

**DOUBLE-ACTION**

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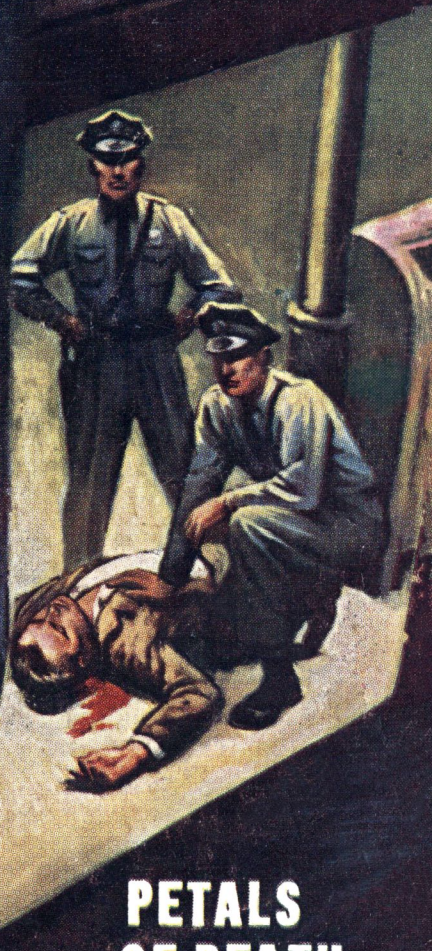
# DETECTIVE

**NEW 2<sup>nd</sup> ISSUE**

**STORIES**

**A  
DOUBLE-ACTION  
POCKETBOOK**

**A  
DOUBLE-ACTION  
POCKETBOOK**



**IN SELF  
DEFENSE**

by **MARGARET  
MANNERS**

**PETALS  
OF DEATH**

by **CREIGHTON WILLIAMS**



**NEW  
2<sup>ND</sup>  
ISSUE**

**DOUBLE-ACTION  
DETECTIVE  
STORIES**

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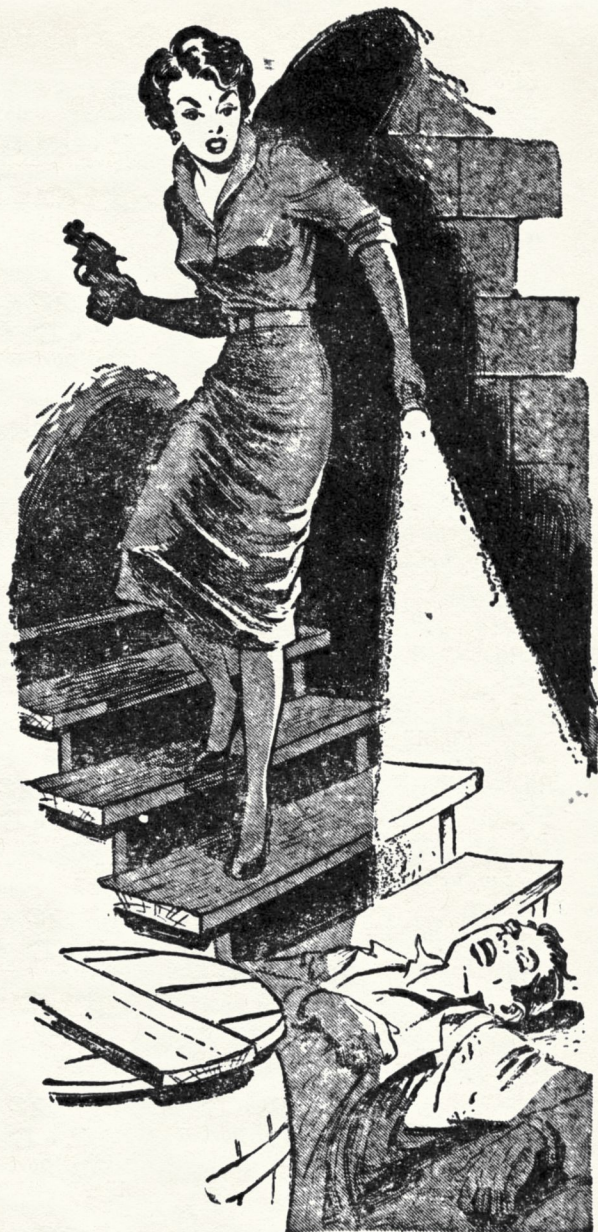


# In Self Defense

*It isn't pleasant  
to be suspected  
even of justifi-  
able homicide!*

*A Novelet*

By  
**MARGARET  
MANNERS**



**T**HE MINUTE she opened her eyes Carol Merrick knew that it was going to be an off day. She was tired, depressed; the thought of getting up and going to the shop made her feel hollow inside. She knew that she had been a coward too long, ignoring the warning signals, pushing away all doubts of Stephen. Now nature was quite properly saying, "Stop! Think! Face it!"



They were all such little things, differences of temperament and outlook. Sometimes she felt as if she were lost, as if, walking a familiar road she had run into a blank wall. Sometimes she was afraid.

Had her inheritance started it? Stephen was proud and independent; she hadn't been tactful about the money. But it had been such a surprise. She had always known that Great Aunt Mildred would leave her the little house near Fielding's Hollow and the personal treasures it contained. But she hadn't realized there would be such a lot of money.

She had been happy and very foolish. "Now we won't have to wait, Steve; we can get married right away."

She had watched the first flush of pleasure fade from his face. "No," he said bleakly, "I can't take your money. We'll wait until I get on my feet."

She had argued, offered to lend him money for office equipment.

"I'm glad for you," he said stiffly. "But I want to give you things myself. Building up a practice takes time and I seem to have a lot of patients who can't pay their bills."

And then the car! Stephen always made fun of his "old bus" but he was proud of it. When he saw the sleek purring thing she'd bought, he said, "Makes the old bus look shabby. Will you let me drive it sometimes, Miss Merrick?" Then he had laughed and kissed her and her discomfort had vanished.

It was funny how everything was linked together. She had needed the car because of the shop, and the shop was another bone of contention. Stephen had been wrong about it, wrong and unreasonable.

"You're not a businesswoman, Carol. You've never had money. Why risk losing it on expensive junk? China, glassware, antiques!" His scorn had hurt.

She had been obstinate; the shop was an old dream that she couldn't give up. She went into partnership with Elizabeth Winters and now after six months it was holding its own nicely. Stephen didn't give her credit for its success. She'd had the luck to get an experienced partner, that was all; he liked Elizabeth. "The right type," he said. "Snob appeal and poise, beauty and brains." Somehow his approval had seemed a criticism of herself. But she had been glad that he was enthusiastic about Elizabeth after all the disagreements they'd had about Malvina Bond.

When she moved into the apartment it was difficult to manage on



what she earned. It was Stephen who suggested sharing with another girl. But from the first he had disliked Malvina, had been pointedly rude to her. Later when she received the money, Stephen's first thought had been to get rid of her apartment-mate.

"But I can't just throw her out because I don't need her now, Steve."

Malvina had remained and Stephen had shown his displeasure by staying away from the apartment.

**T**HERE HAD BEEN good times of course. How gay and amusing he had been on those Sundays when he had driven her out to the house. But the sedate perfection of Aunt Mildred's home had left him cold. "I can't understand your Aunt staying here if she had money, Carol."

At first she thought he meant the loneliness and explained that the house though isolated was not far from town. Besides there had been Martha—companion, friend and only incidentally hired-help. She had pointed out the corner cupboards with their patina of age and polish, the early American glass, the wide pine boards and glowing handmade rugs.

Then she saw that to him these things were unimportant, that he would never understand her reverence for the past and its treasures. He had accepted her tastes with a good-natured shrug. She could have the hooked rugs; he'd take the country air and sunshine.

But there was still one difficulty.

Stephen simply couldn't relax. He had all the city dweller's conviction that a day in the country meant strenuous pleasure. In her passion for privacy, Aunt Mildred had bought up acres of land. The woods and the abandoned quarry were some distance away, but they went with the house and Stephen wanted to swim there. Carol had always hated the gloomy, dangerous spot and said so.

"No one ever goes there, Steve. It's ice cold and very deep; if you got a cramp it would be impossible to climb out."

He had gone in once or twice, pretending to enjoy it, and then with a sheepish grin he had admitted it was too cold for comfort. Stephen was stubborn and domineering, but on those rare occasions when he capitulated he was charming. She would never forget that Sunday when he said, "Carol, I've been stupid. Why should we wait? Sensible people like us ought to be able to work it out. We can get



married and each pay his own share. We'll both work—I at my practice and you at the shop; all right, darling?"

But the struggle had taken the edge off her triumph. She was discovering that it wasn't only the money that divided them. He never bothered to explain things to her; her opinions simply didn't matter. And that was foolish, because there were times when Stephen needed to be told.

That day when the man had stopped them on the street. He had planted himself in their way, his hooded eyes savage and cold.

Without explanation Stephen had pushed her ahead.

Later when he caught up with her, she said, "What a horrible man! He looks like a gangster."

"He is." Stephen spoke absently, "that's Tony Duke."

"Steve!"

"Don't worry; just a patient. He called me in one night."

"But you don't want that kind of patient."

"Of course I don't; but a doctor can't refuse an emergency call. Besides it paid well."

"But he looked so angry."

"Duke's always angry. It's a habit."

Fear gripped her. "Steve . . . You're not in trouble? I know you have to report gunshot wounds to the police . . . you didn't . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake!" he snapped: "I'm not a child. It was an attack of ptomaine, not a gang war. Let's forget it!"

*I'm not a child either*, she thought fiercely. She jumped out of bed and went into the kitchen where Malvina already dressed was having coffee.

CAROL poured herself a cup and wondered how she had managed to get two such beauties in her life as Malvina and Elizabeth. Magazine cover, and Sargent portrait! It was enough to get a girl down. She frowned. What was the matter with her today? Everyday prettiness wasn't exactly a liability; she had her points. She snatched Malvina's hat box from the other chair and sat down heavily.

Malvina raised an eyebrow. "I'm leaving right away. Last minute fill-in on a fashion show. Rehearsal this morning. Hadn't you better get moving, Carol? It's late." And then, "Is something wrong? You look absolutely dismal."

"I didn't sleep well."



"To bad." With her easy egotism Malvina lost interest. But there was something on her mind, she fidgeted, tapped the table, gazed out of the window.

"Look, Carol. I know I've been in your way here. You don't need help with the rent now . . . And . . . Well, your boy friend and I, we strike sparks . . . so . . . A friend of mine is giving up her apartment, it's cheap . . . if it works out I may leave you any day now."

Although it was what she wanted, Carol was irritated. "All right, Mallie."

"I thought you'd be thrilled. Are you sore or something?"

"No." Carol was ashamed of herself. "Just the result of a bad night. I'm glad; you need your own place too."

"Sure." Malvina finished her coffee and stood up. "I'd have to go soon anyway; you and your medico will be setting up house-keeping any day I imagine."

"Don't be too sure of that!" Horrified at what she had said, Carol gulped half a cup of hot coffee.

"Carol!" You aren't going to ditch God's gift to medicine? Oh, brother! Would I like to see that!"

Angry at her indiscretion, Carol lashed out at Malvina. "What a stupid thing to say — just because Stephen told you you were a hypochondriac."

"If he treats all his patients as he treated me, he'll never get anywhere."

"But it was true and you know it. There was nothing wrong with you but late hours and too many cocktails."

"Maybe," Malvina picked up her model's hatbox and swayed to the door. "But a smart doctor gives you a prescription and a little talk. The psychological approach is popular these days, or hadn't you heard?"

The door just missed slamming.

Shaking with anger and humiliation Carol went into the living room and telephoned the shop. "Elizabeth? No, nothing wrong. I just wondered if you could manage without me for the day."

There was a pause filled with unspoken disapproval. "Well, Carol, Janet's here, of course, and she's quite competent, but I have to be out for several hours myself. You know it's important. I was waiting for you to get in."

Remembering all the times Elizabeth had been out while she



stayed in the shop, Carol said, "I've never taken a day off since we opened."

"My dear," Elizabeth's voice was cool. "I was out buying. That was business; you know how one has to hunt and browse for our sort of thing. Aren't you well?"

Carol repeated the lie about not sleeping.

Having made her point Elizabeth was suddenly kind. "Of course, dear. We're not busy; people don't shop for high priced bric-a-brac in this weather. Go to a movie or something, relax."

**A**FTER she had showered and breakfasted Carol put the apartment in order. She wasted an hour arranging bureau drawers and then called Stephen's office. The telephone answering service cut in and offered to take a message. When she tried the modest residential hotel where he lived the switchboard operator said, "No, Miss Merrick; the night man told me he left at five this morning."

Carol murmured her thanks and hung up feeling relieved. If Steve had been called out on an emergency at that hour, it was just as well she didn't reach him. She was in no mood to be tactful and he would be tired and impatient. What she needed was a change of scene. Her perspective was all wrong. She had a momentary idealized vision of Aunt Mildred's house standing in the middle of green fields like a calendar picture. Well, why not? Perhaps she was making a mountain out of a molehill, if so the house would help set her straight. Even if she decided not to marry Stephen right away . . . what of it? It was better to be sure for both their sakes.

She dressed quickly and went down to get the car.

The drive was long and pleasant. She took the back roads, driving slowly, enjoying the countryside.

When she came to what was called the farm road she turned off and followed its long tree-shaded loop behind the house. Going that way she avoided the woods and quarry. She could park under a tree and walk across the field to the back door. It made very little difference anyway, since the road in front of the house was not very much closer. There was no drive up to the front door — just a gate and a footpath.

As she walked through the whirring, chirping grass she felt like a child playing hookey, happy and uneasy at the same time. It was pleasant to run away. But did it really settle anything?



As she approached the house she saw the old berry patch running wild, a tangled mass of brambles in a garden that was already a wilderness. She cut across to see if there were any ripe berries.

Surprisingly there was a gap, almost a crude path recently made into the heart of the patch; brambles had been bent back, grass trodden down. Children perhaps? She listened, pleased with the idea, but there was no sound, no thud of berries dropping in tin pails.

She stopped abruptly staring down at the long deep hole. Certainly no child had dug that. A workman perhaps. It had been dug recently, though the sun had dried and discolored the surface of the earth piled beside the pit. A spade lay there, its blade stained and crusted.

What was it anyway? This was *her* land, and she hadn't ordered any work done. She thought of cisterns, wells, a trap of some kind. But why should anyone dig on her property?

Frowning she studied the long narrow excavation. Someone had spent a lot of time digging it. Of course — workmen had come to the wrong house and discovered their mistake too late. But why hadn't they filled it up again? They'd left a spade; that meant they would return. They were off looking for the right house now. That was it!

She went into the house. But when she put her key in the lock the door opened before she could turn it. She peered in cautiously. The kitchen was in order, the house was still. The new gas stove that used bottled gas, the huge old wood range with the shiny lifter lying beside the round lids, the fruitwood rocker, the table . . . everything was as it should be. But she felt nervous and worried. It didn't seem possible that she could have left the house without locking up properly.

She went immediately to the parlor and took Aunt Mildred's old revolver out of the desk drawer. Did she smell something? Or were her senses simply responding to the suggestion of the unlocked house. She's have to inspect it from top to bottom now. There was no other way to rid herself of this feeling. And with the gun she wasn't afraid.

**S**HE BEGAN with the attic and worked her way down. Nothing anywhere. If anyone had been there he had come and gone like a ghost. There was still the cellar, of course. She had heard of vagrants sleeping in the cellars of unoccupied houses.



Feeling rather foolish she went back to the kitchen and opened the door to the cellar steps. There was no light when she flicked the switch. Bulb burned out, naturally.

She snatched the flashlight from the drainboard and went down the steps.

At the bottom she saw it. Her hand jerked back and the light wavered eerily on the walls. She knew it was no drunk, no sleeping vagrant that lay there. But she pretended that he could hear her, that he would get up sheepishly and go away apologizing. "I'm armed. Get up at once!"

Her voice sounded loud and frightened.

She crossed the few feet of cement and stared down at the back of the dark head. It couldn't be! Stephen was in New York.

She knelt, putting the gun down in order to turn the head toward her. The flesh was warm. "Stephen! Stephen!" she whispered.

What was he doing here?

Had he fallen? She slid her hand under his chest to raise him and snatched it back in horror. He was bleeding!

Her thoughts whirled crazily. The gun had been fired then. Stephen was dead. He'd been shot. Why was he here? Why . . .? The floor dipped away from her into blackness, she closed her eyes fighting to conquer the sickening dizziness.

He'd been dead only a little while; the murderer couldn't be far away. But not in the house, she'd been through the house.

She forced herself to look again. Stephen was dead! He'd fallen, scattering the piled-up papers that were kept for kindling. He . . . She struggled to her feet and felt something crunch under the sole of her shoe. Glass. Had he broken his wristwatch? What did it matter? He'd been killed. She had to get the police; she must remember to tell them that she had handled the gun.

She was shaking violently. The blood on her hand . . . She reached blindly for one of the scattered newspapers. Her hand closed on something smooth and stiff. She scrubbed her fingers with it, sobbing.

Water! Crumpling the useless paper in her fist she ran up the steps, her heart pounding.

*Lift one of the lids! Push the stained paper into the stove! Now wash your hands!*

Without waiting to dry them she ran out of the house across the field to the car.



**"PLEASE!"** she said. "Please Officer!"

He was a tall fair man in a state trooper's uniform. She knew him . . . had seen him in town many times. Just as she pulled up, he came out of the building.

"Miss Merrick!" Upset as she was, it astonished her that he should seem so glad to see her.

She must have said something about murder for his eyes changed. What was he staring at? Blood! There was blood on her skirt.

She tried to explain and felt herself helped out of the car and into the building. And then somehow they were in his office and she was telling him and he was taking notes.

"It was murder," she said. "That hole was a grave; they were going to bury him."

"They?"

"Whoever did it. I don't know."

She explained again about the gun, about her fingerprints.

"It was probably wiped before it was put back in the drawer," he said kindly.

And then he was telling her that he had to get the medical examiner and go to the house. He was going to leave her with the doctor's wife, Faith Birch, who was her husband's nurse. "You've had a shock. I don't think you'd better try to come with us."

He drove her there and handed her over to a pretty middle-aged woman in a white uniform. "Make her some strong coffee, Faith; well be back as soon as we can."

The hours passed. Mrs. Birch came in and out. With coffee. With sandwiches. With a word of encouragement and a smile. "Charlie Millen's a fine man, one of the best investigators in the state. He has quite a reputation. You mustn't worry, my dear; I'm sure it will be all right."

"Yes," Carol said. "He's very kind. I can see that."

**WHEN HE RETURNED** the Lieutenant's manner had changed as he said, "I'm ready now to take your statement, Miss Merrick."

"But I already told you everything."

"Look, I'm giving you a chance, Miss Merrick. That wasn't official. This will be; tell the truth this time."

"But I did."



"Never mind. I'll ask the questions. You didn't plan to come here today?"

"I told you. I came on the spur of the moment. Business was slow; I took a day off."

"You still say you drove here alone? Dr. Fenton wasn't with you?"

"I came alone."

"Then," the lieutenant said softly, "how did he get here?"

"Why . . . I suppose he drove out. He had a car."

"There was no car anywhere near the house. We looked on all the roads."

"By train then?"

"We checked with the bus people and at the station. Strangers are noticed in a town this size. He didn't come into town at all."

"The little local stop at Fielding. He could have got off there and walked to the house. It's quite near."

"There's only one train stops daily at Fielding. One passenger got off there today. A woman."

"What are you trying to make me say? Whoever killed him must have driven him here. It wasn't I."

"You took the gun from the desk drawer. You said it smelled as if it had been fired. Yet you didn't look to see if one of the cartridges was missing?"

"But it wasn't a pronounced odor. I thought I was imagining things because I'd found the door unlocked."

"Yet you were worried enough to go over the house?"

"Yes."

"You didn't fire the gun?"

"No."

"There are no fingerprints but yours."

"But I told you why I took it. Do you think I shot him? That I dug that grave? If I had would I come to the police? Wouldn't I have buried him and gone away?"

"No," he said. "You didn't dig the grave; Dr. Fenton did."

"What?" She stared at him, thunderstruck.

"There's no doubt about it. He wasn't used to that kind of work. His hands were blistered."

"But that's impossible. He wouldn't dig his own grave . . . He didn't shoot himself . . . I mean . . ." She was too confused to go on.

"The grave," Millen said slowly, "was meant for you."



**S**HE WAS speechless. The man was mad. Everything he said was mad.

"Why don't you tell the truth? There's no reason to lie. You're hurting not helping yourself. Can't you see that?"

"But how could the grave be meant for me? It's too horrible to . . . Besides, I've told you, Stephen didn't know I was coming. I didn't know myself until the last minute."

"You're not thinking straight. For our own good, let me remind you that self-defense is justifiable homicide."

"Look," she said wearily, "this is crazy. You act as if you're trying to help me, but you say the most awful things. Why don't you tell me what you think happened?"

"All right, I will." He looked relieved, as if at last she was being reasonable. "At first I thought you drove out together. But I can't understand how he could have risked letting you see him dig the grave. He must have come out earlier and asked you to meet him there."

"But you said he didn't come by bus or train," she reminded him.

"I know. But he could have come out in your car alone. And you could be the woman who got off at Fielding."

"That can be checked," she said feeling more sure of herself. "What makes you think Stephen was going to kill me?"

"The hypodermic, of course!"

"What hypodermic? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, stop acting. Stop protecting him, he said angrily. "Isn't it enough that he wanted to kill you? It was broken, and the stuff had leaked out, but there was enough. We've had no test made yet, but the doctor is sure. The poison has a characteristic odor."

"You think Stephen was going to poison me?"

"When he called you down the cellar . . . You took the gun with you. That's the one weakness; it looks premeditated. But if you'd found the grave, if he was behaving strangely, and you were frightened." He seemed to be pleading with her to agree with him. "Then it would be natural for you to take the gun to protect yourself."

She shook her head not trusting herself to speak.

"Or when he said the bulb was burned out and asked for the flashlight . . . There was nothing wrong with the bulb, of course. He'd loosened it himself. Perhaps you'd changed it recently and you knew it couldn't be burned out, so you were afraid and took the gun. When



he came at you with the hypo you fired. He was shot at close range. It didn't occur to you to bury him; you were too upset. You came here with the only story you could think of. You little idiot, can't you see you're better off with the truth. The evidence confirms a self-defense killing."

"You're the idiot," she blazed. "Why should Stephen have wanted to kill me?"

"Don't you know? My guess is that he was criminally insane."

"Oh!" His stubborn gentleness exasperated her. "What are you going to do? Put me in jail?"

"Not yet; I hope I won't have to. At the moment you don't trust me. You think I'm trying to railroad you into a damaging admission. Listen, and try to understand. I have a personal interest in trying to help you. I don't want you punished, and I don't want you hurt."

"A personal interest?" She was amazed.

He said, "It sounds foolish. I wouldn't tell you if I didn't think it would help. For a long time now I've wanted to get to know you. I've watched you in town, but I've never had an excuse to talk to you. I thought you'd be offended if I tried . . . And then last week when I ran into your fiance . . . I didn't know you were engaged until then . . . I was disappointed . . . I knew it was no use."

**S**HE LOOKED at him curiously. It might be so. He might have been interested. He had certainly greeted her with a surprising amount of enthusiasm. But that bit about Stephen. That wasn't true.

She said, "You saw Dr. Fenton last week?"

He opened his eyes wide. "But he must have told you; it was Wednesday. I often drive by your place hoping to see you. When I saw him coming out of the house I stopped and spoke to him. I didn't know who he was or what he might be doing. He introduced himself, said you were busy in the house, that you'd both driven out for the day."

"But that's not so, we never came out except on Sunday. It couldn't have been Stephen."

"It was the man whose body I just saw. And you were there; he called to you as I drove off."

She said, "If you like me and want to help me, why won't you believe me? I haven't been here with Steve at all lately, and I've never been here on a weekday before. I didn't shoot him. I found



the gun in the drawer, and his body in the cellar. I know nothing about the hypodermic. I can't imagine why Steve dug the grave, but I know it wasn't meant for me. He didn't try to kill me. I'm not lying. If I were I'd do a better job of it."

"Can't you see that self-defense . . ." Millen stopped abruptly and shook his head. "What's the use? You're in a state of shock now. I want the doctor to look at you. You're to stay here overnight. In the morning we'll try again."

"But I can't. I'm due at the shop tomorrow morning."

"You can telephone from here. Get a good rest, and try not to stew over it. It wasn't your fault, whatever happened."

**M**RS. BIRCH whisked into the room as Millen left. Telephone. Of course. She led Carol into the doctor's office, indicated the phone and discreetly withdrew.

Janet's voice answered her call. No, Elizabeth wasn't there; she'd gone out shortly after Carol left. Yes, everything was fine, they could manage easily.

As she put down the phone Carol heard the doctor's voice polite but firm from the inner room. "If you're ready, Miss Merrick?"

He felt her pulse and studied her for a moment. Obviously she needed quiet and rest. In her present keyed-up condition she'd need help in order to relax. "My wife will put you to bed and give you a light supper. Then I want you to take a sleeping pill. By morning I think you'll . . ." He let the words trail off, smiling encouragingly.

An hour later she was lying in the guest room in a borrowed nightgown. Mrs. Birch came in to get the tray. "If you'll just take this? She held out a glass of water and a pill.

Carol took it docilely, made a quick gesture toward her mouth, swallowed water and handed back the glass. The sleeping pill remained hidden in her hand.

She didn't want to sleep yet. The pieces were coming together in her mind. The answer was there waiting for her. She had only to think.

Stephen had dug the grave. That was a fact; she had to accept it. Well, then, he had been forced to do it. And who would make a man dig his own grave? Criminals, gangsters! Stephen *had* treated a bullet wound that night at Tony Duke's, a wound that was proof of a crime, murder probably. Perhaps Stephen had been warned to keep quiet



but they couldn't trust him. So he had been called on a fake emergency at five o'clock that morning.

He had dug the grave, working slowly, playing for time. Somehow he had managed to fill the hypodermic and kept it hidden, but he had been shot when he tried to use it. Her arrival had interrupted them before they could bury the body.

But she had to have proof. If she told such a story now, who would believe her? Yet . . . if Stephen had been able to fill the hypodermic he might have managed to leave a message; she had to go back to the house.

As soon as it was dark she slipped out of bed and dressed without turning on the light. The murderers would be miles away by now. There was no danger, and she wasn't sure enough to ask Millen to go with her.

Quietly she opened the bedroom door and listened. A radio was playing softly downstairs. They'd be in the living room, listening. She went down the back stairs and into the kitchen. It was dark but she could see the shapes of things in the grayness. She inched her way to the door.

She found the car where Millen had parked it. No one stopped her. A few people passed on the street intent upon their own affairs.

**A**S SHE DROVE she wondered why she felt so little grief. Or was this numbness a kind of grief, a frozen grief that would melt, when the shock passed, into sharp pain? She wanted to feel sorrow. Her thoughts of Stephen had been so disloyal that morning, she wanted to give him that last gift of love.

When she reached the house it looked peaceful and friendly in the rising moonlight.

She was on the porch, the key in the lock, before she remembered that the police would probably have taken away the flashlight that had her fingerprints on it. She didn't want to light up the house and advertise her presence.

Leaving the door open she ran back to the car and found the flashlight she kept in the glove compartment.

She went straight to the kitchen, lifted the stove lid and reached in. There were scraps of paper, a cereal box, burned matches . . . Millen couldn't have found it. He'd have said . . .



