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by

Joseph Commings

**TWO SOLID
HOURS OF
READING**





CRIME FICTION STORIES

DECEMBER, 1950 Vol. 1, No. 1

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By
Frank Ward

PARTING GIFT



The jealous husband had a perfect plan to get rid of his wife and her boy friend—until Fate took a hand.

POMFRET walked slowly up the path to his front door, clicked his key in the lock and stepped into the warmth of his own hallway. For a moment he stood there in the semi-darkness, breathing hard, tilting his head, smelling the old familiar smells and wondering at himself for the thing he was about to do.

His wife, Eva, called down from upstairs, "Joe, is that you?"

Pomfret shivered and tightened his hand around the bulky object in his overcoat pocket. He said, as steadily as he could, "It's me, honey," and tasted for a brief moment a spasm of panic.

He took a cigarette from his breast pocket and tucked it between dry lips, dragging in the taste of the unlit tobacco. Then he took off his coat and hat and threw them

over the packed bags lying near the hat-rack by the door, and with the package in his hand, walked stealthily out into the kitchen and opened the door leading down into his workshop in the cellar. He stood at the head of the wooden steps, feeling the hot rush of blood into his face and the dizziness in his head. He went down the stairs and turned on the light.

With the dry cigarette still wagging between his lips, Pomfret sat down at his bench. Carefully, he unwrapped the package, revealing an expensive bronze table lighter fashioned after a globe of the world, with the ignition plunger where the north pole should be, and the countries etched in neatly. Overhead, the echo of his wife's footsteps jarred through the floor, hurrying him along. He pulled the cigarette away from his lips, tearing off a strip of skin, and reached over to the rack for a screwdriver. He unscrewed the filler cap, picked out the cotton wool, threw it in a wastebasket. From the rack where his reloading tools lay he took down a canister of pistol powder. Next he removed the wick from the lighter and fitted into its place a short, fast-burning fuse, and began pouring the powder into the base of the lighter.

He knew powders, he knew gas pressures. He knew what would happen when someone picked up the lighter, holding it close to the end of the cigarette, and pressed the plunger for a light. They'd get a light, all right, a light that would show them the way into eternity. Without air space, the hundred-odd grains of powder compressed into that bronze base would be as deadly as a hand-grenade. Pomfret had seen it work once before. Just four grains of powder jammed down by an improperly hand-loaded bullet to the bottom of a cartridge case, without air space for the expanding pressure of the gas. He still had the wreckage of a once perfectly good heavy-frame revolver in one of the drawers in his filing cabinet.

When he had screwed the cap back in place he picked up the lighter, carrying it as cautiously as he would have carried a bottle of nitro-glycerine, and walked up the stairs. He felt as weak as if he had spent the afternoon

running around the block. He closed the cellar door behind him and leaned his back against it, hard, until his shoulder blades ached from the contact.

He went over to the tap for a drink of water. Then he walked slowly back into the living room and placed the lighter gently on the cocktail table, where no one could miss seeing it. He knew how it would react on Harvey. He knew it would be the first thing Harvey, a chain-smoker, would pick up. He closed his eyes and thought about Harvey's handsome face. Then he went out into the hallway and began putting on his hat and coat.

EVA came down the stairs, and Pomfret paused by the door, watching her, taking her in, gauging the full fluid motion of her body and the slow swing of her long tawny hair and the full rich beauty of her face, feeling again the desire for her and the need of her. He stopped then, and turned toward the living room and took a hesitant step.

She said, "What's wrong, Joe?" and the sound of her voice clipped his resolution in half.

Pomfret laughed, the cracked sound of it echoing hollow and false in his brain. "Nothing at all," he said lamely. "Tired, I guess. Had a hard day."

She came to him and rested her hand on his arm. The touch of her pulled the trigger on his mind and the hatred in him welled up then and flowed fresh and potent until he thought he would kill her then and there, without benefit of gadgets or tricks or long-range plans, if she didn't take her hand off him. He said, hoarsely, "Has Harvey called for his cigarette case yet, Eva?" and his keen, suspicious eyes probed hers for some sign of fear or admission of her guilt.

She took her hand away and color touched her cheeks. "For heaven's sake, Joe, do we have to go through all that again? I told you he left it in the living room the last time he was here, and I took it upstairs to the bedroom so I wouldn't forget to ask you to give it back to him when you saw him at the office. Isn't that reasonable

enough for you? Do you expect me to go down on my knees and beg for belief from my own husband?" Her voice was as tight as a plucked violin string, vibrating against the resistance in his mind.

He thought again of the lighter on the living room table. He let out his breath. The taste in his mouth was as sour and he wanted to be sick. Instead he reached for her and kissed her harshly, feeling the softness of her against him, the elusive, heady perfume, the taste of her lipstick. Feeling too the resistance that had been there for months now.

"Okay," he said quietly. "Okay, hon. Let's skip it." He opened the door and reached down for his bags. "I'll be back," he said, as if it mattered. "It may take time. Maybe a week or more."

"You be careful of those Toledo blondes," she said, smiling up at him. "I don't know if I should trust you that far away from home."

Trust me! he thought bitterly. You don't know if you can trust me? He tried a laugh on, just to see if it would fit, and when it didn't, he turned and walked quickly from the house to the car. There was a harsh bitter nip of Fall in the air. The breaths he took crackled in his lungs and reminded him of football games and the sharp clean tang of mustard on hot-dogs and the closeness and warmth Eva had been to him then, before Harvey joined the firm and began his series of weekly visits, finally moving into the house next door. Pomfret almost tore the transmission out of the car getting it into second gear. As he passed Harvey's house he saw the shadow of Harvey's bulk against the windowshades, and he knew that before he reached the corner the big eager man would be sneaking slyly through the gate in the hedge to where Eva waited for him. He put the car into high gear and went down the street and turned the corner, out of sight.

HARVEY grinned. He had a good-natured, boyish grin that worked well with some types of women. He stood in the middle of Joe Pomfret's living room, staring

at Joe Pomfret's wife. There was sweat on his face. He said, "Look, from now on, it's so much velvet, Ev. Everything's going to be okay. It'll all be over soon."

He walked over to the table and spun a pack of cigarettes so that one flipped out. This he tapped on the table and put in his mouth. He picked up the bronze lighter and held it in his hand. "Neat little gadget," he said, making his voice loud, as if to drown out his own thoughts and the ones in Eva's mind. "Where'd you get it?"

She sat tensely on the edge of the studio couch, staring at her hands. The whip in his voice brought her head up and she glanced at the lighter, then shrugged impatiently. "I don't know. Joe, I guess. He's always bringing something home." She wet her lips. "When, Harv? How long will it be?"

Harvey put the lighter back on the table and poured himself a stiff drink. He put it down his throat in one long smooth motion, and glanced at his watch.

"When he hits the Turnpike hill," he said, keeping his voice even, "he'll have to brake hard for the sharp turn there. When he does, the brake cable goes. I took care of the emergency, too." He poured another drink, rattling the bottle against the glass. "It's a hundred foot drop through that fence. He won't feel a thing."

She shivered. He took the cigarette from his mouth and went over to her. She came willingly and easily into his arms. He kissed her in a way that Joe Pomfret had never known and would never learn, now. For a moment she lay still in his arms, her breath hot on his face, her eyes closed. The room was very still.

Harvey put the cigarette back in his mouth and pushed her gently away. "It's going to be fine, angel. They'll never suspect a thing." Her mouth touched his again, jostling the cigarette. She smiled. Her hand searched out across the table, touching the rough etched metal of the lighter, closing around it. She slid her other arm around his neck, pulling his head down to hers, touching the lighter to the end of his cigarette. Her lips brushed his ear.

"Light, darling?"

By
Clive
Criswell



Hate Calls the Tune

I had the louse I hated in the palm of my hand,
but could I really pin this hot murder rap on him?

FOOTSTEPS slapped the sidewalk behind me, pounding, running hard. A voice piped shrilly: "Pat—Pat, wait!" There was excitement in the call. A touch of hysteria. I turned and saw a kid slamming toward me through the dusk, a kid of fourteen or fifteen. He wore dirty corduroy slacks, a baggy grey sweater and scuffed shoes. His sandy hair needed combing, and when he came closer I noticed streaks on his grimy face. As if he'd been crying.

It wasn't like Lester Harcourt to cry. At least I had never seen him do it, and I'd known him a long time. His pals didn't call him Lester, they called him Butch or got punched in the jaw. He was that kind. A pretty tough little monkey.

He didn't look tough now, though. He grabbed at my

arm, and I thought I saw panic in his eyes. "Pat!" he gulped. "Pat—" He gulped again.

I wasn't interested in his panic. I wasn't interested in anybody named Harcourt, period. He should have known that. There are some things you just don't get over, and what his sister had done to me was one of them.

"Scram, punk," I said.

He wouldn't let go of my sleeve. "Pat, gee, listen!"

"Scram, I told you." I didn't like to look at his eyes. They were blue, like Barbara's. They reminded me of her. Too much. And I didn't want to be reminded of Barbara. I'd been more than two long years trying to forget her. And failing.

"Pat, you got to listen," he said. That was the trouble with him. Persistent. Maybe because he liked me. Some kids are that way about cops. Hero-worship stuff. He choked: "It's pop."

"What about him?"

"He's d-dead, Pat."

THAT stopped me cold. I'd never had anything against old Aaron Harcourt. He was a nice enough guy, as music teachers go. A little impractical, maybe. But he'd managed to bring up his two motherless kids on what he earned giving violin lessons. You had to respect him for that.

I looked at Lester. "How'd it happen? Heart?"

"He . . . he was murdered, Pat."

"What?"

"It's true, Pat. I found him on the floor when I got home off my paper route just now. There's blood on his head, and—and—"

I started walking. Fast. Not toward my apartment house just a few doors down the street, but the other way. The kid kept pace with me. I said: "Did you phone a doctor?"

"No. What good's a doctor? He's dead, Pat. I . . . felt him. His pulse, I mean. Then I came after you. I knew you'd be coming home from headquarters about now, and

. . . you being a detective sergeant and all, I . . . I thought. . . .”

“Okay, okay,” I said. Then as we reached the corner: “What about your sister? Wasn’t she home?”

“No. I guess she already left for Moon Garden. She works out there now. Singing with Al Carlin’s ork.”

“Yeah, so I heard.”

“I wish she’d married you instead of Rudy.”

I stopped at the far curb. “Lay off, punk.” I didn’t even want to hear Rudy Ferranti’s name mentioned. “Now shut up and come on. Quit needling me.” We turned the corner and headed for his house, a shabby little cottage on a seedy lot in the middle of the block. I still couldn’t bring myself to believe his old man had been murdered. Nobody would have any motive for killing an inoffensive violin teacher. The kid had been reading too many detective stories. Or maybe this was his idea of a practical joke.

I walked into the bungalow’s living room and saw Aaron Harcourt’s body sprawled on the floor, face down, the back of his head crushed in from a series of blows. Harcourt was all through giving music lessons. The kid had really told the truth.

I WENT through the motions of putting my finger on the artery in his neck. I knew there’d be no pulse-beats. He was still warm, though. He hadn’t been dead too long. I crossed the room, picked up the phone, and called headquarters. “Pat Whitney talking,” I said. I reported the kill, gave the address, and was told to sit tight; the homicide boys would be right over with a tech squad. I rang off. Then I looked around.

Even as upset as it was, the room was familiar. I remembered all the times I’d been in it in the old days, starting away back when we were all kids in grammar school: Barbara, the skinny, leggy tomboy. Al Carlin the studious one, wanting to be a musician. Me with my mind set on a blue-serge uniform and a badge. And Ferranti the flashy, wiry hellion who swiped oranges and bananas from his father’s fruit stand—and shared his loot with the rest

of us. Whatever deviltry we got into, Ferranti was usually the one who started it.

I remembered another day I had come here, my first day as a probationary patrolman, showing off my shiny new shield, full of pride because I was finally on the force, a rookie cop. Strutting to make an impression on Barbara, who was no longer a leggy tomboy. I remembered how beautiful she had been that day, remembered how bright her eyes had been, remembered the soft golden sheen of her hair. That was the week Al Carlin got his first professional job with an orchestra. And it was the week Rudy Ferranti had come around flashing a thick roll of bills he'd won in a crap game. Almost a thousand dollars. Maybe I sensed, even then, what he would do to me later. What he and Barbara would do to me.

This very living room was where I'd asked Barbara to marry me. It was where she had said yes and held out her finger for the ring that had cost me two months' pay. And it was where her father had told me, just a day before the scheduled wedding, that she'd eloped with Rudy Ferranti instead.

So now I was back again. And Barbara's father was dead in a room that had been torn apart as if by a cyclone. The old man must have put up a terrific struggle before his killer battered him down. The worn rug was bunched, a rocking chair overturned. There was sheet music scattered all over. Ornaments and pictures had been knocked off a desk in a far corner. The place was a shambles.

I PICKED up a double cabinet photoholder in a hinged leather frame. The girl was Barbara in her white graduation gown, her first formal. The tall, studious-looking kid with the glasses was Al Carlin. The wiry, swarthy one was Ferranti. The big hulking guy with the lantern jaw and stupid expression was me.

I hurled it across the room. It landed near an open violin case that stuck out from under a window drape. The violin case caught my eye. It was a special kind, foreign-made and pretty old. I recognized it and turned

to the Harcourt kid, who'd been watching me and not saying anything.

"Where's the fiddle that belongs in this?" I asked him.

His eyes widened. "Gosh, it's gone, isn't it?"

"Seems to be. Take a look around."

He prowled the room, then the rest of the house. He came back pretty quick. "I can't find it, Pat. The one he gave lessons with, that's in the hall closet. But this one—" He screwed up his face. "Any time pop took it out to play it, he always put it back in the case."

I remembered the violin Aaron Harcourt had kept in this special case: an instrument he'd never allowed even his own kids to touch. Now and then, on some particular occasion, he would play it himself—but only rarely, and then to the accompaniment of a lecture as to its history. "A genuine Enamieri," he would tell you dreamily. "A real one. Listen to the singing tone. The mellowness. The warmth. Andrea Enamieri, he was one of the great violin makers of Cremona. A pupil of the master Nicolo Amati. Yes, Enamieri and the more famous Antonio Stradavari were fellow-students. Together they learned their art. Today the public knows a good deal about Strad violins, but very little about Enamieri instruments. A pity, too, because in my opinion Enamieri was the better artisan."

He would look at you, waiting for you to say that this fiddle of his must be mighty valuable. Then he would sadly shake his head. "Valuable to me, yes. But to professional collectors, no. Because the Enamieri signature is not inside." He would hold it up so you could look through the f-shaped holes on each side of the bridge. "Some time in its career it must have had an accident. The original back, with the signature on the inner surface, must have been splintered. It was replaced with this strip of lighter-colored wood. An excellent repair job, you understand. The tone is unimpaired. But that Enamieri signature would have made the difference between a violin worth perhaps a hundred thousand dollars and a concert fiddle you could buy for a thousand. If I were willing to sell for that price. Which I am not."

Lester blinked at me. "Pat, you think somebody murdered pop for that fiddle?"

"It's a theory."

The kid's lower lip trembled. "Pat, I got to tell you this. I don't want you to think I'm a stool, but—well, I got to tell you. Promise you won't think that I'm just a blabbermouth, Pat?"

"What do you care what I think?"

"Aw, Pat," he said. His voice wasn't steady. "Don't hold it against me because sis married that Ferranti guy. It wasn't my fault she was a damned fool."

"Lay off," I snapped. "I told you I didn't want you to mention him to me. I meant it."

"Sure, Pat, okay. Only—well, I wish you wouldn't be sore at me for something sis did."

"I'm not. I'm not sore at anybody."

HE KNEW better, of course. He knew I was lying when I said I wasn't sore. Kids are smarter than you give them credit for. He knew it was eating my heart out because Barbara had married Ferranti. He just didn't know how to put his sympathy into words.

"Pat, look," he said. "I got to mention Rudy to you. Just this once. And I'm not ratting. Only after all, it's my pop that's been killed. That makes it different."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"Well, things ain't been going so good with sis and Rudy. All that talk of his about being in the chips, that was a lot of baloney. That was why he and sis came back here to live with Pop and me a couple of months ago. He was busted. Every cent he got his hands on, he dropped it on the ponies. Or dice."

He scraped the worn rug with the scuffed toe of his shoe. "Rudy wanted pop to sell that fiddle and lend him the money he'd get out of it. He kept telling pop he could take the dough and run it into a real bankroll in a hot crap game he knew about. Pop wouldn't do it, though. You remember how pop was." The kid's voice choked a little and his eyes went to his old man's body. "Maybe he

would have for sis, but not for Rudy. So he kept saying no. Rudy got pretty sore a couple times. He got nasty."

"How nasty?"

"Loud-talk nasty. Then sis went to see Al Carlin and landed a job singing with his band, out at Moon Garden. She said if Rudy wouldn't work and earn her a living, it looked like she'd have to do it herself. Rudy didn't like that too much. He spends most of his time out there watching to see that nobody don't make no passes at her. He blamed it all on pop because he wouldn't sell that violin. And now it's gone.

"I'm just telling you what I know." He was tough again but it was only a cover-up. His lower lip was still trembling. "You make the guesses. You're the copper."

"All right," I said. "I'll make the guesses." To start with, not too many people had known about old Harcourt's Enamieri. That narrowed the field down to his few intimate friends—and his immediate family. In the second place, an ordinary thief wouldn't steal the violin out of its case, he'd take the whole works. But an insider might leave the case behind, closed and latched, hoping the theft wouldn't be discovered right away. Figuring it wouldn't come to light until the next time Harcourt went to take the fiddle out and play it.

Okay. Now suppose the old man walked in, caught the guy taking the instrument from its plush-lined container, recognized him and jumped him. And got killed doing it. It all meshed with what Lester Harcourt said about Rudy Ferranti. I went over to the phone, picked up the directory, leafed through it, located the number of the Moon Garden dance joint, and made the call. "Al Carlin," I said.

Presently Carlin came on the line, his voice modulated and studious as ever. I told him it was Pat Whitney calling and he sounded glad to hear from me. Glad, and a little surprised. I congratulated him on having a dance band of his own and said: "Is Ferranti out there, Al?"

He chuckled. "He's always here when Barbara's on the job. You want to talk to him?"

"Not on the phone," I said. "In person. Be seeing you."

I rang off and said to Lester: "I'm going to pick up a taxi and go after him. You stay here until the homicide boys come. Tell them where I went."

I went as far as the door. Then I said over my shoulder: "When the guys from headquarters get here, better tell them I want a squad car sent after me."

"Okay, Pat." His voice was sullen.

"And you can come along if they'll bring you," I added. After all, it was only natural he'd want to be around when his father's killer was nabbed.

He turned then. "Thanks, Pat," he said.

His eyes still reminded me of his sister's. I went out of the house and didn't look back.

MOOON GARDEN was on the edge of town, just inside the city limits but a good mile beyond where the subdivision housing developments stopped. It was a rambling, ramshackle eyesore that masked its shabbiness with neon signs, including a big pale neon moon over the flat roof. The only thing that put it a cut above a juke joint was Al Carlin's eight-piece orchestra.

