yes, you were in the pool, lady. And you were all alone. Then Ramon came down and told you Nathalia had been killed. He told you you could be suspected and that he'd say he was with you all the time, thus giving himself an alibi in reverse. Then—"

Garz broke in, suddenly suave. "Well, perhaps that was the way it happened. I was walking in the drive and saw her—" He nodded toward the hall. "So I hurried down to protect my future wife and—"

"That was the way it was, wasn't it?" Spear asked her.

Ronnie nodded woodenly, her wide eyes eating into the man she was engaged to marry. "Ramon, did you—could you—" she husked.

"Old Evans killed her in a fit," he snapped out, talking hurriedly. "Then the effort brought on a heart attack that killed him and—"

"Who said he was dead?" Spear asked mildly.

Garz jerked backward a step. "Why you said—you—"

"I never said he was dead, Garz. I said he'd been struck and had a heart attack... Why, didn't you hear me tell the police to rush a doctor along? When he is revived—" Spear's eyes sneered. "Garz, what made you think he was dead if you weren't up there in his room?"

"Ramon!" It was a shrill scream from Ronnie.

Big Garz' sagging jaw jerked up so his mouth was a vicious cruel-lipped slit in his handsome face. Then he had whipped a .32 from inside his dinner jacket. He backed in an arc toward the hall doorway, the words jerking out of him, nerve broken, but as dangerous as a cornered animal.

me up!" He cursed hoarsely. "But you weren't smart enough to carry your own gun, Mr. Detective. No, no... And there'll be another murder tonight if anybody tries to stop me now. Ha-ha!" The laughter had a crazy ring.

Spear paced after him, stalking him calmly as he ran a palm over his patent leather hair. Garz got out into the hall. Spear kept shaking his head regretfully. And then his left hand dived into a side coat pocket and yanked out gripping the stubby-snouted automatic. The two weapons yammered out simultaneously. Garz ducked and half stumbled as a bullet whined past his ear. Spear let go again. Big Garz seemed lifted up on his toes. He spun slowly as the impact of the bullet in his right shoulder carried him backward.

When Spear dashed out into the hall, Garz was seated on the floor, barely feet from the corpse of his victim on the stairs, groaning as he gripped his broken shoulder with the blood cozing between his fingers. The sirens of the county police cars wailed in the driveway...

"A SURE-ENOUGH neat job, Spear," congratulated the burly Detective Captain Halleck as Ramon Garz, manacled, was led out to a prowler car to be taken to the county courthouse. "But what gave you the idea of putting the heat on him?"

"Come here." Spear bumped into the county coroner who was closing up his bag after having seen the girl's body removed. Spear went over to the stairs where Nathalia had lain and pointed at the red stains on the wall. He moved his index finger down to the crimson smudge. "That's lipstick, not blood. Now—look closer, Halleck. See that faint lop-sided 'R' there?"

"It is an 'R', all right, Spear."

"That was my tipoff. As she lay dying, she tried to write the name of her slayer in lipstick on the wall. 'R'—for Ramon... Perhaps 'R' for revenge, too..."

"ALL RIGHT, Mr. Smart Boy! You tricked me—you tripped

THE END

Dark Holiday



By JOHN LOCKHART

Windham wouldn't miss the eye he was asked to donate to science, so he had nothing to lose by accepting. In fact, he suddenly saw a way to freedom here!

HE WAS sitting in a cell on Death Row, a heavy set, swarthy complexioned man in his forties. As he contemplated the four walls, he was thinking it was about time they asked him what he would like for his last meal, and what brand of luscious he wanted. Suddenly he heard the guard's footsteps scraping the cement outside. Then he stopped and rattled the bars on the gate.

"Jake Windham," said the guard glumly, "here's a personal request for you."

"Okay," grunted Windham, with a flicker of surprise. He reached for the letter and scanned the contents. It was from a scientist, a Cletus W. Hartmen, and the father of the guy

he'd recently rubbed out. And he wanted an eye!

It appeared this scientist was going blind and requested an unimpaired cornea. Transplanted? With a gesture of disgust, Jake Windham flung the letter aside. That was a pretty big order! Even from a lug that was facing the chair. Then, as if he had reconsidered a hasty decision, he again picked up the letter and re-read the last half:

"I'm working on an invention to save humanity—a counter explosive to nullify the atomic bomb. Despite my impending blindness, I could have completed this research with the help of my son who could have been my eyes. But you chose to deny me

that privilege in taking his life, therefore I feel justified in making this request of you on behalf of the debt you owe society and of the sons and daughters who will fall in the cataclysmic horror of the next war. With your good eye I can complete this project and repay your debt to society."

Unconsciously Jake Windham closed his eye and knew how the old guy felt. The debt to society part left him cold, but the horrific reference to the next war fanned a paternal spark that had lain dormant for years—his son. A lad of almost fifteen now, and a pretty swell kid.

Then true to form, a crafty smile played over his hard features. Perhaps he could use this to cheat the chair! At least for a spell. An idea, singular and preposterous, formulated in the warped corners of his brain. With sudden decision he walked to the gate and rattled the bars.

"Hey, Guard!" he yelled.

Attracted by the commotion, the guard returned and stared with expressionless fish eyes through the bars. "What is it, Windham?" he said.

"Get me the Warden, quick!" said Jake, thrusting the letter into his hands. "I'm gonna' grant th' old guy his request!"

For a moment the guard looked dumbfounded. Then abruptly he turned and walked rapidly down the corridor. From the hubbub of conversation, Jake could hear his voice echoing down the hall, "Jake Windham'll give science an eye!" Then the elevator door clanged shut.

Ten minutes later Warden Ross walked decisively to Jake Windham's cell. His red face was pouring sweat and there was a tremor of excitement in his voice. "What's this about giving science an eye?" he asked.

Jake Windham was quick to reiterate his statement. "Honest, Warden, it's on th' level! Goin' blind is like goin' west an' I sympathize with th' old guy an' want to help. I'll give him an eye!"

Warden Ross stared at Jake Wind-

ham with unblinking, burning eyes. Then a smile cracked the hard line of his mouth. "All right, Windham," he said slowly. "Your offer's accepted!" He thrust his hand through the bars and grasped Jake's in a firm grip. Then turning to the guard, he said: "Have this man removed to the hospital ward at once."

It was with a feeling of smug satisfaction Jake Windham walked out of the confining quarters of Death Row to the white painted, disinfected smelling cleanliness of the hospital ward. Bedded down on clean linen, he prepared for the arrival of the eye surgeon the following day. If his plans proved successful he might get out of here altogether, but at least he'd short-circuited the juice this time. With a chuckle he rolled over and went sound asleep.

NEXT morning he was bathed and shaved and escorted to the operating room—small, compact and gleaming with fluorescent lamps. Already waiting for him was Warden Ross and an eye surgeon. The latter motioned him to the table and got out his instruments.

With a swagger Jake Windham lay down. From the corner of his eye he carefully noted from which side the surgeon was working. Saw that his instruments were on the right, and that a male nurse handed them across the table as he leaned over from the left. So far so good. The surgeon carefully raised each eye-lid, then strapped on his ophthalmoscope and turned to the Warden for approval.

"Which one, Warden?" he said.

Warden Ross shrugged. "It's immaterial to me," he said off-handedly.

As the surgeon bent over him, Windham carefully closed his left eye leaving the doctor no choice. For several minutes he probed and squinted as a puzzled expression clouded his face. Suddenly he straightened up and turned to the Warden, his eyes blazing.

"Opacity of the cornea, Mister Ross," he said stiffly. "This man is completely blind in that eye!"

For a fraction of a second Warden Ross's countenance was momentarily

blank. "Then take the other one," he said hurriedly.

But as if on cue, Jake Windham had slipped from the table and now stood facing the Warden, a knowing leer twisting the corners of his mouth. "Oh, no you don't," he said coldly. "That's just what I wanted to prove to you birds. I was railroaded on circumstantial evidence 'cause I'm supposed to be a dead shot!" He let that sink in and added maliciously, "With a bum right eye?"

In the ominous silence that followed, Warden Ross's face turned fiery red. Taking advantage of his confusion Windham plugged his point. "They said I picked off young Hartman at five hunnert yards," he continued icily. "Isn't that a laugh!"

Suddenly Warden Ross found his voice. "What is this?" he growled.

Jake Windham motioned like he was shooting a rifle. "Th' doc here says I'm blind in th' right eye. Right? An' any dumb cop'll prove you can't shoot that good with a blind right eye."

"Okay, okay!" snapped Warden Ross impatiently. "You're blind in the right eye now, but presumably it was all right at the time of the killing. Otherwise you wouldn't be here!"

In answer Windham shrugged and glanced at the surgeon. "Let th' doc prove that," he said.

At a nod from the Warden the surgeon stared through his ophthalmoscope. After careful analysis he turned back to Warden Ross shaking his head. "No," he said, "definitely not. The right eye shows every indication of being in that condition for at least a couple of years."

At this Windham grinned triumphantly. "You see," he mocked. "Just like I said!"

"Then apparently you didn't have to be such a crack shot to do this killing," reasoned Warden Ross.

"That's where you're wrong!" snapped Windham excitedly. "I didn't do it, but th' guy what did had to be an expert at long range. Young Hartman was ridin' with a pay-roll driver goin' out to some government plant in th' sticks. At a lonely part of th' road a shot was fired killin'

Hartman, wingin' th' driver an' wreckin' th' car. Later th' driver testified he didn't know where th' shot come from or who done it. No one saw th' shot fired!"

WARDEN ROSS'S face was impassive. "Yes," he said slowly, "I remember the case now you mention it. But what I want to know is why didn't you bring out all this blind-in-the-right-eye alibi at your trial?"

Windham grimaced and his eyes were hard. "Like I said. I was railroaded! They had a pile of circumstantial evidence stacked up against me an' th' D. A. was new in office an' wanted a conviction. Then my mouthpiece got mealy-mouthed an' confused at McClennon's testimony."

"McClennon?" queried Warden Ross.

"Yeah, th' dick from th' Homicide Squad."

"What did he do?"

"Aw, he was th' guy what pinched me," said Windham. "He'd bin' tail-in' me for months an' some stoolies tipped him off I was a crack shot. Then he plants a rifle in my place an' a ballistics expert matches th' bullet taken from Hartman. An' that's all," concluded Windham with finality. "No one saw me near th' scene of th' crime an' you know I couldn't shoot that good with a blind right eye!"

"And all this leads up to—what?" demanded Warden Ross.

Jake Windham drew himself up to his full height, stared the Warden straight in the eyes. Like a poker player flipping an ace at the psychological moment he clipped out his words: "I want a new trial!"

For a long moment Warden Ross returned the stare from coldly appraising eyes. His teeth were clamped shut and his mouth a hard, straight line. Suddenly he found his voice. "Smart guy, huh!" he gritted.

Suddenly Warden Ross turned on his heel. "Okay, Windham," he growled ungraciously. "I'll see what I can do!" With that he strode from the room.

(Continued on Page 94)



*The kid had to catch Carol
Lynce in her beauty parlor
to show her the song.*

The Cat In The Canary's Cage

By REX WHITECHURCH

The song was the greatest thing since "Blues in the Night" but it brought death in the night to the girl who sang it!

MAYBE you've heard the hit tune of the week, but I doubt if you've heard the story behind Train Whistle Blues.

The Evening Journal simply said:

Dean Davis granted stay of execution by the Governor. Rumors of new evidence. Davis, a song writer, was accused of the murder of Carol Lynee, radio canary, and convicted after a noble defense by a practically unknown young lawyer Gabe Gregory...

The waitress in the restaurant who served my dinner knew all about the case. She knew I was Dean's lawyer. She was pretty, freckled, with copper-colored curls hanging to her shoulders.

"I've known Dean a long time," she said. "My name's Amy Rogers. Dean used to work here. He was trying to write songs, and hungry most of the time. I wish there was something I could do to help him, Mr. Gregory. The woman they say he killed was a stuck-up no-good. Dean never harmed her; he wouldn't harm anyone."

"Sure, Amy," I conceded. "He's innocent. But how are we going to prove it?"

She eyed me strangely. I thought I saw a little color leave her high cheeks when a police car drew to a halt at the curb, in the snow. We could see the two young cops through the plateglass window. Amy was relieved when they went by.

She brought her purse to my table and showed me a bank book. "You save him from the chair, and you can have every cent I've got in the bank—two hundred and sixty-six dollars."

I wondered if she was in love with him, but I didn't ask her. The cops

had changed their minds. They were entering the restaurant. I paid my check and went out past them. I heard them order coffee at the counter. The floor was streaked with snow they'd tracked in.

The sensational murder of Carol Lynee, radio vocalist, had attracted wide attention. It was sordid. It would have been sordid if a queen had been murdered in the same way, in a love-nest. That's what the scribes called it—the scandal mongering scribes, I mean, those who work for coffee and sinkers. But I've never seen a clean murder yet. I'm a police court lawyer, beating out an existence with the stench of the bull pen always in my nose. Lysol sure stinks.

Yeah, every murder I've investigated is dirty, with blood and poison and occasionally a knife; the untold details are usually too harrowing to print. You get those killings in any big city. They don't have the clean, fresh country wind to blow the smell away.

It was profoundly disappointing to Dean Davis to learn that Carol Lynee wasn't all sugar and spice and everything to make a girl nice. She'd learned the potentialities of her beauty; she could do things with it. She could get a key to unlock the jealously guarded door of fame, and she could let herself in.

Once she was small town, in a sweater and a collegiate cap, mooching milk shakes at the corner drug. Then she found out she could sing, and she decided to make the other punks sit up and take notice. But I don't think it was half as much her voice as it was her looks that turned the trick for her. Funny...

Judge Ferd Frankenhoff had ap-

pointed me to defend Dean Davis. If you've broke, like Dean was, you've got to take the lawyer the court appoints you, no matter if you're on trial for your life. I was still green and still looking for small defendants in the police court. But Dean Davis showed he had confidence in me from the start.

Well, I did have some strings I could pull—if I had anything to pull them with.

"DEAN DAVIS," I told Hal Rossiter, the governor's secretary and my old lawyer pal, "didn't kill Carol Lynee. He was crazy about her. He's just an east-side boy trying to start a career. He met Carol Lynee when he took a song to her, hoping she'd sing it on the radio. She liked it, but he had to catch her napping in a beauty salon to hum it to her."

"Yeah, sure, Gabe," Rossiter said. He stared out the window of the Rendezvous Club on Edmond Street. "But how does all that prove his innocence?"

I told him briefly how Carol had invited Dean up to her apartment in the Plaza Hotel on Frederick Avenue. "Then he woke up suddenly a block away from there, leaning against a brick wall. In his pocket was the murder gun, and he was in a dazed condition. He couldn't explain. All in all he'd written six different songs for her, but she'd declined them saying they weren't good enough. Maybe she didn't know he was starving and washing dishes in a restaurant for his meals."

I paused to let it soak in, and recommenced. "Dean was sitting in Carol Lynee's apartment when the lamps went out for him. He'd been served a cocktail."

"Where do we go from there?" Rossiter snapped. He was a fleshy guy, had played football when we were in school together, but he was jelly-soft now. I'd always abhorred the way Rossiter parted his straw-colored hair in the middle.

I racked my glass to me. "Dean was a little unbalanced from overwork," I said. "He'd written stacks

of songs, none of them catchy enough to put him in the money. He'd work all day and compose words and music all night. His poems were getting better and his music showed a marked improvement. Then he turned out Train Whistle Blues, the song I introduced in court. We didn't have the manuscript but Dean wrote the words from memory."

Rossiter walked over to the bar and bought some cigars, came back. "Hurry up, Gabe. Let me have the rest of it."

"I guess it was that song that opened Carol's eyes to Dean's genius. By this time he was in love with her. She promised to do great things with the song, and she'd return it to him when he called on her next day. When he went there she wasn't at home. But she had rendered the selection on the radio, not giving the boy credit; she didn't even mention his name."

Patrons were entering the Rendezvous, stomping snow on the floor. The storm clicked on the plateglass window near us.

Rossiter drained his glass. "Please continue," he said.

"When Dean went to her apartment, peeved because she hadn't given him credit for the song, he heard voices. They stopped when he rang the bell. Carol was there alone when he went in. She said she was planning a big send off for him, had tried to arouse curiosity about the song. He didn't understand; he asked for the manuscript, but she couldn't find it. She said maybe she'd left it at the studio. Later on she served him a cocktail, and shortly afterward another. She went out in the kitchen to prepare these. Dean just dropped off to sleep."

Rossiter was a moment getting it. "Poppcock," he exploded. "I—"

I hurried on: "Dean woke up a block from the hotel. He had the murder gun in his pocket. He didn't know what had happened—"

"I don't believe it," Rossiter snapped.

"Hold your hat on your head," I said. Rossiter was too blunt. He lacked imagination. "Back of the

apartment house in the alley," I resumed, "was an ash-can. In this the cops found a small box labelled veronal. You know about the drug. It produces sleep. There was one capsule left. . . You don't suppose the boy had time to put the veronal in the ash-can?"

Rossiter snapped into alertness. "Say—you've got something there! Why didn't you put that in the evidence?"

"The judge ruled it out," I said, tracing circles with my glass. "But he was right. Too many people lived in the hotel. There was no way we could prove the veronal was connected with the murder."

Rossiter rubbed his glasses vigorously and put them back on.

I WENT on slowly, "There's a beautiful woman named Clara Boling who lived on the same floor with Carol. Her friend is Paul Hunter, the famous columnist. Both swore the veronal box came from her apartment as Miss Boling was taking the sedative to make her sleep. She once was a prima donna, but lost her voice because of a throat affliction. Her story was substantiated by the janitor who claimed he discarded the veronal box upon removing it in the waste basket from her apartment."

Rossiter sat quite motionless, then he said heavily, "Like the judge, I don't think it was anything more than a coincidence. The whole fabrication's as unbelievable as a tale by Scheherazade."

I was getting mad, but Rossiter was the only one who could help me. I hoped to reach the governor through him, and he knew it.

A practical man, Hal Rossiter didn't budge from things he could actually see and feel were realities. "I'm still trying," I said, nervous but resolute. "Why don't you help me get Dean a stay. I'm sure the veronal angle is proof of my client's innocence, Hal. As long as there's a possibility of the kid's story being substantiated, it would be murder to let him die in the chair."

Well, that's how I won the first stay of execution for Dean Davis.

The second came a few hours later. But it looked like I was fighting a losing cause. One adversity piled on top of another made the whole thing seem utterly beyond hope. The snowy weather, too, was depressing.

"WHAT'S the news, Gabe?" the kid asked when I saw him in Death Row. "Find out anything?" He seemed worried. His hands shook. He'd been humming the Train Whistle Blues. The warden eyed him skeptically. I knew Dean was living on raw courage alone. Inside of him he was scared. His brilliant eyes evaded mine. "I've seen two guys go to the chair," he added slowly. "I could hear them screaming out here."

"Take it easy," I said. "You're a long way from the chair, kid. I'm here to see the governor, but he went moose hunting. I expect a long distance call from him. By the way—I saw a pal of yours, Amy Rogers who's a waitress at the Select Cafe on Edmond Street. Nice girl. She says for you to keep your chin up."

Dean shrugged. "She's okay," he said.

The first time I'd seen him in the death cell he'd asked me to send some carnations to the cemetery. But he hadn't repeated the request. "It's tough, Gabe," he said, "to die for something you didn't do. You're doing your best, I can tell. But—maybe your best isn't enough. . . Just tell Amy Rogers hello for me."