Then she saw it, crumpled and wedged in the grate. She spread it out on the stove trying not to touch the dried smears.

Stephen's handwriting! Thank God! He'd been able to . . .

In amazement she read the first words and turned to the signature. But this — this was a love letter!

The kitchen light clicked on above her head, a familiar voice said, "So that's where it was!"

Carol couldn't speak. The pattern was broken. The pieces flew apart.

"I thought I might have dropped it outside, but I couldn't be sure. No, leave it there! Step away from the stove! That's it."

A brightly-manicured hand shot forward and grabbed the letter. "Now I can go away. No one will ever know."

Carol looked into the fierce bright eyes and then down at the kitchen knife. It was sharp as a surgical too. Stephen had honed it for her one Sunday.

"I took it out of the drawer when I heard you at the door," Malvina Bond said. Her voice was nervously triumphant, sharp with hysteria. "You were a long time coming in. Were you scared?"

"I . . . I went back for a flashlight." Through the fog of stupefaction Carol tried to think. "You and Stephen; I thought you disliked each other."

"You poor damn fool. The first night he saw me at your apartment . . . it was so strong it almost threw us both. That was why the sparks flew. We were trying to hide it."

"And then you went to his office. But he didn't tell you you were a hypochondriac . . . that was made up just for me, wasn't it?"

"We couldn't help what happened," Malvina said fiercely. "We tried to be careful for your sake. He never came to the apartment if he could avoid it. He wrote to me at the agency. We saw each other all the time. He was going to break it off with you."

"Why didn't he? Why did he go on deceiving me?"

"Don't be a fool, Carol. You came into an unexpected inheritance. Steve had extravagant habits — but maybe you didn't know about that. Anyway he needed money. Oh, don't look like that. He was fond of you in his way. Thought you'd make a good doctor's wife. Your Stevie was no angel, he was a hard boy. But he didn't realize I was as tough as he was. I wasn't going to let him marry you. I forced him to keep meeting me. And he began to hate me, I think. He was



so afraid you'd find out. We used to come up here sometimes in the middle of the week when we knew you were at the shop. He had to do what I wanted. He was afraid I'd tell you. And I had his letters; I was so mad about him then and I thought he'd see it my way if I gave him time. But after a while I couldn't take it. I knew I'd lost him. I asked him to give me some money so that I could go away. He was delighted."

"You blackmailed him!"

"It wasn't blackmail. I was getting out of his way, I was entitled to something, wasn't I? It was he who asked for the letters and offered me two thousand dollars. He could just as well have said twenty. He never intended to give me anything."

**M**ALVINA'S bitterness poured from her. She'd had no time to explore Stephen's perfidy. And now in explaining it to Carol she was explaining it to herself. She accused him and justified herself.

"He smiled and lied to me, and all the time he intended to *murder* me. He said an old friend of yours here in town had offered to lend him money for office equipment. He promised to get the money for me. I was to bring the letters and we'd have one last day together. I took the local to Fielding and walked through the woods past the quarry. I should have known, it was all so carefully planned. But I never dreamed . . . And then after what you said this morning I knew I had to get the money before you told him . . ."

"I don't understand. Before I told him what?"

"That you weren't going to marry him. If he knew that, he wouldn't give me anything for the letters. I called his apartment before I caught the train to make sure. But he'd gone all right, at five this morning. I don't know why he left so early."

"I do," Carol said, shivering.

But Malvina wasn't listening, she was feverishly intent on reliving her tragedy. "He said he had the money and took the letters from me. Then he asked me to wait a few minutes. He'd found a bad leak in the cellar and he had to fix it! He called me to bring the flashlight down to him. There was something in his voice, as if he were terribly keyed-up and trying to hide it. I was afraid. I'd seen the gun in the drawer when I was here before so I took it."

"He was so quick with the hypo I was almost too late." Malvina shuddered. "After I'd shot him I took the letters from his pocket. I



was shaking all over and my hands were full. I guess I dropped the letter then. I thought I'd get his car, he'd parked it near the quarry, that I'd put his body in and drive it into the water. I wiped the gun and put it back . . . it was all mixed like a dream . . . and then as I was putting the flashlight back in the kitchen I saw you through the window.

"I didn't know what to do. His doctor's bag was there open on the kitchen table. I thought if I could leave things in order, you wouldn't go down the cellar, that you'd never know. Then you went into the berry patch and I had time to stuff the letter in his bag and go out through the front door. I got rid of the car in the quarry. And then I found a letter was missing. When you ran out of the house I knew you'd found him, that you'd get the police, but I had to find the letter. I went in and looked . . . they came back . . . I had to hide again . . . I thought I'd go crazy . . ." She looked down at the knife she held. "Now I'll have to . . ."

"No, Mallie," Carol tried to keep her voice steady. "You won't have to. You mustn't. The other was self-defense . . ."

"Nobody would believe it."

"There's proof. The hypodermic!"

"They'd say I planted it there afterwards."

"But the grave, Mallie! They know he dug the grave."

"What grave? What are you talking about?"

"He was going to . . . to bury you in the berry patch. That's why he came so early, he needed time and it was safer early in the morning. They know. His hands were blistered."

Malvina shook with fury. "You're lying."

"I can show you. It proves your story; it will only take a minute."

**M**ALVINA stared at her blankly and then a soft cunning smile transformed her face. "All right. Show me. Take the light and go first; I'll be right behind you." The knife glittered as she raised it.

Carol picked up the light and went to the door. She must be calm and reassuring. It was Malvina's terror that she had to fear, that last desperate stage of panic that would plunge a knife into her back if she spoke the wrong word or made the wrong move.

They went in silence through the weeds of the dark garden.

In front of the patch Carol stopped and pointed. "It's in there, through that gap."



"Keep going."

And then there was nothing more she could do. The grave was at her feet there was a sharp intake of breath behind her and she knew that she had lost. One thrust, one push . . . "Don't," she whispered. "They know it's here; they'll find me."

"But they won't find me, Carol. They'll never figure it out. I'll take your car and leave it somewhere near the city." Her voice grew vicious and full of hate. "It was your fault, all your fault."

"Drop that knife and put up your hands!"

It was Millen's voice. There were noises and a blaze of light.

She heard the struggle behind her, but could not turn. And then as she swayed an arm caught her.

Millen said, "It's all right, Carol; you're safe."

She felt herself lifted and carried. She said, "But how did you . . .?"

"Birch telephoned when you left. We followed. You'd shaken my theory with your denials and I thought I'd just see what you were up to."

He helped her into the car.

Malvina was screaming. She put her hands over her ears to shut out the sound. The police car pulled out. Suddenly the night was still again.

Millen started the car. "I'll drop you off at the doctor's now. Tomorrow morning I'll be over to drive you back to the city."

"Oh, no, you mustn't. You can't take the time. I . . ."

"Oh, yes I can. When you drove up this afternoon I was just starting my vacation. I postponed it to take care of you."

"Thank you," she said unsteadily. "You're very kind."

"No. I was an interested party; I still am."

She didn't say anything.

"You'd better take the pill this time," he advised. "Get a good night's rest. Tomorrow we'll talk it all out and close the book."





*Again, and again it  
happened—a shower  
of gardenia petals  
falling on the body  
of a murdered girl!*

# Petals of Death

By  
CREIGHTON  
WILLIAMS

**F**INGER-LIKE shadows of the buildings lay across Market Street as I swung into a drug store to call the city desk. Ordinarily, on an afternoon paper, our day is done when the final edi-





tion is put to bed; but today I had been out on a hit-and-run case and the sun was sinking into the Pacific by the time I was through.

Ray, the city editor, answered.

"Ray, this is Bill. Anything cooking?"

"Yeah. I've got a little job for you."

"That's what you think. The only little job I want right now is to go home, take off my shoes, mix myself a martini and sit down."

"This is one you'll be interested in, though."

"Okay. What's up?"

"The petals have fallen again!"

"No!" I fairly shouted into the phone. "When did it happen?"

"About thirty minutes ago. We're making over the front page and rolling an extra."

"Same district?" I asked.

"Yes. About three blocks from where they found the Robinson girl. Address is 3241 Hillcrest Drive. Are you going out?"

"I'm on my way. If I find out anything I'll phone it in to re-write."

I hung up the receiver and stood for a minute, thinking. I knew what Ray meant when he said "*The petals have fallen again.*" I could still see the living room of that fashionable Nob Hill apartment where I had stood nearly a year ago looking at the lovely Mary Robinson. Lovely . . . and dead! And, fluttering gently in the soft breeze from the open window, across her body was a cascade of petals! Gardenia petals!

Since that scene so many months ago I had seen a repeat performance! Twice I had written the story for the paper and almost in each case the story was the same! A lovely young girl . . . a fashionable apartment in San Francisco's swanky Nob Hill section . . . shot through the heart at close range . . . her body showered with gardenia petals . . . killer or killers unknown!

The extra had hit the street by the time I got out of the drug store. I picked one up from the boy and read the banner.

### GARDENIA KILLER STRIKES AGAIN!

Scarcely glancing at the story I called a cab and gave him the Hillcrest Drive address. As we swung around a cable car and started the long climb up Powell Street, I leaned back and read what little the paper had found out. The details were the same. Same setting, same section, same shot through the heart . . . and the same shower of gardenia petals!



ONCE AGAIN, like so many times before, I got to thinking about this strange aspect of the cases. What had gardenias to do with the murders? Why the fallen petals so carefully picked off and showered over the victims? It was as though the murderer knew he would become remorseful after each killing, and in knowing that, brought his own flowers for the dead! Or could it be some psychopathic maniac with a fixation for gardenias and lovely young girls — some distorted mind in which this peculiar quirk was so strong that it could only be satisfied with death as a culmination?

Once again I ran over the similarities of the deaths. Young girls . . . beautiful girls . . . girls who were well known in the debutante set . . . girls who could have chosen from a score of eligible admirers. There was Mary Robinson, a charming brunette and member of the Junior League, whose father was head of a large ship-building company. And then, Sally Andrews, a vivacious redhead who had turned down offers from several film companies. And now, raven-haired Joyce Lane with the big, lustrous brown eyes, with whom every bachelor in town was in love — just out of college and yet with a novel already rapidly climbing the best-seller lists.

Time after time these thoughts ran through my mind but I could find no connection — no definite parallel that would provide a clue. Nothing except one thing . . . gardenia petals!

And what a clue! A killer at large in a big city . . . three murders and possibly more to come . . . lives whose fate rested upon a flower that is sold on practically every street in San Francisco!

The cab pulled up in front of the apartment house. Already policemen were holding back the crowd milling around in front. I saw two reporters from the other papers and our own photographer, Bud Hawkins. The apartment house was one of those tall, white buildings overlooking the bay. Well-kept grounds and shrubbery amidst which was a small pool and fountain indicated its expensiveness. I showed my press card to the sergeant at the door and was let in. Across the large foyer a door was partly open — its number 1-A engraved on a brass plate directly over the card which read *Joyce Lane*. I moved into the apartment. Bud was already taking pictures and Lieutenant John Howe of the Homicide Bureau was giving instructions to one of his force. He motioned me to come over.

"Well, Bill. It's the same thing all over again."

"Looks like it," I agreed.



I looked around the room. Nothing was out of place. No furniture disarranged, no drawers opened. Everything was exactly as it should be except for the body on the floor. Lying in the middle of the room, her face calm and restful in death was Joyce Lane. She was dressed in an afternoon dress of black shantung that complemented her black hair parted in the middle and drawn to the back of her neck. There was little blood — just a small dark splotch under her left breast. The black dress accentuated her pallor-white features and, matching the whiteness of her face were the gardenia petals strewn over her body . . . fluttering in the soft Pacific breeze from the open window.

"Just like the others," the Lieutenant muttered, a grim look on his usually pleasant face. "Just like the others. Shot through the heart apparently with a small calibre gun! Lying practically in the same position . . . with those same damn gardenias! Look at her! No expression of horror or surprise on her face! It must have been someone she knew!"

He turned to me, "What do you make of it, Bill?"

"I don't know," I admitted, "it's got me up a tree."

"Me too. And the Commissioner is raising hell! Bill, do me a favor. Take it easy on us in your story. Tell 'em we've got a lead! Tell 'em anything but make them think we're doing something! We're bound to get a break in this soon!"

"Okay," I said, "I'll go as light as I can. But remember, give me a fast break on the story if anything turns up."

**I** LEFT the apartment; I had to get out of there. I knew how the Lieutenant felt. I walked down the hill to the Mark Hopkins. I went up to the *Top O' The Mark* and ordered a drink. I wanted to think. It was dark now and through the huge plate glass windows of the famous circular cocktail lounge you could see the city getting ready for the night, the soft shadows of the now-empty office buildings sharply silhouetted against a softer sky . . . the flashing of traffic signals on the streets below . . . the flickering of neons . . . the dark, blackish mass of mountains surrounding the city and, as an attractive centerpiece, the jewel-like chain of the Bay Bridge lights nestling gracefully over the bay like a beautiful, glamorous necklace. Out there, in that land of jeweled lights and shadows was a phantom who was ready to kill — whose only clue to its ghost-like existence was a love . . . or hate, for gardenias!



Days passed with no indication of any break. The public was thoroughly aroused — was clamoring for action. Letters to the press and the police voiced the people's indignation over the crimes and the apparent inability of the police to find the killer.

One afternoon, late, I stopped in at the Police Commissioner's office. He had personally taken complete charge of the investigation. He looked at me hopefully, as though maybe I had dug up something that would help. But there was nothing I could do. I told him I hadn't found a thing.

"I can't get it, Bill," he said. "We've done everything. We've questioned every flower seller and florist shop in the city. We've looked suspiciously at everyone we see with a gardenia . . . and that takes a lot of looking."

"Have you checked into the girls' friends, their lives, habits, etc.?" I asked. It was a routine question. I knew he had.

He shook his head. "Everything leads completely to a dead end. And I don't mean to be funny. They were all nice girls, leading normally active lives. They ran around mostly in the same set. You know, active in sports, in clubs . . . the same pattern of social life, parties, dances, etc."

"I know. Nob Hill fashion. And speaking of parties, I've got to cover one up there this evening. Some big advertising agency man from New York. Must have landed a new client and wants to start him off with a good press. I'll let you know if I run across anything worth looking into."

**T**HE PARTY WAS in full swing when I arrived. Someone said hello, shoved a martini in my hand and whirled away to greet another guest. I looked around the room. I knew most of the people there, casually, having met them around town at clubs, business meetings and other events. Mostly they were top-flight business executives, some of whom had been transferred from Eastern offices to assume highly-paid responsibilities of Western operations for their companies. There was a scattering of movie people, a few from the literary set and one or two of the inevitable cocktail chasers. It was a mixed crowd — a crowd, I suddenly thought, such as the ones in which you'd have found Mary Robinson . . . or Sally Andrews . . . or Joyce Lane!

With suddenly awakened interest I looked over the party carefully.



Making a mental note to bring up the gardenia murders if I found an opening, I began classifying the guests. John Harrison was the host. He had been transferred from New York a few years earlier as Western Sales Manager for his company. Possibly in his late forties, slightly greying at the temples and of athletic build, he had the reputation of being something of a playboy. Right at the moment he seemed to be doing a good job of upholding his reputation. He was being especially attentive to a very attractive blonde, a promising young movie starlet who had just finished a picture that was a box office sensation. She was now being considered for a part in a new Broadway play. I noticed she was wearing a gardenia corsage!

I soon located Harrison's wife, Rita. Slightly younger than her husband, there was no difficulty realizing that Rita Harrison had once been an extremely beautiful woman. Of dark complexion, with hair now slightly showing strands of grey, there was an energy about her that belied her slender build. She was hurrying about in a rather nervous manner, flitting from one guest to another, assuring herself that everyone was getting the proper attention.

Young, handsome and a member of a prominent New York family, Randolph had entered the advertising business upon finishing Yale and within a very few years had made a fortune. It was rumored among advertising circles that he sometimes was not too ethical in obtaining his accounts; but there was no question that he demanded, and received, considerable respect in business and social life. Now he was talking seriously to Rita Harrison.

Somebody put another martini in my hand and I turned to see Marian Carter. Marian and I had gone to the same college.

"Hello," she said, "so you finally decided to make an evening of it. I hope you're alone. You can take me out to *The Show Boat* when this is over."

"No, to your first statement," I answered, "yes, to the second and maybe to the last. Actually I'm here to do a story on William Randolph. He was on the front cover of a national magazine last week."

"Quite a guy the way the women are chasing after him. Let me tell you about him."

**W**HILE she was giving me the latest about Randolph I let my attention center upon Marian. Not excitingly pretty, she had nevertheless used what she had to the best advantage. Curly, blonde



hair usually cut in wind-blown effect with blue eyes and an infectious smile, she was one of the most popular of the debutante set. Her evening gown was strapless . . . and inviting. At her waist was a gardenia corsage!

"You're not paying a bit of attention to me," she pouted.

"On the contrary," I grinned. "Aren't you a little nervous though about wearing gardenias?"

Before she could answer a tall, slender fellow came over.

"Marian," he said, "where have you been? I've been looking for you."

"Oh hello, Marty. You know Bill."

I knew Marty Lawson. Scion of an old San Francisco family he had long ago established the fact that he did nothing. . . .

"Gardenias!" he exclaimed; "my favorite flower!"

Reaching down he tenderly grasped a petal and let it fall to the floor.

"You love me." And, as he picked another, "You love me not!"

I looked at Marian. Her face was drained of color. She opened her lips, and closed them. Finally, "Marty," she gasped, "No Marty . . . No!"

He laughed. They walked away together. I thoughtfully watched them as they lost themselves in the crowd and suddenly I became aware that Rita Harrison, a bewildered expression on her face, had been watching the whole scene. I looked for John Harrison but couldn't find him. Nor the blonde! I saw Rita turn and move to the french windows opening onto the terrace. It was a warm night and they were open. She stepped out into the shadows. Interested, I moved closer where I could see her.

She was standing motionless, staring intently at the farther end of the terrace. She was hardly discernible in the darkness of the terrace corner. Her hand moved up to her throat. I thought she was ill and stepped forward toward the open window, then stopped suddenly. Quickly I moved over, half hidden by the heavy drapes.

Her face was as a mask, her features frozen in their expressionless hardness. Only her eyes were alive and even in the semi-darkness I could sense deadly scorn and hatred! For a long moment she stood there. Her hand moved slowly upward, clasped the gardenia in her hair and with almost automatic movement she brought it down and slowly began picking the petals from the flower!



Her eyes were still straight ahead and in scarcely audible tones she whispered, "He loves me, He loves me not . . . He loves me, He loves me not," as each petal floated gracefully to the floor. A cold chill went all through me as I knew that I was watching the autograph of a psychotic murderess!

**F**ORGETTING Randolph, I casually walked to the door and out of the house. A cab was passing, which I flagged, and gave the address of the Commissioner's home. He was in his library and I told him all I had seen and heard.

"It may be and it may not be," the Commissioner said, "but we can't take chances. It looks like the break we've been waiting for but we've no proof of anything."

He turned to the phone and called the Homicide Bureau.

"Teletype the New York police," he instructed the officer on duty. "Get me all the available information, if any, on Rita Harrison, wife of John Harrison who is Vice-President of Harrison-Smith Corporation. Harrison formerly lived in New York, and is now in charge of the Western Division of his company. Also, get me a complete file on the activities of Marty Lawson for the past few months."

The Commissioner turned to me.

"We will have to wait until morning. In the meantime, if this is it, we have no time to lose. There may be more petals falling at any minute! Who is she?"

I knew what he meant! The blonde!

"She is Carolyn Adams," I told him, "a movie starlet under contract with one of the film companies, I don't know which. She's probably still at the Harrison's."

"See if you can get her to the phone. Then I'll talk with her."

I dialed the number. One of the men answered and I asked for Miss Carolyn Adams. Over the receiver I could hear the noise of the party . . . the clinking of glasses. I heard him shout, "Carolyn." In a few minutes a girl's voice answered.

"Miss Adams?" I asked.

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Just a minute," I answered, and gave the phone to the Commissioner.

"Miss Adams, this is Police Commissioner Avery. Please listen but don't express any surprise. Carry on our conversation in a normal



tone of voice. I would like for you to leave the party, get a cab and come immediately to the Homicide Bureau in City Hall. No, don't say anything yet. You know of the three murders which have happened in the Nob Hill section within recent months. We hope we are wrong but we have every reason to believe you may be intended for the fourth. You need protection quickly. We will explain when you get to the Bureau. Do you understand?"

I could hear the voice over the receiver, "Yes, I understand."

"Good. Don't tell anyone where you are going."

**T**RAFFIC was heavy. It seemed to take hours to get to City Hall. Actually it was only a few minutes. Miss Adams was waiting. We went into the Commissioner's office.

"I'm glad you came, Miss Adams, and if we are correct in our suspicions, you'll be glad you came too." The Commissioner lowered his voice. "What I told you over the phone is true. I can't go into details but from evidence which we have discovered tonight we sincerely believe your life may be in danger. It is important that you have protection immediately. If you do as we say . . . if you cooperate with us, I can assure you nothing will happen."

"I don't know what this is all about, but I'll do whatever you wish." Carolyn Adams was obviously scared.

"Fine," replied the Commissioner. "First, take off that gardenia corsage."

Hastily, she unpinned the flower and threw it in the wastebasket.

"Now," said the Commissioner, "what are your plans for the next week or ten days?"

"I was leaving tomorrow morning by plane for New York. I'm being considered for a part in a show and I'm to meet the producer. Unless, of course, you want me to do something else."

"No. You'll be safe if you're out of town. We will drive you tonight to the St. Francis. Go in and ask for the hotel manager. He has a room reserved for you . . . compliments of the police department. Tomorrow morning you will be taken home to get your luggage and then to the airport. Don't be afraid. You will be perfectly safe now, but do not go anyplace or contact anyone tonight. Okay?"

We dropped Carolyn Adams at the St. Francis. We saw her go in and go up to the hotel desk. We waited until we saw her talking to the manager.



"Do you think she will do as you say?" I asked.

"I know she will; she's scared. I'll have a man watching her room all night. Any phone calls, to or from the room, will be reported to me immediately. She'll be all right now."

"Okay. What's the next move?"

"We can do nothing until we hear from New York. But . . . if we get the right answer here's the plan. Harrison is the type of man that will go for any girl who gives him a play. So is Marty Lawson. So far, we have nothing on either but we may do some pinpointing by the process of elimination. In case you don't know it, the police department has some beautiful, young girls as members. Smart, too! I will arrange for one to start work tomorrow in the Harrison-Smith offices with the help of the Personnel Manager and without arousing any suspicion. I will also arrange that she is placed where Harrison will notice her. She will be instructed to see that he does. Follow me?"

"Sure," I replied.

"I will also see, if it's necessary, that Rita Harrison 'discovers' the situation. Understand?"

"Yes. Just don't forget. I'm on an afternoon paper. Set the stage at the right time."

"Okay," he laughed, "let's go home."

**T**HE NEXT morning I went over to Avery's office.

"Here's the answer from New York, Bill," he said.

RE TELETYPE RITA HARRISON. OUR FILES SHOW RITA HARRISON CONFINED TO MENTAL INSTITUTION FOR ONE YEAR. SEVERE CYCLOID PERSONALITY. UNDER EXTREME EMOTIONALISM WOULD REVERT TO CHILDISH FANTASY. RELEASED APPARENTLY CURED.

I looked at the Commissioner. He nodded his head.

"We've got what we want. Our girl starts to work tomorrow morning. It will take a few weeks. Let me know where I can reach you at any time."

Three weeks later, the Commissioner called.

"Tomorrow morning," he said. "Rita Harrison called our police girl and wants to see her at 9 o'clock. Everything's ready."

I was at the girls' apartment the next morning at 8:30. The stage



was set. There was a police officer in a small wardrobe just at the right of the entrance. Another was in the apartment bedroom. It was exactly 9 o'clock when the apartment bell sounded. The Commissioner and I slipped quickly into another bedroom.

The police girl said, "Come in."

It was 9:01. The door slowly opened and Rita Harrison walked into the room. She was dressed in a light linen suit. She held a large handbag in front of her, covering her right hand. Again I saw that strange, terrifying mask of a face and the burning eyes.

She took one step forward. In a flat, monotone voice she spoke. "I know all about you and John," she said, "and I've come to make sure you don't take him away from me!"

The girl started to answer. I noticed the Commissioner had his gun leveled at Rita Harrison.

"No, don't try to answer," she said, "I'm going to do this my way!"

She slowly drew her right hand from behind the handbag. In it was a small pistol! Suddenly the wardrobe door opened. Rita Harrison whirled, but too late! The policeman grabbed her arm. . . .

**R**ITA HARRISON sat on the couch. She slumped against the back and wearily closed her eyes.

"Yes," she said, "I killed the others. I knew they were after John . . . to take him away from me. I couldn't stand it. I knew he couldn't resist them! I should have killed him . . . but I couldn't! I loved him too much!"

Suddenly she sat upright and opened her eyes. "You can't understand, can you? How it is to watch someone drifting farther and farther away from you . . . someone you love so dearly. And he loved me, too! I know he did! When we were going together before we were married, he used to send me gardenias every day. Every day for a year. He loved them so much! And then we were married . . . so happy. But the years go by and you're getting older . . . older . . . older." Her voice trailed off into silence.

She looked at the Commissioner and stood up. "All right. I'm ready to go."

The Commissioner took her by the arm. They walked through the apartment door which I opened, and out.





*There were only vague  
suggestions — like  
an auto exhaust that  
didn't sound right . . .*

# In a Heavy Coffin

*'A Novelet*

By WADE B. RUBOTTOM

**A**CCUMULATED DUST and darkness of a budding off-season rain mirrored Ford Wyatt's pinched window. Hoping it wasn't true, he wiped the lenses of his gold trimmed glasses, carefully. Looked again. His glasses hadn't needed wiping. He detected: Grey, with the stealth and persistence of a commando raid, actually was attacking the temples of his curly black hair.

That was all Ford Wyatt had detected for a long time.

Being helpless to stop the vicious attack, he let his blue eyes watch the rain drops. Slowly they turned accumulated dust into mud and







pushed it over the window sign: *Bing Small, Theatrical Placements, Room M-10*.

As he watched, he made a mental note to remind the building manager about removing that sign. His sole callers in this office had been characters looking for Bing Small.

The b. m. had let this office — narrow as a Pullman compartment and twice as long — furnished on the sound theory that moving furniture cost more than this was worth.

Thirty-five bucks for rent, fifteen bucks for a door sign, six bucks for business cards and *Ford Wyatt, Private Investigator* was in business. . . . More accurately, he was ready for business. For the past three days, he'd aired the shades of Bing Small, failed to polish-revive the departed finish on the furniture, and waited for clients. Mostly he waited.

New office, new door sign, and new business cards didn't mean that Ford Wyatt, Private Investigator was new at his racket. He'd cleared one client — a client grateful and dear to Ford Wyatt — of an unfounded murder charge. After Ford had served an intense stooging sequence with private detectives and got his own license, the grateful client had set him up in business. The grateful client's name was Ford Wyatt.

If he didn't get another client soon, he'd be pressed back into stooging — or civil engineering.

The turning knob on his corridor door jerked Ford's feet from his desk. He pulled the solitaire game, he'd just lost, into his desk drawer. He kick-closed the drawer that held his shaving kit, shoe brushes and polish.

The corridor door swung slowly in to reveal its new sign: *Ford Wyatt, Private Investigator, M-10*.