I could hear the band braying something brassy as I headed toward the entrance. After two years I was going to see Barbara again. And I was going to put handcuffs on the guy who had taken her away from me. I was going to arrest him. For murder.

It was going to hit Barbara hard, learning her old man had been killed. It would hurt worse, knowing her husband had done it. Knowing she was married to a murderer. She must have loved him or she wouldn't have eloped with him. Now she was going to lose him to the electric chair. Well, that was her tough luck. She wouldn't get any sympathy out of me. In a little while she would find out what it meant to have your dreams smashed.

I went inside. The place smelled like a pesthole. Tobacco smoke and the reek of stale beer eddied in the dim purple light, with brighter lights centering on the bandstand at the far end of the long narrow room. Along one side was a bar. The other side had booths and tables. All occupied.

A lot of teen-agers were cutting up on the dance floor to the savage rhythm of Al Carlin's crew.

Carlin stood downstage front, facing the orchestra, his back to the dancers. He gave the tempo and fiddled at the same time. Now and then he used his violin bow as a baton. He looked tall and tailored in his tux, and presently when the number was over he turned and gave the clapping crowd a nice studious smile, his glasses reflecting the colored footlights and his violin held in front of him, the bridge side turned in to his lean middle.

The back of the instrument was smooth dark wood—except for a blond streak in the center. An insert strip the color of honey. The color of Barbara's hair.

I felt a sudden tightness in my throat. Then I shoved forward and found the door that led backstage. I came to the wings of the bandstand. I said loudly: "Al."

Carlin glanced my way, saw me and came to me. "You got out here pretty fast, Pat. Still looking for Rudy?"

"I don't know," I said. My voice didn't sound like mine. My finger shook when I pointed with it. "Where'd you get that fiddle, Al?"

"This?" He twirled it. "Why? Do you recognize it? You ought to. It was Pop Harcourt's."

"I didn't ask you that. I asked you where you got it."

He frowned a little. He didn't seem to like my tone of voice. "Is that you talking, Pat? Or is it your badge?"

"Just answer my question," I said. "Where'd you get the fiddle? Tell me and tell me quick."

HE LIFTED a shoulder. "I bought it. From Rudy. He finally talked old man Harcourt into selling it."

"Is that what he told you?"

"Sure. I gave him three hundred for it. Three one-hundred-dollar bills. Why?" Then his eyes narrowed behind the glasses. "Hey, wait a minute, Pat. Are you trying to tell me there was something phony about the deal?"

"Something very phony," I said. "Where can I find Ferranti?" Suddenly I felt tired, knowing what was ahead of me, knowing what I had to do.

"In Barbara's dressing room. It's intermission time right now, and he'll be in there with her."

"Show me the way," I said.

He led me along a narrow hallway that needed ventilating. We came to a closed door and I shoved him aside. I opened the door without knocking first.

Barbara was sitting in front of her dressing table, touching up her makeup. Her hair was the color of honey and her face was the wistful little-girl face that had been haunting me these past two years. A trifle more mature, maybe. And there were tired lines around her eyes, I thought. But aside from that she'd hardly changed at all.

Neither had Ferranti. Those swarthy, wiry ones never change. I saw him turn around, fast, and stare at me as I came in.

Ferranti said: "Whitney!" and Barbara said: "Pat!" and I waved them both quiet. They looked at me. Barbara steadily and Rudy shiftily.

I said: "Your dad's dead, Babs."

Her makeup was suddenly splotchy against cheeks that had gone white. "Pat—"

"He was murdered," I said.

She started to get up off the bench in front of the dressing table but didn't quite make it. She sank down again. She was trying to say something, but no words came.

"He was killed for his violin," I said. I wasn't enjoying this. Maybe I should have enjoyed it, but I didn't. I said: "What would you think if I told you your husband killed him?"

Rudy jumped at me. He was fast on his feet. He always had been. He was fast with his tongue, too. He called me a name. I sidestepped him and hit him in the belly. He gasped and went backward. He wouldn't try that again for a while. I raised my voice and said: "Al, come in here."

Carlin walked into the dressing room. He had the Enamieri in his hands. He went past me and shoved the instrument at Ferranti. "Take this and give me my money back, you creep."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about," Rudy

said. He wouldn't touch the violin. "What money? Where the hell did you get that fiddle?"

"You know where I got it. You sold it to me."

"That's a lie!" Rudy yelled.

"I paid you three hundred-dollar bills." Carlin looked at me. "Why don't you search him, Pat?"

I did just that. I found the three bills in the side pocket of Ferranti's coat.

Ferranti said: "It's a frame, a lousy stinking frame. I don't know anything about—" The denial seemed to choke him. He scuttled to Barbara. "Don't let them do this to me, hon. They're railroading me. Hon, I didn't bump your old man. I don't know anything about it. I swear I don't."

"I believe you," she said.

SO SHE believed him. But that wouldn't keep him out of the electric chair. There was something else I was thinking about, something even bigger. Maybe when Barbara was a widow I might have another chance. In time maybe I could mend some of those dreams she'd smashed for me when she married Rudy Ferranti.

I got out my handcuffs. The guy cringed. And Barbara looked at him again the way she had never looked at me. It was something protective, something you couldn't put into words. She knew him for what he was. Yellow. A loud-mouth. A cheap flash. That was why she married him. It was why she'd stick to him no matter what happened. Because he needed her. It had taken me a long time, but now I knew.

And I knew I wouldn't send him to the chair. I could, and I'd love it. But I wouldn't. Because I realized he wasn't guilty. I'd realized this for quite a while. I turned, took the Enamieri away from Al Carlin and snapped the handcuffs on him.

Al choked and stiffened and rattled the cuffs. His eyes were hot and angry behind the glasses he wore. "What the hell is this, Pat, a gag? I didn't kill pop—"

"Yes you did," I said. "And it was the fiddle that tripped you."

"Now wait, Pat."

"Look," I said. "You're one of the few who knew pop owned an Enamieri. I think you were the thief he caught stealing it."

"You're nuts. I'm making plenty of money. Why should I steal a fiddle I could afford to buy? Besides, the kind of music I play these days, I don't need an expensive violin."

"I thought of that," I said. "But you used to be in love with Barbara, same as I was. And you hated the idea of her being hooked to a louse like Rudy. I think you stole the Enamieri to plant it on Rudy, so he'd be accused. So Barbara would be disgusted with him and maybe divorce him."

I was guessing, of course. But I must have been pretty close to the mark. Carlin's expression told me that.

I said: "But pop caught you in the act. You had to kill him. So then I think you decided your original scheme would still work. Only better. Now you could frame Rudy for murder as well as theft. All you had to do was to slip three bills in the side pocket of his coat—where, incidentally, a guy never carries that kind of money loose. And then deliberately show off the Enamieri where I'd see it and recognize it. You'd say Rudy sold it to you, and you would have him nailed to the cross."

"He did sell it to me."

I said: "No, you slipped up on your logic there, Al. Whatever else Rudy may be, he's smart. If he had murdered pop while stealing the violin, he would have ditched it. The dumbest killer in the world would have brains enough to realize that the fiddle was the one thing that would link him to the murder. His first instinct would be to get rid of it. Selling it to you was the one thing Rudy wouldn't have done. He'd be putting himself in the electric chair for a lousy three hundred dollars. It wasn't plausible. You were trying to frame him. I saw that right away."

"Can you make it stick?" he asked me. Not blustering. He really wanted to know.

I told him I thought I could. And I meant it.

"All right," he said. "I'll take a plea."

He wouldn't look at Barbara and Rudy when he said it. But I did. For the first time in two years I could look at them without hate. "Better start for home, you two," I said. I was thinking there would be funeral arrangements to make. Details to be taken care of. "And—I'm sorry about pop."

Barbara said softly: "Thanks, Pat." Just the two words. But they covered a lot of things. She and her husband went out.

Presently a squad car of homicide guys came to take Al Carlin off my hands. They brought Lester Harcourt with them. After they took Al away he said: "But, Pat, I . . . I thought you were going to pinch Rudy."

"I almost did. I almost made that mistake." He would never know how big a mistake I had come near making.

"But, Pat—"

"Skip it, Butch." He got it. I'd called him Butch.

I put my arm around his shoulder. "Come on, Butch. I'll take you home."

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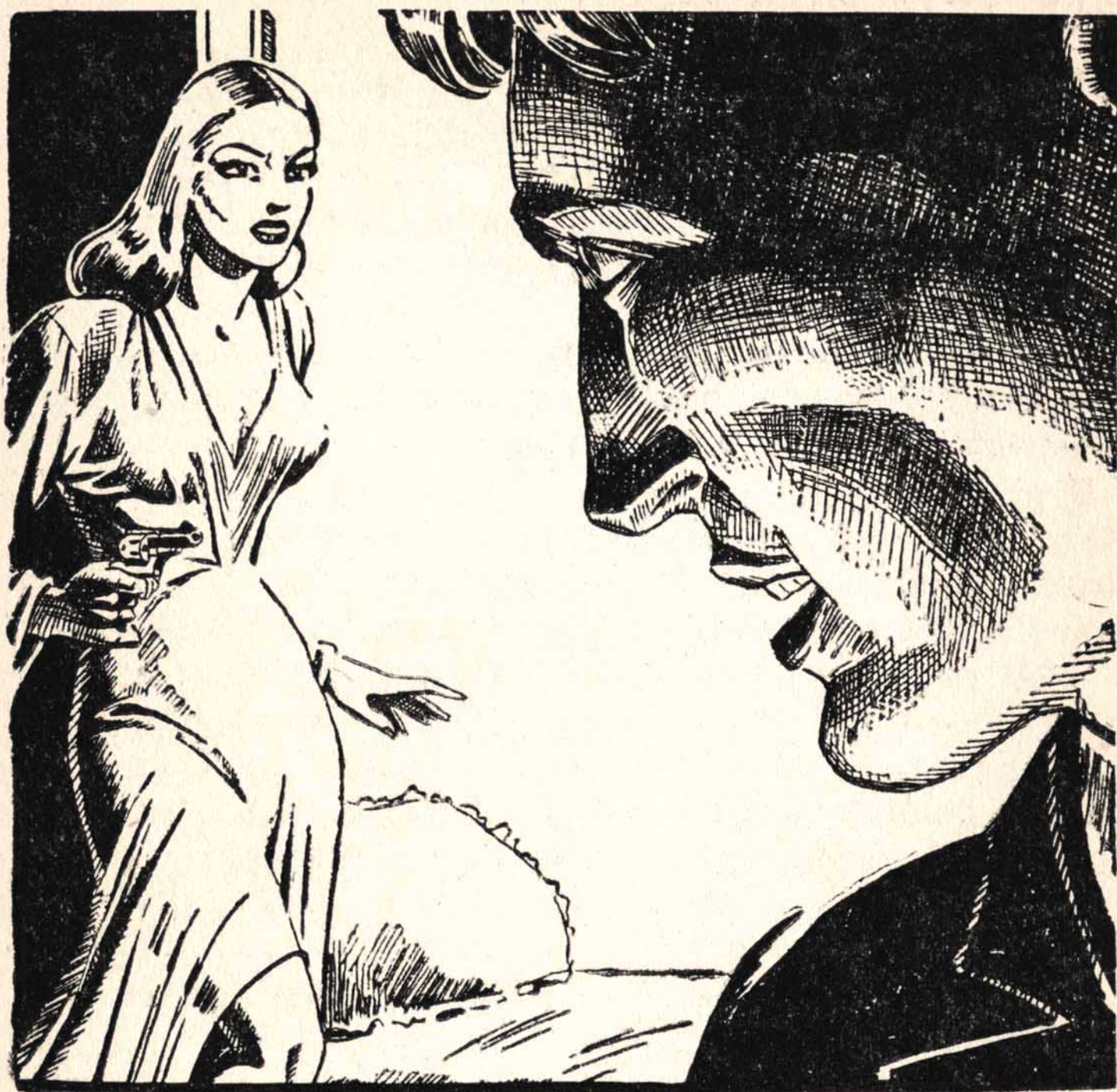
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Gems Glow With Blood

By Joseph Commings

I'm not too honest a private dick, but I draw the line when MURDER lines up on the wrong side.

THE babe was going to soak her feet and ruin her shoes if she kept running through puddles. I followed her through the rain from the Greyhound Bus Terminal. I could go for a girl like that. She was a come-hither blonde. She was carrying a quarter-million

dollars' worth of stolen rubies. And every cop in twelve states was looking for her for murder.

I didn't mind walking in the rain. I was wearing my old waterproof coat and GI brogues. I had to walk fast to stay behind her. But she had to stop running at the next street crossing to wait for the traffic light to change. I came up beside her and put my arm through hers. I could feel a startled vibration electrify her. I said politely, "Need someone to carry your bag?"

"No—thank you!" she said in the hard, icy kind of way that's supposed to freeze a masher. She yanked her arm away. But I had my defrost unit working. When she started across the avenue without waiting any longer, dodging traffic, I followed and took her arm again.

She turned her head to glare at me from under the dripping brim of her felt hat. She had almond-shaped jade-green eyes, cheeks sunken just enough to torment a man, and a full-lipped burgundy mouth that was at present trying to scold instead of look scared. "Is this supposed to be a pickup?"

"Do I look like the kind of man who tries to pick up beautiful blondes?"

"Yes!"

"Would you prefer this to be a pinch—Gertie Sale?"

"Why—?" I knew her name. She was puzzled. "Who are you?"

I had to drag her on the sidewalk as a car, turning the corner, washed past. "I'm Hod Danto," I said. "I'm your contact man."

"You look like you've made some hard contacts."

"I've been bashed around—mostly by the police."

"You rouse my sympathy." There wasn't a shred of sympathy in her voice.

"We'll talk inside. My place is only a couple of blocks away. Do you mind walking?"

"I do mind. But what can I do about it?"

I've never bragged about my dump in the West Thirties and I'm not going to begin now. When I unlocked the door in the sunken vestibule I said, "Third floor." I let

her go up the stairs ahead of me. I watched her legs. Her nylons were all wet around the ankles and rain-blotched at the calves, but they were still the nicest legs I'd seen in a long time. I used the same key again to open my own door. I snapped the light on in the big single room that has a small slot of a kitchen and an even smaller slot of a bathroom. "This is where I live."

"And what's your racket?" she said.

"Private detective."

"Big agency?" She moved in and I closed the door.

"No. I'm a lone—if you'll pardon the expression—wolf."

She stood still. Her long blonde hair was beginning to unravel at the ends where the rain had struck it. Little drops dripped off the hem of her plastic raincoat onto my dime-thin imitation domestic rug. She seemed to hold tighter to her handbag and suitcase.

She said, "Who thought of the idea of taking me to your place?"

"I did. I was supposed to take you to a hotel. When I saw you getting off the bus I changed my mind."

Her eyes hit me with the impact of two stones. "So you *were* there! Why didn't you give me a sign? When no one met me I got into a panic! I thought something had gone wrong!"

"Put those things down," I said. "Take off your hat and coat. I'll mix you something." I flung off my own waterproof as I went into the kitchen slot. "What do you drink?"

"The kind of report that Kinsey gives you in a bottle," she said brassily. I tried to picture her as Renny Jordahl's private secretary, but at the moment I couldn't.

I said from the kitchen, "I knew you were scared. You didn't exactly show it. But I've seen people, in my business, and I can tell."

I CAME back again with two whiskey-and-waters. By now she'd even taken off her shoes and stockings. She was the type who needed very little urging to make herself at home. Her nasturtium-shade suit was wrinkled.

But on her I could stand a mouth painted on crooked or lipstick on her teeth. She sat down, held the drink in her hand and rubbed her bare feet together to warm them by friction. "It's good to relax. I haven't had a moment's peace for a week. Dodging all the time. I feel absolutely safe with you."

"That's my trouble with women. They feel too safe with me."

She said, "Renny won't think this is nice, your changing his plans by taking me here."

I took one sip and put down my glass. "Who cares about Renny as long as we think it's nice?" I was looking at her feet. She had small round toes with scarlet nails. "Let me do that." I rubbed her feet with my hands.

"I haven't got much to say about any of it," said Gertie in a low voice. "I only work for Renny Jordahl."

"You worked *with* him!" I mashed her toes harder than she liked and she tried to pull one foot back. "You were going to marry him—until all this happened. Want me to go over it once lightly, dossier-fashion?"

She tilted her glass back toward her lips and swallowed. "You do a rough massage job. That's all I know about you."

"Renny Jordahl called me up and told me all about it. Jordahl, with the big Fifth Avenue jeweler's front to cover up his crooked business. He had to phone me from a pay-booth because the cops are watching him. They even have his private wires tapped. But there are ways of getting messages through. Just like the way you communicated with him while you were on the lam. It's tough but possible. Jordahl told me that he'd heard you were coming back. He couldn't meet you, because the cops'd nab both of you as soon as you'd met. You couldn't go directly to him because of the same obvious reason. So I was the middleman."

"With ideas of your own," she said.

"You *think* you're in a tough fix. That Czech—what's his name?"

"Jan Bardijov."

"That Czech was murdered for his pigeon's blood rubies. Jordahl—and you—were practically the only people he knew in this country. Jordahl was dickering with him for the rubies. After the Czech was found dead, you two were the first ones the police went for. Then you pulled a disappear act, leaving a cute little note for the police saying you'd taken the stones, shifting the whole blame onto your own frail shoulders."

"Clearing Jordahl," she reminded me.

"It didn't work out exactly that way. The police're still suspicious of him. They're watching him, tailing him. But as long as you two are apart neither of you can do anything worthwhile with the rocks. You can't dispose of them without Jordahl. And Jordahl can't dispose of something he hasn't got."

There was an odd look in her eyes, but she didn't say anything. I noticed that she held the glass with two hands.

I said, "Brief me on the Czech who was murdered."

SHE started slowly. "What do you want to know? Jan Bardijov got out of Czechoslovakia one jump ahead of the Communist grab. He was quite a smuggler. He got out with a sack of harlequin opals."

"Quite a smuggler," I agreed. "Where'd the opals change into rubies?"

"In Burma. Bardijov traveled east. Because opals are rarer in Burma than rubies, Bardijov managed to meet some potentate and make a swap—to his own advantage. He came on to the United States, smuggling in a quarter of a million in the best pigeon's blood."

"Then he got in touch with Jordahl and Company," I said, "expecting to make a sale. He didn't know that it was worth his life."

Gertie looked angry. "He asked a fantastic price. Jewelers don't operate at a loss."

"So you and Jordahl did business as usual. You got the rubies at a hundred percent profit. There's a slight hitch right now, but I'm in the middle to straighten that out. Let's start by you giving me the rubies."

"I?" She almost dropped the glass. "I haven't got them!"

I had my chance to do some eyebrow lifting. Then I tried to cover up my sudden display of surprise with a little sneer. "It's no secret, honey. Jordahl said he hasn't got them. Twelve states know about you. Why be shy with me?"