When I drove back to Mason City Rossiter accompanied me. We stopped at the Miami Club out on Frederick Street where Izzy Rabbicoff, a little guy with a lot of political pull, was host, and Izzy expressed his deepest sympathy for my client. We had drinks.

"You think the governor will grant another stay to give me time?" I asked.

Rossiter shook his head. "I don't know. He didn't call you back from up North, Gabe. Maybe he's not interested any more." He added in a low voice, "You say you talked to Paul Hunter?"

"Yes," I said. "The columnist said

I was off the track on the veronal slant. The Boling woman has been taking the stuff for several months. Hunter sticks to his theory that the veronal found in the ash-can came from her apartment. The janitor, Albert Ledge his name is, backs up Hunter's story."

"What about Albert Ledge?" Rossiter clasped and unclasped his pudgy fists nervously. His eyes gleamed through his shiny glasses.

"He's a quiet young man with a college background," I said. "Last night when I found him in his apartment he was playing the piano. It was swell music he made. I asked him about his music and he said he'd composed several songs. I—" Something popped, interrupting me. It was Rossiter's flat hands striking the table.

"You're not blind," he said fervently. "He's—he's—"

"He's not connected with the case," I said undramatically. "He didn't even clean Carol Lynce's apartment. Another house man did that. The only time he was ever in there was when he repaired a drum lamp for her. But he's a nice looking kid, clean-cut, and anxious to help us all he can."

Rossiter drained his glass. He put the cherry in his mouth. "I guess I was lunging then, at something that wasn't there. My law training, Gabe—you know. I thought, 'Well, there it is. This Albert Ledge stole the manuscript of Dean Davis' song from Carol's apartment.'"

"Knowing it hadn't been published and he could pan it off as his own composition," I said. Rossiter was showing an imagination I hadn't believed he was capable of revealing. I almost chuckled. Only the tragedy of it all kept me stern. Dean Davis was closer to death than ever, and I was his only hope. It made me shudder.

"I wired the governor," I said, "when he didn't answer my phone call. I told him Albert Ledge seems to be holding something back. You can tell when a guy does that, like holding something back against his will, that he would like to tell you.

If we can't get it out of him we're sunk."

"I thought you said he was willing to help you," Rossiter snapped.

"I said he acted that way, but again he acts mysterious, if you get what I mean. He's nervous, tense. Maybe he knows who was in the radio canary's room when Dean Davis rang the bell. He admits he heard the pistol shot. He was coming from the garage in the rear, up the alley. He saw lights vanish from the windows of the murder suite. It faces the areaway and the garage. The back door he found locked.

"He went around to the front," I continued. "When Ledge got to Carol's door the lights were on again and everything was quiet. But he heard voices, a man's and a woman's. Figuring possibly what he'd mistaken for a gun shot had been a cork from a champagne bottle he didn't bother to investigate."

ROSSITER displayed a fresh interest. He opened a bag of salted peanuts and munched on them while I continued. "I think there's a possibility that he knows who was in Carol's apartment with her besides Dean Davis. Maybe he knows the third person was a woman."

Rossiter gave a start, his lips clamped shut. He stopped chewing. "A woman—You mean it's possible a woman killed Carol Lynce?"

"Anything's possible," I said. "But I'd rather think Ledge would shield a woman when he wouldn't think of doing the same for a man. He's the type—the gallant type, you know."

"No, I didn't know," the governor's secretary said solemnly.

Just then tall, stalwart, gray of mane, like a stallion with a proud head and flashing eyes, Inspector Mike Calligan, in dark clothes, stopped at our table.

"All right, Mike," I said, "what's cooking?"

"Nothing. There's not a damn thing to the veronal slant, and we couldn't get anything out of Albert Ledge. The guy won't talk, not beyond saying he didn't kill Carol Lynce to steal the song. He's clean,

I think. I'm sorry, too, for I had hopes of snaring the killer when you reported how Albert Ledge had reacted to your questions."

"What'd he say about his song writing?" I insisted.

"Says he merely composes tunes and words for fun; it's his hobby, like playing chess is yours. He never intended to make anything out of it, does it for his own amusement and wouldn't try to get a song published if he had a masterpiece."

I sat up alert, scuffed my heels on the floor. "Mike, you've let him put a fast one over on you. Paul Hunter told me Albert Ledge tried to get him to print a story about one of his songs, presenting the chorus. He was rather persistent. Took the song to Hunter several times, but the columnist couldn't see anything to it and declined. Of course Ledge knew him because Hunter lives in the Plaza."

The police inspector coolly lit a cigarette. "Funny," he said. "I'll see Hunter. Do you actually think he killed her, Gabe—just to steal Dean Davis' song?"

"I don't know what to think now," I said. "There's seldom anyone as deeply embittered as a frustrated artist who realizes his talent isn't great enough to put him across, who burns to achieve something."

The tall inspector nodded. "Suppose Albert Ledge did murder Carol Lynce—how did he get Dean Davis so far from the scene. He couldn't have walked the guy that far without waking him up. In fact he couldn't have walked him at all." Inspector Calligan walked away then, lifting his hand in a friendly salute. But something was surging through me—I'd begun to feel a hunch throbbing in my head—a hunch that I'd overestimated the virtues of Albert Ledge, the college boy who was burning to crash the gates of the gallery of fame.

A call awaited me at the office. I watched the snow ripple like wind blown ribbons past the windows.

The governor said: "It's crazy, but Hal Rossiter called a while ago to say he thought another stay was warranted. It's altogether against my

will, Gabe, but I'll allow you just twenty four hours more. That is final."

Well, you know how men are, in his position—men big enough to be state executive. They can be reasoned with, but they won't tolerate impositions. After all Carol Lynce had left thousands of bereaved fans. She was widely known—and it wasn't like Miss Jane Jones being murdered because she'd jilted John Smoith, a packing house employee or white collar clerk. There was a load of sinister influence behind this case—and it might explode in the governor's face any moment...No, I didn't blame him.

IT WAS the night of the scheduled execution and nothing much had developed. Snow was still falling, painting the city white and giving it a soft silence that clung to spires and steeples and sky-scrapers—like a white, muffling coat. Paul Hunter was in his office.

"I'm doing a little story on Carol," he said. "She got a tough break, poor kid. It was a long way to fall from a coward's bullet. I figure Dean Davis was jealous of her. He was a nobody, she a celebrity. Fame held them apart. Fame's jealous of her children." Hunter mopped his brow. He was wide shouldered, handsome, neatly attired. I studied him as he sat there, fingering some papers. His blond hair was wavy like maybe he'd been to a beauty salon for a marcel. "His song, Train Whistle Blues—that's what cost the kid her life—"

"That's why I've come to see you, Hunter," I said. "What's become of the song? It occurred to me a little while ago that the song hadn't turned up, that Carol claimed she'd left it at the studio, but they couldn't find it amongst her things over there. So—I figured maybe you knew something about it."

He regarded me in stony silence, then started fumbling with his papers on a low, modernistic desk in a glass enclosed room. "Why, I don't know anything about it, Gabe. I've never seen it. I don't think it's lost. Who'd want it? Why would anyone care

to take it? The song's been so widely publicized now, thanks to you're introducing it in court, that it's famous—it wouldn't be worth anything to anyone but the composer, or his lawful heirs."

"I get what you mean," I said, leaning forward on my chair. "But I've searched high and low for Train Whistle Blues and I can't find the manuscript. I even went through Dean's apartment in Felix Street. There's a pile of manuscripts over there, but not the song we want. He must've made just the one manuscript, the original, and Carol must've misplaced it."

Hunter ran his slim hands carefully over his glistening yellow hair. "Carol wouldn't've robbed him," Hunter said. "You don't think she hid the song, tried to gyp him out of it? You must remember she did the number on the radio, and she had to have the manuscript to give to the piano player. Maybe the piano player has it. I'll find out her name—"

"I've already checked her," I said. "She doesn't have it, but says Carol took it away with her when she went home, seemed to be very deeply interested in it. Therefore it's not logical to think she lost it. She told Dean she left it at the studio."

"That's what he says," Hunter reminded me coldly. "Perhaps he's lying."

My eyes were full of acrimony when I stared him down. "No, he's not lying. He's never lied, not from the very beginning. Somehow that song figures in the murder. I don't know exactly how. But I'll wager it's definitely connected with the case."

Hunter got up, straightened his tie. "We've known that all along," he said coldly. "Dean Davis killed her because she sang the song on the radio without giving him credit for composing it."

I dropped my hands in my pockets and sauntered to the glass door. I opened it, went out without anything more being said between us. I walked to the elevators, aware that the news room beyond was alive with dynamic activity. Reporters were coming and going, copy boys ran hither and yon,

and the elevators were working over time. It was snowing when I reached the street.

DRIVING slowly through the swirl of snow, I parked near the Plaza Garage, in the alley. The back door of the hotel was unlocked. I slid inside, entering the dim-lit basement corridor. There was a short flight of steps and I moved cautiously down these until I'd reached the janitor's quarters.

I heard the gentle tinkle of a piano. On my previous visit to Albert Ledge's apartment I'd seen an ancient slot piano in the living room. Now I twisted the iron knob of the door. The music suddenly stopped.

I opened the door and stood there a moment blinded by the glare of light from the chandelier.

"What do you want?" Albert Ledge said, standing beside the piano. "Don't you know how to knock? Are you in the habit of barging in on people?" He was tall, lean. He had brown hair that wasn't combed. He wore glasses and was clad in white coveralls. On the piano I could see a sheet of music. But I couldn't see the title.

Quickly I shoved on into the apartment, not answering his questions. His thin, sensitive face was bewildered.

"Where'd you get this music?" My voice was sharp with suspicion. "I figured maybe you had it."

"I can't tell you where I got it," Albert Ledge replied. "I wouldn't dare—"

Something surged through me then, but I didn't know what it was. Maybe it was a feeling of immediate danger. Albert Ledge stood there, with his shoulders drooping.

"You'd better come clean with me," I admonished.

I heard a furtive sound in the little room beyond. A long shadow flickered on the wall. I skewed round, but too late. A revolver flashed in a gloved fist. A cold voice said, "You'd better beat it, Gabe. This is my picnic. I beat you to him."

"That's what you say, Hunter." My own voice was as cold, as deadly.

"Where's your proof that he's the man?"

Then Albert Ledge said desperately, "He'll lie! He'll try to put it on me. He brought the music here, gave it to me. He said I could have the Train Whistle Blues, damn him. I know now... He's—"

He wasn't in time. The gun spat, viciously. A rose blossomed on his pale coveralls, formed a thin stem down his chest. He rocked on his feet. He came down, heavily, bounced. I knew before his feet stopped kicking; before the smoke cleared away, that Albert Ledge was dead.

Sedately Hunter put the gun back in his pocket. "There's your killer," he said sarcastically. "Only the cops weren't smart enough to find him—"

I saw through it, as blurred as it was. Lashing out, I hit him in the face. He sagged against the wall. I was too intent on flooring him, missed a blow directed at his head. He evaded me, ran around the piano. I lit in after him, crowded him again. He had the gun out of his pocket now. It slashed downward, ripped a gash in my scalp. I felt the warm salty blood that stained my mouth.

Then something happened. It was all swishing skirts and shapely legs and knee caps clad in nylon. It came tearing across the room. It was a flurry of silk-rustling motion that made Paul Hunter give ground. He barked out a warning, but it didn't do any good.

Amy Rogers, the little waitress was in there pitching. The gun roared but the slug missed her. She was too quick, too supple, and her tiny fists hampered furiously at Hunter's face.

"Drop it, Hunter," said Inspector Calligan. "You just put it down and take it easy—" A blue automatic was steady in his gloved fist. Like a man welcoming bad eggs after he'd talked himself into a mess on a speaker's platform, Hunter submitted.

CALLIGAN got a kick out of it.

"Hunter was in love with Carol Lynce," he said. "The columnist had done a swell job keeping Dean Davis out of the money. When he drugged Dean with the veronal he took from the Boling woman's apartment, he

shot Carol. There was a silencer on the gun. His was one of the voices Dean heard when he rang Carol's door bell.

"Hunter had the song. He'd talked Carol into letting him take it to the office to build a story around it. But he wouldn't return the manuscript. Carol had made up her mind to marry Dean Davis; she'd come to recognize his real talent. All the time Paul Hunter was rushing the Boling woman he was keeping Carol Lynce for a rainy day.

"He carried Dean down the fire escape and a block up the alley where he left him unconscious. When he saw you were hot on his path he decided to frame Albert Ledge. He went to the janitor's apartment to kill him tonight, to make it look like suicide and to place the stolen song where we'd find it. But he gave Ledge the song and waited for the chance. I guess he couldn't kill the guy with him looking at him."

But where did Amy Rogers come in? Well, she'd known Paul Hunter. He'd kept her down, too. She had a good singing voice, better than Carol Lynce's, only she didn't know how to use her charms to get what she wanted. Paul Hunter was sore at her for that very reason. She wouldn't play, unless she played for keeps. Tonight she'd gone to him for help, wanting him to do something for Dean. But he'd left the office and she went to the Plaza where he lived and saw him in the hall. His furtive actions aroused her interest and she followed him to Ledge's apartment.

I took Amy over to see Dean, and they stood gazing at each other a moment through the steel bars. Then Amy said, "Hi, kid."

Her voice seemed to work a charm on him. He grinned, touched her fingers clasped on a bar, and said, "Hi, kid—"

Well, that's the story behind the hit tune of the week. You never know what's behind anything like that. But the other night when I heard Amy Rogers sing Train Whistle Blues on the radio, it all came back to me. They're up in the money. Nothing's going to stop those kids now.

Oh Gargie!

By RAY CUMMINGS

When monkey business is afoot, a monkey's a good thing to have around to deal with it!

IF COURSE, if it hadn't been for Gargie, the thing would have come out much worse. It really began one night last February, when a couple of crooks pulled some fancy arson business on us. At that time, we hadn't even met Gargie. There was just Mary and me. I'm Alan Trimble. Mary's my sister. Maybe you've heard of the "Tumbling Trimbles?" We're acrobats; we come from an old circus family.

That Saturday in February was a red-hot day. You get them sometimes, even here in what they call the Highlands of Florida. We live here winters, practicing new stunts and resting up for the summer circus season up north. Our house is in a fairly lonely section, palms and palmettos and a few citrus groves, with the town of Palm Ridge some two miles away. There's a main highway passing our door, and quite a fair amount of traffic. To earn a little extra money, we had opened a small roadside lunchroom. It worked pretty well—an open-faced counter place for sandwiches, coffee, soft drinks and such.

It was about nine o'clock that hot February evening when a coupe with two young men drove up. I was back of the counter by the coffee urn. Mary went out to serve them at the car. My sister is quite a good looker. Small and trim, and in a dress she doesn't look as muscular as she is. She was greeted by whistles.

"Thanks," she said. "What'll you have, boys."

But they climbed out and came to the counter. They were the flashy dressed, wise-guy type. Both were in their early twenties. One was lanky, pimply and blond; the other small and compact.

"Nice little place you got," the lanky one said patronizingly. "Mak-

in' any money? Just you two here, eh?"

He tossed me a bill, and as I opened the cash register to give him his change, it occurred to me that he gave the drawer a sharp glance. His companion had gone around to the rest room; he reappeared and they went to their car.

They were about to drive away when one of them called at me, "Hey, what's that?"

Smoke was rising from up beside our cottage, which is about fifty feet back from the road. It was all dark up there. Well, it wasn't much of a fire. We had left some trash on the little back porch of the house. It was burning pretty snappy when we and our two young customers dashed there; but with a couple of buckets of water from the kitchen—and me with an ax hacking away the flimsy little porch—we had it out in ten minutes or so.

"Thanks a lot," I said to the lanky youth, who had been right with me most of the time. I hadn't noticed that the other fellow had wandered away; I was too busy trying to keep the house from catching fire. Anyway, he was with us when we got the fire out.

"Guess you're okay now," the lanky one said. "C'mon, Pete, we gotta get goin'."

They departed; and it wasn't until an hour later that I discovered our cash register had been cleaned out!

"Well!" I said. "What will crooks think of next?"

THE loss spurred up. We got a idea for making money. We brought our big twenty foot square mat from behind the house, and did our acrobatic practice in the front yard every afternoon. It worked. A lot of people stopped to watch us;



and we hired a local girl to serve them from the lunchroom. The "Tumbling Trimbles" is a classy act, if I do say it myself; and Mary is a very nifty sight in spangled doublets and fleshings, with me tossing her around on that padded mat in the Florida sunlight. The thing went over big. In a month we were giving half hour shows, afternoon and evening both. The mat was on a platform, with lights. We had benches, rustic tables and chairs for the customers, with lanterns and flags strung on wires overhead.

And then came Gargie. It was a Wednesday night, sort of an off night, with maybe twenty people at the tables. Mary and I had just finished and were standing bowing to the ripple of applause, when I heard a gasp from someone in the audience. Then everybody was looking up over their heads. It was startling, to say the least. On one of the guy-wires a small figure had appeared—a monkey about a foot and a half tall, clad in a short pair of pants and a peppermint-candy, striped jersey. In each outstretched hand he carried a tiny paper parasol which he waved up and down as though to balance himself.

A tight-rope walking monkey! And he sure had a good act. He walked as though he was just about to fall; and when he got close over the peoples' heads, he began wobbling in earnest. You've seen comedians on the tight wire do it? Then the monkey's feet slipped and he went down. The people under him gasped and ducked. But a monkey on a wire has a big advantage over a man. His tail flipped up, grabbed the wire and he hung head down, waving his little parasols as though he was still balancing himself. Laughter went up when it was so obvious that the slip was part of his act.

Then from one of the tables a man said, "Oh Gargie!" He was a little man in a dark suit; beside him on the ground he had a black wooden box with a handle. The "Oh Gargie!" was evidently a signal. When he heard it, the monkey flipped himself back onto the wire, ran along it without bothering to balance himself with

the parasols. After a few feet he made a wild leap into space, and parasols and all, wrapped himself around the trunk of a pine sapling. Then he was down on the ground, a scurrying dark streak as he ran for the man at the table and got whisked into the black box.

That was our introduction to Gargie. We fended off the customers, and eventually got the place cleared. "Git them people away," the little man had mumbled to us. "That was Gargie's debut, see? Not bad, eh? Money in it for you, see what I mean?"

His name was Johnny Peters. He weighed maybe a hundred; and he was twenty-five, or maybe forty. You couldn't just tell, on account of his face somehow suggested Gargie's. He was a funny looking little fellow. I guess he'd been a sailor; a lot of tattooing was on him, and he walked with a rolling gait. He didn't seem to want to talk much about himself, but he had plenty to say about his pal Gargie.

"He's a rhesus monkey, see? I taught him all he knows, and he learns fast. He likes to learn, see what I mean?"

We had Gargie on the table now, and he was shaking hands with us and chattering; and trying to tip a hat which unfortunately he wasn't wearing at the moment.

"He's cute," Mary said. "That's a queer name, Gargie. How'd you happen to—"

"Well," Johnny said, "he ain't exactly Gargantua, is he? So I thought Gargie would fit him better."

