

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE

JULY

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



A COFFIN FOR TWO

A 'LONERGAN OF FRISCO' STORY

by JOHN K. BUTLER

THE TATTOOED CARD

A 'NEEDLE MIKE' STORY

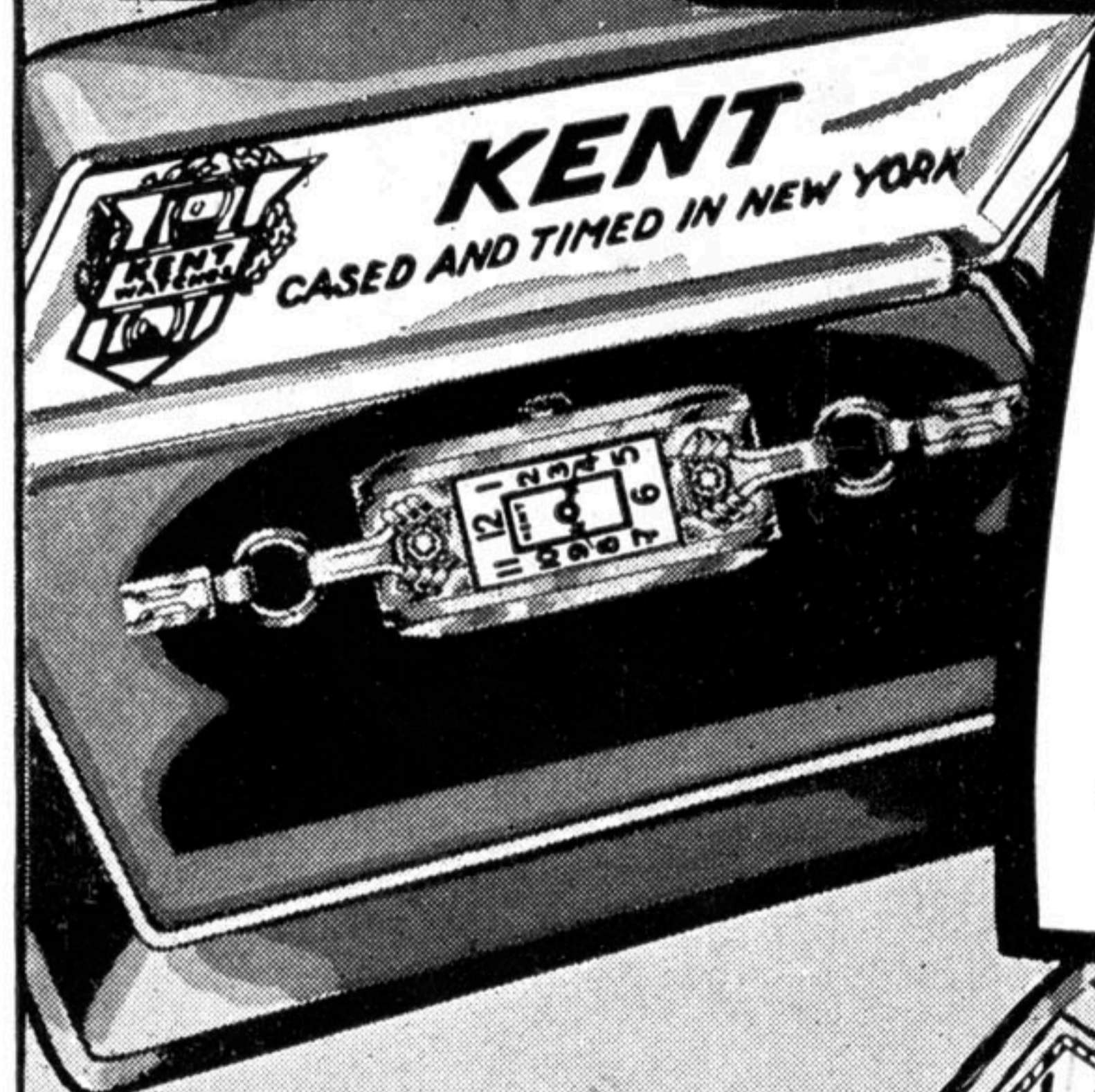
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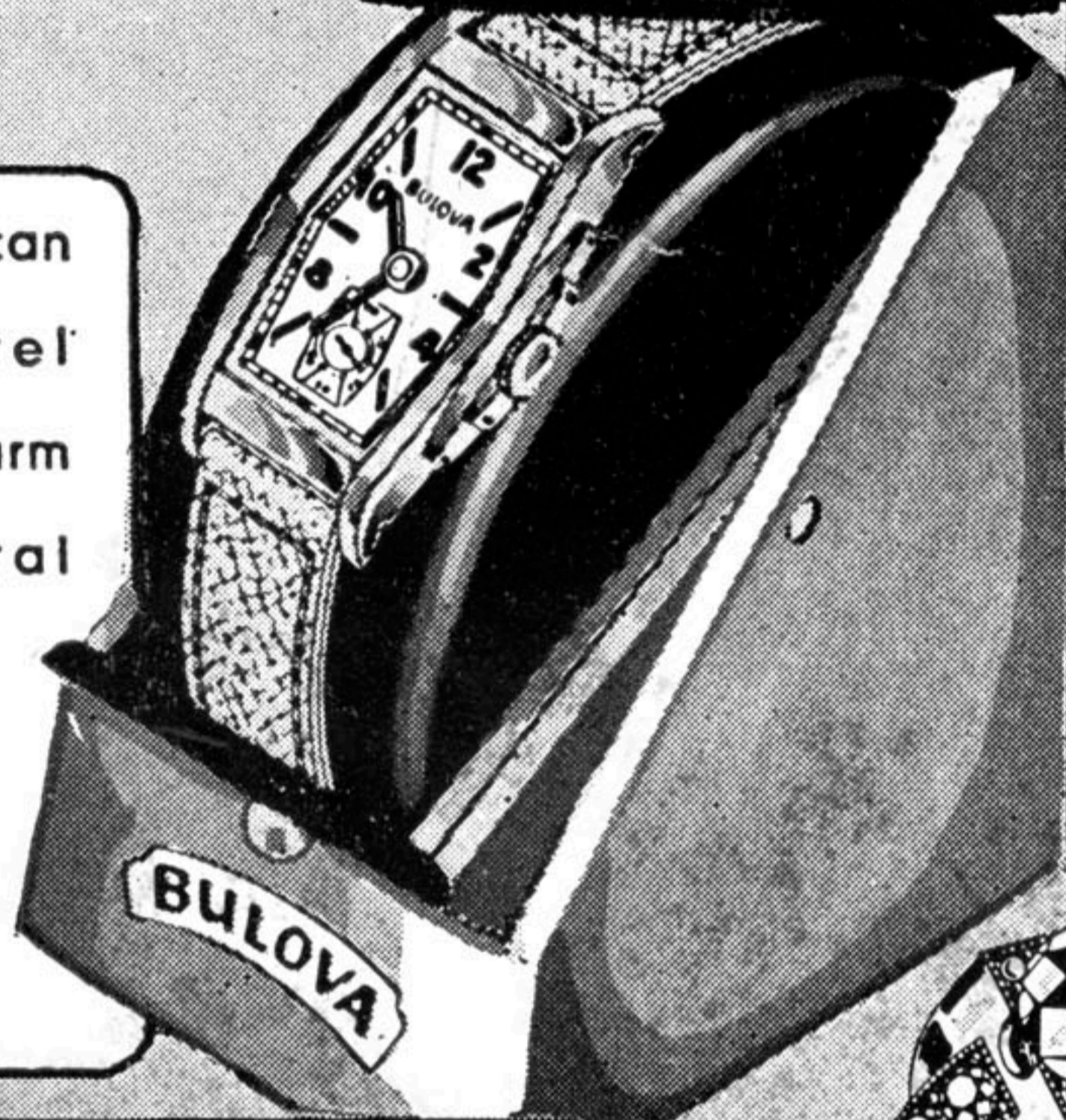
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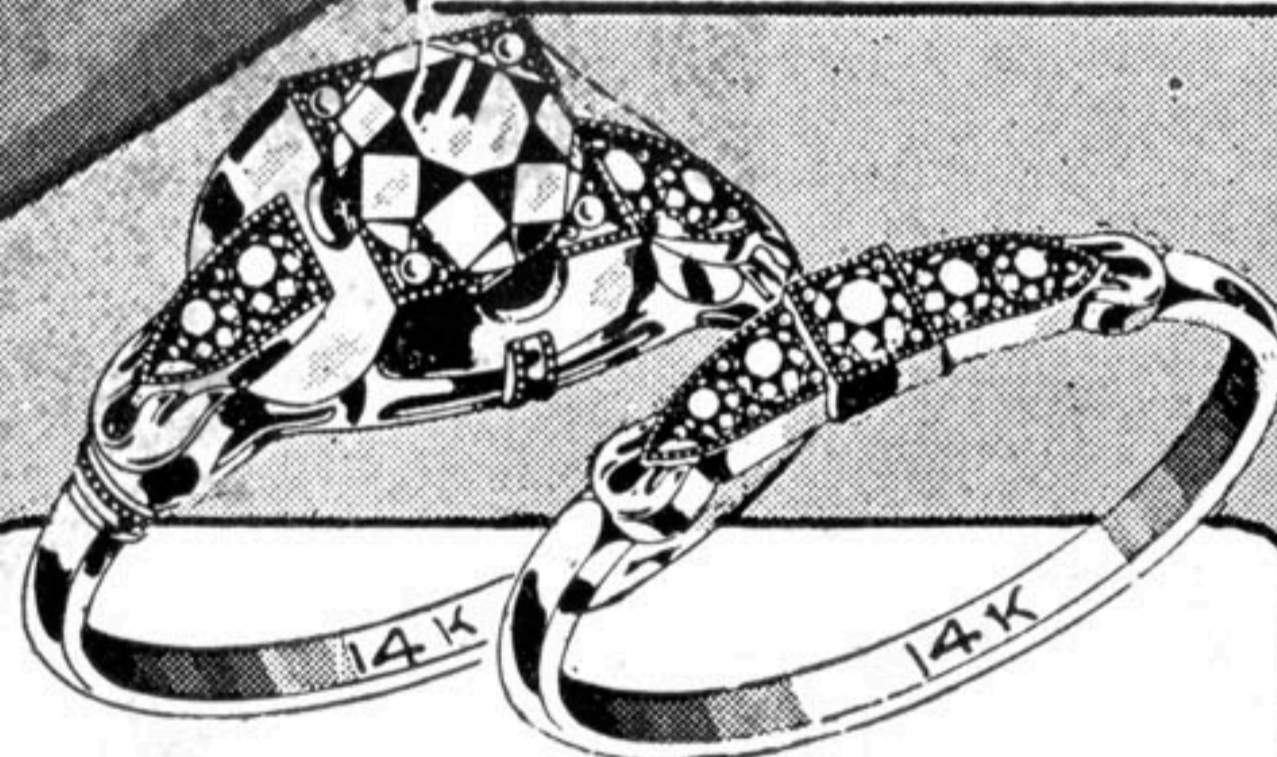
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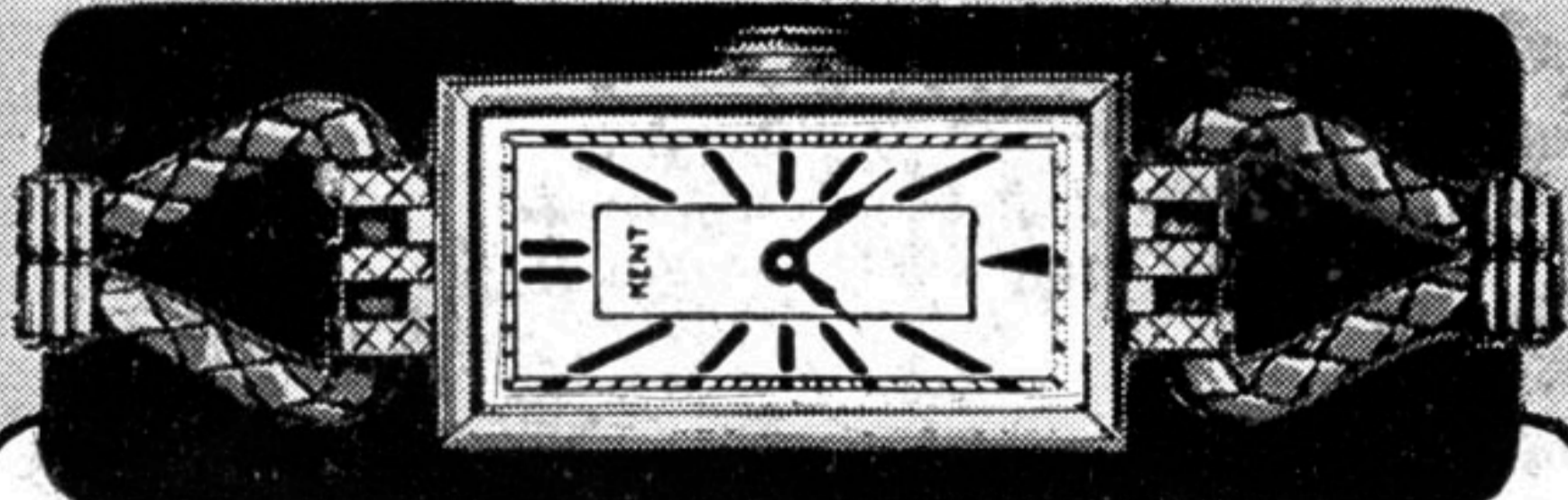
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Get rid of this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

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10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



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EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 24

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From *A Coffin for Two*.

Black-and-white illustrations by John Flemming Gould

Watch for the August Issue

On the Newsstands July 2nd

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The August Thrill Docket

I WAS to go by boat, and a nasty, foggy night it was along the river. Yet, the crew—the four men standing beside the huge man whose distinction of captain consisted in wearing a different hat—made the night seem clean in comparison. I could see them on the long, low-cabined boat directly beneath the pier as I stood on the torn planks and leaned against the great round piling, talking with the water-rat who did his business on shore.

"It's a bad night and a worse job—a murder job, I understand." He put a stubby finger hard against my chest. "I thought as how more than you would be coming, and tougher ones. I can't be responsible once you're aboard the boat. They're tough customers."

I spotted them again in the bobbing lantern, said, "They just look dirty to me."

"Huh," he grunted. "Even if you were one of them G-men, they wouldn't be scared of you none—alone on the water like that. I've been paid cash on the dot. I'm a lad who makes deals square. Oh, I won't give the money back—that part is done and gone with. But I'll give you a bit of advice and sort of stand here while you beat it. These guys got to know a lad's tough or they rough him around."

I took a smile in the darkness as a figure snarled up something about getting under way.

"Do they think you're tough?" I asked the man who had brought me.

"They know it. They—"

That was all of that. I simply sideswiped him in the chest, saw his hands go out, and heard him flop into the muddy, shallow water on the opposite side of the planking. Then I dropped down onto the boat. "O. K., boys," I said. "Let 'er ride."

They were off, and they knew their river. I ducked sharply as the glare of light came, a voice cried out, and a shot roared. Then blackness and fog and night—we were out in the river. I didn't have to be told that the harbor police had taken a shot at us!

That's the way *Dead Men Don't Kill*, the new RACE WILLIAMS thriller by Carroll John Daly, begins, on Page 6 of next month's DIME DETECTIVE.

Since Mr. Daly's last story about his favorite character appeared—way back in February—we've been flooded with letters asking where Williams had disappeared to, whether there would be any more stories about him in the future, if so when, and if not, why not!

Well, anyway, here he is, back again and steaming along as usual. And in answer to numerous queries we want to assure you that no other magazine has lured him away from us and that he'll be in these pages from now on—at least four times a year! Everybody happy?

And then there will be stories in the August issue by Cornell Woolrich, John Lawrence and others. Better watch the stands June 4th!

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A COFFIN FOR TWO

A Lonergan of Frisco Novelette

by
John K. Butler

Author of "Gallows Ghost," etc.

With a corpse practically dumped in his lap, it was up to Rex Lonergan to figure the riddle in red left by a murdered maestro who deserted his hearse to play his own swan-song on the organ—and a parrot that talked wisely if not too well.



He wrestled the trunk through the slide door as they roared past the Crossing.

CHAPTER ONE

A Corpse at His Door

IT was ten minutes past four o'clock in the morning and dark as skyless midnight. The mail-clerk at San Juan Crossing slid open the door of the

express depot and glared sourly at the weather outside.

Rain surged against the side of the old frame building, rattling in angry gusts against its windows. The graveled station-ground, all the way over to the tracks, had become a single puddle several inches deep. The clerk grunted sul-

lenly, pulling a four-wheeled hand-truck into the rain. He pulled it twenty yards up the tracks, stopped it just under the horizontal arm of a steel scaffold. Then he boosted himself atop the truck's platform and attached the mail sack to the release mechanism at the outer end of the arm.

Somewhere off in the dark, the Shoreline Limited whistled shrilly. Very soon now, this crack overnight train on the Los Angeles-San Francisco run would dash past the Crossing. The north-bound mail, dangling from the scaffold like a hanged man, would be snatched away automatically and whipped into the mail-car.

The clerk horsed the empty truck around, and pulled it back to the depot. His shoes sloshed through puddles, rain-drops biting sharp as hail on his face. He passed the bay-window of the telegraph office and saw Joe Martin, the operator, through steamy glass. Joe had it soft. He didn't ever have to come out in the wet. He looked warm and comfortable inside the office, dreamily paring his fingernails while the telegraph key went clickety-click, click-click; clickety-click. Pretty damn soft for some guys.

Out of the dark, a powerful searchlight lanced blindingly into the clerk's eyes. The limited didn't reduce its speed but became a rumbling roar that chattered depot windows. Dark Pullmans, wetly glistening, flashed by—then the last car winked its red and green lights in flippant farewell to San Juan Crossing.

The clerk watched after it. He had seen the canvas sack vanish from the scaffold into the mail-car, and now he saw another thing. It was a sudden shadow that pitched from the train and smacked the rain-water beside the tracks with a mighty-dark splash.

"Hey, Joe!" he called instinctively. "I think they lost the sack!"

The telegraph-operator raised one of

the steamy windows. "Whatcha mean, lost it?"

"I saw something hit the ditch."

"Better got get it, then," Joe Martin advised, and banged the window to shut out driving rain.

The clerk muttered complainingly, dug a flash-torch from his overcoat, and waded up the right-of-way. Muddy water brimmed the drainage canal beside the track-bed, and he trudged along quite a distance before he located the shadowy thing which had pitched overboard from the speeding train.

Bending close, focusing the beam of his flash, he saw it was not the mail-sack, but a large wardrobe trunk made to hold clothes full length on its interior hangers. It lay flat down, partly submerged in the canal, and the upward panel had been ripped loose by the impact when the trunk bounced into the track-bed.

The clerk reached out his hand, flipped away the torn panel. He did it absently, not for any purpose, and slanted his light inside.

He gasped chokingly, deep in his throat.

There was a human body fully dressed, rigid, lying on its back. Canal water gurgled softly into the trunk, washed gently back and forth over the body, made swirling little eddies around the dead man's head.

The clerk was running back to the depot.

"Joe! Hey, Joe—"

In the dark he tripped up, skidded on his hands and knees, cutting his palms in the gravel. But he was up again in a scrambling instant, running.

"Joe!" he called. "Hey, Joe!"

ABOARD the Shoreline Limited, highballing through midnight to dawn, Engineer Mike Hogan checked his time—four-thirteen to the second. He struck his grizzled old head out into the wet

blast, squinting his eyes. Up the tracks, a green semaphore-light beckoned him on.

He pulled his whistle for the San Juan Crossing.

In a few moments, dimly lighted depot windows came into sight, were swept behind. The locomotive had thrown rumbling thunder against the walls of the lonely depot, and the thunder had been returned in hollow echoes.

Scheidecker, the fireman, ducked his head back into the cab and yelled over at Hogan: "I think we lost something, Mike."

"Whatya mean we lost something?"

"Well, I happened to be looking back and I seen something hit the canal. I don't think it was the mail-sack; it looked like it popped out of the baggage-car."

Hogan's oily gauntlet rested on the throttle. He didn't pay much attention to Scheidecker, merely grumbling: "What the hell do you expect me to do about it? Turn around and go back?"

Dark Pullmans rocked and swayed, heavy wheel-trucks hammering ceaseless, tireless rhythm over rail-joints. Inside the Pullmans, electricity burned softly golden along narrow aisles. The air had a stuffy warmth, and passengers slept behind drawn green curtains that twitched and flapped with the motion of the train.

In Compartment B of a car christened *Portland*, two men were sitting out the night. Their berths hadn't been made up. They sat side by side on the plush cushions, handcuffed together.

Some hours ago, a porter had brought a gallon thermos of black coffee. And Lieutenant Rex Lonergan, of the San Francisco police—detective bureau—had used more than half of it to keep himself awake.

His prisoner, Louis Dornberger, alias Louie the Fink, slept snoringly with his head slumped over on Lonergan's shoulder. He was a scrawny little man, com-

pared to the lieutenant, and gave the impression of a small boy who had played too hard during the day and finally succumbed to sleep on his father's shoulder.

But Louie the Fink wasn't young. He'd lived forty-three hectic years. A total of eighteen of these had been passed in state reformatories, city jails, and San Quentin Penitentiary. A month ago, Louie was scheduled for trial on dope-peddling charges, but he jumped bail, vanished. Los Angeles officers picked him up in a rooming-house on South Main Street, holding him for San Francisco. And Lonergan had gone to the southern city to bring Louie back.

It was comfortably warm in the compartment. Rain spattered on the windows, its sound drowned out by the noise of the train. There was no light outside the glass, no sign of dawn.

LONERGAN poured himself another cup of coffee with his free hand. Then he swung that hand in a swift arc, his meaty palm slapping sharply against the prisoner's cheek.

Louie the Fink jerked forward. Before he was fully awake to his surroundings, he whined pleadingly: "Wait a minute, officer! You ain't got nothing on me." The suddenness of his own voice snapped him awake, and he saw where he was, felt the tug of handcuffs on his right wrist. He smiled sheepishly at Lonergan. "Guess I forgot where I was, for a minute."

"Yeah," the lieutenant agreed crisply. "Ready to talk now?"

"About what?"

Lonergan scowled disgust and made a gesture as if to slap Louie again.

Louie cringed and began to talk very fast. "Honest, Lieutenant, it's just like I told you. I got this aunt, see? She lives in L. A. There I am in Frisco, and there she is in L. A. I get a letter from her, and she says she'd like me to visit her.

So I packs up—" The words stuck hard.

"And jump bail," Lonergan finished.

Louie wagged his head. "You got it all wrong. I just went for a visit. I just—"

"How about your date in court last month, on the seventh?"

"That? Well, it's like I said. I can't remember dates, see? Even when I was a kid, like when I was in school, and we had to learn dates—"

"What school?" Lonergan snorted cynically.

Louie the Fink lowered his eyes, pretending to be deeply hurt. "You take the wrong attitude, Lieutenant. You're just like all the other cops—always take the wrong attitude."

Lonergan gripped the little man's necktie. Steady pulling tightened the tie like a noose and drew Louie's worried face close to Lonergan's frowning one. "I'll tell you something, punk. There's been some big-scale opium running into Frisco from L. A. I've got an idea you're one of the cogs in the big wheel. Maybe you had some urgent dope business down south. So you jumped bail."

"No!" Louie protested. "Honest, I don't know nothing about any dope running."

"If you do, you'd better spill it," Lonergan said coldly. "We're watching everything that comes into Frisco. The feds are with us; so's the State Narcotic Squad. We're checking boats, stopping the trucks. We're even impounding the baggage that comes through on trains and buses, if we suspect it. We're bound to turn up a lead, so you'd better talk right now and save yourself a lot of grief later."

"Honest," Louie pleaded, "honest!" He was really worried now, not wanting suspicion of smuggling added to the charges already filed against him. "I don't know nothing about it. All I did was jump my bail."

Lonergan chuckled. His story about concerted law action against the smuggling of opium into Frisco had been true enough, but he knew Louie couldn't possibly be involved in it. Louie was too much the small-time grifter. No organized criminal group would even consider him in its major operations. Lonergan had hinted a connection between Louie and the smuggling because he knew that by throwing a serious charge at him, the prisoner would be apt to confess to the less important law infraction. It was an old police trick, but it had worked.

Lonergan said: "Want to confess to deliberate bail jumping now? Or do you want to figure out more of those lousy lies?"

Louie shrugged puny shoulders, winced dejectedly. "Aw, hell—"

Knuckles made a sudden drumming against the compartment's door, and the railroad conductor stuck his head in. Behind him, the fat Pullman conductor shuffled his feet in the corridor.

"Come in, Riley," Lonergan invited.

RILEY gulped nervously. His face appeared unusually white, beads of sweat clinging to his upper lip. He pushed his greasy conductor's cap far back on his bald head, gestured with a pair of telegrams in his hand.

"Wires," he said. "Picked them up at Point Padre. A trunk dropped off the baggage-car. That was back at San Juan crossing. The operator wired ahead. The police in San Francisco want you to take charge, but they haven't identified the body, and—"

Lonergan held up his hand. "Try to be coherent," he suggested patiently. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"The trunk," Riley rambled on. "It had a dead man in it. I went up to the baggage-car when I got these wires. We were just pulling out of Point Padre. I

went up there, and Bill and a girl were lying on the floor, both bound up. His mouth had adhesive tape plastered across it."

"Who's Bill?"

"Bill Stanley. He's the Mick baggage-man. A guy hit him and tied him up and pushed the trunk off. Then the guy hit the girl when she came in to see her parrot. I just got these wires. The Frisco police know you're aboard with a prisoner, so they want you to take charge."

Lonergan sighed: "Boy! You sure tell a story straight-from-the-shoulder, don't you? A trunk, and a dead man, and San Juan Crossing, and Bill Stanley, and a guy that hit Bill, and then the guy hit a girl, and you got two telegrams, and Bill got his mouth stopped with adhesive tape, and the Frisco police—nuts!"

"I'm not kidding," the conductor gulped. "You can ask George here."

The Pullman official nodded his head in solemn confirmation. "Sure, it's just like Riley says. The guy went into the baggage-car, but we didn't know anything about it till Riley got the wires."

Lonergan sighed again. "I still don't know what the hell you boys are talking about, but I'll be with you in a second."

He fished a key from his vest pocket, removed the handcuff loop from his wrist, sprung it all the way open and locked it around the iron leg of the Pullman seat. This yanked Louie the Fink off balance, pulled him halfway to his knees and left him awkwardly anchored by the bracelets.

"So long, Louie," Lonergan said.

"Hey!" Louie cried. "Hey, you can't leave me like this. Suppose the train cracks up, or something?"

Lonergan stepped into the corridor with the conductors, tucking the key back into his vest. "Just ask for a blow-torch, Louie. A blow torch cuts anything."

Louie the Fink simply sat back and gulped sadly.

CHAPTER TWO

Polly Wants A Snatcher

THE limited's baggage-car carried a capacity load. Trunks were stacked atop each other with only narrow aisles left between. Three dogs yapped incessantly from the wooden kennels, and a perched parrot looked very train-sick and worried. Cases of California gift oranges stood beside a coffin tagged for *Henley Brothers, Morticians*, and there was even a live grizzly bear destined for the Fleishhacker Zoo.

As Rex Lonergan followed Conductor Riley into the car, a voice suddenly shrieked warningly behind him.

"Take *that*, monkey!"

Lonergan threw himself sidewise, yanking his service Colt's from the holster under his coat and whirling with it. There was nobody behind him. Just the caged parrot, which shrieked again: "Take *that*, monkey!"

Lonergan grinned in relief, said, "Hello, Polly."

"Hello Polly," the parrot threw back.

Bill Stanley, the baggage-attendant, was a handsome young Irishman. His hair was thick, his eyes deep-set. Two jagged cuts on his head bled profusely, and he dabbed at the cuts with a crimson-soaked bandana.

"Bill," the conductor introduced, "this is Lieutenant Lonergan, of the Frisco police. On account of he's aboard, they want him to take charge, so you better tell him what happened."

"Those cuts very deep?" Lonergan asked.

"Uh-uh. It'll stop bleeding pretty soon."

"Don't dab at it—give it a chance to congeal."

The baggage-attendant nodded, sat down at a small wall-desk littered with papers and tags. "I was setting here like

this. I heard the vestibule door open but I didn't look around right away. I figured maybe it was just one of the dog owners—or that girl that had the parrot. She kept coming in to see how that parrot was. Even when everybody ought to be asleep, they sometimes come up here. I've seen 'em come like that ever since I been in the railroad business. So I didn't look around. All of a sudden something hits my head. It feels like a sledge-hammer. I hear a man say, 'Take *that*, monkey,' and I'm out like a light."

The parrot batted its eyes, croaked hoarsely, "Take *that*, monkey," and closed its eyes again.

"I fell off the stool," Bill Stanley went on. "Anyway, I guess I fell off it, because when I woke up I was on the floor. Then the girl must've come in while I was out. She was tied up. I seen this here man dragging his wardrobe trunk over to the baggage-door. He slides the door open."

"What time?"

"Well, it was about a half hour before we were due past San Juan Crossing."

"What did the fellow look like?"

"He was sort of short and built heavy. He had red hair. That's the main thing I remember. His hair was like carrots—that red, I mean."

"And you saw him push the trunk overboard?"

"Uh-uh. That's the funny part. Just as he got the door slid open, he looked around like he thought of something important. He looked at the baggage, sort of, and then he come over and tied me up with trunk ropes. I tried to sock him with a fire-ax but it didn't work. He bolted the door that goes back to the vestibule. I figured maybe he'd kill me. But he tied me up with trunk ropes, and he got some adhesive tape out of the first aid kit and plastered my mouth. He even tied a towel over my eyes. He swears at me, says, 'Take *that*, monkey!' and hits

me again. Then he stuffed cotton in my ears."

"Take *that*, monkey," the parrot croaked reminiscently.

"What did he stop your eyes and ears for?" Lonergan said.

"I don't know," the baggage-man shrugged. "I was still lying here when Riley picked up the telegrams at Point Padre. He came up here, busted the door bolt and turned me'n the girl loose. The trunk was missing, and the slide door was part open, so I knew the man had pitched it off. Nothing else was missing. Riley's telegrams said the trunk landed near San Juan Crossing. The mail-clerk stationed there happened to see it bounce overboard. The telegram said there was a dead body in it."

"Why would this fellow push it off near a depot?" Lonergan mused aloud.

"Maybe it was just an accident. This train rambles awful fast, and the Crossing is around a curve. So maybe he didn't see the depot. He got behind the trunk, pushing it, and by the time he heaves it off, we're passing the Crossing."

LONERGAN only appeared partly satisfied. He was thinking that the attendant had said the red-headed man started wrestling the trunk to the slide door a half hour before the train was due past San Juan Crossing. What had the fellow been doing between that time and the time the trunk was pushed off near the depot? Also, there were the odd facts of a towel tied over the attendant's eyes and cotton stuffed in his ears.

Lonergan strolled to the side door of the car. It was slightly open and rain lashed in. Dawn showed a drab gray outside. The Limited was highballing in the last lap of its dash to San Francisco.

He stooped down and picked three neat calling-cards from the floor. Each one was engraved with the following words—

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Lonerger said: "Ever see these before?"

The baggageman shook his head.

Lonerger tucked the cards into his pocket, said to the conductor: "The guy that pushed the trunk off must have been a passenger. How can we find him?"