No one entered.

No one stood in the doorway. . . . Another gagster looking for *Bing Small, Theatrical Placements*.

While crossing the eight feet of his outer office, Ford shrugged his bulging shoulders to set his sports coat. Stepping into the corridor, he found no one between him and the stairway. Still curious as the next guy, he wheeled about. And stared into wide, startled brown eyes.

Her face was a close-up in a horror film; he was Frankenstein's monster.

He enticed her into his client's chair. In the process, he grabbed



a quick inventory: Petite, brown-eyed blonde — twenty-one-or-two. The usual moving parts . . . Displacement made her high powered.

**W**HEN HE SAT behind his desk, he was ready for business. So was she — with the card she laid on his desk. One of his own.

"I work for Wintley Stationers and Printers, Credit Department." Although her voice had the mellowness a man likes in old sherry and young dames, Ford was disappointed. This was no client. Yet he had to admit that Wintley Stationers and Printers were smart — sending a dame like this to dun him for payment.

Everyone ought to use this system.

"When your order came through, I —" swallowing seemed to relieve her inner tension, "— well, I don't know any private investigators. I didn't know what to expect. But this building! It nearly scared the wits out of me. You — you don't look like a man who'd haunt a building."

"Thanks," Ford grinned. "The building is hardly first class, but my service is," he said, just as if she were a prospective client. "Now what can I do for you?"

"I don't know —" again need to swallow stopped her briefly, "but I know what I want you to do."

"Tell me," Ford suggested and offered her a cigaret.

After inhaling deeply, she said, "I want you to find my brother."

Again Ford was disappointed. This was a case, but not for him. "You've been to the police?"

"Yes, the Missing Persons Bureau and — Homicide."

"What did Homicide say?"

"They sent me back to the Missing Persons Bureau." She raised her brown eyes to heaven in a heart touching way, as if praying — or asking forgiveness. "I have no evidence that my brother was murdered."

"You suspect it?"

"I *know* it."

He didn't like to argue with her faith. "Yet you can produce no evidence? What is his name — and by the way what is your name?"

"Helen Bishop. My brother, Ted," she took a handkerchief from her bag, dabbed at her eyes, "was last seen at the home of his fiancée on Harbor Island, Newport. Without trace or clue, he disappeared — two days before his wedding."



No wonder she was upset. Ford had an outsize desire to comfort her. "Tell me about his fiancée and her family."

"Judy Kinsmore, a student at S. C. Two years ahead of Ted. He spent those years in Korea. Her father, John Kinsmore, is retired. He was a stockbroker — I believe."

*John Kinsmore, stockbroker, retired* trudged out of Ford's morgue-like memory. . . . An article, briefing Kinsmore's past, had appeared in a yachting magazine after his cutter had won the last Mid-Winter Regatta. John Kinsmore, the fairhaired boy of the Twenties. Bought in after the '29 crash; sold out just before the next crash in '30. Made his dough fast. Retired. A smart bunny. Planned carefully. Never deviated.

Helen Bishop's brown eyes held Ford's steady gaze. She had him willing to believe anything she said. But he didn't. What she *knew* was unlikely. But he wasn't one to give up easily — a new client, that is.

"Suppose we visit Mr. Kinsmore and his daughter?"

For a moment she seemed genuinely horrified. Then she nodded and slowly for the first time showed him a very brief, a very attractive smile.

**D**RIVING down to Harbor Island, Ford learned:

"... Judy won't admit it, but I know she thinks Ted jilted her because she wouldn't inherit Kinsmore's money. Her father's a perfectionist. He carries it to extremes — you'll see. Ted was murdered. I know."

"You can't just *know* such things. A murder always has a motive; you certainly don't think Kinsmore murdered your brother because he wasn't perfect?"

She offered heaven her now exasperating glance. "No. No. No. The houseboy murdered him. I know it sounds farfetched, but there is something between that houseboy and Judy. I wouldn't want a houseboy looking at me the way Manuel looks at her.

"Just a minute." Ford suspected this gal was a gagster and that she had been looking for Bing Small. "Let's continue with Kinsmore."

"It all started with a visit from an Oregon farmer. He arrived without warning — Kinsmore was out. He blurted out a story that Judy and Ted could hardly believe. It seems Kinsmore's only natural



daughter — who was born deformed — boards with this farmer's family in Oregon.

"Ted's learning about the deformed daughter caused Kinsmore to hate him; he threatened to change his will if Judy married Ted."

Ford took a deep breath. This gal was rambling. "Now tell me about the houseboy."

"Manuel's been with them since Mrs. Kinsmore died — six or eight years. I want you to notice the way he looks at Judy. . . ."

Harbor Island lies to the north of Balboa Island at Newport, a bridge-span from the mainland. Its streets are lined with trees and private parking areas. Its houses are protected by garden walls, pierced by wide garages and imposing entrance doors.

It is not a poor man's haven.

When they crossed the narrow bridge, Helen Bishop sat close to Ford. Conversation in a convertible required sitting close, which was one reason why Ford liked convertibles. He liked Buicks because their wide seats made a girl feel forlorn and unwanted if she sat near the door.

The whole island was dappled with tree-filtered sun; there'd been no rain here. A high concrete block wall surrounded the Kinsmore home. To the near side of a four-car garage, with servants' quarters above, were a pair of wide solid gates. Some distance behind the gates a corrugated iron roof glistened in the sun. Because it was odd, Ford stopped to look.

"There's Ted's car," Helen said.

He followed her point to where a '46 Plymouth Coupe squatted on the parking area. One front tire was flat. The car's polish hid under a coat of dust. Ford parked alongside it.

Kinsmore's wall-entrance door — a heavily paneled pair, framed by more panels — was recessed from the face of the garage. The concrete blocks were painted a warm beige, the doors and wood trim a faded emerald green.

**A** SMILING young Filipino in a crisp white jacket answered their ring. He greeted Helen, "... Miss Judy is helping Mr. Kinsmore, Miss Bishop."

"Thank you, Manuel; we'll find them." She led Ford across the plant-surrounded paved area that spread between the low rambling house and the outer wall. To the left the corrugated iron roof perched



on high posts. It protected a beautiful 48-foot, deep-draft sailing hull. On its deck worked John and Judy Kinsmore.

The shed's extended concrete-paved work area was club room neat. A long workbench on the shed's far side was visible through the hull's cradle. On the near side comfortable terrace furniture fanned around a large coffee table and faced the hull.

Ford enjoyed the medley of good smells that boat lovers rank higher than any perfume: Fresh-cut wood . . . turpentine . . . linseed oil . . . tarred hemp . . . salt air. . .

From the hull's edge they greeted Helen and acknowledged Ford's introduction. Then Judy backed out of sight — as if she were shy.

Kinsmore was tall and slender. He had ample back hair — shot with grey, thick black eyebrows, and a thin black moustache. He was fifty-five; he'd look less — without the mourning around his grey eyes.

Judy Kinsmore had descended a ladder on the other side of the hull. She came around the cradle and rushed into Helen's arms. White shorts, white and yellow striped blouse and suntan displayed her slim body. She was taller than Helen, better looking. Her poodle-cut hair was blue-black. Dark circles under her tear-touched blue eyes told what she was going through. Helen had said she was vivacious. Once, perhaps, she had been?

She asked Helen to go into the house.

"I have a weakness for beautiful sailboats," Ford called to Kinsmore, "mind if I look around?"

Kinsmore beamed. "Of course not; go right ahead."

From all angles Ford admired the trim lines of the deep-draft hull. Close inspection showed her lines were enhanced by exquisite workmanship. The hull was completely plank, sanded smooth, and primed coated — copper to the waterline and white above. Its varnished mahogany transom bore the name *Judy II*.

He admired the cleanliness of the work area. Shelves above the neat workbench held gear waiting to be built into the *Judy II*. Tools hung clean and ready below the shelves. Still crated, an engine waited alongside one end of the workbench. Against the crate leaned six three-inch pipes of varied lengths — flanged at one end and screw capped at the other. Ford wondered . . .

"Why don't you come up and look around?" From high on the deck, Kinsmore had been watching him.



He mounted the ladder. A temporary work deck lay around the framed openings for deck house, cockpit, and hatches. All members and joints fitted snugly and securely. Pride and skill showed in Kinsmore's work. He was now scribing a template for a cockpit combing.

**T**HE WAY to get this man to talk was to admire his boat; Ford didn't have to lie. "You're doing a beautiful job. I know, because I used to own a forty-foot cutter in San Francisco. Who designed this? Rhodes, I'll bet?" When Kinsmore nodded, Ford continued after a glance at the bilge. "I see you have fixed inside ballast."

"I'm a firm believer in the theory that part of the fixed ballast placed inboard makes a craft more sea-kindly."

"It certainly gives a smooth, easy-to-clean bilge."

Despite Ford's efforts, the conversation died there; Kinsmore kept his eyes on his work. To get his full attention, Ford said, "Mr. Kinsmore, I'm a private detective."

Kinsmore continued the even stroke of his plane. A long, thin, and smooth yellow ribbon curled from its throat. He planed to a scribe line on the template more carefully than most men would have planed the final member. When his stroke ended, he glanced up. "I'm sure, Mr. Wyatt, the police will let you read their report about Ted Bishop's disappearance. Why bother me?"

"The police wrote it off as a missing person case. I hope they're right."

Another long smooth ribbon flowed from Kinsmore's plane. At stroke's end, he took a sharp breath. "Mr. Wyatt, I'm busy. Tell me what you want; then leave, please."

The guy was jumpy, too jumpy. I want to talk to you and your daughter."

"I'll talk, but I'll not have my daughter upset by your prying. Bishop's disappearance has deeply affected both of us."

Ford nodded. Then Kinsmore did what Ford hadn't expected. He laid down his plane. "Might as well get this over with; I'm too upset to work, anyway. Besides I need a smoke. Let's go down. Too dangerous to smoke up here."

When seated in the terrace lounge, Kinsmore selected one of a racked group of pipes. Blueprints of the *Judy II* lay on the coffee table.

"Mind if I look at those?"



Kinsmore pushed the prints toward him then jammed his pipe into his tobacco pouch.

After lighting a cigaret, Ford examined the blueprints: Deck plans. Sail plans. Profiles. Sections. The *Judy II*'s lines were as beautiful on paper as in reality. Again he complimented Kinsmore on his craftsmanship. He got no answer.

Kinsmore had left.

He was at the far end of the shed with his hand alongside of a fire extinguisher mounted on a post. Ford noticed there was a fire extinguisher on every post. Kinsmore came back. "I just rang for Manuel. We'll have some beer." He sat down. "Now, let's get on with this Bishop business. I don't want to discuss it when my daughter is here." He looked sad, beaten. "Frankly, I don't want to discuss it at all. Can't work and worry, too."

**T**HIS WAS the moment Ford had been waiting for. "Don't worry, your daughter's fiance will show up."

"That's what I am worried about. A man who'll run out, just before the wedding. Jilt my daughter —"

"Are you sure he ran out?"

"What else?"

"I don't know; tell me about it."

Manuel came with beer and left, silently.

"Nothing to tell. He simply disappeared. At dusk, two weeks ago last Tuesday, he came from the house. I asked him to switch on the worklights as he passed. I was painting the bilge, getting ready to pour the inside ballast. As I picked up my brush again, I heard a car skid to a stop on the street. A door slammed and the car ground away in low."

"Whose car?"

"I was in the bilge; I didn't see it. Its hopped up motor had a peculiar exhaust — unlike any I've heard before."

"You'd recognize it — if you heard it again?"

Kinsmore looked at Ford. Nodded slowly. "Don't get the idea this was a kidnap; the boy just ran out." He finished his beer. "Judy's wedding was the following Thursday. We heard no more from Ted Bishop. We thought it odd, but we went ahead with the plans — naturally. He failed to show up.

"The newspapers played it up; you can understand our embarrass-



ment — Judy's sorrow. I notified the police; did everything possible until I became convinced the boy deliberately ran out." Obviously talking about this wasn't easy for him. "Judy refused to accept what the police and I know; we've quarreled bitterly. All I really have now is the *Judy II*." The way he looked at the hull told Ford he really loved that boat.

"I understand, Mr. Kinsmore. I've got to find that boy."

"Why bother? He isn't worth finding."

"His sister; his mother; your daughter — they all think differently."

Kinsmore laid down his pipe. "Mr. Wyatt, this is a closed case — as far as I'm concerned. I'll not have my daughter questioned; she must forget."

"I know how you feel, but my job is to find the boy. I'll try to keep it out of the newspapers, if you'll cooperate."

"Ted Bishop is a nobody. The newspapers have published all that is interesting to them and their readers."

"Perhaps, but you are an important man, a prominent yachtsman. A mere suspicion of foul play and —"

Kinsmore's lips spread with a broad smile. "Why try to frighten me?"

"Am I?"

"Unfavorable publicity is enough to frighten most men in my position. I don't happen to be like most men."

"I'm sure of that."

From the garage came a young man with a red crew-cut. Muscles bulged his blue and white striped T-shirt. Faded levis hung cowboy-fashion below his slender waist. When Kinsmore introduced him, Chris Saunders loaned Ford a big work-used hand, which Ford was glad to relinquish. His other hand held a new quart-size Pyrene fire extinguisher.

Chris climbed to the *Judy II*'s deck and tied the extinguisher — to a line that hung from a reel in the roof trusses. Above the deck it dangled within quick-and-easy reach.

"Can't have too much fire protection," Kinsmore commented.

**L**OOKING PAST Kinsmore, Ford saw Helen and Judy coming from the house. Even from that distance he saw that Judy had done more than repair her face. Her carriage had come alive.

From the boatdeck Chris flash-smiled a greeting to Helen. As he



looked at Judy, a faraway expression — the kind some men get when they look at sailboats — came into his eyes.

Ford offered Kinsmore his hand. "I appreciate your help."

"It's been a privelege," Kinsmore grinned.

"I'll keep you informed." Then he turned to Helen, "Miss Bishop, we'd better be on our way."

Judy walked to the car with them. "I want to talk with you," Ford said, "without your father knowing."

"And I want to talk with you; Helen and I have plans."

As Ford drove away, he caught a glimpse of Manuel standing in the garage — watching Judy.

In the rear-view mirror, Ford saw her looking at Ted Bishop's car. Her stance made her beautiful. . . . When he became aware that Helen was watching him, his eyes dropped from the mirror to the road ahead. "Well?" she asked, "what do you know?"

"Kinsmore is convinced that your brother jilted his daughter; he's afraid he'll come back."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know; I want to talk with Judy."

"Is that all you want — with Judy?" Her anger was showing. "She'll meet us at *Jarvis' Joint* on Balboa Island in half an hour."

By the time beer reached their booth, the cool interior of *Jarvis' Joint* had crept out of darkness. It was a joint because Jarvis made it one from sawdust-sprinkled floor to 1890-type Bartender; his prices were modern.

Judy joined them before half an hour had passed. Coming from the bright sunlight, the dim interior affected her as it had Ford. It gave him a few minutes to study her face without her knowing. Again her blue eyes were tear-touched.

She talked quietly, telling Helen and Ford much the same thing her father had told Ford. But her interpretation of what she told was different from her father's. ". . . Dad's quite bitter," she said; "he's convinced that Ted jilted me. But he's promised that everything will be all right if Ted returns."

She took a quick sip of her beer and shuddered — as if it were too cold. "Ted isn't coming back; he's dead."

Although tears diluted the blue of her eyes, they didn't flow. Ford patted her hand. "Did Ted have any enemies — or rivals? Did anyone resent him because of you?"



Judy grinned briefly. A pretty grin. "Of course not; with me he could have no rivals."

"What about Chris Saunders?" Helen asked. "You were almost engaged to him . . . once."

"Helen! That's ridiculous. Chris and Ted were good friends; they souped up Chris' MG together."

Ford lit a cigaret, held the match a long time. As arranged, Helen reluctantly excused herself. He then asked: "Did Helen and Ted get along?"

Judy's eyebrows swooped up. "Why, of course. You don't think?" When Ford shook his head, she added, "I suppose they got along better than most sisters and brothers. She's beneficiary on his GI Insurance."

"What about his mother?"

"I don't know her very well. She didn't like me; she wanted Ted to study medicine. I encouraged him to become what he wanted to be: a chemical engineer. His mother hated me for that. She refused to come to our wedding." She stared at Ford, "To think that I quarreled with Ted the last time I saw him."

She lapsed into self-accusing silence.

"What was that quarrel about?"

"It was my fault. Ted didn't want a big wedding. I did — church and all. We compromised. In the end, Ted thought I wasn't giving up anything."

Was he letting this gal take him in? Ford admitted that he didn't know.

**W**HEN HELEN returned to the booth, Judy asked her to stay overnight: They'd go someplace for dinner. Maybe to a movie.

Ford said he was going back to Los Angeles. Instead he had a few drinks and a leisurely dinner as he mulled over his case:

*Helen?* If Ted married, he'd change the beneficiary of his GI Insurance. . . . Or had he already changed it? Perhaps that's what *Judy* was after? No, she didn't need money — that is, her foster father didn't need money. But what about Judy herself? Had Ted broken their engagement, and had she killed him in anger?

*Chris?* Because Judy had jilted him for Ted? He hoped to get her back?

*Kinsmore?* Because Ted had quarreled with Judy? He was a per-



fectionist — he didn't think Ted was good enough for Judy? Perhaps he had helped finish what Judy had started?

*Manuel?* What went on behind his stoical mask?

Five suspects. Or was it six — the guy in the car with the peculiar exhaust? Ford headed back to the Kinsmore house.

From the crown of the Harbor Island Bridge, he heard a car's open exhaust. Its headlights swerved around a corner and slowed for the narrow bridge. Chris was at the wheel. Ford flagged him down, parked, and walked over to the MG. "Nice car you got there. Bet it has plenty of power?"

Chris grinned. "Hop in, I'll show you."

"You've told me. Now I'd appreciate your telling me about Ted Bishop."

"What's your stake in this?"

"I'm a private investigator, hired to find him. What's been going on at the Kinsmore house?"

"Don't ask me, I only work there."

"What are you supposed to do? What do you do?"

"I run errands," he said bitterly. "I hold this; I hold that. I do all the heavy work."

"I can see you're well equipped for that."

Chris beamed and glanced down at the muscles crowding his T-shirt. "I stick to the job for one reason."

"You like boats? You admire Kinsmore's craftsmanship?"

"No. No. I'd work for the devil to be near Judy."

"What about this quarrel between Judy and Ted?"

"Nothing serious — I thought at the time it would be patched up. It was Easter vacation, two days before their wedding. The three of us were on the beach. I went swimming. When I returned to the sand, Judy had left. Ted said he was in the doghouse. He didn't say why. But I could have smashed the guy; I'm for Judy — right or wrong." Under the street light tension showed in the muscles of his jaw.

"She was my girl until Bishop came home from Korea. Well, anyway, we showered in the room alongside the garage. Ted left, saying he was going back to Los Angeles. When I drove away a few minutes later, I noticed his parked car. I thought he'd gone back to square himself with Judy."

Ford wondered how much that quarrel had to do with this case.



"Did he have any enemies? Anyone who would have liked him not to marry Judy?"

"Dozens of guys. I'm one of them."

"Thanks, Chris. Be seeing you."

As the MG roared away, Chris raised his hand in farewell.

FORD PARKED two blocks beyond the Kinsmore house. He walked back along the dimly lit street. Past the light at the wall-entrance door, which set back from the face of the garage. Past the closed garage doors. Then he climbed to look over the shrub-shrouded garden wall. All was quiet. Dark. A dim light burned at the house-entrance door.

Then a garage door whined open. A Cad hardtop backed out, pulled away. Kinsmore was at the wheel.

This gave Ford an unexpected opportunity. He didn't go over the wall. He rang the wall-entrance door bell. Waited for the door to open.

"Manuel, I'm a private detective. I'd appreciate your telling me all about Ted Bishop's disappearance."

"Private detective?" Manuel spoke without a hint of accent. "I don't know anything."

Ford suspected that he'd have to butter Manuel's ego. "You must have an opinion."

"Opinion? Yes. A crime took place here all right." He held out spread-fingered hands. When you find Bishop, I want to sink these into his throat; he jilted Miss Judy." Then he shrugged, "He's gone. I try to be satisfied. If he's been murdered, I'd suspect everyone who knew Miss Judy and Bishop." He glanced at his watch and dropped back into his lingo: "Ho, ho! Excuse, please. Got go see TV *Dagnet*."

Ford walked back to his car. He chained a cigaret to the one he'd finished. He killed time along with the cigaret as he slowly returned to the Kinsmore house.

While studying the blueprints of the *Judy II* that afternoon, he'd detected a flaw. . . . A flaw was foreign to Kinsmore; yet Ford's brief inspection of that hull told him there was room for a flaw and more.

This time he didn't ring the Kinsmore bell. He went over the wall.

From the *Judy II*'s deck he shot his flashlight beam into her hull, played it fore and aft. He asked himself again and again: *Why hadn't*



*Kinsmore followed the plans?* Had he changed the hull in other ways? Ford dropped below. Played his flashlight about. Then he heard the exhaust of a car — the peculiar exhaust Kinsmore had mentioned. Probably the car he'd heard. It was coming closer.

He had to see that car. He climbed out of the hull. Ran. . . . As he reached for the knob on the wall-entrance door, a blow jarred his skull behind his right ear.

He got a Fourth of July preview in a black velvet fog. . . .

**W**HEN HE came to, his head pressed against a large potted plant. An earthquake of a force he'd never experienced before shook him. A faraway voice snapped at him: "All right, Buster, this is no place to sleep it off."

Ford felt for his eye glasses. Miraculously they were in place; his eye focus was not. Before he could take care of that, the hand that shook his shoulder yanked him to his feet.

"What's your name, Buster?"

The guy was a cop in cop's clothing. The purring blur behind him was a motorcycle.

Too groggy to answer, Ford gingerly fingered the bump behind his right ear and the one on his left forehead. Then he remembered the peculiar car exhaust. . . . Why had the murderer come back — if it was the murderer? . . . Why would a murderer drive a car with a peculiar exhaust?

The cop demanded attention. Ford introduced himself. Told him about Ted Bishop. ". . . I was headed for the police when I was slugged."

"Don't give me that. It's a missing person case. The boys investigated; I read the report."

"The report didn't keep me from being slugged." Because the cop couldn't tell truth from malarkey, Ford gave him malarkey. It seemed a good idea at the time. "Radio Homicide; we'll have a friendly little game with Kinsmore and a quick showdown." He was astonished by his own words. A showdown was quick. It could also be disastrous. He was slug-happy and too curious about this case to wait any longer. He told the cop: "I know where the body is. Radio Homicide."

The cop said, "Look, pal, if I bring in the murderer, it's a feather in my cap. I like feathers in my cap. I'm part Indian. I don't intend to ride that snorting two wheeler forever." He held out his big hands,



"If these can't handle the situation, this," he patted the holster flap of his service revolver, "this can. Besides," he grinned, "I've got you."

Just then Helen and Judy drove up in an Olds 88 convertible. Evidently they hadn't found a movie they wanted to see. Chris trailed them in his MG.

Now the cop showed more interest. This time in Helen.

Judy unlocked the wall-entrance door. The five of them went to the boat shed. Manuel appeared from the shadows. He was followed by Kinsmore, who had apparently returned home while Ford was stretched out on his door step.

When Kinsmore saw the cop, he wasn't smiling. "Officer, I'm tired of this man's snooping." He pointed at Ford. "He's bothered me all day."

"He's bothered me too," the cop said. "And my job is to stop snooping. Perhaps, Mr. Kinsmore, you can explain what he talks about."

"Let *him* explain; he's been causing all the trouble. But first you'll get him off my property, or I'll get you off the Force."

"Mr. Kinsmore, he's not going to bother you. Not while I'm here."

The ambitious cop was backing water. He'd be bowing and scraping, if Ford didn't get on with this.

Then the cop surprised Ford. "As a cop, I dislike threats, Mr. Kinsmore. This seeing-eye might be barking up the wrong hull — but I want to listen; go ahead Wyatt." He gestured for them all to sit down.

**J**UDY, Helen, and Chris sat on the lounge. Kinsmore took a chair to their left. Manuel sat opposite him in a chair closest to the house. He'd hesitated, exchanged a brief glance with Kinsmore.

The cop stood to one side.

Ford leaned on the back of a chair facing the group. At the moment cold compresses on his head seemed more important than charging anyone with murder.

He squared his shoulders. "Miss Bishop engaged me to find her brother. Mr. Kinsmore says Ted Bishop wilfully disappeared." He felt all eyes on him as he wiped the lenses of his gold rimmed glasses. Then he looked at each one before leading a trump. "I say, Ted Bishop was murdered. He was last seen here; his car is still parked here. His body will be found here. The murderer sits among you."



"Whom are you accusing?" Kinsmore demanded. Contempt for Ford's theatrics showed on his face.

"No one yet."

Tears ran down Helen's cheeks as she comforted Judy. Ford's shifting glance caught Manuel surreptitiously watching Judy; tears touched her brooding blue eyes, but none ran down her cheeks.

Chris looked baffled. He stared at Ford then over each shoulder as if expecting danger from behind. Or was he looking for a way out?

"Wyatt," Kinsmore sprang up with rising anger, "look at my daughter. "Officer, I'll not stand for this. Bishop's running out on my daughter has caused her enough suffering. Wyatt's theory of murder is preposterous."

"Wyatt," the cop barked, "Mr. Kinsmore is right."

"Sure he's right — about the car with the peculiar exhaust; I heard that exhaust this evening. I'd come back here to look around. As I opened the street door to see who drove the car, someone slugged me."

With a dead pan, Manuel said, "Ho, Ho! Sorrie. I thought you were a prowler. I left you outside the door."

Ford touched the bump behind his right ear. "Mr. Kinsmore told me he was painting the bilge of the *Judy II* when he heard the peculiar car exhaust the night Bishop was murdered."

"Stop saying he was murdered!" Kinsmore snapped.

"There is the driver of the car with the peculiar exhaust."

Chris stared at Ford's pointing finger. "My car exhaust sounds like any other MG exhaust."

"Normally, yes," Ford said. This workshed's corrugated iron roof reflects sound waves into the hull. The hull acts as a sound box and creates a peculiar tone. The exhaust I heard last night, the one Mr. Kinsmore heard the night of the —"

"Sure," Chris admitted, "I met Ted that night. He was angry. Said he was going back to Los Angeles. Before I left, he agreed to talk with Judy again. Said he'd settle with her — one way or another."

"When did you next return here?"

"The next morning — to work. It was late. Mr. Kinsmore had left a telephone message for me to pick up some gear in Newport."

"Just what was he doing when you arrived?"

"I don't remember." Chris scratched his red crew-cut. "He'd been preparing the bilge to place the inside ballast right after the wedding,



but — Yeah, the transit-mix concrete truck was here when I arrived that morning.”

Kinsmore smiled sadly. “Ted’s quarrel with Judy upset me. I was restless. Wanted to do something that showed.”

“What’s in that ballast?” Ford demanded.

“Concrete loaded with scrap lead to give added weight.”

“Is that all?”

**K**INSMORE’S eyes met Ford’s gaze, he hesitated briefly, “The six access-tubes to the keel bolts — I forgot to install them. Shows how upset I was about Ted’s quarreling with Judy.”

Why would Kinsmore tell this?

Kinsmore started to laugh. “Wyatt, you’ve been watching too many TV crime shows. You think Ted Bishop’s body is in the concrete ballast of the *Judy II*.” Tears came into his grey eyes. His hearty laughter visibly drained tension from everyone.