She bumped down the glass. "But I haven't got them. I ran to clear Renny. That's the truth, Hod. Once the cops stopped hounding him, I'd join up with him again and we'd both leave the country. *He* has the rubies!"

I stared at her, hard. I still had her feet in my hands, but I couldn't feel them any more. "I'm glad," I said. "The one who has the rubies is the one who murdered the Czech. I want you to be clean. But don't play me for the little badminton bird, Gertie, shuttling me between you. You're in no spot to try it. You're in a tougher fix than ducking the cops."

Her eyes flashed. "What're you talking about?"

"Jordahl is planning to cross you like an X!"

"What!"

"Jordahl wants to wind up with the rubies and be in the clear. He's going to pitch you to the cops for the murder."

"He can't! I'll talk—!"

"You won't be able to talk—not when you're a corpse!"

She seemed to draw into herself and shrivel up until the skin of her face looked like lemon-peel. The way her whole body jerked made me hate myself for shocking her like that.

Her teeth chattered. "You can't mean it, Hod!" She was close to a breaking point. All her earlier indifference and toughness was a shell.

"I was told to take you to that hotel room tonight and make you hand over the rubies. Once they were in Jordahl's hands and he knew where he could get his hands on you, you'd be finished. You'd be found dead, as if you'd killed yourself, with maybe a couple of the rubies scattered around for added—"

"Hod! You won't help him do that to me!"

"I was being forced into it. Jordahl'd described you and the flyers they'd sent to all the police stations described you. I thought I knew what you looked like. But none of them did you justice, Gertie. When I saw you get off the bus I started making plans of my own."

She looked at me as if I'd suddenly grown twice as tall. "Renny must have an awful lot on you to make you do this. You don't say anything about yourself."

"Yeah," I said grudgingly, "he's got something on me."

BUT I was keeping it to myself. I wasn't going to tell her that Jordahl knew me because I had links of my own with the jewelry business—on the shady side. I wasn't what the police would call an absolutely scrupulous private operator. Several times I'd been retained by the rich Park Avenue crowd to recover vast amounts of stolen jewels. I had a good eye for pretty stones, in the first place, but what was more important I had some underworld connections. Also with insurance companies. I could take a fair guess who'd stolen what. Then, instead of an investigator, I'd become an intermediary. Seeing all the parties concerned, I'd work out a deal to sell the jewels back to the victims again at, say, about fifteen or twenty thousand. I'd pocket a nice corner of the dough. The victims would agree to forget about the robbery. It was the old kick-back.

On the phone, Jordahl had said to me, "I know the men you covered up in those jewel robberies, Danto. What would they think about you if the police got a list of their names?"

I'd said, "The police'll never hear about them, Jordahl. I spent six months in the clink not so long ago just for keeping my mouth shut."

He'd said, "You'll work this deal with me and Gertie Sale, or your mouth'll be kept shut for a lot longer."

So I'd met Gertie Sale. And now I was thinking of double-crossing Jordahl. The big single room was quiet. She was waiting for me to say something. I heard the

rain hissing against the closed, scrim-curtained windows. It was a bad night. I said, sounding her, "Let's quit fencing, honey. You've got the rubies. I've got a fence. I'll get rid of them. Then it'll be you and me, down in Buenos Aires."

Her lips twitched as if she were fighting to keep from laughing at me. "Are you crazy? You don't think you could get away with something like that, do you?"

"Let's have them, honey. Don't be stubborn. I'll enjoy searching you, but you won't."

There wasn't laughter in her now. Her eyes were cold flames. "I haven't got the rubies!"

I gently moved her bare feet to one side, got up. "I'm always a gentleman," I said. "I'll start with the luggage."

I bent down over the suitcase. She'd squirmed around, tearing open her pin-seal handbag and scrabbling a .38 automatic out of it. She poked it up. All she had to do was pull the trigger and I'd have a third eye.

I felt all my viscera start to flutter. But I don't think I showed it a bit on the outside. I said, "You're not going to do any shooting, honey. You're wanted for murder. How far do you think you could run in your bare feet? Or try shoving your feet into those wet shoes while the police're busting up the stairs. Lay that gat down, honey."

I was close enough now to take it out of her hand. Her eyes were looking into mine and I couldn't tell if hers were those of an angel or a devil. I reached out and took the gun out of her hand.

SHE closed her eyes as if ashamed at how weak she was and her arm dropped limply. I snapped back the automatic's slide. A shiny copper-colored cartridge was bedded there in the barrel, winking brazenly up at me.

I let the slide spring back and put the automatic in my pocket. "Search," I said. "Will you do it or do you want me to do it?"

She dragged herself out of the chair and in her bare feet showed me what a stupe I was. She spilled everything out of her suitcase—and she didn't care how per-

sonal the things were that I saw. She dumped the handbag.

But I didn't see any rubies. She gave me a look of long-suffering woe. The shorn lamb look. I tried to cover up my confusion by being gruff. "Unless you've stashed them someplace, it's Jordahl who has them."

"Just this once, believe a woman when she tells you something."

"All right, honey. I'm convinced. But that doesn't get you off the spot. We can still go Argentine way, but we've got to get the rubies off Jordahl first."

She pawed her hands into her hair. "After what you've told me about him, I never want to see him again. All I want to do is get away."

"I want to get away too. Only I'm not so callow as to go without that loot."

"But what can we do, Hod? We'll never get them away from him."

"Isn't it worth trying?" I said. "I know where Jordahl is tonight. If you showed up there suddenly without any warning he wouldn't be able to do a thing to you. The cops'll be too close to him. I won't be far behind you. We'll both work the rubies out of him."

She sat down again with a tired flop. She picked up the highball glass and stared at it. The ice had melted and the liquid had been warmed by her hands. Then her blue-green eyes lifted to mine. "Do you really think we can?"

"Sure," I said.

RENNY JORDAHL was in his office on the twenty-first floor of the Harrow Tower on Fortieth Street. He was going to wait there most of the night, expecting a report from me.

Gertie and I stopped at the building entrance in the downpour. I hadn't figured any definite approach to Jordahl. I was depending mostly on luck—and Gertie's natural wiles. In the lobby of black marble I could see two loafing men, the detectives keeping their vigil on Jordahl. We had to get past them first. I told Gertie to wait outside until

I'd gone in and diverted their attention. Then she'd take a quick sneak through the lobby to the rear service elevator. She'd go up in that and I'd join her as soon as possible.

I left her outside in the rain and casually pushed through the doors. The two dicks got interested in me right away. I recognized the one who elbowed away from the veined wall.

"Where're you going?" he said. He had a pockmarked phiz and a sadistic mouth.

He knew me. I had to act in character. "Up to the eighteenth floor," I said. "The night watchman around? I don't see him around."

"He's down in the boiler room sleeping off his supper." He peered closer at me. "Danto, ain't it?"

"And you're Cougar." We didn't sound like two old playmates.

"What do you want up for, Danto?"

"My mother works there, scrubbing floors."

Cougar sneered. "Are you going to hold the bucket while she wrings out her mop?"

I was standing close to both of them. "I'd like to borrow a buck. Any law against it, skullbuster?"

"You're the type guy who'd let his mother work scrubbing floors," said Cougar nastily.

"And you're the type guy," I said, "whose looks'd be improved with a fat lip. I haven't forgotten that weekend we spent, Cougar. You were the guy with the rubber hose. I felt it but it didn't leave any marks on me. You were the guy who suggested that I go without water while a tap dripped in the next room. You were the guy who thought it'd be more fun if I didn't get any sleep for forty-eight hours."

He niggled with one side of his cruel mouth. The other guy was watchful. Cougar said, "I'll make up for it by putting you to sleep any time, Danto."

"I don't think you're so much, sloose," I said with studied contempt. "Nor your sidekick—Third-Degree Burns."

The other guy straightened up. "My name's O'Neil," he said ominously.

The look I gave them did everything but spit on them. "Why don't you two snouts go take a walk through the park and arrest some sparrows for trespassing on the grass?"

I could see four fists. "Why, you punk!" snarled Cougar.

"What's the matter, sluefoot?" I said. My jaw felt as if it were bound up with piano-wire, but I forced the words out. "You're two to one against me. Aren't the odds big enough for you? Want to go home to put on your cleats?"

COUGAR hit me. I tried to ride the punch and topple over backwards toward the emergency stairway. I rolled over into the dark at the foot of the stairs. Both of them came in after me. Cougar's partner, O'Neil, was wearing copper-toed bulldog shoes. And he was a kicker. Every time his metal toe went into my lower side I felt my intestines come up in my throat.

I didn't hit back too hard to injure their vanity. I didn't want them to toss me in the tank. I let them work off their boyish energy. I kept telling myself over and over that this wasn't much to pay for a quarter of a million bucks and Gertie Sale. It helped to ease the pain. Both of them were broken winded when they were through.

"Get up!" panted O'Neil. "Hit the stairs!"

I lay there. "What stopped you?" I groaned. "You haven't fractured more than four ribs."

Cougar hauled me up and I reeled sickly against the wall.

"Still want to see your old lady?" he grinned harshly. "I'll take you up."

"Frisk him," said O'Neil. "Nobody goes up armed."

Cougar went through my pockets. "Eyetalian rod," he observed, digging it out. He lobbed it on the cigar counter. "You can have it back when you come down."

I didn't dare leave the wall for fear I'd fall over. I slid along it to the first passenger elevator. Cougar came in behind me, slammed shut the gates, and almost blew a

fuse monkeying with the control handle. He stopped on the eighteenth and I stumbled out. "No hard feelings," he said, still grinning.

"Not if it's my turn to say that the next time we meet."

The doors trundled shut and I crawled up the next three flights to the twenty-first.

Jordahl's office door was closed, but unlocked. I wasn't worried about getting things unlocked. Gertie had her keys and her knowledge of the whole outfit. No one was in the all-leather waiting room.

I dragged quietly to the door of the private office. It was closed too. I put my ear to the panel and listened. I couldn't hear a thing inside. There should be voices, sounds of movement. How long was I getting up here? Jordahl might have killed her already!

I turned the doorknob. It made only a cobweb of sound. I swung the door wider.

GERTIE was at the open wall-safe. She was stuffing handfuls of currency into her handbag. I looked around. Where was Jordahl? No one else was in the office. The window was wide open and the grey monk's-cloth drapes were billowing inward on the wind and they were speckled dark with the driving rain.

She turned and saw me and smiled. "Did they hurt you very much, my poor dear?" Before I could answer she went on, "How're we going to get out?"

"We won't have any trouble getting out." My breathing had a grating sound inside my chest. I guess I wasn't kidding about the ribs. "Where's Jordahl?"

"There wasn't much we had to say to each other. I stunned him with this." She picked her automatic up from a bleached oak desk. She continued to smile. "He went out the window. I squandered two of the rubies on him to make it look as if he'd jumped." Her eyes blazed up. "He was going to do that to me! Have you ever seen a man who's fallen twenty stories?"

I looked at her as if she were mad. As if both of us were mad. "You had the rubies!"

She snapped her handbag closed on the money. "I knew the safe's combination. I cleaned it out so that we'd have enough to get to South America. After that, you can get rid of the stones, darling."

"We're not going," I said. I leaned in the doorway. She'd have to go through me to get out.

There was nothing aimless in the way her automatic was pointing. "I've got to have you, Hod! I need you to sell the stones! Come on! They've found his body by now! They'll be coming up!" Her look softened as she expressed concern. "Did one of those men kick you in the head?"

"I wanted to go with you, Gertie. That was when I thought you were clean."

"Hod! Please! We've got to get out!"

"I can't take murder," I said.

She wasn't a slow-thinking girl. She knew that finished it. "Get out of my way!" she said, glowering.

I lurched toward her. "You won't shoot, Gertie. I took that gat away from you once before tonight."

"You're not going to take it away this time!" Her eyes were sea-blue. Like watery graves.

I STARTED to reach out. She pulled the trigger. A sledge-hammer hit me in the right shoulder and I spun halfway around from the impact. I didn't feel any pain. Just the punch. Whether she had aimed for a more vital spot and was so agitated that she spoiled it, or whether she had some perverse affection for me and was giving me a chance to live, I'll never know.

I was back in the doorway again, trying to recover my balance. "You won't do any more shooting," I gasped. I went forward again, walking as straight as I could. As I closed the distance between us she pumped the trigger frantically at my midsection, her face twisted and ugly. No more bullets came out of the gun. I grabbed her hand, trying to snatch the weapon away. She clung to it with furious strength and back-heeled me to the floor.

Locked together, we fought like a couple of animals.

I've seen some rotten rough-house fighting. She used every dirty trick I ever heard of to try to cripple me. I hit back as I would at another man. I wouldn't let go of the automatic. By this time I could feel the bullet in my shoulder, burning as if the devil had red-hot tongs clamped in it.

Her tousled blonde hair was blinding me and in my mouth. Then she yanked back her head, listening. I heard it too. The rumble of the elevator door opening. She leaped up and kicked me in the face with one of her high-heeled shoes. I rolled numbly half under the desk. But I had the automatic still gripped in my hand. When I lifted my head again and focused my bleary eyes on the door, Cougar was coming in.

"What's been going on here?" he snapped.

"The blonde," I said weakly. "You missed her. She must be running down the stairs. Twenty flights. It's Gertie Sale."

"If she is, she won't get through the lobby. O'Neil's down there and a couple of cops." He chuckled heartlessly at me. "What happened to you? You're almost as bad a mess as the guy we found on the sidewalk."

I fumbled with the gun. "You can have Gertie Sale and the Czech's rubies and be damned!"

Cougar had his own iron in his hand. "Drop that rod, Danto!"

I didn't drop it. I snapped the magazine spring—and that took all the strength I had—and pulled out the cartridge clip. I turned the clip over and spilled it toward the carpet. She'd had only one cartridge in the barrel of that gun. The rubies poured out of the clip like red rain.

"My compliments," I said.

There was a fine mist spreading before my eyes. It was as red as the rubies. As red as her lips. As red as my blood.

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ICE FROM A CORPSE

By Ed Barcelo

The killers had the doc in a tight spot, but the old medico still had a few tricks up his sleeve.

OLD DOC WELCH thought it was thunder the first time he heard it. He sat up in bed, stiff, tense, listening for it again. And then, suddenly, a cold chill swept over him as he heard again, this time unmistakable, the three knocks at the front door.

His wife, Myra, grabbed his arm.

"Don't answer it, Jim. Maybe, they'll go away."

The room became suddenly blue-white as lightning

fired the darkness. For an instant, he saw his wife's face, pale and frightened and old.

"Got to answer it, Myra. Might be someone pretty sick. Can't tell." Again, the thunder rumbled and again—three knocks.

Wearily, Old Doc Welch stepped into a pair of slippers, threw a robe over his shoulders. His back ached and he wondered why he hadn't become a lawyer or a plumber, instead of a country doctor. He stumbled past the waiting room to the front door, listened once more to the three knocks.

"All right, all right. I'm coming. Hold your dang-blasted horses!" He switched on a small wall-lamp, opened the door.

Shivering, cold rain lashing his face and body, Doc Welch stared at the two men in the doorway.

"Doc Welch?" It was the tall, shifty-eyed one who spoke.

"That's right." He opened the door a little wider.

"We got a little job for you, Doc. Little surgery."

"Sorry, I'm no surgeon. Broken bones, belly aches and babies. You fellows ought to see Doc Benjamin in town. He's a surgeon." He ran his hands through greying hair, started to close the door.

"You're a surgeon now, Doc."

Doc Welch saw the gun, then. A .38 was clutched in the man's hand, it's shiny, blue barrel only a few inches from Doc Welch's stomach. They forced the door open.

"Behave like a good, little doctor and nothing'll happen to you. Get smart and we'll blast you. Okay, Felix, go get the patient." Felix, the short one, disappeared to a car outside.

Doc Welch backed up in the dim light of the hallway, studied the tall man, his eyes never for a second leaving the leveled .38. Sure, why hadn't he become a plumber? Plumbers were never wakened up at three in the morning to have a gun poked in their belly. All they had to worry about was pipes.

Doc Welch turned then to see Felix and the "patient"

in the doorway. Felix paused long enough to catch his breath, then he locked both arms around the "patient's" chest. Grunting, his face red, he struggled and dragged the apparently unconscious patient into the hallway. Behind them, on the flowered carpet, lay a trail of rain and blood. The tall one slammed the door, never lowering the .38.

"Okay, Doc, take us to surgery. And no funny business."

"You fellows won't get away with this."

"No sermons, Doc. Move!"

He hesitated, then seeing no choice, moved toward the white-paneled door. He opened the door and they were swiftly blanketed in darkness and the heavy scent of ether. That was when he got the idea.

"C'mon, Doc, put on a light."

"Wait'll I find the switch, will you."

HE STARTED toward the cabinets at the far end of the room. There was a jug of concentrated ammonia in one cabinet and if he could get his hands on it before the lights went on, throw it in their faces, it would blind them and choke them for a few seconds and a few seconds was all he wanted. He would soon find something else to throw, a chair, more jugs and bottles, and somehow he'd get a hold of that gun. He'd show them that being old and fat with kind, blue eyes didn't make you necessarily harmless.

Slowly, almost on tip-toes, he reached the cabinet. He reached down in the darkness, gripped the jug, started to unscrew the cap. Suddenly, the stillness was broken by a muffled scream. He whirled, saw Myra silhouetted in the doorway.

"Okay, lady, stand where you are. C'mon, Doc, get that light on."

There was no use to play it brave now. He didn't want Myra stopping any bullets. Do what they said. At least he'd live—maybe. He cursed, angry that Myra had stumbled onto the scene, then switched on the light.

"All right, lady, get over there with the Doc."

She saw the gun, flashed a fear-crazed look at her husband.

"C'mon, move!"

"Better do what he says, Myra."

She moved toward him in short, quick steps. He put his arm around her. Felix and the other man dragged their still unconscious friend to a table in the center of the room, lifted him onto it.

"All right, Doc, operate."

HE SHOT a glance at his wife, saw the tears, the tremor of her lips, patted her gently, then moved reluctantly toward the table. He made a visual examination of the man on the table and in just a few seconds, he knew.

"Looks like you're a little late, boys. Your pal is dead."

"Now ain't that something," the tall one said. His dark eyes blazed. "Operate, Doc."

"Operate? For what? I told you this man is dead."

"Do like I tell you, Doc. Open him up."

The Doc looked up, puzzled, saw the strange, twisted grin on the tall man's face. Were these men crazy?

"Maybe, you better explain to the Doc, Felix. Let him know what he has to do."

The short man moved closer, waved his own gun at the dead man.

"Seems our friend had a little stomach trouble, Doc. He swallowed some diamonds he shouldn't have."

Doc Welch still didn't get it.

"He was going to take a little trip below the border—and with all them gems in his belly, too. Only we got a slug in his back and talked him out of it. Now open him up, Doc. They're coated with plastic. You can't miss them."

Suddenly, everything became clear to Doc Welch. He'd been in town that afternoon, stopped in the Waffle Shop for a cup of coffee, and there had run into the sheriff having a dish of his favorites. It had passed over his head at the time, but now he remembered. The sheriff had

spoken of a big jewelry store stick-up. He'd said three men—\$30,000 worth of diamonds. Then these were the same men the whole state was looking for.