"That's easy," Bill Stanley put in. "I got the stub for his trunk." He fished through tags on his cluttered desk. "Sure, here it is. The wardrobe trunk was tagged for the passenger in Car Nine, Section Five, Lower."

"By gosh!" the conductor exclaimed suddenly. "I remember the fellow now. Sure—he was in Section Five, Lower. A stocky fellow with a lot of muscle and hair like a bonfire."

"Swell," said Lonergan, turning toward the vestibule. "Let's go, Riley."

The parrot cocked its head to one side and echoed: "Let's go, Riley."

Lonerger grinned. He stepped over to the cage and waggled his finger through the wire bars. "Smart Polly, huh?"

The parrot snapped its sharp beak, and Lonergan yanked his finger away in a hurry.

"Smart Polly," the parrot screeched, "smart Polly—smart Polly—"

When he saw the girl, there was nothing more to tell. She had entered the baggage-car—and gone out like a light.

CAR Number Nine of the Shoreline Limited was a Pullman christened *Lake Tahoe*. Passengers in it were getting dressed. Already, the porter had dismantled several berths. Gray dawn seeped through the windows.

"This is Section Five, Lower," Riley pointed.

Lonerger grabbed the edge of the green curtain, drew it aside. Sheets and blankets were in a mused heap at the foot of the berth.

Riley glanced at his watch. "We're due in at six-ten. That's twenty minutes. Maybe he went to the washroom."

"Go see. Check the train from end to end, but my guess is you won't find him."

Lonerger fished under the berth and found a small grip that was tagged for Section Five, Lower. He tried to spring it open but the catch wouldn't move. He got out his pocket-knife, went to work on the lock.

When Riley came back, fifteen minutes later, Lonergan was still trying to snap

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But you *can't* be healthy if you're constipated. Perhaps, nothing does so much to pull down your energy and dull your ambition. Poisonous wastes in your system always drag at your health. You *can't* keep at the top of your form unless you get rid of them.

So if *you* want to feel better, if you want to step up your energy, if you want a quick mind and a vigorous body,

remember this one thing—*see that your bowels move regularly!*

But the way you move your bowels is important. Instead of taking a laxative that disturbs your system and upsets your stomach, take gentle Ex-Lax.

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the lock. He was using some language.

"Me and George went from stem to stern," Riley said. "He's not aboard. That baggage-car door was partly open, so maybe he dropped off at Point Padre when we stopped."

"Yeah," Lonergan grunted, and grasping his knife like a dagger, slit the traveling-case along the side. The leather was tough, but he slit it with a sawing motion, laying the bag wide open.

Inside, he found some shirts, shaving equipment, changes of underwear. His hands explored to the bottom and hauled out a pair of .45 Army Automatics. He examined the guns closely. The serial numbers had been filed off. He searched every piece of wearing apparel for laundry marks but didn't find any—only the places where the marks had been removed.

"I guess he dropped off, all right. He didn't care about leaving his grip behind—nobody could learn anything from it."

The limited was moving slowly now, its bell tolling dismally as it crawled through the freight yards. A colored porter bustled up and down the aisle, whisk-brooming passengers, gathering up traveling-cases. Men appeared freshly shaven, their jowls powdered. Women passengers pattered with their cosmetic compacts, adding last touches of lipstick, rouge, dabbing at strands of hair under their hats.

"Here we are," Riley told Lonergan. "We're in, Lieutenant."

The locomotive, a streamlined monster, nosed slowly into the terminal, picking its own rails out of the maze of tracks in the yards. Its bell kept tolling forlornly, like a church bell in a sleepy village.

Engineer Mike Hogan was leaning out of the cab, and San Francisco greeted him with morning drizzle. The locomotive snorted steam beside its giant wheels, puffing and hissing after the long, hard

dash from Los Angeles. Engineer Hogan saluted his gloved hand to the yard superintendent. Just another run, just another Hogan victory—the limited was on time.

Vestibule doors were hooked open now, and Pullman porters, white-jacketed, stood patiently on the steps while the train crawled in its slot between concrete station platforms. Air-brakes began to blow and groan.

REX LONERGAN and Louie the Fink stepped down from Car Seven and walked side by side under the platform shed. Louie's wrists were handcuffed in front of him, but he'd draped his overcoat over the steel chain, concealing it.

Before they had walked the length of the train, a uniformed policeman and Inspector Hu Rawlins, and two newspaper men, came striding to meet them.

"Geez," Louie grumbled. "You'd think I was a public enemy, or something."

"Don't flatter yourself," Lonergan said. "These boys don't want to see you."

The reporters suddenly broke into a run and got to Lonergan's side ahead of the inspector and the cop.

"Hello, Lieutenant. How about a statement?"

"What kind of a statement?"

"About the trunk with the stiff in it. Got any leads yet?"

Lonergan snorted. "Leads yet! What do you think I am—a magician?"

Inspector Rawlins strode up and pushed himself between Lonergan and the reporters, saying, "Cut it out, you boys. When we're ready to make a statement, we'll make it."

He was a firm-jawed man, vigorous, and usually meant what he said. He turned Louie the Fink over to the uniformed officer. Nobody paid much attention to Louie—the reporters didn't even glance at him.

Rawlins took Lonergan's arm, and they walked very briskly down the platform, weaving in and out of the train crowd, dodging busy reporters, side-stepping hand-trucks loaded with baggage.

"Shall we hold the passengers?" Rawlins asked.

"Nope," Lonergan clipped. "The guy dropped off at Point Padre after he pushed the trunk overboard. The conductors and the baggageman can give us a fair description. I told them to come over to headquarters and look at our rogue's gallery."

"You think the guy maybe has a record?"

Lonergan nodded. "I got an overnight bag here. It's the one he left behind. Two army guns with the numbers filed out. No laundry tags. Nothing. That makes it look like he's got a record somewhere."

Rawlins said: "As soon as we get a description from the train crew, I'll wire the Point Padre sheriff's office."

Lonergan shrugged, shook his head. "My guess is that the guy's put Point Padre a lot of miles behind him by this time." He fingered into his vest pocket, brought out one of the cards he'd found on the floor of the baggage-car, handed it to Rawlins. "Let's check on that phone number. Get the address on it. Then we'll pop around and pay a visit to a musician named Bernard Kavanaugh."

CHAPTER THREE

The Busy Corpse

AT ten o'clock in the morning, San Francisco's beach appeared as coldly gray as rainy winter. Dark clouds pressed low and thick gray mist obscured the ocean. In Golden Gate Park, the trees drooped forlornly, and the bridle-path was a series of mushy puddles.

The police squad-car shot out of the park, turned south on the shore boule-

vard. Its siren wasn't going but no traffic threatened its speeding progress.

Rex Lonergan and Hu Rawlins sat in the back seat, their overcoat collars turned up, the brims of their hats pulled down. They didn't speak, merely sat there with arms folded, while the police driver throttled the car along the desolate boulevard.

On the left, back from the beach, houses stood scattered over the gloomy dunes. Here and there, lonely roads led back to hopeful real estate subdivisions.

Rawlins called to the driver: "Better start looking for Monterey Terrace."

"It's still farther on," the driver said. "I know exactly where it is, on account of my wife's sister used to live there—that was before they moved over to Oakland."

The police car ran a fast mile, then throttled down, and swung in a slithering turn on wet pavement. It began to bump and jolt over a rutty street called Monterey Terrace.

The driver pointed out a frame bungalow. "That's where my wife's sister used to live."

"Nuts to it," Rawlins snapped. "What do you think this is—a sight-seeing tour? We want to find Forty-eight Seaside Lane and a guy named Bernard Kavanaugh."

"Sure, sure. I was showing it to you, that's all."

Seaside Lane was nothing but a pair of wheel-ruts through the sand dunes. Gravel had been thrown in the ruts, but the car's wheels whirled and skidded, fighting for traction. Old frame houses and small cabin-like shacks were scattered far apart. This section of the beach had been an artists' colony.

"There's the place," Lonergan said.

It looked like a renovated barn squatting atop a dune. There was a big studio window built into the north side. All around the lot, a wire-mesh fence rose to

a height of six feet, topped with three strands of barbed wire.

"The guy sure must go for privacy," Rawlins remarked.

HE and Lonergan got out of the squad-car and climbed wooden steps to a padlocked gate in the fence. Lonergan rang the bell. He rang it for nearly ten minutes. An old man working with flower pots across the street came strolling over.

"You better phone him," the gardener advised. "You could ring that bell all day, and if he don't want to see you, he won't."

"Bernard Kavanaugh?"

"Yes, sir. He's sort of what they call a recluse. He don't like to be disturbed. But he sure disturbs everybody else around here when he gets to playing that damn organ."

"Is he home?"

"I guess so. He played that organ, swearing and cussing, all night. My wife, she's an invalid, and it sure disturbs her."

"Did you see him today?" Lonergan asked.

"No. I hardly ever see him. He don't come out. He just sits in there and annoys the neighbors with that damn organ. He won't let the tradesmen deliver. He won't let anybody in. He just sits there and plays."

"He's bats, huh?"

"Sure!" the gardener agreed vehemently. "Where I come from, back in Idaho, they'd put a feller like that in the insane asylum. But out here, they call him a genius and let him go on playing at all hours of the night, cussing and swearing, and keeping the neighbors awake."

Inspector Rawlins called down to the squad-car: "Hey, Tommy! Bring up the wire-cutters."

The police driver plodded up the wooden steps, and Rawlins put him to work on the gate.

The gardener said: "You fellers'll get arrested for busting into a place like this."

Lonergan flashed his police badge in the palm of his hand.

The gardener ogled it. Then he noticed, at last, the blue uniform and brass buttons on Tommy, the squad-car driver. "By gosh!" he exclaimed. "You fellers are from the police! You gonna arrest him for playing that there organ all the time?"

Tommy's wire-cutters snapped the strands around the padlock. The gate opened. Lonergan and Rawlins walked through, stamped up the steps to the house.

The front door had a simple cabin-latch. Lonergan used his penknife, lifted it, and walked into the studio.

It was a big room, drearily empty. Autographed pictures of famous musicians hung close together on the pine walls. There was a big pipe-organ down near the studio window, a grand piano, two radios, a victrola.

Outside, rain fell hard now. Water ran over the shingle roof, gurgled in metal drain-pipes.

The body of a man lay sprawled before the cold fireplace, his right hand flung out toward the ashes. He looked as if he'd been a tall man, six feet, thin. A nickel-plated revolver rested on the hearth, just beyond the reach of his pale dead hand.

Lonergan said to Rawlins: "Let's get that old gardener in here."

Rawlins called out the front door, and the old man came in hesitantly, holding his cap in his hand, rain dripping from his overalls. He saw the body. "By gosh!" he gasped hoarsely. "By gosh—"

"Is this Kavanaugh?" Lonergan asked. He grunted at the man's nod.

THE dead man wore a shabby tweed suit, very bagged at the knees, tattered at the cuffs, loose fitting. Lonergan put

on a pair of cloth gloves and worked them tight down on his fingers. Then he began to explore the dead man's pockets. It took quite a while to accomplish all of this business.

He took the contents to a battered flat desk, examined them—pipes, a tobacco-pouch, loose kitchen matches. The leather wallet contained three hundred and fifty-eight dollars in currency, and there was ninety-two cents in change in a worn little purse. Mostly, the pockets had contained folded sheets of paper, ruled with horizontal lines in groups of five. Upon these lines, music notes were marked in ink, scratched out, corrected. It was evident that Bernard Kavanaugh composed music.

Lonerган's gloved fingers now held a stack of personal cards he'd taken from the man's coat pocket. Each card was identical to the three he'd found some hours ago on the floor of the baggage-car of the Shoreline Limited.

BERNARD KAVANAUGH
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He told Inspector Rawlins about it, said: "The guy carried the cards in his side pocket, and the tweed's all bagged out. It looks like three of the cards fell out of his pocket in the baggage-car, and I'd think *he* was the guy that pushed the trunk off, except for one thing. The conductors and the baggageman agreed that the guy was a stocky little man, red-headed. Kavanaugh's tall, thin, and has dark hair. That's the only thing—"

Rawlins interrupted with a wave of his hand. He was bending over the body on the floor, crouched there, staring thoughtfully at Lonergan. "It's not the only thing," he corrected solemnly. "This body's been through rigor mortis and is beginning to soften up. I'll bet my badge the coroner will tell us Kavanaugh's

been dead for a good time over twenty-four hours. So how in hell could he be on the limited last night, pushing a trunk overboard?"

"I'll be damned!" Lonergan said.

"Yeah," Rawlins agreed. "Me, too."

"You think somebody planted the cards on the train to give us a bum steer?"

"I don't know." Rawlins grunted. "I don't know."

LONERGAN'S eyes pinched to slits. An idea had struck him that explained nothing, only made the maze the deeper. He whirled, faced the old gardener. "What's your name?"

The old man jumped in surprise at being addressed so unexpectedly. His cap slipped and he juggled it awkwardly, finally got hold of it again. "You mean—*my* name?" he gulped.

"Yeah."

"It's Lingenfelter—Robert H. Lingenfelter."

"How long have you lived across the street?"

"Well, my wife's an invalid. We had a farm in Idaho. The doctor said she ought to come to California. He's a fine doctor—one of the best in Idaho."

Lonerган sighed impatiently, asked again: "How long have you lived across the street?"

"Well," let's see now," the old man began, holding his forehead in deep thought. "It must have been about March, about—"

"This year?"

"Oh, no. Seven years ago. It was in nineteen thirty."

"That's better," Lonergan said. "Now, we're getting places. How long has Bernard Kavanaugh been your neighbor?"

"Two years. He moved in about August third of—"

"Forget it," Lonergan clipped. "When we talked to you outside, you said Kavanaugh played the organ in this studio

all night last night. Now isn't that it?"

"Sure," Lingenfelter nodded. "He played it all night. My wife couldn't sleep."

Inspector Rawlins was watching Lonergan, staring in speechless amazement, while the lieutenant went on with his questioning.

"Are you sure it was Kavanaugh playing?"

"Sure."

"Couldn't it have been somebody else?"

The old man shook his head determinedly. "No, sir."

"Why not?"

"Because I know Kavanaugh's voice."

"You heard his voice last night?"

"Sure, I heard it up till about four o'clock this morning."

"Who was he talking to?"

"Nobody. He just talks to himself. He's been acting like that for two years. He tries to compose music, and when it don't go right, he cusses and swears at himself. He yells at himself: 'Kavanaugh, you're not a composer—you're a dunce!' He keeps cussing himself out, just like that, and all the time he's playing that damn organ."

"And you heard him last night?"

"Sure."

Rex Lonergan cuffed his hat to the back of his head, paced around the studio, saying to the inspector, "How do you like those potatoes? A man's dead for over twenty-four hours, yet up till early this morning he's playing the organ and swearing at himself. At the same time, he might be on the limited pushing overboard a trunk with a dead man in it. But all that time, he's been a corpse, himself. He was a mighty busy corpse if you ask me. I've heard about these artists and musicians doing screwy things, but no corpse can do all that stuff!"

Inspector Hu Rawlins was astonished and looked it.

CHAPTER FOUR

"He Will Come Back"

WHEN the car from the morgue arrived, Lieutenant Lonergan and Inspector Rawlins were upstairs exploring the bedroom. The room had little furniture, no decoration and was just the room for a bachelor musician.

Over the head of the bed, there hung a large framed photograph of an attractive woman. She wasn't young, maybe close to forty. Her pose in the photograph was very pious. Blond hair waved loosely to her shoulders. She wore an enveloping white satin gown, and her angelic eyes gazed heavenward with an expression devoutly religious. Her graceful hands clasped a prayer-book to her breast.

In green ink, in roundly feminine penmanship, the portrait was autographed—*To Bernard Kavanaugh, Inspired musician, Brother of the Faith, sincere wishes from Leona Hunnicutt.*

Lonergan studied the photo and its inscription. Then he gave a low whistle, "Hey, come take a lamp at this."

Rawlins took a lamp at it. "So what?"

"You know who she is, don't you?"

"Sure—an evangelist. Runs an independent church down in Los Angeles. Has quite a following."

"I'll say," Lonergan commented cynically. "Last year her congregation dropped over a million bucks in dimes and quarters into her collection plates. That's on top of donations for the support of the church. All gravy for Leona Hunnicutt. She drives a couple of imported cars and lives in a mansion big enough to be a hotel. She—"

"Cut it out," Rawlins interrupted indignantly.

"Cut what out?"

"Talking like that. I'm a church-going man, and I'm damned if I'll stand here and have you try to make grafts out of

churches. I'm not ashamed to say my wife and I haven't missed a Sunday in thirteen years."

Lonergan asked pointedly: "Sure, but you don't attend Leona Hunnicutt's church, do you?"

"Maybe not," Rawlin's grumbled, "but churches all over the world—they're the only decent influence we got left. And don't try to feed me a lot of sour-puss stuff about pastors being in it for the money."

"Listen," Lonergan explained. "All I'm trying to tell you is that whenever there's anything absolutely honest in the world, some grifter comes along and makes a private little racket out of it. Leona Hunnicutt isn't connected with any church, but she's got her congregation believing she sprouts wings. Anybody that tries to sell religion at two-bits a throw ought to be tarred and feathered. But Leona's getting by with it because nobody can prove it on her."

Rawlins shrugged. "O. K. Suppose this particular evangelist happens to be a grifter—so what?"

"So this. Three years ago a man named Bernard Kavanaugh played the organ in her temple. They were seen together a few times. Then, one day, a reporter on a San Diego paper spotted them secretly hitting the high spots. They both wore disguises. The reporter tried to make a scandal out of it, but his paper was afraid

of libel, so the story was handled without naming names. Leona Hunnicutt never squawked. After all, the world's full of decent evangelists, and Leona'd only be starting her own funeral if she beefed."

"Where'd you learn all that?"

"Nathan, on the *Examiner*. He told me about it. Anyway, right after the story came out, Bernard Kavanaugh resigned as organist. I guess he ducked out of L. A. Leona couldn't afford to have that scandal pop up again. So nobody's seen them together since."

Inspector Rawlins looked interested. "This stiff downstairs? He's the same guy?"

"I think so. I didn't place his name till I saw this picture. Then I remembered about him and Leona Hunnicutt."

"You think he shot himself on account of her?"

"I'm not sure he shot himself at all. Didn't you notice something funny? There's dried blood on his face, all right—but where's the blood that ought to be on the floor?"

DOWNSTAIRS in the studio, morgue attendants were lifting the body of Bernard Kavanaugh into a long flat basket. "Dead about forty-eight hours," the coroner's man told Rawlins. "That's only approximate. We'll have to get the body on the table."

Lonergan said: "The main thing we

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want to know is this—he couldn't have been pushing a trunk off the Shoreline Limited at four o'clock this morning, could he?"

"The deceased? Certainly not."

"And he couldn't have been sitting here at his organ all night, composing music and swearing at himself, could he?"

"Certainly not. The condition of the body shows the gradual disappearance of rigor mortis. While my estimate is only rough, it's not that rough. The man died of bullet wounds—two of them—entering over the left eye. The fact that *two* shots were fired tends to disprove a suicide theory. However, there's the possibility that muscular reaction, following the firing of a self-inflicted bullet, might cause a tightening of the hand, pulling the trigger a second time instantly following the—"

"Save it," Lonergan suggested impatiently.

"We'll see you later," Rawlins added.

The coroner's man, looking slightly hurt, snatched up his leather case and followed the morgue crew into the rain.

THE studio was quiet now, dreary. Water gurgled in roof-drains, beat steadily against the big north window. Lingenfelter, the gardener from across the street, plucked his shabby cap, shuffled his boots. "Can I go now, officer?"

"Nix," said Lonergan.

"No," echoed Rawlins.

Lingenfelter hung his head apologetically, backed up to the wall by the door and watched silently as the two detectives strode around the cold room.

A table beside the organ-bench was littered with sheets of music, hand-written. Each sheet had lettered at the top of it the title—*Prelude to Death*.

Lonergan showed the sheets to Rawlins. "Looks like he's been working on this. If you ask me, it's a pretty gloomy name for a song. He must've been a

gloomy guy." He shook his head at it.

"Say!" the inspector exclaimed.

"Say, what?"

"*Gloomy*. That's what gives me the idea. A while back there was a musician in Europe or someplace. He wrote a number called *Gloomy Sunday*. The song was so damn gloomy, he got depressed and bumped himself off. Or, anyway, if he didn't, a lot of other people heard the song and did."

"Bumped themselves?"

"Yeah. I don't quite remember how it was. I saw it in the papers. What I'm getting at is—"

Lonergan nodded, finished briskly, "Kavanaugh got so worked up over his *Prelude to Death* that he shot himself. That it?"

"It's an idea," Rawlins pointed out.

Lonergan shrugged his shoulders loosely. "Maybe it'll turn out that easy—and maybe it won't." He was sitting on the organ-bench now. The music-rack before him held sheets of music, and it held something else, a hastily scribbled note propped against the music.

"Hey, we missed something!" Lonergan said.

Rawlins stepped up and read the note over Lonergan's shoulder—

If you return before I do, I've gone to Oakland. Be back in the afternoon and evening to play the *Prelude* for you.

"What the hell do you suppose that means?"

"I've got a guess. It means Kavanaugh didn't expect to die. He intended to play his composition for somebody, so he left the message for that person."

Rawlins nodded briefly, adding: "The person must have a key, or why would the note be left *inside*? So, having a key, that person might be the one who did the gun-blasting."

Lonergan said: "But there's another angle. We can't tell from the way the

message reads what day it means when it says 'afternoon and evening.' Maybe it meant yesterday. But, on the other hand, maybe it means today."

Hu Rawlins snapped his fingers with a sharp, cracking sound. "I get it. If the note means today, and if the person doesn't know Kavanaugh's dead, he'll still show up—this afternoon."

"Sure. That's the angle I want to play. I'll take a long-shot gamble, stake myself out here alone. You duck out of here. Patch up the gate where we cut it. Tell the press to lay off printing anything about Kavanaugh's death till the night edition. Hush up the coroner, and all those guys that were here. Don't have any police cars around. I'll wait here till eight o'clock tonight. If the guest Kavanaugh expected doesn't show up by that time, it means he knows about the death."

Rawlins agreed: "Swell. But we've got to act fast. This party might show up any time now—it's getting on to noon." He whirled and saw Lingenfelter standing by the door. "How about this fellow, Rex?"

"I'll keep him with me. He might spill something to the neighbors and create a lot of excitement."

Lingenfelter blinked owlishly, twisted his cap in gnarled old hands. "I got to go," he protested. "My wife, she's an invalid. We come out here from Idaho. I won't tell anybody about the trouble."

"You're staying right here," Lonergan told him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Voice from the Dead

IN half an hour, the outside gate, where police wire-cutters had clipped it, was hastily patched, and the squad-car drove off. Nobody living in the vicinity could have seen the morgue-wagon come and go or suspected that there was a local

excitement. The studio squatted alone on a sand-dune, and the only neighboring house having a view of it was the Lingenfelter place across the road. Lingenfelter's wife was an invalid, unable to move from bed, or even able to see the studio from her bedroom.

Inside the studio, the air had a clammy dampness. Lonergan had turned off all the lights when Rawlins left, and the big lonely room was in cold gray shadow.

The old gardener shivered. "It's enough to give a feller pneumonia."

Lonergan slipped off his overcoat. "You can wear this," he invited.

They went up the balcony steps, the gardener's boots clumping, striking wooden echoes. Rain rattled in a sudden down-pour against the windows, pattered on the shingle roof, made lots of watery noise in the metal drainpipes. Dark daylight seeped into Kavanaugh's bedroom. Water leaked under the casement window, formed a creeping puddle on the floor.

Lonergan opened a door to a small square closet. "In there," he ordered. "Better sit down. We may be here for hours."

They sat side by side, cramped in the closet, the door left open only a crack.

"I ought to go home to my wife," Lingenfelter complained.

"Nix," said Lonergan. He recognized the old man as the gossip type, suspected that if he let him go the scattered residents of the neighborhood would be well informed of the Kavanaugh murder within an hour and a crowd of curious gawks would gather outside, rendering the stake-out totally ineffective. He couldn't take that chance.

Two hours went by, with only the sound of the rain and the feeling of clammy dampness. The wind whispered icily over the bare floor, sneaking in sinister currents into the closet.

Then a bell jangled suddenly.

"That's from the gate!" Lingenfelter gulped.

For a couple of minutes, there was no sound but the rain. Finally, a key clicked downstairs, and the front door squeaked on rusty hinges, closing again with a sharp slam.

Shoes tapped softly on the studio floor. A long silence. Then there was a whirl of electricity—the organ-pump—and musical notes sounded like a weirdly human voice, crying. Somebody was running fingers over the organ-keys, pulling out stops, testing, warming up.

"It's *him!*" Lingenfelter groaned whisperingly. His bony body lurched in the closet, bumping against Lonergan. "It's *him!* It's just like he always starts!"

Lonergan clapped a meaty palm over the old man's mouth.

The organ began to play steadily. Its muffled music filled the studio, vibrating resonantly against the pine walls. First, the music had the vigorous gaiety of an organ waltzing an overture in a movie theater. Then it became hauntingly sad—a dirge from an organ in an empty church.

It's tragic sadness deepened with each crying chord, and finally it was a funeral march, distantly singing a hymn to the dead. It rose sometimes to hopeful prayer, devoutly joyous belief in after-life, only to sink again to morbid depths, groaning and taunting like the voices of restless ghosts.

Lonergan wasn't a soft man and he was seldom emotionally moved by music. But this organ got him. The ghostly cry of it prickled his back, crawled like billions of tiny bugs into the roots of his hair.

"That's him," the gardener whimpered. "That's his piece."

Lonergan tightened his hand over the old man's mouth. He knew what Lingenfelter meant—that Bernard Kavanaugh was now playing the organ, work-

ing on his composition *Prelude to Death*. Yet Kavanaugh was dead, his body in the morgue by now.

THE organ cried out forlornly, chained ghosts making their haunting pleas for mercy from the soggy earth of graveyards. Then the music broke off, and a truly human voice bellowed impatiently: "Damn you, Kavanaugh, you're not a musician—you're a dunce! Try it over, Kavanaugh! This part is *death*. It's rotting coffins under six feet of sod. It's maggots worming and eating in forgotten bodies—play it that way, dunce. Play it!"

Upstairs in the bedroom closet, Lingenfelter's eyes went wild. He clawed at Rex Lonergan's arm, gasped hysterically: "That's him—that's Kavanaugh! He always cusses himself like that!"

The voice below no longer shouted self-criticism. Its shouting died away, as morbid music swelled to intense volume. Expert hands controlled the organ; an expert's composition sang a madman's conception of death. Unseen ghosts raced in every sobbing chord—ghosts that howled and shrieked like winter winds around a desolate prairie farmhouse. Fleeing from graves, they peopled the chill night, banging shutters on lonely homes, crying out wild fright as they became trapped in decaying barns. Always they escaped, flying on, screeching. But always the distant call of a funeral march dragged them back to their soggy graves where they wept and pleaded and fought at their chains to be free again.

Rex Lonergan slammed out of the closet, yanked open the door from the bedroom to the balcony.

Below him, the studio was somberly gray, unreal. Rainy daylight from the big north window was tinged with the gray of late dusk. Water flashed and flickered over the glass. Lonergan's hard-soled shoes clattered on the bare steps,

and before he'd reached the bottom, the organist had heard him, and the music ceased with a plaintive wail.

It was a young woman. He couldn't see her very well through the gloom. She seemed no more than a fragile silhouette against the silvery gray of the window, appearing so unreal he had a swift feeling she might vanish before he could get closer to her.

BUT she was real enough to be startled by his abrupt and clattering intrusion by way of the stairs. She didn't vanish, didn't even move, just sat there on the organ-bench, half turned toward him, both hands pressed to her frightened face.

"You scared me," she said softly.

Lonergeran, moving swiftly to the organ, squinted around the room, probing each gray shadow. "Where is he?"

She stared at him without understanding. "Who?"

"The man."

"What man?"

"The fellow that was swearing. Just a second ago. I heard him."

She took her slim hands from her face, folded them in her lap. He saw that she had dark hair, coal black, and eyes brightly blue. She couldn't have been over twenty, wore a mannish suit, a turtle-neck gray sweater, and, though they made her appear briskly efficient, she did not suggest a mannish type.

"Are you one of the students?" She didn't wait for Lonergan's answer but went on: "I'm Colleen Walsh, secretary to Mr. Kavanaugh. Perhaps you're a friend of his. I didn't know anyone else had a key. Mr. Kavanaugh didn't tell me he was expecting anybody."

Lonergeran fished out his police-shield, showed it to her. "I'm an officer, Miss Walsh. Your employer got in trouble."

"Trouble?"

"Plenty. I'm here to investigate. I

was upstairs when I heard somebody come in. Then I heard you playing the organ. Who—" He intended to ask about the mysterious voice of the dead man, but, before he'd even framed the question, the voice spoke again, with startling abruptness, directly behind his back.

"You damn fool!"

Instinctively, he ducked his head, jumped to one side. But there was no one behind him, at all. The electric phonograph stood against the wall, a massive walnut cabinet, and from its ornamental speaker the voice came once more, bellowing, "Play it, Kavanaugh! Play it right, you dunce! Rotting corpses, stinking graves—"

The speech broke off at that point.

Lonergeran raised the lid of the cabinet. An oversize record, of the diameter used in radio transcriptions, turned a slow merry-go-round under the needle. No sound came from the speaker, not even the faintest scratching of the needle.

CHAPTER SIX

The Girl Who Was a Ghost

LONERGERAN flipped a tiny switch on the outside of the cabinet. The record stopped turning. He lowered the lid and faced the Walsh girl. "What the hell's the idea?"

She didn't answer, looked frightened, worried. Her slim hands were locked together, pressing until the knuckles became whitely bloodless.

Lonergeran said: "I'll tell you the idea. This is a recording of Kavanaugh's voice. It doesn't run continuously on the record. In the silent spots, you played Kavanaugh's composition on the organ here. You'd only cut off long enough to have his voice come from the speaker. Then, when the record went into a blank spot again, you worked the organ. The answer is that anybody hearing the gag from the

outside would think Kavanaugh was playing and cussing himself. You wanted the neighbors across the road to hear it."

The shrug of her shoulders was brief, almost a shudder. She didn't look up at him, still didn't speak.

"You'd better start talking right now," he advised. "You're in a tough jam. I've caught you trying to put on this act to make the neighbors think a dead man isn't dead."

"Dead man?" Her eyes were puzzled, watching him in the half light of the room.

"I mean Bernard Kavanaugh. Don't try to kid me. Don't try to tell me you don't know he's dead."

She shook her head slowly, incredulously. "But you said he was in trouble."

"That's what I meant by trouble. He got into trouble and got out of it by dying."

"You mean he killed himself?"

"No," said Lonergan firmly. "After a load of this crazy set-up, how could I think he killed himself? Somebody settled his trouble for him by gunning him between the eyes."

"But how? When?"

"That's what I want to find out. How? When? Where? Why? The way I see it, you're the person to answer those questions."

She studied the detective in a way that seemed completely sincere, and her voice had a little tremble of fear in it. "If Mr. Kavanaugh's really dead—well, I don't know anything about it."

"He's plenty dead," Lonergan assured her. "Maybe a trip to the morgue might convince you."

She winced, putting her hands to her cheeks. "I'll believe you. It's hard to believe, that's all."