THE upshot was, we hired Gargie and Johnny, who figured he'd have Gargie in the movies in a year. So Johnny was to get a percentage of the profits on the new business Gargie brought us. And, as a matter of fact, our business certainly did get better. Combined with our tumbling act, Gargie was a swell drawing card. Every morning Johnny trained him, and he was a born comedian, giving his burlesque of a tight-rope walker. I had a special wire rigged for him. It ran along above the edge of the

spectators' chairs and tables. Gargie would make a surprise appearance on it. And when he was hanging by his tail, head down after his fake fall, he'd reach and grab somebody's hat, or a woman's scarf or something, and scamper off with it. People like to laugh at other people's discomfiture; that gag brought a big laugh.

By April we were drawing really big crowds. Sunday nights we always had quite a bit of cash on hand, which I banked on Mondays. I don't know why I was thinking of that with a sort of uneasy feeling, one especially busy Sunday, but I did.

"Okay, let's close up," I said to Mary, when we had sent our employees home, and the last customer had gone. There was just Mary and me, and Johnny who was sitting on the sand beside the lunch counter, talking to Gargie. It was a chilly night. Johnny had Gargie in his box. Gargie liked it hot.

"I'll switch off the lights," Mary said. She did and with the big electric sign off, and no lights over the lunch counter, the darkness of the cloudy night leaped around us.

Suddenly we were startled by the sound of a car motor starting up. In the dark windless night, it was clearly audible. Not a car approaching from far away, but one close at hand.

In the dimness, Mary and I exchanged glances. We had no time to do anything else. The car appeared, not on the highway, but from a dark group of palms out beyond the parking lot. It came only a hundred feet or so into the open space, then its headlights sprang on. The yellow glare of them caught Mary and me, bathed us and clung.

It was all so quick, we just stood there transfixed. I was aware that the car motor had been shut off; the brakes went on with a grind and screech and the car stopped.

"Stand where you are!" a man's voice said. "Reach over your heads if you don't want to get a bullet into you!"

The headlight glare was dazzling, but I could dimly make out the blob of an open car, with a dark figure standing up in it. Mary's fingers

were on my arm. Her grip tightened; she let out a little gasping cry.

"Easy!" I murmured. "Put your hands up! Don't let's get shot!"

We stood together with our hands over our heads. The car wasn't much more than fifty feet away. I could see a man in dark clothes leap from it to the ground. "Okay!" he said. "We got 'em! Come on, Sandy. Put them damn lights out an' make it snappy."

The car lights went out. Our captor was advancing on us, and in another few seconds I could distinguish him more plainly. He was bare-headed, a close-clipped bullet head of iron-grey hair. A black handkerchief was tied around his face so that just the eyes showed above it. In his hand was an ugly-looking black automatic, leveled at us.

"You got sense!" he said. "An' you too," he called at Johnny. "Come over here. Take it slow an' keep your hands up! You won't get hurt!"

Johnny was only a few feet away from us. He came slowly forward and joined us with his hands over his head. The other man was out of the car now, masked and with leveled gun like his companion. He was bare-headed also—a tall, thin fellow who had the look of being much younger.

"Hold 'em, Sandy," the older man said. He chuckled. "This won't take long. I'll get the cash."

"The cash register's back of the counter," Sandy said.

SOMEHOW his voice was familiar. Then I remembered. He was the pimply-faced youth who had helped me put out the fire, while the young squirt who was with him, looted us. Evidently he had figured the pickings would be better now—which indeed was the truth—so he'd brought his older man to pull a regular stick-up job. And they'd hidden their car nearby, waiting for us to close up.

"Thanks for setting my house on fire," I said suddenly.

That startled him. "So you're a wise-guy," he growled. "Keep reaching or s'elp me I'll drill you!"

"Okay," I said. "I don't want that. The cash is all yours."

It didn't take long, as the older man had remarked. Mary, Johnny and I stood docile, with our hands up. We were midway between the edge of the group of tables, and the front of the lunch counter. Sandy stood in front of us, his nasty-looking gun muzzle describing a slow arc from one to the other of us. Behind him there was enough light so that I could see the other bandit rifling the cash drawer. I had a gun over there, parked behind the coffee urn. Not a chance in the world of getting to it. And at that, I can't say I was too sorry. Money is one thing, but exchanging bullets with a wild-eyed bandit at close quarters is quite another.

Then the burly thug, with his pockets stuffed full of our cash, was coming back. He joined Sandy, both of them with their guns on us.

"Okay," he said. "Let's get out of here! Back up, you three, an' if you—"

He checked himself, startled. There was just an instant when the muzzle of his gun wavered as he flung a glance overhead. In that second I had heard a faint chattering. And there was Gargie! Balancing himself with his little parasols, he was coming along the guy-wire almost directly over us. For a second it surprised both the bandits so that they gazed up. It flashed to me then that I might have jumped them, but it was too dangerous.

"What in the devil—"

"Jus' their damn monkey," Sandy muttered.

Then both the bandits had circled us and were backing toward their car. "Don't move!" the older man warned us. "You—"

"Oh, Gargie!" Johnny abruptly murmured.

Johnny took a nasty chance, doing that. He startled me, no less the bandits. Both their gun-muzzles turned on him. But they didn't fire; they had other things to think about. Directly over them, Gargie was doing his act. His fake fall was in full swing. Far be it from me to figure out what was in that monkey's mind. But Gargie is a conscientious little

fellow, and Johnny had given him the signal to fall and hang by his tail. Which he certainly was doing.

The bandits by the table didn't have any hats, which I guess must have annoyed Gargie very much. Nor were they women with a scarf or a shawl for him to seize. So he did the next best thing. He swung and reached, and tried to grab the black handkerchief from the face of the older thug.

AND that's when the shooting started. With a swinging monkey, head down, clawing at your face, you're a little handicapped. Both the crooks jumped, with startled oaths, and the older one flailed his arms to knock Gargie away. Then the bullets began sizzling around. Those two gunmen weren't much on quality, but they sure made up for it in quantity. A stack of dishes on the lunch counter crashed; an iron saucepan on the stove was drilled so that it let out a clang like a bell.

You've no idea what a lot of things began happening at once. Johnny and I had shoved Mary down to the sand and dropped with her, which was lucky because quite a few bullets whizzed where our heads had been an instant before. And in the midst of it, I saw that Gargie was still making valiant efforts to do his stuff, though he certainly must have been confused that things were going different from usual for him. The black handkerchief wouldn't come loose from around the thug's head. Then Gargie made a swing to reach for the other man, and he let go his tail-hold and dropped on Sandy's head. He didn't like it there, so he jumped back and landed on the older thug's shoulder.

Now with an earnest, hard-working little monkey trying to unmask you, I imagine any stickup man would be confused. This fellow let out a roar, and staggered, flailing to knock Gargie away. And that's approximately when I went into action. Being an acrobat from the age of five, teaches you quite a few tricks. I went up into the air from a crouch and landed with my head hitting that big thug at about his belt line. He fell over

backward, with me on top of him, and his gun flying away into the darkness. Gargie had jumped into mid-air; and I guess he decided this was no place for him, because when he hit the ground he streaked away.

That was a pretty husky customer I had under me. I had time to take a couple of jabs at his face, but with a roar he rose up like a wounded bull and heaved me off. In the dimness nearby, I had a vision of Johnny in action. The skinny, sandy-haired young crook had evidently exhausted his bullets and decided that the best thing he could do was go elsewhere. He was running past, but Johnny, from the ground, took a scrambling plunge at him, caught him around the legs and brought him down. As he fell, he cracked his head against a table leg—and that was the end of Sandy for a while.

Johnny was up on his feet, ready to help me. But as it happened, I didn't need it. The bull-like fellow was rushing me, but instead of trying to avoid him, I stooped, caught him just right by a bit of luck, and heaved

him over my head. It wasn't quite the same as tossing Mary, but I managed it. And before he could rise, I whirled, seized a heavy rustic chair and whanged him over the head with it. That did it. He sank down, and out.

Well, that was the wind-up of the affair. Mary, Johnny and I were pretty busy for a minute or two, making sure none of us were hurt. Johnny babbled out how he had released Gargie, sending him into his act, just on the chance something would happen.

"It sure did," I commented.

"By the way, where is Gargie?" Mary wanted to know, when we had phoned for the police to come and get what was left of the thugs.

And then we saw Gargie. I guess he wasn't a bit satisfied with the way his act had gone, because he was back up on the guy-wire. As we watched, he came running out, stopped, and made one of his very nicest little bows.

THE END

THREE MASTERS OF MYSTERY

GRETA BARDET

T. W. FORD

ALAN RITNER ANDERON

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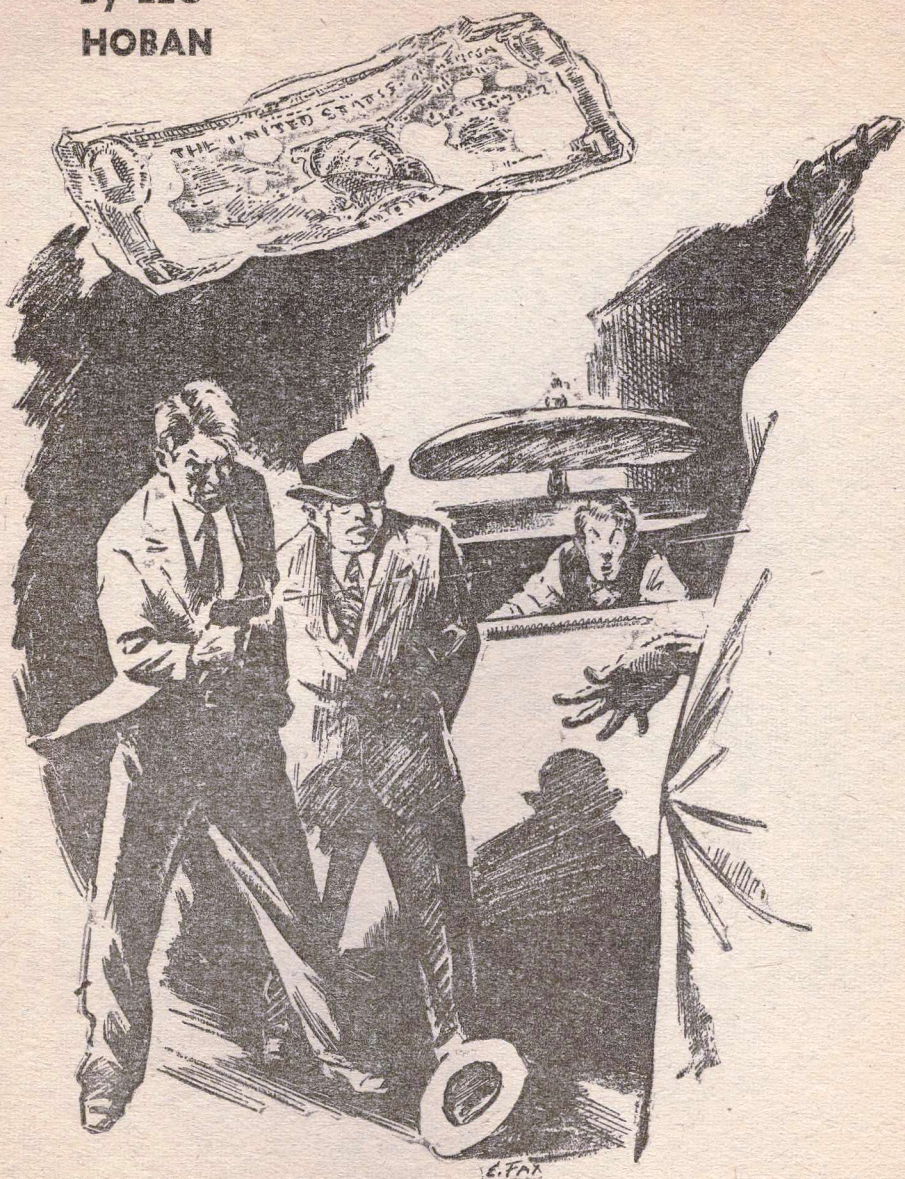
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ONE BUCK TO HEAVEN

By LEO
HOBAN



*It was only a dollar bill, but to some of those through whose hands
it passed, it brought life—and to some —*

THE DOLLAR bill Doc Gleason held in his hand was the most masterful and ingenious piece of murder ever conceived in the fertile brain of the Big Guy.

Not that there was anything remarkable about the bill. It was just like any other one-buck bill. It would purchase up to the limit of one dollar whatever its possessor chose to buy. And the recipient could do the same with it. And the next. And next. Then finally the bill would go back to the Treasury Department to be honorably discharged by cremation, its job well done.

Fog from San Francisco Bay made dancing, sardonic dervishes outside the window of the hotel room when Doc held the bill up to the vagueness of daylight.

Doc was slightly over middle height, but looked shorter due to his chubbiness. A fringe of hair like a crooked three-quarter halo staggered reluctantly around his bald pate. His cheeks were fat and healthy and his petulant mouth too full. In which respect it matched the larceny in-born in his heart.

He sat down in the overstuffed chair and his belly came up to perch in his lap. Glasses hanging on a black ribbon gave him an academic air but failed to hide the avidness in his eyes as he stared at the one dollar bill.

"Fifty grand!" he muttered. "Fifty thousand bucks right here in my hand—if I live long enough." Then determinedly: "And I will."

"But you," he said to the bill, shaking it viciously. "You're absolutely no good. You never will do any good. Money! Damned stuff!"

The bill under the movement of his hands seemed to shrug.

Doc hurled it blindly away from himself, and waddled across the room to take his first drink of bourbon in days. He needed it; but not too much of it... Too much of it will outsmart a smart man who of necessity must commit another murder....

His back was turned and he did not notice the bill rear upward as though affronted. Dollar bills were meant to help people, not to be called no-good

and heedlessly thrown away. The bill straightened and its swoop leveled off in the draft.

Then, as if suddenly repugnantly tired of all the sordidness, meanness, gluttony and sudden death as represented by Doc, it nonchalantly dove through the open window.

Doc yelled and made a futile grab for it. The bill, in brief uncertainty, floated over the street, then disappeared into the cleansing fog.

Doc crushed his hat on his head and left the room, running. He plunged head-down along the corridor, his arms upraised as he struggled to get into his topcoat.

It was then that the foot reached out and tripped him.

Gasping for breath, he rolled over and stared upward. That Spike O'Toole was in back of the gun wasn't particularly surprising. In all added up.

But the manner in which Spike had his legs braced, his wide shoulders straight and his too-bright eyes taking a double-sight down the barrel of the automatic, was suprising. He meant to kill... O'Toole was a cautious guy, a positive guy....

Unless hurried he shot for keeps with safety.

"The buck, Doc," O'Toole said tiredly. "I'll take that buck."

Doc got slowly to his feet, watching the gun. "That buck just floated outta window. I was just going after it."

Spike chuckled humorlessly. "We don't need it. You're out. Just me. I need it."

DOC'S GLANCE went insolently over O'Toole. He made it a point to start at the sweat-stained fedora and slowly past the soiled shirt, shabby topcoat and broken shoes.

"You could use fifty G's," he said. "But you look like you might spend the buck first. If we're gonna get it, we better get out in that street quick."

O'Toole looked undecided, then moved closer until the gun pressed its nose hard into Doc's right kidney. "I'll take the buck," he said.

Doc looked resigned. "I'm giving

it to you straight. We gotta find it in the street. I was mad when I got the Big Guy's note. I threw the bill across the room. The damned thing went in for aviation."

O'Toole's jaw, battered like a discarded blacksmith's anvil, wavered slightly. "This ain't no time to kid, Doc. We both ain't gettin' no younger; this is our last chance at a big score."

Doc nodded somberly. "Security's a great thing for a hood when he starts gettin' old," said O'Toole.

Doc moved his rounded shoulders. "That's the way I figured too."

"But twenty-five G's wouldn't have been enough for you?"

"Or you?"

Spike shrugged. "Wouldn't you have knocked me off for twenty-five?"

"Or less," Doc said grudgingly. "You know security's a great thing."

"Only there ain't enough of it. At least not enough to go around." Spike's left hand went briskly over Doc; then, with a sudden movement, dropped the automatic into his topcoat pocket.

"This is staying here," he said, "just in case you don't find that buck."

"We'll find it," Doc muttered. "Not me. WE. We're partners again. You got your buck the Big Guy sent you?"

"Sure, pally," Spike nodded. "In a very, very safe place."

A dollar bill sailed over the transom of a room, and a voice burred: "Will you ham actors go somewhere else to rehearse. There's your damned buck."

Doc looked at the balled bill, edged forward, and carefully spat upon it. O'Toole hesitated, then bent and hit it dead center.

"The guy's rich," O'Toole said, nodding at the room. "He's got a buck—and what good is any one lousy buck?"

"A buck can't do a thing," Doc agreed. "Just one lousy buck ain't got what it takes."

IN THE FOG, out in the street, the bill floated uncertainly, then settled on the pavement. It twisted away from an aged newsboy and fell before the wrinkled suit of a young man with a too-bitter mouth.

Caffin's head was down and for long blocks and many more miles there had been nothing but endless pavement.

Then—suddenly—there it was—one buck.

One-hundred miraculous cents. There wasn't any question of its background. It was a buck; that was sufficient. Nothing about it seemed murderous.

He made rapid calculations. With his nickel he had a dollar and five cents. The trolley would be a dime, a shave and a shine—on Howard Street—could be had for thirty-five cents. A clean shirt at the Chink's would be twenty. That left thirty-five to eat on.

Clutching the dollar, he started for the restaurant.

The sign next door said: "SUITS PRESSED WHILE YOU WAIT—40 CENTS—"

The pressed suit suddenly was more important than an urgent meal. Caffin went into the tailor shop.

The presser, small and scared-looking, was saying to a round-shouldered guy in a depressed topcoat: "Okay, okay... maybe this is it."

He almost ran up to Caffin. "A press maybe, yes?" His eyes ran appraisingly over Caffin's fine but badly wrinkled suit.

Caffin nodded briefly and disappeared into the cubbyhole at the rear of the shop.

When the presser went to his machine, Caffin heard him say triumphantly: "That pays the bill—right to the penny. Tell your boss he can't freeze me out of the neighborhood even if he don't give me no time. It's a poor neighborhood—but a lucky one—for some people."

The door slammed hard behind the second man. The presser began to whistle.

Caffin, sitting in his shorts and dirty shirt, grinned. The buck had helped someone else... Wotta buck!..

It had made it possible—for him—

to see Carlton in an hour. Not that Carlton was squeamish about a guy's appearance... He just wanted things done neatly. Same way about kills—neat. Carlton was a smart operator... Caffin had been waiting for six months for Carlton to leave Alcatraz. The wait had been expensive; but when he saw Carlton now it would be worthwhile. Had he went into see him looking like a broken-down bum Carlton might have paid five hundred. Looking like he was in the chips his gun would be worth about three grand. That buck really had been lucky....

The bill seemed to shrug in the collector's pocket. It was just a buck to help some people, to crucify others... Its powers were amazing. One buck that held life or death for stupid mortals...

Jones, the collector, moved slowly up the street, feeling like a heel. To collect bills for guys like Katz was making dough the hard way. Katz had said that if the presser didn't have ninety bucks—to the penny—to slap a paper on him. It was Katz's way of doing business. Getting a small time tailor into his association, lending him dough, then proceeding to break him—toss him out—and take over. But maybe it wasn't all Katz's fault. He took orders from the Big Guy, whoever he was....

Jones was glad the young guy had showed up with the buck, for the forty cents the guy had spent had saved the presser's shop. It was a lucky bill all right. Acting on a hunch, Jones took it from the outer wrapping of the boss' big roll and transferred it to his slim one.