He turned now, stared at the dead man. And this guy on the table had apparently tried to outwit the other two. He had coated the diamonds with some kind of plastic material, swallowed them one by one, hoping to escape by himself to Mexico. Unfortunately, for him, his pals had got wise and killed him.

"Okay, Doc, we ain't got all night. Snap it up!"

"Suppose I refuse?"

"Suppose you don't." The tall one's teeth were bared in a murderous smile, as he waved the gun in the direction of the Doc's wife.

From a rack, he removed a white laboratory coat. At the table, he cut away the man's shirt and undershirt, lowered his trousers, then covered him with a sheet. The two men backed over against the wall. The Doc could see they wouldn't like this. He forced a pair of rubber gloves onto his hands, then went to the cabinet near the sink and removed what instruments he would need.

Paused over the corpse, the shiny, stainless-steel scalpel in hand, he took a last look at the two men standing in the shadows against the wall.

"Cut, Doc."

Doc Welch began.

A CLOCK hung next to the linen cabinet. It ticked away five, ten, fifteen minutes . . . and then, Doc Welch looked up. He couldn't help feeling a sort of grim, professional satisfaction at a job well done. The incision had been made and he had found what he was looking for.

"Doc, I got itchy fingers. Start picking them pellets out . . . and hurry!"

With forceps and tweezers, the Doc began to remove the wet pellets. He laid them carefully in a large patch of gauze.

Ten minutes later he removed the last pellet, stared at between fifteen and twenty pellets lying in the gauze.

"That's all of 'em."

"All right, Doc, now you can take that plastic coating off the diamonds."

For a long minute the Doc stood silent.

"You'll need some kind of a corrosive agent to take that plastic stuff off. Lye 'll do." Then he stopped. "Only I don't have any." Their eyes shifted. "Heck, you can buy it in any grocery store."

"Then what?"

"Well, put the diamonds in a pan of lye and boil 'em for about five minutes. That should take it off and it won't hurt the diamonds."

The two men avoided the corpse on the table. The tall one grinned victoriously and scooped the gauze into a bundle, stuffed the bundle into his coat pocket. Then he turned to the old doctor.

"You did good, Doc, and just to show you how much we appreciate it—"

The butt of the gun came sudden like a whip, smashed against the Doc's mouth, sent him sprawling to the floor. Myra screamed and ran to him.

"See you, Doc." The tall one laughed, slapped at the gauze bundle in his pocket. "Wonderful surgeon, that Doc." They were both laughing throatily as they left.

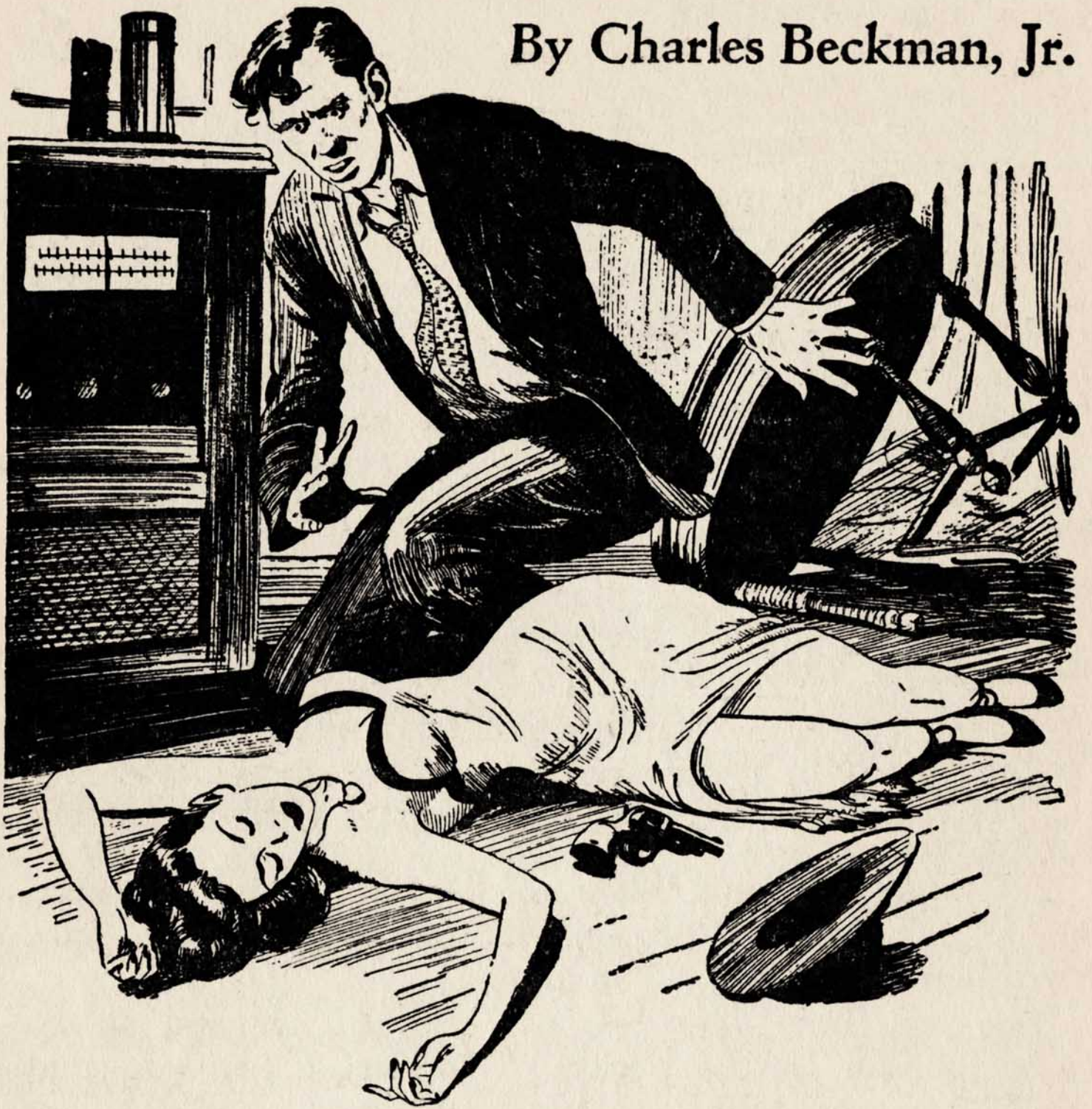
Doc Welch didn't speak until he heard their car grinding up the country lane. Then he turned his head, looked up at Myra. A slow, trickle of blood oozed from his pain-throbbled lips. Yet he smiled, and the smile became a laugh.

"You know, Myra, I'd give a hundred dollars to see the look on them gunmen's faces when they try to peddle a load of hot gallstones. Go call up the sheriff."

"What do you mean?" She was blinking fast.

"Why that fella there on the table had enough gallstones in his bladder to anchor a river boat. I just substituted the gallstones for the real pellets. Well, quit staring at me that way. Call the sheriff. Tell him we got every last one of them diamonds, and then put on some waffles. The sheriff is crazy about waffles."

By Charles Beckman, Jr.



How Dead Can You Get?

All he could remember was the beautiful dead girl.
But who was she—and why had he killed her?

HE SAT alone in the darkness of the room. The night sounds of the city drifted up to him faintly. There was a cigarette between his fingers. He had been sitting there a long time. It hurt him to move, so he was very still, trying to think. Once he had touched the back of his head where the ache was. He had felt hair matted with drying, caked blood. His fingers had come away

sticky. The pain started there and coursed down between his shoulder blades with steady, dull throbs.

He sucked on the cigarette until it was limp, trying not to think of the pain, trying to remember. . . .

He had stumbled off the bed a half hour ago in a blind fog of pain. His groping fingers had located a light switch. He had looked once around the cheap, dirty hotel room. Then, because the light cut painfully into his burning eyes, he'd snapped it off and sat in darkness.

But before that? Nothing. Nothing except that one clear picture. He closed his eyes and saw it again in detail.

SHE WAS beautiful, the girl. Her hair framed her pale, sensuous face in a shimmering black pool. She wore a loose satin negligee, black as her hair, dramatic against the milky white translucence of her smooth skin. Her full, sullen lips were parted slightly, showing a line of fine, even teeth. She was staring up at him without blinking.

He could see himself looking down at her and thinking crazily that he was glad the bullet hole was in her temple so the hair would cover it. *So that, even dead, she could go on being beautiful.* He had bent, straightening the gold locket at her throat because he knew she would have wanted everything perfect. And that was all he remembered. Nothing before. Nothing after. Just the dead girl and this hotel room.

He finished the last cigarette he had found in a crumpled package in his pocket. He forced himself to stand up and to stay there until the waves of dizziness and nausea passed. Then to walk slowly to the light switch and press it on.

He kept his eyes closed for a long moment, letting the light filter through his closed eyelids, then slitting them gradually so his eyes grew accustomed to the light.

He shuffled to the wash basin in a corner of the room, turned the dripping faucet on and sopped cool water on the back of his head. Then he dried his face and hands and stood before the bureau's cracked mirror.

HE SAW himself for the first time. A strange face that he could not remember. He brought his fingers up, touching his lips, his cheeks. The reflection was that of a thin man in his late twenties. His complexion was pale as if he were seldom in the sunshine. There were dark smudges under his blue eyes, lines around his mouth. His dark brown hair was clipped in a short, crisp style.

He wore a rumpled sport coat, blue sport shirt and dark slacks. He raised his hands before his eyes, turned them over. They were slender and soft. The hands of an artist, an office worker, a druggist. . . .

Or a killer?

The vision of the dead woman flashed before his eyes again. He tried to remember if there had been a gun in his hand.

Suddenly, frantically, he searched his pockets. In the left patch pocket of his sport coat, he found it. A small, nickeled .25 automatic. He pawed at it with shaking fingers. In the firing chamber, there was an empty cartridge shell. . . .

Dully, he sat on the edge of the bed. Then went through the rest of his pockets methodically. He pulled out a wadded handkerchief, a comb, some loose change and a key-ring. In his billfold he found twenty-two dollars in bills. There were no papers. Only a driver's license and an empty business envelope addressed to "George Noles" in care of the Clayton City National Bank in Clayton City.

The name Noles sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn't be sure that it was his own. He tried to remember Clayton City and working in a bank.

"George Noles."

He spoke the name aloud and jumped at the sound of his voice. It was an eerie experience, hearing your own voice for the first time.

He stood up then and walked out of the room and down the dimly-lit stairway. An old man was dozing behind the hotel desk and he wanted to ask him how he had gotten into the room. But an instinctive fear held him back. If he had killed a woman, the police would be look-

ing for him. He had to find out first who the dead woman was . . . *and if he had killed her. . . .*

The cheap hotel was on a quiet, narrow street in a deserted part of the city. A few cars were parked at the curb in front. He took the key-ring out of his pocket. Attached to it was a tag bearing the license number of a car and the name, "George Noles. Clayton City." He didn't recall having come in a car.

He found a black 1940 model coupe with a license number that corresponded with the number on his key tag. One of the keys unlocked the door and he slid behind the wheel. That was when his foot struck the small leather satchel on the floor boards. In the dim glow from the dash-light, he opened it. He stared numbly at the bundles of currency that filled it. With shaking fingers he took out one of the bundles. The paper band around it bore the name, "Clayton City National Bank." There was in the neighborhood of ten thousand dollars in small denominations in the bag. . . .

THE highway marker on the city limits of Clayton City said, "Population, 7,000." It was a small, clean town nestling in the hills. A town where life was not hurried and a man could be contented or bored, according to his temperament.

It had taken George Noles—if that was his name—an hour of fast driving to reach Clayton City after asking directions from a filling station attendant. Now he drove slowly down Main Street, not knowing what to do next. He told himself he was a fool for coming back here. And yet, suppose he were innocent of any crime. Suppose he had a family here . . . waiting for him. . . .

A man lounging in the doorway of a drug store waved as his car passed. "Evening, George," he called. Noles forced himself to wave back. Now he was at least sure that his name was George Noles and he was from this town.

He passed the City Library at the end of Main Street. Something, an unconscious reflex, caused him to slow the

car. He glanced up at the clock in the court house steeple, as if from force of habit. It was ten p.m.

"She'll be getting off from work, now," he said suddenly. He stopped the car. Why had he said that? The words had slipped from his lips automatically, formed somewhere back in the dark, locked chambers of his mind.

He parked the car. Got out and walked slowly up the wide concrete steps into the modern brick building. Somehow, even before he pushed through the glass doors, he knew what the librarian would be like. He knew that she would be blonde. That she would be a bit on the thin side. She wouldn't be exactly pretty, but she would have serious brown eyes and a soft mouth and she would be nice to look at. She would be wearing a freshly starched dress and she would be sorting through her index cards with steady fingers until she glanced up and saw him and then her fingers would freeze.

It was like that. The color left her face. Her lips moved wordlessly. Then she looked down at her cards, but she wasn't seeing them now. "Good—good evening, George," she whispered with forced evenness.

He didn't know how to begin. *What did you say? Look Miss, who am I? Have I just killed someone and stolen a large sum of money? Was I running away? Am I a thief and a murderer? Please tell me, Miss. You seem to be someone who might be a friend . . . who might help. . . .* No, you said none of those things. You stood there, groping for words that would not come.

SHE looked up again, at his strange silence. She glanced at his eyes, at his rumpled clothes, the blood on his coat collar. She paled and her fingers pressed whitely against the card box she was holding. Then quickly, efficiently, she went about the business of closing the library for the night. She locked her desk drawers, snapped the lights off, picked up her handbag. She took his arm, led him swiftly out of the building, down to where his car was parked.

She seemed to know the car. She got behind the wheel. He leaned against the cushion next to her, weak and spent, letting the night air wash over his sick face and cool the fever in his temples as she drove. She didn't speak, waiting for him to begin it. He found it hard saying anything at all at first.

He began slowly, searching for the words. "A little over an hour ago, I woke up in a hotel room in Sanderton. I didn't know who I was or how I got there. I couldn't remember my name—nothing. A blow I had gotten on the back of my head seemed to have left me with a kind of amnesia. I found a letter in my pocket with my name and this town on it. I drove back here and when I passed the library something seemed to make me stop . . . to tell me that you might be a friend. . . ."

In the darkness, her eyes were filled with many things. Incredulity, shock, pity . . . and something else. "Let's—let's say we were once friends, George," she whispered. "I—yes, I'll help you if I can."

He felt a growing dread of the truth he was trying to uncover. He felt that when he broke the dam that locked his past, a flood of evilness would wash his soul straight to hell.

"I—I don't know your name."

Her voice was half a sob. "Mary. It's Mary, George. You can't—remember anything?"

"It's like dim shadows on a wall. There—there was a girl. Very dark. Beautiful. . . ."

"Her name is Liss, George. Liss Denham." Her face was like chalk in the darkness.

"Yes. Yes, now I seem to know that." He glanced at her, hating what he was doing to her and afraid of the knowledge that was slowly coming to him. But unable to stop now. He was walking straight into hell and he couldn't stop. . . .

"Do—do you think I might have had an argument with her? Do you think I—I might have murdered her?"

"Murder. . . ." She looked at him, her eyes wide and stricken. "George . . . I—why do you say. . . ."

"I must see her, Mary. Can you drive me to where she lives?"

SHE nodded wordlessly. She swung the coupe around, into a side street. They drove silently along shadowy lanes and then parked before an apartment building. It was in a quiet, residential part of town. The apartment building, an old-fashioned three-story frame affair painted a faded yellow, stood in the middle of the block. He left the blonde girl in the car. His sick mind groped vainly for some shred of remembrance as he walked into the dimly-lit vestibule. A typewritten tab on one of the mail boxes told him that Liss Denham occupied apartment 3-A. He walked up the carpeted stairway. She did not answer the buzzer. He kept his finger on her doorbell as minutes ticked by. His hands grew sweaty and his stomach cramped with nausea. He wished she would answer the door. That she would come out alive and unharmed and he would know the vision of her death was just the delirious dreaming of his sick mind.

But she did not answer the buzzer.

He went downstairs and around to the side of the building. There, he found a rusty fire escape. It went up to the third floor, past one of her windows. He broke the teeth out of his comb, used the end of it to pry the screen hook loose. The window was not locked. He eased it up noiselessly, swung his legs into the room. Then he groped for the light switch.

He found her in the living room. . . .

It was exactly as his mind had pictured it. The small, cramped room with old-fashioned furnishings. The green and yellow flowered wall paper that clashed with the red drapes. The parchment shade floor lamp spilling its light on the girl sprawled beneath it. Only, she wasn't so pretty any more. Her face was waxen and pinched and her mouth was twisted in a grimace. . . .

The nightmare had become a reality. The gates of hell had swung wide now and he was walking right into them.

Get away from here, George Noles, a thousand voices

screamed in his mind. *Take the ten thousand dollars and the car and don't stop driving until you're in South America. Don't pry any more. Leave the past alone. It's better that you don't know who George Noles is or where the money came from or who Mary is or why this girl is dead. . . .*

UNCONSCIOUSLY, his hand had taken the .25 automatic from his pocket. He was staring at it and at the girl . . . his mind sick and reeling. So absorbed that he did not hear the key turn in the hall door or the padded footsteps behind him. He jumped when the voice said, "Drop the gun, Noles."

Slowly he turned, lifting his hands.

The man standing there was short and stocky. He wore a wrinkled seersucker suit, tan-and-white shoes, a blue tie. His face was bland, expressionless. Everything about him was neat, precise: his short, clipped mustache, his thinning strands of brown hair carefully slicked over his shiny scalp . . . the way his soft, fat white hand held a revolver pointed steadily at Noles' stomach. He might have been a professional man, a doctor, lawyer, or a bank president.

"So you killed her," he said, his voice shaking. "I warned Liss. Don't trust that hick Noles too much. He isn't as dumb as he looks, I told her."

Noles licked his lips. "Listen. . . ."

"I can see how it was," the man went on, trembling now. "You decided it would be nicer to have the whole fifty thousand . . . better than having Liss. She planned it all for you. You wouldn't have had brains enough to open a tin piggy bank. But once you had the money, you started thinking a little under your own power. How simple it would be, you know, to have it all for yourself. So you killed her, you rotten hick. . . ."

"No," Noles cried. "Listen, I don't know who you are or who this woman is. I—I don't even know who I am. I woke up in a hotel room less than two hours ago, sixty miles from here. I had been struck on the back of the

head. I couldn't remember how I got there or anything before I woke up. All I could remember was this woman lying in this room. But I couldn't have killed her. . . . I'm not a murderer."

The man's eyes narrowed. "The old insanity business, Noles? It won't work, Noles. Maybe with the police, not with me. Liss was my sister. I have more of a personal interest than the police. . . ."

HIS pudgy white finger closed around the trigger. "I'll tell them you tried to kill me. That I caught you in the act of murdering Liss and you turned on me. I fired in self-defense. He raised the gun. His lips curled. "The town will believe anything of you!"