"When did you see him last?"

"A week ago Sunday."

"Not since then?"

"No. He went away. I don't know

where." Her eyes were quite helpless.

LONERGAN'S eyes narrowed. "All last night the guy across the road heard the organ going and Kavanaugh's voice. That was you, wasn't it? You were playing and running that record of his voice."

"Yes," she admitted.

He strode into the fireplace alcove, pointing at the floor. "And you mean to tell me you didn't see Kavanaugh's body lying here?"

Both her hands clutched the edge of the organ. Her slim body was rigid and once more gave the impression of a dark statue silhouetted against the north window. "I'm afraid I don't understand you."

"This is where we found him. Right here in the alcove. About three hours ago."

She shook her head. "There was no one here when I left just before daylight this morning. I walked over to the end of the car line and took the four o'clock car."

He rubbed his jaw vigorously. "So, if I believe you, that means his body wasn't here until around four A. M. or after."

"You must believe me! I swear I'm telling the truth. I never dreamed there was any trouble. I've come here every night for a week to play the *Prelude* and run the electric phonograph. I've always been alone. No one else has a key except Mr. Kavanaugh."

Lonergan cut her short with a nod. "How about confessing why you've been doing this?"

"He told me to. I'm his secretary, you know. In return for my services, he gives me organ lessons."

Lonergan gaped. "He told you to?"

"Yes. It was nearly a year ago."

"This gets crazier and crazier," Lonergan sighed. "You mean you've been playing this gag for him for nearly a

year?" He kept shaking his head now. "Not continuously. It's just when he goes away."

"You don't know why he wants to let people think he's here?"

She tossed her head haughtily. "Mr. Kavanaugh is a genius."

"Maybe," Lonergan snapped in disgust, "but I'm just an ordinary person and I'd ask that guy plenty! He's been playing you for a sucker. You've been making an alibi for him every month for a year, and now all it's got you is a jam. It looks to me like he was planting an alibi for himself so he could go away one time and murder somebody. Only, that somebody turned the tables on him."

She looked insulted. "Don't be absurd."

Lonergan snorted: "A cop can't catch criminals by mincing around and tickling them with feathers." He strode impatiently to the organ and pointed to the note on the music-rack. "When I first spotted this, I figured Kavanaugh wrote it. I thought it meant he was going to play his piece for a guest. But you wrote it. Right?"

She nodded. "I've been expecting him back any day. I left the note because I thought he might arrive before I got here."

"This gag depends on nobody ever spotting you coming in here when Kavanaugh's away on these trips. Right?"

"Yes. But not entirely. Sometimes students come for lessons. Anyway, the neighboring houses have no view of this place—just the one across the road. And sometimes I come in the back gate."

He was standing by the fireplace now, his back to the cold hearth. The alcove in which it set was deep, flanked by benches, and, from where he stood, he couldn't see the stairway or the balcony. But he heard the sudden clatter of stumbling feet.

Lingenfelter was at the top of the steps.

"Say, officer," he called down, "is it all right if I come out of the closet now?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Emptied Coffin

LONERGAN'S thoughts were interrupted by an insistent summons. It was a ringing telephone. "Everybody pipe down," he said.

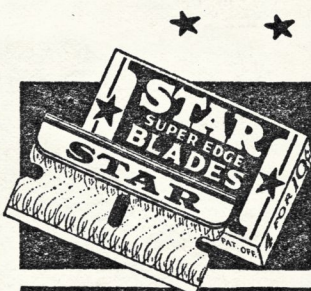
Lonergan picked up the receiver. He tried to muffle his voice, hoped it might sound like Bernard Kavanaugh. "Hello. I'm busy practicing. Call me back in five minutes." Then he rang off sharply, got the operator. "Listen, I'm Lonergan, of the city police. I'm at Seaside seven-seven-three-five. You can check on it through Inspector Rawlins at headquarters."

"Yes, sir," the operator agreed briskly.



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"O. K., somebody's going to call this number. Keep track of it and tell me where the call's coming from before you open the connection. Got that?"

"Yes, sir. I'll check and notify you."

In less than a minute, the phone rang again. "Operator speaking, Mr. Lonergan. I've just checked with Inspector Rawlins and he says *he's* the party ringing this number. Shall I connect you?"

"Yeah," Lonergan grumbled sourly. "Thanks."

The voice of Hu Rawlins boomed into the receiver: "What's all this hocus-pocus, Rex? Tracing calls?"

"Yeah. I tried to toss my bait out and all I got on the hook was *you*."

"I'm plenty," Rawlins barked. "I've been wanting to call you for over an hour but I thought I might spoil your play out there. Did I?"

"No."

"Anything happened yet?"

Lonergan growled cynically: "Nothing except a dead man playing the organ—and a few trivial matters like that."

"It's hot, huh? Well, I've got some hot dope myself. Shall I talk first?"

"Let's have it," Lonergan invited.

"Well, I got the railroad crew down here. They went through the pictures in the rogue's gallery but they couldn't find that red-headed guy who had the trunk checked to him."

"What's hot about that news?"

"Nothing. But the conductor all of a sudden remembered he'd delivered a batch of telegrams to passengers on the train, just after they passed Mission City. One, he delivered to the passenger in Car Nine, Section Five, Lower."

"The red-headed guy?"

"Sure. So I got in touch with the telegraph company. Know what the wire said?"

"How the hell should I?"

"It said—'Mother died unexpectedly stop maybe you can make faster time by

leaving train stop your baggage will be picked up at San Francisco depot.'"

"How was it signed?"

"Just 'Greg'. The message was sent from here. We can't trace the sender. And it was only addressed to the train and the ticket."

"I'll be damned."

"You haven't heard anything yet—I'm dishing it to you in easy stages. An hour ago I got a call from the sheriff at San Juan Crossing. He'd hauled the trunk with the body in it over to his morgue. He discovered the body was embalmed."

"What?"

"Yeah, embalmed. It was an undertaker's corpse, all fixed for burial. Naturally, the sheriff couldn't send any identification, because undertakers don't put papers on bodies dressed for the grave. The only dope he could give was that the body was an old bald-headed man. It looked like a corpse from a good undertaking-parlor, well shrouded, well embalmed."

"This is screwy," Lonergan said.

"Sure. And there's still more. A little while ago we get a call from the best-known morticians in the city—Henley Brothers. They tell us they had a body coming up on the Shoreline Limited."

Lonergan snapped his fingers. He remembered the gray casket he'd seen in the baggage-car, along with trunks, dogs, crates of oranges, even a parrot and a live bear.

RAWLINS went on: "Henley Brothers sent their hearse to the depot to pick up the coffin. It contained the body of a prominent real-estate man who died last week in L. A. The family wanted Henley Brothers to handle the burial up here at Sacred Heart Cemetery. So the body came up on the limited. There was supposed to be quite a funeral because this fellow had made a lot of money, all honest. He died of heart attack."

"Go on."

"Well, the body never showed up at the undertaking-parlor. And a while ago the hearse driver walked into a drugstore and called headquarters. He was all bloody. He'd been stopped in the factory district right after he picked up the coffin. A couple of guys in an old car pulled the job. They beat up the driver, tied him with baling wire, put him to sleep with chloroform. When he finally came to, and got the wire off him, he was in the back of the hearse, parked in an alley. The coffin was busted open, empty."

Lonergan whistled softly. "Any identification on the two guys?"

"One was stocky-built, red-headed. His description tallies with the one the train crew gave us on the guy who pushed the trunk off. This hearse driver didn't get much of a look at the other guy. And Henley Brothers can't make head or tail out of it.

"I'll be a cockeyed son of a so-and-so!" Lonergan muttered vacantly. "Two corpses turn up in the wrong places, and, in a place where a corpse ought to be—it ain't." He sighed, clucking his tongue. "Got anything more?"

Rawlins swore. "Isn't that enough for one day? It's the craziest damned case—"

A bell began to jingle lightly as Lonergan stood there at the phone. Across the studio, Colleen Walsh rose tensely from the organ bench, stood poised, listening.

"What's that bell?" Lonergan asked her.

She was frightened, clenching and unclenching her hands. "It's the back gate! It's like the front gate—rings a bell when you open it. But it's locked. I'm the only one who had a key except Mr. Kavanaugh."

Lonergan clipped into the phone: "Call you back, Hu. This joint's getting as busy as a stock exchange." He broke the connection, put the phone on the table.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Ghouls Arrive

THERE was a side door at the foot of the stairway. It had a small, diamond-shaped pane of glass in it, and, through this, Lonergan peered. He saw two men coming up the concrete path from the back gate.

They were both of the same stocky build, and, from a distance, walking side by side, they suggested twins. They wore heavy tweed coats, collars turned up to the mufflers knotted at their throats. Rain slanted steadily against them, and they bowed their heads before it, keeping their hands deep in coat pockets.

Lonergan whirled from the glass pane, snapped at Colleen Walsh: "Shut off that organ-pump. Duck into the kitchen." He glanced up the stairway and saw the man he'd forgotten again.

Old Lingenfelter sat on the top step. Huddled in Lonergan's overcoat, he looked very cold, unhappy and worried. "How about me, officer?" he inquired timorously. "Is it all right if I go home now? My wife—"

"Pipe down! Get back in that bedroom closet."

"Again?"

"You heard me. Make it fast and quiet. Don't let a peep out of you."

Shaking his head, muttering to himself, the old man tiptoed obediently back into the upstairs bedroom.

Lonergan strode across the studio on the balls of his feet. Colleen Walsh had shut off the organ-pump and was just slipping through the kitchen door ahead of him. The door squeaked as he pulled it almost closed after them. He waved the Walsh girl to the farthest corner of the kitchen and kept his post at the door crack. There was no sound but the beat of the rain, the drip and gurgle of water in roof-gutters and drainpipes—

no other sound till a key rattled in a lock.

The key rattled for several seconds, gave up. Another key was tried, clicked without result.

Lonerган unholstered his service gun, dangled it beside his leg. His attitude was one of infinite, unruffled patience. He just waited, watching through the slit he'd left between the door and its frame.

THEN he happened to turn his head and saw Colleen Walsh wasn't taking it so calmly. She had her back to the kitchen-sink, resting her hips against it, and her hands were pressed to her face. Her lips trembled in fear, from the gnawing suspense of waiting for an unknown occurrence.

Lonerган grinned, winked, to reassure her. Immediately, he had to turn away. The lock of the back door had snapped suggestively. Peering out from the kitchen, he saw the two men step into the studio.

One said: "Go get it fast, Red. I'll keep an eye out front and back. Our feet are wet, so be sure to mop up your tracks when you come down."

"Sure," his partner nodded. He was a husky man, not very tall. His shoulders had the muscular thickness of a wrestler's—and he had red hair. It showed under his hat, a splash of carrot-color against the freckled paleness of cheek and jaw. He ascended the stairway rapidly, shoes clumping across the balcony, making a patter of sound in the bedroom upstairs.

The man remaining below yanked off his muffler and wiped his rain-wet shoes.

From up above, Red's voice called down: "I got it, Greg."

"Right," said Greg. He took off his hat and tucked it under his overcoat so drops of rain wouldn't spill from its brim to the floor. His hair was sandy, almost white at the temples. He had a thinnish face, a tight-mouth deeply lined.

Lonerган watched him take long steps to the fireplace alcove, look into it, heard his sharp gasp.

"Geez! Hey, Red—it's gone!"

Red's shoes moved slowly up above on the balcony. Lonerган could hear the swish of cloth as Red mopped up the tracks his wet feet had made on the bare floor.

"What's gone?"

"The stiff! Geez, it ain't here."

Red came clattering down the steps. "What the hell you mean—it ain't here?"

He had his hat off, tucked under his coat, like the man named Greg, and his hair was dull flame. He held a large framed picture under his arm, and Lonerган had a sound hunch it was the portrait of Leona Hunnicutt which had been hanging over Kavanaugh's bed.

Red glanced sharply into the fireplace alcove, at the place where the musician's body had been until morgue attendants removed it. He exclaimed in amazement: "I'll be a dirty son-of-a—"

"Cops?" his partner offered.

"Hell, no. They'd still be fooling around if they found him—taking fingerprints and all that stuff."

"Maybe it was the dame—that secretary he had. I told you we ought to wait at her apartment and pick her up. She probably came barging out here ahead of us."

"Don't be a dope!" Red snarled. "That dame don't know her ear from a hole in the ground. If she found the stiff, she'd call the cops. What the hell would she go ditching the body for?"

"I don't know," Greg muttered hopelessly, "but there's something awful crazy. We better scam."

Lonerган said: "Nobody's scamming. Both you guys better stay like you are!"

HE PUSHED slowly through the kitchen door, showing them the muzzle of his service Colt's. The moment

before he spoke, the man named Greg had taken a .45 automatic from the holster under his coat, but he didn't try to shoot it—the automatic went off accidentally, from the sudden reflex of muscles when the detective had surprised him. He was surprised all right.

The gun roared, drummed bullets into the floor at Greg's feet. Its mechanism had been filed down so that one touch of the trigger emptied the entire clip of cartridges with machine-gun rapidity.

Loneragan didn't use his Colt's. Many times before, he'd seen guns go off aimlessly like that when the man holding it lost control of his nerves. He knew there was nothing to fear from the aimless blast. In that split second, neither Greg nor Red intended to battle him. But the unexpected sometimes hits the best of men. It hit Lonergan, struck him from behind.

It was Colleen Walsh.

The roar of Greg's automatic, beating sharp thunder against studio walls, frightened the girl into complete hysteria. Her one wild thought was to get away from danger. She flung herself through the kitchen doorway, collided with Lonergan, and both of them spilled to the floor.

Loneragan landed on his knees.

Greg yelled, "Get him!" and Red threw the picture.

It came with the speed of a baseball. The glass in it made it heavy, and a corner of the frame crashed against Lonergan's forehead, ripped flesh, spouted blood into his eyes.

Greg hurled his empty automatic. Lonergan ducked it, stumbling to his feet. Greg yanked a small fat revolver from his pants pocket, but he could only snap one shot out of it. Lonergan shot him five times.

Red jumped Lonergan, jumped on his back. He had no gun, Lonergan's had no shells, and they fought with their fists.

Loneragan twisted away, rolling on the

floor. Through blood-fogged eyes, he got a glimpse of Colleen Walsh flattened against the wall, heard her nightmarish screams, throaty, weak. Greg was down, groveling, wrapping his arms around his abdomen, yelling: "Geez, I'm shot. I can feel it burning my guts—"

Red slugged Lonergan at the base of the neck. Lonergan lashed out with his elbow, missed. He was groggy and blood flooded his eyes. He couldn't see.

Red barked, "Take *that*, monkey!" and hit him again at the point where the spine joins the head. He kept hitting like that. The blows jolted Lonergan's brain, kept jolting, but had less and less sting to them.

Loneragan heard continuously the words, "Take *that*, monkey!" and he remembered the parrot in the baggage car of the Shoreline Limited.

HE THOUGHT he must have been unconscious for at least an hour. But it was only seconds. Colleen Walsh still stood flattened against the wall, trying to scream; Greg still flopped on the floor, pressing his bleeding abdomen, groaning.

Red had snatched up the revolver Greg had dropped when Lonergan shot him. He pointed it at the detective, gibing: "How-ya like it now, tough boy? Not so hot, huh?"

Loneragan rubbed fists into his eyes, trying to clear the blood away.

Red went on: "That's the way it is. One minute there's one guy on top, the next minute it's the other guy. So it's my turn now—and mine's the last. Kinda tough, huh?"

Greg, clutching his belly, tried to get up. "Blast him, Red. He's a cop."

Loneragan didn't speak.

Red calmly aimed the gun at Lonergan's head, saying coldly to Greg: "Sure! He's a cop all right. I'll throw it right in his teeth."

Greg couldn't get up. He tried to haul

himself up on the bench by the fireplace, but his arms failed him. He sagged in the middle, flopped to the floor again. "Geez, Red! Hurry up—take me to a doc—"

Lonergeran, staggering to his feet, appeared to be as badly hurt as Greg. But he was only pretending. On his acting depended his life. Red had the gun and would shoot it. Only seconds remained for Lonergan to act. He knew he couldn't just rush the gun. Red was too far away for that.

So Lonergan staggered over to the organ-bench, leaned against it as if he needed the support. "Wait a minute." He was begging for time, fighting for it, bluffing for it. "I got to tell you something. It's about that coffin on the limited last night. The conductor got the telegram and he told us. You guys only got one chance."

Red flashed a worried glance, lifted the gun a little. "What the hell you talking about?"

"Your one chance."

Lonergeran staggered away from the organ-bench, bumped against the wall. He looked groggy, incapable of thinking. But his mind was working fast and sharp. "I'll make a deal with you. I'll give you the one chance if you let us go—myself and this Walsh girl."

"What chance?" Red demanded doubtfully.

Lonergeran wiped blood from his forehead. He pretended his mind was so fogged he couldn't tell where he was. Staggering, he bumped against a table cluttered with Kavanaugh's scribbled sheets of music.

Red said: "Quit that falling around. If you can't stand up, lie down!"

"Sure," Lonergan agreed, making his tone sound nervous and his face express fear of the gun. His knees seemed rubber, and apparently it was a struggle for him to keep his balance. "My head hurts,"

he explained in a delirious mutter, touching the base of his skull where Red had slugged him.

His legs knocked against the electric victrola. "Leona Hunnicutt," he began. "It's about Leona Hunnicutt—"

Use of the name gave Red a jolt. Lonergan had known it would.

"What about her?" Red lowered the gun a little.

LONERGAN didn't take advantage of the lowered gun. He was still ten feet away from Red, not close enough to rush. He pushed himself away from the victrola, staggered a few rubbery steps in a half circle, but he kept his distance, not going any closer, holding his hands out to show that he had no desire to approach it, was acutely afraid of its darkly ominous muzzle.

"Quit stalling," Red snarled. "Quit flopping around."

"Sure," Lonergan muttered worriedly, "sure. Only don't shoot."

Red lifted the revolver and sighted it across the ten-foot distance at Lonergan's chest. "What's all this about Leona Hunnicutt? Talk fast and sudden."

But it wasn't Lonergan who talked fast and sudden. It was a voice he'd been waiting for, stalling for. It shouted with mysterious abruptness directly behind Red's back.

"*You damned fool!*" it said. "*You damned dunce!*"

Red whirled instinctively to face an unexpected antagonist, and, as he whirled, so did the gun in his fist.

There was nobody behind him. There was only an electric victrola with the recorded voice of Bernard Kavanaugh coming from the speaker. Lonergan, in the moment he'd staggered against the cabinet, had flipped the switch.

Red saw instantly what had cheated him. He tried to whirl again to shoot. But Lonergan had already lunged. The

first right hook took Red on the side of the jaw, was followed up with a fast left-right.

Colleen Walsh screamed briefly.

Red's head jolted and lurched under Lonergan's sudden fist attack. The gun banged twice, aimlessly, and Lonergan gripped it with his left hand, chopped at Red with his right. The gun roared and bucked, and emptied itself, searing Lonergan's hand with blasting powder.

Lonergan fought fast and hard. He slugged Red with continuous swinging blows, beat the man back to the wall.

From the victrola the voice of a dead man boomed loudly: "Damn you, Kavanaugh! Play it! Rotting corpses, stinking graves—"

Mingled with the recorded voice came the groans of Greg, the hysterical screams of Colleen Walsh, the grunts and heavy breathing of Lonergan and Red as they fought all over the room.

Lonergan's face was a smear of running crimson. He sucked air past his clenched teeth, now and then swiped at the blood that got in his eyes.

Red missed with a hastily hurled chair, and Lonergan closed in, slugging him with hard-knuckled rights and lefts. They were in the fireplace alcove. The stocky man staggered Lonergan with a low kick, then stooped and had a poker in his hand. He lashed the iron rod in swishing arcs, like a whip, striking for the detective's head.

Lonergan let one of the blows land on his shoulder. It was almost a bone-cracking blow, but he kept his feet. He didn't give Red a chance to strike again, closed in once more with swinging fists. A boiler-house right cracked against a jaw, and Red's knees buckled.

Lonergan hit him twice more while he toppled down. Red did not move once after he lit. He lay as still as a sack of cement. Then there was only the girl's weeping.

CHAPTER NINE

Curtains for Daisy Jones

COLLEEN WALSH called headquarters. Lonergan sat slumped in a big leather chair. He was still breathing heavily, and used a handkerchief on his face, mopping away sweat.

"Are you hurt, officer?" the girl asked anxiously.

He shook his head, and looked across the room at Red and Greg. They sat side by side on the floor with their backs propped against the wall. Rain was a dreary drizzle against the big studio window. Neither man spoke. Red's right wrist was handcuffed to Greg's left.

Lonergan stretched his arms, breathing deeply, exhaling in a long sigh. "Why don't we have a little chin-fest?" he suggested. "Just to pass the time."

"About what?" Red grumbled.

Lonergan shrugged casually. "Nothing serious. Just a few trivial matters, such as the reason you two guys killed Kavanaugh."

They exchanged sharply worried glances, and the flame-haired man snapped at Lonergan, "You're nuts if you think you got a beef like that on us!"

Lonergan smiled blandly. "I may be nuts, but I'm not nuts enough to get myself a date with the gallows—like you guys have."

Greg tried to speak, but the words faltered, didn't come out right away. His eyes became glassy, and a cough racked his chest. He clutched his stomach with both hands, holding himself in. A feather of liquid crimson showed at the corner of his mouth.

"Listen," he managed hoarsely, "you ain't got no murder rap on us."

Lonergan lifted his eyebrows curiously. "No?"

"No!" Red cut in. He snapped to his partner: "Don't let this big dick throw a scare into you, Greg. He ain't got a

thing. It's just so much apples." He glared.

Loneragan gazed at the ceiling disinterestedly. "You guys must like Leona Hunnicutt an awful lot to go to the gallows for her. It's none of my business, of course. My job ends when the jury brings in the verdict." He stretched his jaw in a bored yawn. "However, I might run up to San Quentin to watch them spring the trap on you. That's not my job, of course. It's just curiosity. I sort of get a kick out of watching you killer-guys turn yellow-belly."

Red's face flashed tense hate. "Nuts to you, you dirty—"

Loneragan smiled pleasantly. "You're tough now, but I'll bet my badge against a lock of your hair that they have to carry you up the thirteen steps. Your knees'll be so weak, you'll practically choke on the noose before they even spring the trap."

Greg suddenly hunched over limply, sobbing into his hands. "Geez, Red—I ain't gonna take it!"

The redhead hit him sharply with his handcuffed wrists, barked at Lonergan: "Don't listen to this guy. He's sort of hysterical on account of the way he's shot in the belly."

"I ain't gonna take it!" Greg sobbed.

Loneragan added coldly: "You'll take it, all right. You're not so bad shot we can't patch you up for a hanging. You're headed straight for San Quentin's dance-hall, Greg. Know what the dance-hall is? You'll do a solo dance in there. You'll dance on the end of a rope, kicking your feet in the air. Then it'll be Red's turn."

"Shut up," Red clipped, and advised his partner: "The dick's workin' on you. Don't let him get you."

"I don't care what he's doing. I never killed nobody and I ain't takin' no raps."

"Not even for Leona Hunnicutt?" Lonergan inquired.

"We don't know any Leona Hunni-

cutt!" Red protested. "Who the hell's she?"

Loneragan pointed to the picture on the floor. "Then why did you come here to sneak that away from Kavanaugh's bedroom?"

Red's jaw tightened grimly, and he stared at the detective for a long time. Then he said quietly: "All right, I'll talk."

"Swell. Maybe you'll get off with life. You guys worked for Leona Hunnicutt. You killed Kavanaugh for her. Let's hear the dope."

RED said: "I'm giving it to you straight. We work for Leona, but we never killed Kavanaugh. Leona heard about somebody killing him, and she sent us up here to lift that picture so she wouldn't be in a scandal. Somebody here in Frisco killed him."

Loneragan gave a short laugh. "Don't feed me that. Kavanaugh was killed in Los Angeles and his body stored up in a trunk aboard the Shoreline Limited. The train crew can identify you as the passenger that had the trunk checked to him. I've got a case against you, Red, so the only thing you can do is come clean."

Red gulped, batted his eyes thoughtfully. "I'll come clean. Only, I won't say I killed Kavanaugh. Neither will Greg. It was Leona."

Loneragan nodded. "That's what I guessed. She had to do it, or nobody'd go to all this trouble of carting a body halfway up the state. If a couple of punks like you and Greg wanted to kill Kavanaugh, you'd just do it, wherever he was, and let him lie there. All this business of transporting the body goes to show that the shooting happened unexpectedly, that Leona did it, and that she tried to cover up by getting the body out of Los Angeles."

Red nodded slowly. "That's it. First, I got to tell you about Leona. That's not her real name, see? Her regular handle

is Daisy Jones. She played burlesque houses for a few years under the name of Marsha Reed. Me and Greg met up with her in St. Louis back in nineteen twenty-two."

"What's your name?"

"George Martin. They call me Red. Greg here is Bill Gregory. So we met up with Daisy and worked a badger game for a few years. We worked it in Florida, New York, Chicago, and one time we even went to Bermuda. But Daisy didn't like it. She said there was too much risk for only a few grand. She kept thinking out ideas, and finally she landed on the idea of running a phony church. It'd all look on the level, and she wouldn't have to pay taxes. So she changed her name to Leona Hunnicutt, on account of it sounded honest, and we went to Los Angeles."

"Why there?"

"Well, L.A.'s got a lot of independent churches and evangelists."

"Not crooked, though," Lonergan said.

"No. That was the idea. All them evangelists in L. A.—they're on the level, see? So we figured it was a good chance to sneak in and work our graft. Inside of ten years we had a big take. Leona preached, and what she preached was like the regular churches. So the congregation lapped it up. We felt like heels, sometimes, selling religion, but the graft paid big dough and nobody had a comeback. Then Leona got a crush on this Kavanaugh guy."

Lonergan said: "Sure. Kavanaugh played the organ for her in the temple."

"Yeah. But she had a yen for him, and sometimes they'd hit the high-spots together. One time a newspaper guy spotted them in San Diego. We thought we might have a stink. We couldn't afford to lose a million-dollar racket, so Leona told Kavanaugh he'd better duck out."

"I'll tell you the rest," Lonergan said. "Leona dished out the money so Kavanaugh could have his studio up here in Frisco and compose music and give organ lessons. But they wanted to get together secretly, once a month. So Kavanaugh hired a secretary—Colleen Walsh. He made a record of his own voice and, while he was down in L.A. with Leona, Miss Walsh would sneak into the studio and play the organ and run the record. Just in case any reporters were still hunting a scandal, they'd think Kavanaugh was right here, composing."

Colleen Walsh said: "But I never knew where he went. He didn't take me into his confidence."

"Naturally. He couldn't let anybody know the real answer, or it would ruin Leona's religion racket. Here was Kavanaugh in Frisco, and Leona in L.A., nearly five hundred miles apart as far as the papers were concerned, yet actually together once a month without anybody knowing the difference. On the last trip they had a fight."

"Sure," Red agreed. "Kavanaugh found out Leona used to work badger games. So he tried to blackmail her. Leona—well, she all of a sudden turned Daisy Jones again, and hauled out a gun and plugged him deader than hell. Then she called Greg and me."

LONERGAN smiled without humor and said: "So you guys figured out the perfect alibi to keep Leona clear of the murder rap. It was already set up for you. Here was Colleen Walsh letting the neighbors think Kavanaugh was right here. All you needed to do was smuggle the body north and plant it here in the studio to be discovered some time by the police. With Leona down in L.A., and the body here in Frisco, there wasn't a chance in a million we'd ever trace the job to Leona. So you stuck the body in a wardrobe trunk. Greg came ahead."

Red nodded sullenly. "Greg came

ahead by plane. Me, I rode the limited." "And so it happened," Lonerган went on, "that I was aboard the same train bringing a little punk named Louie the Fink back to town. That was one of the things that worked against you. The other was that there'd been some dope smuggling into Frisco. You guys didn't have anything to do with it, but the thing got in your way just the same.

"Greg heard the police were checking incoming baggage on trains. You were already riding the limited with Kavanaugh's body in the trunk, and it scared the devil out of Greg. He was afraid the police, looking for dope, would find the body. So he sent you that telegram the railroad conductor delivered to you after the limited passed Mission City. You knew by it that the trunk gag wasn't going to work. So you went up to the baggage-car, socked the attendant with a gun. As you socked him, you said: 'Take that, monkey!'"

Red gaped, open-mouthed. "How the hell do you know I said that? He told you, huh?"

Lonerган grinned. "Sure, he did. But a parrot backed him up on it. Anyway, your first plan was just to push the trunk off the train and escape, yourself. But then you figured that the trunk would be found beside the tracks. And, when it was found, police would wonder why Kavanaugh's body was being removed from L.A. One thing would lead to another, and we might get a line on Leona."

"That's right," Red admitted.

"So you got a better idea. You saw a coffin in the baggage-car, destined for Henley Brothers, the swank morticians. You knew that even if police were impounding baggage at the Frisco depot, looking for dope, they wouldn't hold a coffin bound for a reliable undertaker. So you saw your chance to carry out the alibi as you first planned."

"Geez," Red grunted. "How'd you

guess all that?" He looked astonished.

"Because you tied up the baggage attendant, blindfolded him, and stuffed cotton in his ears, and it was half an hour before you pushed the trunk off at San Juan Crossing. And the rest of it fits. You spent the half hour getting the coffin open and switching the bodies. But while you were hefting Kavanaugh's body around, three of his business cards spilled from his pocket. You didn't notice them; I did—later. Anyway, you put Kavanaugh in the coffin and the embalmed body in the trunk. Then you pushed the trunk overboard. It was just an accident that it landed near a station and the agent spotted it so soon."

"I figured it wouldn't be found till daylight." Red grumbled. "I never seen that station coming up."

LONERGAN said: "After the trunk was overboard, you carefully sealed the coffin again, dropped off the limited at Point Padre. You reached San Francisco almost as soon as the train did, got together with Greg, and knocked over the Henley Brothers hearse as it was leaving the station.

"You planted the body here in the studio just as you first figured. Only, you forgot something. When bullets spout blood from a man's face, some of it ought to make a stain on the floor near his head. The wood over there where we found Kavanaugh was clean as a whistle."

Greg glared at his partner. "I told you, didn't I?"

Lonerган went on: "So, except for that slip, and the cards I found in the baggage-car, we would have assumed that Kavanaugh had been murdered right here. We never would have connected the case with the trouble on the limited and Henley Brothers' missing corpse."

"Geez!" Red clipped.

"Your next step was either to get Col-

leen Walsh to stick by the alibi she'd built up for Kavanaugh, or to get her out of the way. You tried to get her at her apartment a while ago but she wasn't there."

"We wasn't gonna hurt her. We just meant to buy her off."

"Maybe," Lonergan said doubtfully. "Anyway, after you'd planted the body here, getting in with the keys you took off Kavanaugh, you remembered Leona's picture upstairs in the bedroom. You had to come back and sneak it away or it might tie her into the case. Even if we didn't suspect her of murder, it would play the devil with her religion racket. But she can't save it anyway, now. In a few hours we'll have the L.A. police pick up Leona Hunnicutt on a murder rap."

"Daisy Jones is her real name," Red reminded him.

SIRENS died with a low growl on the road outside. Lonergan opened the front door. There were two squad-cars and an ambulance. Uniformed policemen broke the lock on the gate. Lonergan watched them with smiling amusement.

Inspector Hu Rawlins barged up the path, followed by the law contingent.