He needed a little luck, too....

* * *

DOC AND Spike came into the street. The aged newsboy, damp with fog, stood huddled against the building. When Doc stopped he regarded him incuriously.

"See some money fall into the street?"

The newsboy shifted his cud. "Rheumatism's bad. I can't move very fast. But the eyes are fair."

"Hell," Spike grumbled. He dug

change from his pocket. "For a paper and—" he said suggestively.

"Found money ain't no good," the newsboy said. "I should know. That's why I'm selling these." He passed a Call Bulletin to Spike.

"A young fellow that looked too old picked up a bill just yonder." He inclined his chin across the street. "He went into the restaurant over there."

Doc already had turned and was weaving his way through traffic. Spike rolled the newspaper near his pocket, and when his arm hung loose his fingers were inside the paper around the automatic and his thumb pressed against the paper's outer edges.

The paper raised briefly until it pointed at Doc's back, then lowered. Until the buck was found it was too early for the gun....

* * *

They went into the restaurant. Three men sat at the long counter. None were young. The short counter-man in the dirty apron hurried up near the cash register. Spike moved almost lazily to the side counter. When the man came up he unrolled the newspaper—and there was the gun.

"Okay," the whitened counter-man said. "Take the till. I don't care. Just take it easy. It's all yours."

"Nuts!" Spike grated. "We don't want your damned money. We're lookin' for a buck."

"Just one dollar?" the counter-man gasped. "Sure—help yourself."

Spike pressed the cash register, and it gave an ominous clang. The three men sat in frowning concentration at the counter. Finally, after riffling the bills, Spike turned to them.

"Any of you guys got a buck bill?"

Two men reached cautiously into their pockets and placed money on the counter.

Spike motioned briefly to Doc. "Take a look."

Doc looked, examining every dollar bill minutely. Finally he said, "It ain't here."

"Where's the young guy who came

in here?" Spike asked the counter-
man.

The belly under the white apron moved in relief. "A young guy started in, then went into the tailor shop next door."

Doc already was heading for the door. His eyes were avid again. "You keep them covered here, Spike. I'll take a look."

Spike yelled, "No you don't. You don't get hold of that buck alone again." He joined Doc, then cautiously pulled the door closed and went into the tailor shop.

The counterman sagged, his head turning in puzzlement. "Everyday stickups get less sense." Then he went on rubbery legs to the phone and called police.

* * *

IN THE TAILOR shop, the presser was just finishing the suit. Caffin sat musingly in the dark cubbyhole.

The presser saw Doc first, then Spike, then the gun when Spike moved from behind Doc. He threw up his hands. Spike went to the empty cash drawer. Caffin heard a curse and looked out.

He wasn't sure who was the more frightened, the presser or the man without a gun. They made a queer holdup pair. Two guys—one gun—and the pair obviously enemies. A very odd heist combine...

"Where's the young guy who came in here," Spike said.

"I donno," the presser stuttered. "A bill collector just went up the street, little guy with a scar on his chin and a limp in his left leg. He took all the bucks I had."

Spike, watching the presser, drifted back to the cubbyhole near Caffin.

Caffin saw the gun approach through a slit in the curtains. It was a lone gun. And the guy in back of it looked too old to be too tough anymore. It was a golden opportunity. When he went up to the Big Guy with a gun to hire, it would be smart to have a gun. Any self-respecting gunman should. It spoke of class. And this dumb old gungel approach-

ing at an angle seemed made to order. His own had been in hock for weeks.

He took the gamble, reaching hurriedly through the curtain and grabbing and twisting the gun upward. Spike yelled, but held on. It was Doc who hurled the heavy iron still warm from the burner. It struck Caffin on the chest, knocking him back into the booth.

Spike twisted free, took deliberate aim and shot Caffin twice, once in the chest, once in the neck.

Caffin still was falling when he turned to the frightened presser. "That buck. This guy ain't got no pants, nothing to hold a buck in. Where's the other guy, the one with the limp."

"His—his next stop usually is Manny's, two blocks up. But a buck! This is crazy." He gestured at Caffin. "You knock off a man for one dollar."

Spike made up his mind swiftly. He raised the gun to shoot the presser, then lowered it. Another kill wouldn't save anything. Three witnesses already—four counting the counterman—were in the restaurant.

The heat was on. Damn that dollar bill....

He fled with Spike up the street.

* * *

Jones, the collector, unaware of havoc behind, stopped at the corner drugstore below Manny's. He bought medicine and milk, and made sure the lucky buck was among the bills completing the purchase. The sick kid down the street needed both items, but more than anything else he needed luck.

It was when he passed the bill across the counter that Jones noticed for the first time that two numbers—one and zero—had been written across the back of the bill. Some guy just doodling, he thought....

As he turned up the old brownstone steps of the tenement, he heard shots racketing behind him on the street. He did not pause. It wasn't politic to know too much of any shooting, and it was just damned foolishness for a bill collector carry-

ing the boss' dough to even get close to where slugs were flying.

He went up to the third floor. The woman who answered his knock was haggard-eyed, her face white and wan. She looked at the medicine and milk and murmured: "Thank God! Thank God!"

Inside the baby in the crib was almost too still. He hadn't intended making this stop until later in the day. Now he was glad that the lucky buck had prompted him to change his mind. The kid was sick, darned sick. A little later might have been too late. The dollar bill, he vowed, was the finest dollar bill he had ever heard of. Always taking people out of jams....

DOC AND Spike were halfway to Manny's when they heard the whine of prowler cars. The whines seemed to approach from every direction.

"You were a damn fool, shooting that young guy. We're so hot now we're on fire."

"I had to. He wanted the gun."

"A guy's crazy to want a gun."

"Maybe this guy was," Spike clipped. "He didn't look like no pansy. Maybe I did him a favor."

"Yeah, but you didn't do us one," Doc growled. The prowler cars were coming nearer.

A cab driver came from a drug-store doorway, stopped and tried to orient the sirens. Then he shrugged and got into his empty taxicab.

Spike said suddenly to Doc. "What were the numbers on your bill. We gotta get to the Big Guy and fast now."

Doc looked frightened. "I just read the note. It said to study the bill—meet you—and come to Euclid Avenue. Where on Euclid Avenue, I ask you? It didn't say. Before I could get in touch with him I had to see your bill, too, before I could collect. That was the rub. He knew what kind of guys we were. There's fifty grand somewhere on Euclid Avenue. He knew only one of us was going to try and show up. Twenty-five apiece wouldn't have been enough."

Spike didn't argue the point. "I know. He wanted one of us to rub

the other guy out. Only it didn't work out that way."

"No," Doc nodded morosely. "Only it's going to work out with both of us on a slab if we don't lam from here." A prowler car had pulled up across the street from Manny's.

"The cab quick," Spike said. "Manny can wait."

They got slowly into the cab, unhurried and frankly curious about the prowler car.

"Looks like trouble of some kind," Spike said conversationally. "What was it driver?"

"Dunno," said the driver. "I'm just glad that it isn't me. Where to gents?"

"Sixty-eight hundred block on Euclid," Spike said, watching Doc. "There's no hurry. Take it easy."

"So your bill had sixty-eight on it," Doc said, trying to smile at Spike. His voice was softly confidential, but somehow ominous. "Jeest! How I wish I had looked at mine!"

"Lookit," Spike said. "I don't know whether sixty-eight is the first two figures of a number or the last two numbers. That's why your bill was needed to get the right number. The Big Guy and fifty grand are there—if we only knew where—there—is."

"I got good ears, pals," the driver said. "Sometimes I'm not supposed to have. Other times I got sense enough not to have. But what's it worth to you guys to get a buck bill with two numbers on it?"

"You talk too much," Doc snarled.

SPIKE grabbed Doc's rigid arm, his eyes riveted on the driver's back. "It's worth ten grand," he said sibilantly, "if it's the right bill." He had his arms crossed and the gun muzzle snuggled in the crook of his left arm, it's muzzle pointed at the driver's head.

The cabby whistled soundlessly. "Ten grand! What if I told you where it was? Still ten grand?"

"Still ten grand," Spike said, his finger white on the trigger. "That is—if it's the right bill."

"When do I get the ten grand?"

"Soon as we get the bill, visit a

place, and come out. Half hour at the most."

"Hot dough, ain't it?"

"Would that matter?"

"No-o," the driver said hesitantly. "I got larceny in me. I ain't got what they call ethics in me. Only people won't seem to let me work at my trade. I done three stretches in the Big House for a helluva lot less than ten grand."

Spike nodded approvingly. "You're okay. You're our kind, bud."

"Nuts!" Doc grumbled. "Let's just get the bill. We're losing money. Already this lam has cost us ten grand."

"It could be worse," the cabbie said smugly. "Somebody might take it all."

"Like you?" Doc grated.

The cabby, smirking, turned. His eyebrows raised slightly when he saw the automatic's ugly snout across Spike's elbow. "Me? Hell no. I been honest now come three years. Just driving this hack. My word's good." The last was said, almost desperately.

"Where's the bill," Doc snapped. "Buck bills move fast. They reach too many people."

The driver considered that, his hands shaking on the wheel. "Well, this one went into a place where a good guy on a party decided to take a moochin' dame home from a night club. This dame, see, was a louse. The guy just was being friendly. Anyway the dame said she was going to yell copper—or else."

"So?" Spike prodded.

"So I take this bim over, see, and this Doc gives her a handful of bucks. And of course she slips me a few just for driving her."

"And the guy was threatened with losing his store—his wife finding out—unless he paid," Spike said knowingly. "Just the old badger game."

"Yeah—in a way," the cabby admitted. "Only this guy wasn't a big shot. When the bim showed up this guy had just tapped the cash register saying it was lucky that some little guy needed some medicine and dough. Because he needed just one buck to square-off the bim. With the salary due him he could have taken

more and still squared-up before the day was over. It was that buck that took him out of a Helluva tight spot.

"And about the buck this dame gave you?" Spike demanded. "Was that one of the bucks you got?"

"Maybe-e, maybe it was-s."

"Okay, bud. We'll take it."

"But the ten grand?"

"Coming up, buddy, coming up just like ham and french fried. Just let us see that bill," Spike grated.

"It's a phony," Doc said suddenly in panic. "A bank teller—anybody—could have written two numbers on it. We're sticking our necks out."

"Are WE," Spoke grumbled. "You know the number I got from the Big Guy. I don't know yours."

"I don't know it myself," Doc almost pleaded. "We're partners. Don't you remember. You said so yourself."

"Sure — sure — we're partners," Spike nodded approvingly.

"Only now," Doc said logically, "we ain't got twenty-five grand apiece. We got twenty each, cuttin' in the hackie. We're worse off than before."

"Listen," Spike quipped. "Twenty grand each ain't so bad for a guy to retire on." His eyes were blandly lying by the minute.

THE DRIVER, over his depth, was carefully pressing down the catch on his near door, ready to roll into the street. He'd seen men like Spike before. He didn't have a chance at that 10 G's. When a guy got as old and desperate as the mug with the gun, one last big haul did the trick.

Spike said, "Hold it! Give us your roll."

Stiffening, with rigid fingers, the cabby obeyed. He passed it back over his shoulder without looking back.

He heard Doc grunt, "One and zero." There was a pause. "It's in the same handwriting, Spike. This is it."

"And what initial is on the left back corner of the bill? Spike clipped.

Doc looked, and said hollowly: "Just the initial R."

"It's the right bill, all right," Doc

said in satisfaction. "Mine said L. That makes it read 6810 Euclid Avenue. The numbers are joined now. Now for the Big Guy. He's there, after these 15 years in Alcatraz. He thought we would kill each other—and only one show up—for our end of the dough he had stashed. Smart egg—as usual—this time we'll out-smart him. He's got more than fifty G's there—and a dead guy doesn't need even one G. Get what I mean, Doc?"

"Sure," Doc said morosely. "Take it all. We fouled him up once."

"Well, he was the Big Guy. Why should us small men take anything from him. We were big, too. But the government still was shooting after him. Well, they got him."

"Sure," said Doc. "They got him for fifteen. You and me only for two each. But the Big Guy proved when he asked us to come after our cut he hadn't forgotten who got him that dough. It was us!"

"Sure was, but I got a hunch he didn't like us. The way he fixed up these bills showed he expected us to be broke and only come in one piece."

"He was always a smart guy. In fact too smart for his own good. He'll kill himself, sure as hell."

"It's 6810 Euclid?" the driver asked.

"It's 6810 Euclid," Spike said non-committally.

The taxi started there.

The taxi got there. The only thing missing was the driver. He was under some brush on a highway, his body to be discovered two or three months hence.

SPIKE WALKED boldly up to the door. Doc sat sedately in the cab, wearing the driver's cap. He waited until the door opened reluctantly, and then he slid from under the wheel.

Spike, he vowed, couldn't get away with this steal.

He cautiously paced to the side of the house.

Spike was speaking:

"All right, Big Guy, it took 15 years to get this. And it's due. You know that?"

"It's always been due. You and Doc actually done the triggering. The financial thing I got tripped up on was out of your sphere. Bucks tripped me, shooting didn't. That was for hirelings like you."

"Like you giving us the bucks with markings on them. You still think they'll foul us up?"

Doc, watching the Big Guy, was amazed. The Big Guy had changed radically. His eyes looked beaten and there was fat around his shoulders and middle. He seemed sedate—and waiting for something. In fact he looked like he had waited for many years....

"I think the bucks you men received will foul you up. It's in the cards." His voice sounded fatalistic.

"And you'll get clear? You're too smart to foul up bucks?"

"I have several millions stashed, if that's what you mean?"

"That's just what I mean. I want them!"

"I thought you would." Then, "Well shoot! You double-crossed me at my trial and waited like Vultures, until I got out. If you had come singly, you'd have had 25 G's each. I knew you would go for the whole, just like you done to me at the trial. Well, okay kid, you shoot it—and find it."

"It's amazing to come in here and not find a gunsel," Spike said. "You used to be more cautious. You wouldn't stand for a fifty grand tap—even if it was due?"

"I depended on a guy who didn't get here," the Big Guy nodded. "He was supposed to be a pretty fair gun. His name was Caffin. I was told he was a young but good kid out of Chi."

"Never heard of him," said Spike, forgetting the man he had shot in the presser's.

"I'm giving you back your buck, pal," Spike said. He reached under his belt to a money belt and drew the lone bill left therein."

"I'll take it," the Big Guy said grimly. "That's one buck I want to die with."

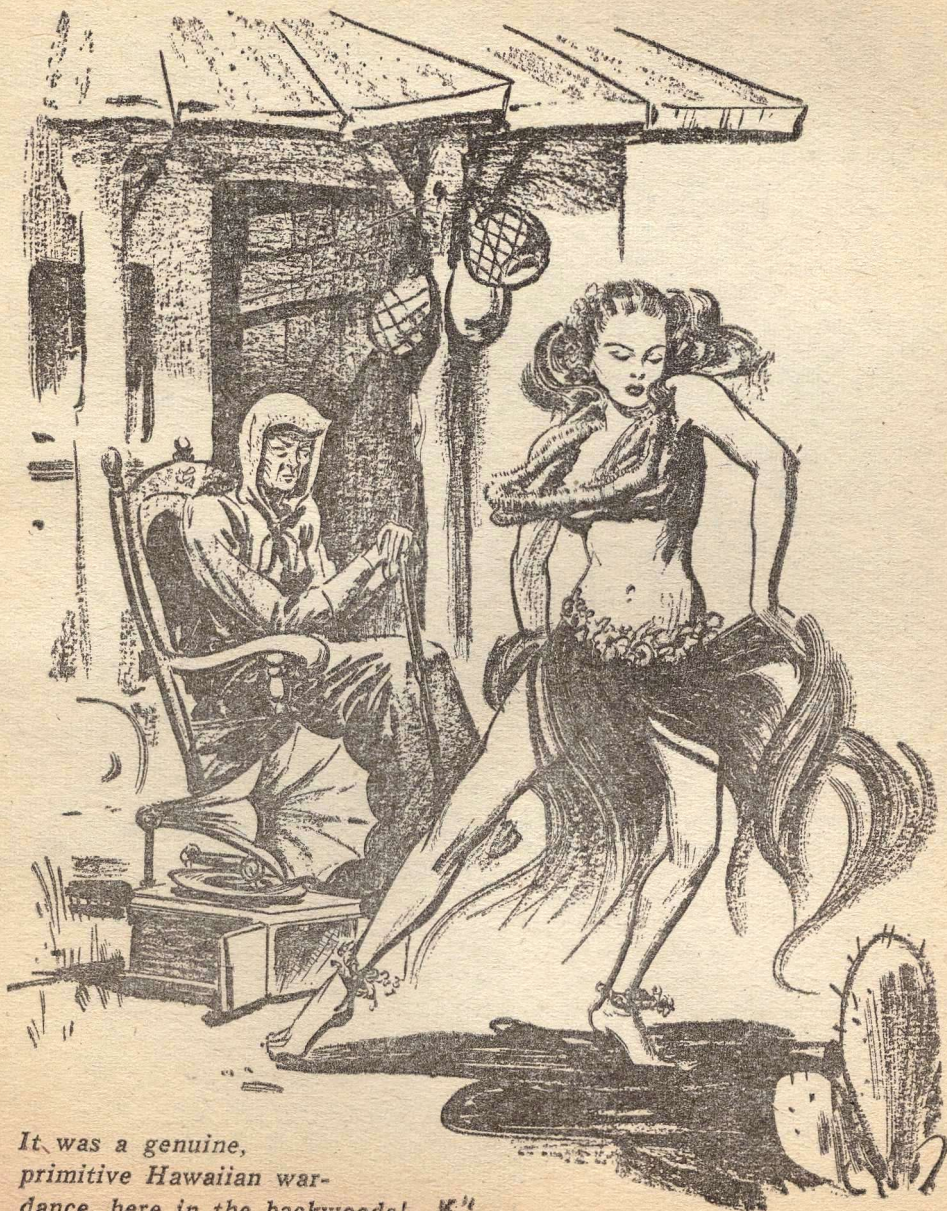
"You should. It ain't no good to

(Continued on Page 69)

DEATH'S GUITARS ARE SINGING

By HAL K. WELLS

*'And deadly peril awaits the stranger who accepts hospitality in
Murder's household!'*



*It was a genuine,
primitive Hawaiian war-
dance, here in the backwoods!*

JOHN COLBY was hiking casually along the dirt road in the dusty sunlight of late afternoon when a totally unexpected burst of music from beyond a roadside paw-paw thicket brought him to an abrupt and startled halt.

The instruments were Hawaiian, but the crashing guitar chords and barbaric rhythm sang a spine-rippling war song that was as far removed from ordinary Hawaiian music as raw meat is from a chocolate éclair. This music had hair on its chest, and the hair was daubed with the war-paint of jungle fighting men charging into battle. In the somnolent rusticity of this lonely southern Ohio hill district the savagely pounding strains were as tantalizingly incongruous as a bloodstained war-club in a farmhouse umbrella-stand.

Colby listened tautly until the last crashing chord ended. Then he left the road and started through the thicket. The music began again, this time in the languorous rhythm of a dance. The thicket ended. Colby slipped behind the trunk of an oak tree at its inner edge.

The strange music was coming from a portable record-player on the lawn of an old and weatherbeaten farmhouse. A girl, with dark eyes set exotically beneath faintly slanted brows in a smoothly tanned face, was dancing to the singing chords.