Everyone except Manuel and the cop looked relieved. If possible, Manuel’s expression became more impassive.

Kinsmore completely threw Ford. His whole case collapsed. How could he milk a confession out of a laughing man?

Kinsmore laughed and his daughter cried. A very effective combination. Crying gave Judy an excuse to hide her face. He’d bring that face out where he and Kinsmore could see it. Often a guilty person would confess if some one he loved was in danger.

His next words brought a wail from Judy: “Judy Kinsmore knows who killed Ted Bishop.”

Kinsmore’s laughter stopped abruptly. “You unutterable liar.” Flash anger bounced him to his feet. “Wyatt, you’ve stopped being a funny man.”

In brittle silence everyone stared at Ford.

Disgust distorted Judy’s red-eyed face. Chris held one of her hands. A smile of contempt lurked on his lips. Manuel was, as usual, Manuel. Ford wondered if he ever showed any emotion while he watched *Dragnet* on TV.

Anger flushed the cop’s tan.

Ford was between an important irate citizen and an irate cop. Only Helen wore an expression not antagonistic to him. Hers was an expression of pity.

Kinsmore’s indignation had convinced them all. Especially the



cop. He was full of apology — and threat. "Sorry, Mr. Kinsmore, I shouldn't have listened to this guy."

The cop was still plucking a feather for his cap. He came at Ford with pistol ready in one hand. He brandished handcuffs in the other.

Kinsmore's flash-anger died. He made a helpless gesture that indicated Ford was an irresponsible psychopath. "I'm tired of all this." He sat down, loaded his pipe.

It was Helen who interrupted the feather-plucking cop. "Officer, don't you see that Mr. Wyatt is out on his feet? Manuel, get him a glass of water."

"Yes, Miss," the cop agreed.

Ford suspected: If Helen asked, the cop would forget the whole thing. He felt grateful to her. And miserable with his own poor showing of taking care of himself.

He raised the water glass to his lips with both hands. Handcuffs made him awkward. The water dispersed his about-to-be-sick feeling.

He noticed Kinsmore calmly puffing his pipe and admiring the *Judy II's* lines.

**T**HE FOG lifted from Ford's mind. Watching Kinsmore, had given him a new concept of how to break this case.

"Kinsmore, you told us about using scrap lead to add weight to the *Judy II's* concrete ballast. Tell us about using that ballast to hide the murder weapon." He pointed to the brass fire extinguisher dangling on a cord from a reel in the roof trusses. It shone bright in light from a work lamp. "That's a new fire extinguisher. The one it replaced is the murder weapon."

Kinsmore puffed his pipe, calmly unaware that his admiring glances at the *Judy II* had shown Ford how to milk a confession from him.

He loved the *Judy II*. Probably more than he did Judy. He was a perfectionist. Judy had disappointed him by falling in love with Ted Bishop.

"Kinsmore, a craftsman with your skill and love of perfection doesn't forget — not even a small detail. You certainly didn't forget to install those keel bolt access-tubes before placing that ballast." He pointed to them leaning against the crated engine. "You didn't forget; you didn't have time to install them."

Kinsmore continued to smoke his pipe. He uttered no protest.

"You, Kinsmore, and I know that Ted Bishop's body is encased



in the concrete ballast of that hull. You know because you put it there. I'll prove that I know if I have to break his body out with a pneumatic jackhammer."

Kinsmore wasn't blowing smoke now. Anger flushed his face. "You'll not touch that boat." He charged up to Ford. "I'm calling my lawyers to see that I get police protection." He swung around. Started for the house.

He didn't get far. Manuel's foot darted out. Almost before Kinsmore hit the concrete paving, Manuel had him hammer-lock helpless. "That's why you screamed at me — when I climbed the ladder to watch the concrete being poured."

"That's why," Ford added, "you sent Chris to Newport when there was heavy work to do; that's why you guided the concrete chute and tamped the concrete in place; you didn't want anyone to look into that hull."

The cop left Ford — handcuffs secured his wrists. He pulled Manuel off Kinsmore's back. "None of that, Buster."

Seconds later, Kinsmore stared at handcuffs, transferred from Ford's wrists to his own. He'd never learned to accept defeat.

Judy's terror stricken eyes clung to her foster father. Then a wave of loathing swept her face.

There was a sigh of relief. It came from Ford. Again he longed for cold compresses on his head; he said, "Manuel, what in hell did you slug me with?"

A grin spread Manuel's lips. He struck his left palm with the heel of his right hand. His grin widened. "Ho, ho! Sorrie."

Ford knew he meant every word of it.

Helen drove Ted's Plymouth back to Los Angeles with police protection — soon as the cop went off duty.

Judy rode near the driver's side in Ford's Buick. She was to stay with friends in Brentwood. She'd asked one question: "I can't understand why — why didn't Manuel speak up before?"

"His loyalty created a blind spot until he saw that Kinsmore loved the *Judy II* more than you."

She'd been badly shaken. A double tragedy: Her fiance. Her foster father. Ford had an outsize desire to comfort her.

But Judy was young, she'd be vivacious again. Just now all she could say was: "I knew Ted hadn't jilted me."





*Three persons had been there, but two  
had arrived to find murder already done!*

# Three For The Kill

By CLIFF CAMPBELL

**H**E HAD walked blocks before the night became real and frightening. He had moved through a period of complete and horrible nothingness. But now, suddenly, he realized that the wind was sharp, that it swept in from the shadowy, pines-clad hill, disconsolately moaning. He realized the steady beat against his face was rain. And he knew that he staggered, his topcoat open, blowing behind his lanky body, and that inside he was turning over and over, ill.

Jim Brady stumbled against a tree, and his hands clutched at the rough bark for support.

"Oh God," he said aloud, "what can I do?"

But there was no answer from the night; only the wailing of the wind, and the slap of the rain on the pavement, and the wave of nothingness threatening to reengulf him.

Brady groaned then, and at last he shuffled on. He could see Nada's eyes now, darkly agonized, peering from the recesses of his mind. He could see the question in them and the fear. And he could hear his heart beating loudly with its demand. But finally, he came to the two





pale lights mounted on either side the steps outside the precinct station. And finally he understood that there could be no compromise.

He mounted the steps, pushed open the door. The warmth inside stole over him, lethargic; he went on down the corridor until he stood before the desk.

He said, "Officer, I killed a man tonight. I murdered Paul Colvin."

It was like looking through a funnel at first; there was too much to see. Too much for Brady's battered mind to tabulate carefully in



emergency. There was the back room, and the white, white light. There were faces, scowling sometimes, but always grim. And the voices, harsh, confusing.

There was, in the background, the excited whisper of police reports. Mere catch phrases: "Inspector Ramsey was at home. He went right over to the Colvin house." "Vance phoned. He and Steve Ramsey are coming in as soon as the coroner is through." Catch phrases . . . but a dam to Brady's lips, his brain. His anguished mind had somehow frozen over, could not answer to the pounding questions. Only behind the barrier did it probe the background, seeking, pleading for one word of consolation. For word of Nada . . . Paul Colvin's wife.

Not until the door opened upon Inspector Ramsey did the dam give way. There was an abrupt silence. Steve Ramsey stood a moment in the doorway, gaunt, thin lipped, a little stooped. His face was granite-hard beneath thick gray hair and graying brows. His eyes were clear blue, and bright, demanding. Brady sighed then, and Ramsey came on in.

"Hello, Brady."

"Steve," Brady said. "Could I have a cigaret?"

"Of course."

The cigaret was good, like wine. As Brady smoked, Ramsey, deeply frowning, reached into his own breast pocket, removed a cigar, slipped the band off, bit off the end and lighted the cigar. His teeth clamped hard on the end.

"Don't you think you'd better tell us why, Brady? And how?"

"You've been up there—to the house?" Brady countered.

"Yes."

"And Na — Mrs. Colvin?"

"She's under a doctor's care at the moment, Jim. Shock."

"Of course." Brady wet his lips. "I didn't want to do this to her. I wish I could have spared her."

"But you, a lawyer, with full knowledge of the law, admit to murdering Colvin?"

"Yes. I'd phoned Nada earlier — I suppose she told you that?"

Steve Ramsey didn't answer, and Brady wet his lips again.

"I wanted to get her out of the way, Steve. I wanted to be sure I'd see Colvin alone. Not to kill him, you understand. That — that just happened. I told her to walk up the back road, to the hills, the pines, that I'd meet her there. So then at ten o'clock, about ten o'clock —



well, I saw Paul Colvin. I told him I couldn't stand by any longer and see Nada suffer.

"She did suffer, Steve. He was a brute, you know that. You've had dealings with him. He had his fingers in every crooked pie in town; he made the law and flaunted it and used it. You know that, Steve."

"I know it," Ramsey said.

"Well —" Brady was breathing hard, gnawing his lips between each jerky sentence. "We'd been in love, Nada and I. I had a little practice started, a little money. We were young, and the world — hell, Steve, can't you see? She was the world!"

"But Colvin got her," he continued savagely. "It was through Norm Jansen, Nada's brother. Jansen got into some trouble. She wouldn't tell me what it was, but she told me she had to save Norm from prison. She married Colvin, Steve. She married a devil. He didn't want her; only the compliment of her beauty."

"Tonight —?" Ramsey pressed gently.

"I told you. I was going to take her away, but I was too much of a man to steal her. Too much a fool, I guess. When he threatened me, I — I lost my head. There was a — a shears handy. I grabbed up the shears. I stabbed him."

"And then?"

"I wiped off the prints."

"With what?"

Brady caught his breath. Ramsey pointed to a small, bloody square of linen one of the detectives produced.

"This handkerchief, Jim? The one the boys took off you when you came in?"

Brady looked down at his hands. They were pressed into fists and when he opened them the imprint of his nails stayed in the flesh.

"Yes."

"But this isn't *your* handkerchief, Jim. It's a woman's. There's an *N* in the corner. It belongs to Nada Colvin, doesn't it?"

"Doesn't it, Jim?" he repeated at Brady's silence.

Jim Brady whispered, I — I'd carried it all these months. I didn't realize I'd used it tonight."

"So after first intending to confuse the police by obliterating any fingerprints, you later decided to turn yourself in?"

"Yes," Brady said.

Ramsey relit his cigar, and the rich smoke wafted worriedly to



Brady's nostrils. "We're going back to the Colvin house. You too, Jim."

"But why?" Brady cried. "I don't want to go back there! I've confessed to the murder!"

"Why?" Ramsey said queerly. "Because Vance tells me that handkerchief wasn't out of the Colvin house before you carried it away tonight."

**T**HE police car was snugly warm; the clicking windshield wiper drowsily monotonous, placating. The wipers and the warmth were like young Detective Vance, Inspector Ramsey's pink-cheeked assistant. Vance sat in the back seat with Jim Brady, and Vance said two or three times, "What's the idea, Jim? Why don't you come clean, tell the truth?"

Brady listened to the dreary song of the wipers. He could see his face in the rear vision mirror, black brows drawn tight, dark eyes staring. He looked old beyond his thirty years, strangely thin and haggard. Like a man who has seen hell and found it — hell.

"Look, Jim," Vance continued. "We've been good friends, you and the police. You're a good guy. You're young and you got a future. Besides, the Inspector and I are honest cops — you can trust us. Is it the girl, Nada Colvin, you're worried about?"

"Let him alone," Ramsey called gruffly.

"Okay, okay," Vance grumbled, "but he's trying to make monkeys of us, and I'm no monkey."

Brady wondered what he'd do when he and Nada met. He brushed the thought aside. But memory of *her* and of the man she'd married would not be brushed aside. He remembered Colvin stopping him one day at court, months, many months before. A suave Colvin; flaunting gardenia and spats and cane; a man with thick laughing lips and eyes that were contemptuous. What was it Colvin had said? "No hard feelings, Brady? The better man always wins! Have a cigar?"

Colvin was the kind who offered fat cigars right and left, though he didn't smoke himself. Or drink. "No vices," he'd grin — the kind of grin that cheerfully called himself a liar.

And Brady remembered one night, later — the moonlight and the pines off the road behind Colvin's pretentious house where Nada had phoned she'd meet him. She'd brushed trembling fingers over his



face, his lips. She'd said, "Jim, I had to see you, just once more. Oh Jim, that this has happened to us."

He'd tried not to take her into his arms that night. And failed. And once failing had forevermore lost his strength. He'd said huskily, "We can't go on this way, Nada. You've got to leave him."

"There's Norm," she'd said simply, miserably. And he'd cursed her brother, Norm Jansen, under his breath. "Jim, he's so young, so weak. I can't forsake him!"

"You're wrong," he'd answered fiercely. "You are forsaking him. Hes living with you under Colvin's roof. He's spending Colvin's money. Don't you see what Colvin is doing to your brother, Nada? Shaping him — to his own ends. To a lock and key upon *your* soul. Darling, you can't go back —"

But she had gone back, and parting he'd called to her: "You'll always find me waiting . . ."

The police car slowed, pulled off the street and into a winding drive. Vance said, "Out, Jim," and led the way inside the house. Ramsey walked with Brady.

The room was brightly lighted, window draperies pulled tight. A large room, to the left of the hallway, with Colvin's desk stiffly against one wall, and a box of cigars, symbol of his gregarious life, on top the desk. Seeing the room again, so soon, struck Brady like a blow. Each detail found its memory groove still raw. The three cigars missing from the newly opened box. The wine-colored rug . . . with its streak of gray, of ground-in ash, near the chair and the ash stand where Colvin had fallen to the floor — and death. The chair itself — awkward, seemingly out of position. Conclusively so, for its feet had gashed the rug's thick pile. Brady's gaze stopped then; he was clearly startled.

Beside the chair — a sewing cabinet, open. There was linen in it, and floss, and the glint of needles.

"Handkerchiefs, Jim," Ramsey said softly. "Like the one you say you've carried for months. Handkerchiefs she was embroidering."

"But mere similarity of design doesn't signify anything —" Brady began.

"Don't be a sap," Vance snapped. "That bloody handkerchief you had was new, had never been laundered. Do you think we can't prove that the floss in the initial and the floss there in the *cabinet* match?"



Come out with it, Brady. You never saw that handkerchief before tonight. You found it lying near the body!"

There was a gasp from the hallway, and Brady swung around. Nada stood there, and behind her, swaying drunkenly, her brother, Norm. He was about twenty-one or -two, slender and blond like Nada and with something of her fragile beauty. Two patrolmen had hold of Norm Jansen's arms.

One of the cops said, "We picked him up in a dive downtown. He says he's been downtown all evening, but take a look at his shirtcuff, chief. Blood!"

Nada Colvin was utterly white. She came forward automatically, to Brady. He led her to a chair.

**H**E KNELT before her, held her hands, and their coldness was his own. When her dark eyes opened, he saw not fear in them but horror. But she stared beyond him, beyond the hall, at the closed door to another room. Norm Jansen's voice penetrated from this room, a voice plainly frantic.

"But I tell you I wasn't here! When I phoned home about nine-fifteen, and Colvin said Nada was out, and I heard that he had a visitor —"

"Wait a minute," Vance cut in. "Repeat that, Jansen."

Jansen began to cry. He was brittle and effeminate, Brady knew. A shears might easily have been *his* choice of weapon.

"Jim," Nada said, "Jim, please don't let them harm him."

"There's nothing we can do."

"But he's not a — a killer! Jim, he's *crying*."

"Darling, wait," he warned. "And listen."

"I tell you I wanted to talk to Nada," Jansen's voice continued pleadingly. "I wanted to borrow some money."

"Colvin answered the phone?"

"Yes. He said he couldn't talk because he had a deal —"

"How do you *know*? What makes you sure he had a visitor?" Vance demanded.

"Be-because I heard the man's voice, over the wire in the background, talking to Colvin."

"Background —" Brady muttered. He rose suddenly from Nada's side, and the patrolman who had been left in the room to guard them edged closer, expectantly. But Brady only crossed the room, to the



outer wall. Stood frowningly there, his gaze thoughtfully on the cold air intake, the steel grating in the floor.

"You're sure?" Vance was pressing harshly. "You remember the words?"

"N — no. I don't remember what I heard. I —"

Jansen's voice trailed off, and presently the door opened and Steve Ramsey and Vance came into the hall. Ramsey reached into his breast pocket for a fresh cigar, lit it reflectively.

"*Background*," Brady muttered again, and his nostrils flared. Speculatively, he kicked at the grating with the toe of his shoe.

"Funny, chief," Vance was whispering in the hall. "The girl said, too, that Colvin had a visitor when she left the house to go to the woods. A man he'd been anxious to see alone, in private, the reason, according to her story, he'd dismissed the servants for the night. She and young Jansen didn't get together on their stories, couldn't have."

Ramsey nodded, "Unless the crime was premeditated, arranged for beforehand — and by the looks of things it wasn't. However, there's still the blood on Jansen's cuff. He claims he doesn't know where that blood came from. When the laboratory detail gets through with him —"

"Just a minute," Brady interrupted. "I'd like to talk to Norm myself."

"Ixnay," Vance said crossly.

"You want this killing solved, don't you?" Brady swung on Ramsey, continued harshly, "Do we make an issue of it, Steve?"

Ramsey said slowly, "I'm trying to be fair —"

"Are you, Steve?"

Ramsey considered this, called over his shoulder then: "Bring Jansen across the hall." He moved just inside the archway, remained there, like a keen-edged sword waiting to strike, his heavy brows hooding his eyes. The second patrolman, with Norm Jansen in tow, appeared from the other room.

Jansen's bleary eyes showed red with tears. His hands were trembling. He stumbled to a chair, sat down, flashed a frightened glance at his sister. The room was suddenly still.

"Vance was convinced I didn't kill Paul Colvin," Brady began. "That I was shielding someone else. He was right. I found Paul Colvin — dead. And I found Nada's handkerchief lying beside the body. My one thought at that moment was that she had told Colvin



about us, our plans, that he'd tried to stop her and she'd acted then blindly, instinctively, killing him."

Nada gasped, but Brady refused to look at her.

"I acted blindly too. My mind was in a fog, paralyzed. I didn't reason — couldn't have reasoned or I'd not have stupidly carried Nada's handkerchief with me to the police. But if Nada had killed her husband, would she have sought escape and safety by wiping her prints from the shears — and still leave the handkerchief pointing to herself lying beside the body?"

"The handkerchief, having come from the sewing cabinet, wouldn't convict her," Vance admitted. "It was accessible to anyone the room was accessible to."

"Correct — so it was a foolish clue at best, planted by a foolish mind. Her brother's."

"You can't pin this crime on me!" Jansen cried.

"Isn't that what you intended to do to Nada?" Brady asked grimly. "You tried to contact Nada earlier by phone — to wheedle money from her. When you discovered she wasn't home, and Colvin was engaged, you decided to come home and *take* what money you needed."

Jansen was silent, his jaw setting stubbornly.

"You *did* come home, Jansen."

"That's a lie!"

Brady said, "You fool, the blood on your shirt proves you were here. There is no other explanation."

Jansen cursed, came out of his chair, swinging his arms. But the two uniformed men bore at him from either side. There was a momentary scuffle. Jansen sat down again, suddenly, forcibly. There were handcuffs on his wrists.

"Is that all, Brady?" Steve Ramsey asked gruffly.

Brady's smile was strained, "It's just the beginning — because Jansen, like I, *found Paul Colvin already dead.*"

**T**IME wound on in startled silence. Vance broke in harshly then: "What kind of a bluff are you running, Brady?"

"No bluff." Brady faced Jansen abruptly. "You made certain there would be blood on Nada's handkerchief. You dropped the handkerchief where it would be sure to point to her guilt —"

"I had to!" Norm cried. "I hated Colvin, everybody knew that. I



was in a spot, with suspicion sure to fall on me right away. For all I knew Nada *had* killed Paul. But she's young, and beautiful. She'd have a chance with any jury. So I wiped the shears so that my fingerprints wouldn't be found on them, and — and then I got out. You've got to believe me — all of you!"

"The furniture was just as it is now?" Brady pressed.

"Why —" Jansen looked about him stupidly, "why, yes."

"Are you *sure*? Was the ash stand where it is now?"

"The ash stand? I — I guess I stumbled against it when I entered the dark room, come to think of it."

"You knocked it over?"

"No — it was knocked over! I stopped and set it upright! It was then I saw Paul's body —"

"Wasn't there something else? Something you, like I, were conscious of but which, in the urgency of the moment, you attached no significance to?"

"I — I don't know."

"Relative to the ash stand," Brady prompted.

"Why—yes, smoke! The room was heavy with cigar smoke!"

"Exactly. It took me a long time to remember this also. When Steve Ramsey lit his cigar a few minutes ago —"

"What are you getting at?" Ramsey asked grimly.

"That a man was with Colvin before and at his death, the visitor both Nada and Norm insist Colvin had. That this man smoked one of Colvin's cigars — from the box you see there on the desk, a box peculiarly with but three cigars missing. Ramsey, I want one of your men to raise the cold air grate in the floor."

"Why?" Ramsey snapped.

"Ash stand overturned — a streak of ash ground into the rug on a line ending precisely at the grate. Ash spilled in the death struggle, which the murderer could not remove from the rug.

"And because," Brady added significantly, "he either tried to raise the grate and could not in the press of time — try it as I did a few minutes ago; you'll find that it sticks—or *because he didn't miss the cigar butt that rolled into it and is now lying on the catch pan below.*"

Vance whistled, crossed to the grate, got down on his knees, peered through.

"It's there all right," he said. "But who is to say it may not have been there a long time?"



"Suppose you raise the grate and see?" Brady suggested softly. "Suppose you offer the butt to your laboratory for study. Compare the saliva in its end — and the brand and the imprints of teeth. Compare each one of these things with *the cigar in Steve Ramsey's mouth.*"

Ramsey came away from the wall, slid into the archway in one instinctive motion. His hand flashed up with a gun. It happened so suddenly that Vance, the uniformed men, could only stare. Ramsey said: "Don't move, any of you. I was hoping you'd miss the ash trail, the cigar butt, Brady — as I did until it was too late. I was hoping to clear you and Mrs. Colvin and Jansen, because after all, I'm no damned rat. I couldn't send a man to the chair for a crime I'd committed."

Brady was standing quite still, watching Steve Ramsey's face, but the muscles were tightening in his body.

"I forgot I'd taken Colvin's cigars," Ramsay went on huskily. "I've been doing it so damned long it was a habit. I didn't see the butt roll into the grate when we fought and the stand fell over — or remember it afterward. Killing, you see, isn't my line —"

"And the reason, Steve?" Brady asked.

"You knew Colvin, didn't you? He's had me in a corner for years, covering for him and his dirty friends. He's had me where he wanted me. But tonight — with everything that counted to me threatened, I — I lost my head." A smile crossed his lips, a jerky smile. "So I smoked myself out —"

"The aroma, the bouquet from the two cigars you smoked this evening was vaguely familiar. I began to wonder if it wasn't the same I'd smelled in this room when I discovered Paul Colvin's body. Then I recalled that the bands you removed here and at police headquarters did match those in the cigar box. And finally —" Brady hesitated, moved a step nearer the archway. "I accounted for the three cigars that were missing from the box. Of course, you *could* have helped yourself to some smokes when you and your men arrived on the case, but I knew you were too good a police officer to jam a case."

"Stay where you are," Ramsey warned thickly.

Vance said, "Steve — for God's sake, drop that gun! You'll get a break —"

Ramsey was shaking his head. "I had a reputation as an honest



cop. I wasn't — but I can at least be honest with myself now. Stay where you are, all of you. I'm backing out —"

"Steve, you fool!" Vance cried.

Ramsey said, "Goodbye, boys." He was gone then, and the front door slammed and the key turned in the lock. Vance cursed, lunged for the hall, the door; the two patrolmen were behind him.

"The back door!" Vance yelled from the hall. "Get him before he —" A single shot cut into the night, cut off Vance's words. The three men raced down the hall, to the rear.

Brady turned to Nada Colvin. She rose from her chair; her eyes were very bright.

"You'll find me waiting," Brady said.

She whispered, "No, Jim — you'll never wait again."



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# A Glass of Wine Before You Go

*Amy couldn't fight the girl  
with the long black hair the  
way the girl had fought her.*

By D. S. HALACY, Jr.

AMY MITCHELL stood in the doorway, looking at the table she had set. The maid she had dismissed earlier, wanting to handle every detail herself. Everything must be just right, because this dinner Amy had prepared would be the last she and Hugh would have together.

She had poured the wine just a minute before, and it shone darkly, catching the highlights from the tall white candles she hadn't used for so long. But then, this was her birthday, a very special birthday. Looking up from the perfection of the table, she saw herself reflected in the mirror back of the buffet. A thin woman, with a plain face, for whom clothes had never seemed to do much. Perhaps, she thought, she shouldn't blame Hugh; but of course she did.





Turning back to the kitchen, she lifted the lid on the roast, smelling the rich meat as she basted it once more. It had surprised her that Hugh had agreed to come. She hadn't seen him for two weeks, both



of them pretending it was the press of business. Both knowing it was the woman.

For the first few months, Amy had hated the black-haired woman, Anna. She was twenty years younger than Amy, but even at that age Amy would have been no match for the seductive singer who had taken Hugh from her. Then gradually, her hate had shifted to Hugh, and the memory of little things that kept coming back to her, fed that hate until she could no longer keep it under control.

Her birthday seemed a good time to settle the thing, and she had called him at his apartment downtown, reminding him of her birthday. She declined his offer to take her out somewhere, telling him instead she wanted the two of them to share a supper in the house she had once called theirs.

As she took off the apron protecting the black silk dress she wore, she heard a slight sound in the dining-room, and went quickly, thinking perhaps Hugh was early. There was nothing there, and she frowned until she noticed the venetian blinds swinging slightly. She closed the window and then went into the living-room to wait.

**H**E WAS punctual, as usual. As the clock started to chime, she heard his key in the door and she got up slowly, forcing a smile as he came across the carpeting. He kissed her lightly and then handed her a white-wrapped package.

"A happy birthday, my dear," he said in an even tone, she wished she could have matched with her thanks.

"They're beautiful," she said, taking the earrings from the box. They were. Beautiful and expensive, and she wondered if it was just a sop to his conscience. Stepping to a mirror, she fastened them carefully, then turned to thank him again.

Should she thank him for the months of bitter heartbreak, too? For the nights she had sat home alone, knowing he was not alone. Why had he ever bothered to marry mousey little Amy, she wondered? But of course, it was for the money. The money that he needed to make more of his own. Much more, so that now he could afford this house, and the downtown apartment. Besides the house he had bought for the girl.

Amy had seen the house, and she had the feeling that she could have picked it from a dozen others, knowing only what the girl looked like and what she was. It was a beautiful house. Beautiful, and yet



relaxed and casual-looking. The same careless freshness that was so expensive. It wasn't like Amy's house at all. As the girl was unlike Amy.

The break was imminent, she knew that. Hugh's visits to Amy were tapering off to the point of courtesy calls. It galled her that he could be so easy about it, so completely charming while he slowly killed everything inside her. If she hadn't loved him so, it would not be so easy to hate him the way she did now.

She had vowed that she'd not see the girl take Hugh completely. There was that bitter pride left in her yet, even after everything else was gone. Amy, thinking herself a moral woman, a prudish woman even, was willing to do the thing she had planned so carefully. Because it was the only thing for her to do. She could not fight the girl with the long black hair the way the girl had fought her. It was foolish to consider such a possibility. Hugh had shed the years and the things they had shared, as though they never really existed. And perhaps they never had, at that. Perhaps Amy had only bought him for a while with the money.