Lonergan said: "If you boys hurry up, maybe you can still smell the powder-smoke."

The room became noisy with stamping shoes. Ambulance men, wearing white jackets, carried a stretcher over to Greg.

Hu Rawlins noticed Lonergan dabbing at cuts on his face, said: "Hell, Rex, you look like somebody almost got you."

Lonergan pointed to the electric victrola. "A dead man spoke up and saved me."

Greg was taken out on the stretcher. Red went out handcuffed between two burly police officers.

But the studio was still filled with men. Their big shoes tracked wet all over the floor. Everybody was talking to everybody else. A newspaper cameraman shot flashlights of the room. An investigator from the D.A.'s office was mysteriously pacing off the distance from the fireplace to the organ. Hard heels ground out cigarette-stubs on the floor. Rain-drops dripped from flung-back overcoats. Everybody got in everybody else's way.

Then there was a man peering down from the bedroom balcony. He looked very old, tired, dejected, bundled up in an overcoat that didn't fit him and was much too big. He cleared his throat timidly until he got attention.

Robert H. Lingenfelter, meekly apologetic, said from the balcony: "I'm sorry to bother you, gentlemen, but my wife's an invalid. We just live across the way. We come from Idaho. The doctor said it was good for her health. So do I have to stay in the closet? Or do you think it's all right if I go home now?"

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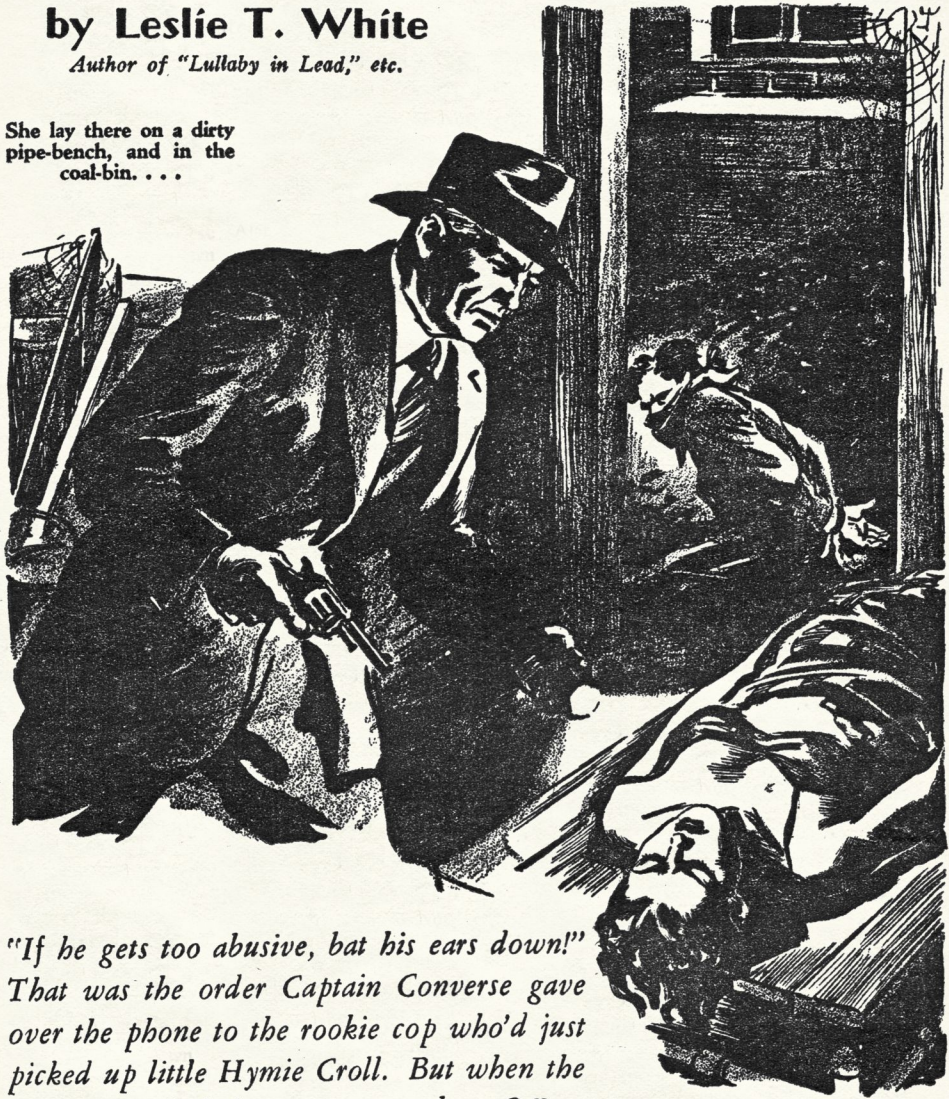
"Don't Change Dames in the Middle of Murder"

A Complete Mystery Novelette

by Leslie T. White

Author of "Lullaby in Lead," etc.

She lay there on a dirty
pipe-bench, and in the
coal-bin. . . .



"If he gets too abusive, bat his ears down!"
That was the order Captain Converse gave over the phone to the rookie cop who'd just picked up little Hymie Croll. But when the skipper reached the apartment where Officer Green was holding the man for questioning, all he found was a dead body and no sign of the bluecoat. Why had the patrolman taken his superior's muss-up order to mean murder, then vanished from the scene? How could Converse justify his instruction, in the face of the battered, bloody corpse that lay there on the floor?

CHAPTER ONE

"Lay off, Copper"

McMURTY grunted as if a blow hurt him, swished his head down and stabbed viciously with his left. Then he braced himself, ducked again, knocking over a chair.

Captain Converse lipped a cold butt across his face. "Will you sit down, Roundhouse, or get the hell out?"

McMurty righted the chair, straddling it, a hurt expression warping his face.

"O'Riley is trying to cover; Lawler's slamming away at the champ's middle," the voice of the announcer chortled. "A right, a left, another right—"

Hostetter, sprawled in a chair near the door, said: "Roundhouse suffers for all the Irish, Cap. He thinks he's in that ring with the champ."

"I wish to hell I was at the fight instead of parked in this damn station-house." McMurdy countered. "Sometimes I wish I'd stuck to fightin' instead of becomin' a cop."

Hostetter clucked. "The trouble with you, Roundhouse, was that you stuck to the canvas too long."

Big McMurdy sucked air. "I sometimes wonder what keeps me from— Ah, nuts to you guys. Here's the bell."

"Fourteenth round, folks!" shouted the announcer. "This is a close fight, my friends. The champ looks a little tired—"

"Cut it!" barked Converse. He started to adjust the volume dial when the door banged open against the stopper and a man and a girl came into the battered little cubbyhole of an office.

Captain Converse paused a moment, squinting over his shoulder at the couple, then he slowly bayoneted the radio-switch. "You boys can pick up the broadcast in the squad-room," he told McMurdy and Hostetter, tilting his head toward the door.

The two dicks pushed erect in unison and started for the hall. The man and the woman moved aside to let them pass. Hostetter went out last, met Converse's eye and quietly closed the door after him.

The man and the girl waited a minute, watching the door as if they expected it might bob open again. Converse rocked back in his swivel-chair, appraising them with chill, neutral eyes.

THE man was stumpy—an inch or so over five feet—but he stood so straight that he gave the impression of trying to stretch himself. His clothes were pressed to a razor-edge, dandified. He was freshly barbered, but his flabby jowls were purple-shadowed. He wore horn-rimmed spectacles, but carried them so low on his nose he had to look over them. The sacks beneath his eyes reminded the veteran copper of a squirrel's pouch. He carried a floppy-brimmed Panama in one manicured hand, a legal-sized briefcase in the other.

The woman was in her early thirties. It was difficult to be definite because she had been overhauled so many times by experts. Her figure was a thing of full curves and suggestive hollows. Her tight-fitting dress did nothing to spoil the effect. Beneath a perky, inverted-saucer hat, her hair exploded in crinkles over her head. She wore artificial lashes, dark and low, but they couldn't hide her eyes. They were old, those eyes, and smoldering. As they locked with the skipper's own, the fire in them kindled, flamed resentfully.

She jerked a square of printed paper from her purse, slapped it on the desk before him. "Do you recognize that?" she challenged.

Converse looked at the paper, framed his squarish jaw in a gnarled paw. It was a good hand, and it told a lot about the man on the wrist-end of it. Long, lean with fingers that tapered slightly—ca-

pable, honest, like all of the rest of him.

"Sure," he answered her question. "It's a police circular of two people we want to locate. Hymie Croll, a cheap little chiseler who can tell the grand jury what it wants to know about graft and corruption in this town, and the other one is a tough tart known as Luella Purviance. She's been sharing a lot of things with Croll, including his bed and bankroll. We want to ask her where Hymie is. If we find them before the graft crowd, we got a witness. If they beat us to 'em, we'll find a couple of smelly corpses."

The girl hissed breath through her teeth, leaned across the desk.

"You know who I am?"

Converse nodded.

"Sure. You're Luella Purviance. This guy with you is Abie Saulan, a shyster, also in the heel class. When you get done askin' questions, I got a few of my own."

"You had better watch your language, Captain Converse," Saulan rattled.

"An' I'm not done either," snapped the Purviance girl. "I'm not a criminal and I won't have some blue-nosed old flatfoot spreading police circulars around about me. You've hounded Hymie into hiding, and I don't know where he is. If I did, I wouldn't tell you, and you're not man enough to beat it out of me. You're trying to frame Hymie Croll—trying to puff smoke so the grand jury won't get too damn curious about your own affairs. You've got a private war on with Fanchot De Lisle, because he won't cut you in on the graft, and you think you can frame Hymie. Well, forget it. If Hymie ever goes before the grand jury it'll be your neck, not his. That's a promise, flat-foot."

"Are you all finished?" asked Converse.

Saulan gently pushed the girl aside, snatched the circular from the skipper's desk, and poked it into the unzipped case.

"We'll keep this," he observed. "I may

use it in a civil action against the police department. Luella, I advise you to say no more. I'm here to protect your interests." When Converse chuckled cynically, Saulan's voice took on a brittle edge. "Captain, I insist that you recall this malicious circular at once. Miss Purviance does not know where Croll is, and I will not have her subjected to the attentions of every roughneck cop in town. If she is molested, I warn you, I'll sue you, personally and officially. Unless I have your word, I will take the matter up with Police Commissioner Mattery. Now, what is it going to be?"

CONVERSE put his hands flat on the desk, pulled his chair straight and his elbows winged out from his broad shoulders as if he meant to dive across the desk. For a full two minutes he sat silent, impaling the lawyer with his eyes. They made a violent contrast, and the girl must have noticed it as she let her eyes wander from one to the other.

Converse was everything Saulan was not. Tall, a trifle stooped as if a weight burdened his shoulders, he was flat-bellied, lean-flanked. Although they did not show, you knew he was well-muscled. His face was molded by his work, and nearly thirty years of police service had disked little deltas around his eyes and mouth and furrowed his forehead. Hair, once black, was salted gray. His suit was of good tweed but a stranger to a pressing-iron. His linen was immaculate, conservative, and his black shoes glistened from rubbing, suggestive of the almost military training of his harness years.

"Now, listen to me, you two vultures. I'm not concerned with your personal opinions of me. But get this one thing, and get it—" He garbled a curse as the telephone jangled, scooped up the pear-shaped receiver. "Converse speaking."

"This is Patrolman Walter Green, Ninth Precinct, Badge One-four-two-

five," the man on the other end of the line announced. "I got Hymie Croll, sir."

Converse took a deep appreciative breath, as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"Where are you calling from?"

"The Chesterfield Arms, sir. I recognized Croll on the street from the circular. He was alone. I followed him to this apartment house, Suite Three-two-one. He was packing to leave when I came in. He refuses to come to the station—says I have no right to be here since I haven't got any subpoena. He threatens to walk out on me. He's—he's gettin' pretty damn abusive, Captain. He wants trouble. What'll I do?"

Converse tightened his grip on the instrument.

"Keep him there, if you have to bat his ears down. I'll bring over the subpoena, myself. You tell him he'll get all the trouble he wants when I get there."

"They've got Hymie!" screamed the Purviance girl.

"I'll be there in under ten minutes," Converse concluded, and hung up.

"You've no right to hound that man!" Saulan shouted. "You can't drag citizens around like that! By God, I won't stand—"

Converse stretched out his hand, prodded a push-button twice, then stood up. He pulled a crush felt on his head. "Will you be good enough to get the hell out of my sight," he told the attorney, "or do I throw you out?"

"I'll warn Hymie!" bleated the girl, and made a grab for the telephone.

Converse reached over, caught her high on the arm. He grabbed Saulan in much the same place, lifted them so their toes barely touched the floor. As if by pre-arrangement, Hostetter opened the door at that instant and the skipper heaved the wailing couple into the corridor. He strode between them as they jockeyed for balance, and, heeled by the horse-faced

Hostetter, and the grinning Roundhouse McMurty, tramped down the half-flight to the street entrance.

CHAPTER TWO

The Rat Murder

IT WAS a half-drizzle, freshening the air and diffusing the hard grimness of the old stationhouse. As he strode down the three steps to the street level, Converse glanced up at the green globe over the arched-stone entrance, then passed it to the big clock in the city-hall tower. It was ten minutes of eleven.

McMurty wormed his huge frame back of the steering-wheel with a convulsive wrench of his hips. Converse barked an address and entered the tonneau of the squad-car. As Hostetter was about to follow, Saulan tried to crowd in ahead of him.

"I insist on going alone," he shouted. "Miss Purviance has engaged me to protect Hymie Croll's interests."

Hostetter caught him by the scruff of the neck, brushed him aside. "We ain't operatin' a busline," he growled.

McMurty tooled the car into motion, and Hostetter let the motion swing him into the seat beside the skipper. When he glanced out the rear glass, Saulan was running up and down the sidewalk, trying to flag a cruising cab.

"I got an ambition," McMurty threw over his shoulder. "I'd like to bust that little grifter with my left jab." He demonstrated at the windshield, and the police machine swerved.

"Watch that wheel, you damn fool!" barked Converse. "I've told you about that before. Now, by God, I'll be something next time. Any more of that shadow-boxing when you're driving me, and I'll transfer you to the traffic squad where you can stop and start cars with that wild swinging."

"He'd be good at that," Hostetter volunteered. "Especially if you'd give him some canvas so he could lie down every once in a while."

McMurty started to swear, then pulled the siren wide to drown words.

When the wail died in echoes, Converse said: "Isn't Green that rookie who shot hell out of those three stick-up men two months ago?"

Hostetter nodded. "Yeah, Walt Green, in the ninth precinct. Why?"

"He's right on his toes," the skipper said with satisfaction. "He tailed Croll into the Chesterfield Arms, got him there now." He patted his breast pocket. "I been carrying this subpoena for a long time. I'll be glad to get rid of it."

Hostetter braced his shoulder against the side of the car as McMurty high-balled her around the left side of a stalled trolley. As the machine steadied, he grunted.

"Well, this about brings the big row to a showdown. If you can make Croll march in there an' tell what he knows of graft and corruption in this town to the grand jury, something's got to break. I only hope, skipper, it won't be us. When a crooked betting commissioner gets his anchors down, he's damn hard to float. When a smooth customer like Fan De Lisle happens to be the commissioner, you got real opposition. He's got an organization with roots in nearly every department of the municipal government. You had guts to tackle it in the first place."

Captain Converse gave no sign that he heard. He rode the swaying seat with the ease of a professional cowboy in a saddle. Twice he raked a match alight, nosed the butt of his cigar into the flame. But although he failed to light it both times, he didn't seem to notice. When McMurty sent the squad-car into a long, dry skid that brought them up hard in front of the Chesterfield Arms, Converse prodded open the door, got out and crossed the

sidewalk. His shoulders were squared.

"I'll just tag along," Hostetter said casually, and they entered the building together.

They ignored the desk, strode into the elevator and the skipper growled, "Three," to the Negro lad at the controls.

THE little Negro looked them over, spotted them for law. He couldn't very well be wrong. Typed by their work, these two were much alike. Big men, strong men, veterans too long to be aggressive save when needed, yet they radiated control and confidence in every move.

The Negro was young, and he had his orders. He glanced obliquely at the night clerk, asked: "Who-all you want to see?"

"Three—*third*," Converse reiterated wearily.

The lad slammed the door, cushioned the elevator aloft. "Yaah, sah. You want the third."

Hostetter sighed. "That's what we was hinting at."

They left the elevator for a long corridor of many doors. Converse swung right, glanced at the brass numbers over a door to get his bearings, and tramped to the front of the building. He found 321, patted the panel with the back of his hand.

They waited a moment before the skipper rapped again, with his knuckles this time.

"Perhaps Croll decided to accompany Green to headquarters?" Hostetter suggested.

Converse shook his head. He closed a big hand over the knob, experimented. The door surrendered and he pushed it open and went in.

The interior was dark, yet the subdued light of the corridor splashed ahead of the skipper, showing him a small entrance hall. He felt along the edge of the wall till his fingers touched a switch, which

he depressed. As the living-room was illuminated, Converse growled, "Damn!" and kept his hand on the light switch.

The room was well furnished and in good taste, yet there was an air of impermanence about it, as if it had never actually been lived in. It was as impersonal as a department-store window. The oriental rug was new, colorful, offering a rather grotesque background for the body sprawled in the middle of it.

Hostetter quietly closed the hall door. Captain Converse let his hand fall from the switch to his side and walked over to the body.

"Somehow, I never figured you'd get to serve that subpoena," breathed Hostetter.

Even in death, Hymie Croll resembled the rat he had been in life. He lay partly on his side, his arms and legs thrown out as if he had been knocked over while running. The top of his head was battered in and the blood masked the upper half of his thin, hawkish face. He still looked sleek. He always reminded Converse of a rodent that had just climbed out of sewer water. The use of perfume heightened this illusion, at least in the skipper's cynical opinion. The smell was noticeable now, mingling with that peculiar, elusive odor of death.

Converse straightened from his cursory examination, walked quickly through the other five rooms of the apartment. They were empty of life. When he returned to the living-room, he looked tired.

Hostetter pushed up the brim of his hat. "It's a tough break, skipper."

"Green said Croll was getting abusive," Converse admitted slowly. "But I can't quite figure this."

"Green's a rough, tough kid," Hostetter shrugged. "I don't know him, but the way he piled into those three monkeys a couple of months ago proves it. He must have got into a fight with Hymie, hit him just too hard, and—" He made an elo-

quent gesture with his mammoth hands.

"Why didn't he wait, then?" growled Converse, half to himself.

"He probably got panicky, skipper. I remember the first time I ever killed a man—hadn't really meant to, although the mugg had it comin'. I wanted to run, anywhere, just so I got a lot of distance behind me. I was sick at my stomach for a week."

Converse's retort was drowned by the rush of feet in the corridor. Hostetter started for the door when it swung wide, debouching the Purviance girl and Saulan. An instant later, McMurty's square hull jammed the opening.

"They tailed us," McMurty grunted, as if the situation required an explanation. Then he saw the body, and whistled through his teeth.

THE girl saw it, too. With a bleat of anguish, she dove into the living-room and fell sobbing on her knees beside the body of Croll. Luella squirmed on the floor a moment, then left it in one wild leap that carried her against the skipper. "You killed him, you rotten murderer. You killed my man. I'll scratch your damn eyes—" She proceeded to make the attempt, but Hostetter caught her shoulder, swung her violently into a chair.

"Shut up," he snarled at her, pinning her down with one competent paw. "Captain Converse had nothing to do with this. Croll was picked up by a patrolman. There must have been a fight."

"Fight?" shrieked the girl. "You know damned well Hymie wouldn't fight with nobody, especially some stinkin', ex-pug of a killer-cop! Look at his poor head! You think he did any fightin' with that? Why, you—" She struggled desperately to leave her chair.

Saulan shook a puny fist in Converse's face. "You bullying gorilla!" he shouted. "I heard you tell your henchman to batter this man's head in. This is murder, and,

so help me, I'll see that the State Bar Association back a murder prosecution against you. I'll personally testify to what I heard you say in the station and—"

Converse looked bleakly at the lawyer. "Has it occurred to you, that I don't give a whoop in hell for all the chiseling little shysters ever spawned? Now shut up, or I'll forget myself."

Saulan stood on his tiptoes, yelling: "I dare you! I just dare you to so much as lay a finger on me! I—"

The skipper meant to smack him, had his hand raised, but McMurty beat him to it. McMurty wheeled the mouthpiece around with his right, then drove a studious left against the flabby chin. It was not a hard blow—not by McMurty's high standards—but it was effective. Abie Saulan's feet left the rug in unison and his body performed a short arc which terminated, shoulders first, in a large divan halfway across the room.

"Now, don't say a word," McMurty warned, "or I'll do that again."

Saulan said a few more words—said them after he had staggered erect, grabbed Luella's quavering arm and steered her into the corridor outside. Then he thrust his head back into the apartment.

"I'll get you now, you murdering blackguards!" he yelled. "Just you wait until I get into action—" He retreated in haste, slamming the door as he saw McMurty moving toward him.

"You shouldn't have struck him," Converse growled.

McMurty's mouth sagged. "Why, skipper, you was just gonna sock him yourself! I just wanted to save you the trouble."

"That wouldn't be trouble," Hostetter put in from across the room. "This other thing is trouble." He indicated the corpse. "So what, skipper?"

Converse glanced at him. "This is a killing," he said grimly. "We get a salary

to investigate 'em, even if they're against ourselves. Roundhouse, go dig up the manager, interview the neighbors. See what you can find." As McMurty tramped heavily out of the apartment, Converse turned to Hostetter. "Dave, go over this place carefully. Don't worry about who it hurts. I'll call the station."

HE WENT into the entrance hall where the phone was, called headquarters. He checked to see if there were any word or report from young Green. There was none. When he came back into the living-room, Hostetter was just climbing up from his hands and knees.

"Hymie was apparently getting ready to scam," Hostetter reported. "Found a couple of bags all packed." He squeezed his lower lip between his teeth, handed the skipper two bullets. There was blood on one of them.

"Thirty-eight specials," he summarized. "Regulation for the uniformed boys. Found them under the divan, near the fireplace. Green must have pistol-whipped Hymie, and the cylinder of his gun flew open. He got excited and didn't miss these two."

Converse handed them back.

"Mark 'em for identification, same as you would in any case, and turn them in as evidence. We may as well go back to the station."

McMurty opened the door and came into the living-room with a quiet, white-haired little woman. Converse and Hostetter instinctively stepped in front of her, shielding the corpse from her eyes.

"This is Mrs. Sutton, the resident manager," McMurty explained. "Nobody heard anything, but Mrs. Sutton was coming out of her suite about eleven o'clock an' she saw a uniformed cop running down the back stairs." He glanced significantly at the skipper.

"I hurried after him," Mrs. Sutton enlarged on the terse explanation. "But he

ran out the service entrance. Won't you please tell me what has happened?"

Captain Converse took her arm, gently propelled her into the outer hallway.

"There's been a little trouble," he told her. "You may be asked to tell what you saw again, but, in the meantime, don't worry too much about it. The Chesterfield Arms is a decent house. We'll try to see it don't get dirtied up. I'm sorry we even had to be here, Mrs. Sutton, but it's part of our work."

She gave him a wistful, confident smile, thanked him and walked down the corridor out of sight. Converse sighed, thought what a damn shame it was there weren't more women like Mrs. Sutton in the apartment-house racket and started for the elevator. Hostetter pushed McMurdy ahead of him, locked the door of 321, and followed.

They went down to the street, into the machine. McMurdy goosed the engine alive, leaned around.

"Now, where?"

"The stationhouse," Converse grunted. "I got something to attend to mighty quick."

CHAPTER THREE

The Captain Walks the Plank

THE drizzle had stopped, and there was no mist when the squad-car pulled up in front of Central Station. The green light looked cold, uninviting, and all the garish features of the lumpy old building stood out in sharp relief. Converse led the way up the stone steps, bunted the door open with his shoulder, and pushed in.

"You two go down to my office," he told McMurdy and Hostetter. "I got a little private business with the Old Man." He left them, disappeared into another office.

Ten minutes later, when he tramped

into his own cubby-hole, they were waiting. Converse circled his desk, stood leaning on the tips of his spread fingers.

"I just had a long talk with the chief over the telephone," he announced in flat tones. "You boys are transferred, taking effect immediately. Roundhouse, you're going to traffic. Dave, you're shunted to personnel. Now don't give me an argument. I've threatened to do this for a long time." He sat down abruptly, avoided their eyes and fished a cigar out of the top drawer.

McMurdy sucked air a minute, gasped: "But what the hell, Cap? You ain't that sore at me because I took a slap at that shyster? Maybe I done somethin'—"

Hostetter waved him to silence. "Shut up, Roundhouse." He turned to Converse. "See here, skipper, you're not fooling anybody. You're trying to draw a herring over the trail. You figger there's a rap to take, so you're goin' to stand it alone. You're the tops, an' Roundhouse an' I don't intend you to take this beef solo."

"Is *that* what he's tryin' to do?" McMurdy exploded. "Well, I'll say we won't—"

Converse shook his head impatiently. "Shut up and get out of here. It's all over now. I've made the arrangements, and it's settled. Couldn't change it if I would. You're each working for another captain, so report to your details and let me run my own. Good-night." He yanked a pile of reports and started sorting them to indicate the interview was over.

McMurdy wanted to argue, but Hostetter grabbed his arm, and they went out in silence. After the door banged, Converse stared at it for a long time, then he rose and went to the window.

A sickly moon, with a diseased ring around it, shed a wan light over the old precinct. Captain Converse felt a tinge of nostalgia for the comparative trouble-free days of a harness-bull. Then he

thought of young Green, and winced. He shouldn't have spoken to the kid the way he did, but, when he told Green to bat Croll's ears down, he hadn't expected it to be taken literally. Yet, in spite of that, he felt responsible.

The tower clock commenced to toll the hour. Converse looked up without waiting for the complete strokes, and saw that it was midnight. Before the clock stopped its chiming, a large limousine swung to an impatient stop behind the squad-car. The skipper watched the tuxedo-clad figure dive out, disappear into the building. He sighed, turned from the window, and dropped into his chair. He had just time to light his cigar when the office door bounced open, and the man in the tuxedo charged in, slamming the door behind him.

"Hello, Matterly," Converse said. "Sit down."

COMMISSIONER MATTERLY braced himself flatfootedly on the opposite side of the desk. He was a military-looking man, fortyish, with a spiked mustache and flat-brushed gray hair. His jowls bellowed in and out from muscular reaction, as he fought to control himself.

"Of all the damn fools!" he blurted at last. "Good God, Converse, did you deliberately try to ruin this graft case? You can't really be such a blundering idiot by accident."

"We don't know all the details yet," Converse suggested quietly.

"Details! What more details do you want? I've stood your rough-house tactics a long time, Converse, but this is too much. Your gross, rule-of-thumb jungle methods have always irritated me, but I had a certain respect for your years of experience. I see they taught you nothing but the ability to use your fists. It's bad enough to use extra-legal tricks, but to deliberately order a young patrolman to bash a witness's head in—a witness, mind

you, not a criminal—and give that order in the presence of a well-known lawyer! Why, it's the most stupid thing I ever heard of."

"There may have been circumstances," Converse persisted. "Perhaps someone else was there and made a battle of it. It was common knowledge that De Lisle wanted Croll out of the way. I mean to check up on De Lisle and—"

"And I'll save you that trouble," Matterly cut in. "Commissioner De Lisle sat through the championship fight tonight at the Auditorium, not twenty feet from where I sat. Don't make yourself ridiculous by casting suspicion on him because I would have to be an alibi witness for him. As for you checking, that's out. I'm sorry, Converse, but you are suspended for cause, at once. Where are the two other detectives who worked on this with you?"

"They got too scientific," Converse admitted. "I couldn't use 'em, so they were transferred."

"A little science might have saved you," Matterly snapped impatiently. "Since these boys couldn't work with you, perhaps they are all right. Your case will have to come before the police trial board for official dismissal, but I assure you the verdict of the board will coincide with mine. There is no longer a place for gorillas on a modern metropolitan-police department. If the district attorney chooses to prosecute—"

Converse's cigar assumed an aggressive angle. He pushed erect, mashed his hat on his head and started for the door.

"Since I'm fired," he growled, "I don't have to listen to you make a political speech. Go tell it to the press."

"I'll tell you—" shouted Matterly, but Converse barged into the hall, yanking the door shut behind him.

As he tramped past the information desk, the sergeant on duty asked: "Taking Number Eleven?" referring to the

old squad-car. Then his jaw dropped. Converse wagged his head. "Walkin', Charlie—walkin' home."

CAPTAIN CONVERSE lived alone in a little flat on Dupont Street. He had never married—somehow, he'd never gotten around to it. As a young cop, he hadn't time to meet the sort of girls he wanted to marry. After that, being single became a habit. He had lived in the same flat ever since he was jerked out of harness and switched to the Central office, fourteen years now. It was an old house of the gingerbread era. Sliced four ways, it offered small, high-ceilinged apartments. Converse lived in the right front, upstairs.

He climbed the seven grooved old steps, pushed open the door. The lock was pure ornament; it hadn't felt the caress of a key in a dozen years. Another flight, and he pushed into his own small, tidy flat. He crossed to a comfortable old chair, facing the window, and dropped into it. With the room still dark, he stared moodily at the blackish silhouette of the city—his city—rimmed against the horizon.

Fired? A blundering idiot . . . a gorilla . . . a damn fool? His shaggy head bobbed in silent assent. Perhaps they were right. He'd tried to play the game as he saw it, give 'em a clean city, fight against the vast organizations of political corruption. He didn't care much about Croll's death. Croll was a rat who was better off dead. But it did ruin the graft case, and, worst of all, it put young Green in a spot.

Converse chewed his lower lip. He didn't know Green—not personally—but reports showed the kid had guts. The fact that Green thought enough of Captain Converse to call him direct would react against him. The full impact of the opposition would strike him. Nothing he could say would help much. De Lisle and

his clique would force a political-minded D. A. to file charges of murder, or at least manslaughter. This would cloud the issue of the graft investigation, and Captain Converse, scarred old veteran, and Patrolman Green, ambitious rookie, would be the sacrificial goats.

Converse came to his feet. He couldn't fight back, sitting down. He was halfway to the door, when someone rapped gently on the other side. Frowning, he grasped the knob, pulled.

The girl was young, thin and dark. Outlined in the opening, face in shadow, her posture was almost defiant. Converse knuckled the light switch and watched the illumination splash over her features.

"Captain Converse?"

He nodded, moved aside to let her pass into the room. She moved hesitantly, stiffly, as if trying to keep her shoulders up. He shut the door, turned. She faced him, gloved hands clenched tightly in front of her trim little suit.

"I'm Marian Green," she announced through taut lips, and, when she saw that he failed to understand, added: "Mrs. Walter Green."

Converse said, "Oh," and automatically moved a chair into position for her. But she shook her head, put her hands behind her back and leaned against the table.

"Captain, where is Walt, my husband?"

Converse felt along the hard outline of his jaw.

"I don't know, Mrs. Green. How . . ."

"Please don't be evasive," she interrupted. "I heard the radio broadcast about what happened—that Walt had killed a witness and ran away. Some reporters came out to the house, asked insulting questions. They said you had ordered him to kill Croll, and that you were fired."

"That's not strictly accurate, Mrs.