The melody was a *hula*. The girl wore the conventional grass skirt and flower *lei*, but there all resemblance to the hip-wriggling Midway atrocity ceased. This dance, like the battle song, was the real thing—as starkly primal as the dark heart of the jungle itself.

Sitting in a rocking-chair nearby was an ancient crone who was the oldest human being Colby had ever seen. Even the heat of the August day was not enough to warm those aged bones. Her frail body was huddled in a shawl of Hawaiian *kapa* cloth. A pair of eyes glowed like black opals in the gauntness of her wrinkled face.

The guitars stopped in a final singing crescendo. The crone's hands beat in feeble applause. The girl turned

toward her for a fraction of a second her face contorted in an expression that verged upon open hatred.

An instant later it was gone, and her features were again smoothly impassive. It was at that moment that someone spoke from close behind Colby.

"Caught you spyin' around, huh?"

Colby turned and saw a tall, uncouth character holding an oldtime .45 pointed at his midsection. The narrow face beneath the slouch hat reminded Colby of one of those oversized rats that infest country corncribs.

"H'ist your hands and get goin'!" the fellow ordered.

It didn't seem a very good time to argue. Colby started across the lawn. The character with the .45 brought him to a halt when they reached the women.

"Just a tramp I caught skuklin' behind a tree, Gail," he said to the girl. "Snoopin' around to see what he could steal, I suppose."

"Steal?" the crone squawked. Her sunken eyes glittered with the eerie fire of senile dementia. "He's a thief, come to steal the Treasure of the Islands. Stop him, Dave! Kill him!"

"Here, heare! What's going on?"

The demand came from a pudgy, bald little man who came bustling around the corner of the house. There was an expression of worried petulance upon his round face.

"I was passing by when I heard the music," Colby explained. "I took a look to see where it came from. Then this character came along with his cannon."

The little man studied Colby's dusty clothes and the week's growth of reddish stubble on his face.

"He didn't care nothin' about the music!" Dave snorted. "He's just a thievin' tramp, lookin' to see what he could steal."

"Fiddlesticks!" the little man exclaimed. "What do we have that anyone would want to steal?"

"We got the Treasure of the Islands," Dave said sullenly. "I ain't never seen it, but I know it's here, and it's—"

"Shut up!" the little man said

sharply. "You're paid as a hired man not as a he-gossip to discuss family affairs before every stranger who comes along. Put that revolver back in the house and get on about your evening chores. And, Gail, you'd better take Aunt Chloe inside."

WHEN THE others had gone, he turned apologetically to Colby.

"I'm sorry you got such a rude reception," he said, "but our situation here is a little—ah—peculiar. You see, Aunt Chloe isn't quite right in her mind. She believes that this worthless old Ohio farm is really a Hawaiian royal palace and that she is one of the ancient queens. She got the idea from our family history. Some of our people have been missionaries and traders over in the Islands since as far back as 1850. We humor her delusion as much as we can. I fixed up those old records for her, and Gail does the ancient dances."

The little man broke off abruptly. "But you're not interested in our family history. It's getting late and you're probably thinking about food and lodging. We'll be glad to give you a meal and a bed for the night, if you'll do a little work in exchange."

"All right by me," Colby said.

They went around the house to the wood-pile. Colby picked up an ax and started swinging.

"Fine!" the little man applauded. "I can see that you've chopped wood before, Mr.—ah—"

"Just call me Red," Colby said.

"Just Red? Isn't it—ah—Chicago Red, or something like that?"

There was a wistful note in his voice that gave Colby the tip-off. The little man was one of those stay-at-homes who have an odd hero worship for tramps. He wanted to be told some bedtime stories about the riproaring romance of the open road.

Oh well, Colby reflected, that was part of the fun of the game. He gave the little man both barrels. In the next half hour they rode the rods from Chi fo Frisco. He managed to

get a little information in return. The little man's name was Horace Robbins. He had a radio shop in the village ten miles east. The old woman was Chloe Robbins, and she was a great-aunt to Horace and Gail. Horace only got out to the place on weekends, but Gail stayed there all the time.

There was one subject, however, about which Horace was definitely not talking. When Colby tried to hint about the mysterious Treasure of the Islands, the little man shut up tighter than a clam with lock-jaw.

IT WAS nearly dark when Horace finally got enough of Colby's hobo yarns and went into the house. Colby chopped wood for a few minutes longer, then stopped to smoke a cigaret. There was a pile of trash near the wood-pile. Colby was a stamp collector in his more respectable moments, and several envelopes among the trash caught his eye. He started looking them over on the chance of finding a stray commemorative or precancel. He did not notice Horace's return until the little man was close behind him.

"Looking for something?" Horace's voice wasn't any too pleasant.

Colby did some fast thinking. Tramps weren't supposed to be philatelists, and after the hobo routine he'd given Horace he'd feel like a fool now to have to admit that he was really nothing more romantically vagabond than a young Cincinnati architect whose idea of vacation fun was to hit the open highway and play hobo for a couple of weeks.

"Just looking for stamps," he said casually. "Fellow I know in Cincy buys them sometimes if they've got flags on them, or pictures. You know—some guys collect them, I guess."

"I wouldn't know anything about it," Horace snapped petulantly. "I've never had either the time or the money for any such foolishness as stamp collecting."

He peered at Colby sharply for a minute, then his face cleared. "I came out to tell you that supper is ready."

And, Red, I wonder if you'd do me a favor?"

"What kind of a favor?" Colby asked.

"Well, it's like this. Aunt Chloe has had an odd change of mind about you. First she thought you were a thief, come to steal the Treasure of the Islands. Now she believes you're an emissary of a neighboring king, sent here to look upon the Treasure so you can describe it to your people. She may get badly worked up if we don't humor her. Would you mind coming up to her room after supper?"

"I'll be glad to." Colby kept his voice casual, but the promise of actually getting a look at the mysterious Treasure started his bump of curiosity itching like a dozen hives.

He stopped on the back porch to wash up. When he entered the kitchen Horace was just starting upstairs with a tray of food. Gail, clad now in a crisp house dress, served Dave and Colby.

Dave ate in glum silence. Gail was equally uncommunicative, with a sullen impassivity that puzzled Colby. They were nearly finished eating when he finally broke the silence.

"Where do you buy records like that?" he asked, jerking a thumb toward where guitar chords wailed from upstairs.

"You can't buy them," Gail answered. "Those are private recordings made years ago by some of our people in the Islands. The melodies are almost as old as Hawaii itself. Horace transferred them from the old cylinder records to modern discs."

"Have you ever been in Hawaii?" Colby asked.

"No, but one of my grandmothers was a full-blooded Hawaiian."

"That must be where you got that talent for dancing," he commented. "You can really dance."

"It's the one thing in life I'm really interested in!" For the first time, her face showed animation. "I love to dance. I'd give my soul to be able to go somewhere that I could study it under good teachers!"

"Why don't you?"

"I can't," she said hopelessly. "My parents died when I was just a baby

and Aunt Chloe took me in and was everything to me that my own mother could have been. Now that she is old and mentally sick, I simply can't leave her."

HORACE came downstairs then. "Are you ready to go up now, Red?" he asked. "Aunt Chloe refuses to go to bed until she shows you the Treasure of the Islands."

Dave showed sudden interest. "Hey, how about my comin', too? I ain't never seen the Treasure."

"All right, come along," Horace assented. "And you too, Gail. You can put Aunt Chloe to bed when we're through."

Aunt Chloe was in a big corner bedroom at the head of the stairs. Hawaiian tapestries and implements on the walls made the place look like a miniature museum. There was a large sea-chest against one of the walls. Near it on a table was the record-player, silent now.

The old woman raised a withered hand from her rocking-chair as they entered.

"Greetings, Red-Haired One from across the sea," she croaked. "You shall not be disappointed in your quest. You shall see the Treasure. You shall feast your eyes upon the feathered glory of the Queen's Mantle."

Colby drew a sharp breath. He had been in Honolulu, and he had seen the famous Feather Cloak of Kiwailao in the museum there. They couldn't possibly have one of those fabulous garments in this poverty stricken Ohio farmhouse!

Horace threw back the lid of the chest, revealing a miscellany of Hawaiian curios of shell, bone, and wood, a small packet of age-yellowed letters—and a feather robe. Colby's mind was a welter of conflicting emotions as Horace carefully lifted the garment out and handed it to the old woman.

"The Queen's Mantle," she crooned. "Treasure of Treasures! For a hundred years scores of hands labored to complete it. Only the feathers of the rare *mamo* bird could be used, and from each bird only a single fea-

ther from beneath each wing was fine enough for so royal a garment. Is it not a thing of glory and beauty?"

Colby swallowed hard. "It is beautiful," he managed to say.

"It is priceless, Aunt Chloe," Horace assured her. "The Kiwalao Cloak is valued at a million dollars, and this mantle is even more perfect."

Dave gasped in surprise. Greed shone ugly and naked in his face as he stared at the garment. Gail, too, was staring at the robe, but Colby could not read the expression on her impassive face. Great Scott, he thought, is it possible they believe that thing is really one of the ancient Hawaiian royal feather cloaks?

The feathers in the Cloak of Kiwalao were of incredibly fine texture, almost as delicate and slender as the hair from the human head. Those, in this monstrous caricature looked like they had been plucked from the tail of a barnyard rooster. Their gaudy iridescence did not even try to imitate the golden body and red trimming of the Kiwalao Cloak. As an item for a Hallowe'en masquerade, the thing might have a top value of five dollars.

It was obvious that Aunt Chloe believed in its genuineness, however. She was so absorbed in caressing it that she had forgotten all about the rest of them. Horace nodded toward the door. Dave and Colby followed him out.

"A million dollars," Dave muttered incredulously "for a feather gimcrack like that!"

"What did you think of the Treasure, Red?" Horace asked.

Colby did not know what he was expected to say, so he played it safe. "I got a real kick out of it," he said. "I never expected to see anything like that"

He turned to follow Dave downstairs, but Horace stopped him.

"I'll show you where you bunk while we're here."

THEY WENT back along the hall to a tiny rear room that contained a rickety wash-stand, a cot, and a straight-backed chair

"It's pretty small," Horace admitted, "but we're short on bedrooms. I'm bunking in the living-room downstairs myself. You can leave the hall door open for ventilation."

"O. K.," Colby said "What's that other door—a clothes closet?"

"No, it connects with Aunt Chloe's room. It's locked, so don't let it bother you."

"It won't," Colby stifled a yawn. "I think I'm about ready to flop now. That wood chopping sort of did me in."

He found that he was even more tired than he had thought. After he had blown the lamp out and gone to bed he started to mull over the weird riddle of the feather cloak, but in five minutes he was sound asleep.

The next thing he knew he was sitting bolt upright on the cot while a savage melody throbbed in his ears. It came from the old woman's room next door, and this time the guitars were crashing in a wailing tocsin that fairly tore the night apart!

Colby glanced at his watch. It was midnight. There were sounds of someone moving around downstairs. He thought he heard the door of the bedroom across the hall open.

Then the music ended abruptly. There was the low murmur of Gail's voice, apparently talk to Aunt Chloe. Then there was a scream—a spine-crinkling cry that seemed to lance the air like a white-hot knife!

Colby got off the cot then, fast, and grabbed his pants and shirt off the back of the chair.

"Horace! Dave!" Gail's voice was laced with pure horror. "Something terrible has happened!"

When Colby stepped into the hall Gail was standing in the doorway of the old woman's room, with a faded blue dressing gown swathing her slim figure and the knuckles of one hand pressed tightly against her lips.

He ran toward her. "Anything I can do?" he asked.

Before she could answer, Horace came barging up the stairs. Close behind him came Dave with the .45 in his hand. They surged into the room. Horace crossed to the bed where Aunt Chloe's frail body was

limply huddled while the deep-set eyes in her withered face stared blankly at the ceiling.

"She's been murdered!" Horace exclaimed huskily. "Somebody choked her to death!"

"Yeah," Dave snarled, swinging the .45 to cover Colby, and "he somebody is the same one who tore that hunk off his shirt on the lid of the chest!"

COLBY looked at the chest and his heart zoomed abruptly into his throat. There was a small strip of dusty green cloth caught in the closed lid. He looked down at his shirt. There was a piece torn from the right sleeve.

"You beast!" Gail exclaimed. "You filthy, murdering beast!"

"Wait a minute!" Colby protested. "I wasn't even—"

"Shut up!" Dave ordered venomously. "Thought it'd be easy to strangle her and get away with a million dollar feather cloak, huh? But you didn't know about the alarm gadget. When the lid of the chest is raised, the record-player starts. Scared you plenty, didn't it? You got out of here so fast you didn't even notice you left part of your shirt in the lid."

Dave jerked a thumb toward the connecting door. Colby saw that it now stood ajar.

"And there's the way you got out," Dave said, "the same way you come in. That old lock wasn't hard to pick."

"And there's the way you got out," Dave said, "the same way you come in. The old lock wasn't hard to pick."

Gail nodded. "That's the reason I didn't run into you in the hall," she said to Colby. "When the record started, you lost your head and ran back into your own room. Then a few minutes later you came out the hall door, trying to make it look like you'd just been awakened."

Colby started to answer. Then he took a look at the three hostile faces around him and realized that any attempt at argument would be merely wasted breath. Someone had done a very thorough job of framing him for the electric chair!

"Mebbe he grabbed the cloak before he got scared off," Dave suggested.

Horace shook his head. "He hardly had time."

Gail opened the chest. The alarm device was apparently a one-shot affair, for no music came this time.

The robe was still there, its gaudy feathers undisturbed. Colby stared down at it while far back in his brain something rang like an insistent little alarm bell. There was something vitally wrong about the contents of the chest, but his mind was too dazed with the rapid blur of events to quite catch it.

Gail's face twisted in grief as she glanced briefly at the robe, then closed the chest.

"Poor Aunt Chloe and her wonderful cloak!" she said chokingly. "I can't stand it in here any longer, Horace, with—with her lying there like that!"

"We'll all go downstairs," Horace said soothingly. "You take care of Red, Dave. I'll phone the sheriff."

The phone was at the rear of the downstairs hall. While Horace went back to it, Dave herded Colby into a large, lighted room at the foot of the stairs. Gail followed them and sank wearily into an arm-chair.

COLBY'S brain raced with swift alertness as he realized that for the moment he had Horace and Dave split. It was a golden opportunity that was not likely to come again.

"Dave," he said, "they're making a sucker of you."

"What do you mean?" Dave demanded suspiciously.

"They told you that feather cloak is worth a million dollars. The truth is it's nothing but a cheap imitation that wouldn't bring five bucks in a rummage sale!"

He saw doubt beginning to dawn in Dave's close-set eyes.

"You don't have to take my word for it," Colby said confidently. "Ask Gail."

"How about it, Gail?" Dave asked. His eyes flickered away from Colby momentarily, but not long enough.

"We were just humoring Aunt Chloe about the cloak," Gail admitted weari-

ly. "It isn't really worth anything."

Dave's lips twisted into a snarl. He forgot all about Colby as he turned angrily toward Gail. That was Colby's chance and he took it.

His left hand flashed out and clamped Dave's gun-wrist, forcing the muzzle ceilingward, while his right fist streaked for Dave's jaw. The blow struck with a solid impact that buckled Dave's knees.

Colby put both hands on Dave's gun-wrist then and swung his own body low and hard to the left. The .45 dropped from Dave's numbed fingers as he shot headlong over Colby's shoulder. His hurtling body knocked a chair over, then landed with a crash that rattled the window-panes.

Colby snatched the .45 up. There was the sound of Horace's feet charging down the hall. His round face appeared in the doorway, the went abruptly blank as he saw the gun in Colby's hand.

"Come on in, chum," Colby said. "We're holding open house."

He got the three of them lined up against the wall.

"You won't get away with this, Red!" Horace sputtered indignantly. "I already had the sheriff on the line. He'll be out here in the next fifteen minutes."

"So if I'm smart I'll run for it now while the going's good?" Colby asked. "Thanks, but I'm not having any. I'm sticking right here until I find out which one of you three lovely characters murdered that old woman upstairs and tried to hang the rap around my neck."

"What's the use of trying to brazen it out?" Horace asked petulantly. "We already know who killed Aunt Chloe, and we know why she was killed."

"For that so-called royal feather cloak?" Colby snorted. "Nuts! That worthless curio had no more to do with the murder than the kitchen sink."

Horace's lips pursed.

"I told him—and Dave—the truth about the cloak," Gail explained. "He'd already guessed it."

"A tramp wouldn't be supposed to know the cloak was bogus," Colby

said, "so it made a nice motive for the murder when the killer framed the crime on the tramp. Doing the actual framing was an easy enough matter. Gail, was your door open when the record started?"

"No." Her eyes flickered toward Dave with thinly concealed distaste. "I always sleep with my door closed."

"Then either Horace or Dave could have sneaked up from downstairs without your hearing them," Colby said.

"But we didn't!" Horace exclaimed indignantly. "What possible reason would we have for killing Aunt Chloe?"

THAT WAS the big question that was worrying Colby. The farm itself was the only tangible asset that the murderer, or murderers, could hope to gain, and the place was too rundown to bring more than a few hundred dollars. He thought again of the sea-chest and the elusive discrepancy in its contents when Gail had opened it, but the harder he tried to remember just what that discrepancy was, the more it eluded him.

Time was running out, and fast. There couldn't be more than ten minutes left before the sheriff was due. Colby felt the cold dampness of nervous perspiration on his temples. He glanced around the room in sheer desperation, trying to pick up some faint lead somewhere.

There was a horsehair sofa, several chairs, and over in one corner a cot where Horace apparently slept. On the floor near Colby's feet was a blue serge coat that had been on the chair that Dave had knocked over. Colby glanced idly at the small sheaf of envelopes and papers that had spilled from an inside pocket. Then suddenly he looked again and more intently.

There were oblong pieces cut out of the corners of a couple of the envelopes. It took a moment for the full significance of the thing to hit Colby. He remembered something then, and with that initial impetus other significant facts began falling into place like tumblers in a lock.

Most important, he remembered

now what was missing in the chest the second time it was opened. Hawaii in the early 1859's. That could very well be it. If it were, everything else tied right into place.

"O. K., folks," he said slowly. "I know the reason now why Chloe Robbins was killed. And I know the one who killed her!"

The silence in the room was as tautly vibrant as though charged with a thousand volts.

"There was a packet of old letters in that chest," Colby said. "Remember them, Gail?"

"Of course. Aunt Chloe often had me read them to her. They were sent to Aunt Chloe's mother by a sister who was a missionary in the Islands nearly a hundred years ago."

"Ever notice the stamps on them?"

"Yes. I noticed them rather closely because they were so different from modern stamps."

"Try to describe them."

"They hardly looked like stamps at all," Gail said thoughtfully. "They were pieces of almost transparent paper printed with blue ink. They had 'Hawaiian Postage' across the top and a big '13' in the center, surrounded by little curlicues. They were eight of them altogether."

Colby drew a deep breath of relief. Now he was certain he was on the right track. There was no possible mistaking the identity of the stamps Gail had described.

"Those stamps may look crude," he said, "but they are among the rarer classics of philately. Collectors call them the Hawaiian 'missionaries'. They were in use for a short time in the early 1850's when Hawaii was still an independent kingdom. The 13 cent ones of that type have a catalog value of \$2,000 each as loose stamps, and they're worth considerably more on cover. If those old envelopes are in reasonably good condition, eight of them could easily bring as high as \$20,000."