There it was again. What sort of man had George Noles been? What evil sickness had ruined him? Had it been this woman, Liss Denham?

"Wait," Noles cried desperately. "I don't know anything about any fifty thousand dollars. But I can prove I wasn't taking that much money. Down in my car there is a satchel. There couldn't be more than ten thousand dollars in it.

The man shrugged that off. "So you've hidden part of it. I'd hardly expect you to carry fifty thousand dollars in small bills around with you."

Noles' sick mind raced against time. He had to know all of it now. He had learned that his name was George Noles and that he had worked for the Clayton City National Bank. Apparently Liss Denham had talked him into stealing fifty thousand dollars from the bank which they were to share. But what sort of power had she had over him? He must have loved her with an intensity that stopped at nothing.

Then had he really killed her? If he had loved her that desperately, he might have killed her out of jealousy. Or perhaps he had wanted the money more than the woman. He could have struck his head in a fall, running away from the apartment.

Liss Denham's brother raised the gun again. It would

take him about two seconds to pull the trigger and send a bullet crashing into Noles' heart.

His mind went back to that remembered vision of this room and the dead Liss Denham. Once again, he saw the clear details. He saw himself kneeling beside the dead girl and arranging her locket. A foolish gesture. . . .

Arranging her locket!

The thought crashed in his mind like cymbals.

AT THAT precise moment, the hallway door in the other room opened. There was the hurried tap of a woman's heels and the blonde girl, Mary called, "George? I got worried. You have been here so long. . . ."

She stood frozen in the doorway. Her eyes were on the dead Liss Denham, her face a mask of stunned horror.

In that brief instant, Liss Denham's brother flicked his eyes in her direction and George Noles leaped. Every movement sent racking pain through his head. He flung himself on the short, balding man, hurling him back. They crashed into the wall, Noles' shoulder ramming into Denham's stomach. He got his hands on the man's pudgy wrist and he twisted the gun loose. Kicked it across the room, then ducked after it, scooped it up. Denham had half slid down the wall, clutching his middle, his eyes rolling, face contorted as he gasped for breath.

Noles waited until Denham got his breath back.

"Now tell me all of it," Noles said. "Start from when I met your sister. You see, I wasn't lying when I said I don't know anything that happened before two hours ago."

Denham looked at the blonde girl, his lips curling. "Want her to hear it?"

Noles hesitated, looking at her.

Her brown eyes were dark smudges in her white face. "I—I guess I already know most of it," she said.

Then Denham talked in quick, short sentences. When he had finished, George Noles knew all of it. It wasn't pretty.

Liss Denham and her brother, Avery, had moved to Clayton City six months ago. She'd visited the bank sev-

eral times and Noles struck up an acquaintance. Soon he was infatuated with her. He used all his personal savings, trying to keep up with her expensive tastes. Then she'd talked him into taking this money from the bank vault. With his knowledge of the bank procedure it had not been difficult. He had stolen the money tonight.

Denham finished, "I tried to talk Liss out of this but she was always the head-strong type. And tonight you killed her. But you won't get away with it, Noles. . . ."

GEORGE NOLES shook his head. "That isn't all of it. You see there was one detail. The one thing I could remember clearly when I came too back in Sanderton, was this room. I saw Liss just as she's lying here and that was when someone struck me from behind.

"The last thing I did before that person hit me, was to straighten a little gold locket Liss always wore at her throat." He nodded at the body. "But you see, it's gone now. Someone has been in here since that time. Someone who removed the locket, but did not report the murder, for good reason."

He moved toward Denham step by step. "I don't think I killed Liss Denham. I don't think it at all any more."

He stood before Denham. He ran one hand over the other man's pockets in a quick motion.

Denham began sweating. Little beads of it stood out on his lips. His eyes flitted like a trapped animal's.

Noles found the locket in Denham's vest pocket. He snapped it open. Inside were pictures of Liss and Avery Denham and a fine engraving that read, "*To Liss from her husband, Avery.*"

"You killed your wife, Denham," George Noles said. "I must have come in and found her right after you did it. You hit me on the back of my head, planted the gun on me, took the locket off, then drove me to the hotel in Sanderton, left part of the money in my car and put me in a hotel room, hoping I'd be so frightened when I came too, that I'd run with what money I had. The police would naturally connect the theft with the murder."

Avery Denham panted, "That doesn't prove anything. Just because she was my wife doesn't prove I killed her!"

"The police have something called the 'paraffin test.' With it, they can tell which one of us fired a gun tonight. I'm willing to take the test. Are you, Denham?" He reached for the telephone.

Denham's breath was coming in short, ragged gasps. His shirt was soggy with perspiration. A dark ring of it had soaked through under the arms of his seersucker coat. "She was going to leave me," he whimpered. "The way it was planned, she was to get you hooked, talk you into stealing the money. Then we were to take all of the money and ditch you. But, damn her, she fell for you, and I'd rather have her dead than for someone else to get her. . . ."

GEORGE NOLES sat on the sofa with the blonde girl while they waited for the police. There was no fight left in Denham—slumped in a chair opposite them. Denham had hidden all but the ten thousand dollars he had planted on Noles, but they would find that and give it back to the bank. Perhaps, Noles thought, they wouldn't be too hard on him. Gradually, his mind was clearing now, and he could remember scenes from this town. Shady lanes and the quiet, friendly laughter of neighbors. He could even remember walking to church on Sundays beside this slim, blonde girl, Mary.

"I—I may have to go to prison for a while. When I come back, I wonder if I might see you now and then," he asked haltingly.

Her eyes were filled with that strange look . . . and with tears. She looked away from him. "Per—perhaps, George. We'll see."

"Who are you, Mary? What were you to me?"

She started to speak, but didn't. She had been dead inside for so long now, she couldn't trust herself with emotions. She'd tell him later . . . or perhaps his mind would clear and he would remember . . . that she was his wife. . . .



AH, SWEET MYSTERY OF DEATH

By Bryce Walton

He called Death "A woman, soft and sweet—." Was this guy a poet, a neurotic—or was he really. . . ?

NOW THEY'VE left me alone. I tell them how it happened, and I laugh. But no one else seems to think it's funny, how I cut up Warren Burron with a hand-ax. I guess some people like their humor on the lighter side. So I'm here all alone, thinking and waiting. It'll be even funnier if my lawyer, Forbes, brings me the right word. But just the way it stands now, with my possible trek to the gas chamber, that's funny enough.

Here's the way it is: I killed Burron all right. But it wasn't really murder. I swung the hand-ax, but no one seems to understand when I explain how I'm not the murderer. It's confusing, and Burron's voice whispering to me

in the night doesn't clear things up. It's what he whispers to me that makes the joke complete. But nobody understands.

In trying to explain it, I start at the Union Station where Mrs. Burron picked me up that afternoon. I start there because that was where I should have stopped.

Eva had always been something special to look at. She hadn't changed. I stared, and Eva's eyes clouded and her lips quivered. Her voice was thick, the kind that can make an icicle hot. She was streamlined and moved like a cat. Her skin was like polished copper, and her hair like shiny blue-black ink spilling over that skin. Her eyes always seemed to burn, not bright, but deep and warm like smoldering coals in a fireplace.

I DIDN'T know why yet, but Burron had invited me up to his twenty-room cottage at Big Bear. Just Burron and his wife and I. A cozy threesome. I'd accepted. I was sick. I'd gotten a brain concussion in a football game. I felt all right, except for an occasional ache. I told him that, and that I'd appreciate the opportunity for a nice long rest. I'd decided to drop out of my senior year at the U. I'd forgotten, almost, about Eva whom I'd known quite well at school six years before. That was where she'd met Burron.

I knew my acceptance was a mistake as soon as Eva met me at the station. Alone. Just Eva and that big black convertible of Warren's. My name is Will Gardner. It isn't St. Anthony. I guess Burron knew I was a sucker for temptation. He had it all figured out. How easy it would be to murder me.

Eva drove that big torpedo through the damp night with a kind of fierce determination. Her long body was at ease, her lush legs sprawled easily. But her face was tense. Muscles broke the smooth copper of her throat and made lines run down to the corners of her mouth. She kept the cigarette lighter busy.

So far, we hadn't exchanged over a dozen words. While we made verbal sounds, our eyes and our minds had

been speaking another language. More easily understood, but the kind that's better kept off the record. A kind of universal language that's far superior to Esperanto.

Her hand dropped to my knee. I shivered, and it was like I'd blundered into a high tension wire. My voice wasn't very calm.

"Lay off," I think I said, or something equally absurd.

Her laughter wasn't absurd. It was sort of high and desperate and nervous. I could see her lips curl in a crooked red arch in the light from the dash. A sudden sharp warning of pain shot through my head.

She said, "Don't make me laugh any more, Will. I'm not in the laughing mood tonight."

"I'm not trying to be amusing," I said. "I mean it. I'm up here to rest, to relax. And that's all. I'm going to keep it clean."

Her voice was shrill. It had a throaty electric undertone, like a cat's cry. "You didn't have any idea of seeing me at all!"

I said, no. But it didn't ring true. I meant it, but I didn't know. I'm no introspectionist. I've never bothered about what my unconscious was doing to me. Let some big-lettered name do it, for fifty bucks an hour. But not with me. Not now. It's too late now to start, at any price. And I understand it takes a few years to do it right, and I don't have nearly that much time.

Let's just drop it with the remark that a guy doesn't always know what he's thinking, or even what he's saying. Or even what he's intending to do, maybe the very next minute, or hour, or day.

The car went faster, around those hair-pin turns up the mountains to Big Bear. To my right I saw the sprawling panorama of L. A., way down in a fogged pocket that seemed as endless as the Universe. Warm rain began to splatter on the glass. The windshield wipers started a soft humming pattern.

She said, "I suppose you accepted the invitation, just to *talk* with Warren? Just to sit in front of the fire and be intellectual! Be intellectual as hell!"

I didn't answer that. I'd never been able to be intellectual, with Warren Burron or anyone else. And she was right. I remembered Burron. You might call Burron a dilettante, whatever that means. He never *did* anything. He just appreciated things, that's what he always said. And that's how he and I had gotten acquainted. To Burron, athletes, particularly big men, were phenomena worthy of appreciation. We'd gotten to be good friends during my sophomore year. And only because Burron said he was trying to figure out what made the *physical* type of human being function in a modern, so-called mental age.

That was Burron. Not a snob, as I remembered. But something above even the snob. A small gaunt watery-eyed guy with a penchant for studying things. An appreciator, and a kind of bystander. He explored, and examined, and analyzed. I had been one of his objects of investigation. When he became interested in some particular subject, whether it was cubism, or Mayan culture, he threw himself into it right up to the roots of his mousy hair.

After I got to his cottage at Big Bear, I found out the first night what his latest and absorbing interest was, and I wished I had never come.

It was Death. It was Death and Suicide, and Murder. And all in poetry.

BUT BEFORE we got to his cottage, Eva told me a few other things about Burron. Mostly about Burron and herself. How beautifully they didn't get along together. She hated Burron, loathed and despised his very guts. But that wasn't Burron's way. Burron couldn't hate anybody. Burron wasn't the emotional kind. Hate and loathing, love and adoration (Burron said) are things to be studied.

And long before the unpleasant conversation I had with Eva as she drove through the rain got very far, I began to get the idea. Burron had married Eva just so he could study her. All right. Maybe you know enough about Burron now. Maybe not. It doesn't matter very much. I decided that he was insane. But that doesn't mean anything either. Ask any twenty authorities to define insanity.

Compare notes. Burron doesn't fit into the notes at all. The notes don't even fit.

A guy who can go on whispering to me after I chopped his head thoroughly with a hand-ax, that kind of guy can't be shoved into a pigeon-hole. Can he? A guy who dragged me up there to experiment with me and with Death. A guy who worshipped Death, and called it a ". . . woman who is soft and sweet . . ." and a guy who would push a nasty affair between his wife and another man, just to see if it would affect him, and to *study* it! A guy who loved Death. . . .

You figure it out. I'm tired. I'm sick too. I'm tired and sick, and tonight, moonlight is shining through cold steel bars, and the moonlight is colder than steel.

And Burron's whisper comes down through the moonlight.

"Thanks, Gardner! Thanks, very much. You made it a beautiful and complete thing, and I'll be eternally grateful to you."

Eva turned off the motor, doused the lights as the car coasted in and moored to a siding. It was suddenly just darkness with Eva's body and mine all wrapped up together in it, as in a blanket. It didn't seem like a shroud then. She moved over against me. I didn't play hard to get. Her voice was soft and intimate and warm. Her hair floated around my face. Her arms were moist and hot.

And then, hardly knowing how, I rediscovered what her lips were like. Curved and full and cushiony-soft. I'd never found anyone so exciting as Eva Burron. Body, voice, breath, all exciting. Pressure was building up inside me. I felt like a pressure cooker pushed up to the third red ring. My forehead was getting slippery.

She had explained about her and Burron. She said now, hotly against my ear:

"Now you know why I'm glad to see you, Will."

"I know," I said.

"He's like a soft wet grub," she said. "And all he does is look at me, and ask me questions, and make notes in his little books."

IT WAS ALL very clear to me. No more elaboration was necessary. I was stuck in a helluva situation, that was all. I felt like a mouse trapped in a maze. And like most really effective mazes, I felt so pleasantly trapped that I didn't really know whether I was trying to get out or not, whether I even wanted to get out.

And then a light flashed through the wet glass. Eva grinned thinly. She turned on the car lights. Burron's white wet face gazed in at us. He came around and opened the door. Small and wispy and mousy. A little grey man. I was still leaning over his wife, my arms around her, that's the way he found us.

All he said, in his low precise voice was: "I'll take your suitcase, Will. That is, if you're not too busy." He didn't say it with sarcasm.

It should have been nice. We sat before the fireplace, a big fire made out of big crackling logs. There was the strong smell of red cedar wood, and pine needles, and the smell of fresh wet rain. But it wasn't nice. It wasn't nice because Burron kept talking about Death. About Death, and Murder, and Suicide. All with capitals, like I've written them. Like each was an entity, a philosophy, a basic truth.

He kept my glass filled without my ever noticing that he had kept it filled. It didn't give me that comfortable relaxed feeling, the excellent bourbon didn't. It made me more and more afraid. It made me afraid, then self-conscious because I, a two-hundred-and-thirty-pound full-back, all muscle and not fat, that could run, and had been on wrestling teams, that I should be afraid of a little pip-squeak in an orange smoking jacket who peered at me and measured me, and sometimes smiled softly at what he found in me.

And being self-conscious of my fear, that made me mad. He knew it. He analyzed the whole process, then added gently.

"And now you're getting mad, aren't you, Will?" That made me even madder.

Eva, wearing a housecoat never designed for the moun-

tains, laughed a little wildly. She was drunk, and she was nasty about it.

"Go on, Will," she sprawled out, arms thrown back, hands splashing through the spilled ink of her hair. Her lips were set in a kind of snarl. "Go on and bare your soul. You don't think you were brought up here to enjoy yourself, do you? You damned guinea pig . . . vivisection, that's what it is. Just a lotta damned vivisection. . . ."

Burron smiled. It was a weary smile as though her part of the experiment was about over. I noticed the blue veins delicately lining his skin.

"We have our little tiffs," he said. He stood with his back to the fire. "A matter of incompatibility of a most thorough kind. She's primitive. Completely emotional, which is to say, thalamic. While I'm non-emotional, almost completely cortical. Eva reacts emotionally to any kind of stimuli, Will. A simple pleasure-pain behavior. Her world is just a series of barriers against which she must always strive in order to satisfy very basic and simple physical desires." I wasn't impressed. That analysis sounded like everybody.

I WAS LOOKING around the room. It didn't look like a cabin in the mountain. It looked more like a retreat in Greenwich Village. Mad art on the walls, meaningless and distorted statues made out of pieces of wire and jagged glass. And a series of glass cases along the opposite wall were assorted guns, knives, garroting cords, and other instruments of murder.

He'd mentioned them. He'd mentioned his library. Books on murder and death. Ranging from journalistic reports of actual cases to poetic passages on the beauty of death. Eva stared into her glass. Burron was watching my roving eyes.

"But you're so different from Eva, yet so similar, Will," Burron said. "You're one of the most interesting examples of atavism, or regression, I've ever met. You have a fine mind, but it's helpless because of your uncontrollable primitive desires." His pale expressionless eyes looked at

me. His statement hit me like a bucket of ice-water.

"You've committed murder, Will. At least twice that I know of."

I started to get up. I was very mad. Eva laughed, hysterically.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked. "What the hell're you talking about? What's all this blabbing about murder and death? I don't go for it, Burrton. I didn't come up here to plays games like that. Furthermore, I'm not interested in that high-class tramp there."

Eva threw her glass at me. Burrton smiled as the shards of glass tinkled on the floor. "Damn you, both of you," she yelled.

She ran up the stairs in a flurry of flashing legs. Burrton sat down opposite me. The glass twisted slowly in his white fingers. A dull throbbing was growing in my head. I rubbed my eyes.

"At least twice," he said again. "But so ugly and sordid and so physical. The man—I don't remember exactly—you were in a wrestling match. Remember that, Will?"

I felt cold. My throat was dry.

"An accident," I said. "When I threw him, he landed on his head. His neck broke. It was an accident. In sports like that it—"

"—is murder, Will. Let's face it." He leaned toward me. "And knowing you might kill others, by accident, you kept on wrestling. And then there was the unfortunate chap in that football game. You tackled him. He went down. They carried him off the field. Your tackling him was the last thing he ever remembered. An accident, Will. But you kept on playing football."

The crackling fire sounded loud. I settled back. The hell with him, I thought. He wanted to see me blow up. I settled back. "Look here, Warren. What's this all about? What's the real reason I'm up here?"

Burrton smiled in a gentle way. "The real reason, *your* reason, Will? You're here because of Eva. You want her. You've always resented my taking her away from you."

I managed a laugh. "You! Your dough, you mean. Why she doesn't—"

Burron nodded with a weary sigh. "I know. You don't have to explain what she thinks about me. She married me for my money, and now she has to live up here, isolated, with only me to give her companionship."

"That's not a nice way to treat a healthy girl," I said. "And as for resentment—listen, Warren—you have the resentment of the little weak man against a strong man. You can't deny that. You can cover it up with all kinds of fancy talk. You can be as arty and intellectual as you like—but it all boils down to a damned inferiority complex, Warren. So why can't we forget it? You're really jealous of Eva because she wants me, and you know it. That's the whole thing. You've gotten me up here to satisfy some screwy twisted desire. God knows what. So now we face it and forget it. I can still enjoy myself up here. Or even better, drive me back to L. A. tonight, and—"

Burron wasn't listening. His eyes had a funny shine over them.

"Will—Death is different with me, its fascination I mean, different than it is with you. You love to kill, you enjoy destruction and violence. With me, it's a different kind of attraction. I worship Death. To end life is the greatest single victory a man can administer to another, and to himself. It's the method that annoys me."

He pointed.