Green. Your husband called me, and I admit I was indiscreet in my advice. However, I didn't order him to kill—"

"But he didn't do it!" blurted the girl. "Oh, I know he shot it out with those bandits a few months back, but they shot first. Even then he wasn't very proud of the thing. I know my husband, Captain Converse—know him better than anyone. He would not beat a witness or anyone else to death. The reporters said that this Croll was a small man, just over five feet. Well, my Walt was six-feet-two in his stocking feet, and strong. Does it sound reasonable that he would use his gun?"

Converse shrugged. "It doesn't sound like it," he admitted. "But he certainly pulled out at a bad time. You can't expect people to think otherwise."

She stretched an upturned hand toward him. "But that's why I came to you. Walt was everlastingly talking about you, about your idealism, your honesty. Perhaps that's why he got into trouble, doing what he thought you would do under similar circumstances."

Converse looked at her steadily, caught the glitter of a new-born tear spill over the rim of her eye.

"Tell me the rest of it," he suggested quietly. "Just exactly why did you come here? No, youngster, don't back out now. You had something else on your mind, when you came here. What is it?"

HER chin trembled, became criss-crossed with panicky little wrinkles. She groped along the table, felt a chair and let her body sag into it. Then she covered her face with her hands. "A man came to the house a little while before the story of Croll's death was broadcast. He gave the name of Vince Vogel, and stated that he was a private detective. He wanted me to give him two hundred dollars for some information about Walt."

"What sort of information?" Converse frowned.

"About Walt and some woman," whispered Marian Green. "I ordered him from the door. I told him that I had implicit faith in my husband and that if he did not leave immediately, I would telephone the police. He dared me to, and, when I turned to the telephone, he told me he knew the name of a woman he claimed Walt was having an—" She paused, biting her lip.

"Well, I can't see the connection with this present case," Captain Converse grunted.

"But there is. The woman was Croll's mistress!"

Converse whistled softly, walked over to the window. He heard the Green girl sobbing, and wisely let her cry it out. After a long pause, he swung around.

"You believe what this man said?" he asked.

Her chin snapped up. "Of course not!" she declared emphatically.

"Good." He nodded his approval. "In the first place, I know every private dick with a license in this town. There is no one by the name of Vogel. What did he look like?"

She shut her eyes, as if conjuring the vision of the man from memory.

"About five-ten, swart, oblique black eyes. Weight about one-seventy, well proportioned, nattily dressed. Hands blunted, but well kept, face clean shaven, thin, avaricious. Large, even teeth, and a smile warped to the left side. Loud-checked tie—and, oh, yes, he was about thirty-five. He looked as if he had Latin blood in him."

Converse smiled in spite of himself. "That's a better description than I get from most of my own men," he complimented her.

She returned his smile. "Walt taught me. We used to ride in the trolley and whisper descriptions to each other of people sitting across the car. Walt called it his home-work." The smile faded. "Can

you find him for me, Captain Converse? I want him back."

"You're satisfied in your own conscience that he did not murder Hymie Croll?"

"I just *know* he didn't!"

Converse put his hat on. "You better stay right here tonight," he suggested. "The newspapers will be looking for you again. I can't promise anything—I'm not exactly a copper any more. But I'll browse around a bit. There's a man I want to see. I'll call you if I find anything." His mouth contracted into a hard cut.

She folded her hands. "I'll wait until I hear from you. You'll always be a cop, Captain Converse—you're born of that breed. Walt was right about you. Thanks."

Converse grinned a little ruefully, let himself into the corridor and tiptoed downstairs. He hit the sidewalk, paused a minute, then tramped north. At the second intersection, he managed to flag a cruising owl.

"The Normandy," he told the driver, and let the motion of the cab swing him into the rear seat.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Devil Wears a Tuxedo

TO ENTER the Normandy you passed a doorman, resplendent in scarlet and gold braid, waded ankle-deep in a red carpet stretched under a colorful marquee and were whirled through a revolving glass door that glistened like an emerald-cut diamond. You coursed down marble stairs, bannistered with modernistic brass, and, at the first landing, you were greeted by a beautiful girl whose only job was to smile at you. It was a dazzling, scintillating smile that was presumed to warm not only the heart but expand the pocket-book. By that time, your ears picked up

the seductive air of muted music. A headwaiter—or, if you looked a trifle provincial, one of his assistants—captured and piloted you, among the riot of pretty women and handsome men, to a table.

Captain Converse paid off his cab, trudged grimly down the red carpet and spun his way through the door. He retained his hat and went on down the stairs. The girl whose job it was to smile did so automatically, but without much warmth. The skipper never saw her, collided with the headwaiter.

"I don't want a table. I want to see De Lisle."

The other man tried to block him, saying: "I don't believe he is in."

Converse brushed him aside. "Don't worry about it," he growled and turned left into a cloistered hallway.

The corridor debouched into a circular anteroom. Beyond it was a private office. As Converse tramped into the place, a dark-haired young man rose from behind a desk. His immaculate tuxedo fit him like a coat of enamel, and his smile was waxy.

"De Lisle alone?" Converse demanded.

The man shook his head. "He isn't around," he said. "Something I can do for—"

"I'll have a look," the skipper grunted, put his hand on the knob.

A second man, in whipcord chauffeur's uniform, boosted himself out of a deep leather chair, elbowed in front of the copper. "Wait a minute, fella," he drawled. "You heard Mr. Feathers tell you the boss isn't around."

Converse pushed open the door with the hand he had on the knob, grabbed a palmful of whipcord uniform in the other, and barged through the opening, carrying the chauffeur with him.

The room was more like the private lounge of an exclusive club than an office. A low table, which might have passed for a desk, squatted in the center

of the rug and held two glasses. A tiny, black-haired girl slumped sobbing in a chair on one side of the table. Out of the opposite chair rose the figure of a man.

He was very tall—as tall as Captain Converse—but not so heavy-skeletoned. He wore formal evening clothes with informal grace. His head was large, well sculptured. His hair was grayer than the skipper's, but prematurely so, for he was still a young man. He glanced at the table near the doorway, at Converse holding the squirming chauffeur in the strait-jacket grip, at Feathers pulling a gun out of his pocket in the background. Then he grinned.

"It's all right, boys," he chuckled. "Captain Converse is an old and valued friend. I'll call you if I want you."

Converse gave his man an extra jostle, pushed him through the opening and slammed the door in the face of Feathers. He waited a moment as if he half expected it to open again, then he swung around.

"I'd like a word with you, De Lisle—alone. You know it's important or I wouldn't be here." He eyed the diminutive brunette significantly.

The other man bowed. "We were all through," he said in a rich, resonant tone. "Good luck to you, Tina"—this to the girl—"you'll like Chicago." He took her gently by the arm and steered her toward the door. As he opened it for her, Converse noticed his fingers tighten on her arm, saw her flinch, then jerk away. A moment later she passed out of sight.

De Lisle came back into the room, moved so the stumpy table separated him from Converse. Their eyes met, held, and De Lisle smiled—an easy, confident smile.

THEY measured each other like fighters, appraisingly, analytically. Old enemies, respect had blunted some of the surface bitterness. They had both come up from the bottom, but whereas Converse had struggled to keep free of the

morass of politics, De Lisle had fought his way up through the political tangle.

De Lisle was well equipped for the climb. Handsome, vital, his personality had that quiet strength that won the respect of men and the passion of women. The post of betting commissioner was a lush one and his private venture, the Normandy, had become headquarters for the sporting elite.

"I'm sorry you had trouble getting in," he said, breaking the silence.

"Don't apologize," Converse growled. "I like it that way. Whenever I'm accepted in a place like this, I'll figure it's time to check up." He paused, watched the other man shrug, and went on: "De Lisle, you and me have been on opposite sides of the fence for a long time. Up until tonight, I had hopes of breaking you and the grafters you run with."

"Apparently something has changed your mind."

Converse nodded. "Hymie Croll was murdered tonight. That's a tough break for me because through Croll I could have broken you and your crowd. He tried to sit on the fence. He leaned your way a long time, but I had tilted him back to my side. Then he was killed."

"We won't cry about Hymie," De Lisle observed dryly.

"No, we won't cry about that. God knows I never expected to breathe on the day I'd ask you for a favor, but I came here to ask one tonight. De Lisle, I want young Walt Green."

"Perhaps you had better spell it out," the commissioner suggested. "It might make sense that way."

"It don't make much sense the way it stands," the skipper growled. "Green is a tough young cop about twice the size of Croll. It don't smell right that he should bash that mugg's head in just to hold him. That's a little too smooth for my stomach."

"I see what you're driving at. This

Green is a cop—the cop. Have you seen the latest extra?"

When Converse wagged his head, De Lisle opened a drawer in the table, pulled out a folded newspaper and handed it to the copper.

Captain Converse read the two-column story, digested it slowly. It was all there—all the slime, the subtle innuendoes. An anonymous tip had come to the paper to the effect that Officer Walter Green was mixed up with a former mistress of Croll's. Luella Purviance's name was not mentioned, but the inference was strong. The story went on to state that reporters had been unable to locate Mrs. Green when they sought her in reference to the latest development. There was also a lengthy statement by Police Commissioner Matterly in which the dismissal of Captain Converse was explained in detail.

The skipper chucked the paper on the table. "Stop quibbling. I don't know all the answers, not yet, but you do. Well, I feel responsible for putting that lad behind the eight ball; I want to turn him over to his wife. Give me Green and I'll quit, step aside and leave you alone."

De Lisle leaned forward until his weight rested on the tips of his long fingers atop the table.

"Jim Converse, I've known you a long time," he said. "I put up with a lot of stuff from you, let you push my boys around and grab a lot of cheap publicity with your psalm-singing following. Now you get stymied by your own high-handed tactics so you crawl over here to wheedle and, when that fails, threaten me. You talk of me turning up some killer cop so you'll quit and leave me alone. Well, get this. I don't know anything about this mess except what I read in that paper. I do know, however, that you were fired, kicked out of the police department. That leaves you just plain 'mister,' so I'll give you about two minutes to clear out of this place or I'll give

my boys the pleasure of throwing you out."

Converse tried to keep his temper. He felt the blood boil into his face until his leathery old hide tingled. He bit his lip, flexed his big hands. The nape on his neck stiffened and he brushed it down with studied casualness. He started to speak, meant to control himself, but he'd taken too much for one night.

"Why, you fram'in'—" he exploded, and his right hand flicked out to close on the other's shoulder.

De Lisle threw up his hands in a hasty defense, shouted: "Feathers, Mace—quick!"

Converse heard the door bang open. He brought his free hand up smartly, caught De Lisle an open-handed belt across the mouth that spilled him into a low chair, then turned to meet the expected assault from the rear.

To his unbounded amazement, instead of the charging figures of Feathers and the chauffeur, Mace, the square hulls of Detectives Hostetter and McMurdy stood stolidly on either side of the door. Converse lowered his fists, sucked air through his teeth.

"Well, what the hell—" he began, but the grinning McMurdy butted in.

"We was just browsin' around, skipper."

Converse threw an oath at him, then swung on De Lisle, who sat on the edge of his chair, rearranging his clothing.

"I'm not askin' now," the skipper grated. "I'm tellin' you. I'm in this fight deeper'n ever, and, when I find the answers, I'm comin' back for another visit. You better be ready for it."

"I'll be right here," De Lisle said slowly, "and ready, *Mister Converse.*"

CONVERSE glared at the two grinning dicks, turned, and stomped out of the room. He heard the sure-footed thud as they strode behind, but he did not

turn until he reached the street. Then he swiveled on Hostetter. "How'd you two birds show up? Didn't I say the pair of you were transferred? What's the idea of butting in?"

"Don't get lead in your pants, skipper," Hostetter placated him. "You got us transferred, so I called the Old Man an' convinced him it was a swell time for me to take my vacation before breakin' in a new job. Roundhouse developed a serious pain, so he's on sick leave."

Converse tried hard to keep his face straight. "I get it. You break orders and come tailing me around town on your vacations. What happened to Feathers and Mace?"

"Oh, them monkeys?" McMurty laughed. "It was like this, skipper. Dave tells me my left ain't so good no more, then, just at that moment, this ape in the trick suit steps in front of me. I just bunt him over, but still my left ain't so good. Then Feathers takes a pass at me—so what the hell?" He spread his hands resignedly.

"And *that* one," Hostetter admitted, "was a beautiful left jab."

"You lads are the tops, but you've got to stay out of this fight," Converse grimaced. "It has developed into a personal war and it would cost you your pensions to get mixed up in it."

Hostetter ignored the remark. "What's the idea in jumping De Lisle? He was at the fights, so he's in the clear. You can't get around that, skipper."

"After being a cop for twenty years," Converse growled, "I've learned you can't outline a case in advance—you just got to smell your way along. Well, my nose took me to the Normandy. I don't know the answers yet, but like I told De Lisle, when I find them they won't be very far away from this joint."

McMurty exchanged glances with his partner. "Tell him what we heard."

Hostetter nodded, said: "The D. A.

himself showed up at the stationhouse just a little while after you left. He sees a swell chance to get his picture in the papers so you're elected goat. He's going to file criminal charges against you and Green, with the emphasis on you. He don't credit the story that Green was mixed up with Croll's gal. All he can see is Converse and Green."

"That means that you'll be jugged," McMurty supplemented. "Why don't you come out to my house? The little woman would be tickled—"

"Yeah," Hostetter stunted. "Maybe tickled like the time we came out to play poker. No, the skipper can lay up in my summer cottage."

During this argument, Converse was looking over McMurty's shoulder toward the lavish entrance of the Normandy, just a few feet away. He saw the girl duck out, hugging a small make-up case, noticed that the doorman gave her a respectful, yet familiar, salute. As she vanished into a waiting cab, he settled the discussion briefly.

"Thanks, but I'm playing this alone. Take now—in over ten years I haven't made a social call on a pretty girl after midnight. Well, I'm starting to circulate right now, and kindly get this straight—I don't need any chaperons."

"I get it," McMurty chuckled. "The skipper's been repressed."

Converse grunted as he moved away. He quickened his stride, jumped onto the running-board of the first cab in the wait line.

"Stretch a towline onto that hack just pulling away," he barked at the driver. "Police business."

"O. K., chief," grinned the driver, and meshed his gears. Converse let the jerk of the machine swing him into the tonneau.

A lot of things were in his mind right then, but he didn't encourage them one little bit.

CHAPTER FIVE

Love-nest Assassin

THE cab in which the girl rode went north along Bleak Street, then swung east along Park Drive. Because the thoroughfare was deserted at this time of night, Converse ordered his driver to hang well back. Thus it was when the lead cab turned sharply into Van Cleve Avenue, they nearly lost it. By a fast piece of driving, however, they managed to pick up the trail as the girl's cab slowed in front of the Century House.

"Want I should fritter past?" Converse's driver queried.

The skipper decided to take a chance.

"No, pull up twenty feet behind 'em."

The diminutive girl had paid off her cab and was keying her way into the swanky apartment building, when Converse touched her shoulder. She gave a strangled bleat of terror, and her arms tightened around the small leather case.

"Take it easy," he admonished. "Nobody's going to hurt you."

"What you want? Please, you won't rob—" Her voice was husky, with a broad accent. Converse guessed she was Spanish, or high-caste Mexican.

"Keep right on moving," he told her. "I want to talk with you." He piloted her through the half-opened door.

She shot a hasty glance over her shoulder, but her cab was already swinging away from the curb, so, with a little shudder of resignation, she moved into the luxurious lobby.

There was no clerk, because the Century House did not keep its officials in evidence. Clients with sufficient money to maintain a suite here did not care to have their movements under constant surveillance. Rich men paid for most of the apartments, but Follies beauties, glorious models and other examples of feminine pulchritude tenanted the lavish suites. Even the elevator was automatic.

They entered it and the girl punched the button marked 11. As the elevator began to cushion aloft, she turned and he got his first full-face view of her.

She was not pure Spanish, or pure anything, for her eyes were too oblique. Staring at her, Converse thought she was the most doll-like creature he had ever seen. Small though she was, her form was full breasted, and, through her open cape, the soft contour of her abdomen rounded out the perfect line of her torso.

Her eyes fascinated him, probably because they were so unusual. At first glance, he thought they were jade-green, then he detected a tint of red and decided he was wrong. The slant was sharp and Oriental and there was a sheen to her skin that made him want to touch it. He was sure it would feel cold, like marble. Her hair was sleeked off the rounding forehead, knotted on the nape.

"You are the man—the one"—she pronounced it 'wan'—"who came into Fan's office. *Capitan* of police. He sent you to chase me out."

The skipper shook his head. "No, Tina. I followed you here because—" He paused as the elevator came to a stop.

The girl opened the door, led the way down an ivory-toned corridor. She unlocked another door, stepped into a small entry. When Converse followed, she closed the hall door and moved ahead into a spacious living-room.

The skipper had been in a lot of places, but never a room like this one. The ceiling was high, and domed. It was a soft shade of blue and marked with stars. The walls and furnishings were tinted in ivory, trimmed with fine gold stripes; even the baby-grand Steinway was ivory finished. But what startled him was the size of everything. All were small, tiny, like a doll's house—like the girl herself. It made him feel, by comparison, a great behemoth.

Tina jerked the throat-strings of her

cape, hurled it from her, and faced him. She seemed to have more confidence in her own environment.

"Now, why you follow me?" she demanded. "He send you!"

Her tone was accusatory, and the skipper used the fact like a lever. "Why would De Lisle send me, Tina?"

"So, he *did* send you!" Her slant eyes flamed alive. "The camel! He threw me out, then send an h'officer so he can get his filthy little apartment for some cat. All right, I go! I won't stay another minute!" She pirouetted, flounced into a bedroom and slammed the door.

CONVERSE grinned in spite of himself, followed quietly. When he opened the door, Tina was viciously hurling silk underwear into an open wardrobe trunk. "Chicago!" she flared. "Stinkin' slaughterhouse!" She whipped her dress over her head and stood in step-ins and brassière.

"He'll be sorry!" she spat at Converse, who lolled just inside the door. "I weesh I had scratch his eyes out." She yanked a wool dress out of a closet, plunged her head into it and then wiggled her hips to take the wrinkles out of it.

The skipper took off his hat and sat on the edge of the silk-covered bed.

"Tina, Fan De Lisle and I have been bitter enemies for years. After you left tonight, I gave him a good smack in the mouth. Does that make you feel any better?"

She stopped her packing, eyed him suspiciously. "Then why you come here?"

He saw her eyes move furtively toward the leather make-up box she had carried into the room. Without replying, he reached for it. She tried to intercept the move, but he brushed her aside, thumbed open the catch. A low whistle escaped him.

The case contained three neat piles of

money. He poked his finger inside, fanned the first pile. It consisted mainly of fifties and a few hundreds. There must have been close to twenty thousand dollars in the box.

"This is a pay-off," Converse growled, half to himself. "You're leaving for Chicago against your will."

"Well, what of it?" cried the girl. "He got another spot in Chicago, so what business is that of yours? This money is a gift, an' you can't prove any different."

Converse closed the case, pushed it toward her.

"I just figured tonight was a funny time to go to Chicago. When did he give you your walkin' papers, kid?"

She tried hard to climb onto her dignity, but emotion overbalanced her. "Tonight. No warning, no anything. He just say: 'Tina, my dear, I have found a nice little job for you in Chicago.' Poof—like that it was!"

She jerked a littered drawer out of a dressing-table, heaved it halfway across the room in a burst of temper.

The skipper smiled ruefully. "Tina, did you know Hymie Croll?"

The furrows of anger smoothed out of her forehead. Her brows arched, then V-ed with the narrowing of her peculiar eyes. Her face became as a wax mask of cunning.

"So you want to know about this man Croll?" she murmured huskily.

"I want very much to know the circumstances of his death."

She had a silk gown in her hand, ready to lay in the open case, but now she hurled it to the floor. She whispered: "Wait!" and tiptoed across the room to the door.

Converse leaned back across the silk coverlet, resting his weight on his elbow. He saw her open the door and caught a beautiful view of her profile as she started to ease through the opening. He was staring at the swan curve of her throat

when the two gunshots burred together. The tiny body shuddered, was driven hard back with the impact of the slugs. Even as the skipper dove off the bed toward her, his experienced mind told him nothing smaller than a .38 would have that striking power.

As he reached her, she swiveled, jackknifed against him. Her tiny arms tightened convulsively about his big arm. He tried to move her aside, to jump through the doorway, but her falling movement closed the door and she clung to him, for she was not yet dead.

He scooped her into his arms, laid her on the bed. Then he finally tore his arm away and went through the doorway at an angle, his old service gun in his right hand.

THE living-room was empty, but he pounded across it and jerked open the hall door. The long corridor was deserted, and, when he stopped, only silence greeted him. He hesitated a long moment, hating to quit, but finally decided to go back. The tortured struggles of the girl had delayed him enough to give the killer getaway time. He holstered his gun, reentered the apartment, and slipped the guard-chain in place. Then he went into the bedroom.

Converse knew she was dead when he crossed the threshold. She had died hard, for her diminutive body was coiled about her stomach, like a cat sleeps. Although she was beyond pain, he straightened her gently. Two slugs had deflated the beautiful curve of her abdomen, saturating the clean dress with blood.

Weakening to impulse, he touched her cheek with the back of his gnarled old fingers. The velvety flesh was not cold, as he half anticipated, but soothingly warm. Swearing softly, he took a slow turn around the room.

He located telephone wires leading under the hoopskirt of an ivory doll, lifted

it, and scooped up the instrument to call headquarters. However, when the operator came on the line, he caught himself, smothered the automatic impulse to send for the homicide squad, and asked for information, instead. He asked for, and called, the number of the Normandy.

It wouldn't be a wise move to call the police, not yet. He was in a bad spot, and knew it. When a voice broke the silence of the line, he demanded to speak with De Lisle, and, to his surprise, the betting commissioner came on the line.

Converse was nonplussed for a moment. Subconsciously, he had not expected to find the proprietor of the Normandy at his office. But the suave tones of De Lisle revived his antagonism, and his voice was hard, bitter when he said: "This is Jim Converse, De Lisle. I'm getting a little closer. Be seeing you." Then he hung up on the other man's reply.

He looked at the girl on the bed and the lines of his forehead V-ed in concentration. He felt irritated with his own impotence and not a little futile. He was like a man on one side of a broad river. He was satisfied that he could see both sides of the puzzle, but there was no bridge to cover the gap which separated the sides.

He picked up the little leather case containing the money, pushed it out of sight in the drawer of her dressing-table. Then he opened her case, took out a folder of keys. He wanted to walk in the open air—to get away from the sight and feel of death where he could think without prejudice. He let himself out of the apartment, made sure the door was securely locked, and took the automatic elevator to the street.

The farther he got into this mess, the more complicated it became. And the more it did, the deeper he got himself. It was about time for a break to come his way.

CHAPTER SIX

The Corpse That Walked Off

IT WAS cold outside, but the air was fresh and tinged with moisture. Captain Converse left the Century House without encountering anyone, and started to walk. He marched automatically, with that tireless gait of the well-conditioned copper used to the feel of pavement beneath his competent feet. To direction or distance he gave no heed, for his mind was in many places. The cerebration of a veteran cop is an unexplainable thing.

The skipper went over the case carefully, mentally running down each separate character, each minute clue, each new idea. Periodically, he would shake his head, terrier-like, and try a new tack for he felt close to the true facts of the case.

He set the three women up on a mental shelf and examined them. Luella Purviance, Marian Green and Tina—he didn't even know Tina's last name. Tina had died because she had known something about the death of Hymie Croll and because she had exhibited a willingness to impart that knowledge. He wondered if she had heard the killer in the adjoining room, or whether it was mere instinct which had driven her to the door, and her death. Well, that killing couldn't be laid to Fan De Lisle—not directly, for De Lisle had been at the Normandy.

He mused over the story of Marian Green. The man known as Vince Vogel was a phony, at least in name, for the skipper knew every dick in the county. Yet could there be any truth in the story? Was young Walt Green interested in a mistress of Croll's? Would that not offer a logical explanation as to how he happened to stumble onto Croll so conveniently? The skipper didn't want to believe that possibility, but he had to explore it.

And if that were the case, was Luella

Purviance the girl, or could it have been Tina? Converse's frown darkened as he recalled the velocity of the bullets which had brought death to the strange little girl with the oblique eyes.

He shrugged the thought away, raised his eyes and found that his feet had carried him halfway across the midtown district to the doors of the Dreamland Auditorium. The main bank of doors were closed, but, when he walked around to the Tupper Street side, he found a corps of janitors cleaning up the huge arena.

He tramped under the north bank to the office where a group of accountants were still sweating over the box-office receipts. There was a dick from the robbery detail named Swanson and two harness-bulls guarding the take. The skipper exchanged greetings, asked Swanson if he knew the address of the head usher.

The robbery dick nodded. "Sure, Terry McGonigle was in charge of the fight last night. O'Riley's manager and some of the handlers started a poker game in Dressing-room A. Terry's still in. Want me to send down for him, Captain?"

Converse shook his head. "I'll saunter down that way. It was a good fight, eh?"

"One of the best," acknowledged Swanson. "It netted me a fin note."

The skipper turned, trudged down to the other side of the big auditorium. He poked his head into the dressing-room, caught McGonigle's eye and beckoned him out. Terry was a squat little human, bald-headed, with bulbous ears and a nose which resembled a knotted end of rope. Twenty years ago, when Jim Converse had covered this same precinct in harness, Terry McGonigle had the middle-weight championship almost in his grasp. He had let a blond hooper get in his fingers, and the championship had slipped out of reach.

"Terry," the skipper said, after the

customary preliminaries about old times and the recent battle, "do you know of your own knowledge whether Fan De Lisle stayed through the entire fight?"

McGonigle gave the copper a shrewd glance, nodded. "He did that, Jim. He came early and was introduced before the special."

"Could he have left without your knowledge, then come in later?"

McGonigle wagged his head. "No, not tonight. We kept pretty close tabs on all the passes. As I said, De Lisle was introduced just before the special event, which didn't last long, and then he was there when the main event began because I had to send for him between the first and second rounds. A telephone call from some jittery dame."

Converse perked up. "Did he leave, then?"

"No. He got me to send one of my ushers for his chauffeur—a guy named Mace, who was sitting up in section F. Mace pulled out with the car, but De Lisle went back to the ringside."

"You're sure of that?"

"Absolutely, Jim. He came out a couple of times between rounds to make a call or place a bet, but he was right on tap all evening. After the battle, he went around to Lawler's dressing-room for the celebration. I was there, myself. Does any of this help you, Jim?"

Converse shrugged. "Not much, Terry. Do you remember whether the woman who called had an accent or not? Sort of Spanish-like?"

"Not that I remember. She was all het up about something, because when I asked her to leave a number an' I'd have De Lisle call her after the fights, she squalled like hell. Told me he was expectin' the message. She sounded like a hard, competent baby to me, Jim."

"And you say this call came in between the first and second rounds of the championship fight itself?"

"Yeah, right after the first."

CONVERSE expressed his thanks and left the auditorium, to trudge along the streets, head bowed in thought. It was easier for the skipper to think on the move. His brain worked best when his powerful body was in action.

He concentrated on the call from the girl. It might mean everything to his case or it might mean nothing. Yet Tina had died after De Lisle had thrown her out, and Tina had been his mistress. Hymie Croll had lost a mistress, too, but in that case it had been Hymie who checked out of the picture, not his sweetheart. Converse began to want to know who the call was from. Was it Tina, or was it her successor? He decided to return to the lavish apartment in the Century House. Perhaps he might find something among Tina's effects which would point to a rival in the affections of Fanchot De Lisle.

Converse lengthened his stride, cut over to Market Street, and caught a cab. It shuttled him across town, and, within ten minutes, he was again entering Tina's apartment.

He sensed something was wrong the instant he stepped inside the suite. His hand sought the stock of his revolver as he shut the door, his back against it. After a period of silent immobility, he eased across the living-room and gently pushed open the bedroom door.

The body of the little black-haired girl was gone.

The skipper was used to surprises, but this one jarred him. He felt the sweat ooze out of his hide as he stepped into the bedroom and made a hasty search of the toilet and dressing-closet. Unable to accept the fact that Tina's body could have been taken out of the apartment, he went from room to room but finally returned to the bedroom, convinced.

He leaned against the dressing-table, staring at the bed. Slowly, he became

aware that the golden-silk coverlet had been changed. The bed was covered with a white counterpane, crudely tucked in at the sides. Then the import of his discovery registered, Converse swiveled, yanked open the drawer of the dressing-table. The leather case was there, but the money was gone.

He switched out the light, walked over to the window and stared moodily out over the city. Barren flat roofs stretched out toward the harbor, their monotony broken only by the ghostly flutter of clothing on limp lines. Ridged against the blue-black horizon was the brutal bulk of the city's gas-tank, like a Gargantuan garbage-can. An owl-car braked harshly at the foot of Elk Hill, stopped and started noisily. Before its defiant rattle blended into the stillness, Captain Converse swung sharply, his muscles tensed.

Call it instinct, intuition, or a sixth sense, yet he knew the hall door was opening even before he heard it. When the low, subdued laughter of the woman reached him, he was already padding toward the living-room door, his gun unholstered.

"Ooh, isn't this too ducky!" exclaimed the woman. "Like a baby's playhouse. I'm going to love this."

A man chuckled. "You ought to love it," he observed with a trace of sarcasm. "This lay-out came high. You made a good deal, Lou."

"There's nothing one-sided about it," the woman retorted snappishly. "I usually earn my way."

The man laughed again. "Well, keed, far be it from me to fight with you."

"Now, that we understand each other," Converse heard her say, "let's be friends."

The skipper caught a sound that made him think it would be a good time to open the door. When he moved into the other room, Feathers stood braced in the center of the rug, Luella Purviance crushed in

his arms. It was a romantic picture.

"Come out of it," Converse growled and motioned them apart with his gun.

FEATHERS tore his lips away from the girl's full mouth, looked over her shoulders into the cynical features of the copper. For a moment he froze immobile, yet, in that space of time, no expression broke the dark, well-barbered mask that was his face. The Purviance girl stiffened, turned her head slowly. Her eyes globed with fear.

"Converse! Gawd A'mighty!" Her arms tightened convulsively around the man.

"Step aside, Feathers," Converse barked.

Feathers half raised his arms, grabbed Luella's wrists as if he meant to push her aside. Then he abruptly shifted his hold, gave her a hard push that sent her reeling toward the detective. Simultaneously, he jumped backward, and went for his gun.

Luella uttered a terrified bleat and threw up her hands as if she expected Converse to shoot right through her. The skipper was tempted to do just that, but he couldn't bring himself to it. He took a long step sideways, stumbled to one knee. Feathers took two quick shots, missed with both of them. He was ready to try again, when Converse cut a leg from under him.

Feathers twisted into a heap, like a small boy when one stilt breaks. He rolled on his side and tried to lift his gun, but Converse rocked forward and stepped on his gun wrist.

The skipper turned, motioned the Purviance girl back. "Cut it!" he warned her. "I'll let you have it!"

Then he reached down, slugged Feathers once on the jaw with his free hand. Feathers relaxed. Captain Converse jerked out his cuffs, shackled the other man's wrists behind him, then

heaved him onto the ivory-toned divan. After that, he turned his attention to the girl.

Luella Purviance was numb with fear. Hands behind her, she crouched flat against the wall, eyes dilated on the copper.

"Fawncy meetin' you here," the skipper grunted. "This comes as something of a surprise."

"He was just showing it to me," she whimpered.

Converse chuckled sardonically. "Why, you cheap little tramp," he growled at her. "How many times in one night do you think you can fool me? So you're the gal who cut little Tina out of the picture, eh?"