"Why—why, that's a small fortune!" Gail exclaimed.

Colby nodded grimly. "It was a large enough fortune to make a murderer of Horace!"

"Horace?" Gail repeated. "Oh, no!"

Horace's flabby cheeks were gray, but his jaw set stubbornly. "I don't know what you're talking about," he blurted.

"I'll draw you a map," Colby said. "See those envelopes that have spilled from your coat? A couple of them have the stamps cut off. Probably current commemoratives of air mails, the sort of stuff that every stamp collector saves. But you're not supposed to be a collector, Horace. Last night you told me that you knew nothing whatever about stamps."

"What if I did?" Horace said defiantly. "It wasn't important."

"It was plenty important," Colby answered. "You've probably been hiding your stamp knowledge with that same lie for a long time. You were afraid that if anything went wrong with your murder scheme, the fact that you knew rare stamp values might point suspicion toward you."

THERE WAS the shine of perspiration upon Horace's fat cheeks. Colby pressed his attack relentlessly.

"You didn't want those stamps for your collection. You wanted them for the \$20,000 they would bring. You'd have inherited your share when Aunt Chloe died but you got tired of waiting. So you cooked up a murder scheme that would not only give you prompt possession but would also give you the whole works without having to split with Gail or anyone else. All you needed was a tramp for a stooge, and I came along."

Horace's lips began to tremble. "You can't prove anything," he faltered.

"I can prove plenty," Colby said. "You put the idea about showing me the feather cloak in Aunt Chloe's mind to give me the supposed motive for the killing. You suggested that I leave my hall door open so you could get at my clothes. After you killed Aunt Chloe, you disconnected the alarm hook-up, got the letters out of the chest, and closed it on a strip torn from my shirt. You unlocked the connecting door to my room. then you turned the record-player on and beat it. You probably had slow-warming tubes in it to give you plenty of time

to get downstairs so you could appear a few minutes later as Mr. Innocence, just awakened from a sound sleep."

Horace's face sagged like that of a collapsing dough man. "You haven't got any real proof!" he whispered huskily.

"I've got the best possible proof," Colby said confidently. "You were badly rushed for time when you came running downstairs with the packet of letters after the murder. You put them in a temporary hiding place, but you were in too big a hurry. There's a corner of them still sticking out in plain sight!"

The gag worked. Horace's eyes shot momentarily over toward the cot.

"Thanks," Colby said. "I thought you must have hidden them somewhere in this room. You couldn't have had time to go very far with them. Take a look at that cot, will you, Gail?"

She found the packet of letters, snugly tucked away in the pillow. Her face was clouded with shocked grief as she confronted Horace.

"I don't know anything about them!" he half screamed. "One of you folks put those letters in there!"

"No dice, chum," Colby said bleak-

ly. "The three of us came into the room together when we came downstairs and we can all swear that no one of us was ever near the cot."

"That's right!" Dave growled truculently. "You can't pin your dirty work on any of us, you murderin' skunk!"

Horace stared hopelessly from Dave's snarling face to the horror and loathing in Gail's blazing eyes. Then he broke, completely and sickeningly.

"All right, I killed her!" he moaned. Tears trickled down his doughy cheeks. "I waited, and I waited, but she wouldn't die. You can't blame me. All the money those stamps would bring, almost in my very hands, and I couldn't touch it. I couldn't wait any longer. I had to kill her!"

He was still blubbering and babbling in an orgy of self pity when the sheriff drove into the yard, but there was no sympathy on the faces of his three companions. Their memories still carried too vivid a picture of the frail, lifeless figure in the bed of the big corner room upstairs.

THE END



IT'S BACK AGAIN!

With An All-Star
Lineup, Featuring

TOO MANY
COOKS

T. W. FORD

Watch for The June
Issue of

SPORTS
FICTION

(Continued from Page 59)

nobody. Never saw a buck that could give so many people trouble. It just ain't no good."

"It's a buck to heaven, kid—if you make it."

"I will."

A voice from in back of the Big Guy said: "I wouldn't if I were you!"

Spike looked at the Big Guy. "Fifteen years—and you call copper, huh. Uh rat!"

The action was confusing after that. The detective behind the curtain triggered three times at Spike. Spike shot twice before falling.

Doc, outside, saw the blue uniforms and the gunsmoke, and lit out for the cab.

One buck had gotten them into this. A blast-all. It was nuts. Spike should have been smarter. He knew the Big Guy wasn't a dumb guy and might want to even-Stephen after fifteen years.

Doc, fleeing, thought of one buck. All it had brought was murder. But

the Big Guy had sent it out on that mission, like a flier going into flak he almost walk on.

He heard a voice say, "Halt!" once, and then he knew no more. There was no pain. It was like a sedative in the head. After while there was just nothing. A man dies that way.

In back of him a druggist was home with his wife all because a short man spent a marked bill on medicine; a tailor had saved his shop; a baby's life had been saved, and a bill collector thought he had done his best—going for his last buck. All alive.

In back of it was a killer who wanted a stake to get started again; two hoods and a gangster brain that were dangerous and a larcenous cabby. All dead.

The FBI later made a terse report: "THIS BILL IS COUNTERFEIT."

THE END



10 COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

Featuring

THE CREED OF GOSPEL CUMMINGS

By Chuck Martin

are in the May issue of

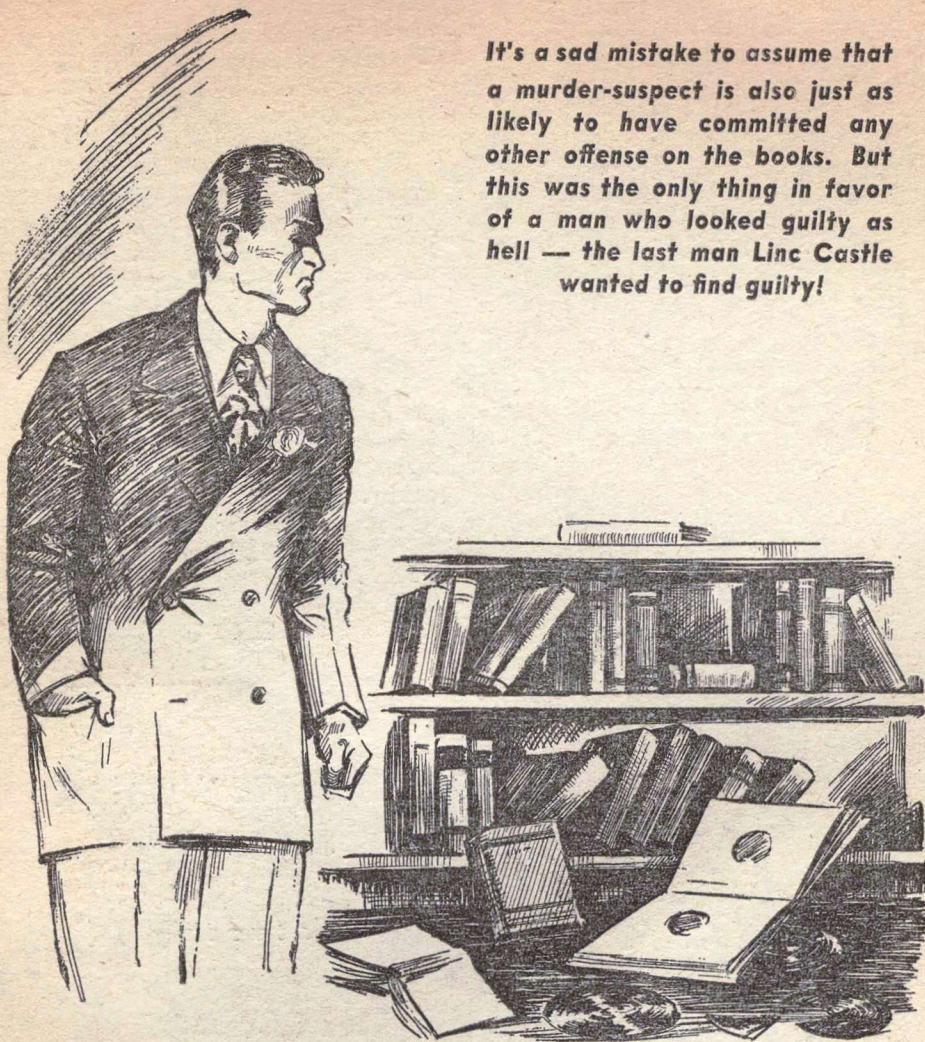
FAMOUS

WESTERN

BIG KILLING

A Linc Castle Novelet

It's a sad mistake to assume that a murder-suspect is also just as likely to have committed any other offense on the books. But this was the only thing in favor of a man who looked guilty as hell — the last man Linc Castle wanted to find guilty!



By SEYMOUR IRVING RICHIN

THE REPORT of Senator Leigh's murder sent a blade of pain through Linc Castle.

Murder was no new thing to Castle; he'd seen killing in all forms during his career. The battlefields of Spain had shown him death, too. But nothing in his experience had ever hurt him like this.

Senator Leigh murdered. This was

enough to take the heart out of a man.

"Somebody's made a mistake, Chief," Castle whispered. He was seated before a large mahogany desk in his book-lined Greenwich Village studio, holding the phone with tensed fingers. On the wall over his desk was a large painting of Lincoln, decorated with the banners of the



Loyalist Brigades. "A mistake, Chief," he repeated. "Not Senator Leigh. Say it's all a mistake, Chief—"

"No mistake, Castle. Leigh is dead; somebody caved in his head. We got the report a few minutes ago from a hicktown cop upstate. They're holding a Negro named Barnes for the killing; Barnes was valet and chauffeur. This'll make a helluva splash in the pond, Castle. When the newsboys tuck this in their type-writers it'll rock the country like Pearl Harbor. I need my best man on this case; that means you. Can you start for Leigh's Estate now?" He rattled off an address. "Well, answer me, for cripes sake. Why the big quiet? You drunk or something?"

Castle couldn't have answered anybody, then. Not after this news. He noted the address mechanically on a telephone pad, then stared at his handwriting like at a foreign language.

"Leigh dead," he muttered. "Dead."

"Deader'n a mackerel. Snap out of your trance, Castle. Man, there's no time to lose. Can you start out now? Dammit, answer me!"

Castle recovered, then. "I can start out now," he said distinctly. "Good night."

Moving fast, Castle cleared his desk of several sheets of typed manuscript paper, placed them in a neatly ordered desk file, ripped the notation from the telephone memorandum pad, pocketed it, and rose out of his swivel chair, moving for his holstered .38, hung in the corridor closet.

He bore an amazing resemblance to the painting on the wall, looked older than his twenty-eight years. He wasn't any more a handsome man, than the great American President, but warmly human qualities were etched in the deep lines of his face, in the earnest glance of his single eye. His right eye was a shell, only glass—a fascist rifle butt in Spain had snuffed out its sight.

CASTLE lifted his black leather holster from a closet hook, and strapped the gun under his armpit.

Next came a conservative blue gaberdine jacket from a closet hanger and he slipped into it. A bright red rose was a refreshing circle of color, pinned to his lapel. The rose was a part of Castle. Each morning he bought a new American Beauty from his favorite florist; he was never without it.

But the rose made no impression on him now, the fragrance of it, the sight of it.

"Leigh dead." He couldn't believe it yet. Some impulse made him move back into his study and pluck a green-backed volume from one library shelf.

Bradford Leigh—Conscience of the South was the title, the author, Vincent Paine. No one knew Vincent Paine was Castle's penname, not even his publishers. None of the famous detective's closest friends dreamed he was the author of the biographies and political histories that had stunned the nation with their relentless anti-totalitarian exposes.

Holding the book, something made a bow in Castle's middle and shot an arrow of despair into his throat. Leigh's death, he knew, would hurt the nation like Roosevelt's fall at Warm Springs, Georgia. *Conscience of the South*—he'd pinned that label on him for good reason. Leigh had been a great Southern liberal; now he was gone, his head caved in and this Barnes in handcuffs because of it. Castle scowled. No American in this decade had ever had a better friend than Senator Bradford Leigh.

He couldn't wait to look into this.

TEN MINUTES later Castle was gunning his speedy blue coupe through the night-shadowed New York streets, heading for the Leigh Estate. Overhead, a gleaming scimitar of moon paced the car, slicing through patches of cloud. Wind blew, a cool August wind that attacked the windows and fenders with a lashlike snap. There were street sounds. Below, the Independent subway tore its moaning weight through the guts of the city and the shapes of pedestrians and cars made noise all

around him, but Castle heard nothing. He had too much on his mind.

He was driving for over three hours and weary to the bone when a white arrow angled at him out of the darkness of the hills. The sign read:

Leigh Manor—1 mile
Turn right
Drive carefully

Castle tensed. After several minutes of fast wind and empty road, Leigh Manor emerged faintly from the gloom. It was far off still, its stucco lines tucked tightly between two shoulders of black rolling hill. One window showed light, on the ground floor of the Manor. The light was a square of yellow in the pitch black.

Castle aimed his coupe at it, swerving up a hilly curve. The road was empty and dead like a racetrack at night. It flowed under his headlights like a black stream. Then, details of the estate grounds defined themselves as Castle drew near.

North of the Manor, about twenty yards off was a lake, a huge gleaming scar in the wooded hills. A winding series of stone steps connected it to the building. On the lake's shore a small dock made a shadowy shape, and smaller shadows were tied to it—canoes and rowboats.

The lines of Leigh Manor were suddenly vivid, like a plane rushing into sight. The square of yellow widened, became a double-doored veranda window, blazing with light. The shadows of people etched themselves on the glass—four or five, Castle judged, at a glance.

He nosed the blue coupe down a tilted asphalt driveway, put on the brakes and shifting to the door, glancing again at the window. Even as he watched, it exploded. The light puffed out, the shadows of people vanishing like smoke. A high whine of smashing glass echoed in the sudden total dark. There was a brief silence. Then Castle heard something heavy thud on the ground and a voice shouted,

"Barnes cut the lights, smashed the window with a chair and jumped

out! That murderin' black will make a break for the boats! Probably try to escape on the lake. Everybody stay in this room, except my deputy! You search the grounds, Kroll! I'll cover the dock. Kill him if you have to, but don't let him get loose!"

Castle's breath hissed. He cut the car headlights dead, and leaped out the door, his right hand flashing for his .38.

THE BROKEN window became yellow again. Somebody had flicked the lightswitch back on. Castle watched, crouched on the driveway. The smashed window had the jagged outline of a broken drum. People were milling behind it, shadow-like. One of the shadows kicked glass out of the window frame and jumped out.

It was the deputy called Kroll, Castle knew, because he moved to search the grounds. Then Castle lost him in the gloom. Another man followed Kroll through the window and vanished down the stone stairway to the dock. Both men had guns. Those guns were up and hunting.

Castle moved off the driveway, feeling at the dark with his gun. His slow footsteps whispered on grass. A squat shape defined itself in the black suddenly—Kroll. The deputy was moving past a log.

Castle thought it was a log at first. Then excitement leaped through him like a crazy highnote. That was no log, no log had hands like that, clenched, crawling hands. No log had knees and glaring eyes like that.

"He's behind you, Kroll!" Castle shouted. "Watch out!"

The squat deputy went taut, like a startled shadow. Then he moved lethally, shot at Castle. Castle saw his gun tilt and hit the grass on his belly. Three flame jets streaked from Kroll's gun, like links in a chain. The red links drove a roaring over Castle's head.

Castle was unmindful of the wet grass against his face. He pressed himself deep in it, deep as he could. Those slugs had come close. In the sudden dead silence of his mind, Cas-

tle knew what had gone wrong. Kroll had taken him for Barnes in the dark, judged his warning to be a trick...

Another bullet smacked close, pitching dirt and grass into Castle's face. This was getting bad. Castle thought fast. He had to get out of here. He was in an exposed position. Kroll's next bullet might tear a hole in him...

There was no next bullet—only a short, broken scream. Castle risked a glance up. His limited vision baffled him. He saw the fight piece by piece, first the rolling wave of ground, then the desperately struggling men tilting on the ground like grotesque shadows.

The shadows became real fast. Harsh curses came from them. They whirled around twice then hit the earth in a scramble of struggling muscle. Castle saw Kroll's gun fly loose of the tangle. It thudded somewhere in the dark.

Castle ran at them, his gun tightly held. They were far off. He couldn't risk a shot; they were too close and the dark was bad for accuracy. He ran with all his might.

Struggling with the deputy, Barnes whipped over on top of him. Kroll tried to scream again, didn't scream; he couldn't. He would never remember exactly how he was smashed down.

Barnes had fast, efficient hands. One clawlike hand fastened on Kroll's throat, pinning him to the earth. The other hand became a fist, a club of skin and bone. The clubbed fist lifted high in the dark and hung there briefly, aiming. Then it lashed down. He hit Kroll in the face, once; once was enough. Motion died out of the deputy's body like he'd taken a bullet.

Barnes didn't see Castle coming for him in a fast crouch. He was searching for Kroll's gun. He leaped off the prostrate deputy, his dark, burning eyes scrutinizing the grass. His steps were careful, weighted with the slow motion movements of a man who is looking for something. He spotted the gun then, lying near-

by like a stain of black ink on the grass. The slow motion steps galvanized. He reached the gun and stooped over it.

"Don't touch that," Castle said. He drew near, panting. "I'll have to send a bullet into you."

Barnes stood there, rooted. He was a tall, powerful youth, his face black granite, stone cut into live features. A keen intelligence was in his burning glance, melded to consuming fear. He didn't say a word, didn't move. Then his head turned slightly and his black eyes caught hold of Castle's leveled .38.

"Back away from that gun, Barnes. I'm telling you."

Still the man didn't move. Bright sweat glistened on his stonelike expression.

"Don't try anything else you'll be sorry for. Back away from there I said!"

"Sorry for!" Barnes laughed, a wild roaring laugh that was an explosion of sound in the silence. "They insult my race, Kroll the worst! They say I should be lynched! They frame me for a murderer! And you tell me I have something to be sorry for! Don't joke with me, man!"

HIF OBEYED the wave of Castle's gun, moved back reluctantly. Castle scooped the gun off the grass, dropped it into his jacket pocket, all the while pinning Barnes with his own .38.

"You're a suspect to me," he told Barnes. "Not a black suspect—just suspect, that's all. Don't get any wrong ideas about that."

Again, Barnes' laugh boomed. "Go ahead, shoot," he said. "Don't wait to get me in the back. That's a good finish, isn't it? Killed while trying to escape, they'll say. Guilty as hell. No more investigation, no national scandal. Just another dead black man, and why worry about that?"

Sadness swept through Castle; he knew what had built that fear. It was painted red-white-and-blue, but no less vicious and deadly than the Nazi brand that had bled Europe white.

Some of Castle's blood had flowed in the war, back in '37 when Chamberlain was twirling his black umbrella and chasing the ghost of peace, when Franco was taking guns from Hitler and Mussolini and honest Spaniards were dying for the crime of carrying union cards.

And now, Castle thought, staring at Barnes, the lesson of the war had not been fully learned by America. As long as a human being could have a look of fear like Barnes' there was plenty for Americans to learn.

"Get that look off your face," he said to Barnes. "You won't get shot, not unless you get tricky. No matter what anybody told you, you'll get a fair break. Start moving to Leigh's house."