There was just this one way out. She watched Hugh as he saw the wine already poured, tense until it was plain that he accepted it with no question. He seated her and then went around to his place, waiting for her to act.

It had been their custom to say a grace before each meal. Amy, because it was in her upbringing, and Hugh accepting it as a harmless ritual. He was waiting for that now, but Amy couldn't make herself bow her head this time; not with what was on her mind now.

Instead, she raised the wine glass, making herself smile over it at her husband. Hugh raised his own glass, rising to the occasion with the flawless aplomb that infuriated her now. If only he could have laughed at her, flaunted the thing in her face. But no, he was always under control, always civilized. Even as he killed her by degrees, he maintained that superb poise that once had won her, he was the perfect gentleman.

He held his glass at eye level, smiling across at her.

"To Amy," he said. "And the nicest birthday she's ever had." The guilt must have been in her eyes then, and she drank quickly before he could sense it. Before it could let him interfere with what she had planned. And when she had drained her glass, he still held his full, in the toast he had given her.



**S**HE FELT the fine wine inside her now, warm, and not at all the way she had expected it would be. Across from her, Hugh's smile widened, and when he spoke his voice had a sudden sharpness, she had never heard before.

"Thank you, my dear," he said. "You've saved me a great deal of trouble." He paused, the glass still close to his lips. "I didn't think you had the courage, Amy. I really didn't, and I tip my hat to you. But unfortunately for you, I've had you watched for a long time now. There are dictaphones all through the house, I've used detectives. I knew about the poison, the way you planned to break up my affair with her!"

It began to come to her then, what he was driving at, and her hand went to her throat in an uncontrollable reflex. "No —" she whispered hoarsely. "No, Hugh —"

"Yes, Amy. I came in through the french doors and switched the glasses while you were in the kitchen. Goodbye, Amy, your 'suicide' will make it much easier for me!"

Then, as she tried to get to her feet; to cry out again, he drank the wine she had fixed for herself. As the poison gnawed into him, the shock of astonishment lit his horrified eyes. It was as though he were trying to ask with his last breath if she had actually planned to kill herself!

And in the last split second before he died, there was the other question dawning. The awful possibility that Amy had stumbled onto his dictaphone; planned the whole thing this way.

Of course, Amy didn't have time to tell him; he would just have to guess.





*It was rather convenient that  
Leonard had a prison record...*

# *All-Timed Confession*

By GENE L. HENDERSON

**F**OR THE SECOND time that morning, Jasper felt as if all of his breath had been knocked out. Only this time he felt almost sick. The letter lay on top of his desk, where it had dropped. Anne was getting married! That meant the end of his guardianship over her and, uncle or not, she'd expect all of her inheritance before long.

That meant he had ten thousand dollars to explain away, gone on poor speculations on the market. She had no use for him anyway so nothing but the money would keep him from prison.

He saw Leonard, his new assistant of one month, staring at him anxiously, and scowled so that the other wouldn't feel encouraged to come over and plead again. That brought up the second problem and his active brain began to tumble over a plan. He'd just discovered



that Leonard had a prison record prior to coming to the Hadley Department store where he, Jasper, was head cashier.

He could still hear Leonard pleading that he'd been framed by the gang he'd been running around with as a kid. That he'd been made the goat by the police and sent to prison for the attempted bank robbery. Now the old gang had been trying to get information from him concerning the Saturday receipts at the store but he'd refused to tell anything.

Jasper remembered the gang leader's name and decided to look it up in the phone book. If everything went as he'd began to plan, the two of them could make it look like a professional job and get away with all of today's heavy receipts. Even better, Leonard was sure to get the blame once his past was discovered.

Pete was easy to find but proved suspicious over the phone. Finally he consented to talk it over in his car that evening and, if it still sounded all right, to help out for a fifty-fifty split.

After work, he met Pete several blocks away and they rode down along the River Drive. The big man was still suspicious but avidly interested as Jasper explained that only he and Leonard knew the combination to the safe.

"I don't know," growled Pete. "It sounds too easy to me."

"There's almost ninety thousand in the safe," coaxed Jasper. "Fifty-fifty and Leonard will get blamed."

Pete chuckled. "Yeah, that I like. Especially with him so high and mighty when me and the boys tried to talk to him. Okay, it's a deal. We can go in my car right now, it's dark outside. I don't like the streets too empty when I pull a job. Is everyone gone at the store?"

"Everyone except the night watchman. I know his habits and, besides, there's a side door I have a key for."

"Okay. I can jimmy it a little so it'll look like it was forced. Let's get started."

**T**HE WATCHMAN was back in his room as Jasper had known from past experience he'd be. He led the way quietly to the second floor offices. The big wall vault loomed at the far end of the room, causing Pete to whistle softly and say, "Boy, I'm glad we didn't try to tackle that without any help."

"It's just as good as any in the banks," Jasper whispered proudly.





He had Pete hold a cupped flashlight over the combination while he worked it. Finally the door swung open and he almost feverishly pulled open the cash drawer. He froze, astonished, and stared into the empty interior. Then he pulled at all of the others, finding only a few bags of coins in one.

"It's gone," he said dully to Pete.

"Say, what is this you're pulling," demanded the other.

"It's true. It's always kept there, I can't . . ."

Pete cursed and said, "It's that double-crossing kid. No wonder he wouldn't talk to me and the boys."

"It must've been, agreed Jasper. "He was the only other one that knew the combination. Even if . . ."

He was interrupted by a curt command. "Don't move a foot. Thought I heard something." They both whirled around and, in the dim night lights, Jasper saw that it was the old watchman, holding a .45 in one hand and a flashlight in the other.

Jasper thought quickly. "It's all right, Sanders," he said.

The old man looked closer, then lowered the gun. "Oh, it's you, Mr. Benson. I thought a minute that it might be . . ."

He was cut off by the sound of a shot booming in the office. For a



moment his mouth hung slackly, then he slowly crumpled to the floor. Jasper saw then that Pete was holding a small revolver. He exclaimed, "You shot him in cold blood!"

"He had a gun on us."

"But he'd never have used it after recognizing me. I have a perfect right to be in here after hours."

"Yeah," said Pete doubtfully. "I'd forgotten about that." He started towards the body, saying, "We'd better drag him into . . ."

"Don't touch him!" commanded Jasper sharply. Pete stopped as if he'd run into a stone wall.

"Why not?"

"We didn't get the money, but Leonard can keep it and the credit for this, too; I don't want none of it."

"Say," admired Pete. "You're pretty sharp on this thinking business. Right now we'd better scam in case anyone heard the shot."

**T**HEY WERE quickly out the side door and in Pete's car several blocks away before they heard sirens screaming towards the store. Reaction had set in now and Jasper tried to control the violent starts of trembling that swept over his body. There was still the ten thousand to account for with his niece but perhaps he could reason with her. The one of murder tonight was a thousand times worse. As he remembered the missing money, he felt a vicious satisfaction that Leonard would burn for the murder.

"I can cook up an alibi," Pete was saying, "but how about you?"

Jasper thought rapidly, then came to a decision. "Put me off uptown," he instructed, "and I'll see a movie. If they ask me anything, I can always prove I was there." Pete let him out in the uptown crowd and he was soon watching a movie intently, also taking care to drop the ticket stubs in his pocket.

Afterwards, as he walked towards his house after getting off the bus, he felt as peaceful as if the murder a few hours previously were nothing but a dim dream. He fumbled for the door latch with his key and jumped at the voice behind him.

"Mr. Benson?"

As he turned, key still in his hand, a flashlight beam made him squint his eyes and shade them with a hand.

"Yes?" he answered. "Who is it?"



"The police," replied the other in a calm, matter-of-fact voice that still made Jasper's pulse feel like it had skipped a beat.

A little nervous, but not frightened, Jasper ran over everything mentally to make sure it was all in place. "The police?" he said falteringly, as he was sure any good citizen would have done in his place. "I don't understand." He could see that the other was a plainclothes man, a detective.

The other man was still courteous but insistent. "I'm afraid that I'll have to ask you to come downtown for questioning, Mr. Benson."

Jasper felt frightened all of a sudden. "What for?" he demanded. "I'm a law-abiding citizen; I refuse to go willingly."

"Then I'm afraid you're under arrest."

"What for? I have a right to know."

"For the murder of a nightwatchman at the Hadley Department Store tonight."

"Murder!" He began to feel desperate. "Surely you're joking. I've been at a movie all evening; I can prove it." The first man had been joined by another from a car he hadn't previously noticed parked at the curb.

"I'm afraid that'll be hard to prove, Mr. Benson — especially since we can prove you were at the store."

"Impossible! How could you?"

The two detectives looked at each other, one shrugging. "Guess it's all right to tell since it's cut-and-dried. Only two people knew the safe combination, you and your assistant. Right?"

"That's correct."

"Your assistant has a prison record, as you were aware of. He became frightened after work this afternoon and went to your employer, saying he was afraid his old gang would attempt a robbery at the store. So, all receipts were removed after closing hours.

"You see, Mr. Benson, your employer and assistant both saw that the safe was locked before leaving. It could only have been opened by one other person . . . you!"





# Buildup To Murder



*It was simple, but clever; Doc Yates would kill three men in such a way that the third would be regarded as murderer of the first two. And Yates, with no visible motive for any of the killings, would be eighty grand richer!*

By ELTON WEBSTER

**D** C. "DOC" YATES composed his lean long face and enunciated into the telephone mouthpiece. "This is the Yates • Investigation Agency, Yates personally speaking. Will you be kind enough to put Mr. Sheldon on the wire?"



The voice at the other end said, "Mr. Sheldon is engaged at this moment. I am his secretary; perhaps I can help you." It was a nice lower-register female voice, with a hint of sultriness behind it.

Yates was intrigued by it but repressed the instinct to get in a little fast flirting. "But of course. It really isn't important enough to bother Mr. Sheldon himself about. I simply want to report that a would-be client tried to hire me to protect him against assault by Mr. Sheldon."

There was a gasp from the secretary, then a quick laugh at the absurdity of the situation. Yates adjusted his crimson knitted tie over the gray shirt, and decided she was probably a brunette. The long-limbed type but with curves, too.

She said, "The idea of Mr. Sheldon assaulting anybody is quite ridiculous. I don't quite understand. If this is some form of blackmail, why —"

Yates interrupted stiffly, "Pardon me. There was no idea of direct assault, of course. The man who tried to hire my services — he was using a fictitious name, of course — claimed he feared harm from assailants hired by Mr. Sheldon. This man's story was that he knew something concerning Sheldon of a criminal nature."

It was the girl's turn to interrupt. "That is palpably absurd."

"Of course. I told him that bluntly, but he insisted that he was in danger, that Mr. Sheldon knew he knew. And, therefore, that Mr. Sheldon might consider it expedient to put him out of the way. Those last were his exact words."

The secretary was suspicious now. Her voice was fringed with icicles when she said, "Well, Mr. Yates?"

"Nothing beyond that." His voice had become stiff and distant. "I refused the case. We don't care for that kind of business, of course. But I believe the man is deranged and might be dangerous."

"Mr. Yates, if Mr. Sheldon thought he was in any danger, he would take steps to —"

It was a shame to cut in on that voice but he did. "Thank you, but I am not trying to drum up business, madam. I merely thought Mr. Sheldon might like to know a man is going about the city making slanderous charges about him. That is all." The receiver made a dull click against the fork of the cradle as he hung up. "Move number one in the game."

Adis undulated in from the outer office. Adis was small but voluptuous with a pert baby face, a high blonde pompadour, and one very



cute brain beneath it. Doc Yates sometimes suspected that the time would come when she might turn out to be a little too cute. She said in an affected but none-the-less intriguing drawl: "What's the Sheldon matter, Doc?"

Yates unfolded his six feet of flat body lazily and put on the vague amiable smile that was as effective a mask as a curtain. But his deep-set black eyes were guarded; they always were. "Honey has been listening in on the switchboard again, eh." He bent to hook open the drawer where the Scotch was kept.

"Naturally, Doc. . . . You always said you like to have a witness to the conversation unless it's a personal call." She picked out the bottle of Scotch and two glasses and poured. They had a drink. Yates shook his head for himself and she poured herself another.

He dropped back into the chair, patted his lap and spoke as she poised another question. "Forget it, Baby; come over here." He grabbed her by the wrist when she looked doubtful and tried to play coy.

"If I catch my Nylons again on the edge of your chair . . . Doc, if that wealthy Horace Sheldon should hire you, there'd be some real sweet onion skins, wouldn't there? Hey, since when have you started carrying your gun in your side pocket?"

He took it out and slid it into the center drawer of the desk. She started to prod him for an answer but began to purr after a few moments. He liked the way Adis purred. But if he cleaned up on this Sheldon angle, he meant to move in new circles, real top-drawer stuff. And Adis would have to go; she lacked the class for that kind of stuff.

The blonde head pulled away and lifted. "Doc, the man you mentioned on the phone, the one who wanted to be protected against Sheldon — when was he in here? I don't remember him."

He said, "You wouldn't, Honey. He was in Monday when you were out to lunch." And he pulled the blonde head back down roughly.

**I**T WAS approximately twenty-eight minutes later when the phone call he expected came. Adis covered the mouthpiece and said, "Inspector Mauck of Headquarters. What kind of a jam have you —"

He waved her off his lap and smiled at the instrument. Things were working. When people like Horace Sheldon, wealthy manufacturer, contacted the Moines City police department, they got action.



Sheldon had been somewhat impressed by the tip on a man who professed to fear attack from him, or he would not have relayed the information to the police.

"People with guilty consciences are nervous," Yates murmured, then uncovered the mouthpiece. "Yates speaking, Inspector. What can I do for you? . . . Oh, about the client who tried to hire me on the Sheldon matter. Yes, sure. Well, it's simply as I gave the facts to Mr. Sheldon's secretary. No, I never laid eyes on the man before. When I heard a man of Mr. Sheldon's caliber was involved, I didn't want any."

Inspector Mauck made a nasty sarcastic noise at the other end. Yates remained solemn-faced. "No, Inspector, we are not trying to muscle in on any business. After, it occurred to me Mr. Sheldon might like to know that a man was circulating a story that —. See here, Mauck, you can't call me a chiseling rat running an agency as a front for something on the borderline of blackmail! I'll have you know —" It was Yates who was hung up on that time.

He rose, whistling softly, picked up his hat and headed out without another look for Adis. "I won't be back this afternoon," he threw over his shoulder.

"How about the afternoon off for me, Doc? I don't want to sit around this fly-trap all alone."

"Hang on that switchboard. Something important might come through. Remember, it's getting near fur coat time, Baby. If things work out right, maybe . . ." He left it hanging there.

Downstairs he went into the corner bar, signed the barkeeper negatively on a drink, and went back to the lone phone booth. He used up considerable silver on a long-distance connection to Chicago and got Dick Haney. He listened a few moments, then said: "All right, Dick. Keep an eye on Hengen's hotel. I've been tipped he's due to get in here sometime Thursday, two days from now. He'll doubtless fly. Keep tabs on the airport there. He's due in here for a birthday party Thursday night, so you can about figure when he'll take off. I'll want to know. . . . Okay?"

He emerged and walked out past the bar without having a drink. Behind his lean, grave face with the watchful eyes was the glow of a man who has had about a half dozen Courvoisiers.

"Haney out in Chi will keep his lip buttoned," he rechecked mentally. "I know about that little business of his out in Cicero in '49.



When Hengen takes off from Chi. . . ." He had investigated Hengen's background carefully. Hengen was smart, no round-heel. An attorney, he had been one of the "bright young men" attached to a bureau in D. C. during the war days. Too, he was Horace Sheldon's future son-in-law. "But when he takes off to bring in the payoff, I cut myself in. . . ."

Yates checked with the office at closing time and said "no" when Adis asked about dinner. Dinner with her meant an evening of drinking, and there was still a detail or so to be handled. He did a little pub-crawling himself, browsing about the night spots and smarter bars. It was in a place on the West Side where the sporting mob bent elbows that he finally tracked down Van Henry, columnist of *The Evening Dispatch*. The brilliant but erratic scandalhound was lapping up Cuba Libres and was already half tanked. Which meant he wouldn't be too critical about the source of a tip that would provide a sensational item for the morrow's column.

Yates circulated, swapping conversation with several of the boys though he never went near Van Henry. A chubby bookmaker lent him an attentive ear for a couple of minutes. Yates eased out, confident the bookie wouldn't let him down. He knew about the charge Chicago police had against that bookie.

It wasn't until after luncheon the next day that he appeared at the office. A stodgy storekeeper, seeking evidence for divorce against an older wife, chewed his nails on the waiting-room bench. Yates gave him the brushoff though he had bled him for another fifty two weeks ago. Adis was running a temperature when she followed him into his room.

"Sheldon's secretary called six times. They — want you to call them the moment you get in. It's probably about this here in *The Dispatch*. Henry's column." When she came around the corner of the desk to point out the item in the folded back sheet, she stood close against him in the periwinkle brushed-wool frock that was a little too snug over the girdle sector. She had on a copious quantity of that new perfume, *Indiscreet Night*, too.

If Yates was aware of any of it, he never gave it a tumble. When he was working on some new promising case, he had a trick of drawing into a hermitical shell. "Hmm," he said, then read aloud the indicated line from the Van Henry pillar. "*In subrosa circles in the Big Burg the whisper is that a certain former employee of a defense*



plant outside of this city is being accompanied by bodyguards of the Yates Detective Agency in fear of retaliation from Horace Sheldon. The same Horace Sheldon, good readers, whose aircraft parts company has been threatened with investigation of its war contracts on the floor of Congress. It may just be a lot of wild talk, all smoke and no fire, but those in the know say the Yates Agency bodyguards are very real. . . ."

Yates slapped the paper onto the desk, looking amazed. Actually he had caught the first edition when it hit the newsstands over an hour ago. "That's cockeyed, Adis. You know I refused the case, that I've got no bodyguards out. . . . Get me Sheldon's home."

## II

WHEN he was alone, he fingered open a few inches the center drawer of his desk. Inside he could see the society column of a morning paper of two weeks ago. He had memorized the item stating that Horace Sheldon, on this coming Thursday, would give a birthday party for his engaged daughter, the glamorous Roberta Sheldon, at the smart exclusive *Blue Moon Club*. The call came through and Sheldon's secretary with the provocative voice asked him to wait a moment. Horace Sheldon himself came on.

"See here, Yates, I don't know who in blazes you are; nor do I care," the manufacturer snapped in a dry scathing voice. "But unless you have some decent explanation — and add to it an immediate retraction to the press — I shall place this matter in the hands of my attorneys immediately."

"I imagine, Mr. Sheldon, you are referring to the item in *The Dispatch*. It has just been called to my attention," Yates said in a grave respectful voice. "As to who I am, my only answer is that I operate a modest investigation agency. A man of your position, of course, would never have heard of me; and I also imagine that if you cared to pull a few strings, I would be ordered by certain civic authorities to close up and vacate the town."

Yates was careful not to sound too apprehensive.

He paused, waiting. He could hear Sheldon doing some snorting and grunting. Sheldon, the private eye knew, was a tall, spare man who was forced to use a cane because of a partially paralyzed leg. He was said to be a virtual dynamo in business and possessed of a



choleric temper when he believed he was being taken advantage of in any respect.

"I don't understand any of this, Yates. I got the message on that first call of yours and it sounded like so much balderdash. If you're trying to get your hooks in for a piece of business, dammit, I'll —"

"Mr. Sheldon," Yates knifed in frigidly, "to a small operator like me, any assignment from the Sheldon Corporation would be a wind-fall. And as I hinted before, you could probably drive me out of business; but the fact remains, I did *refuse* the case mentioned in my talk with your secretary."

Horace Sheldon became somewhat mollified. "Look, Yates, I don't want to be unfair. But I'd like to find out who started that gossip a man has to hire bodyguards in fear of me! I intend to find out, too."

"The point is," Yates came back smoothly, "that I am not supplying protection to anybody fearing trouble from you, Mr. Sheldon. So it would be rather stupid of me to issue a public statement saying I was, wouldn't it? I suggest you reach Van Henry, the author of the statement."

Sheldon said he had. He said Van Henry's claim was that he couldn't remember the source. That it had come to him with a number of other items.

"Then it obviously was not me, was it, Mr. Sheldon? As proof of my sincerity, I'm quite willing to call at your house and discuss this with you face to face, sir." He stuck out his tongue at the mouthpiece as he buttered up the man with that "sir." Immediately after the end of the Korean war, Sheldon had retired from active control of his company, running his affairs from the prepossessing residence in the Heights, the smart suburb above the city. "If there is anything I can do . . ."

Sheldon had calmed down. He said he guessed perhaps Yates himself was in the clear. But when he brought up the columnist, Van Henry, he began to fume and roar till a fit of coughing choked him off. A woman's voice took over the wire. It didn't sound like the secretary, though.

"I am Mr. Sheldon's daughter, Roberta Sheldon, Mr. Yates. My father is unable to speak further now."

"Well, I just don't want him to put me out of business."

"Oh, I don't think you need to worry." She laughed a little.



He rubbed his hands with satisfaction when he hung up. Actually meeting the daughter over the telephone wire was a better break than he had plotted for. He was being tied into the coming situation very neatly. They would remember who Doc Yates was.

Adis floated in, lounged over a corner of the desk, and looked hurt in a pouty way. "When did I get run out of the club, Doc?" She leaned forward to work open the liquor drawer of the desk.

Yates pressed it closed firmly. "Don't be absurd, Baby. You heard me say on the wire that I realized Sheldon could drive me out of town. I wasn't kidding; I got to walk soft."

She whiffed cigaret smoke from her snub nose in angry puffs. "Something cooks on the front burner, Doc. I can tell it by the way you're wearing your ears these days. If you're knocking yourself out over some new pigeon —"

He held up a well-manicured hand. "I don't know what Sheldon's daughter looks like. Besides, I never tumble for those debs; they can't carry their Scotch. . . . All right; did you ever hear of nuisance value?"

"So you are building something with Sheldon."

"He doesn't know it yet, Honey. But if the mysterious cluck who tried to hire me to protect him should attain sufficient nuisance value — well, perhaps Sheldon would have to have him traced down." He tapped her crossed knee with a long finger to accentuate the point. "And what more logical candidate to do the tracing than yours truly."

"You're smart, Doc," she cooed. "And Sheldon's got the rocks to pay a nice fat bill, eh?"

"Keep your mind set on silver fox, Baby." He slapped on his hat as he tilted up her face. "I'll call in later."

"Hey, you had a date to take me to luncheon today."

"You'll have to take a rain check on it, Honey."

**H**E WENT over to the East Side and then downtown, traveling warily. He took a crosstown bus from the office, shifted to the trolley, picked up a cab at the lower end of the city in the old business section, quit the cab two blocks from his destination, a cheap fifty-cent-per-night hotel for bums and luses. He made a complete turn around the block on which it stood, then ducked into the cigar store on the corner and phoned the hotel to reach his man. It took a little doing inasmuch as the joint had a phone in each hall instead of in



individual rooms, and his man had to be roused from his usual alcoholic stupor. There was a beer and light wines trap halfway down the block from the Old Metropolitan House and Yates met his stooge there.

A little later, ten dollars lighter in the pocket, Yates watched his man clump back to the hotel. If the heat should be put on him, the rum-sodden fool would spill all he knew; no question of that. Yates whistled softly.

"There are always ways of guarding against that. . . ."

Thursday, Adis wanted to know how the Sheldon matter was developing. Slumped behind his desk on which was a picture of Miss Roberta Sheldon on the society page, Yates merely shrugged. It was hard to tell much about Sheldon's daughter from the picture. She looked like the timid type, plain-faced with a page-boy bob. The hair seemed brown. Yates decided she would be what was known as a "good sport" and probably played a good game of tennis.

"Perhaps Sheldon needs a bit more needling," Adis suggested. "Perhaps you should make another plant, Doc. A little more publicity, maybe." She pulled the handkerchief from his breast pocket, fluttered it open, then replaced it, folding it so two points showed.

"No, no lipstick," he said. Then cocked an eyebrow in a grimace of surprise, "Plant? . . . Have a drink, Adis. You're smart."

She raised her glass. "Not smart enough to be beyond jealousy, you big cluck! If I was to find out this was a cover-up for some off-the-record woo-pitching of yours — well, I'd start throwing things, Doc. I'd be so mad, I'd throw everything in sight." Her eyes slitted up tightly. "And I wouldn't care who got hurt, Doc. . . . Never forget that!"

He spiked a finger against the tilted nose and pushed till it flattened. "Speaking of jealousy, you'll have the femmes around the sin spots turning green when you make the rounds with those new silver foxes. . . . Now leave me alone for a spell. I've got some heavy thinking on the docket."

It was mid-afternoon when Haney called through from Chicago. "Adis! And bring your dictation pad," he called out as she plugged him in on the call. When she came in, he said, "Go ahead, Dick"

"Hengen's taking the seven-thirty plane out of here, Doc. I double-checked it," Dick Haney said. "Anything else?"



"Yeah. Ill wire you fifty inside the hour. Seven-thirty, eh. . . . That will get him in here about ten-thirty."

"Ten-thirty-five, Doc."

"All right. Be at the Chi airport when that plane takes off and make sure there are no last-minute changes. When you see him board the plane, phone me again. Got that? All right. Fifty coming. Goodbye."

Yates allowed himself a satisfied smile.

**A**DIS was smoldering in a build-up to a third-degree burn when he broke the connection. Her eyes were very small; it gave her a slightly piggish look. "A very nice trick, Doc, getting me in here! Afraid I'd listen in and —"

"Get mature, will you? This is big business. Didn't you tell me to build another plant on the Sheldon matter? This is it."

"But you don't trust me enough to let me listen in on it!"

"Oh, for Lord's sake, Adis! Look, if this monkey hadn't been coming straight through to Moines, I'd have to have arrival and departure times at the other points he might be hitting. I'd have called them out to you."

"Oh." She saw the little danger flags, the whitening around Yates's nostrils, and slid down on the arm of his chair. "Doc, honey, what's the plant?"

"Wait till I get it figured out, won't you, Babe? I'm taking chances, big chances. . . . Adis, a bathing suit couldn't reveal any more than that frock you've got on."

"Complaining, mister?"

He felt her preening herself by an uplift movement of the body like a self-adulating cat. He felt it by his arm around her. "Hell no. I just hate for the clients to get a free show. Let's have a drink." He made his own a half shot. He was glad when somebody came in and Adis had to get out. He wanted to keep himself sharp, uncloyed, as the moment of the big play neared. . . .

At ten minutes to eight, Haney came through from Chicago again. Ray Hengen, Sheldon's son-in-law-to-be, had taken off on the seven-thirty plane all right. Yates looked like a pallbearer about to go up the aisle with the casket, but the dark eyes were snapping. Adis was pleased when he let her in on the setup. He was playing a hunch, he said, that the mystery client, who'd tried to hire him for protection



against Sheldon, might be snooping around the airport when Hengen came in.

"He hinted Sheldon's future son-in-law was tied into the thing. Now if I could put my finger on that little mystery guy again, I'd have something concrete to show to Sheldon and then . . ."

"I catch, Doc."

"Okay. Stay in and I'll call later and maybe we can get together." He hung up on her, hesitated over a drink, thumbs-downed the idea, locked up the office, and left. . . .