She shook her head mutely.

"Talk?" he asked. "While you got a chance."

Her head wagged again, nervously, as if she anticipated a beating.

Converse grinned without mirth.

"You ought to get the hell beat out of you, Lou," he admitted, reading her mind. "But I'll get you another way." He glanced at Feathers lying inert on the divan. "This case is beginning to make sense."

"Listen, Cap, for God's sake gimme a chance!" Luella gaged. "This guy works for Fan De Lisle. They picked me up to bump me off. Gimme a break! Let me go, and, s'help me, I'll get out of the country. If you keep me here it's the same as murdering me."

Converse sheathed his gun, regarding her speculatively.

"You should have taken a powder when you had a chance. Talk with you is a waste of time. You can't even lie straight. Now, get into that bedroom."

She backed into the bedroom ahead of him. He made her stretch out on the bed, then he tore a bathtowel into strips and tied her hand and foot.

"Just one blat out of you," he warned,

"and I'll tie your long tongue as well."

She shook her head frantically, lay quiet.

Converse crossed to the dressing-table, lifted the little Colonial doll and picked up the telephone. He called a number, waited until the circuit was complete, then said: "Converse talking. Get in a cab and drive to the Century House. The front door will be open, so come up to Apartment Eleven-fifteen. Good."

"More cops!" the girl sobbed, then clamped her lips tight.

The skipper grinned at her, reached down and tore the telephone wires out of the box, breaking them. After that he shuffled into the living-room.

FEATHERS had returned to consciousness. He lay warped on his side, trying to reach his wounded leg. When he saw Converse watching him, he twisted around defiantly. "You got no right in here," he challenged. "You're no cop now, mister. You're just a common burglar."

"I'm getting around pretty good for a guy that isn't a cop," the skipper observed. "It seems that Fan De Lisle pays for this little nest and puts only his favorite canary in it. I gather from your remarks that our mutual pal, Lou, is Number One Canary right now. Funny, I never would have expected that, her being so thick with De Lisle's old enemy, Hymie Croll."

Feathers' mouth curled sidewise into a sneer.

"No use fishing, mister."

"I suppose not," Converse said with his tongue in his cheek. "Still, it's interesting. Luella must be quite a gal, though I never noticed it personally. Seems there was a rumor started by a guy—a guy that looks something like you, Feathers—to the effect that a copper named Walt Green had a great yen for Lou. Know anything about that?"

"Nothing!" snapped the man on the divan.

Converse shrugged. "Probably just an idle rumor to drag a herring across the trail. By the way, does De Lisle have any idea that you and Lou are such intimate pals?"

"You rat!"

Converse chuckled, lowered his bulk into one of the tiny chairs opposite the divan. He fished a cigar out of his pocket, lighted it with a bland air of content. Feathers watched him through narrowed eyes, like a wolf in a trap. The skipper smoked peacefully, his eyes unfocused by concentration.

Presently, someone tapped hesitantly on the hall door. Feathers stiffened, hope gleamed in his eyes to die when he noticed the smug grin on the copper's face. Converse crossed to the door, opened it and ushered Marian Green into the living-room.

She came in hurriedly, her eyes filled with question. Then she saw the man on the divan, and grabbed the skipper's arm.

"A friend of yours?" Converse asked.

"Vogel!" she whispered. "That's the man!"

"I thought so," Converse chuckled, cutting in. "Well, now we can really go to work."

"Did you find Walt?" Marian Green demanded huskily.

Converse shook his head, opened the door into the bedroom.

"Not yet," he admitted, "but we'll take Mr. Feathers, alias Vogel, down to the stationhouse. I got a couple of real rough coppers that could make a mummy broadcast. I got another prize in here, but I'll just make sure she's tied up tight. We'll leave her here so in case the boys bear down too hard on Feathers and kill him, we can still make her talk. You kept your cab?"

Marian Green shuddered, nodded. Converse went into the bedroom.

"Listen," rasped the Purviance girl. "You can't do this to me. You can't, I tell you."

"Shut up, Lou," Converse growled. "We'll get around to you later. I'll just make sure these knots won't slip." He untied the bonds, readjusted them. When he straightened, he grinned. "Now, you hellion! You'll stay put. Think over what I told you. If you don't talk when I come back, I'll roast the feet off you." With that threat ringing in her ears, he walked out into the living-room.

He jerked Feathers erect, hooked his arm under one of his own and helped him to the door. The trip to the street was made in a hostile silence.

Feathers balked at entering the cab, but Converse bunted him into the tonneau, followed. Marian climbed in last, sat on the other side of the skipper.

The driver took one long look at the handcuffs, asked: "Central Station?"

Converse fixed his eyes on a large custom-built limousine parked just ahead of them. "No. Back up about fifty yards and sit tight for a while."

The driver shrugged, started to back the hack along the street.

"What are we waiting for?" Marian asked.

"Watch," the skipper advised, and lapsed into silence.

THEY sat tense, fixing their eyes on the limousine ahead after the focus of his own gaze. Feathers squirmed restlessly, cursing. Converse ignored him. Within five minutes, a girl darted out of the Century House, scrambled into the limousine.

"She slipped her bonds!" Marian Green exclaimed, startled. "She will escape!"

In the darkness of the cab, the skipper smiled. He leaned forward, said to the driver: "If you ever want to drive a cab in this town again, don't lose that buggy

ahead of you." Then he sat back easily.

"You deliberately allowed her to get away," Marian Green whispered. "I think I understand."

"Good girl. Keep your chin up."

"It's away up," she smiled back.

The limousine caromed away from the curb in a crazy burst of speed, took the first corner in second. The cab driver grunted, souped his buggy and rolled after it. Converse leaned over the seat, watched the speedometer. It climbed to sixty, stayed there as the two machines roared toward the suburbs.

The Purviance girl never glanced back, or if she did, she gave no evidence of it. She held a straight course, her right foot leaded with terror. Like a wounded pigeon, she drove in a straight line to her destination, a small, isolated house on the south side of the freight yards, near the Farquall Slough. The skipper's cab was about the length of four city blocks behind when the limousine's lights whirled sidewise as Luella sent it into a dry skid.

In the beam of the stilled lights, they saw her separate herself from the black blob of the car and tear into the small frame house.

Converse ordered the cab to a stop in the lee of a small tool-house about a couple of hundred yards from the cottage. The driver turned around for instructions. In the dim half light of the early morning, Converse scowled into the freckled, homely features of the cabby, then smiled.

"You got a gun, son?"

The driver shook his head. "No, chief, but I got me a swell wrench." He exhibited a piece of steel about a foot long.

The skipper nodded approvingly. "Swell. Now, you sit tight and keep your eye on this wolf." He indicated Feathers with a nod. "Pin his ears back with that wrench if he makes a move. I'll be back after a while."

"And me?" demanded Marian Green.

"Can't I do something?" Her eyes shone.

"You sure can. If I get bogged down, you caress Mr. Feathers' head with that wrench all the way to headquarters while the driver runs his buggy. Think you can do that?"

Marian gave Feathers a bleak stare. "I'm quite sure of it," she snapped.

Captain Converse left them, circled the tool-shed and walked down a spur-track that went past the rear of the cottage. He scrambled down the cinder slope, over a picket fence into a tiny, rubbish-filled yard, before he paused to survey his position.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hurricane House

THE COTTAGE was box-shaped, covered with weathered shingles. Small, ugly even in the uncertain light, its only virtue was its isolation and its proximity to the roundhouse a half-mile down the road. Sickly yellow light seeped through rotted blinds, but the windows were too high above the ground for the skipper to reach. The whole house was raised on a high concrete foundation.

As he moved around the building, he saw the large sedan parked on the other side. He frowned, wondered how many people were inside. He found himself wishing Hostetter and McMurty were lunging along on either flank. Not that he was afraid—the skipper wasn't afraid of any crook so far born—but he didn't want to fail. This case meant too much to him. In shaking off the conservative reaction, he leaned the other way. He unholstered his gun, slipped a fresh shell in place of the shot used on Feathers, walked coldly around to the rear, climbed the steps and deliberately kicked the door in.

With it still banging on shattered hinges, he charged into a kitchen, across

it. He met Attorney Saulan running through a hall door, stopped him with a gesture and backed him into a living-room. Then he stood straddle-legged in the archway and digested the tableau before him.

Commissioner De Lisle leaned against one corner of a square table. Luella crouched on the edge of a chair beneath him. Saulan had moved into the room ahead of Converse and now stood tense, ready to run at the first opportunity. Standing on either side of a small stove, were two men in rough clothes. One was a huge gorilla with a broken nose and pock-marked hide, a one-time wrestler known as Iron Man Betz. The other man was gaunt, and his fox-face was pitted with the grime of the yards. He looked like a railroad watchman and, somehow, Converse decided the house was his, although the skipper did not know the man.

They regarded him in sullen surprised silence. Only the Purviance girl exhibited the terror which claimed her. The watchman made the first move when his hand started for the open holster at his side.

"Hold it!" Converse growled.

The watchman's hand stopped, came slowly up.

The skipper let his eyes run from one to the other, but his attention was fixed on the girl. "All right, Lou," he said harshly. "You've run the full length of your rope. Somebody in this room is going to start talking, or I'm going to start shooting. It might as well be you."

"Did Feathers squawk?" Luella whimpered impulsively.

"Stop it, Lou!" De Lisle told her quietly. "He's bluffing." De Lisle glanced significantly at Saulan. "Do the talking, Abe."

The attorney swallowed, looked helpless for a minute, then began to shout: "You haven't any right to bust in here without a warrant. Lay down that gun at once, or I'll—"

"You'll what?" the skipper wanted to know.

Saulan squirmed. "I'll sue!"

Converse laughed, and Saulan shivered at the sound.

"If you ever get out of this room alive, you mean," the skipper jeered. "There's only one reason in the world why Fan De Lisle would have anything to do with a joint like this one—you're using it to hold somebody. That somebody is Walt Green."

"Feathers did talk!" yelled Luella.

"Shut up," snarled De Lisle. "I'll knock your damned skull in, you little fool. Abe will handle this."

"I won't shut up. Abe isn't doing so well, either. I'm not going to take the rap. By God, Fan, I'll turn state's evidence before I'll stand—"

A GUN exploded behind Converse. He saw Luella crumple, then he tried to turn, but a gun slashed across his skull and he pitched forward on his knees. Falling, he caught a foggy impression of the uniformed figure of Mace following him. He heard vaguely the low moan of the stricken woman, the cursing of men's voices and the cool, suave tones of De Lisle.

"Neat work, Mace. She deserved it, the slut!"

"You better finish that cop," the hoarse voice of Betz cut in. "He's a tough one."

"A pleasure," Mace grated, and another gun thundered in the confines of the little room.

The skipper's eyes had weakened, the figures merged into a disjointed blur. He pushed up to one knee, tensed himself for the expected slug.

There was a scream—a man's scream—and another shot. Then fighting forms swirled about the room. The skipper thought he heard the happy growl of McMurty, but he couldn't be sure. Out of the fog, he saw the watchman whip out

his gun, start to bring it up. Converse managed to get up on both knees, then he went into a long dive. His head butted into the watchman's stomach and they both went over fighting.

THE contact with struggling flesh made the skipper feel better. A fist struck his face, helped to clear his head. He started pumping both fists automatically and was rewarded with agonized grunts from his opponent.

It didn't last long. The watchman sagged, went limp, and, when Converse staggered around for new worlds to conquer, he found Hostetter and McMurty in complete control. Hostetter was grinning at him.

"Nice goin', skipper. You're even better when you're half out."

Converse pulled erect, steadied himself against the table. De Lisle was on his hands and knees, head hanging like a trail-weary pony. Mace was spread-eagled on the floor, obviously dead. Iron Man Betz was bent into an inert heap near the limp figure of the watchman. McMurty was sitting on the floor holding Luella's head in his lap.

"Where in hell did you monkeys come from?" Converse demanded.

Hostetter nodded at the Purviance girl. "We trailed you to the Century. We saw Mace go in, then, after you came out, he showed again carrying a girl. We tried to tail him, but lost him, so we went back to the Century lookin' for you. We saw Feathers and Lou go in, so we climbed into the back seat of the limousine to greet 'em when they came out. When we saw you pile into the cab and back up, we figured something was hot, so we sat tight. Lou drove us out here without knowing it."

"We sat on the floor," McMurty enlarged.

Converse scowled. "For a couple of guys on vacation, you babies get around—

I wish you'd work that hard on duty." He swayed out of the room, looking for a cellar door.

He found it, went down. A struck match showed him a droplight. He turned it on.

The body of little Tina lay on a dirty pipe-bench wrapped in the golden-silk coverlet. Converse bit his lip, peered into a coal bin.

A tall young man in shirt sleeves lay half on the damp cement floor, half on the coal pile, his hands shackled behind his back, his feet roped together. There was a filthy gag of sack-cloth tight around his mouth, but his eyes were lively, full of anger.

Converse reached over, untied the gag. The man turned over, spat relievedly, then eyed the skipper coldly.

"You Walt Green?" Converse asked. "I'm Converse."

Hostility went out of the young patrolman's eyes. He grinned ruefully. "Yes, sir. I'm Green. What in hell am I here for, anyhow?"

Converse removed the handcuffs and the leg rope before answering. He helped the young cop erect, steadied him until the blood began to circulate.

"Just one question," Converse said. "Did you call me last night for anything?"

Green looked bewildered. "Why, no, sir! Was I supposed to call you?"

"About what I figured," Converse growled, half to himself. "There's a girl in a taxi parked near the toolhouse down the road. She knows most of the answers. Better trot down there. I'll be along after a while. Her name's Marian."

He helped Green up the stairs, pushed him out the front door, then he went into the living-room. McMurty had lifted Luella onto the table. She was quite dead. De Lisle sat glumly in a chair nearby, under the watchful eye of Hostetter.

"She talked a little," the big Irishman said. "She must have been out of her

head, though. She said she bumped off Hymie."

"Did she say why?"

McMurty glanced sidewise at De Lisle. "She did. She made a deal with Fan De Lisle. She was gonna move into that wren-cage in the Century House."

Converse smiled dryly. "She was out of her head all right. Take 'em all down to headquarters, boys. I'll meet you there."

"Suppose the D.A.'s there?"

"If he isn't, we'll send for him."

HE TURNED, walked through the house and down the road. He saw Marian and the cab driver trying to keep Walt Green from jumping the now cowed Feathers.

"That's the guy who rapped me on the head," Green shouted angrily.

Converse grinned, stuck his head into the cab. "Feathers, it's all over. Mace just killed Luella, and he's deader'n a mackerel. De Lisle is on his way to headquarters. We found Tina's corpse in the basement. This is one swell chance for a wise guy to miss some of the heat by turning state's evidence. We got enough on the bunch of you to file first-degree murder charges and make 'em stick. Now you don't have to talk, I wouldn't threaten you. However, if you don't, I'll let Patrolman Green bring you into headquarters in his own fashion."

Feathers glanced obliquely at Green. "I'd rather talk," he admitted dryly.

"Who killed Hymie?"

"Lou killed him. She made a deal with Fan to put him on the spot, but, when she got to Hymie's apartment, he was packed to leave. He wouldn't let her go, insisted she had to leave with him. So Lou bent a poker over his head and killed him.

"She got panicky and called Fan at the fights. He told her to sit tight and sent Saulan out to front for her. Meanwhile, Fan sent Mace out for me. We wanted a

goat for the job to turn it onto you, so we picked on this copper, Green. He'll tell you that side of it."

"I sure will," Green cut in savagely. "They pulled up alongside me, told me there was a hold-up in the next block. When I jumped into the tonneau, this monkey knocked me cold."

Feathers smiled ruefully. "Mace took Green's coat and ran up into the apartment and out again to make it look good. We planted a couple of slugs under the couch, figuring you'd find 'em. We called Fan and he called you, posing as Green."

"I know about that," Converse grunted. "That made it look like Hymie was alive when Luella grabbed herself a good alibi by being in my office when De Lisle called. But who killed Tina, and why did you give that yarn about Green to his wife?"

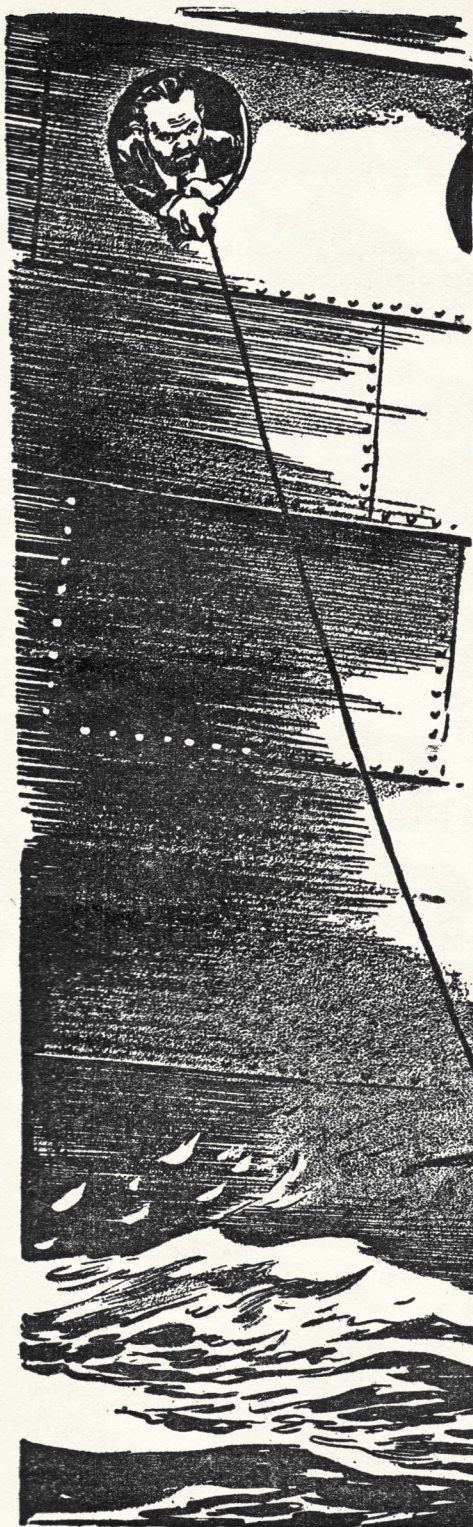
Feathers shrugged. "Mace saw you strike out after Tina. He beat it up there ahead of you. Tina didn't know much, but she could make some pretty good guesses and she was sore because Fan kicked her out. The dough didn't satisfy her. Mace heard her start to squawk, killed her. Then he waited in the lower hall until you left, went back and brought the corpse out to the cottage where the boss was holding Green.

"About the Vince Vogel act. Well, we figured if Mrs. Green thought her husband was mixed up with Luella, she'd do one of two things. She'd get mad and tell the papers, or she'd shut up tight to protect him. We knew if it got out it would blow smoke in somebody's eyes."

"Why was I kidnaped?" Green asked.

The skipper answered that one.

"They wanted to make it look like a cop did the killing, kid, so they picked on the nearest cop, which happened to be you. It won't hurt you. We need new blood in the detective bureau. De Lisle's reign is all over. A man shouldn't ever change dames in the middle of a murder."



You Can't Trust A Corpse

by

O. B. Myers

Author of "The Black Room," etc.

Suicide framed to look like murder was something Purser Breck had heard about — but this cockeyed death in the Cunaria stateroom seemed to be exactly the reverse. Here was a little guy, conked in a locked cabin with the key inside, and every clue pointing to self-annihilation. Which didn't jibe at all with another little man's claim that he was the slayer and anxious to hang for his crime!

THE *Cunaria* lifted its nose smoothly to the long, mid-Atlantic swells, plowing a good thirty knots behind its churning propellers every hour. Two days out of Cherbourg, there was a brisk following breeze, the September sun was just warm enough to take the chill out of the air, the barometer was high, and everything pointed to a quick and pleasant

"—hauled him up a little, once in a while, just to tantalize him. Called it the water cure."

voyage. Which just goes to show how wrong the signs can sometimes be.

Up on the play-deck, Breck leaned against a davit and breathed great lungfuls of crisp ocean air. It was, he reflected, a great life. No wonder men stuck to it for a lifetime in spite of the meager pay and slow advancement. For one thing, you came into contact with the nicer sort of people, at least on a liner of the class of the *Cunaria*. For example, that crowd engaged in a game of shuffleboard by the port rail, there. The four members of the younger generation were playing, and their parents sitting by the rail, watching. Anyone could see with half an eye that they were Park Avenue, or its equivalent in some other city. Healthy, clean-cut, refined, aristocrats in the best sense of the word.

Of course, you would occasionally run across passengers who belonged to a lower order of society—swindlers, international crooks, fleeing embezzlers, or such. In fact, it was one of Breck's duties as purser to keep his eyes open for card-players who were a little too lucky, notorious gem-runners and known dealers in narcotics. But he had already looked over the passengers this trip without spotting any suspicious characters, and so felt quite easy in his mind.

Reaching into his pocket for a cigarette, he was annoyed to find that he had left his pack somewhere. It would hardly be proper to mooch one from a passenger, and there was no other officer in sight at the moment, so he turned toward the companionway. In the doorway, he almost ran head-on into a man coming up the stairs. Breck had noticed him before, usually in the smoking-room. He was a short fellow, thin-featured, wiry, who always wore, in spite of the balmy weather, an overcoat so long that it reached nearly to his heels. Just now, he seemed agitated, as if in a great hurry to get somewhere,

though he certainly didn't look like the type to gambol on the play-deck. His long, thin nose was quivering, mouth half open, eyes unnaturally bright.

"I beg pardon, sir," said Breck, stepping aside.

The man went on past him without a word or nod, and turned toward the bow. Ambling down two flights to B-deck, the purser promptly forgot the incident. After walking the length of the port corridor to his office, he remembered that he had no cigarettes there. Having nothing else to do, anyway, he went down another flight, crossed to the starboard side, and started back toward his stateroom, near the stern.

The narrow, carpeted passageway was lighted by regularly spaced bulbs. On his left were doors opening directly into the cheaper Class A staterooms, on his right the service quarters of the ship. The doors of a couple of storerooms, closed and locked, then an open one giving onto a small steel grating from which a ladder descended steeply, a faint oily smell, and the throb of thousands of horsepower, came up the ladder to register on his senses. Through the next door on his left, also open, he could hear the clatter of cutlery and dishes. That was the Class B kitchen, as he well knew. But before he reached it he came to a sudden stop, rooted to the floor.

He had heard the sound of a shot.

THE sharp crack was distinct, but not loud. The steel partitions of the ship served to muffle it effectively, and the other noises in the corridor helped. But he could have sworn that it came from behind the stateroom door on his left. He noted that the number painted there was 184, as he raised his hand to knock.

After knocking twice and getting no reply, he called in a restrained tone, his mouth close to the panel. There was no answer from inside, and he could hear no sound of movement. He tried the knob.

The door was locked. He knocked again, harder, but got no response.

After a moment of indecision, he drew his pass-keys from his pocket and selected the one marked *C-deck Staterooms*. But he found that he couldn't get it in the lock because there was already a key in position on the inside. That made it certain that there was someone in that stateroom. He knocked once more, with growing apprehension.

When he turned his head, he saw a passenger coming along the corridor toward him. The man was dressed in an inconspicuous gray suit and hat, but his features were unusual enough to mark him in a crowd. He was of medium height, stocky in build, with long arms ending in gnarled, muscular hands. His square, chunky head was set solidly on his shoulders. In contrast with his nose and mouth, which were disproportionately large, his eyes were small and deep-set and of a most peculiar shade of yellowish orange. His hair, worn too long, his eyebrows, extravagantly bushy, and his beard, cut square just below the chin, were all dark red in color, a dull and lusterless tinge.

Breck got the impression that he was on the point of speaking. Then he passed on with a rapier-like glance and fitted a key into the door of the next stateroom, Number 186. As the door opened, Breck started toward him. Some of these rooms connected, to make suites, and some did not—for the moment he couldn't remember which.

"I beg pardon, sir. Is there a door from your room, into One-eighty-four?"

"No, there isn't," was the reply, in a voice that, coming from that rugged chest, was so soft and liquid as to be almost a shock. "Why, what's the trouble, Purser?"

"Nothing—nothing at all," replied Breck quickly. A glance inside assured him that there was no door in the partition. He waited until the bearded man

had closed the door behind him, then moved along the corridor in the opposite direction and knocked at 182. After waiting a few moments, he opened this one with his pass-key, only to observe that there was no connecting door there, either.

He had backed into the passage again when he saw a white coat.

"Steward!" he called. The man in the starched jacket came out of a cross-corridor, toward him. "Who occupies One-eighty-four?"

"A gentleman named Burkett, sir. He's generally in the bar."

"Well, he's in here now, but there's something wrong. The door's locked, and he won't answer. You'd better fetch the ship's carpenter."

Breck waited in the corridor while the steward disappeared, to return in a few minutes with a man in gray overalls, carrying a kit.

"See if you can tweak that key out of there," Breck instructed him.

THE KEY in the lock could not be budged from outside, and the carpenter shortly set to work with auger and handsaw. It took him ten minutes to cut a piece out of the center panel big enough so that Breck could reach through and turn the key.

"That's Burkett, sir," gasped the steward, paling.

The body lay face upon the floor, in such a position that the head and shoulders blocked the door from opening all the way. Breck stepped around quickly and dropped to his knees. As he seized the right wrist, a revolver slipped from the nerveless fingers to the floor. In that wrist he could feel just the faintest trace of a pulse.

"Go for the surgeon, quick," he snapped at the steward. "And after you've sent the doctor here, notify the captain." To the gaping carpenter he said, "See about hanging a new door there at once."

They both vanished hurriedly, leaving Breck crouched over the unconscious figure on the stateroom floor. Burkett was a big man, broad-shouldered and heavy, with powerful limbs and coarse features. His thin blond hair straggled over his eyes, which were closed. At first, Breck thought he was in pain, but then saw that an old scar in his scalp, contracting as it healed, had pulled his ear and the right side of his face back, giving him a distorted, leering expression. The thick lips moved feebly. Breck leaned closer.

At a footstep by his elbow Breck looked up quickly, expecting the physician. But it was the passenger from 186 who had just stepped through the door. His face was stiff with surprise, his eyes bleak.

"Are you a doctor?" queried Breck sharply.

The bearded man shook his head, staring at the floor. The man lying there emitted a sudden, hissing sigh, and his eyelids fluttered open for a brief moment. He did not see Breck, but looked straight up at the other man. Breck wiped bloody froth from his lips.

"Take care—of—things—french—" He choked helplessly.

"All right," said Breck anxiously. "Take it easy. A doctor is on the way. He'll fix you up O. K."

But he was lying and knew it. The dying man seemed to make another effort to speak, though he no longer had the strength to open his eyes. But blood filled his mouth, and his big chest heaved futilely. Suddenly, all his muscles stiffened, but only for an instant—then he relaxed with a last, bubbling groan. When Breck sought and found that wrist once more, there was no longer any trace of a pulse.

AS HE rose to his knees, the ship's doctor entered. It took him only a few moments to verify the fact of death, and the cause. There was a small round bullet-hole exactly in the middle of the

chest, low down, but the leaden missile had mushroomed as it tore through the lung and, where it emerged from the back, had plowed a gap nearly two inches wide. The bullet itself, a misshapen lump of metal, was tangled in the fabric of the dead man's coat.

"Here, Breck," said the doctor. "You'd better take care of that. A dum-dum—reminds me of the war. You'd think if a man were going to shoot himself, he'd choose a less painful tool, wouldn't you?"

The purser bent down and picked up the gun. It was an old-style revolver with a nicked barrel and six chambers, and was still faintly warm to the touch. When he broke it open, he could see that it had recently fired one shot. The empty cartridge was still in the chamber, the other five being fully loaded. As he slipped it in his pocket, the third officer arrived from the bridge.

"What is it, a suicide?" he asked Breck.

The purser nodded. "I happened to be outside the door when he pulled the trigger. It was locked on the inside, so we had to cut our way in. There was no one else in here, of course."

"The captain will want it hushed up, naturally. Try to keep the news from spreading among the passengers, won't you?"

Breck nodded, then noticed the man with the red beard. "You won't mind keeping quiet about this, will you, Mr.—"

"Waterman," was the reply. "Don't worry, I won't talk."

Something in his manner made Breck ask, "Did you know him?"

"Only as a smoking-room acquaintance," answered Waterman. He seemed to be weighing his words carefully. "I was playing bridge with him this afternoon. When he was dummy, he got up and left the table—said something about getting a cigar. He was gone so long we thought he'd quit, so I came down to my stateroom. I didn't even know, then, that he

occupied the next room." He grew vague.

Had there been any indications other than suicide before him, Breck would have entertained suspicions of this man with the red hair and the jaundiced complexion. His manner was overcautious, as if he had been caught totally unprepared and was afraid of making a misstep. And, at the same time, he watched two members of the crew lift the corpse onto a stretcher and carry it out with a peculiarly cold and yet ferocious gleam in his eye that Breck could have sworn was hatred. Under the circumstances, however, suspicions of anyone at all were utterly uncalled for, though Breck made a mental note that Waterman probably knew more about the dead man than appeared at present.

"I see," said the purser. "You'll probably be asked to make a formal statement to the captain, later. In the meantime, we'd appreciate your cooperation in keeping the affair quiet."

The bearded man bowed stiffly and left the room. The carpenter was busy hanging a new door on the hinges. A steward was outside in the corridor to ward off the curious. Noticing that the port-hole was open, Breck crossed to close it. His eye was caught by a mark on the rim, just below the lower edge. The paint was chipped away and the steel underneath dented, as if it had been struck a sharp blow by a pointed instrument. He stared at it, for a moment. It conveyed nothing to him at the time except the obvious fact that whatever had happened had happened on this voyage. Such a blemish would certainly have been removed during the regular inspection in port.

Shrugging, he closed the port and screwed the handle down tight. The carpenter had finished with the door. After a last look around, Breck went out and locked it behind him. Then he walked immediately to the captain's cabin to make his report in person.

"Damn it," muttered Captain Mathis,

"why did he have to pick the *Cunaria*? There's nothing so bad for a ship's reputation as a suicide. Of course, it will have to come out in our official report of the voyage, but try and keep the gossips off it, will you?"

"I've already taken steps, sir, to hush it up," nodded the purser.

IN accordance with these instructions, Breck spent that evening and the following morning making quiet, guarded inquiries. He found that Burkett had been traveling alone and had no acquaintances on the *Cunaria* except Waterman and the other two men with whom he had several times played bridge in the smoking-room. He notified these three to come to the captain's cabin at four o'clock to make their formal statements.

He found also that the passengers had somehow gotten wind of what had happened in Cabin 184, without getting any of the details. An undercurrent of rumor was running through the salons and along the decks. Some spoke of a murder, some of a suicide, some merely of an accident. There was even one fantastic whisper that a passenger had been shot while resisting arrest by a ship's officer. Breck tactfully refused to affirm or deny anything, pleading complete ignorance.

At four that afternoon, he went to the master's suite below the bridge. The captain was already there, as well as the second officer and a clerk to take dictation. The three passengers arrived a few minutes apart. The first two made identical statements. They had never seen Burkett before boarding the *Cunaria*, and had merely played bridge with him, at a cent a point, three or four times. He had won small sums from each of them. At no time had he acted strangely, or spoken of taking his life. At the time of his death, they had been waiting for him, in each other's company, at the card-table.