A FINE artistic taste marked the lavishly decorated drawing room, where the dead man lay. A Dong Kingman watercolor hung on the wall over the fireplace, an especially beautiful effort by the famous Chinese-American artist. Volumes of classical records lined one wall. The fireplace was electrically lighted and on the mantelpiece were two silver candlesticks, valuable antiques.

Castle was stooped over the grotesquely sprawled out body of the great statesman. Watching him out of empty eyes was Barnes, standing near the fireplace, flanked by Kroll and Sheriff O'Hara, the man who'd raced to the dock. Kroll's beefsteak face was welted along one cheek. A twig of dried blood streaked down from the edge of his lip. His small, sadistic eyes were buried in the moonface, like black pins in a cushion. He had his gun back; it was outlined against his gray flannel jacket at one thick shoulder. He glared malevolently at Barnes.

A tall redhead was seated on a blue divan near the broken window—Suzanne Leigh, stepdaughter of the murdered man. His death had made no severe mark on her on her cool, candybox prettiness. She'd cultivated it too carefully ever to forget it, the curled auburn eyelashes, the false Jean-Harlowe dot on her cheek, the

studied pose of her body. She watched Castle out of impassive brown eyes.

Her fiance was more nervous. Wayne Hoover sat beside her, his thin, delicate fingers hopping on his lap. At any other time the blonde youth might have looked dapper in his tropical, sand-colored suit. He looked sick. He made a conscious physical effort not to look at the dead man.

"Interesting," Castle muttered. He plucked the rose absently out of his jacket lapel and twisted the stem, a habit when deep in thought. His single gray eye missed nothing; he had a camera-like feeling for detail, his eye was a fast moving lense printing images of evidence on the screen of his mind.

He noted the bloodstained, solid steel jackhandle on the rug with thinning lips. Obviously, here was the murder weapon. Castle turned back to the body. Leigh's gray-maned head bore one deep welt in the skull, over the left ear. It had been enough. Leigh had died instantly.

"Interesting," Castle repeated. "Interesting." He examined the books, strewn upon the Persian rug. Some were badly torn. They lay near a chess table, with inlaid black and white squares upon which chess pieces stood in mid-game.

Castle was astounded by the quality of the books. They were rare collector's items, all of them, invaluable classics. One was a first edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves Of Grass*, another contained a Washington Irving novel in manuscript. The other volumes were old translations from the Russian poet, Pushkin and the French short story writer, Guy de Maupassant.

CASTLE gasped and glanced quickly at Leigh's library, next to the fireplace. One shelf was a ruin of toppled books and torn pages. On close examination, Castle discovered an empty wallsafe behind the shelf. Whoever had murdered Leigh had rifled the safe and destroyed

some of the Senator's precious collection in the process.

"Kroll," Castle snapped warningly. "Keep an eye on Barnes!"

Turning, Castle had noted the man, staring at one heavy silver candlestick on the fireplace mantelpiece.

"He won't get hold of nothin', Castle," the deputy retorted. "Just let him make another play. I'll pay him back. It'll be his last one." He didn't go on. He sealed his fury behind a humorless grin. "Just let him make another play," was all he said.

Castle hardly heard him. At the mention of the candlestick Wayne Hoover's hoppy fingers had stopped dead on his lap. Castle noted that and the observation puzzled him. Candlesticks. What was so peculiar about candlesticks? Something made him stare deeply at the man. Hoover returned the stare and immediately the dance of his fingers began again.

"What are you looking at me like that for?" Hoover snapped at last. He had a distinct Southern drawl.

"Why? Are you nervous?"

Hoover gave a high-C laugh. "No, I'm not nervous," he said sarcastically. "I see murders every day. Usually in the morning before I have my toast and coffee. I'm not in the least disturbed by this."

"Be quiet, Wayne," Suzanne Leigh said. "That doesn't help."

"But this idiot detective—"

"Be quiet, I said!"

Hoover shrugged weakly and dropped his head into his hands.

"All right, dear."

Castle turned to Sheriff O'Hara who was eagerly trying to attract Castle's attention.

"All right. Let's have what you know, O'Hara," Castle said.

"I got the call on this killin' at eight o'clock tonight," O'Hara said. He was a small paunchy man, bald like an egg, with a whisky-cracked voice and an exaggerated idea of his own importance. "Just after eight, it was. I know 'cause I was playin' pinochle with Kroll at me office and the eight o'clock racin' results was comin' over the radio—"

"Who reported the murder?" Castle cut in irritably. "Stick to the point, please."

"Miss Leigh did."

"She discovered the body?"

"That's right. And she phoned me right off, she did. When I heard the Senator's name I passed the call to New York meself. O'Hara I said to meself, I said, you're no slouch at this business, no slouch at all, but this is mighty big—"

"Good," Castle interrupted. "You called New York at eight. That was going on four hours ago. What did you discover in this time? Anything of importance?"

"Begorra, yes." O'Hara opened his jacket, hooked two fat thumbs in his vest pockets and rocked on his heels. "O'Hara's no slouch at this business, mind ye, no slouch. That jackhandle there—" he nodded at the murder weapon—"take that jackhandle there—"

"What about it? Please, let's not waste words!"

"It came from Leigh's garage, that's what about. Barnes was Leigh's chauffeur. Ye know that. He was in charge of the Senator's car, as well as his valet. If he had a mind to kill him, why that jackhandle was right where he could get it—"

Barnes broke in savagely, "I didn't kill him! Somebody else sneaked that jackhandle out of the car! Maybe Hoover! He hated the Senator enough—!"

A BLOW cut him off. Kroll swung on him, hooked his right fist deep into Barnes' midsection. He folded like a hinge, gasping. Kroll hit him again, a left hook to the same spot, his thick shoulder twisting viciously behind the punch. Barnes rocked in agony.

"Don't interrupt," Kroll said quietly. "Next time you won't interrupt." He smiled at Castle, his glittering black eyes asking praise.

"You didn't have to do that." Castle hurried to Barnes' side, gripped his shoulders and helped him recover his balance. "You okay?"

"Thanks, yeah," Barnes said, after

a long moment. That was all he said. But his burning eyes said a lot more. He glared at the faces in the room.

"Try that again," Castle flared at Kroll, "and I'll have you broken, hear me?"

"What did you expect?" Kroll said. "Me to kiss this nigg—"

"He's got a name!" Castle snapped. "Call him by his name, understand!" He added with heat that there'd be more peace in America if words like nigger, dago, kike, and spic were used a lot less.

Kroll wiped at his blood-stained lips with the back of one hand, and said nothing. But from the brooding cast of his face, Castle knew this man hated him now. Something in his bones told him he'd have trouble with this man before the night was over.

Castle whirled back to O'Hara. "Let's get on with this. The jack-handle points to Barnes. Granted. How about the chess game here? And the torn books. Do you know anything about them? And how does Hoover and Miss Leigh fit into this?"

"The chess game points to Barnes, too," said O'Hara. "Sure and begorra, I'll prove that for you, Mr. Castle. You know, good detectives ain't only in the big cities—"

"Supposing," Castle cut in icily, "you let the newspapers praise you and give me the facts."

O'Hara's thumbs fell loose of his vest. He flushed and continued, greatly chastened. "The Senator was a lover of chess. So is Barnes. They were friendly and played together regular. Hoover and Miss Leigh don't know one chess piece from another. Miss Leigh says she was walkin' on the grounds with Hoover when the Senator was murdered. Barnes has an alibi, too. He says he was rowin' on the lake. For my money, he's lyin'—"

"Was anybody else in the Manor tonight, besides these three?"—quickly, from Castle.

"No."

"What were Hoover and Miss Leigh doing here?"

"Visitin'. They came north to get the Senator's consent to their marriage."

"And Senator Leigh? Why was he up North, do you know?"

"He came to this place regular, every summer. Liked to study the way blacks and whites lived in New York, he did."

"I see," Castle said. Then, "Why are you so sure Barnes is guilty?"

O'Hara said the handwriting was all over the room. "Who would the Senator be playin' chess with, except Barnes? Tie that in with the jack-handle and it's an open and shut case." O'Hara pointed at the looted wall safe. "The Senator always carried the safe-key on him. Accordin' to Miss Leigh, there was three thousand in cold cash in it. Barnes knew about that key. He was Leigh's valet and knew his habits like his own. The case is open and shut."

Castle absorbed all this thoroughly, his single eye agleam with thought. Open and shut. It looked like it all right, looked damned well like it. Only one thing was wrong. If Barnes had been a white man, Castle would not have felt this persistent doubt. But it just didn't make sense. No Negro as intelligent as Barnes would murder Bradford Leigh like this. The Senator had been the Negro's white hope for equality in America.

"Did you search Barnes' quarters for the missing money?" he inquired, turning back to O'Hara.

"Nope. Didn't have a chance, yet. Kroll was goin' to when he pulled that break."

"Where are his quarters?"

"In the left wing of the house. Want me to give it the once over?"

"It would be a good idea. And," Castle added as O'Hara moved to the door, "search for the safe-key, too."

WHY NOT ASK Hoover a few questions, Castle?" Barnes said quietly. "Why point your gun only at me? Ask him why the Senator hated his guts—"

"Shut your black mouth!" Hoover sprang from the divan, his thin body

a live wire of hate. He lunged for Barnes.

Castle broke his lunge. The tall detective reached him in a blur of motion; his bigboned hands sank down on Hoover's shoulders and caught hard. Hoover's face went gaunt with pain. He tried to shrink away from those hard hands. The hands held him. He tried to twist loose. The hands were stronger.

"Let me go!" he gasped. "Let me go."

Castle freed the twisting shoulders, spun him around, placed the flat of his hand against the front of Hoover's sand-colored suit and shoved. Hoover staggered backwards. He would have fallen but for the girl. She came rushing off the divan to his aid. She caught his arm and steadied him. She glared angrily at Castle.

He didn't give a damn. He said, breathing hard, "The Southern lynchrope doesn't go here, Hoover! In this state a man doesn't die because his skin is black! Don't try that again! Next time I'll use my gun on you!"

"Thanks," Barnes said as Castle faced him.

Castle said, somewhat annoyed, that thanks were not in order. He glanced at Kroll. The squat deputy hadn't moved from Barnes' side. Nothing could budge him.

"So Hoover hated the Senator, eh?" Castle prompted. "Why?"

"Because the Senator wouldn't consent to Miss Leigh marrying him. He thought Hoover was a fortune hunter—after Miss Leigh for the money the Senator would one day leave her. I knew Senator Leigh, Castle and that's the truth. I loved that man. We were friends; we played chess together. I borrowed his books and he borrowed mine—"

"Books?" Castle rose up on tip-toe, glancing briefly at the torn volumes on the floor. "Books?"

Barnes pointed at Leigh's library. "See that collection? I have one almost as large in my own room. No first editions of course, but every dollar I earn goes mostly for books.

I love reading like I love chess and I say I loved Senator Leigh more. I got to know his heart, Castle. When you play chess with a man, when you trade books with a man you get to know him deep. And his heart was hurt, Castle; he cried when he heard Miss Leigh and Hoover were engaged."

Castle stared at Barnes' burning eyes. "Go on," he said.

"There isn't much more. Only this—the Senator argued with Miss Leigh and Hoover yesterday. Right here in this room. I was here and heard it all. He lost his temper and told her he'd cut her off without a cent if she married him."

"He said that?"

"He said that."

"Lies. All lies." Suzanne Leigh swayed over to Castle, her green shantung dress rippling around her knees. Seeing her at close range, Castle felt a certain steel edge behind this redhead's paper-mache prettiness. Her femininity was a sheath in which the dagger of her will was hidden, like bad looks behind a veil. He knew something was on her mind, from her narrow glance. But she wouldn't say it. Not directly. Women like Suzanne Leigh talked in circles.

"I'VE HEARD of you, Castle," she said. "Your first name's really Eric, isn't it? Not Linc. You changed it after fighting in the Lincoln Brigade, didn't you? Took the name from the Brigade flag. The man who looks like Lincoln. The man with the rose all the time. Why do you wear that rose anyway?"

Castle smiled mysteriously. "For one reason, because I like it."

"Know why I ask that question?"

"Why?"

"Because any man who'll wear a rose every day is soft. Any man who'd risk his life fighting for another country is soft, too. And you're being soft right now."

"I am?" Castle didn't argue the point about soft and strong-minded men. Why bother?

"Of course you're soft," she said.

"I know how you idealists think. My stepfather fought for the colored man's rights. Barnes is colored, therefore he wouldn't be likely to kill him. That's in your head, isn't it?"

"Maybe."

"Then you don't know Negroes! Ask a Southerner, they know! Show them easy money and they'll cut their best friend's throat to get it! My stepfather was a fool, thinking differently. That's why he's lying there like that now—I!"

"Hey, Castle!" O'Hara's shout cut her off. He came puffing back into the room, banging the door behind him. Two books were under his left arm and both fists were crammed with greenbacks.

"I found the three grand!" he gasped. "It was in these books in Barnes' room. Hidden between the pages. So was the key to Leigh's safe. It's Barnes we want all right!"

All eyes were on O'Hara. Barnes moved, then. O'Hara's shout moved him like a spur. He lunged for the fireplace, seized one heavy, silver candlestick and started for the broken window.

Kroll woke up. He whipped after Barnes, his hand sliding for his shoulder holster. He said calmly, "This time you're through, you black—"

He didn't finish. Barnes hurled the candlestick at him. Kroll took it flush in the pit of his stomach. The blood drained out of his face. He buckled up, his hand falling limply from his shoulder holster, like an empty glove. He hit the floor on his knees, trying to breathe, trying with his whole body and mind to breathe again...

It all happened in seconds. O'Hara watched Kroll's agony, stunned. Castle was caught off balance. The fast action had taken place behind him. But he reacted swiftly as Barnes flashed past. There was no time for a gundraw, he knew instinctively. He dove at Barnes' legs, his long arms clawing for a tackle. He missed. The floor came up and jarred him to the teeth. The last he saw of Barnes was his leaping, kicking legs dis-

appearing into the black behind the window.

CASTLE ROSE shakily. O'Hara dropped the money and books on a fat-padded chair and hurried to Kroll's assistance.

"I'm okay." Kroll shrugged loose of his hands. "I'm okay," he panted. "Leggo." Then, "Did he get away?"

O'Hara nodded but said nothing.

"One of you stay here! Watch them." Castle ran to them, clipping orders. He waved a hand at Hoover and the girl who were staring at the broken window. "O'Hara, you come with me. He'll probably try to escape into the woods, by way of the lake. We'll nab him. Kroll, you're hurt. You stay here. Keep an eye on Hoover and the girl till we get back—"

Kroll whispered savagely, "I want to hunt him."

Castle said, "What?"

In that same controlled whisper, Kroll insisted he felt fine. "I took too much from him. I want to get at him. Don't leave me behind."

O'Hara looked at Kroll's face then turned to Castle. "Better take him. He knows the grounds better than me, anyhow. He's been all over them."

Castle hesitated.

"Take me," Kroll said. "I know the grounds."

"Okay," Castle said. "You stay here, O'Hara, and keep your gun handy. Barnes may double back. Come on, Kroll. We have no time to lose."

Castle leaped through the smashed window and legged it down the stone stairway to the dock. Behind him, Kroll moved cautiously along the estate grounds, his gun drawn.

Wind split past Castle's face in twin streams. He could pick nothing out of the night. Nothing human. There were only the dark trees rushing past, the gleam of the lake like an enormous coin and the wind, fanning past. No sign of Barnes.

Even as he ran, thoughts swarmed into Castle's mind. He remembered Barnes' remarks about books and

chess. This man had a finely developed intelligence. The circumstances of the murder puzzled Castle then, the implication of the jackhandle and the unfinished chess game. Barnes would have known the jackhandle would draw suspicion towards him. The same went for the chess game. Assuming he'd killed Leigh, would he leave such evidence around?

Castle reflected then on the money O'Hara had found in the colored man's books.

"It's too pat," he muttered. "The whole thing's too pat."

But if not Barnes, who? Miss Leigh? Very unlikely. Senator Leigh had loved her, and she knew she could get anything from him; that was clear from Barnes' remarks. Murder would be so needless...

That left Hoover. Castle frowned. Nothing pointed to the dapper Southerner, not a shred of direct evidence. He had a motive, true. The Senator had been a hard obstacle to his marriage, and a man in love could kill for less than that—especially a violently emotional man like Hoover. But still, nothing concrete pointed to him.

Every element of evidence was directed at one man—Barnes.

"Still it's too pat," Castle murmured.

CASTLE'S face tightened, then. Shadow outlines defined themselves on the lake's edge. The shadows swayed in the gleaming waves—rowboats and canoes. One of the shadows was rocking violently.

"Ah," Castle breathed. His gun slid into his hand. He left the last stone step, hit the grass and ran to the dock. He saw Barnes, suddenly.

The man was crouching on the dock, ripping at the knot that held a mooring rope of one of the rowboats. He freed it and yanked the craft to him.

Castle fired a shot over his head. Barnes flattened down instantly, hugged the dock.

"Throw that rope away and leave the boat alone!" Castle shouted.

Barnes kept hugging the dock. He didn't move.

"You're a bullseye on that dock, Barnes!"

He moved then, whipped the rope away. It hung in the air like a snapping whip, then splashed into the water.

"Get up, now." Castle came close. "And stand still."

Before Castle's gun, the shape on the dock turned into Barnes gradually, became the same clenched, powerful hands, the same tensed body, the same granite of face and burning eyes. Strange, Castle thought, how those eyes could catch hold of your face.

"It's you, Castle." The tenseness thawed out of Barnes' body. "Thank Gawd you're not Kroll. Kroll would be worse." He ran to the detective.

Castle's jutting gun stopped him like he'd run into a wall.

"Stay put. Don't get clever again."

Barnes shook his head.

"All right, walk to me slow," Castle said.

Barnes obeyed. "Listen to me," he said desperately, drawing near.

"You're mighty tough to hold onto, for a man who wants to be listened to."

"The whole thing's a lynchrope, Castle. They got a noose around my neck and they won't let go. Eenie, meenie, minee, mo, catch a nigger by the toe. I'm black, see, so they don't care. What's another few drops of black blood mean anyway?" Barnes was stonelike, his body hard and motionless like stone is hard and motionless, his face the same. "You look like Lincoln, Castle. I'd trust a man who looks like Lincoln. I'd trust him with my life, and that's what I've got to do. Don't believe them, Castle. This is a frame! Every inch of this lynchrope! I didn't kill Senator Leigh."

Castle said nothing, merely looked at him, then waved him back to the manor with his gun. Barnes started to say something more and Castle cut him off with, "You'll get a fair break. I said it once. I'm telling you again."

(Continued on Page 82)

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CRACK DETECTIVE

(Continued from Page 80)

THERE was sound. Heavy footsteps beating the ground. Then the heavy footsteps brought Kroll's shout,

"I heard that shot! Did you plug him, Castle?"

"Kroll," Barnes whispered. "He's mean. Keep him from me, Castle. He's got meanness on his face—"

"He won't touch you if you behave," Castle said. "Calm down. I'll handle this." But inside he was worried. He shouted into the dark. "Over here, Kroll. I got him all right. Take it easy."

The deputies squat shape came bolting out of the blackness. His gun was up. He saw Barnes and his face twisted.

"He's tame now," Castle said. "Put your gun away, Kroll."

Kroll lowered his gun, drew within a few yards of Barnes. His sadistic eyes glinted. "Castle, don't get in my way."

"You fool—"

"I'm gonna mess this jigg up, Castle—"

"You fool, put that gun up!" Castle moved to him. "You mad, Kroll?"