### III

**S**HORTLY before eleven, he entered his modest apartment house a little up from midtown over by the river and the slaughter-house section. It was one of those second-rate places with self-service elevators and neither a doorman nor a hall attendant on at night. At exactly three minutes of eleven, in shirt sleeves and with necktie removed, bearing a half-filled bottle of Scotch and a couple of glasses, he knocked on the door of the apartment adjoining his. It was occupied by McCumber, a balding little Civil Service worker in the highway department.

"Say, I'm sorry about that yelling a few nights ago," Yates said when McCumber opened up. "Somebody at the party just got a little too high. Thought you might like a drink."

That was all right with the hen-pecked McCumber. His wife wouldn't let him keep anything stronger than a bottle of beer in the place. Mrs. McCumber pulled on her shoes hurriedly and gave Yates a frosty smile when he entered the crowded over-furnished living room.

"Make yourself comfortable," McCumber chirped as he picked his way around a knick-knack jammed end table to reach the radio. "I was just about to get the eleven o'clock news on the city station." He always did; Yates had heard him through the thin partition.

"Well, here's mud in your eye," Yates said after pouring a couple of generous shots. "How're things down at your office, Mac?"

Mac said things were looking up and that maybe he'd get a promotion. The Moines City station's identification letters issued from the radio. Then: "*We now give you the regular eleven o'clock broadcast of city news. A special flash has just come into the studio. Horace*



*Sheldon, wealthy manufacturer of this city, has just been shot to death by an unknown assailant at the Blue Moon Club where Mr. Sheldon was giving a birthday party for his daughter, Miss Roberta Sheldon. Miss Sheldon's fiance, Ray Hengen, just arrived by plane from Chicago, appeared at the club almost immediately afterward. Police say death was almost instantaneous. . . .*

"Holy jumping jeepers!" exploded Yates, letting half his drink spill onto a table doily of Mrs. McCumber's. "I was just speaking to Mr. Sheldon yesterday!"

"You — you knew Horace Sheldon? Why, he's one of the wealthiest men in the city," McCumber said, impressed.

"No, not exactly. It was just some little business matter. But I never suspected *he* was in any danger. Never." He left a few moments later, still appearing shocked.

Back in his own apartment, he got Adis on the wire. She had heard the news too. Yates said he was "damned sore." "Just when I was really building something, too. Listen, Adis. You been in all evening? Alone?"

She sputtered sulphurously at the last innuendo. He calmed her with, "Look, Baby, Doc could be on a little bit of a spot. Get your feathers down, Gorgeous; the silver foxes aren't lost yet. But simmer down and listen."

That got her in a listening mood.

He said, "It makes it fine that you were in — and alone. Because — *I* — was — with — you till a few minutes ago. Get it? I left about a quarter of eleven."

A hard impersonal note tinged her voice. "Look, Doc. Did you do it? Because I'm damned if I'm going to get my skirts all dirtied up with —"

"Turn off the panic! If I cooled Sheldon, don't you think I'd have an alibi prepared in advance? Of course. All right. It's just that I don't know the score yet and that the police will be digging up anybody in contact with the dead man lately."

Adis registered approval.

"You were with me till about a quarter to eleven. Do I have to tell what we were doing?" she giggled.

He gave back a laugh. "If I were guilty, I'd have made sure we were out so somebody could see what we did, Baby!"



**I**T WAS still short of eleven-thirty when a plainclothes man from the Homicide Bureau knocked on his door. Inspector Mauck would like to see him down at the *Blue Moon Club*. Fully dressed, Yates reached inside to hook up his hat.

"Sure thing; I was expecting word from him any moment." The flatfoot remained stonyfaced. But Yates knew every word he uttered was being laboriously pigeonholed in the man's mind.

A cordon of uniformed men were around the *Blue Moon* over near the town's smart apartment colony on the other side of the city when they arrived in the police car. Caslin, a captain in Homicide, gave Yates a stiff nod and he was whisked inside. You went down two steps into a discreetly dim simply furnished foyer. There was nothing ornate or ostentatious about the expensive *Blue Moon*, with its reputation for having the slickest and toughest velvet rope in town to crash.

The intimate cocktail lounge opening off to the left was like a veritable jewel box. Further on down was the arched entrance to the dining room, a segment of the small dance floor caught in a frozen blue spotlight. No music issued from there now. The plainclothes man with Yates halted him there indecisively. Yates let his wandering eyes slide to the right. Across the foyer from the dining salon a small side corridor branched to the men's room and the business office of the establishment. Midway along it were a few phone booths. It was usually illuminated only by blue bulbs in wall brackets. Now the police had turned on the big garishly bright bulb in the overhead fixture. And though the body had already gone out, Yates could see where it had been.

Chalk marks indicated the position the corpse had occupied on the cobalt-hued carpeting by one of the phone booths. Sheldon had evidently collapsed half in and half out of a booth. The police photographer was just packing up his equipment.

"Had three slugs in him. Smack in the chest. Any one of them could have been fatal," somebody said in a hushed voice.

Mauck came out of the dining room. He was a small, large-headed man with a harsh face built up from a ledge of jaw. He had come up from a harness bull and always looked as if he were forcing himself to remember he mustn't shout at people. He was a regular bulldog on a case. Mauck stood rubbing his splayed nose back-handedly.

"Hello, Yates . . . Been a little shooting here."



"So I heard — on the radio newscast. I figured you'd want to see me."

Mauck snapped a match and held it as Doc Yates produced a cigaret. Their eyes were close across the flame. Mauck had to look up. "Where did you hear the radio report, Yates?"

Yates told him, knowing the thorough-going inspector would send a man up to see the McCumbers. "Spend the evening there?"

Yates shook his head. "Hell, no. Just got home about then. Say, are you trying to put the finger on me for this —?"

"Just checking, just checking, Yates. You were in the city, of course. . . ."

"Why sure. I —. Say, the mayor was in the city, too. So was the manager of the local ball club. Why not rope them in?"

"Maybe I will before I'm finished. Where were you this evening? Out on business, of course. Of course, you can't mention names without violating a confidence, but —"

Yates shook his head. "Simpler than that. Out pitching a little woo. With my office secretary, as a matter of fact, at her place."

"That's a lousy alibi, Yates."

The Inspector's voice lacked conviction.

Yates shrugged. "Can I help that? I didn't know somebody would have murder in their heart tonight — or I'd have gotten a better one."

"That's an idea. . . . That was what you might call an inside job. Whoever shot Sheldon knew his every move of this evening, what he'd be doing each minute. He got a phone call and took it in that booth down there."

Yates elevated eyebrows. "'S funny. If he'd called the club, they'd have put it right through to Sheldon's table with one of their portable extensions."

"That's right, but the call came in on the instrument in that booth. Yeah, we already checked on the source of the call; it was made from the adjoining booth. Sheldon stepped into answer. The murderer stepped out of the adjoining booth, stepped in behind him, and let him have it, closed the door of the booth, thus extinguishing its light, and went away from here." Mauck shrugged thick shoulders in his \$60.00 sharkskin suit. "Maybe he didn't go very far; maybe he didn't go out the front door — although he could have. Silencer on the gun, of course, and with the music playing. . . ."



Yates pursed his lips for a whistle but didn't give it. "Very neat." He eyed the dead man's malacca cane propped against the booth. "What's the motive?"

"That's what I'm looking for. It wasn't any ordinary one of revenge or anything. The murderer was too cool and neat about it."

Yates nodded agreement. "Couldn't have done better myself."

"Thought you might be able to give us a feeder. Maybe something about the caller at your office." Yates said he had told all he knew about that. "All right. Want to come inside and meet the dinner party?" It was a tacit order.

This was part of the Mauck technique, Yates knew. It reminded the private operative of a certain baseball general-manager who purchased players in droves, figuring one of the bunch had to live up to the promise. When Mauck hit a cold case, one without a lead, he simply threw together everybody who could know anything, then awaited developments.

Yates was looking at a man he knew instinctively would have made him a swell partner. Mauck was saying, "This is Mr. Hengen, engaged to Mr. Sheldon's daughter."

Hengen was medium height, broad, with one of those homely, frank faces people instinctively took for honest. He had plain brown hair carefully combed and the mild voice of a man always half afraid of interrupting somebody. But Yates read the signs in a flash; the quick-sliding gray eyes behind spectacles that masked their penetrative quality. The flat-lipped mouth that hinted at ruthlessness; and the manner of never making a move without a mental dress rehearsal first.

Ray Hengen shook hands and looked at Mauck. "How does Mr. Yates enter into the case?" The inspector gave him a thumbnail sketch and Hengen gave Yates an apologetic smile the latter could have imagined him perfecting before a mirror. "We're all wrought up, naturally, and I wanted to know just — well —"

"And you almost sounded guilty." Yates gave him a quick laugh.

There were three other young couples in the party plus a middle-aged bachelor. All society names. It had already been established they were all at the table during the time Horace Sheldon was outside so they were of little interest. Mauck permitted them to leave within a few more moments. He said they were still checking on the help.



"But I'm afraid we'll dredge up nothing there. Practically all of them have been here for years. We —"

"Pardon me." Hengen elbowed past Yates. "Darling, how do you feel now?"

Roberta Sheldon was entering the room, long since cleared of patrons, on the arm of the female attendant from the powder room. She was long-limbed and slim as Yates had imagined. At first she was just another perfectly groomed girl in severe white evening dress with something shy about her. Then Yates caught the rhythm of her body as she moved, saw that the long bob that had looked brown in the society page photo was actually a dull, deep red. He looked at her past Hengen and her eyes swiveled and something jumped inside Doc Yates. They reminded him of deep sea water, those long, naive eyes, aquamarine beneath dark-winged brows.

Yates was introduced to her. She said quietly, "Oh, of course, Mr. Yates. A cigaret, please, Ray." She sat down. "Mr. Yates, can you tell us anything about the identity of that caller of yours? I'm certain it could have been only some deranged fanatic who shot my . . ."

**Y**ATES beat Hengen with the light for her cigaret and lounged on the corner of the table. Shrugged. "You might have something there. Right away, I put him down as an alcoholic." But he could give little more, he said. He had been busy, had several important phone calls while the man was there.

"Didn't he identify himself?" Roberta leaned closer to Yates as if to break through his nonchalant attitude.

"Gave the name of Zane. Obviously fictitious. When I pressed him more, his answer was to offer a fat retainer."

"And that didn't interest you at all?" said Mauck with blunt sarcasm.

"I figured the man was a psycho, a plain nut. You get them all the time, little characters with overpowering secrets and persecution complexes. He seemed like just another crank until he mentioned Mr. Sheldon's name just before he cleared out." Yates glanced at Hengen as he finished. Hengen had the vague look of a person who considers the conversation a waste of time.

"Your caller's like the little man who wasn't there. Leads us nowhere." Mauck turned to confer with a lieutenant.

"Only some poor fool who *imagined* Dad had wronged him would



want to — to kill him," Roberta said half aloud. It was plain she adored her late father."

"Whoever he was, he was smart enough to get away with it cold," said Yates sharply and watched her wince.

Hengen stared at him coldly. "The police have got to grill every employee and every guest who was here. Mauck said they'd taken the name and address of everybody who had been dining in the place. All right. Fine comb that list, I say. This was obviously an inside job."

He sounded as if this pronouncement solved the case.

Yates cocked an eyebrow. "Yes? From the radio report, Mr. Hengen, I understand you just came in on a plane. You got here before — or after — the shooting?"

"Immediately after it. They had just found the — found Mr. Sheldon a minute or so before I arrived. Everything was confusion."

"Did you happen to note the name of the cab driver who brought you here?"

"Why — no."

"Anybody see you when you entered?"

Hengen shook his head. "No. Traffic was heavy in the block and I got out at the corner and walked down. The doorman must have been inside in the excitement. Say, why?"

Yates hoisted his thin shoulders. "Nothing. I was just wondering after you said that it had to be an inside job. . . . You got yourself a Tartar, Mauck."

The Homicide inspector said there wasn't any more they could do that night. Out on the sidewalk, the Sheldon sedan swished a nose as long as a locomotive up to the curb. Yates bowed to the girl as she got in.

"I'll see if I can track down the mystery caller," he murmured.

He put on the air of a man trying to remember an important detail. "Perhaps . . . well, he phoned me this morning."

Hengen pulled his head back of the car. "What? You didn't mention that to the police, Yates!"

"No. I didn't see how it would help them. And I had planned to take it up with Mr. Sheldon first because the man mentioned his son-in-law — you. . . ."

Hengen smoothed an eyebrow. "Why don't you ride out to the house with us, Yates?"



## IV

THEY SAT in the library of the big Sheldon mansion up in the Heights. The radio newscaster said. *"Inspector Mauck of Homicide has issued a statement to the press. Mauck states the police have a promising suspect and that they will bend every effort to unearth circumstantial evidence connecting him with the slaying of Horace Sheldon. Meanwhile every person in the Blue Moon club will be thoroughly investigated within the next twenty-four hours. Then..."*

Hengen rose to cut off the station but Roberta said "No" in a voice husky with emotion.

Yates sipped the Scotch and picked up the thread of the conversation. "It's a thin chance — but it could lead somewhere. When Zane called on the phone this morning, he seemed to be whispering off-wire to somebody with him. He stated another party was involved in the criminal charges he could bring against your father, Miss Sheldon." Yates raised his drink, looking over the glass at Hengen.

"There couldn't have been anything like that. There couldn't have been. . . . What are the chances of locating this man, Mr. Yates?" Roberta said levelly.

"That's it. There is always the chance he might call again. And I did spend part of today checking on a few places where his type would hang out, the cheap hotels and lodging houses, the lower-class bars. As I said he was plainly an alcoholic — and down-at-the-heel as well, one stage above a bum. But I do have other matters to attend to. A man must make a living and —"

Hengen picked it up quickly, with just the hint of a drowning man grasping at a straw. "Roberta, I think we should hire Mr. Yates to conduct his private investigation as our agent."

"Why — uh — yes, yes." She rose, quivering a little. But the beryl-hued eyes were steady as they lifted to Yates's. "A retainer is customary, of course. If —"

Yates laid a casual hand on her arm. "Suppose we let that wait till I bring up something concrete? . . . Right now, I suggest a little session in bed for you with a sedative."

"That's right, Roberta." Hengen moved over to open the library door for her. "The strain isn't over yet by any means."

She said goodnight to Yates. "It isn't necessary to tell you I am willing to go to any lengths to apprehend the man who . . ."



Halfway across the deep-piled rug, he overtook her and dropped a hand on her shoulder. "Miss Sheldon, I suggest you don't leave the house alone tomorrow. If you must go out — well, have Hengen accompany you. The man who did this — well, if he is a psychopathic case . . ."

She managed to smile. It made her mouth do interesting things. "Really, I'm not afraid. I —"

He tightened his fingers on her sun-tanned skin as if to accentuate his words. She frowned up at him at the pressure. Then the frown faded as he said, "You are a rather striking looking girl, Miss Sheldon. You could be picked out of a crowd easily."

Hengen came back in a minute and stuck a cigar in his mouth and lighted it. "You said this Zane mentioned me when he phoned today. How?"

"Oh, nothing much. Just said you were involved with Sheldon in whatever it was."

"That's patently absurd." He gave up waiting for Yates to offer comment on that. "This looks to me like a rat building up a convincing background for blackmail. He tells a third party — you — that he has information against a man which causes him to fear harm from that man. Then —"

"Only blackmailers aren't in the habit of knocking off the intended victim. The victim can't pay hush money from the grave, you know." Yates felt like a cat toying with a mouse.

**W**HEN he left, he took a cab to Adis' place. She had a tiny apartment in a remodelled brownstone in mid-town. It wasn't far from his place. He let himself in with a passkey. She had on a scanty negligee and scads of *Indiscreet Night*.

The police had been there all right. "What's the dope, Doc? . . . I saw a set of the most bee-utiful silver foxes today."

"Somebody bumped Sheldon; that's all I know. What did the coppers say, anyway?"

"Nothing much. I just said you'd been here with me. One of them wanted to know if we'd been playing dominoes, and they left. You said you had a new angle on the Sheldon thing."

"Oh, well . . ."

"You think you can dig up the murderer?"

"Hell no. That was a neat job, really neat. It'll have Mauck of



Homicide biting his fingernails down to his elbow. . . . But I sold them on the idea of the crank who called at the office being able to tell us something."

Adis frowned. She didn't like to be puzzled. "You think you can find him, then."

"Hardly. Those psychos are a dime a-dozen, wandering around all over, too. But if I can take some information, some traces maybe, concerning him — well, they'll keep on paying — and well."

"You're a bright lad, Doc. Sit down over here."

He shook his head. "Got to be going. . . . Now don't blow a gasket, Baby. These flatfoots will have a tail on anybody remotely associated with the job. Don't you want some rep left to go with the silver foxes?"

When he got outside he heaved a sigh of relief. Somehow Adis had become a little tawdry and very obvious. He wondered if it were the contrast of Roberta Sheldon. His heels slapped down hard against the sidewalk and he cursed himself sullenly. It was a hard and fast rule of his never to go on the make for a dame until he was washed up with a case. Inside of another half block though, he was smiling tightly. He had put the fear of exposure in Ray Hengen's heart. When he, Yates, had been telling Roberta about "Zane's" claim over the phone that a second person was involved with her father, he had failed to say the person so named was Hengen. Hengen had looked relieved; that was the payoff.

Back in his apartment, Yates dialed Police Headquarters and asked for Mauck. Mauck would be there. When he was on a big one, he kept a cot in his office, the old bulldog technique of staying with it. He came to the phone, his voice sounding as if his throat were lined with cotton.

Yates said, "That flattie you got watching my joint is down in the corner Coffee Pot smooching with a bleached blonde, Inspector."

Mauck almost blew out his front bridge cursing. "Did you call me at this hour just to tell me that? I got a good mind to pick you up —"

"To tell you that — and something else. I got a tip. It may not be worth much, but you didn't find the murder gun, did you?"

Mauck did some more cursing and said he was no damned fool. If they had, they'd be tearing the town apart at this very minute to



trace it down to its owner. Everybody in the *Blue Moon* had been searched, of course.

"All right. Keep your toupee on. There's a whisper going around that a medium-sized guy entered the *Blue Moon* with a small bag, maybe a briefcase, just before Sheldon was found cooled. Don't waste time asking me my source. Those kind of birds never crack to the coppers. You know that."

"Medium-sized man, eh. . . . Maybe a briefcase. Hmmm. Lotta respectable citizens do that. You can't hang a man for having a small bag."

"Well, I was just trying to help." But Yates was satisfied when he cut off; Maucks drawl to simulate boredom had been too affected. . . .

Yates got the repercussion of it the next morning when he walked into the little restaurant at the corner of Jefferson and Moss. Hengen was there, looking slightly drawn over a half-finished orange juice and a cup of coffee. He had been calling the office the third time when Yates lounged in at ten-thirty. Hengen's voice was tight with anger when he said hello and that the police had been around to question him that morning already.

"That's always their privilege," Yates said drily.

"Thanks. I happen to be an attorney myself. But they wanted to know —"

"I never discuss business before I breakfast," Yates verbally side-tracked him negligently. He ordered melon and ham with eggs and a pot of coffee. Actually it was his second breakfast but he felt very good about the way things were going. Strictly according to schedule. Hengen was reacting like a puppet to its control strings.

But aside from working a cold cigar around his mouth, Roberta Sheldon's fiance kept a grip on himself while Yates ate heartily. Yates poured a second cup of coffee and lighted up.

"Now . . ."

Hengen said evenly, "Mauck got me out of bed this morning. He wanted to know what kind of baggage I flew in with, how much, and everything."

"Why should that scare you?"

"'Scare?' . . . I'm not scared, Yates. But Mauck claimed somebody entered the *Blue Moon* just about the time of the killing — somebody with a briefcase or overnight bag." He put a match to his cigar.



Yates studied the match as if fascinated. "Dammit, Yates, I didn't have a bag of any kind when I went in there."

"Nobody said you committed the murder."

Hengen's mouth whitened around the cigar. "Are you trying to frame me into this thing? Mauck let drop you'd given him the information about the man with the bag. You!"

"But you just said you had no bag of any kind with you." Yates tasted his coffee experimentally, added sugar.

Hengen's nostrils widened as he blew out hard. "But having just stepped off a plane, I'd be expected to have. The police would take it for granted I had. Maybe they think I'm lying."

"Maybe." Yates put more cream in his cup.

Hengen took the name of The Lord in a flat hard voice. "I happen to be your client, but I don't think you care what happens to me, Yates, by —"

"Care?" Yates smiled saccharinly. "Hengen, honey, I'm just nuts — positively nuts — about you. When I look into your great big glassy eyes — put down that water, jerk! Now, let's understand each other."

"Go ahead."

"You hired me to —"

"To find out who killed Horace Sheldon."

"Nuts! To prevent a murder rap from being hung on you!"

"Just one minute, Yates. I know how to handle blackmail. And if you think —"

"I didn't say you were guilty. But you think it could be hung on you, perhaps."

Hengen didn't get angry that time. He smiled with his mouth only at his cigar tip. "You're smart, Yates. So I kill the wealthy father of the girl I'm engaged to marry. Motive?"

"Maybe you don't want to marry her." Yates shrugged. "All right. You're *not* crazy, but maybe you're hard up for money."

Hengen had a good poker face. He kept it that way now by conscious effort, Yates knew. Yates went on:

"Now, with Daddy dead, daughter inherits everything. You marry her and you have — *everything*. Sometimes coppers' brains work that way."

"They could look at it that way, couldn't they?" Hengen wiped his upper lip with the napkin. "It's crazy but . . ."



"Sure. But it's enough to send a man to the chair on. Did you have any baggage on the plane?"

"Yes. Left it in the checkroom at the airport to save the time of going all the way to my hotel before going to the *Blue Moon*. That ought to prove —"

"Not much. You couldn't prove to the police that you checked it *all*, could you?" Yates got up without taking his check. "You'll just have to leave things in my hands, Hengen. I'll have another try at unearthing that Zane bird."

"Just what did he look like?"

"Small and frayed-looking with graying hair, as I told Mauck at the club last night. The morning Zane came in I had a bad head so didn't notice much."

"How about a drink?" Hengen stopped by the small bar. He looked as if he could do with one.

Yates said he'd take a rain-check and stepped out into the brisk wind. The temperature was dropping. He glanced through the plate glass window and caught Hengen in the act of mopping his face with a handkerchief. Yates laughed. He had the man sweating, and Hengen hadn't fooled him about what he was actually afraid of. Soon he would have his man where he wanted him.

## V

**Y**ATES made another trip downtown, shifting from a cab to a trolley and then to another cab. Mauck was at the office when he got back, smoking a cigaret as he chatted with Adis. Mauck only smoked cigarets when he was trying to seem aimless and just passing the time of day. He said hello.

"Say, what time did you say it was you went to see your sweetie last night, Passion Flower?" Mauck thumbed at Adis as he spoke.

Yates knew he hadn't said. He also knew Mauck had gotten Adis to give him some stated time. Yates tossed his hat onto a chair and there was a patronizing look on his solemn face when he turned it back to the Homicide man.

"Fresh from the coroner's inquest and you just got to dig yourself the murderer, eh, Mauck?"

"Well?" Mauck stood with a kind of quiescent implacability, ignoring the gibe.



"Just why in hell do you have to try to fit me into the crime, anyway?"

"Because I don't like you," Mauck said. "I never liked rats."

"I think I could lick you, flatfoot."

"We'll let that wait till the day I get you in the back room of some precinct house, Yates. Well?"

Yates shook his head. "Don't know what time I fell in Adis' front door, flatfoot. I was slightly canned. She had to fill me up with black coffee."

"And the big goof kept insisting I'd given him a left-handed spoon, too," Adis put in with a cute pout.

"Well, we all have our little cross to bear," Mauck said and left. He stuck his head back in the door. "About that mysterious caller of yours who feared Sheldon . . . Strange, isn't it, nobody but you, Yates, has ever seen him?" He left for good that time.

Adis followed Yates into the inner sanctum. She was wearing a plain gray tailleur, but she could make even that look provocative. Yates slid an arm across her shoulders but she put a cigaret in her mouth and waited for a light.

"Mauck smells something, Doc."

"Sure. It's a habit with him. When he gets to the Pearly Gates, he'll ask St. Peter what his alibi was for the night before."

"Speaking of alibis, where really were you last night when you were supposed to be with me, Doc?"

"Trying to put the finger on that monkey, Zane, who claimed he had something on Sheldon. I told you, Honey. Come over here and get comfortable."

She sat on the far corner of the desk instead, regarding him speculatively. "Yes, out at the airport. Why couldn't you have told Mauck that instead of saying you were at my place?"

Yates frowned. "That would hook me into things. Mauck would want to know why I was so interested."

"Of course, you could have killed Sheldon."

"Sure. But it wouldn't make sense, would it?"

"I just wanted you to realize how important my alibing you is, Doc." She rose languidly, stretching. "The morning papers said the Sheldon skirt has green eyes. . . . I could do with a good steak for lunch."

They went out together for lunch. Yates caught a cab afterward,



promised the driver a buck tip if he made fast time up to the Heights, and kept his eyes glued on his wrist watch en route. He was operating on a tight time schedule now. Hengen was there as Yates knew he would be. Roberta was drawn and ashen when she came down to the library. It was a luminous paleness that made her look interesting. Yates took her hand and said he hated to bother her at a time like this.

The green eyes met his steadily, hard and with no hint of moistness. "Don't worry about me, please. I'm interested in just one thing, finding out who killed my father. You found something, Mr. Yates?"

He said, "Maybe it's something." He looked at his wrist watch again. "It was while I was out snooping around for that man, Zane. I heard somebody mention Mr. Sheldon's name. When I tried to talk to him, he got suspicious and ducked out. He was a pretty shabby looking character, too, like Zane. And I told you the last time Zane phoned he had somebody else with him at the other end of the wire."

"What do you plan to do, Yates?"

"I made some inquiries. He usually comes back to this place about six in the evening. I suggest you and Miss Sheldon go down there with me to take a look at this man. Perhaps you'll recognize him. His precipitous flight was suspicious and —" The phone rang. Yates couldn't have timed it better.

**R**OBERTA answered and said it was for Hengen. "Don't look so worried, darling. It's a man — not a woman."

Yates strayed along before bookshelves as if examining titles. He wanted to get the tenor of the conversation. Hengen listened for some seconds. He said, "I'm busy, all tied up. I can't make —" He listened some more. Yates held his breath as he watched Hengen's teeth bite into the cigar. Then Hengen nodded.

"Don't say so damned much . . . over the wire. . . . All right, I'll be there then." He hung up and came back to Roberta. "Dear, I'm terribly sorry. . . ." It was an important business matter that had come up. A man had just arrived from Chicago. "I've got to see him at six-thirty. Can't get out of it."

"That's unfortunate," inserted Yates. "Perhaps Miss Sheldon could come along with me, anyway. She'll be in good hands. If this man —"

"Of course." Roberta answered for herself.



Yates left, arranging to pick her up there at the house at five-thirty. Outside he worked a hand inside a pocket to finger the cool metal of his Police Positive. Hengen wasn't fooling him with the lie about the business appointment. Yates knew. He thought of Hengen's angry query at breakfast, "Are you trying to frame me into this thing, Yates?" Yates laughed softly. . . .

He walked into the office a few minutes before five and twiggled Adis' uptilted nose. "Trot along home now, Honey. Papa's rigging a little phoney show for Hengen and the Sheldon dame to keep 'em interested. A piece of heavy sugar will be rolling in soon. I'll phone you later and —"

"Sure Papa's rigging a phoney show — but for whom?" She pulled away and snapped open a vanity and slapped angrily with a powder puff at her nose. "Miss Sheldon phoned to say she'd meet you here at five-thirty instead of at her home. And she didn't say anything about Hengen being along. She said *she'd* meet you. Up to your old tricks, Mr. Yates?"