"Those cases. Look at that conglomeration of grisly instruments. Can you imagine anything more horrible and sordid and ugly than to end life with one of those? With blood everywhere, and muscles straining, sweating? I worship Death, too, Will. And I've figured out a way to kill. The perfect and the most artistic way. A complete death cycle. Death wrapped up and tied in a perfect gift package to myself. For Death is a woman with dark hair."

Then I got it. The room seemed so very still then. The rain seemed far away. Cold slid along my back. Something was inside my skull with hammers.

He was going to murder me, Underneath it all, he was

just a jealous little guy who was tired of hearing Eva's griping, and who was tired of hearing her talk about the kind of guys she went for. And he was going to show her, and himself and me. But murder wasn't all of it.

He had got me up here to murder me, but I didn't know how he was going to do it, or when. Except that he would do it like Burron did everything. He was a perfectionist. He would make it beautiful, he said. Clean, complete.

LATER I WAS between cool starched sheets, listening to the rain. Lying in the dark. I wasn't sleeping. I was thinking, or trying to. I was scared, and again, I wasn't scared. It was a challenge, a fight. I liked that.

But this was a little out of my element. If Burron had been a big man, physically, it would be simple. Burron was right. A big man's world is simple. It's physical, and as long as he keeps it on that level, he either wins or loses and that's that.

But this was over my head. He was going to get me, but there wouldn't be any meeting in an arena with swords, guns or fists. Nothing like that. Nothing like that at all.

I couldn't run out on it now. I couldn't because I'd been trained too long to fight. So I stayed. But I knew it was wrong. Because of my head.

I kept trying to figure out how Burron was operating. I stayed for one day, then two, then a week, and then two weeks. By then I found out but it was too late. By then I was living in a kind of feverish blinding hell, and I had chopped his head all to pieces with a hand-ax.

Eva Burron kept after me. She never let up. Burron deliberately made it inevitable that he would find us together in one situation or another. And Eva wasn't the kind I could resist. That's it, simply. I couldn't. I could hate her guts. I could hate my own. But it didn't make any difference.

We were all walking on a bridge. The bridge was made out of spring steel, and it was stretched tighter and tighter. And one night it broke. That's the way I guess it was.

After the third day, I got the hand-ax out of the glass case. It had killed someone before, Burron said. I didn't think he knew I had it. None of the guns had ammunition. And I couldn't find any on the place. So I carried the hand-ax under my belt most of the time to protect myself. I didn't know when or how Burron would strike at me. But I was ready to defend myself.

I'd always believed in defense as a winning method, rather than offense. I'd always been able to turn aggressive tactics into self-defeat. The momentum of a lunging wrestler can be used to put him on his back. The swing of a boxer can carry him right into a knockout punch. I've seen an aggressive eleven frustrated and licked time and again by stopping their every play until they lost heart and died. Burron was no wrestler, or boxer or football player. He had his own peculiar approach. Offense, defense? I don't know. But Burron had his way.

I slept with the ax under my pillow. I carried it under my belt. It was one of those small scouting axes, with a little metal guard that folds out of the handle and sheathes the blade.

He had to have known I had the ax, but he never let on. Eva noticed it. We were out on the back porch. The moon was shining through the pine branches. She noticed it because she had her arms around me.

A little gasping scream came out against my face as her lips jerked away from mine. She backed away. She blinked and ran her tongue over her lips until they shone wet and red. Her fingers slipped along her cheeks. Her throat moved as she swallowed. "Will . . . you're going to . . . to *kill* him!"

I grabbed her wrist. I jerked her around, and she mewed with pain like a kitten.

"Okay," I said. "You married him. You got a lot of money, security. That's success for a woman and you got it. But that wasn't what you wanted. You want amusement. You've got that now. You should be happy. You want amusement more than success. Don't pretend you don't like this. . . ."

The screen door slammed. Burron's voice was low and emotionless.

"You're quite right, Will. But guilty of over-simplification. Won't you come in and have a drink?"

Eva cried. She turned and ran past Burron and disappeared inside. I walked past Burron slowly, turning as I did so. He held a knife in his hand. One of those knives from one of the glass exhibit cases.

I WAITED UNTIL he got past me, then followed him in where I sat down in front of the fire. Eva had run upstairs to cry. Burron stood before the fire, playing with the knife. The fire caught it, threw hard flashes of light over my face. I dropped my hand over the handle of the ax under my shirt. Sweat itched on my face and back.

My voice had gravel in it. "You want to commit a nice beautiful murder, Warren, or were you only kidding? Anyway, a knife would be so crude."

Burron looked insulted, but resigned. "You're lacking an appreciation for subtlety, but I expected that. Only an artist could appreciate Death as a beautiful thing, for example, a beautiful woman. Sensitive artists like Poe, Keats, Shelley, Byron—it was Death that inspired them. But they were really wooing, you see. Death, to them, was always a lover. . . ."

His eyes seemed to grow dark and still. "I love Death too, Will. I want to perform it, like an artist painting, or composing, in a perfect and beautiful way. I want to kill, and I want to be killed. That way, Death would be complete. But the method must be untainted. And it must be perfection. What could be more expressive than these lines by Felix Kowalewski."

And then he quoted poetry to me. Quoted poetry!

"Death is a Woman; Death is soft and sweet;
Death is the fairest mistress of our hearts.
To our last dreams a magic she imparts
And ends them there. Ah, Death is most discreet!
Death is a Woman; and her hair is dark. . . ."

There was more. I don't remember the rest.

What it seemed to mean was this. That Burrton wanted to murder me. Beautifully, and perfectly. But that he also wanted to commit suicide.

I got up. He was still quoting poetry. He was spinning the knife around and around, keeping time to the rhythm of his chanting.

"I never did appreciate poetry very much," I said. My voice was hoarse. My throat was filled up and I felt a little sick at the stomach. "So you go on and quote poetry and drink that very fine liquor. I'm going up and hit the sack. I'm going to get a good night's sleep, and I'm going back down to L. A. in the morning. Frankly, Burrton, I think you're crazy as hell. I think you've lost your mind. And I don't want any more of it."

His laughter followed me up the rustic stairs. And in that laugh was a crazy, climbing note of something. I didn't figure out exactly what until I was opening the cedar-paneled door of my bedroom. And then I knew.

It was triumph.

Eva was in my room waiting for me.

I grabbed her arm and twisted. I shoved her back toward the door.

"Get out," I said. My voice sounded more savage than I'd intended. "Get out. Maybe I can't convince you any other way that I don't like playing with wives, not even lunatics' wives. Maybe I can't resist too much temptation. But I don't like it, see. Maybe this will show you how I really feel."

I slapped her. Her head bobbed like a golden cork on a black pond.

She squirmed through my fists, into my arms. Her body was hot and it twisted against me. She was heavy against me. I gave way, and my knees caught the edge of the bed. We both fell backward.

And Burrton opened the bedroom door. His face looked like a splatter of white enamel against the wall. His eyes seemed lifeless. They swam with dark dead lights.

"Just passing," he said. "I was going to ask Eva if she

wanted a—drink, or something. But I see she's being entertained. Good night."

Eva slammed the door after him. All pretense was gone. Her hair was tumbling, and her eyes were wild. Her face shone white and pinched in the moonlight. *Death is a Woman, and her hair is dark.*

Her voice broke. "I can't stand it. I can't stand it any more."

I PULLED HER away from the door. I held her close against me, and I kissed her, I smashed my mouth over hers. She sighed, and then I opened the door with one hand and pushed her out into the hall.

"I'm going back to L. A. in the morning," I said. I couldn't seem to see very well, not because of the dark, but because of that pounding pain in my head, and the blur that kept coming across my eyes. "You can come along for the ride. It'll be a little cleaner that way."

I could see only her eyes moving away from me. Her whisper reached me before I closed the door. "All right, Will. That'll be fine. That'll be all right with me. I'll come along for the ride."

And then from still further down the hall, her whisper drifted to me. "Except that I don't think Warren intends for you to get back. . . ."

I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. I tried to think about something, anything at all to make the hours go faster. And it was dark, and very quiet around the cabin. A night wind rustled through the pine branches, but that was the the only sound. But Burron knew I was leaving in the morning. His laugh had been one of victory over me. Whatever he was intending to do, he would do it tonight.

Then things started happening to me. All the time it had been building in me, and all at once it broke loose. I began to sweat. I threw back the covers, and sat in a chair. I started to smoke. I got a bottle out of the bureau and started drinking. Nothing did any good. Aspirins didn't stop the pressure in my head either. I tried to loosen tense muscles. The whiskey was sickening. The

cigarette turned stale in my throat. That pressure in my head tightened.

That was the state I was in, when Burron suddenly opened the door.

His little white face was flushed and wet. His eyes were bright. His mouth was partly open. He lunged. He leaped at me, like an eager mouse. I saw only the bright gleam of silver in his upraised hand. I yelled at him. I'd never been afraid before. "You're not going to get me, Burron. Not me. . . ."

I slipped out of the chair as he lunged. I felt my body, heavy and thickly muscled, moving instinctively. But not the way it used to move for me. Maybe he knew I was in bad shape physically, or he'd never have tried to tackle me with a knife. That's what I thought then. Later I knew the facts. Which aren't always as they seem, are they?

I wasn't thinking clearly. I guess he'd planned it this way. My nerves were shot by then. I couldn't make my mind work right. It was thick and grey. Ordinarily, I would have laughed at a little man like that jumping me. Instead, I was afraid. I had that ax out. I grabbed him with my left hand and brought the ax down. He screamed. Blood ran down over his face. His mouth opened at me.

I didn't recognize what he said, then. Later, I remembered it.

"Thanks, Will. For the cooperation . . . perfect . . . neat. . . ."

I hit him again. He stumbled back and fell in the dark hall. He whispered:

". . . and happy he who, dying, knows that bliss . . . the far lost music of her . . . timeless . . . kiss. . . ."

I finished it there.

ALL my defense attorney had to offer was an insanity plea. Eva testified that I'd been carrying the ax for days, waiting for my chance. Eva was free, and with money now. And I guess she didn't want to be stuck with past memories. Wanted to start off fresh and clean.

I'd argued self-defense until my lawyer, Forbes, convinced me that I didn't have any argument at all. I was a big man, and Burron was a little man. I'd used an ax. And Burron hadn't had any weapon at all. He'd wiped the fingerprints off the knife he'd been playing with before the murder. And when he came into my room that night, he hadn't been carrying any weapon at all.

I ran out of the house and bummed a ride into L. A. where the cops soon picked me up. When they found Burron, he didn't have any weapon in his hand. That silver gleam in his hand I'd thought was the knife . . . it was one of those expressionistic things made out of wire and pieces of glass. Very shiny and maybe deadly looking in the dark. But something no one could ever be convinced was lethal. It was all Burron's plan.

He had it figured out, perfectly. He would murder me that way. He knew Eva, knew she'd testify against me. And I would go to the gas chamber. . . . He would murder me without laying a hand on me, let the state do it.

So it really wasn't murder at all. It was suicide and murder combined.

He even left a suicide note, addressed to me. But it was no good as evidence. It was poetry, written in the form of a sonnet. I don't remember it. It doesn't matter now. All that matters is, that he whispers to me. He whispers and tells me how beautiful it all was. And he keeps thanking me for my cooperation. . . .

FORBES just left. He told me it was okay. No gas chamber. The insanity plea got across. So I'm laughing now, and I'm laughing at you, Burron! Your perfect murder didn't come off, did it, Burron? Huh? Crawl and squirm in your grave. You didn't think about the brain concussion did you, Burron? Huh? I had doctors, psychiatrists, on my side. You didn't think about that did you? And there's not a damned thing you can do about it now, is there, Burron?

Burron!

Burron! Is there . . . in the moonlight! . . .



Murder Comes Calling

By Logan Legare

She was an angel—with the heart of Satan. When she died, she left tragedy sown for many others.

IT'S NOT murder in itself that makes it so bad, it's the after-effects. For when the victim dies, it's usually just starting with the living. At least that's the way I've come to feel about it, though I sure could be wrong, judging by the opinions of a few old cranks around Hoskinsville who say I've got too many funny ideas to be editor of the Hoskinsville *Clarion*. But the old cranks are very much in the minority in our town, and even if they weren't, I started the paper eighteen years ago, come next spring, and I'm going to run it the way I been running it as long as I got ink and can find a linotype man.

Anyhow, I wasn't thinking of all the hell and misery just one little murder can let loose in the world the night

I stopped at Margot Graham's cottage. I was too busy with my own thoughts, too afraid someone would see me come here.

Maybe you're wondering why a waddling, wheezing, pink-fleshed fellow of fifty-five like me would be sneaking into Margot Graham's cottage. Well, sometimes I wondered myself. My wife died five years ago, but I've got two fine kids who'd have been awful crushed to see their old man slinking along that walk toward the white cottage that gleamed faintly in the night. I felt like hell myself. I'd been to the cottage once before.

I'd known even while I was going there the first time that it was pure insanity. But, brother, you ain't seen Margot Graham. Anyhow, tonight she'd commanded me to come there. That's right—commanded. And I was going, remembering her phone call, her hard tinkling laugh.

In my pocket I carried a thousand dollars. It was a stiff price for a man of my meager means to pay for her silence about that other visit, but over the phone she'd given me to know that I had no choice. . . .

MY HAND felt cold as I turned the knob, then I closed the door behind me, feeling like a fish meshed in a heavy net.

A crack of light showed under a door to my left, and I knew she'd be in there in the living room, all the blinds drawn, the lighting soft. I knocked on the door, got no answer.

I tried the knob and the door swung open. She was there in the living room, waiting for me, all right. But she wouldn't have waited all crumpled up on the floor like that.

I got inside the room and closed the door fast. I was in here with murder, I realized as I bent over her. And yet, even with that chilling thought going like lightning across my mind, my pulses raced, just looking at her.

I shook myself, swallowed some of the tightness out of my throat. The sultry light had left those violet eyes now and the midnight hair was streaked with crimson. She'd

been hit once just over the temple. Once had been enough. Then I saw the cigar band lying on the floor and bent to pick it up. I looked at it, dropped it in my pocket. Then I gave the room the once-over. There was no cigar in any of the ashtrays, no sign of a murder weapon. Only me and Margot Graham, and the living room she'd furnished in square, pastel furniture and softly glowing lamps when she'd first come to Hoskinsville.

Enough of the paralysis left me for me to stagger back out of the room. In the hallway I waited awhile in the darkness, just shivering and trying not to think. Then I opened the front door.

THE street was quiet, deserted. I crossed the small porch, ran across the lawn to keep my footsteps from echoing on the walk. I was running like hell, but two blocks away my mind began working again and I slowed to a walk. I took the cigar band I'd found beside Margot Graham from the side pocket of my coat. A little of her blood was on it and I shuddered. Then I crammed the band deep into the left pocket of my coat, headed for the *Clarion* office.

When I closed the door behind me, the smell of paper and ink washed pleasantly over me. My desk was over to one side, piled high. A stack of yellowed papers was in the corner, and it seemed you could never find anything in the cluttered office. In eighteen years you accumulate a lot of stuff and every time I thought of cleaning the place I couldn't make up my mind what to throw away. So it just kept piling up.

I took off my coat, hung it on a nail over my desk. I heard a movement behind me and whirled around, jerking. It was Willie Lance, my reporter and associate editor. He'd just come through the short corridor from the composing room.

He looked at me and said, "What's wrong, Cass? You look as if you'd seen a ghost." He was a short, thin young fellow with big ears and a long nose. His parents had died several years ago and Matt O'Toole—who is Hoskinsville—had sort of taken Willie under his wing. Matt had sent

Willie off to school, but Willie'd come back, gone to work for me.

I made some damfool reply to Willie about having indigestion. I washed my hands and put water on my head. I don't really think I expected the cold water to drive the vision of Margot Graham's lifeless body from my mind. I was just stalling, getting myself together.

Then I realized what I might be doing to myself. The longer I stalled, the worse it was going to look for me if it came out that I'd been in Margot Graham's cottage. I wheezed back to the long, gloomy office. Willie had sat down at his desk, run a sheet of paper in his ramshackle typewriter, and was lighting a cigarette, preparatory to starting on the sports page. His chair scraped back sharply as I picked up the phone and gave the operator Sheriff Raymond Nord's number.

Willie came over beside me. "What's up, Cass? Why're you calling the Sheriff?"

"Murder," I said.

"What. . . !"

At the other end of the line, Nord said, "Hullo."

"This is Cass Bailey, Raymond. Skedaddle right over here."

Willie tugged at my arm, his eyes wide over his long nose. "Who?"

I shook his hand off my arm, said into the phone: "Raymond, you get the hell over here. I'll guarantee to wake you up!"

"Can't you tell me. . . ?"

"I'll tell you when you get here!" I shouted.

I REPLACED the phone, and Willie was fairly jumping in his pants. "Who got killed, Cass? And who did it? Are we going to run an extra? How. . . ."

"Just keep your shirttail in. We ain't going any place until Raymond Nord gets here. Somebody murdered Margot Graham, but we ain't running a scandal-sheet, Willie. You'll get your chance to write up the facts that Nord finds."

He shrugged helplessly, crestfallen, and sat down and chain-smoked until Raymond Nord slammed the office door rattlingly behind him.

Willie jumped about three feet off the floor. It's Margot Graham, sheriff! She's been murdered!"

Raymond drew up stiffly, looked from Willie to me.

I nodded. "She's at her cottage. I found her."

"You!"

I sat down on the edge of my desk. "About a month ago, just a day or two after she'd got in town, Margot Graham came to the office to take a subscription to the paper. Willie was out and nobody was back in the composing room, and my stomach was bothering me. So when I took a little nip—strictly for my stomach, you know—she sort of invited herself to one, and. . . ." Face burning, I couldn't go on.

Raymond Nord leaned his grizzled length toward me, his slate-colored eyes as wide as they would go in their crinkles of wind-burned skin. "You're trying to tell me, Cass, that you. . . ."

"All right," I said hoarsely, "I played the part of an old fool. We had a drink or two and got sort of . . . well, chummy. It was like being drugged. She left the office and a day or two passed. I kept seeing her face every which way I'd look—even overhead in the darkness when I'd lay in bed and couldn't sleep. So the third night after she was here . . . well, I didn't have anything to do. I just sort of found myself going toward her house. I was crazy, I'll admit. But I'm just a human, Raymond. . . ."

"And a damn weak one at that," Raymond said.

"That's right." I guess I came close to moaning it. "I knocked on her door. Then I knew what a fool I was being. I guessed she'd laugh at me. But before I could turn and run, she opened the door, and she didn't laugh at all. Well, she laughed, but not amused, mocking laughter like I thought she'd laugh. She invited me in, and I couldn't have turned from that door if there'd been a million horses dragging me, helping me get away from there."

Raymond didn't snort derisively. He'd seen Margot Graham, like everybody else in town. He waited quietly.

"We just sat and talked," I finished lamely. "So help me. She let me feel welcome, but at the same time she made me aware that I was old enough to be her pa. Then I left, and that's all there was to it until this afternoon. She phoned me, and she wasn't so nice. She was brittle and tough. She wanted a thousand dollars or she was going to start a storm of gossip and scandal that would ruin me. And in a town as small as Hoskinsville she could have done it."