Kroll didn't answer. He didn't put his gun up either. He plunged at Barnes in a sudden burst of motion, hacking the gun at the man's head.

Barnes ducked, his arms shielding his face. The gun slashed over him, the vicious cut humming the air.

"You damned fool, you're out of your mind!" Castle caught Kroll's shoulder in a fierce grip and shook him. "Give me your gun!"

"You saw what he did to me. I'm gonna mess this jigg up. Leggo!"

Barnes came erect. His fists were lifted, clenched hard. Castle's gun froze him. He stared at Kroll, kept those fists hard.

"Give me your gun, Kroll," Castle repeated, softly now. "Or I'll take it. You won't like the way I'll take it."

Kroll went beserk then. He twisted loose of Castle's grip, dropped low and drove the gun at Castle's head. Castle shifted under the slashing steel. He felt it pass with every nerve in his body. His own .38

BIG KILLING

whipped for Kroll, then. Whipped swiftly. The steel muzzle caught Kroll flush on the jaw. Lines of blood streaked there like cracks in ice. Kroll shuddered, stood there briefly, swaying like a wheatstalk. Then his gun slipped from his hand and he crumpled.

Castle picked it up and pocketed it. As soon as he'd struck Kroll he'd leaped back, keeping Barnes pinned under his .38. The man hadn't moved.

"He's mean," Barnes said. "I told you he's mean."

"Yeah, he's mean." Castle was breathing heavily. He decided to leave Kroll temporarily where he was and look after Barnes first. He could send O'Hara down to pick him up when he returned to the building. "Okay, start moving to the Manor."

O'HARA SAID, "Where's Kroll?" when Castle led Barnes back into the drawing room at gunpoint. Hoover was standing behind a stiff-backed chair, his hands wound around its mahogany arms. The girl stood beside him, her tongue moving on her lips like a stick of rouge.

"Kroll's out cold down at the dock," Castle spoke without ceremony.

"What!"

"You heard me. Go down and pick him up. You better take him home. I don't want to see him."

"What the hell happened!"

"He tore off his badge and threw it away, that's what happened. He's through, washed up. He better learn how to play a saxophone, because he won't earn another dime in his life posing as a law enforcer. I'll see to that. Now go pick him up."

O'Hara swallowed. "Can you handle Barnes alone?"

"I can handle him alone. You don't have to come back." Castle smiled thinly. "Kroll, I think, needs your help a little more than I do."

O'Hara shrugged and slammed out.

Castle picked the silver candlestick off the floor, where it had fallen after hitting Kroll. Even as he touched it, he saw Hoover's face freeze. Castle frowned, puzzled. That

(Continued on Page 84)

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CRACK DETECTIVE

(Continued from Page 82)

was the second time he'd done that tonight. A candlestick. What was so peculiar about a candlestick?

Castle set the silver antique back on the mantelpiece, beside its mate and studied them. His single eye flashed. One candlestick was speckled with motes of dust. The other shone brilliantly. Someone had cleaned one and not the other.

Why? Castle's thoughts raced. He remembered the death wound on Leigh's head. A candlestick could have inflicted that injury as well as a jackhandle. In the sudden quiet of his mind Castle knew it had been. There was only one reason for one candlestick being clean and the other dusty. There had been bloodstains on it. And the murderer had cleaned one and overlooked the other!

Slowly, the murder frame built itself in Castle's mind, piece by piece, every link of planted evidence fitting neatly. Now he knew who had the motive and the opportunity to kill Leigh and frame Barnes. But there wasn't a shred of direct evidence to prove it; Castle knew that.

Castle moved away from the candlesticks, then. He heard Hoover sigh. He moved to the books and money which O'Hara had deposited on the fat-padded chair. He got a shock then. One of the books was entitled, *Bradford Lee—Conscience of the South*, by Vincent Paine.

"You like Paine's writings, Barnes?" he asked.

Barnes nodded. "I deprived myself of food to buy that book. I'd give my eyeteeth to meet that man."

Castle smiled. "You never know," he said, "what people you meet in this world."

Hoover cut in with heavy sarcasm, "Lord! A man's murdered and you hold a discussion on books!"

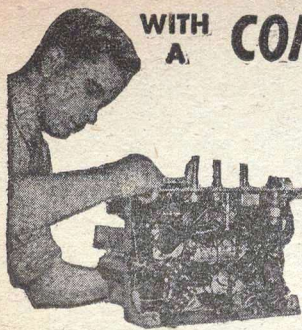
"The books are evidence," Castle said. "Valuable evidence." He moved back to the mantelpiece and picked up the shiny candlestick. The girl came close to Hoover and touched his shoulder with one hand. "Barnes didn't rob that safe," Castle said.

"No?"

"No. A man who spends his last cent on books may commit murder;

(Continued on Page 86)

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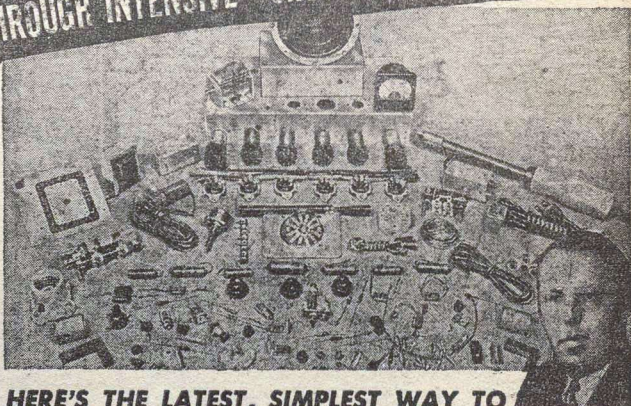


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CRACK DETECTIVE

(Continued from Page 84)

he may kill his best friend for a few dollars. But he won't destroy first editions of masterpieces!"

Hoover laughed. "And you call yourself a detective. You ought to take up shoemaking. You don't know a-b-c. A man who'll commit murder is capable of anything."

"Murder," Castle said, in soft tones, "is like a deck of cards. There's always a joker, Hoover."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"Supposing Barnes were framed." Castle came within five yards of the blonde man and leveled the candlestick at him. "Supposing you framed him, Hoover. Supposing you lost your temper and killed Leigh because he was blocking your marriage. Say you killed him with this candlestick I'm holding—"

HOOVER sprang toward Castle, taking the chair with him. His face was the color of cigar ash.

"Now I'm just supposing," Castle said lightly. "The chess game would be a natural for you. You could set it up yourself, make it look like Barnes was playing Leigh. You could get the jackhandle from the garage and substitute it for the candlestick—more evidence pointing to Barnes. And you could fake the robbery, and plant the money in his room while he was rowing on the lake. Couldn't you, Hoover?"

"But since you don't know chess, you'd set the board up wrong—the way it is now."

Hoover broke, then.

"You won't handcuff me!" he said, and in one fluid motion he whipped the chair and flung it at Castle. Hurling at close range, Castle had no chance to duck. The flying chair smashed him onto the floor. He lost the candlestick. Pain was in him. Wires of pain cut through his chest muscles, where the chair had struck.

He lay, stunned, on the floor. The force of his fall whipped open his jacket. The blue butt of his .38 jutted in clear view.

Hoover dove for it, wrenched it free. Castle twisted on the floor, fighting the shadows in his brain. He got a flash of Hoover's face, smiling

BIG KILLING

over him and the gun leveling down. Then he saw Barnes, only a piece of him. His face and his arm, holding the candlestick. The candlestick slashed and met the blonde, smiling face. Blood smeared away Hoover's handsomeness. The floor caught him in a shapeless heap, like a marionette with the strings cut. He lay there, senseless, the fallen gun near one limp hand.

"Thanks, Barnes," Castle staggered erect, and recovered his gun. He manacled the unconscious man swiftly. "You saved my life."

"I'm glad," Barnes said. "You don't know how glad I am."

Castle whirled on the girl. She was standing over the fallen man, with the back of her hand pressed against her mouth.

"He did it," she said. Her voice was dead. "I had nothing to do with it!"

"Keep talking," Castle said.

"It was like you said. My stepfather infuriated him. He told Wayne he was after a big killing, in marrying me, and that he was on to him. He laughed at him, said he'd cut me off without a cent, but Wayne wouldn't fool him. So Wayne killed him, killed him—" She sobbed.

Castle scowled. "So you tried to frame Barnes," he said, disgusted. He moved to telephone headquarters for an ambulance and squad car.

Barnes stopped him. "Why do you wear that rose all the time, Castle? What's behind it?"

Castle smiled and said it was a thing of the spirit. "A rose is a remarkable flower. It's an American Beauty. Nothing can destroy it, you know? Give it floods and fire and bombs and it's always back next year, trying again. Like people. And color doesn't mean a thing. Red roses, white roses—they're all the same under God's sun. In times like these I like to remember that."

Barnes came over and shook his hand. Black hand and white hand met in a firm grip. They both liked the feeling.

THE END



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JOEY SPANOLA used to be a good kid, but lately he is getting too big for his pants since Old Man Hoffmann give him the job at the grocery store when Mike got his Greetings. Mike was pretty big stuff on Cherry Street, and Joey thinks now he's got Mike's job he's as hot as Mike himself. So he sometimes forgets we got organization here on Cherry Street and us older guys won't take any chicken from the kids, even a kid like Joey, who is plenty smart and is making twelve smackeros each and every Saturday for making Hoffmann's deliveries.

Well like I said, Joey is getting too big for his pants, and we don't none of us know what to do about the kid. We thought we got him good a couple weeks ago, all right and legal, according to the book, but it turns out he is a smarter kid than we ever thought. We was all sitting around in the clubhouse, which is a old construction shack on the waterfront they didn't bother taking away when WPA quit, and we was... were... talking about Joey and the other shirty kids, when Muggsy come in lookin' as sore as my old man when somebody says "lawyer" to him, and told us this Joey was out chalkin' up the billboards. Then Muggsy all of a sudden shuts up, and I can see he is lookin' at me kind of funny. After a while he starts in whispering with the other guys one at a time and every time I get close enough for an earful I find they are talking about some movie star or a ball game, or anything they can think of there is nothing to whisper about. After a while I got plenty sore, and I decided what the hell, if all the guys got somethin' they won't let me in on, I'll take myself a powder.

(Continued on Page 90)

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CRACK DETECTIVE

(Continued from Page 88)

Well I didn't even get around the corner. I slam the shack door and start off down the alley, and the first thing I see on the fence is these big letters, GEORGIE'S OLD MAN IS A JAILBI...and then it stopped there, and it look like somebody made it stop fast. Well I got on back to the shack so fast I was back before they hardly knew I went, and I grab Muggsy and ask him who done... who did it. Muggsy says it's Spanola, and he comes with me to find the guy, and all the time we're looking for Joey he keeps telling me not to do anything I shouldn't. He keeps reminding me what Pop says about always doing according to the book, so I won't get framed like he did, and about using the King's English, and by the time we dig up Joey I had it all figured out what I should do.

Like I said, our mob always tried to do by the book, according to the law, and by this time we got to know plenty about it on account of my sister having married a attorney-at-law, his name is Benny, and my Pop working for the courthouse characters before he was framed. So I know the difference between say slander and libell. Libell is when you write it, and it hurts somebody's character or reputation or loses him his job, and that is much worse than slander which is just saying the same kind of thing. Except there are plenty of things, like some kind of words, you can say but you can't write em. So I got it all in my mind; knowing how Joey is always bringing stuff from Hoffmann's to his gang, I can call him a thief, which is King's English, and not libell, but only slander and not even really slander because it's true.

JOEY finally shows at Hoffmann's where he was...were waiting after we look over the whole Cherry Hill for him, and first thing I see him I yell, Hey Joey, what you got today from Old Man Hoffmann? Joey comes looking tough and scared at the same time, and I can see Hoffmann's looking out the window, with his ears both of them wide open. So

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ACCORDING TO THE BOOK

I make it good for the Old Man, and I says to Joey, That was good pears yesterday, what do we get today, Joey? Being very careful of course to use the King's English and not to say anything I wasn't sure was true, on account I didn't get one of the pears, but I saw all Joey's gang with them.

Joey all of a sudden lets out a big laugh, and he says, loud enough for Hoffmann to hear, Listen Georgie, he says, you can't come around here saying lies to make me lose a good honest clean job. He says, You're always saying you go by the book, Georgie, he says, And so do I, he tells me real loud, And since you are telling lies, and you cannot prove anything, he tells me, and I can see he too is being careful to use the King's English, You had better retract your statement, or I will sue you for slander, he says.

I laugh right back at the little smart guy and I tell him I know a few things myself about the law, and if he feels that way about it I will go straight over to Benny and see about him being not only a thief but a libeller. So from the way he looks then I can see he had forgot about his libell in writing that about my Pop.

I can see too he is thinking up a smart answer fast so I don't give him any chances, I walk off, and I go straight to Benny to tell him about it. Benny is a funny guy lately though. He used to sometimes answer me straight and sometimes laugh a little like, but lately he just looks at me funny when I ask him about the law, and when I told him about Joey he gave me this funny look, and he let out a big sigh, like he was awful tired, and he tells me:

(What Benny told Georgie is on page 96. Benny found Georgie's story a little complicated, which is why he seemed so tired. It all came down to three important questions: Did Joey libel Georgie (we've corrected Georgie about the spelling of that word)? Did Georgie slander Joey? And is slander really less important legally than libel?)

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CRACK DETECTIVE MURDER ON MY KEYBOARD

(Continued from Page 17)

there that I'd never again have to stop a story to figure out how a guy felt when he'd been sentenced to the chair.

"I took your bottle of whiskey," The Wife said, "If that's what you're looking for. When a man of your age, Mike Chandler, starts out chasing murderers instead of making a living—such as it is—writing about them, then it's time to call a halt."

Pat looked at me for a moment and then turned to her mother. "No, Mother," she said gently, "we can't do this to Pop. We just can't. Not when he's wounded and tired out, as he is now, we can't."

The Wife shrugged her shoulders and said, "No-o, I suppose we can't, Pat."

She went out to the kitchen and came back with my sinus remedy. She poured out a generous glassful and smiled resignedly as I gulped it down.

"Oh, well, I suppose there's no use trying to change a man of your age," she said.

She smiled again and then slipped the bottle back under the pile of rejection slips.

THE END

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CRACK DETECTIVE

DARK HOLIDAY

(Continued from Page 87)

A few minutes later Jake Windham was ushered back to the hospital ward. He was chuckling to himself and felt all puffed up. He'd sure turned off the juice that session. Instead of warming the seat he spent the remainder of the day loafing on a hospital cot, two solid granite blocks from Death Row—and safe.

That night, ensconced between clean sheets, he dreamed of the Warden burning up the wires to the Governor. Asking for a reprieve! Wheels within wheels.

NEXT morning Detective Lieutenant McClenon came in. A tall, heavy set man in his thirties with a round face and a double chin he possessed the genial familiarity of a bar tender. It was difficult to associate his 200 pounds of good humor and twinkling eyes as the crack dick of the city's famous Homicide Squad.

Jake Windham, inherently suspicious of anything pertaining to the police, sat up on his cot and gave him the fish-eye. "Hello, Bad News," he said cockily. "Seems like you done a lotta' good work for nothin'?"

McClenon laughed embarrassedly and ignored the remark, took off his hat and scratched his bald pate with a thick forefinger. From his pocket he withdrew a long envelope and pushed it toward Windham.

"Jake," he said, "you're a smart guy! The Governor's given you a temporary reprieve and here's your request for a new trial. You can have your choice of a mouthpiece and he'll fix a date for you on the calendar. Just sign on the bottom line."

He hauled out a fountain pen and handed it to Jake.

Well, there it was, the perfect setup! For a fleeting moment Jake Windham was suspicious. He grabbed the letter and scanned the contents with a practiced eye. Sure enough, it was on the level! A request for a new trial—signed, sealed and delivered with the Governor's signature! Excitedly he grabbed the fountain pen and signed with a trembling hand. Jeez!

Freedom! Life!

DARK HOLIDAY

Suddenly McClennon snatched up the letter. "You shot your bolt that time, Jake," he barked. "You signed with your left hand! With your right eye gone you can still be a crack shot. A left handed crack shot!"

Abruptly Jake Windham slumped down on the cot. Like a black-out curtain slamming down on a spicy tableau of life, his assurance and cockiness left him. With glazed eyes and the sudden, inexplicable return of his prison pallor, he stared at the wall opposite. Who was the guy that said something about nothing ventured nothing gained? Well, he was right—and McClennon was right too. Damn him!

"Okay, McClennon," he said with a sickly grin. "You win."

With the carefulness of a cat seeking a place to settle, he stretched out to full length on the cot. Placed his hands under his head and stared at the ceiling. "But to show you I ain't such a louse," he said thoughtfully, "I'm goin' to give that old guy my good eye anyway."

Then, as if the thought had just occurred to him, he raised himself on an elbow and looked at McClennon. "Mebbe I owe it to him—I dunno. Anyhow, it's a lead-pipe cinch I won't need it anymore! An' if this scientist Hartman with his experiments can prevent my son an' your son from bein' killed in th' next war, I can still be some use in this world."

Jake Windham flopped back on the cot and closed his eyes.

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CRACK DETECTIVE WHAT BENNY TOLD GEORGIE

First of all, slander and libel both are just different varieties of the same thing. Defamation is the legal word for it, and the law doesn't care whether it's written or said in front of witnesses. Georgie had the idea the slander was less important because he knew that certain words were defamatory when written and not defamatory when spoken. But the penalties are the same for both, with just that one exception.

Joey would have been guilty of libel. . . except what he wrote was true and could be proved. Libel consists of any published statement that would tend to make other people avoid the object of the libel because they were made to believe he had some trait of character, some physical trait, (perhaps a highly contagious disease) were a kleptomaniac, etc.—any statement that would make the object of the libel suffer in his business, profession, or trade. Joey's statement was "published," because published, under the law, means only written in such a manner as to make it possible for a third party to read the statement. It was also a statement that would be likely to make some people avoid Georgie. . . but, unfortunately for Georgie's case, it was true.

The laws governing slander are the same as those on libel, except, of course, that the statement must be made in the presence of a third person, instead of being published. In that case, it would seem as if Georgie were in the clear too, because he knew that what he said about Joey was as true as what Joey wrote about him. But. . . Joey could prove his statement, and Georgie couldn't prove his. Technically, Joey could have won a slander suit, because Hoffmann fired him on account of what Georgie said. If he had not been fired, and could not prove any loss, it is doubtful whether he could have won an actual case, even though he was technically in the right.

THE END

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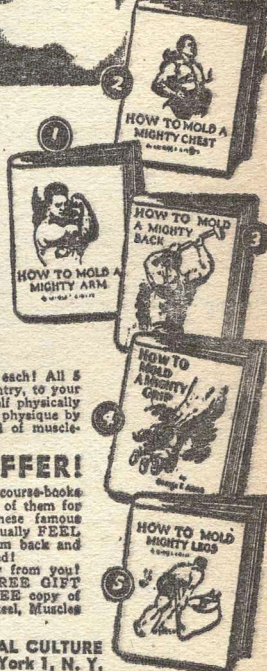
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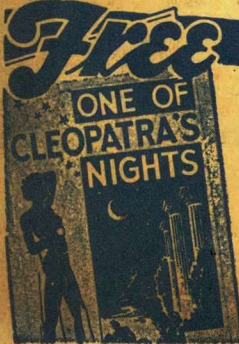
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