He went into his own office and banged the door after him. It wasn't good stuff, he knew, but his nerves were tautening. He was like a hunter closing in on the quarry, poised for the kill. This was the key play coming up. If he pulled it off, he'd have Hengen practically with blood on his hands. Yates took a drink, then made a steeple of his hands, pressing fingertips hard against each other as if to hold the pent-up pressure building in him.

The outer door slammed and he told himself that was Adis going home. He opened the door of his own office and tossed off another quick one. He was just sliding the glass away when he saw the shadow of a woman's pert hat against the frosted pane of the outer door.

"Roberta," he murmured and his dark eyes fired up.

Roberta Sheldon came in, chatting with Adis. Adis was folding up a towel, just back from the ladies' room. "Here's Mr. Yates now." Adis escorted her to the private office, gave him a dirty look, and shut the door after the other girl. But Adis didn't quite close it.

**R**OBERTA came forward with hand outstretched. She'd been called to the funeral chapel to make some final arrangements and thought she might as well come right on. "It was very nice of you to keep your secretary overtime to chaperon us, Mr. Yates. Actually,



I'm a little disappointed. From the movies, I'd always gathered private detectives were twenty-four-hour-a-day wolves."

He held her hand a moment. "Roberta, you shouldn't have left the house unescorted," he said sternly. Then he went over and closed the door.

She accepted a cigaret. They stood leaning against the desk, side by side, smoking. He used her first name again. "Roberta, I must tell you something. . . . It's not nice. It'll be hard for a girl like you who doesn't know big business to understand. But — well, your father made some business deals that were hardly strictly legal, I've learned that. And that's what makes me believe Zane or this other man could give us a lead — or even be directly involved."

He heard her catch her breath. He added, "What I've learned will never go beyond me, Roberta. Don't worry."

Impulsively she moved her hand against his on the desk edge. "Thank you. Thank you for telling me so nicely, Doc."

Adis' knock and entrance were almost simultaneous. "Here are the papers on that Heprud case you asked for." She gave him the large manila envelope from the file, meanwhile studying Roberta's mouth intently. What she was checking on, smudged lipstick, was plain.

Roberta smiled faintly after she'd gone. "Well, *somebody* suspects you, anyway."

He looked down at her. "You know the saying about might as well be hung for the whole sheep as for the skin."

She said, "Yes," eyes locked with his.

He could feel that thing between them, hard like a challenge yet at the same time pulling him toward her. He half hated her because she could get inside his shell like this. He lifted an arm.

Roberta said quietly, "Your secretary left the door ajar again, Doc."

He went over and yanked it wide and Adis was meticulously dusting her typewriter. "Come on," he said roughly to Roberta. And they left.

## VI

**S**HE HAD her car outside, a sleek maroon coupe. They headed downtown as he directed. She drove through the dusk with a casual daring that had him pinned back against the seat repeatedly. That quality, daring, was surprising in her. In the lower part of town



they worked eastward to draw up before a drugstore on a dim side street deserted at that hour.

"Leave the car here, Roberta."

In the drugstore, she touched his arm. "Why should we be afraid of the police?" She guessed he was doubling to throw off a tail in case there was one.

"Would you like the police to grab this man, sweat him and then hand the reporters the material for a nice juicy scandal?"

Her hand tightened on his arm. Yates knew she was trusting him more and more. He steered her to the rear of the store and through a side door that gave onto the L-shaped lobby of the corner office building. The building had entrances on the side street and on the avenue. He took her out the latter and they moved down the block swiftly in the cloak of the misty blackness.

"The point is," he told her, "that you might just have seen this man if he called at the house — or perhaps in your father's office. If I know he had known your father, I can really crack down on him. It's a thin chance but . . ."

On the second corner down he wheeled her into a place called *Snade's Bar and Grill*. It was pretty grim and her nose wrinkled with distaste. "I hardly think a man associated in business with my father would patronize this kind of —."

"A man can sink pretty low," Yates cut her off. He took her past the dregs of humanity lining the bar to some booths on the other side of the narrow room and a little further back. "No, no. You sit over there." He forcibly propelled her to the back side of the booth, then dropped down opposite her. "I can keep peeping out. I want you to have a particularly good look at him when he comes in," he explained.

They ordered Scotches. He saw her hand trembled a little when she raised her glass. She started when a couple of men came in. Yates angled his head around the side of the booth and said no after a quick look. He eyed his wrist watch. They talked little. They had another Scotch.

She said, to make conversation out of nervousness, "You — your work must be very interesting."

"Sometimes. And disappointing, too."

"You mean when you fail to solve a case?"

"Well, that. Then, other times, when a case is closed up — well,



that's the end. There's no further excuse to see an interesting person you might have met on the case."

Their eyes met and it was like an impact. Hers left his when a newcomer entered. Yates said he wasn't the man either. He checked his wrist watch again and they lifted their glasses. Yates's froze as he stared rearward. He swore softly as he rose.

"He was in that last booth all the time. He just went out the side door — in a hurry." He pressed her back into the seat. "You wait here, Roberta. I'll try to bring him back." He dashed out the side door.

Almost twenty minutes passed before he returned. Seventeen to be exact by the battered clock over the bar. Roberta was getting worried. Two characters at the end of the counter were ogling her over the thicket of two-day beard stubbles. The waiter hovered close, wondering if he was going to get the check paid, and giving her the patronizing look reserved for stoodup skirts. Then Yates reappeared, swigged the rest of his drink and said to her, "Let's get out of here."

She caught at his sleeve. "Doc, what happened?"

"No soap. He got away." He was breathing hard and white about the nostrils as if scared or angry. She saw that one side pocket of his coat was slightly torn and then noticed the lump rising on the side of his jaw. He drained the glass. "There was a tussle. I had him, then he pulled a gun on me." He shrugged to say the rest of it. "Dammit, why didn't I have a heater on me at a time like that!"

Her eyes widened.

"No hits, no runs, and one big error. Let's get out of here, Roberta."

The maroon coupe was climbing the curbing grade to the Heights beyond the city before she spoke. "Why do you think Ray — Mr. Hengen, I mean — might have shot my father?"

He jerked from the slumped posture of defeat beside her. "The fool, what's he been telling you?"

"It isn't what he said. Sometimes — like last night at the *Blue Moon* — I just get that feeling, Doc."

"He *could* have done it. That's the point."

"What's the point?"

He liked the way this was leading. It fitted. "*Could* have done it. That's the way police minds work. It was possible for him to have under the circumstances — so he's a suspect in their book. Mauck suspects everybody until proven innocent."

"Oh." She speeded up the car again.



They went up the drive to the Sheldon mansion and got out to stand on the stone steps and look down on the lights of the city. The shrubbery rattled drily in the chill wind. She shuddered.

"It's getting cold."

"Uh-huh." He dropped a hand casually on her shoulder. "You can fire me if you wish. I muffed that thing tonight."

"No-o, Doc." She raised the aquamarine eyes to his.

"Thanks, Roberta. I'll bust a gut breaking this case open." Her face, upturned, was just below his. He had the feeling the green eyes were trying to see inside his brain as he bent to kiss her.

After she caught her breath she made a soft laughing sound. "Miss Adis Simpson would be very jealous if she saw that."

His laughter was a little ragged with emotion. He cursed himself silently and checked his wrist watch as he said he might call later. It was six-fifty-eight.

**A**T SIX-TWENTY, Ray Hengen crossed the dark street in the old business section downtown and stepped into the dingy entrance of the Old Metropolitan Hotel. He was ten minutes early but his ragged nerves wouldn't take the strain of waiting. Topcoat collar pulled up, he ducked by the wan neon sign of the pool parlor in the basement and went up a half flight of worn stairs. There was a moth-eaten sour-smelling cubbyhole of lobby to the right. Directly ahead a dim enclosed flight of stairs led to the lodgings above.

As he hesitated the wizened-up clerk behind the tiny desk turned and stepped into the office back of it, hauling a pint bottle from a pocket. Two derelicts snoozed in brokendown leather chairs. Hengen tiptoed past them and darted up the stairs unseen. That was all right with him. The less he was seen the better, just on general principles.

On the third floor, the mixed odor of stale sweat, insecticide, and cheap tobacco assaulted his nostrils. He turned left and near the end of the corridor, on the rear side, found the door with a faded "317" painted on it. He knocked twice lightly. A door off to the right creaked open and Hengen stood facing the other way till he heard it close. He knuckled "317" again, harder. Still there was no response.

The sound of somebody on the stairs drove him to try the knob. The door gave to his pressure and he said "Zager," and slid in hurriedly. Light came from a single bulb with an old-fashioned green



metal shade strung over the battered dressing table in a back corner. Hengen said "Zager" again and clicked the door shut behind him. An acrid odor hanging in the air stung his nostrils. In the next second he recognized it for cordite from gunpowder. The hair tickled at the back of his neck and it was an effort to twist his eyeballs in slow sweep.

Zager was there all right, but he wasn't going to answer a knock ever again. Just beyond the cone of yellow light on the worn carpet, a little half-bald figure in a mussed white shirt, Zager lay on his back. There were three holes in the front of the shirt across the chest, two of them fringed with crimson rosettes of blood. One yellowing hand was twisted in the sheet at the side of the rumpled iron bed. Hengen knew he was sucking air through his gasping mouth but still felt as if he were choking.

"Zager," he heard himself say automatically in a hollow whisper. It was stupid. There was no need to even examine the body; Zager was dead as hell. *Flee!* dictated the numbed Hengen's brain.

Knuckles rattled on the door like the hammers of doom. Hengen felt like a trapped animal. The unlocked door creaked as a body on the other side leaned against it.

"Hey, Zager, I got a pint. Wanta a drink? Are ya awake?"

Hengen tried to disguise his voice, to imitate the querulous nasal whine of Zager's as he remembered it. He said, "I got somebody here now."

"Awright." Footsteps shuffled down the hall, then seemed to pause and wait.

Hengen was shaking like hell. He tried to keep his brain cool. First thing to do was to turn out the light so nobody passing would see *in* as he left. He did that. Refracted light came through the grimy window and bent across the prone body. It seemed to move though *he* knew it hadn't. He made himself count ten and then started silently across the carpet for the door. Something creaked and he froze. He wiped his mouth and jeered himself mentally, telling himself it was just a board under his own foot.

The creak came again, and he hadn't moved then.

The wan yellowish light extending past Zager's body pointed to it like an arrow. Pointed to the door of the closet over to the left of the door onto the hall. The closet door was open a few inches now, swinging wider, loosened by something that had jarred the old building.



Hengen sensed the presence of the man inside the closet even before he saw the faint gleam of the polished toe of a shoe. The murderer.

**H**ENGEN never knew what made him start for the man. Perhaps it was the instinct of self-preservation, knowing the slayer was aware that he had seen him. At the same instant, the man hurled himself out the door at Hengen. Hengen's left hook chopped solidly to the other's head, rocking him back. Hengen threw two more, grazed him, and then unloosed a swing below the belt. The other blocked it and grappled. They thudded against the wall. Hengen tripped on a rent in the carpet and went down to one knee. His clawing hand fastened on the other's coat and there was the rip of cloth.

He came up and they hammered away at each other in the dimness. Hengen caught one on the jaw but brought up a knee sharply to the groin. The murderer groaned and swayed. Hengen grabbed for the throat, had it, then lost his hold as he stumbled across the corpse. The killer's face passed through the weak beam of light but the jammed-down snapbrim hat hid the man's features. Hengen sent him crashing back into a chair with a blow and closed in.

But the killer had sidestepped neatly. Hengen's outflung arm brushed a shoulder. And the hard round muzzle of a gun dug Hengen's side freezing him.

"Turn around," the murderer whispered.

Hengen obeyed. The next instant his hat was knocked forward over his eyes. The gun barrel came down across the back of his head. It was like a rock being dropped into a pool, sending crashing waves of sound hammering against the sides of his skull. He sank, but the blow hadn't been heavy enough to black him out completely.

His hat fell off completely as he hit the carpet. One of his legs was across a leg of the dead man. Hengen was powerless to move it. But he was conscious though his head buzzed like the inside of a beehive. He heard the murderer open the door cautiously, wait several seconds, then close it firmly after him and go swiftly down the corridor.

After some moments, Hengen jackknifed his body into a sitting position and fought against retching. The dark veil dissipated before his vision. In the light from the window, he saw the open suitcase on the stool at the foot of the bed. Some papers lay on the floor around it as if it had been ransacked. Hengen got to his feet, clawed for a



chair, was almost engulfed in blackness. Then his strength returned under the spur of necessity of saving himself. There would be no chance of overtaking the murderer now, and if he himself were found there with the dead man —

His foot hit his hat and he managed to pick it up on the third try. When he inched the door open, the hall was deserted. He went down it and the stairs, not hoping to get by the desk clerk unobserved this time. But a drunken lodger was reeling and roaring around the lobby, the attention of all eyes. Hengen ran down the half flight onto the street and turned into the dimness beyond the pool parlor. At the corner, he turned north and walked eight blocks by count before daring to look for a cab. He had just passed a place labelled *Snade's Bar and Grill* when his whistle brought a hack cruising downtown into a U-turn.

He gave the street below the Cavendish where he was staying and slumped into the corner of the seat. Then he began to tremble uncontrollably. If he were hooked up to this murder . . .

## VII

**A**T THE corner of the block on which he lived, Yates reconnoitered. "Trust Inspector Mauck to be prompt," he said, smiling calmly at the police prowler car parked outside his apartment house. Yates entered the corner drugstore and into a phone booth. First he called Hengen at the smart Cavendish. Hengen's voice came over guardedly.

"You're in trouble, Hengen."

"Who — who's this?"

"Yates. Not the police — yet."

Hengen made a strangling sound at the other end, then tried to pass it off as a cough. "What do you mean?"

"Look. I can't talk now. Just got away from the police for a moment. But another man's been killed, Hengen, and the signs point your way — again."

"See here, Yates, I didn't — I mean, I don't know what you're talking about! Again? Hell, I've killed nobody, I —"

"Gotta go now, Hengen. Listen. Don't answer your phone again, and get out of that hotel before anybody can pick you up. There's a chophouse just around the corner. Wait there till I show."



"All right," assented Hengen, dry-voiced.

Yates hung up, chuckled, put in another nickel, and called the Sheldon home. He had his man on the run now; Hengen was cracking. Roberta's voice came over the wire and Yates dropped his voice almost to whisper level as if afraid of being overheard. "Something's happened, my dear. I can't give you the details. Haven't got time now. But we've got to cover Hengen."

"What-t? Doc, what's he done?"

"It's what the police may *think* he's done, Roberta. He's going to need an alibi. So he was with us this evening. Get it? The *three* of us were out together looking for that man."

"The three of us. Of course. I see."

"I'm telling you so you can corroborate me. Your statement alone wouldn't mean anything to the cops because you're engaged to the guy. But I can alibi him; I can swear he was with us every minute."

"I understand, Doc."

"So don't mention the fact that I stepped out of that bar and grill for even a few minutes. Overlook it — so that I can claim Hengen was never out of my sight. Gotta go now. I'll call later, Roberta, and —"

"Doc, if anything comes up where can I reach you?"

He hesitated. It didn't seem too important. He could always put her off if she phoned. So he said, "I'll go to my office when I'm free in an hour or so. You can try to reach me there; just sit tight."

Then he went out and swung boldly up the block toward his apartment. A cop stepped out from the green-and-white prowler car and a plainclothes man, Hoffman, came around from the other side.

"Hello, Yates. The inspector wants to see you."

"Sure, anything for my pal, Mauck. Mind if I pick up a topcoat first? It's getting cold." Hoffman went up to his apartment with him. Yates pulled on a coat and buttoned it, keeping the torn side pocket of his suit turned away from Hoffman. "All set, Hoff."

When they passed midtown in the prowler car and failed to turn west, Yates said, "Say, this isn't the way to headquarters."

"Not going there, Yates. A guy got bumped downtown and Mauck wants you to take a peek at him." Hoffman refused to say more.

They drew up at the shabby Old Metropolitan House. Uniformed men were arming back the throng of bums and drifters from the entrance. Hoffman took Yates in and they went up to the third floor



and along to Room 317. Mauck stuck his big head out, nodded.

"We got a stiff in here, Yates. Wantcha to take a look at him. A fella by the name of Zager. Maybe you've seen him before."

Yates shook his head as he fitted a cigaret into his mouth. "I never recognize my victims, Mauck."

They went into the cheap room, crowded now with officers and department experts. The harsh light of the ceiling bulb left it denuded in all its drabness. Mauck thumbed toward the corpse only a blind man could have missed. One of the uniformed men lifted the sheet away from the little man's tired face.

"Know him?" Mauck looked up from the process of cleaning a fingernail with a toothpick.

**Y**ATES bent, removing the cigaret from his mouth, then nodded. "Yep, Mauck. It's him all right, the guy who used the name of Zane. He's the mystery caller who came to the office with the line about being in danger from Horace Sheldon."

"Cripes, I was never sure you'd even had that caller before. He's registered here under the name of Zager. From Chi."

"How'd you connect him with me, Mauck?"

"Had one of your business cards in his pocket."

"I can't do anything for him now. Any leads?"

"He was killed with a .32, the coroner is pretty sure. Same caliber that bumped Sheldon." Mauck was holding himself in. "You've been ducking around pretty slickly of late, Yates."

Yates got it. "I don't like being shadowed; makes me feel as if I had a split personality."

Mauck blew a gasket then. He grabbed the front of Yates's topcoat and twisted, jerking the private operative forward off balance. Mauck was swearing deep in his throat. "You're tied into this somehow, damn you, Yates! I know it! I got a good mind to take you to some quiet station house and wring ya out till ya —"

"Go ahead — and I'll swear you'll be a harness bull back pushing your flatties around some gashouse district beat inside of twenty-four hours," Yates said evenly.

Mauck eyed his balled-up fist, breathing hard. "Go over the punk for a heater, boys!" Two of them proceeded to.

"Hey, you don't need to tear the pockets outa my clothes," Yates said as a big hand grabbed at a side coat pocket of his suit. Yates



wore a calm smirk. They came up with his Police Positive. "Sure. You got its number listed down at Headquarters. I got a license for it."

Mauck nodded reluctantly, releasing Yates's coat. "Well, if you had done it, you wouldn't be carrying around the gun you used."

"Good. You can take off the dunce cap, Mauck."

Mauck cuffed him twice, rocking Yates's head on his slim shoulders. Yates kept his arms at his sides. Mauck wanted him to strike back, of course. Mauck hit him with a straight arm to the shoulder that sent him spinning into the chair. Yates was white about the nostrils but he held the smirk.

"Even money says there's at least a couple of men in this room who'd like to be the new chief of Homicide, Mauck."

Mauck exhaled loudly and pulled at his collar. "This is connected with Sheldon's death, somehow. And you ain't snooping along the sidelines just to get your picture in the papers. . . . All right. Come on."

Yates was handed back his gun and they went out as two men from the morgue with a basket crowded in. They went down the stairs.

"You got an alibi for this evening, of course, Yates."

"Sure. A woman, again."

"Adis, the skirt from the office?" Mauck's voice was too gentle, trying to hide the hopefulness behind it.

"Shucks, no. I was out with Miss Sheldon."

"G'wan, she's a nice girl, Yates."

"Keep your thoughts above the belt for once, Mauck. I've been retained by her in this matter. We were attempting to check on something."

They were down in the shoddy lobby. "Yeah? Where?"

"A joint called *Snade's Bar and Grill* on South East Avenue."

Mauck's mouth pressed up hard. "'S not more'n eight or nine blocks from here, Yates."

Yates exhaled smoke from a fresh cigaret. Said wearily, "If you'd only tip me off in advance of a murder, copper, I could see to it I was across the county line when it happened."

Mauck took him by the arm and went over to the desk and picked up the phone on the counter. He called the Sheldon home. Roberta came on. Mauck asked her if she'd seen Doc Yates that evening.

"Oh, you were with him. I see. From what time? Met him at his



office at five-thirty? Yes." Mauck stood so his bleak eyes rested on Yates. Yates could hear Roberta's clear voice telling the rest of it, about going downtown to the bar and grill. She said they'd parted at about seven o'clock.

Mauck's eyes tightened. "I see. . . . Was Mr. Yates with you all the time or did he maybe step out for a minute? He was with you all the time. I see." Mauck's face fell as he hung up. "All right. Drag your pants outa here, Yates."

Yates gave him a mocking salute. "Be brave, Inspector! Some day maybe you'll catch me peddling peanuts without a license. . . ."

**A**T THE chophouse around the corner from The Cavendish, Hengen was propped on a stool at the smart little bar in the rear. The bar maid was just setting another highball before him. Hengen wasn't drunk, Yates could see. But he was in that state of sweating, mentally and physically.

"Now to let him have the final blast of heat," Yates said to himself as he gave him a curt wave and made his own face even more somber. The bar maid said the restaurant was about to close. Yates tossed a bill on the bar and said they'd only be a few minutes. "Mine's Scotch." Then he sat silent, drumming slowly with his fingers.

Hengen finally said in a tight ugly voice, "Go ahead, keep it a damn secret."

"It'll be in tomorrow morning's headlines."

"What?"

Yates kept him hanging deliberately. "Were you down at the Old Metropolitan House a hotel downtown, one of those scratch houses, this evening?"

"You know I had that business appointment, Yates."

"Oh, that's right. Fine; you'll have an alibi." He raised his highball and studied it intently.

Hengen bit his lip. "Well — no. The man didn't show up."

"Oh. . . . A man was found dead down at the Metropolitan. Name of Zager. It was the man who called himself Zane and came to my office about Horace Sheldon. He was shot to death with a .32 like Sheldon, they're almost certain."

"Oh," said Hengen. He took a drink, holding himself rigid. "And where do I —"

"When the police calibration experts down at headquarters get a



look at the slugs under microscopes, they'll be able to tell whether or not they were fired from the same gun that killed Sheldon," Yates went on in a colorless voice. "Mauck is working on the theory they were."

"Where do I come in?" Hengen said again.

"A guy in the pool parlor beside the hotel entrance saw you come and go. You shouldn't have worn anything as distinctive as that Glenplaid suit on the job. At least, this guy's description fits you, Hengen. He said you were pretty clear in the glow from the neon sign of the pool hall. You — or whoever it was." Yates rattled the ice in his glass slowly.

"Cut that out — I mean — well, why should *I* want to kill some poor bum down there? It doesn't make sense."

Yates shrugged. "How should I know? Mauck hangs the two killings together. Why should you kill Zager any more than why you'd want to kill Sheldon?"

**H**ENGEN put down his glass slowly, waited till the bar maid returned to the kitchen. "If Mauck's got such a swell description of me on the scene, why hasn't he picked me up?"

"Mauck hasn't got the description yet. . . . The guy in the poolroom happened to know me. He gave me the dope, figuring to help me break the case. But how long before he does go to the cops — well, you guess."

"All right, Yates, I — I was at the Metropolitan House. Zager was the one who called me at Roberta's. He was the man I had to see. But when I walked into his room — I swear it, Yates — he was already dead!"

Yates just stared, one eyebrow cocked quizzically. Hengen's hands clawed at the bar edge and he talked hard and fast and low. He told Yates about getting no answer to his knock and entering to find the corpse. His voice went hoarse in his desperation to convince Yates.

"That Mauck is one hell of a skeptic, mister."

"Listen, Yates, the murderer was right there! Honestly." He told about seeing the man in the closet and the ensuing fight. He showed the lump on the left rear side of his skull.

"Mauck'd claim the dead man gave you that in attempting to defend himself, Hengen. Honest, it's a lousy story."

"But — but what could my motive be?"



"Easy. Mauck'd claim that Zager knew why you killed Sheldon — so you had to silence him."

"But I didn't kill Sheldon, Yates!"

"You have no alibi for some minutes around the time Sheldon got it. Prove to Mauck you didn't kill Sheldon — once he finds out you were down at the Metropolitan House."

Hengen's breath wheezed out. He drained the bottom of the glass. Hengen measured him and let him have the finisher.

"You hired me because you were afraid the Sheldon killing could be hung on you, to prove you didn't do it. But — hell, I'm trying to help you. But if you're holding anything back — well, my hands are tied."

Yates caught the bar maid's eyes, tapped the five-spot before him, and said, "One more round and keep the change."

They got it. Hengen drained half his, then turned a gray twitching face to Yates and whispered, "I was bringing eighty thousand in cash to Sheldon."

Yates emitted a soft whistle of astonishment. "Eighty grand? You're kidding. Where would you get that?"

Hengen was beyond the stage of holding anything back. He wanted to get out from under. "It wasn't mine. It was from a firm in Chicago — never mind the name. During the war, the Sheldon Aircraft Parts Corp. sublet government contracts to that outfit. This was a kickback." He breathed hard.

"But in cash?"

"The Sheldon Corp. is threatened with investigation by a Congressional Committee right now. So they didn't risk sending a check or anything that could be cashed. . . . I brought it in on the plane."

Yates nodded. "And you checked that at the airport?"

"It was in a special locked briefcase and I left my stuff in the office of the airport manager. . . . Brought it up to the hotel the next day . . . In the safe now."

"Eighty thousand . . ." Yates rolled the words slowly. "Eighty grand — that you could pocket without anybody being any the wiser. Phew . . . Let Mauck latch onto that detail and you got an A-1 priority in the electric chair, Hengen!"

"What the hell can I do with it, Yates? I don't dare tell Roberta her father was mixed up in a deal like that. I can't get rid of it unless I chuck it in the river!"



"If Mauck starts nosing around this hotel and gets a police order for your possessions . . ." He emptied his glass, stared through the bottom of it as he held it poised to his face, blew smoke into it. Then he put it down deliberately as if he had arrived at a momentous decision.

"I'll take care of it for you, Hengen."

"What?"

"Sure, I'll take the risk. *I'm* not under suspicion. We can put it in my office safe. Till you're cleared, anyway."

Hengen's eyes narrowed. "And you'll want your cut of it afterward, eh?"

"I never did make a practice of working for peanuts. I could wash my hands and run to Mauck right now, on one hand. On the other, the moment I put that briefcase of yours in my safe, I'm incriminating myself."

"All right. I'm over a barrel."

"And it's my job to get you off it. We've got to make a move before Mauck can put you on the scene at the Metropolitan House. . . . I need some time to think. Pick up the briefcase from the hotel safe. I'll be in your room in five minutes. We haven't got a minute to throw away."

**W**HEN he entered Hengen's hotel room, the briefcase was on the bed. "Open it," Yates ordered. Hengen complied in silence. Yates took the heavy case from him and quickly inspected the neat packages of hundred dollar notes clasped in bank bands. Yates figured Hengen might be holding out on a piece of it but there was no time to count it then. There was plenty there, no doubt of that. Yates re-locked the case, calmly pocketed the key, and spoke before Hengen could protest.

"Go out to Fischers. It's a dance joint out beyond the city line on Plymouth Parkway. Any cabbie knows it. Wait for me there."

Hengen wiped literal beads of sweat that protruded from his white forehead. "What's the idea? Why —"

"Don't ask questions now. You're on the spot in two killings. I'm going to try to get you off that spot." He pulled open the door.

"Wait! How long before you'll get there? I —"

"You can wait. You haven't anything else to do, guy. Anyway, there's a bar out there."