When they had finished, and departed,

the red-haired Waterman made his statement. It coincided with the other two exactly, and went on to cover what he had seen and heard in the corridor below decks, which checked Breck's own observations in every detail. He had barely finished dictating to the stenographer when there was a knock at the door.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the third officer, entering. "There's a passenger out here asking to see you. He says his name is Weil, and that he can give you some important information about Burkett."

The captain's brows lifted. "Send him right in."

The mate opened the door and made a gesture with his head. Into the room came a little man with a long thin nose, wearing an overcoat that hung all the way down to the tops of his shoes. Breck recognized him instantly as the fellow he had met the previous afternoon at the head of the port companion on the play-deck, but for the moment the purser attached no importance to that fact.

The short man, without glancing to either side, marched directly up to the captain's desk. He kept his hands in his coat pockets, and his skinny face was twitching, as if he were too upset to speak.

"Well?" said Captain Mathis. "You have something to tell us?"

"I did it," said the little man abruptly. "I can't stand this any longer. You'll get me, anyway. I killed him."

THE very air in the room seemed to turn solid, imprisoning every man there in helpless rigidity. No one moved, or spoke, or even seemed to breathe. The master was the first to recover. "Just a minute, Mr.—er, Weil. Would you mind repeating—er, telling us exactly what you mean?"

"I mean Burkett. I killed him. Shot him in his stateroom. I'm confessing. You might as well arrest me now as later."

There was another moment of stunned

silence. Then Waterman, from his position by the clerk's desk, started to take a step forward. Breck saw that his mouth was open as if to speak. But the captain halted him by a gesture, and addressed Weil again.

"Perhaps you'd better go over the whole thing from the beginning, so we'll understand. . . . Take this down, Clerk."

The little man drew a deep breath and licked his thin lips. He seemed almost to be enjoying his position, as if a great weight were being lifted from his heart. He spoke in a rasping, nasal voice, and never moved his eyes from the expressionless face of the captain.

"He hated me. Ever since nineteen thirty-two, in Omaha. I was forced to testify against him in court. I told nothing but the truth, but he held it against me. I never saw him afterward, had no idea what had become of him, until I found he was on board the *Cunaria*. From the way he acted, I could tell that he still felt the same way toward me. I wanted to put an end to his hatred, hoped to conciliate him. So I went to his stateroom, yesterday afternoon, to explain. But he refused to forgive and forget. In fact, he became angrier. When he started to pull a gun from his pocket, I had to shoot in self-defense. That's all."

This time, it was Breck who started forward with a question on his lips, but again the captain motioned for no one else to speak.

"You shot him?" he said calmly. "With what gun, Mr. Weil?"

"With my own automatic. You'll find it in my cabin."

"And then what did you do?"

"I ran out. I was excited, naturally. I went up on deck. I meant to say nothing. But I thought it over, and decided to confess."

"Did Burkett fire at you?" was the next question.

"No. He never had time. I shot first,

and he fell." The man's face was bleak.

The captain asked very slowly, "When you ran out of his room, did you lock the door behind you?"

The short man seemed surprised and annoyed at the questions. "Why, no. I don't think so—I couldn't have. I had no key."

The captain leaned across the desk and his voice was suddenly stony. "Then how do you account for the fact that Burkett, when found, held in his hand a revolver from which one shot had been fired, and the fact that his door was locked *on the inside?*"

Breck had never before seen such an expression of amazement and consternation. He sensed instinctively that it was too genuine to be acting. The passenger named Weil rocked back on his heels and clutched at his trembling chin. His face went livid.

"His door locked?" he stammered. "On the inside!"

"Yes," said the captain firmly. "And the purser was passing in the corridor, and heard the shot fired. No one entered or left that room from that moment until he broke in and found Burkett, dying. How do you account for that?"

Weil's eyes were starting from his head. He stared at Captain Mathis as if he were looking at a ghost. His lips moved soundlessly. Finally, he pulled himself together and attempted a sickly smile.

"Quit kidding me," he croaked hoarsely. "Dead men don't get up and lock doors. I tell you I shot him. I admit it. Arrest me."

The captain gave him a long, searching look, then turned to the second officer. "Mr. Foss, take this man in my bedroom and sit with him for a few minutes while we discuss this matter."

Weil shrugged, and turned to follow the mate. Then, for the first time, he met the eyes of the red-bearded man, standing in the far corner. Neither of them spoke,

but Breck was convinced that he saw a flash of recognition. In fact, he thought he read more than that. The little man seemed to shrink even smaller inside his ridiculously long coat, and as he crossed the room he seemed to be shivering.

No sooner had the door closed behind him than Waterman stepped forward. "If you have no more need of me, I'll be going, sir."

"Certainly," said the captain. "But I'll ask you to say nothing of what you've heard—for a short time, at least."

"Of course not," agreed the bearded man with a half hidden smile, and backed through the door into the corridor.

THE captain was incredulous. "What do you think of that statement?" he asked, frowning. He was thinking what a disagreeable thing this was to have happen on his boat.

"I think the man is simply batty," replied Breck. "What he describes couldn't have happened. He must suffer from hallucinations."

"Or else he's publicity mad, and can imagine nothing more exciting than being the central figure in a nice juicy murder case. Of course, he knows that when it comes to trial the facts will come out, and he can't possibly be convicted, in spite of his so-called confession. In which case, if we lock him up now, the line will be in a nasty mess over false-arrest. Clerk, read over that statement of his once for us, will you?"

The clerk read from his shorthand notes, and then Breck and the captain discussed the amazing confession for several minutes. But the more they considered the matter, the less convinced they became. Finally, the captain called to the second mate to bring Weil back in the office.

"I don't know what your motive may be, Mr. Weil," the master staid sternly. "But I am forced to the conclusion that

you are not speaking the truth. What you tell me simply doesn't jibe with the facts. I have no intention of being made a fool of, so that you can make the headlines. I might lock you up as a dangerous lunatic, except that you seem to be dangerous to no one but yourself. Unless you can fit your story to the facts we already know, I'm taking no action whatsoever."

The little man's jaw dropped and his pallid cheeks quivered. Breck thought he exhibited not merely surprise, but stark terror.

"But I—I killed him. I tell you, I'm confessing the murder. Don't you believe me? I don't know anything about the door—I can't remember whether I locked it or not. What difference does that make? I shot him. I'll show you the gun I shot him with."

At that the captain raised his brows. "Purser, go with Mr. Weil to his cabin, and if he has a gun there bring it back here."

The short man, apparently pleased, hurried out of the door, with Breck on his heels. "It's Sixty-three, on B-deck," he volunteered.

They went down the port companion and walked rapidly toward the stern along the open deck. Before they were amidships, Breck noticed a man's figure, a hundred feet ahead. He came out of a passage, crossed behind a group of strollers, and threw something over the rail into the sea. It was too far for Breck to get any idea of what the object was, and it wasn't until the man turned and strode toward them that he recognized the square-cut, crimson beard.

He passed without speaking, but gave the purser a curious, twisted smile. The short man said nothing, but pressed closer to Breck's side and hurried along faster than before. They entered a short cross-passage, turned right in the corridor, and halted before a stateroom door. Weil fumbled in his pocket, but Breck on an

impulse, turned the knob without waiting. The door swung open.

"What the—I was sure I locked it!" exclaimed the passenger.

The room was in some disorder. All the drawers were pulled out. There was a heap of clothes on the bed, and a traveling-bag stood open in the middle of the floor, its contents rumbled.

"It's in the bag, there," cried Weil, dropping to his knees. He hunted wildly among shirts and socks. "It—it—Where the devil! It's gone!" he wailed. "My God, it's gone—it's been stolen! I put it in the bag, here—I hadn't even changed the cartridge, I tell you!"

He was, thought Breck, a magnificent actor. His distress was as real as if the absence of that mythical weapon exposed him to an accusation of murder, instead of an accusation of innocence.

"If you find your automatic, Mr. Weil," said Breck sarcastically, "together with any further proof that you shot Burkett, no doubt you will inform the captain at once." He backed out into the corridor and closed the door after him, leaving the little man weeping on the floor. But he had no more than moved a step before he heard the key turn in the lock of 63.

When he reported what had taken place, the captain said: "Just what I expected. He probably never owned an automatic. He's just balmy, in my opinion."

IT WAS the following morning when Breck once more entered Stateroom 184 to pack up the dead man's effects and make certain that there were no traces of the tragedy for its next occupant to discover. Burkett had owned the usual traveling-man's kit, but not much clothing. It took him only ten minutes to stow things in the one suitcase. Then his attention again centered on the scar in the paint just below the rim of the port-hole. An arm-chair stood there. Glancing down at it, he saw some flakes of paint on the

cushion. He lifted the cushion to shake them off, but came to a sudden stop.

Something rolled out from underneath and dropped to the floor. He picked it up and stared in astonishment. It was a bullet.

It was round, clean and shiny, its nose flattened somewhat where it had evidently met the steel rim. But it showed no slightest trace of blood. His mind searched for an explanation. It could not have been there long. The flecks of paint on the chair proved that. Perhaps Burkett had fired once to test his revolver, and then a second time to kill. No, the gun in his hand had contained only one empty cartridge. He had not reloaded, for there was neither extra ammunition, nor an empty shell, anywhere among his effects.

Breck took the bullet to his office and got Burkett's nicked revolver out of his safe. Yes, it fitted—it was the right caliber. He now examined again the other bullet—the one that had torn a path through bone and lung. But it was so distorted out of shape and diameter that it was impossible to tell much about its caliber, though he knew that it might still be identified by the tiny lines on its outer surfaces, the tell-tale marks of the bore that had fired it.

He picked up a small magnifying-glass and studied it. Yes, he could see some scratches—some were twisted out of shape, but others were fairly plain. The more he thought about finding that second bullet, the more his curiosity was aroused. Damn it, he could try!

He took the revolver down into an alleyway behind the boilers, where he got an oiler to help him arrange a pile of pillows against a steel bulkhead. He fired one shot from close range, and then spent ten minutes locating the bullet, which had not penetrated half as far as he had expected. Then he carried it back up to his little office, and set to work to examine it alongside of the others.

IT WAS more than an hour before he learned anything positive. In the first place, Breck was not a ballistics expert, and knew the principles involved only from what he had read in newspapers. In the second place, he lacked the proper apparatus. Instead of special lights to bring out the markings, and a comparison microscope with a double-field, he had only a desk-lamp and a hand magnifying-glass. Furthermore, the conclusions which his observations forced upon him were so grotesque that he hardly dared to believe his eyes.

As nearly as he could tell, the last two bullets—the one he had fired himself, and the one found in the chair below the port—were identical. Without more accurate measuring-instruments, he could not swear to it, but they appeared to have the same scratches, and hence must both have come from Burkett's revolver. The other one, however—the one that had killed Burkett—was different. To an exact similarity he could not swear, but a difference was something that even his crude tools made positive. That mushroomed slug, he was forced to conclude, had never come from the nicked gun.

He sat back, closed his aching eyes, and tried to think clearly. What did that mean then? Burkett had not shot himself with his own revolver. He had been killed by a bullet from some other gun. In other words, he had been murdered. The shot that hit the rim of the port-hole, however—Burkett had evidently fired that. Breck, himself, had heard one shot. But which one? And if there had been a murderer in that room, how had he gotten out, leaving the door locked *on the inside*?

Breck thought of the port. Yes, it was large enough to pass a small man's body. But what then? He could not cling to the smooth hull of the ship. A rope to climb would be his only method. He rose and went quickly up to the play-deck. The shuffleboard lay-out was directly above

the location of Cabin 184. The same group was again playing. He asked them a few tactfully worded questions. Yes, they had been right there playing all Tuesday afternoon. No, no one had climbed over the rail. They were positive no one could have done so without being seen.

He returned to his office with a fantastic idea taking shape in his mind. It was so fantastic as to be utterly incredible, and yet the only possibility, as far as he could see, that would fit all the facts.

What if a murderer, hidden in Cabin 184, had shot Burkett down as he had entered and was about to lock the door? The killer, having then departed, leaving his victim writhing on the floor, what if Burkett, wounded, dying, had for some inconceivable reason wished to make his death appear to be suicide? He might have reached up and turned the key in the lock, and, drawing his own revolver, have fired one shot out the open port. Only by a diabolic freak of fate, coupled with the unsteadiness of his hand, that shot might have missed the port-hole, hit the rim, and fallen back into the arm-chair.

Breck shook his head and swore softly. No, it was incredible. It was beyond the bounds of reason. He had heard tales, more than once, of a man committing suicide and deliberately laying clues to point the suspicion of murder at a hated enemy. But for a murdered man, in his last agonies, purposely to lift suspicion from his killer and lay clues pointing to suicide—no, that was inconceivable. A man can be robbed of nothing more valuable to him than his life, and no instinct is stronger than a man's desire to see his own death avenged by the capture and punishment of his murderer. That was the very basis of human nature, and a man of Burkett's venal characteristics would be no exception.

He tried, all that afternoon, to put the crazy idea out of his mind. But the evidence of the bullets kept returning to

haunt him, as well as Weil's inexplicable actions. In one way, those protestations of guilt only increased his bewilderment. Why would a murderer, otherwise unsuspected, beg to be arrested and tried, even if he did stand a chance of getting life imprisonment on a plea of self-defense, rather than electrocution? The whole thing was screwy, grotesque. There must be some other explanation. And yet—

AFTER dinner, when the *Cunaria* had passed Nantucket and was plowing steadily through the dusk toward New York, he went to the captain. He described what his study of the bullets had revealed, and expounded his explanation of events.

"Are you batty, too, Breck?" the captain snorted. "You ask me to believe that a dying man would fake suicide to help his murderer escape? No, there must be some other explanation. Burkett killed himself—I'm convinced of that. Only, I can't figure Weil's confession, and as for those bullets!" He looked sharply at the purser. "What do you suggest?"

"I would like to wireless New York police headquarters. Yes, I know we'll be there in a few hours. But I have a feeling that, instead of being at the end of a crime, we're in the middle of it. What we've seen so far is only the first act. There is more coming. What comes next may explain Burkett's death, but then it will be too late. I don't understand what's happened so far, but I have a fear that my denseness is going to lead to more and worse trouble."

"Whatever we do in this case, we stand a good chance of looking foolish." The captain shrugged. "Use your own judgment, Breck."

The purser went at once to the radio-room and spent five minutes composing a message. Briefly, but clearly, he described Burkett's suicide and Weil's incredible admission of guilt. He mentioned curtly that

there was conflicting evidence in the bullets, and ended by giving a general description of the two passengers.

Two hours later, the *Cunaria* was steaming through the night, with Ambrose Lightship dead ahead, still five miles off. Breck's reply was delivered to him in the captain's cabin, where the master and the second officer listened while he read aloud—

"If man named Burkett has five-inch scar right side scalp, he is probably Buck Birkette, notorious Kansas bank robber and fugitive from justice. In that case, short man is doubtless Weasel Weil, former accomplice and informer. Arrest him on general principles. Advise you search passenger-list immediately for Frenchy Carrou, alias Garret, former pal of Birkette and traveling with him when last reported. Latter wanted two charges robbery. Very dangerous. Arrest at once, but exercise caution. Description, five-feet-nine, one-hundred-eighty pounds, once heavily tanned, present sallow complexion, light brown hair and eyebrows—latter bushy—flat nose, large mouth, very long arms. Prominent feature, eyes—unique shade deep yellow, no lashes. Hold, if on board. Inspector will meet you at Quarantine."

Breck read that description a second time, and snapped his fingers. "Well, that's Waterman! It says nothing about a beard, but he could have grown that, and dyed it red. And a man with one alias can have a dozen. We'd better go and grab him right away."

"Wait a minute," warned the captain. "He's a dangerous character, remember, and you're not armed. Mr. Foss, got your Colt handy? Good. Mine's right here. You and I will go after this Frenchy. Breck, you make tracks, meanwhile, to Weil's cabin, and by the time you bring him up here we'll have the other man in the brig."

Without another word, the three officers filed out of the door. Captain Mathis and the second officer, their faces grim, turned in one direction, the purser in the other. He went down to B-deck, back along the port side, and into a passage.

Before the door marked 63 he halted. With his hand raised to knock, something made him pause. Silently, he dropped to one knee and put his eye to the keyhole.

AT FIRST, all he could discern was the fact that the light was on. Then he saw a movement—an opaque figure crossed between him and the opposite wall. It was man, but his narrow line of vision permitted him to learn no more, until that man stooped low for some unknown purpose. Then Breck drew a sharp breath. He could not see any portion of the occupant's face, but what he did see set his heart to pounding. He could not be mistaken—it was a dark-red beard!

Weil's cabin—and Waterman, alias Frenchy Carrou, was in there. Breck's only thought was that now he could grab them both at once. He straightened up and selected a pass-key from the ring in his pocket. Slipping it noiselessly in the keyhole, he gave it a sudden twist, threw the door open, and stepped into the room. Almost at once, a roll of the ship swung the door closed behind him, but he didn't notice that.

The bearded man, over by the open port, had whirled to face him, and his face was livid with surprise and rage. The lips curled back from his yellow teeth in a snarl, and a curse rattled in his throat. Breck got no inkling of what he was about, but did see something very odd. A rope, made fast to one of the legs of the bunk, led up at a slant and disappeared out of the port into the night.

Before he had a chance to guess what that might mean, he saw the short-bladed knife lying on the washstand, and a muscular hand dart toward it. Instinctively realizing that the best defense was a vigorous offense, Breck leaped forward. As the hand closed on the knife, he fastened a grip on the wrist. Immediately, his muscles were straining to the tearing-point.

He rotated on one heel, and tried to jerk that arm over his shoulder. But the hilt of the knife grazed his jaw and almost knocked him spinning. He carried his twist farther, but the other man spun with him, and delivered a thrust to his belly with his left hand that buckled Breck in the middle. The purser, having experienced his share of rough-and-tumble fighting, knew something about holds and tricks, but he found his antagonist's brute strength overpowering.

He dropped to one knee, and then rose as quickly as he had dropped, butting upward with his head. He caught the bearded chin a glancing blow. The other man's head flew back. But fury seemed only to add to his sinewy power. He flung Breck bodily away from him, though the purser still clung grimly to his grip on that steely wrist.

For a few moments, they flung about that tiny cabin like two bulls chained together. Then, in the next instant, they were locked in a close embrace, arms entwined, knees hooked, skull butting skull. Breck's one hand was pinioned at his side by a crooked elbow. His other still gripped the bearded man's right wrist, but the strength of his arm was waning. That hand drew back. The cruel blade of the knife glittered malignantly under the light as it poised in the air.

The sweat stood out on Breck's brow in great beads. His lungs were bursting with the intensity of his effort. He could not have cried out now had he wanted to with all his strength. To stop the inexorable movement of that threatening hand was beyond his utmost powers. His face was jammed against his opponent's neck. Opening his mouth, he gripped a handful of beard in his teeth and jerked savagely.

He knew that real hair came away, because he could taste blood. It was not a false beard, then. A curse of pain rewarded him, but the other man did not shift his position. The hand that held the

knife strained back farther still, and downward, and suddenly Breck realized that his foe was not trying, for the present, at least, to attack him with the blade. He was striving first to cut that rope.

THE purser tried to whirl, but could not budge. He put forth every ounce of his strength. The knife halted for a moment only, then continued to move lower, quivering with the strain. The blade, keen as a razor, crept closer and closer to the slanting rope, which was taut as a hawser under a heavy load. Closer and closer, until Breck saw the edge touch the first strands.

He knew perfectly well that as soon as that rope was cut, the knife would be turned on him. With an agonized groan, he exerted the last of his strength. But his antagonist was a veritable gorilla, and now sensed his triumph coming. He barked a hoarse laugh, and jerked his right hand sharply downward. Breck saw one of the three strands part completely; the others quivered and writhed.

A mist blurred the purser's eyes. Blood pounded in his throat, choking him. He threw his weight sidewise in a last desperate effort to destroy their balance. His bones cracked, but that sinister hand never moved an inch. He tried to bring his knee up in a vicious thrust to the groin, but was blocked. His head was spinning, and a swirling blackness was engulfing everything. Through it, his ears were assailed by a deafening explosion, and a red-hot stab of pain ran through the ribs on his left side. His last conscious thought, as he sank to the floor under a crushing weight, was, "How the devil did he reach a gun with his other hand?"

IT WAS hardly a moment, however, before he was opening his eyes. Captain Mathis bent over him, dashing water in his face. "You all right, Breck? I had to graze you, or I'd never have gotten him

with the first shot." His face was anxious.

The purser pried himself to a sitting position. By his side lay the bearded man, blood welling from a hole in his shirt front, eyes staring glassily at the ceiling. The second officer, heaving rope in through the port-hole, a yard at a time, asked gruffly, "Where's Weil? Did you find him? . . . My God, here he is!"

They had an awkward job to haul the little man in through the port. He was wearing that long overcoat, and was saturated with salt water. The rope was lashed about his two wrists, and his mouth was jammed wide open by a razor-case propped between his teeth. They laid him on the floor, and were surprised to find that he was alive. But by the time the doctor came and started work, he had died without regaining consciousness.

"He must have been dragged on the surface, at the end of that rope, for more than an hour, I'd say. Probably he was hauled up a little way, once in a while, just to tantalize him. That gag would prevent a cry loud enough to be heard on deck. The water cure, they used to call it."

IT TOOK half an hour's rest, and a couple hookers of whisky, before Breck was able to control his trembling limbs enough to walk. Then he managed to make his way to the captain's cabin, where a little later he listened to Inspector Van Tale, of the New York force.

"Weasel Weil and Birkette held up a bank in Omaha together, in nineteen thirty-one. They got away with over eighty thousand dollars, which was never recovered. Both were captured, and the Weasel turned state's evidence. His testimony sent Birkette up for twenty years, and got himself off with six months. Frenchy Carrou, who was in on the job, too, managed Birkette's escape a year later, but evidently Weil had, by that time, dug up the swag and made off with it. Naturally, the pair of them set out on

Weil's trail. They must have just caught up with him on the *Cunaria*."

"Then perhaps he was right about self-defense?" remarked Breck.

"Perhaps," shrugged the inspector. "More likely not. The Weasel would never give the other man an even break. He was always a coward. The way I figure, he had a double object. His confession was genuine—he actually wanted a sentence. That would keep him in the custody of the state for a long time, where at least he would be safe from Frenchy."

"Why was he afraid of Carrou?"

"That man was a devil incarnate," said the inspector grimly. "He once served a sentence in French Guiana, where he learned some plain and fancy tortures from the guards, and the natives. He never killed an enemy quick and clean. He reduced a man to a screaming bundle of intolerable pain, and kept him in that state as long as possible. And he was notorious for never forgiving a squealer. You can see that, to a yellow rat like Weil, even a quick and painless death by electrocution was preferable to falling into Frenchy's hands. But it seems that Birkette outguessed him. He wanted to be sure his pal Frenchy got hold of the Weasel before the *Cunaria* reached port—so, with his dying strength, he deliberately mused up the murder clues."

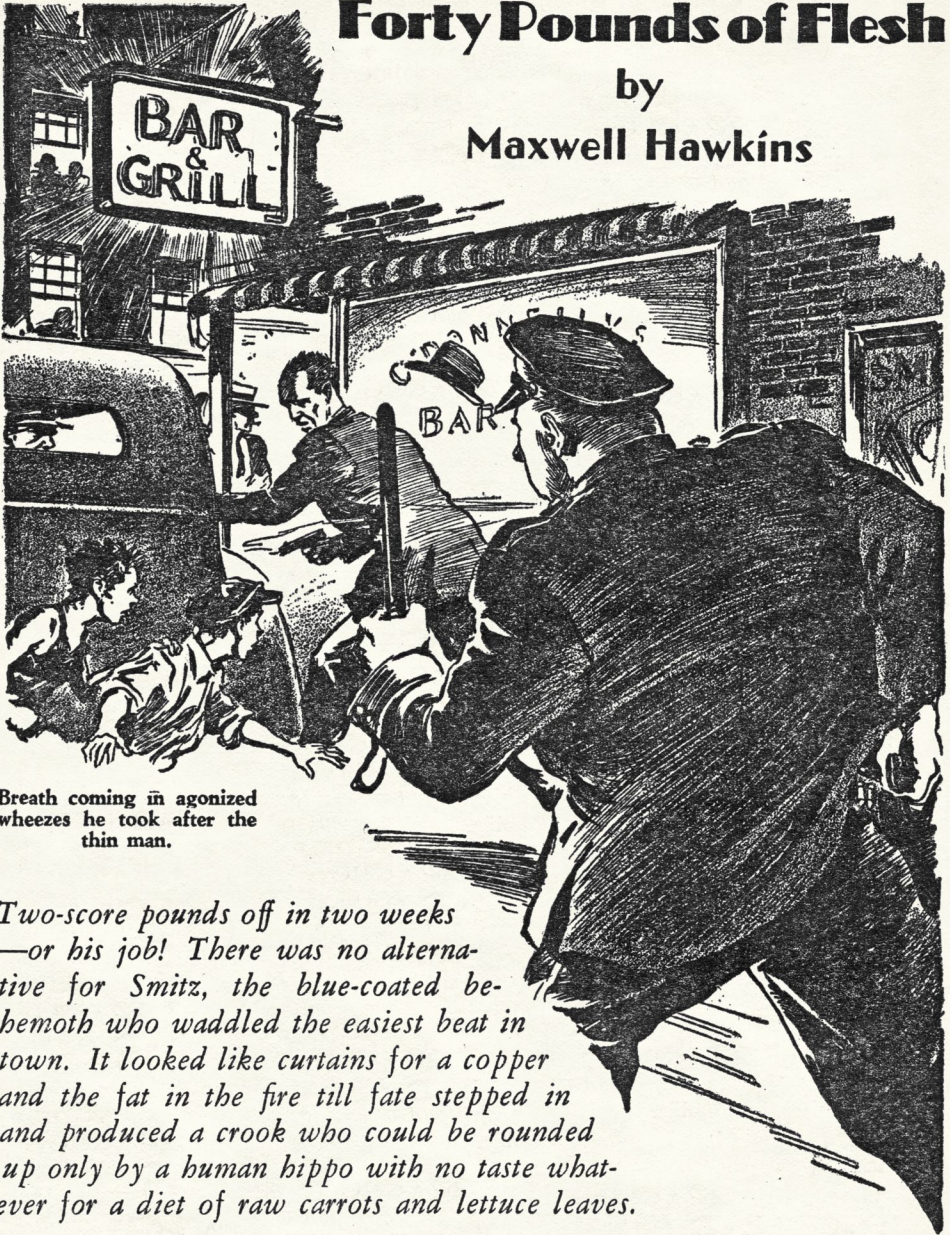
The inspector looked admiringly at Breck. "You were mighty smart to guess it, even if you couldn't believe what you guessed. I've seen plenty of queer crimes, but never one like this. When the dead man, himself, is in league with his murderer to distort the evidence, then the devil himself might well be puzzled!"

He rose with a satisfied smile. "I'd call it good work for one voyage. Three of our most undesirable citizens erased cleanly, and not one drop of honest blood spilled! . . . Good Lord, Purser, I beg your pardon. I'd forgotten that nick in your ribs. How's it feeling now? O. K.?"

Forty Pounds of Flesh

by

Maxwell Hawkins



Breath coming in agonized wheezes he took after the thin man.

Two-score pounds off in two weeks—or his job! There was no alternative for Smitz, the blue-coated behemoth who waddled the easiest beat in town. It looked like curtains for a copper and the fat in the fire till fate stepped in and produced a crook who could be rounded up only by a human hippo with no taste whatever for a diet of raw carrots and lettuce leaves.

OFFICER HOMER "HIPPO" SMITZ squeezed his two hundred and sixty pounds of perspiring flesh through the doorway of the Quality Restaurant and deposited it on a chair. The chair and Officer Smitz both groaned faintly. He unbuttoned his summer tunic, pulled out a handkerchief and mopped it around over his broad and rosy

face. Then, he glanced over at the clock.

The minute-hand was just beginning its climb toward midnight.

From the clock, Officer Smitz's pale-blue eyes moved to the framed menu hanging in back of the counter. After that, they took in the half-dozen cards which set forth the day's specials. He sighed reminiscantly, and, for a moment a beatific

smile bathed his plump features. A voice at his elbow transformed the smile into the scowl of a man who has just been aroused from the Elysian dream by a bucket of cold water.

"What you have, Homer?"

In deference to the official importance of his table customer, Pete Kalas, owner of the Quality Restaurant, had come forward to serve him. Officer Smitz dourly regarded the swarthy face of the man at his elbow. He made a convulsive movement of his throat, as if encountering difficulty in finding his tongue. Finally, he muttered: "Black coffee. No cream."

Pete nodded. "Yeah, what else?"

Officer Smitz's blue eyes roamed to the menu on the wall, glared at it defiantly. He transferred the glare to Pete. "Lettuce and sliced tomato. No dressing."

Repeating the order, Pete waited expectantly, but no further word came from Officer Smitz. "What else?" Pete prompted.

Slowly and noisily, Officer Smitz drew his breath. He grimly seized his belt and holster and adjusted them to a more comfortable position about his equatorial expanse, squaring his shoulders. "A pear," he growled. "One pear—and that's all!"

Pete retreated toward the counter with an ominous shake of his head. It pained him to see his erstwhile best customer reduced to such feeble provision. For eight years, he had been serving Officer Smitz bountifully. Most of the patrolman's present poundage had originated in the Quality Restaurant. But now! As he selected a large tomato and began to peel it, Pete Kalas again shook his head.

As for Officer Smitz, he let his corpulent body jelly down on the chair and stared glumly out the window into the night.

When he had placed the coffee, salad and pear on the white-topped table before Officer Smitz, Pete rocked back on his heels and watched his customer attack

the dainty repast with the voracity of a snowbound wolf. "I read about it," Pete said.

Officer Smitz grunted through a forkful of lettuce leaf.

"He's tough, that mayor," Pete continued. "He say no more fat cops, huh? Fat cops can't catch crooks, huh?"

A slice of tomato caught in Officer Smitz throat. He downed it with a gulp, then sank his teeth viciously into the pear.

"How many pounds you lose, Homer?"

Officer Smitz's reply was muffled by crunching pear. "Twelve."

"Twelve pound in two week!" Pete whistled. "How many more you got to lose, huh?"

"Forty!" Black despair was in Officer Smitz's tone. "Forty more pounds in the next two weeks."

For a long moment, Pete contemplated the idea of the huge man beside him minus forty pounds of his ample dimensions. Then, he shook his head and clucked sympathetically. "What if you don't lose him, maybe?"

Officer Smitz rose ponderously from his chair, and his fingers fumbled at the buttons of his tunic. From his five-feet-ten of height, he glowered down on the small figure of the restaurant owner. "In that case," he said hollowly, "I'll be dropped from the cops—without any maybe!"

WALKING the half block from the restaurant to the precinct station, Officer Smitz meditated on his woes—those twin demons diet and exercise. Behind the sheathing of lard that covered him, he felt empty—yet he experienced an acute gnawing inside the vacuum. For two long weeks, he had battled against obesity. His former rich and abundant fare he had cut down to canary-bird proportions. His time off was a nightmare of Indian clubs and calisthenics, in bed and out. The total result was twelve un-

noticeable pounds that had gone the way of all flesh.

The city was in the midst of one of its sporadic drives against crime. Officer Smitz had taken a score of such drives in his stride, albeit a stride somewhat hampered by two hopelessly collapsed arches. But this drive was different. It was engineered by the new mayor, a lean and hungry-looking person.