"And you a man with a public trust like a newspaper," Raymond added sagely, "and with two kids you wanted to protect. Sure . . . she knew you'd pay off. What then?"

"I went to her house with the thousand dollars. It's in my pocket now. She was dead. And that's all, so help me."

RAYMOND looked at me a long time and the hairs on the back of my neck and all along my arms were like pins. Then he said quietly, "I'll call a deputy and the coroner and we'll go over to her house."

I rose heavily, my back sticky with sweat. While Nord phoned a deputy, Willie Lance stuck a pencil behind each one of his big ears, stuffed his coat pocket full of yellow paper; we left a small light burning, locked the office door, and got in Raymond Nord's car.

Margot Graham lay just as I had left her, arm outflung, crimson nails biting into the carpet, the soft light somehow glaring and harsh with the presence of death. I sat down and kept my face turned away. Nord inspected the room, while Willie shivered and stared in horrified fascination at death.

Nord left the room and I heard his footsteps all around in the back part of the cottage. He came back in the living room. "Her bedroom's been torn to pieces, drawers dumped on the floor, mattress ripped, even the carpet pulled off the floor in a pile. Somebody was sure hunting something."

"Think they found it?" Willie said.

Nord bobbed his sandy-haired, shaggy head. "A picture has been torn off the wall. Behind it, Margot Graham had cut into the wall and inset a steel strongbox. Somebody was evidently hunting the key to the box and found it. The box was on the floor, open, the key in the lock, empty."

He planted his feet wide before me. "You wouldn't know anything about that, Cass?"

I shook my head vehemently. "Raymond, I told you the whole mess, so help me. Can't you see? I'm not the only one Margot shook down. That was her racket, simple and profitable. But somebody kicked, killed her, and took whatever incriminating evidence she had against him from the strong box."

There was a sound at the doorway and Raymond's lank deputy came in. Raymond gave the deputy instructions to stick around until the coroner came, added that it was apparently a clean kill with no clues; then as we went out, Willie almost tripping on my heels, Nord added: "As I was saying, maybe she came here to shake a few of you old fools down. I'm inclined to believe it. But the day she came here I started checking on her, quietly. She had a double motive in coming here, Cass. She had her little racket—and this is the home town of her former husband. It was made to order—a small town where they'd gossip about anything and a little gossip would ruin anybody and, in case she ran into difficulties and needed legal help, an ex-husband who is the finest legal brains in the state."

I stopped in my tracks. "Not Gerald Winison!"

Raymond nodded, and even in the darkness I could almost see his face tightening, growing grey, haggard.

"Gerald Winison!" Willie breathed. "Golly, what a story!"

WE DROVE across the middle of Hoskinsville. It was Matt O'Toole's town, who called its people his children, some of whom had gone out to win fame. One of whom had been married to Margot Graham. I wondered

if they'd mention Gerald Winison for governor after tonight.

We drew up before Gerald's small brick bungalow, got out. We waited, and I could feel Raymond Nord's reluctance. Then with a sigh he started for the door.

Gerald's young auburn-haired wife answered the door and Raymond twisted his hat in his hand. "I'd like to see Jerry, Mrs. Winison."

She smiled, said hello to all of us, and added: "Come in please."

"No," Raymond said. "I can talk to Jerry out here."

He came to the door after a moment, a tall, husky young man in his shirt sleeves. His dark, crinkly hair was mussed, his eyes sparkling. "Hello, fellows. Been upstairs in the kid's room, wrestling with the little rascal. He. . . ."

"Come outside, Jerry," Raymond said heavily, and Jerry's words cut off in his throat. He stepped out, closed the door behind him.

"I didn't want your wife to hear this, Jerry, but Margot Graham's dead."

"It was murder," Willie, standing at my elbow, added. Jerry finally said, "When?"

"Tonight," Raymond said. "I want to talk to you, Jerry. Tell your wife you'll be coming back later."

Jerry turned stiffly, opened the door, poked his head in, and told his wife he would be back after awhile. We went down the walk to the sheriff's car. I could sense the questions on Jerry's lips, but he didn't say anything.

The sheriff started the car, began cruising slowly down the dark street. "Want to tell me, Jerry? I know that you were married to her. I found that out not long after she got in town."

"Yes," Jerry said. "I was married to her. But I divorced her. Peg—my present wife—knows all about it." Somehow he spoke too loudly.

"Yeah," Raymond remarked almost sadly. "The day she came to town, for instance, I had a hunch Margot Graham was up to no good. So I went to the train station, checked the point of origin of her ticket. From there it wasn't too

hard, sending wires, making a couple phone calls. You better tell me the whole thing, Jerry."

"Why not?" Jerry said with a faint, bitter laugh. "After this thing breaks I'll be washed up anyway. I'll have to leave Hoskinsville and all that I've built here and take my family some place else.

"I thought I'd got over Margot Graham when I came to Hoskinsville," Jerry was saying softly. "I married Peg and pitched in to work. It's been five years since then, short years. I knew they were over the moment I passed Margot on the street, a day or two after she'd come here. She'd seen my picture in a newspaper, she said, and had decided to take a look in my new home town. She asked me to come to her house, and like a spineless rat. . . ."

". . . In a hypnotic trance," Raymond said heavily.

"Yes," Jerry's voice shook. "In a hypnotic trance I went to her house. I talked to her a few minutes, left. Somehow I was over it; I didn't want to go back again. That night at home with Peg I knew I was cured of Margot Graham once and for all. Then she called me. And what could I do? Have the whole town know I'd slipped to my former wife's house under cover of night? Try to convince them that it hadn't meant anything, that I was cured of her?" His laugh, again, was bitter. "I might as well tried holding a hurricane in a fragile china teacup! If Margot said the things she said she would, I knew I was a ruined man."

"So you went back," Raymond said.

"Yes," it was almost a whisper. "I went back. Again, and then again. And she told me she'd hit a gold mine, that she didn't know so many yokels just waiting to be shaken down existed in one town. She was going to trim . . . the whole bunch of us. And I was going to be her legal aid if she needed it—or else. Her first collection, she said, was going to be fifty thousand dollars."

"Fifty thousand!" Willie, I, and Sheriff Nord said it almost at once. Raymond added: "Who the hell in Hoskinsville would have that kind of money?"

"She didn't say," Jerry's tortured voice went on.

“You didn’t know any of the men, Jerry?”

I squirmed in the back seat. Jerry didn’t answer for quite awhile, then he whispered, “The only one she ever named was Doctor Daniel Hastings.”

THE house of Doctor Daniel Hastings was quiet with the chill calm of death. All the bright lights in the long quietly-furnished living room couldn’t dispel the cloud that hung perpetually over the place. Or maybe it was just because I knew that upstairs lay Dan’s wife. She hadn’t walked in almost ten years since her automobile accident, and Dan had operated seven times, each time knowing it would take one more operation to cure her. And through all the pain, she never lost her smile, the worship in her eyes, the expression on her wasted face telling the world that next time Dan would succeed. . . .

Dan invited us in. His eyes clouded a trifle as he looked from one to the other of us, saying hello, his strong, surgeon’s hands hanging stiffly at his sides. “Sit down, gentlemen.”

Raymond shook his head, and we remained standing, a little knot just inside the doorway. Raymond said, “Can your wife hear us?”

Dan Hastings frowned. “No. She’s fixed for the night, upstairs, with the nurse. But why. . . .”

“I just wanted to spare her listening to what we’ve got to say to each other,” Raymond said. “Margot Graham has been murdered. You’re not going to deny that you knew her?”

Dan looked from one to the other of us. “No. I’m not going to deny it.” He turned his bald head so that his face was tilted away from us. His voice was low, thick: “I knew—I suppose I knew even while I was seeing her that it would come to this sometime.”

Raymond said, “How many times did you see her, Dan?”

“Twice.” He looked up slowly, his eyes burning with self condemnation. “I’m not going to ask any of you to understand. Always in the past I’ve lost myself in my

work. In the clinics. I've managed to crush the hopelessness and despair of watching my wife lie week after week, helpless and hurting, and being unable to help her, crush it just by working until I dropped.

"I'll not ask you to understand," he said again. "But I was tired of pain and hopelessness and despair. I . . . I guess I was awfully lonely. Then one day Margot Graham walked into my office. I lost my sense."

". . . In a hypnotized trance," Raymond Nord remarked heavily. "Then she put the pressure on you for a shake-down, Dan?"

Again his blue eyes went over us. He nodded.

"How much did she want?" Nord asked.

"Fifty thousand dollars?"

Dan laughed grimly. "Where would I get that kind of money? Every dime I make has a place to go." He could have added that it was because he got paid in dimes mostly.

"**T**HERE'S just one thing I want to ask, sheriff," Dan Hastings said. "Don't let my wife know. I'll take what's coming to me—but it would kill her."

"I'll not let her know," Raymond said. But each of us knew it was a promise he couldn't keep, possibly. There'd have to be a trial. . . . And no matter who finally got the noose around his neck, all our names were coming out.

Raymond said, "You go along upstairs and tell your wife you've got to be out awhile, Dan. We'll wait outside in my car."

When Dan came back, he got in the back seat with Willie and me. Willie had turned on the overhead light in the car, was scribbling furiously on his yellow paper. He looked up, eyes shining with excitement, face flushed. "What a story! What a story! Now I'll drop the bomb-shell. The next stop, gents, is Matt O'Toole's house!"

We almost went through the top of the car. "You're crazy, Willie!" "That's a lie, Willie!" "You're letting your marbles spill, Willie!"

"No," Willie said. "I ain't crazy, and I ain't lying. I . . ."

"He's not," I said heavily. I ran my hands in the pockets of my coat, pulled the cigar band that I'd found beside Margot Graham from the right hand pocket. "I was hoping you'd get a confession maybe before now, Raymond. I wasn't intending to hold out on you, but I didn't want to show you this until I had to." I handed him the cigar band. "Everybody around town knows that Matt O'Toole smokes that brand. I found it beside her body. That's her . . . her blood on it."

Raymond folded the band slowly, slipped it in his vest pocket. "She sure must have been some woman. Even after she's dead, she's tearing the foundations right out from under Hoskinsville—you, Cass, our honest, fighting newspaper man, Jerry, the lad with the playgrounds, teen age clubs, the fighter for civic betterment, Dan the crusading doctor, and now Matt O'Toole, who built the damn town in the first place!"

Raymond turned to Willie. "How come you to think of Matt?"

"I heard him couple days ago when I went up to his place for a story. He was talking over the phone. To her. 'Sides, Matt O'Toole is the logical guy to be taken for as much as fifty thousand. He's rich."

YOU'D never have known it by looking at him. Matt ushered us into his sweeping living room with its rustic furniture with a hearty hello. He was a strapping, freckled, red-headed Irishman, his hair flying like a wild flag. Some doctor had told Matt thirty years ago that he might live six more months by coming to the hills. Matt had come; he was still alive. He'd transformed the hill wilderness into a city bustling about the woolen homespun textile industry. O'Toole mountain homespuns were known the world over, the choice fabric of elite tailors in New York. And in building his industry, which he'd started from hand looms in rough mountain cabins, and his city, Matt O'Toole had never lost sight of the human element. He believed in parks and churches and good schools. He believed in good working conditions and clean govern-

ment. Jerry had built playgrounds, but Matt's money had backed him. Dan had fought for the clinics, but Matt was really the general in the campaign.

Now he shook our hands warmly and invited us to drink his whiskey, but Raymond said awkwardly: "Some other time, Matt. We got important things on our minds. Margot Graham has been murdered."

MATT SAT DOWN, squinting his blue eyes, running his hand through his shock of wild red hair. "You think I had something to do with it?"

Nord took a long, deep breath. I wished I was out of here, wished I'd never heard of Margot Graham. I knew Jerry and Dan felt the same way. Willie was all ears, literally and figuratively. Raymond Nord said finally: "I know you knew her, Matt. I know she was trying to shake you down for fifty thousand dollars."

Matt looked from one to the other of us. His eyes were grave, even alarmed, but he managed a chuckle. "A pack of old fools!" he said, shaking his head. "She wasn't *trying* to shake me down. She did it! I guess I just love Irish whiskey too much. Hell, I even promised her in writing that I'd marry her!"

"And she got the fifty thousand?" Raymond asked.

"Got it two days ago," Matt said.

"But you didn't kill her?"

"No," Matt said, "I didn't kill her. I just looked things flat in the face, realized I'd been an old fool in a . . ."

". . . . Hypnotic trance," Raymond supplied dourly.

"That's right," Matt said. "She did sort of hypnotize me. You never knew her well, Raymond? She was an angel, with a core right out of Satan's heart. She was a lady, and a black hearted schemer. She was a princess, and a ruthless guttersnipe."

Raymond looked at us and said, "None of you did anything wrong, actually. But, you know, one of you is a murderer."

We looked at each other then, and the room grew cold. I sat down. Raymond walked over to the phone, called

the coroner. He talked a few moments, then came back to face us. "She was killed between six and nine tonight. You, Jerry, where were you?"

"Home," Jerry said. "I'd had a hard day at the office."

"Can you prove it?"

"My wife was there, and the maid."

Raymond turned to Dan. "And you?"

"I was at the hospital," Dan said. "I called my house at five-thirty, then went directly up to my surgery. I left there at about eight, went down to consult with Dr. Lamb until after nine. I'd got home just before you came. Three or four doctors and half a dozen nurses can prove I never left the hospital between six and nine."

"And you, Matt?"

"At the plant," Matt said decisively, "having a little conference with a superintendent and a couple of foremen."

Raymond turned to me and my mouth got dry and I felt empty right down to my toes. Between six and nine I'd been alone. Until I'd found her body right about nine o'clock.

I hunched down in my chair listening to the silence in the room, feeling their eyes on me. I pushed my hands down hard in my coat pockets; then I came out of the chair with a jump that startled them all.

"*Where was Willie!*" I demanded.

Willie jerked so hard the pencils fell from behind his ears. "What do you mean, Cass Bailey?" he shouted.

I grabbed him by the collar, shook him. "You killed her, you little rat. Matt O'Toole put you in college and you were too rotten to stay there. Tonight you slipped into her house and killed her! We've been thinking of the shakedown angle as a motive—but what about the fifty thousand Matt gave her? She knew you, maybe recognized in you a rat she could use! And you slunk around until you'd learned of the fifty thousand. You tore her bedroom to pieces hunting for it, found it in the strongbox hidden in the wall behind the picture! She came in, surprised you, and you caught her in the living room and killed her.

"If Matt wasn't in her house tonight, the band from his cigar must have been planted. You took the band with you to plant, Willie. You intended to drop it in the bedroom where she'd find it. She'd recognize it as Matt's, and since she and Matt were supposed to be the only ones who knew he had actually given her fifty thousand dollars, you were banking on her jumping to the conclusion that he'd been there, got his money back. But it didn't work out that way. She came home earlier than you'd thought she would. And you killed her. Then you decided still to use the band, but for a different plant, a murder plant."

He jerked out of my grip, moved back. "You're crazy, Cass Bailey. Any of you could have planted the cigar band!"

"Yes, Willie," I said, "but you did. You knew she was mixed with important men. You wanted to get enough of the important men involved to make the investigation a hush-hush affair, so in a few days you could skip out with the money. To keep the affair as squelched as possible you wanted all of us in as bad a light as possible; that's why you left the cigar band on me, in my pocket! Isn't that the truth Willie?"

"You're crazy!" Willie shouted again. "I didn't touch the band!"

I CAN prove you did, Willie. You were the only person who had access to my coat—while it was hanging over my desk when I went back to the washroom just after I'd come in the office. You went through my pockets, found the band. But you made the mistake of putting the band back in the wrong pocket. The band was in the left pocket of my coat when I entered the office, but it was in the right pocket of my coat when I reached for it to hand it to Sheriff Nord!

"If you're in the clear, Willie, why did you go in my pockets in the first place. You were hoping the sheriff would find the band on me or that I'd have to hand it over. Every little item to make it look blacker played in your favor . . . but, Willie, you know some place in her

house you must have left fingerprints. Even after she's gone, she and her house will finger you and. . . ."

With a sharp cry Willie lunged back, his hand diving under his coat toward a gun. He brought the gun up, fired, hit the wall. He steadied himself in a split instant, while we were trying to get in motion. He'd not miss this time.

But another gun spoke, Raymond Nord's, and a tiny black hole jumped into being in the bridge of Willie's long nose. The hole disappeared in a flood of crimson, and somewhere in his short fall to the floor Willie Lance died.

We stood looking at his crumpled heap, wiping our faces and shivering a little. Nobody spoke for a few moments; then Raymond Nord said: "Funny how a man can think a million thoughts between two ticks of a watch, while Willie was getting set to pull the trigger again." He looked from one to the other of us dourly. "Thoughts about a nice town filled with swell people and the old fools who have made it. Thoughts about kids in playgrounds, people in white, airy clinic and modern hospital, about a newspaper that's never let a city official get out of line, about the red-headed ruffian behind it all." He sighed heavily. "I even thought about Jerry's wife and kid, Cass' two offspring, Dan's wife and her faith in him that he'll justify one of these days. So . . ." he shrugged his lean shoulders. "If Willie hadn't made the break he'd have got a trial. Trials bring to light a lot of things, innocent things, but things that would have enabled Margot Graham to drag everything I was thinking about right down into the grave with her. But since Willie did make the break. . . ."

Matt said, "It was your life or his."

Matt turned then and began pouring whiskey. We needed it. Jerry looked at his jigger. "To Margot Graham," he said.

Dan added: "May she rest in peace."

"She won't," I said.

"No," Matt O'Toole said, "she wasn't that kind."

"And," Raymond Nord muttered, "neither was Willie."

Odds Are on DEATH

By
Ashley
Calhoun



Corcoran looked like a sucker in the gambling joint, but he was really a private dick, and a tough one at that!

CORCORAN threw snake-eyes. An audible gasp went up from the well-dressed crowd around the crap-table. They had seen Corcoran make six straight passes; watched him run a ten-spot up to six hundred and forty bucks. Then, since there was no limit in Spot Shelton's ultra-select gambling establishment, Corcoran had shot the works.

And lost. Loudly the girl alongside him said: "You were foolish, honey. You should have dragged down."

Her name was Margie Zaine. She wore her blue-black hair sleekly coiffed; she had a Madonna face. Her figure was a poem of curves sheathed in a crimson satin evening-

gown. Men had a hard time keeping their eyes away from her.

She was a capper for Spot Shelton's place. Sucker-bait. But Corcoran was no sucker. He was a private dick. He grinned down into her dark eyes. She was playing her part to perfection. Nobody on Spot Shelton's staff would possibly suspect her of disloyalty to Shelton tonight. . . .

Nor could anybody guess what Corcoran was really up to. Thus far he'd played his part of a reckless sap to the hilt. But it had been a tough job trying to make the dice obey orders. Luck's a fickle jade; when a man wants to lose, he almost invariably wins. It had taken him more than ten minutes to go broke.

THE tuxedoed croupier said: "Still your dice if you want them, Mister." Margie Zaine pressed herself closer to Corcoran. She was trembling a little.