At a midtown garage he picked up his car, a medium-priced used black sedan, drove to his office and parked on the other side of the block from it. Things were going almost absurdly smooth. His dark eyes flickered at the big bluish globe of moon swinging past the Drexel Tower. When he unlocked the door of his office, he slammed a hand into his gun pocket, froze, and kept his finger motionless over the light switch. His nostrils twitched as they picked up the fresh aroma of cigar smoke.

After he had whipped the place over with a fountain pen flashlight, he cut on the regular lights. Inside of a matter of seconds he realized the place had been searched thoroughly. "Good old Mauck," he said with a little laugh. The place had been gone over, he figured it, sometime after he had stopped in there briefly after taking Roberta Sheldon home. Mauck's boys had found nothing or they'd have picked him up before this. In his own room, he went halfway down through the litter in his wastebasket and came up with what he wanted. The best searchers would overlook a trash basket, never thinking of anything being hidden practically in the open there.

Just on a hunch, he called The Cavendish and had them ring Hengen's room. When he heard the receiver being cautiously removed from the hook, he barked in a thick disguised voice, "Hello, hello! That you, Mr. Hengen? Hengen? This is police —" At Hengen's end the receiver was softly replaced, breaking the connection. But Yates was really surprised that Hengen had not already gotten out of the place.

He had a drink from his desk and puffed leisurely on a fresh cigaret. He had to give Hengen time to get out to Fischers and wait and sweat some more and dump more drinks into himself. He had to be in the right nervous state for the final act. Yates himself was cool and unflustered, without a twitch in his whole frame. He felt like a master chess player, but using real human beings instead of the inanimate pieces of the usual game.

His hand caressed Hengen's briefcase. He would take it with him out to Fischers, of course. And in the morning, he would place the money in the safe deposit box he had already rented under an assumed name. Then he would simply wait a while and —

Somebody was at the door of the main office. Swiftly he whipped the cushion from his swivel chair, put the briefcase on the seat, then covered it with the cushion. When he went to the door, he could tell



by the shadow against the frosted glass that it was a woman outside. He opened up and Roberta took an impulsive step toward him, hands half lifted as if seeking protection.

"Doc, I had to see you right away!" She caught at his arm. "I'm scared, Doc. I need you — your help. . . ."

## VIII

**T**HEY faced each other, standing close, in the shadows of his private office, well away from the small desk lamp. Her mouth seemed to be trembling and she seemed to shrink inside the white polo-cloth sports coat. But the green eyes were level and firm when they met his.

"Doc, I'm scared, terribly scared. I — I think Ray Hengen is guilty."

"Yes?" he said. He was suddenly husky-voiced and all the calmness was gone. The blood seemed to be roaring in his ears.

"The way he's been acting — oh, I don't know. But he *could* have killed my father and —" Her voice broke and her hand tightened on his wrist. "Ray had the opportunity. He can't account for those few minutes."

Yates waged an inner struggle for self control. "Why should he have killed him? He was due to marry his daughter!" She didn't seem to notice he had used the past tense in referring to her engagement.

"I know. I know. But I just learned — don't ask me how — that Ray was bringing a large sum of money in cash to my father. And Ray was in trouble back in Chicago. . . . over a girl. He needed money desperately. . . . Don't you see?" A dry sob shook her.

He took her by the shoulder, nodding slowly. This was a surprise angle to him. He hadn't planned it this way but it was good. "He was bringing money to your father? Really? Then, it could be, could be."

"And then that fake appointment this evening, Doc. . . . There was no appointment. The second man was murdered, and where was Ray Hengen?"

"I guess I can't save him, Roberta."

"Oh, Doc! The man I was engaged to wed — a murderer. . . . You'll have to let the law take its course, Doc. You mustn't get yourself involved."



**You mustn't!"**

He caught her then as she swayed. Caught her and pulled her with almost brutal roughness to him. Her gasped "Doc" was smothered by his mouth and he felt her arms tighten around his neck. In the back of his brain a little alarm bell tinkled faintly. He started to release her but her arms drew him back. It was very sweet.

After a while, her head jerked up from his shoulder. He felt her looking by him. He twisted his head without releasing her. In the dimness beyond the doorway of the private office stood Adis. Fury had her eyes squinted up to pig's size. Yates went cold; somehow he had the feeling it had been planned this way.

**A**DIS sneered. She advanced a step and looked Roberta over from head to foot as if she were something blown out of the gutter. "So, you're just like the rest, aren't you? Just like any skirt! You had to go chasing after that two-bit Don Juan like all the other floozies!" She flounced around on a spiked heel. After a moment, the front door slammed after her.

Roberta's cool unperturbed smile shocked Yates. He felt that things had escaped from his control. It was as if another, an invisible, hand had begun to pull the strings. Roberta pulled on her gloves. "I guess I'd better leave now. I hope you'll be able to explain things, Doc. Ring me in the morning."

He didn't try to detain her. He had things to do; afterward he could try to figure out things. She patted his cheek almost as if he were a fumbling adolescent as he let her out the office door. He ran his tongue over his lips and tasted her lipstick and resented the fact it could mean so much. She was the first woman to get inside his skin. And that hadn't been in his plans either.

He gave her a few minutes to get clear of the building, took the precious briefcase, made certain he had the heater he had removed from its wastebasket hiding place, and left. He had been almost certain no tail had been on him when he came down from The Caven-dish. When he got in his car and headed uptown, though he zig-zagged and doubled, there was no sign of any of Mauck's men following him either. He was somewhat surprised at that. He stopped to phone Adis. Her apartment did not answer. He tried a neighborhood tavern he knew she frequented when she was alone. She was not there either. That wasn't so good.



But as he drove northward out of the city, he reassured himself. After he had made this last play, he'd try her number again. And in the morning, he'd buy her those silver foxes. Vain materialistic little Adis wouldn't be able to resist them; not her. And he could explain that Roberta had flung herself into his arms in a wild plea to get him to save Hengen who, by the morning, would be revealed as the two-time murderer.

"That line — and the furs on top of it — will hold little Adis," he said aloud as he cut onto the Plymouth Parkway. "But it sure was one peculiar coincidence. . . ." He was thinking of how Adis happened to walk into the office at that minute, especially when he himself hadn't expected Roberta. That seemingly unimportant detail kept intruding itself upon his consciousness like an annoying thorn. That and the strange fact that Mauck wasn't bothering to tail him any more.

**H**IS thoughts jumped back to Roberta herself and his foot unconsciously toed the accelerator harder. Any thought of giving Hengen a chance at escape was out now. He had to have an open clear field with Roberta. Hardheaded Yates had begun to dream dreams.

The car rolled across a culvert a couple of miles below Fischers and he drew in at a gas station to use the phone booth. He called the dance joint and asked them to get Hengen from the barroom. Hengen's voice came over the wire with cold anger remarkable for a hounded ragged-nerved man.

"What the devil's the idea of getting my name bandied around this place, Yates! You —"

"You'll find out. Meet me out in front of the place in five minutes. Out in front!" And Yates rang off.

A couple of hundred feet from the neon-glittering entrance of Fischers, at the far edge of the parking lot, Yates pulled off the highway and cut his lights. After a few moments, he made out Hengen's figure on the gravel drive before the entrance. Yates got out of the car and moved down toward him, clinging to the shadows. He patted his regular gun, then shifted the second one to the pocket of his top-coat. The bilious-hued moon peered through a cloud rack, wanly silvering the hill behind the roadhouse where the summer picnic grounds were. Nobody would be using them at this hour and this time of year, of course.

"Everything perfect — perfect," he murmured, then whistled. Hen-



gen paused in mid-stride in his pacing, looking around. Yates worked a little closer and repeated the whistle. Hengen hesitated, then faced his way.

"Come over here," Yates called as the couple on the steps went inside. "Over here, Hengen."

Hengen sent a look swivelling around warily, then advanced to meet Yates, backed a few yards into the deeper darkness. "That you, Yates?" Yates scowled; why in hell did the man have to call so loudly? He answered and Hengen moved closer to join him. There seemed to be an inexplicable aura of confidence about Hengen.

"Say, what's the idea of getting me out here to play tag in the dark?" he demanded truculently.

"Because I'm going to take a couple of shots at you?"

"What-t?"

"Two men have been shot at — fatally, Hengen. You're under suspicion in both cases. So now you'll be shot at for a change."

"I don't get it, Yates." He started to strike a match for the cigaret he had poked into his mouth. Yates struck the match from his hand. Hengen cursed.

"Not so loud. . . . Listen, we want to get the heat off you, to get you out of the beam of suspicion. What better way than to have an apparent attack made on your life? Get it? If, to all appearances, you are almost the third victim, that takes you out of the role of the potential murderer. . . ." Yates waited. He expected argument and suspicion on Hengen's part.

Hengen stood looking at the ground and said, "Well-l."

"Your story will be that you got a mysterious phone call to meet somebody here. You were told that the man who'd meet you here could throw some light on Horace Sheldon's death."

"Yes?"

"A stranger came up to you here, according to your story, and said he was only the go-between. That the man who wanted to see you was out in back in the picnic grounds. You went out there — and the shooting started. Somebody tried to get you."

"I see." Hengen's voice was easy and without strain.

"Sure. We go up there now. I shoot. The shots will be heard. You come running down, yell for the police, and give your story. Mauck will figure somebody else must have pulled the trigger in the two killings."



Side by side, they moved along an aisle between cars on the parking ground, passed the glassed-in veranda at one side of the building. Then the brassy grind of the orchestra inside came to them, then ebbed as they walked into the grove on the slope behind the dance joint. There was a curving path. Yates half stumbled over a projecting stone. Hengen immediately slowed to keep back beside him.

Dried leaves rustled underfoot. Off to either side among the ghostly gray trunks stretched the picnic tables like gray biers. Once some small night animal scampered away as they approached. The path bent up to the right as it mounted the slope. The trees thinned toward an oval-shaped clearing ahead. Its grass was bluish in the moon-glow. Yates froze as he caught a noise that was not one of the night sounds. But a car roared by on the road below, obliterating all other sounds for the moment.

A FEW yards on, Yates caught something again, stopped quickly. He could have sworn it was the sound of a footstep. But Hengen began to whistle tunelessly through his teeth like the sizzle of a radiator. Yates cursed him in a hoarse whisper, realizing it was his own nerves that were going ragged. For a moment it seemed as if Hengen were grinning in the dimness.

"What *you* so jittery about, Yates?"

"Come on." They got to the edge of the clearing. Yates moved off the path, computing distance and direction. When the job was done, he could duck down through the grove and get to his car without being seen from the dance joint. Hengen had stepped several paces away from him and was watching him hard, hands jammed in the coat pockets of his gray suit. Yates peered back down the path. When he looked back, Hengen had edged still further away. Yates suddenly realized Hengen had a gun on him. Something about his position told Yates that.

"All right," he said. "You go up there into the clearing and come walking down this way. I'll be right here. I'll send a couple of shots over your head, then duck out. Then you run on down to the joint, and —"

"Why should I go up into the clearing?" Hengen said coldly. "Why can't you just pop away here?"

Yates was quivering. He suddenly hated Hengen. "Just in case



somebody should be snooping around and see, you damn fool! Go ahead!"

Hengen nodded. He turned suddenly and the next moment was running up the path. He ducked into the heavy shadows on the trees on the left. It took Yates by surprise. For a moment he thought Hengen was trying to flee. Then he saw him appear at the edge of the clearing. Almost at once Hengen veered off to the left, out of sight. Yates called out hoarsely once and went up the path to keep him in sight. He had a gun in his hand, the one he had removed from the office wastebasket, equipped with a silencer.

At first, he couldn't see Hengen out there. Then he saw a hunched-over figure moving out there in the high, uncut hay grass. Yates backed a few strides to keep out of sight himself, then left the path and entered the picnic grove to the right. He ran lightly down beside several of the bare wood tables to turn sharply up toward the clearing. At the edge of it, crouched, he doubled back toward the path. He would meet Hengen sooner than the latter expected to come near him.

Behind the end of one of the tables a few feet from the path, he knelt and steadied the gun with the silencer across the table top. No, there would be no gun reports as Hengen expected. One, perhaps two, close-up shots into the head. Then he would beat it the hell out of there after folding the dead Hengen's hand around the weapon to get his fingerprints on it. And later, perhaps not until tomorrow, Ray Hengen would be found an apparent suicide with the gun that had been used in the murders of Horace Sheldon and Zager.

Yates thought once of Roberta. Then his mind congealed on the job at hand. He picked out Hengen coming along the lower edge of the clearing, just a vague outline by the trees of the grove. It was plain that the man was wary, suspicious. He paused once, then came on again. His suit seemed strangely darker than Yates remembered it. He came to the head of the path, wheeled into it. Yates thought he caught the glint of metal in the man's hand. In a few more seconds he would be down the path opposite Yates.

**T**HE YELLOW finger of a powerful flashlight slid silently across the picnic table before Yates. Wavered. The surprise of it paralyzed him for a costly second. Then the beam swiveled on over to splash full in his face as he twisted toward the source of it. There was a shout like a sea's bark that was incredibly like Mauck's voice.



Swearing, squeezing his blinded eyes, Yates threw himself sideward to the other side of the table, rolling once in the dirt when he landed. There was a crashing in the grove further down on the hill. He came up lunging forward, knowing what he had to do in a split second. He had to kill Hengen and get the murder gun planted on him. Then let anybody try to prove anything. He ran for the path and twisted up it. Hengen shouldn't be too hard to take for a crack shot like him.

Yates saw the lump of crouched figure up ahead in the high grass, fired at it. The thin cough of the silencer was swallowed almost at once in the quick double crash of the other's gun. One slug almost trimmed Yates's hair over the left ear. The second took him in the ribs on the same side, burning cleanly through the flesh with a fierce sting as it half twisted him. The man came out of the grass, zig-zagging as he closed. It wasn't Hengen; it was one of Mauch's plain-clothes flatfoots.

Yates threw himself into the picnic grounds to the left of the path. Over his shoulder he glimpsed two yellow tongues of flashlights lapping among the trees for him. A bullet slashed through the dry branches over Yates's head, coming from across the path behind him. There was yelling from three sides. In on that side of the grove, he stumbled across an unseen bench and went headlong. The .32 silencer-equipped gun was knocked from his hand. That was all right, he didn't want that damned thing any more.

Staggering as he drew out his Police Positive, he cut sharply downgrade to his left. He had to get to his car somehow. And another of those dangerous spikes of yellow light leaped out of the darkness from further down the slope. He dropped behind a refuse basket just before it reached him; it wheeled on over toward the path. There were the muffled sounds of men cautiously closing. He darted on along the side of the slope, aware now he was in a dragnet, that something had gone as wrong as hell, that his very life was at stake. The trees thinned and he could just see the white rear wing of the dance joint through them. Hope welled inside him. If he could get down there and slip inside, among the crowd —

A figure detached itself from the trunk of a tree ahead. With the instinct of a hounded trapped animal, before he even thought, the running Yates veered sharply to his right toward the clearing. He bored into the shadowed darkness for yards before he realized who



it was he had seen there by the tree. The gray-suited Hengen! The one man he might have gotten through.

"He's over here — over this way!" Hengen was shouting.

It was too late to go back then. The next instant he sighted the legs of a man out in the dimly lighted clearing. The legs were coming into the grove toward him. Yates's wind tore in his throat and his hurt side burned hotly. He hesitated, then ducked under one of the picnic tables. The beam of a flashlight ran down along one side of it.

Yates counted ten, then crept on on all fours till he was able to put an outdoor barbecue grille behind him. He rose in a crouch and ventured to the edge of the trees. He was outside the net now. There was a thin chance. . . .

From behind, in the sudden stillness, a muffled voice said, "He must have tried to slip down to the road. He isn't up this way."

Luck took a hand on Yates's side then, too. A drifting rag of cloud blotted out the face of the moon and the clearing was in darkness. He started through the high grass, curving over to his right toward the big shed-like building down beyond the picnic grove. If he could get behind that, he would be able to get down to the road and make a try for his car again. The moon poked through the filmy tail of the cloud and he froze down beside a small boulder in the open.

**I**T CAME softly. "Doc . . . Doc!" It was Roberta; she stood at the head of the path into the grove, the dark red hair falling over the shoulders of her white coat. She glanced back over her shoulder, then came walking out toward him. It seemed incredible; she wasn't shouting the alarm. "Doc," she said again. "Come this way — quickly."

*She is nuts about me*, his brain flashed. She had no gun. He half rose; once he had hold of her, he could use her as a shield, and as a hostage, too, perhaps. He started toward her. There was a sound down in the trees, a sound that came nearer. But he was only a couple of yards from her. She wore an enigmatic little smile.

"Don't be afraid, Doc . . ." Then her hand came out from under her coat with the small, slender flashlight. And the sharp yellow beam hit him squarely in the eyes as she shouted, "Here he is! Here — Mauck!"

He tried to wrench away from the beam, finally was forced to twist his head behind his upthrust arm. He grabbed at her with the other but missed, still blinded. He could hear them racing toward him.



"Surrender, Yates!" a man roared.

Yates fired once at the sound of the voice but could see nothing. He had to turn and flee. There was the whiplash of a gun report. His left leg went numb and buckled under him and he went down. He came up on one knee, twisting around, to try to defend himself. The thin pencil of light from the flashlight in the girl's hand slapped him in the face again. Mauck's hoarse oath came from a few yards away. The crack of his gun. And Yates was drilled in the right shoulder, his own weapon knocked from his hand.

"Three murders was one too many, Yates! We caught you building this one!"

## IX

THEY were in Inspector Mauck's office at headquarters in midtown. Yates still couldn't figure how things had suddenly exploded in his front teeth. But he had a grip on himself now. A police surgeon had strapped up his wounds temporarily and given him a hypo to deaden the pain. On top of that, Mauck had set up two hookers of Scotch for him. In the chair on the other side of Mauck's desk, Yates sat braced to take weight off his right wounded shoulder and calmly drew on a cigaret. He ignored Roberta and Ray Hengen off to one side and kept his eyes on the slow-pacing Mauck.

"Three murders was one too many," Mauck picked it up from the picnic grove.

Yates said, "Quit bluffing, Mauck. The only thing you can hang on me is attempted assault out there at Fischers."

Mauck didn't sizzle. His was the composure of a supremely confident man. He thumbed at the silencer-equipped .32 on the corner of the desk for which his men had combed the picnic grove. "That, Yates. It's the murder gun used in the two killings. One of the boys will take it downstairs and fire it on the range. Then we'll check the bullets with those taken out of Sheldon and Zager. We'll find the same gun fired them all, all right."

Yates nodded slowly. "Of course. And in court, how will you prove Hengen didn't drop that gun up there in the grove?"

Mauck rubbed his ledge of jaw like a man a little bored with it all. "Because, Yates, the police had Hengen in protective custody out at Fischers before you arrived. We know exactly what he did have



and didn't have on him. As a matter of fact, we gave him another gun to defend himself if necessary."

Yates sat feeling as if he had been mule-kicked dead center. He still didn't understand how they had trapped him, and he didn't want to risk exposing his hand by asking too much. He had it figured that they'd been taling him and Mauck had just stumbled onto things. A cord at the hinge of his jaw jumped as Hengen scratched a match for Roberta's cigaret. Yates still didn't look at her. If he did the spate of emotion would blast his poise. He gave Mauck a patronizing smile instead.

"Neat, Mauck, neat. That still doesn't prove I had the gun, Nobody ever heard of the coppers planting a gun in the picture before, did they? Nope. In court, your case —"

"You're red-handed, Yates," Mauck said, harshly.

"Forgetting my alibis? Try to put me on the scenes of the murders —"

**M**AUCK broke in again, sneering. "Alibis? Like sieves, Yates. Full of holes. You left Miss Sheldon for almost twenty minutes about the time of the slaying of Zager. She told us that, correcting her earlier statement, Yates.

Yates had expected that after what had happened up in the clearing. But he had his answer, still not looking her way. "Sure, she has to say that to protect Hengen. He had the motive. Zager knew about the cash he was taking to Sheldon when he killed him. So Hengen had to fix Zager to —"

Hengen's short laugh preceded Mauck's answer. Mauck's answer was a question. "And the two killings are linked up, eh, Yates?"

Doc Yates had the ugly feeling he was being toyed with. It wasn't like Mauck to be so lacking in belligerency. "But, of course. And try to put me on the scene *there*, Mauck!"

"You *had* an alibi, didn't you, Yates?" The inspector motioned to an officer. "Bring her in."

A door was opened and Adis Simpson came in from the adjoining room. Yates was riveted back in the chair, eyes bulging, lips tight. Adis' eyes were reddened from weeping. But they were grim and merciless as they stared over Yates's head. Mauck walked over to her.

"Where was Yates the night Horace Sheldon was slain?"

Adis' eyes closed momentarily, then opened, as hard as ever, 'I



don't know. I didn't see him or hear from him till after the murder was reported over the radio," she said emotionlessly.

That did it. Yates's heart jumped so it felt like a stab of pain in his side. His braced right hand slipped limply off the arm of the chair. He'd really believed Adis had been too infatuated with him to turn. Like a physical impact, he felt her screwed-up eyes drop onto him.

"I warned you, Doc," she said between tight teeth. "I told you I'd start throwing things — *and that I wouldn't care who got hurt!*" She started to pat her pompadour. Then her hand clawed down over her eyes; she had been terribly hurt. The officer helped her out of the room.

Yates rebounded fast, whipped by the anger in him. He drew hard on a cigaret and began to talk a streak. "Give your stenographer the 'go' sign, Mauck. Confession. Here it comes." The hand of the officer seated in the corner began to fly over his shorthand notebook.

"Zager started it," Yates said dispassionately. "He was an accountant with that Chicago firm Sheldon's corporation was subletting contracts to. Got bounced out, I imagine, for some financial juggling. But not before he learned there was going to be a kickback payoff to Sheldon for those contracts. Zager came to town and looked me up; he wanted to shakedown Sheldon for blackmail."

**H**E HEARD Roberta catch her breath at his brutally offhand mention of her dead father's name. His lips curled. He was licked but he was going to pull some of them under with him before he was finished.

"Zager still had a friend with the Chi outfit," he continued. "He got tipped about the eighty thousand payoff coming through to Sheldon, that Hengen was bringing it through. . . ."

"And about there you got big ideas, eh, Yates?" Mauck prompted.

"Yeah. I kept Zager under cover and went to work." He related how he had inserted himself into the picture by sending word to Sheldon about the client who had sought protection from attack by Sheldon. How he had followed that up with the plant in Van Henry's column about a certain person being guarded by operatives of his agency. He stopped to get a fresh cigaret awkwardly with his left hand and Mauck held a match for him.

Mauck said, "Building background, eh. . . . The Sheldon family and



Mr. Hengen would guess you knew enough about undercover things."

"That's about it." Yates was completely impersonal now. "I had Hengen's arrival timed to the minute. How Sheldon got it — well, you know all about that. I did it, of course."

The police stenographer's pencil snapped and Mauck ordered Yates to wait till he was set with another. "All right."

Sotto-voced, Roberta Sheldon said, "Ray, he was dressing you up to be the murderer right from the beginning. Good Lord. . . ."

"The rest was simple. Not knowing a murder was on schedule, Hengen would have no alibi, naturally. From then on in, he was scared because of that kick-back money. The murder of Sheldon made it as good as hot money. I kept putting the needle to Hengen. I had Zager phone him at that exact minute to insist on seeing him. Hengen was like a piece of putty for me." He smirked.

"You're quite a designer of crime," sneered Mauck.

"You didn't break this case anyway, Mauck!"

"Go on." He was balancing the silencer-equipped murder gun on his palm, put it down hurriedly. "Oops! I forgot."

Yates's eyes lidded as he saw the gun go back to the corner of the desk. Yates told how he had set the stage for the murder of Zager, slipping out of the bar and grill to go to the Metropolitan House. Hengen had almost ruined things by arriving early and catching him, Yates, there. "But I knocked him out, and it still could have been hung on him as I planned. The rest —" He shrugged.

"Yeah, you attempted one murder too many, Yates. Hengen was going to look like a suicide. Sure. Then —"

"Don't crow, Mauck! If that damned little Adis hadn't followed me to Fischers and sold me out — oh, well! But get this! She was in on this thing with me. She —"

"Cut the snow, Yates." Mauck shook his head. "She didn't follow you to Fischers and bring us; she didn't know you were going there. All she did was to break your alibi for the night of Sheldon's murder. She did that only after you were trapped in your office by Miss Sheldon."

Yates could hear a fly buzzing about the green shade of the desk lamp. He heard his own voice, husky, echoing, "Trapped in my office by Miss Sheldon?"

Mauck nodded sharply. "She broke this case, Yates. She suspected you before she knew of Zager's death." He made a signal.



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Roberta Sheldon began to talk in a quiet, controlled voice. "It was quite by accident, I guess. When Mr. Yates returned after his alleged chase of the man he said might help us — that was down at that bar and grill — he regretted the fact that he himself hadn't been carrying a gun. But I remembered that when we were leaning on the desk side by side at his office, I had felt something like a gun in his side coat pocket. Later, when he took me home, I let him kiss me to see if he still had it on him. I felt it."

Yates twisted painfully in his chair and stared at her for the first time. The aquamarine eyes met his steadily, impersonally.

"I began to wonder then. I remembered how — when I was at his office — how jealous his secretary had been," she went on, still facing him. "I began to think things out. I went to The Cavendish. Mr. Hengen wasn't in then. I waited in the lobby and saw him and Mr. Yates return. After Mr. Yates left, I went upstairs and got Ray to talk. He told me everything that had happened."

**S**HE PAUSED, still regarding Yates unswervingly. "I phoned Miss Adis Simpson under the pretense of trying to locate Mr. Yates. I let her know I intended to go to the office, figuring she would come over, too. I got in touch with Inspector Mauck. Then I went to the office and led Mr. Yates into embracing me till Adis came and caught him in the act."

Beside her, Hengen said something under his breath.

Roberta finished it off. "I realized Mr. Yates had tricked me into being his alibi earlier that evening. It was my idea he might have used Adis the same way. If she became sufficiently infuriated with jealousy . . ." She stopped.

"And she did," Mauck picked it up triumphantly. "And when I picked her up as she left the office, she confessed she'd lied to give you that alibi, Yates. All we had to do then was to rush out to Fischers and wait for you to walk into your own neat little web! Ha!"

Yates sat quivering, eyes still locked on the girl. It sank into him; it maddened him to the point of insanity. He, the hard-boiled wise Yates, the guy who could take the dames in his stride — he had been duped by one of them who had made him fall for her! He remembered again how back there in the clearing, when he had a last thin chance of escape, she had led him into the last trap. It was too much.





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Because he was wounded, they didn't expect him to move so quickly. He swung sideward from the chair and with his left hand snatched the silencer-equipped gun from the desk. He swung it on her, recalling how Mauck had put down the weapon quickly when he seemed to remember it was not unloaded.

"Stand, everybody! I drill her if there's a move." He looked along the barrel into her green eyes. They met his wild stare without fear.

"You damn fool! That's the move I figured you to make," Mauck said without tension.

"I'll let her have it! I haven't anything to lose," Yates warned hoarsely. "She played me like a sap and —"

Mauck walked around the corner of the desk. Yates barked a cry. Mauck still came on. Yates pulled the trigger. The hollow click of the empty cartridge chamber was lost in the pistol-like slap of Mauck's open hand across Yates's jaw. Yates was rocked back against the chair and slid to the floor. Mauck stood over him, blowing on a fisted hand.

"Of course the gun is empty, Yates. And if you only weren't wounded — oh, brother, would I have fun! . . ."











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