At the far end of the table a tall, nervous young man flashed a veiled glance at the private dick; flicked his eyebrows. Corcoran took his cue. He said to the croupier: "I'd like to keep on shooting, but I'm cleaned." He passed the cubes to the player on his right. Then he said: "Could I get a check cashed?"

Up at the end of the table, the tall young man was listening to a willowy blonde in daring décolletage. He seemed annoyed. The blonde looked sore. The croupier beckoned an attendant. The attendant came up to Corcoran and said: "How large a check, sir?"

"Oh, about five hundred." Corcoran drew a check-book from his dinnerjacket pocket. He didn't produce the flat .25 automatic which also reposed in that pocket. The attendant frowned dubiously. "I'm afraid I'll have to let Mr. Shelton pass on that, sir. It's more than I'm authorized to cash. I'll take you to his office."

Margie Zaine said: "Never mind. I'll show the way." She looked archly at Corcoran. "I know Spot Shelton. I'll introduce you. Come along, honey."

That was a chuckle, of course, Margie knew Shelton. She worked for him! But she wouldn't be working for

him after tonight. Corcoran slipped an arm around her waist. She led him out of the casino-room and down a long, carpeted corridor. She knocked on a closed door.

A voice said: "Come in." It was Spot Shelton's voice, sleek and purring.

They entered. Margie said: "Hello, Spot. This is my friend, Mr. Jones. He wants a check cashed."

Shelton's eyes were heavy-lidded and crafty to match the thin gash of his avaricious mouth. "Glad to accommodate you," he said affably. "How much will you need?"

Corcoran raised his ante. "A thousand will do."

Like a light turned off, Shelton's smile faded abruptly. "A thousand?" he said sharply.

"Sure," Corcoran said, "I've got plenty in the bank. Want proof?"

"What kind of proof?" Shelton purred.

Corcoran nodded. "Send for Harry Greer. He's out at the dice-table. I just saw him. He's a teller at my bank. He knows the balance I carry. Call him in. Ask him."

Shelton spoke into a house-phone.

IN A MOMENT the door opened. A tall, nervous young man came in, the one who had flicked his eyebrow at Corcoran a while ago.

He said: "Why, hello, Margie. Good evening, Mr. Jones," he added politely to Corcoran. Then he looked at Shelton. "You want me?"

Corcoran said: "He wants to know how much money I've got on deposit in your bank, Harry. Tell him."

Greer cleared his throat; it was his only sign of uneasiness. "Why, more than thirty thousand dollars, roughly speaking."

"Ah," Shelton smiled apologetically to Corcoran. "In that case I'll be delighted to cash your check, Mr. Jones." He went to the wall behind his elaborate desk, shoved aside an etching, and toyed with the dial of a counter-sunk safe. A big yellow solitaire diamond glittered on the ring finger of his right hand as he opened the safe's circular door.

Corcoran pulled out his .25 automatic and said: "Thanks, Shelton. Now step back and sit down before I blast you."

The gambler whirled, his sallow cheeks pale. "What is this?"

"You might call it a stick-up," Corcoran said. "But I'd sooner say it's a bit of justice outside the law. I'm not a hood. Just a private shamus working for Harry Greer and Miss Zaine."

"Why, you dirty—!"

Corcoran said: "Tie him to the chair, Harry. And Margie, you grab the dough out of the box. Just thirty grand."

"Thirty grand—?" Shelton snarled an oath at the girl. "You double-crossing vixen!"

Greer slugged him in the teeth. The gambler sagged into his chair. Greer produced a skein of picture-wire, and bound Shelton's wrists and ankles, saying: "Maybe Margie used to be a double-crosser. But not any more. She's all through capping for you, Shelton."

Margie was pulling packets of currency out of the safe, stuffing them into her beaded purse.

Greer went on: "She got me to play your crooked games, Shelton. But you didn't count on her falling for me, did you? Well, that's what happened."

"Falling for you? That's a laugh, you dirty—"

Greer said: "I'm marrying Margie, see? That's why I hired this detective to help me get back the thirty thousand dollars you took away from me with your loaded dice. Now I can put back what I took from the bank—before the auditors catch up with me. And from now on, Margie and I are going straight."

The gambler squirmed helplessly. To Margie he snarled: "Don't be a sap, kid! Greer's playing you for a sucker. He won't marry you. Look what he did to Jackie Allan. Made her fall for him, too, then handed her the air. He'll treat you the same way! Put that dough back, baby—and I'll forget the whole thing." He added: "You can keep out five hundred if you want to. That's all Greer ever lost to me, the lousy liar. He never dropped any thirty grand!"

"I don't believe you, Spot," Margie said quietly. She

snapped her purse shut. It bulged with the currency.

Shelton raged: "You put that dough back in the safe or I'll get you if it's the last thing I ever do!"

Greer hit him on the jaw again. The gambler sagged against his bonds, unconscious. Greer went over to him to make sure the wires were tightly knotted. He said: "Okay. He won't get loose for a while."

THE door opened. A feminine voice said: "That's what you think." It was the willowy blonde who had approached Greer at the crap-table. Greer said: "Jackie Allan—!" in a scared whisper.

In spite of her heavy make-up she was gorgeous. Her hair was spun gold. She said: "I told you I'd get even with you for handing me the gate, Harry. I warned you I'd get something on you."

Greer sputtered: "You—you—!"

"Take it easy, Harry," she said frigidly. "And put that money back where it belongs. Spot Shelton was plenty decent to me after you walked out on me. This is my chance to make it up to him. You put that money back, or I'll scream the place down."

Corcoran went into action. He jumped at the blonde and slapped a muffling hand over her mouth. He looked at Greer. "What about this, Harry?"

"A pack of lies!" the bank-teller said harshly, indignantly. "It's true I was nuts about her for a while. She was the one who first got me into playing Shelton's crooked games. When I found out she was one of his come-ons, I ditched her. Then I fell in love with Margie, here. Margie came clean with me; promised to help me get my money back from Shelton. . . ."

"Okay. Hand me that picture-wire," Corcoran snapped. He took the skein, tripped Jackie Allan to the floor, tied her. When he got through, she was gagged with a handkerchief and trussed like a turkey.

Corcoran got up. To Greer he said: "Get your coat and hat and go home. Margie and I will phone you from her apartment, later. We'll leave shortly. It wouldn't look good

for all of us to be seen pulling out of this joint together.”

When Corcoran and Margie strolled casually back into the gaming-room a little later, Greer was gone. Corcoran stopped at the roulette-table long enough to lose the fifty that Margie had slipped him. That was to make everything look okay. After all, he was supposed to have cashed a check. . . .

After four wrong guesses at the wheel, he yawned. “Let’s beat it, Margie. I’m tired,” he said loudly.

She fastened herself to his arm. They went out; found a taxi. They headed for her apartment.

“You were swell,” she said. “Now Harry and I can be married, and—”

“Could I kiss the bride?”

She gave him her lips in gratitude.

THE cab stopped in front of her apartment building. They went into the lobby. It was deserted and dimly lighted at this late hour. They made for the automatic elevator.

From a curtained alcove to the left, a hand appeared. It was a white, soft-looking hand wearing a yellow diamond solitaire and holding a revolver.

As the gun crashed, Margie Zaine screamed and clutched at her breast. Blood spurted through her fingers. She dropped her handbag and fell.

Corcoran made a grab for his automatic. He fired at the drapes. He knew he must have missed, because there was no answering fire.

Bellowing, the private dick smashed toward the curtained alcove. As he hit the drapes, something thunked down on his head. He was stunned. Fireworks exploded inside his brain. He reeled drunkenly; pitched to his knees.

By the time he got up again, the alcove was empty. There was a doorway leading to the alley alongside the building. The door was open. . . .

Corcoran stared stupidly at Margie Zaine’s sprawled form. Death’s waxen mist was on her Madonna face. Her handbag was open and empty. The money she had taken

from Spot Shelton's office wall-safe was now gone.

Shelton, who had threatened her . . . Shelton, who had worn a yellow solitaire diamond on the ring finger of his white, effeminate hand. . . .!

Corcoran snapped out of his daze. He was thinking of Harry Greer, now. Maybe the bank-teller would be next on Shelton's list of victims. Maybe it was already too late—

Sprinting out into the night, Corcoran grabbed a passing owl cab. It zipped him to Greer's apartment-house, an unpretentious three-story structure with exterior fire-escapes marring its old-fashioned red brick façade. Corcoran raced up to the second floor. He reached the bank-teller's door and pounded on it. "Greer—let me in! It's me, Corcoran—and hell's to pay!" A muffled pistol-shot answered him. Then a heavy thump, as of a body falling. And finally, silence.

Corcoran hit the door. It bruisingly rebuffed him. He backed away and smashed at it again, putting his full two hundred pounds behind the impact. This time the portal gave way. He stumbled into the room.

AN OPEN window framed the iron fire-ladder just outside. In the room's center lay Harry Greer, breathing heavily, with his eyes closed. Thick clotted blood wept from a raw hole in his left shoulder. A thin drift of gunpowder-smoke eddied in the dull light from a table-lamp. Corcoran ran heavily to the window; stared outward, downward. He couldn't see anybody. He returned to Greer and worked over him. At last the teller opened his eyes. "God . . . my shoulder . . .!" he groaned faintly.

"Who drilled you? Was it Shelton?"

"I . . . don't know! I was . . . getting ready to . . . start for Margie's place . . . and a shot . . . came from . . . the window. . . ." Greer sat up weakly. "What are you . . . doing here? My God . . . if Shelton shot me . . . he may go . . . gunning for Margie. . . . You should have . . . stayed with her. . . ."

"I'm sorry, kid, but Margie—Margie's dead." Corcoran tried to break the news to him gently. "Take it easy

while I try to do something to fix this shoulder of yours.”

“Margie . . . dead. . . ?” The teller pushed Corcoran away. “Do something. . . !” he cried hysterically. “Call the cops . . . trail that dirty rat . . . get him . . . kill him. . . !” His lips twisted vengefully.

Corcoran said: “Yeah. Trail Shelton. That’s a large order. He’ll be on the lam for sure, now. He must’ve got loose in his office; reached Margie’s place ahead of us. Then he blasted. He killed her—and thought he killed me, too. So he came here to bump you. But just as he fired at you from the window, he heard my voice out in the hall. He realized he hadn’t croaked me. And now he knows he’s in the soup; knows my testimony will convict him. He’ll go into hiding.”

“You’ve got to find him!” Greer sobbed. “Get going! I’ll phone the cops. Move, blast you!”

Corcoran went out. It was going to be tough, trying to locate Spot Shelton. Corcoran didn’t know where to start. Then he got an idea. He found a drugstore and a phone book. He looked up Jackie Allan’s name and found it. He made a note of her address. A taxi took him to a bungalow court. He rang her bell. When she opened the door, Corcoran drew his automatic and shoved the muzzle against her. He said: “You’re pinched for murder, baby.”

She was wearing lounging pajamas. Her wrists were red and chafed from the wire with which she’d been trussed back in Shelton’s office. There were marks on her ankles, too. The ankles themselves were slender and dainty, to match the rest of her.

She said: “Pinched . . . for murder? What do you m-mean?”

He backed her into the little living room and kicked the door shut behind him. He pushed her onto the divan and stood over her, glowering. “What happened after I left Shelton’s joint?”

“Why—why—I managed to spit that gag out of my mouth. I yelled for help. People came in and untied me and Shelton, too. Spot brought me home.”

Corcoran said: “Straight home?”

"Yes." She seemed puzzled.

He said: "You're a liar, baby. You hated Harry Greer's guts because he ditched you. You hated Margie Zaine for taking him away from you. So you gunned the both of them, to get even." It was preposterous, of course. Corcoran knew that. But he wanted to throw a scare into Jackie Allan.

ALL the color drained from her cheeks. "I—I don't know what you're talking about!" she said.

"Margie's dead. You killed her. You tried to kill me. And you put a bullet through Harry Greer's shoulder."

"I—I didn't! My God, I wouldn't—" She reached up and grabbed his gun-arm. "D-don't point that thing at me. And you can't believe I'd—"

He looked at her, steadily. "There's just one way you can buy yourself out of this mess, baby. I want you to tell me where I can find Shelton."

From the hallway a voice growled: "That's easy, snoop. Here I am. And this thing in my hand isn't a saxophone. It's a rod. It shoots bullets."

Corcoran said: "How did you get in here?"

"I've got a key," Shelton said. "Why not?"

"You'll be getting a key to the hot squat before long," Corcoran said.

"I gathered that. I was home listening to the radio when I heard a bleat go out for me on a murder rap. That's why I'm here now." He looked at the blonde girl. "Why did you kill Margie, babe?"

"But I didn't—I didn't! That's what I was trying to tell this copper—"

"That's okay. I understand the setup." The gambler glared at Corcoran. "You're not arresting her, snoop. I won't let you."

Shelton shifted his gun to his left hand, doubled his right. He hit Corcoran on the button. Twice. Hard. Corcoran's knees buckled. He took the count.

When he awoke, Shelton and Jackie were gone. The house was all upset, as if a hurried job of luggage-packing

had been accomplished during the private detective's unconsciousness. Corcoran felt his bruised jaw. The flesh wasn't cut.

He stumbled out of the cottage. He walked four blocks before he found a cab. He gave the driver Greer's address. "And step on it—to save a guy's life!" he panted. Seven minutes later he burst into Greer's apartment. Greer had contrived to bandage his nicked shoulder. He stared at Corcoran. "What—?"

"Shelton's still on the loose. He's got a gun. He may be on his way here to finish you!" Corcoran said. "But we'll trap him."

"H-how?"

"Have you got a roscoe? He took mine."

Greer opened a desk drawer. He brought out a revolver. Corcoran snatched it and jammed it three inches into the bank-teller's belly. "The jig's up," he said grimly. "You *bumped Margie*. Where's the dough?"

Greer turned a pasty yellow. "Are you crazy?"

"Like a fox," Corcoran snapped. "Listen. Shelton told the truth tonight when he said you only lost five hundred to him. When he told Margie you never intended to marry her. You were a smart skunk, Greer. You'd never swiped any dough from your bank. That was just a stall to make Margie fall in with your schemes.

"You planned to rob Spot Shelton. He looked like an easy touch. And you did a lot of ground-work before you pulled the strings. You first tried to work through Jackie Allan; but when she wouldn't work with you, you ditched her. You took up with Margie. Margie fell for your line. She really figured you loved her, wanted to marry her. And she believed you when you said Shelton had gypped you out of thirty grand.

"That was a lie. And besides, Shelton's dice are straight. . . . Well, after Margie agreed to help you, you hired me. We pulled the heist; got the dough from Shelton's safe. Shelton made threats. You saw a chance to get the money, be rid of Margie—and pin her murder on Shelton."

Greer gulped noisily. "You're all wrong—"

"Nuts. You swiped Shelton's diamond ring off his finger while he was tied to his chair, knocked out. Then you went ahead to Margie's apartment house. You waited behind that drape. You wore Shelton's ring when you shot Margie. All I saw was your gun-hand—and the ring.

"You didn't drill me. You wanted me alive—so that I could testify it was Shelton's hand I saw holding the murder-gun. You just conked me. When I came to and rushed here to your place, you fired a shot out your window, so I'd hear it. Then you fell on the floor and played possum. You wanted me to think Shelton had come here and drilled you.

"*But the wound in your shoulder was from my bullet, Greer! I winged you when I shot through that drape after you drilled Margie!*"

"No, Corcoran! You're crazy!"

"Nuts! I should have guessed it right away, when I looked at your shoulder the first time. The blood had already started to clot. But I was dumb. I was dumb up to the time Spot Shelton slugged me on the jaw in Jackie Allan's bungalow a little while ago. Then I saw the truth."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Shelton poked me with his right—but it didn't cut my cheek. *He wasn't wearing his ring!*

"That was the tip-off. Maybe somebody else had the ring. Not Jackie Allan, because her hands were smaller than the one I saw through that drape. And why didn't Shelton croak me in Jackie's bungalow when he had the chance? If he'd been guilty, he'd have drilled me to keep me from spilling. Instead, all he did was biff me. He just wanted a chance to get Jackie away—because he thought she was the killer. He loves her; wanted to protect her.

"Okay. Jackie wasn't guilty. *But if Shelton thought she was, it meant he was innocent himself.* Get it? So that cleared everybody but you, Greer.

"You had motive: greed. You had opportunity. And you had my bullet hole through your shoulder. You also had a roscoe—which I just tricked away from you. Got anything to say now?"

GREER snarled: "You'll never take me, Corcoran!" and swatted at the revolver in the private dick's fist.

Corcoran shot him through the other shoulder. "So you'll suffer a little before they burn you," he said. He was thinking of poor little Margie Zaine lying dead because she had loved unwisely. . . .

A search disclosed the thirty thousand dollars that Greer had taken from Margie's handbag. And Corcoran also found Shelton's diamond ring, under Greer's mattress. Corcoran phoned police headquarters. "Come and get the guy that bumped Margie Zaine," he said.

"We've already got him. Spot Shelton. Picked him up with a blonde a while ago."

Corcoran said: "Turn 'em loose. They're clean. And you might tell Shelton that a dumb cluck named Corcoran would like an invite to the wedding. . . ."

→ Well, friends, we have come to the end of our first issue of **CRIME FICTION STORIES**. We have tried to give you the best, most enthralling yarns we could find, and in this handy little size that would be convenient for all our readers. Now we are anxious to know what you think.

**WE
WILL
PAY** **\$ 200**

for every letter published in our forthcoming issues containing interesting and constructive comments. So get busy, readers, and let us hear from you.

THE CASE BOOK

Conducted by Steve R. Bonner

CRIME fans, this is the inside story of how **CRIME FICTION STORIES** came into being. For a long time, the editors of **POCKET DETECTIVE**, **HOLLYWOOD DETECTIVE**, and **PRIVATE DETECTIVE**, have had to reject some wonderful and unusual manuscripts because they did not involve a police officer in the solution of the stories. This bothered us a lot, because these stories were really top-notch in action and suspense, but they just didn't adhere to the policy of the other magazines. Well, Roy Monte of Detroit, Mich., hit the nail on the head with this letter:

"I am a rabid detective and mystery story reader, and I never fail to grab a copy of your magazines as soon as they reach my local newsstand, but one thing always makes me a little annoyed. Why does a private detective or a cop always figure out who the criminal is? Isn't it true, that in real life, many a crime is solved or stopped by an ordinary guy who has no connection at all with the police department? I'm getting a little tired of the tough private op who walks into a corpse, takes a slug of whiskey, and immediately grabs the killer. Why don't you publish a magazine in which there are lots of murders and fights and pretty gals, but where the guy who just happens to be there does the detecting? Also, how about including plenty of crime stories that are different?"

Good advice, and that's exactly what you are going to find in **CRIME FICTION STORIES**. We're not going to limit ourselves to any type of story. So long as it concerns crime, and measures up to our rigid standards of quality, we'll consider it. So let us know what *you* want, write and tell us which stories you liked best and why.



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