At the thought of the mayor, Officer Smitz's eyes darkened and he clenched his hamlike hands. For it was the mayor, himself, who had promulgated the order that all members of the force whose pounds were not within a stipulated ratio to their inches should be dropped as physically unfit.

As he lined up in the squadroom with his brother patrolmen for the roll-call, Officer Smitz glanced over the blue-uniformed figures. With one or two possible exceptions, they seemed to him to come well within the mayor's requirements. He sank deeper into his private slough of despond. So far as he could see, life was just a succession of thin men.

Lieutenant Fogarty was one of them. He was also nervous and irascible. He ran a critical eye along the uniformed line, on the hunt for a loose button or an unshined shoe and then began to read the routine announcements in a monotonous voice. Wrapped in his own thoughts, Officer Smitz scarcely heard him.

"Sixteen years old, blond hair, gray eyes, wearing a blue dress. Left home to go to the grocery last evening and failed to return. Parents think she may be trying to make her way to Hollywood—"

The lieutenant's words broke through into Officer Smitz's consciousness. He scowled faintly. Another movie-struck kid lamming out from home. Probably a kid with skinny legs. He groaned inwardly.

Fogarty's droning voice suddenly took on a new note. "Here's something for

us!" he announced sharply. "Joseph Riccio, alias Joey Rich, alias the Spig, broke prison this afternoon. Age twenty-five, five-feet-eight, a hundred and thirty pounds, black hair, brown eyes, dark complexion, drooping left shoulder. Under life-sentence for killing a delicatessen owner in a hold-up." Fogarty's voice became more informal. "Most of you men know this punk. Used to live over on Ninth Avenue. He may be coming back this way, because he's made a lot of threats against people in this precinct who testified against him. If you run into him, watch your step. He's a killer."

Officer Smitz nodded imperceptibly. He knew Riccio—the skinny yellow rat! The murmur that ran the length of the line showed that the other patrolmen remembered the escaped convict, too.

"Just one more thing." Lieutenant Fogarty paused, and his accusing gaze came to rest on Officer Smitz. "Don't forget that under Department Order Number Sixty-seven, you'll all have to take a special physical examination the first of the month. Mayor's orders."

Under Fogarty's scrutiny, Officer Smitz could feel the blood fill the fatty folds of his neck and chin. He was acutely conscious of his balloon-tire midriff and his tugboat stern. He shifted uneasily from one flat foot to the other.

"That's all," Fogarty snapped.

On the way downstairs, Officer Riley placed a hand on Officer Smitz's shoulder. "Well, Hippo," he grinned. "How you makin' out with your dieting?"

Too depressed to resent the nickname, Officer Smitz shook his head. "Lettuce," he muttered. "And then more lettuce. Riley, I feel like a rabbit."

"You don't look like one," said Officer Riley.

THE beat which Officer Smitz patrolled from midnight till eight in the morning extended for the most part through a

neighborhood of squalid tenements. Two blocks, however, ran along the avenue, with its shops, a movie and numerous saloons, euphemistically designated as taverns or grills. He had been assigned to it for more than five years. Everybody in that teeming neighborhood knew him at least by sight—Officer Smitz to his face, Hippo behind his back.

Officer Smitz exchanged a few words with the patrolman he was relieving and then checked in at the call-box on the corner. At a leisurely wobble, he started down the street, pausing now and then to try a closed store door or flash his light in a darkened window. He turned off the avenue and found himself among the tenements.

It was a hot night. On the fire-escapes and stoops, the occupants of the grimy buildings sought a little surcease from their stifling rooms. Men and women leaned out the windows in a futile hunt for a cooling breeze. Children cluttered the sidewalk, in spite of the lateness of the hour. Frequently, the wail of a fretful baby rose above the medley of sound.

At the far end of his beat, Officer Smitz halted, back against the closed door of a tailor shop. He waited there, drawing warily on a cigarette cupped in his big hand, until Officer Gus Barker, who had the adjoining beat, sauntered up.

"Hot," Officer Smitz said.

Barker nodded. "Yeah. This ought to melt some of that fat off of you, Hippo."

"You ain't so thin," Officer Smitz replied, bristling.

"I'm thin enough for the mayor," Barker said.

Officer Smitz was silent.

"How many pounds you lost by your dieting?"

"Twelve."

Barker shook his head. "You'll never make it, Hippo. Not by the first of next month."

"If he'd only give me time, I could do

it," Officer Smitz said grimly. He sighed.

"He won't give you time. The mayor's tough. He's like all them reform mayors, except that he don't like fat cops." Barker uttered a dry laugh. "Nobody loves a fat man."

Officer Smitz tapped the end of his nightstick on Barker's chest to emphasize his words. "Listen, Gus. I don't want to be loved. All I want is to keep my job on the cops."

"Have you tried salts?"

"No," Officer Smitz said firmly, "and I ain't going to!"

"You get me wrong about the salts, Hippo. You put 'em in a bathtub full of water. Then you get in the tub and soak."

"That's not my idea of salts."

OFFICER SMITZ dropped his cigarette to the sidewalk and ground it out with his heel. With a little gesture of his nightstick, he parted from his fellow patrolman and started back over his beat. Some of the turmoil in front of the tenements had subsided as the night wore on, but there were still plenty of people in the steaming street.

Halfway down the block, a small sedan drew up at the curb and a man got out. Heedless of the heat, he was wearing his coat and, as he walked rapidly away from Officer Smitz, he kept his right hand in the side pocket. His hat was pulled low over his eyes. His left shoulder drooped a good two inches below the level of his right.

A short distance from the corner, the man with the drooping shoulder paused before a door. It was the side entrance to the bar, whose neon sign glowed redly at the street intersection just beyond. After a moment's hesitation, he turned the knob with his left hand, pushed the door open and slipped inside, shutting the door behind him.

Officer Smitz, deep in his own thoughts and troubles, failed to notice the new-

comer on the scene. To be sure, as he came abreast of the sedan, he observed that the engine was running and from force of habit glanced inside. A man with a straw-hat cocked over one eye was lounging behind the wheel. Officer Smitz could see nothing suspicious in that. He continued on past.

The next moment, however, he came to an abrupt halt. His mammoth figure grew as rigid as a statue, a surrealist statue of a policeman. Muffled by walls, but still unmistakable, had come the report of a pistol shot. Three more blasts followed in quick succession. Grasping his night-stick firmly, Officer Smitz lumbered into action. He headed down the street like a bull seal crossing an ice-floe. Before he had gone twenty steps, his breath was whistling painfully, his face was beet red, perspiration spouted from every pore. But still he pounded ahead.

He had almost reached the building on the corner, when the side door burst violently open. The man with the sagging shoulder darted out. In his hand was a smoking gun. He tossed it into the street, wheeled and started for the parked sedan. But suddenly his horizon was obscured by a mountain of flesh in a blue uniform bearing down on him.

"Stop!" Officer Smitz panted.

The gunman snarled an oath. He side-stepped, reversed himself and dove for the corner. Officer Smitz made a move for the pistol that hung on his left side. Then, instantly, he realized its use would endanger people in the street. With an inarticulate cry of anger, he started after his slippery quarry.

As the skinny figure of the gunman raced under the neon sign, his hat fell off, and Officer Smitz caught a clear view of his face. Riccio!

It was not only that Riccio was an escaped convict and killer—a killer who had just thrown away a smoking gun—but he was a thin man—an insultingly

thin man. All the resentment against diets, exercise, scales and thin men which had been smoldering in Officer Smitz's breast erupted in a volcano of rage. He let out a wild bellow, summoned all the strength in his flattened arches and put on more speed.

When he turned the corner, the fleet-footed Riccio was nowhere in sight. Yet it was obvious to Officer Smitz that Riccio could not have distanced him in that short time. The avenue was a long block away. Riccio must have sought refuge inside one of the tenements along the street.

His breath coming in agonized wheezes, lightning-like shafts of pain shooting from his insteps to his knees, Officer Smitz slowed down. His heart was pounding like the drum in a Boy Scout band. He could hardly see because of the sweat that ran down over his eyes, but through a misty veil he tried to look over the line of stoops leading into the hot, smelly buildings.

And then vertigo engulfed him. He saw everything turning black—a blackness curiously intermingled with green lettuce leaves and red figures of weighing-machines. Officer Smitz knew he'd have to sit down, or at least find something to lean against, something to prop up his wilting body.

He took a groping step, then another. Blindly, he reached out and his hand encountered the iron railing that guarded a basement areaway beside him. With a feeble sigh, he clutched it and let his weight relax. But his fingers had closed around the top of the gate at the head of the stairs down into the basement. Under Officer Smitz's two hundred and sixty pounds, it swung inward. The next instant, Officer Smitz went hurtling down into space.

PETE KALAS hurried forward with a broad smile, as Officer Smitz limped into the Quality Restaurant the next evening. He grabbed the patrolman's

moist and massive hand, shook it vigorously. "I read about it in the paper, Homer!" Pete exclaimed. "By golly, you're a big hero maybe! Capture that guy who broke out of prison and shot the man in the bar. Sit down, it's on the house."

Officer Smitz made a derogatory gesture, dropped his perspiring form into a chair at one of the tables. "That was nothing," he murmured. "I'm a cop, ain't I?"

"Yeah, and what a cop!" Pete bobbed his head admiringly. "I read about it in the paper. You chased that guy down the cellar. Then you knew he was hiding behind the door. So you jumped, by golly—all the way from the sidewalk against that door. You knocked that door right off his hinges. And, bang, you flattened out like one of my pancakes that guy who was hiding behind it!"

"That was nothing," Officer Smitz demurred.

"Nothing? It says in the paper you broke five of his ribs!"

"Six," Officer Smitz corrected.

"Say!" Pete leaned closer and peered sharply into Officer Smitz's round face. "It says in the paper that you got yourself stuck in that doorway. They had to get the firemen to chop you loose. Is that right?"

A deeper shade of pink flooded Officer Smitz's cheeks for a moment. He coughed,

frowned heavily. Then, he brightened and nodded. "That's right. But I got wedged in there on purpose. So that rat Ricco couldn't crawl out from under the busted door and make a getaway. See?"

"Sure, sure," Pete exclaimed. "You was smart. And no skinny cop could've done that, huh?"

"That was nothing," Officer Smitz disclaimed modestly. His glance sought the menu on the wall. He leaned back in his chair, stuck his thumbs between his belt and bulging body. "Bring me a big bowl of Yankee bean soup, roast pork, mashed potatoes, coffee with lots of cream and a slab of custard pie. And make it snappy!"

"You bet, Homer. On the house!"

Pete started for the kitchen, but suddenly jerked himself to a halt and returned slowly to the table. He bent over and whispered cautiously: "Listen, Homer. Ain't you forgot about the mayor?"

Officer Smitz snorted. "The mayor? Me and the mayor had a little talk this afternoon in his office. He says I'm too valuable a man to risk pounding a beat, so he's transferring me to headquarters."

Pete gasped. "A better job maybe, Homer?"

"Yep. In a chair at a desk." Officer Smitz waved his host toward the kitchen. "Hurry up that grub. And Pete—as long as it's on the house, put a lot of butter on those potatoes!"



MURDER EDITS THE NEWS

By NORVELL W. PAGE

Larch was coming back to the town which had renounced him—and where death crouched waiting for him, ready to spring. But he did not foresee that he was bringing with him death for those loyal to him—and worse than death to those whom he had learned, once more, to love. . . .

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DEATH SINGS A TORCH-SONG

by

Robert Davis

Author of "Something for the Sweeper," etc.



He started to drag the man across to a dirty touring-car.



Out of the past floated the haunting voice of a girl who sang of a love that died. And as the chorus faded the blast of a pistol-shot took up the refrain, turning it into a murder-melody that ended only with the swan-song rattle in the white throat of the one who had begun it.

THE THREE of them were standing close together against the brick wall, blurred and vague in the blue of the neon sign. Dennis Lee paid no particular attention to them until he saw that one of them was Harvey Lake, that he was drunk and that he had a gun.

Lee closed the door of his roadster softly, then, and stood still, watching. The thick-set man was facing Harvey Lake. The set of his square shoulders told that he wasn't afraid of the gun and that he

was angry. The thin little man was half behind Harvey Lake, holding on to his left arm. He was talking, and the words came only as a smooth, cajoling blur against the thickly sputtered incoherence of Harvey Lake's voice.

"Sister," said Harvey Lake, and his voice started rising to a shout. "Damned—"

The thick-set man hit him. He moved forward lightly one step and hit Harvey Lake on the jaw with his right fist.

Harvey Lake's long, smoothly muscled body bent a little in the middle, and his feet scraped on the gravel. He turned around and fell forward into the thin man's arms. The long-barreled revolver went skittering along the ground. The thin little man sagged under Harvey Lake's weight.

"Take care of him," said the thick-set man. He was breathing hard and trying to make his voice sound casual. "Take him home, sober him up and tell him what a damned fool he is." He watched the white blur of the thin man's face. "I don't know just how you fit in this, Crail. I've got a feeling someone has been putting ideas in Harvey's head. I hope I don't find out that you're the one who's been doing it."

He waited a moment, but the thin little man didn't say anything. The thick-set man turned on his heel and walked along the wall toward the front of the building. The thin little man slowly lowered Harvey Lake's limp weight to the ground. He straightened up and brushed mechanically at the front of his dark coat. He stood there, motionless and watching, until the thick-set man turned the corner of the building and went out of sight. Then he leaned over and said, "Come on, Harvey."

Harvey Lake made a thick, muttering sound, but didn't move. The thin little man picked up the long-barreled revolver and put it in Harvey Lake's pocket. He put his hands under Lake's arms, lifted him and started to drag him across the lot toward a dusty touring-car. Lake's heels scraped laxly on the gravel. Dennis Lee watched until the thin little man reached the touring-car, opened the door, and started to shove Harvey Lake into the front seat. Then he turned and walked in the direction the thick-set man had gone.

THE blue doors of the club had criss-crossed polo mallets painted on them in gilt. Lee went up the three steps,

nodded to the doorman and went into the oblong entrance-hall. He gave his coat to the cloakroom girl, and then the woman standing at the entrance of the bar said one word, a little uncertainly. It made him step back.

"Dennis."

She was small, and still very slim. The ten years hadn't aged her face at all, and her eyes were clear, sparkling, youthful. She was smiling at him now, just as she used to smile, as if it came from pleasure deep inside her. Her hair was that ash blond that gleamed like sleek gold in a spotlight.

"Joan!" Lee said incredulously. He came forward and caught both her extended hands. He remembered again how her quick, vital smallness had always made him feel clumsily huge and awkward.

"I was afraid you wouldn't remember me."

"Remember you!" Lee said.

"It's been ten years, and you've gone a long way."

"Not far enough to forget you," Lee said. "No, not that far, Joan. And you—"

"Still married," she said. "And still happy. Very happy, Dennis."

"I'm glad," Dennis said, and meant it. "I've often wondered—"

There was a little cough, and the thick-set man was standing beside them, looking at Joan in a way that was half apologetic and half inquiring.

"This is my husband, Dennis," she said. "Martin Field. Martin, this is an old and very dear friend of mine, Dennis Lee. He leads the band here. A long time ago I sang, and he played for the same orchestra."

Field's grip was quick and firmly hearty. "Hello, Lee. Anyone who is a friend of my wife is a friend of mine, whether they like it or not."

"Thanks," Lee said. He kept his grip on Field's hand and turned it a little

until the cut across the square, hard knuckles was visible. "I saw you a moment ago, outside, talking to Harvey Lake."

Blood darkened the tan on Field's heavy-jowled face. "You know Lake?"

Lee nodded. "He comes here often. I've met him."

Joan Field was staring at the cut on her husband's knuckles, and her eyes were darkly worried. "Martin, you promised."

"I know," Field said uncomfortably. "I know I did, dear. And I meant it, too. But the damned young fool—"

"I'm sorry," Lee said.

Field smiled at his wife ruefully. "It doesn't make a bit of difference. She'd have found it out in five minutes. She always does. I think she reads my mind. But I'm glad you're here to vouch for my story. Really, my dear, I tried my best to pacify the young fool. I argued with him until I was tired. But then when he started waving a gun around—"

"That's true," said Lee.

"A gun?" Joan Field said, and put out her hand to touch her husband's arm.

"Oh, it didn't mean a thing," Field said hastily. "Honestly, it didn't. I don't think he even meant to threaten me with it. He was just feeling exuberant. He was a cowboy, you know, and uses a gun to express his feelings. But it put the top on things, as far as I was concerned. I wasn't going to have him waving a gun in my face. So I hit him. Only once, though. Honestly."

She shook her head. "I don't like it."

FIELD patted her on the shoulder. "Come on, now. Don't let anything worry you. Young love, you know, and all the rest of it. He'll get over it. He'll come around tomorrow and apologize. You see if he doesn't. Harvey's a good kid. Lee, do you know this fellow Crail who was with Harvey?"

"No. I've seen him with Lake several

times, but I've never met him anywhere."

"Know what he does?"

"No."

Field squinted his eyes slightly. "I don't, either. Can't figure out just why he wants to pal around with Harvey. They're not the same type. Harvey's a clean kid even if he is a little light on brains. Crail looks pretty slimy to me. I wish Patricia hadn't dropped Harvey in such a pile." He stopped and looked at his wife uneasily.

She smiled in a drawn, worried way. "You didn't let any secrets slip, dear. Everybody in the whole country knows the story, and besides Dennis has long been noted for his ability to keep his own counsel. You've always been a rather dark and somber person, haven't you, Dennis?"

"I don't mean to be," Lee said.

"I know, but don't change. It's nice, I think. I suppose you know, Patricia, Martin's sister?"

Lee nodded. "Yes. She and Lake used to come here often."

"They were engaged. They had a quarrel. We've been in Bermuda for the last three months, and we didn't know about it until we got home yesterday. It's a rather serious quarrel, I think, and I'm sorry we weren't here when it happened. There's a matter of money."

"Yes," Field said gloomily. "Patricia and I have a lot of it. We inherited it from our father. He stole it." He looked at his wife. "Well, you know he did, dear. He gyped people on stock-promotion deals. He was a big crook. Had a very charming personality, though. Too bad I didn't inherit that instead of his money. But Harvey's a young fool. Just because he hasn't much—as if anyone who can play polo like he can needs money—he stalks around and poses like a dictator and talks about husbands who are kept by their wives. No wonder Patricia finally got tired of it, although she hasn't very many

brains, either." He shook his head over it.

"Now that you've settled the question of your family's mental and moral status," Joan Field said, "don't you suppose we could change the subject?"

"Oh, sure," said Field. "Sorry, Dennis. My sister and the Viscount Leslie Aubudon are dining with us. Won't you come and join us at our table?"

"Glad to," Lee said. "A little later. I'll have to start the band off, first. I'd like to ask a favor of you, Joan. You remember your old song—*Love is Dead*?"

"Of course, Dennis. I haven't heard it played for years."

"I've always kept an arrangement of it. I like it. Will you sing it with us sometime tonight?"

"Dennis, I can't! My voice—"

"Sure you can," Field said. "What's the matter with your voice? It's swell. It's marvelous. I love it. I want to hear you sing with Dennis Lee's band."

She was looking at Lee. "Do you mean it, Dennis?"

"Yes. I'd be very grateful if you would, Joan."

BINNIE had the band set up when Lee came across the dance floor, and he nodded absently, fingering one of the valves of his trumpet. Lee said: "Find the arrangement for *Love is Dead*. I've asked an old friend of mine to sing it with us."

Binnie plopped the trumpet-valve and looked at Lee out of the corners of his eyes.

"Her name used to be Joan Carr," Lee said. "She introduced the song at the Rose Garden."

"The hell!" said Binnie. "She here?"

"She's married to Martin Field."

"Oh," said Binnie. "Well, I saw his yacht come in yesterday, so I guess that's all right, too. She used to sing, that girl. I've heard her take that *Love is Dead*. Man, when she got through, you felt like

the only thing left was to go home and turn on the gas. It was a honey of a song, anyway, but most of the gals couldn't hit it. I knew old 'Bugs' Blue when he wrote that. Know where he got it? He took the melody out of two funeral songs. That's a fact. He told me so, himself."

"Let's get started," Lee said.

Binnie played the trumpet-break just as Bugs Blue wrote it. He played it lovingly, and the notes were soft, round drops of sound that stirred ripples quietly in the corners of the room. Lee heard the rustling of movement, and knew they were crowding close in the doorway of the bar. The trumpet went up and up and stayed there. It came down in a dipping slur that muted itself to a lingering whisper, and then, when her voice came, it seemed that there was no sound anywhere else but that.

It was haunting and low, and left a thick ache in Lee's throat. The spotlight had cut away the last ten years, removed it as it removed the darkness of the rest of the room, and she was singing with him dim, shadowy and tall beside her. Lee was listening to nothing but her voice, yet instinctively he heard the accompaniment of the orchestra and knew they were not following the arrangement now. They were playing with her, for her—and it was something more than music. It was a long, slow dream full of sadness.

Somewhere in the darkness around the bright tunnel of the spotlight glass made a brittle slash of sound breaking, and then thunder seemed to blow in and hammer at the walls. There was nothing for a second but the rolling echo of that blast.

Lee saw Joan Field's slight body jerk, and her voice stopped in the middle of a bar. She turned to look at him. There was faint, incredulous horror on her face. She took one step toward him, put out her hand.

Lee caught her, held her close against him. He could feel her growing heavier

in his arms. His voice was a harsh groan. "Play—play it loud!"

Binnie's trumpet shrieked in commanding sound, and the rest of the band caught it with a flare. Lee could feel her sliding down against him and swung her up in his arms as he stepped off the platform. He thrust his shoulder against the door and was in the narrow, gray-carpeted hall. Vague forms crowded in around him.

"Call a doctor!" he said. "Quick!"

He took her in through the open door of the dressing-room and put her down on the couch. There was light here, but he couldn't see the other people in the room or hear what they were saying. He could see the paleness of Joan Field's face against the flowered chintz of the couch-cover. He could see the shadowed blue of her eyelids, and the pinched white look around her mouth. He could see the bullet hole, ugly and blue-edged, just above the deep-cut line of her dress.

He made a pad of his handkerchief and pressed it over the hole to stop the welling red blood. But he knew from the touch of his fingers that he wouldn't have to stop it, that it would stop itself, that Joan Field was dead.

LEE looked up into the tortured, twisted face of Martin Field. Martin Field knew, too, that she was dead. He was staring down at her, trying to realize the truth. He put his hand up to his lips. His fingers were trembling.

"Dead," he said. "Somebody shot her there while she was singing. They shot through the window of the bar that looks out on the parking-lot. I turned my head when I heard them smash out the glass, and I saw the gun flash. I saw it." He shook his head slowly. "Someone killed her. But that can't be true, can it, Dennis? No one would kill her. Not Joan. No one could do that."

Lee didn't answer, because there were no words that he could say. He watched

Martin Field breaking right there before his eyes. Grayish pallor was working up under the tan of his square-cut face, and his thick body sagged a little as if he were crumbling inside.

A tall, thin man with smoothly white hair pushed through the people in the doorway and said, "Doctor," curtly. He knelt down beside Joan Field, moved Lee's folded handkerchief and touched her gently. He looked up at Lee, shook his head and made a little fatalistic movement with his shoulders.

Martin Field said, "I know she's dead." He moistened his lips. "That stops it for me, Dennis. That's all of me that meant anything lying there. There isn't anything left now. It's all gone—everything."

Lee's voice was low and thick. "She got me my first job. She didn't know me, but she saw me standing outside and persuaded the band leader to give me a try-out. I was hungry that day."

A voice was calling, "Martin! Martin!" frantically, and Patricia Field came in the room. The red on her lips stood out dark and vivid. Her hair was sleekly black, and she had the square-cut jaw of her brother. "We were just coming in, and I heard—they said— Oh, Joan—Joan!"

"Dead," said Martin Field.

She put her arms around him, but he didn't seem to see her or know who she was. He stood there swaying a little. "Dead," he said.

The Viscount Leslie Aubudon squeezed his high, wide shoulders through the press of people at the door saying, "Please, please," in a flustered, flatly nasal voice. His blue eyes were anxiously worried, and as soon as he got into the room he stood still uncertainly and said: "Now, Patricia. Don't. Some silly fool in the bar said—a beastly kind of a joke to play— Oh, good God, then it was true. I mean, you don't do—it isn't—"

"Dead," said Martin Field.

He turned out of his sister's arms,

walked toward the door, and the people there backed away. He staggered slightly, and his shoulder hit the wall. Then he went through the door into the hall.

Patricia Field looked at the Viscount Leslie Aubudon. "Go with him, please. Help him."

Aubudon said: "But, my dear, I can't! You here—I can't leave you—"

"I'll go," Lee said.

THE white gravel made the parking-lot a vague gray square in the darkness outlined by the shadowed loom of cars parked along its borders. Lee stopped in the doorway, looking out with his eyes squinted against the fizzing blue of the neon sign.

There was a close little group of figures under the bar window, and Lee could hear the doorman saying loudly: "I heard that glass break, and I started around this way. I tell you it wasn't two seconds after that shot was fired when I turned the corner, and there wasn't anybody around anywhere!"

Lee saw the stumbling figure of Martin Field at the far corner of the lot. Lee started to run toward him, and then he saw Field stop beside a long, shiny coupe and fumble with the door-catch.

"Field!" Lee called sharply.

Field had the door open, and he dragged himself inside the coupe. Lee was halfway across the lot when the engine caught with a sudden sputtering roar, and the coupe lurched straight forward, bounced off the curbing. It swung erratically into the road, straightened out, gathered speed.

Lee turned and started for his own roadster. Then he remembered that the keys were in his overcoat pocket, turned again and ran toward the entrance of the club. Splinters of glass caught his eye, lying on the gravel under the small window at the end of the bar, sparkling like slick bits of ice. Lee went through the doors and into the narrow hall. The cloak-

room girl was gone, and Lee went inside the narrow cubicle and fumbled along the row of coats until he found his own.

The keys were cold, grasped tight in his fingers, as he ran out the front door and back across the lot. The roadster's engine sounded a thin hum of power. He bumped down over the curb, turned to the left and then to the left again. Now, he was out on the North Post Road that lifted in a smooth, white sweep ahead of him.

The top was down, and the wind was like the push of a soft, cool hand against his face. His foot was flat against the floor-board, and the voice of the motor ascended to a scream. Far ahead, he caught the wink of double red lights. They disappeared. A moment later, he fought the wheel going around a curve, and the double lights were ahead again, but no closer.

Lee leaned forward, unconsciously trying to urge the roadster to greater speed with the strength of his own body. The double red lights pulled away from him. They grew fainter and fuzziy, and then they were gone again. Lee came up over the brow of a hill and down with a breathless rush. He didn't see the side-road, until he was past it. His foot came down hard on the brake. The tires screamed on the pavement, swaying the car back and forth in a long, whirling skid.

Lee backed and turned. The side-road was narrow. There was a thick green hedge bordering it on both sides that slid by like a smooth wall in the glare of the headlights. The road turned sharply back on itself, went up a steep little hill. Lee stopped the roadster with a jar just behind the shiny coupe that Martin Field had driven away from the club. Lee got out and noticed that the coupe had only one taillight. It was not the car he had been following.

The house was square and white, looming on the crest of the hill, and far below

it was the flat, smooth sheen of Lost Bay. Harvey Lake came around from behind the shiny coupé. He was swaying, bent-kneed, and he held his head tilted to one side, staring at Lee.

"No, you don't, now," he said thickly. "You stand still."

"Put it down," said Lee.

Harvey Lake raised the long-barreled revolver, and his thumb was curled familiarly around the big hammer. "I'm going to shoot—"

The hammer clicked, and Lee hit the barrel with the flat of his hand, knocking it away from his chest. The thundering report was an echo of the one he had heard in the club, and he smashed his fist into Harvey Lake's face. Harvey Lake fell straight backward, and his head hit dully against the fender of the coupé. He slid down, half sitting, crumpled over.

The headlights of a car swung in a great, bright arc and outlined Lee and Harvey Lake, as an engine made a throbbing gasp that choked off short. There was the sound of quick feet running. Patricia Field went blindly past Lee and knelt down on the gravel beside Harvey Lake, holding him close against her.

"Harvey!" she said in a moaning, breathless voice.

LEE turned away from them and went slowly up the long steep flight of cement steps, and onto the long porch of the house. He walked slowly along the porch with his footsteps sounding hollow and cold under him and looked in through the open windows. The study was small and dimly lighted, and Martin Field was lying face down on the floor under the gleaming steel eye of a wall-safe. He was dead, and blood that was slow, red and deep was gathering into a pool beside him.

There were a pair of French doors diagonally across the room, standing ajar. Lee slid in through the window and walked toward the doors, going carefully

around Martin Field's body. He looked out and down onto a flat garden court ghostly with the loom of graceful marble benches. A privet-hedge closed off the far end, and Lee saw the shadowy figure, black against a black background, run along the hedge and disappear through it with a faint snap of breaking twigs.

Lee ran that way, his feet noiseless on the springy, close-clipped turf. He worked through the hedge, and the ends of broken branches whipped at his face. On the other side was the curve of the white drive where it circled around in back of the house. There was a car, and now the shadowy figure was leaning inside it. The brake made a sudden series of sharp snaps, releasing. The shadowy figure started to push against the car, and then Lee's feet scraped lightly on the gravel.

The shadowy figure turned, and it was Crail. His black overcoat was buttoned up tightly around his throat, and he wore a derby hat. The black of the overcoat cloth made his face thinly pallid. He said something to himself in a whisper and whirled to run. Lee tackled him in a long, driving lunge, smashed his small body hard into the side of the car.

LEE came down the steep flight of steps that led up to the front of the house. He was pushing Crail ahead of him, and had Crail's arm locked behind his back. Patricia Field was still kneeling beside Harvey Lake, holding his head in her lap and saying things to him in a soft, murmuring voice broken by sobs.

Feet thudded hard running in the drive, and then the Viscount Leslie Aubudon crossed the path of the headlights and leaned down over Patricia. He was breathing in long gasps. "My dear! I couldn't find the road—up here. Lost completely. No sense of direction at night. Had to park car—down by the bay and climb the hill on foot. Is that—is that the Lake fellow? What's the matter with him?"

Lee walked Crail forward. Patricia and Aubudon turned to look at them, and there was no sound for a long, tense moment, until Crail screamed suddenly: "He did it! He killed them both! He made me help him!"

"You filth," said Aubudon.

"He did it!" Crail screamed. "I gave him Harvey Lake's gun outside the club, and he went into the bar with this girl. Then, when the lights were out, he knocked the glass out of the window to make it look like someone outside did it, and then he shot Mrs. Field. We had it all figured out. There's a little alcove in front of the window, and you can't see anyone in it from either side. He was going to shoot Mrs. Field while she was sitting at her table, but she was singing, and the lights were all dimmed, so he did it then. After that, he came up here to get in the safe, and Mr. Field caught him at it. He killed Mr. Field."

Patricia made a sudden, agonized sound.

"It's a damned lie," said Aubudon.

"He made me help him! He was going to pay me for making it look like Harvey Lake did it. I'll tell you why he did it. Because he's married, that's why. He was married secretly to a girl that danced in the same club that Mrs. Field did a long time ago. I know because I'm the girl's manager. Mrs. Field told him to get out and stop going around with Patricia or she'd expose him and his marriage. She had letters from his wife. They were in

the safe. That's why he killed her."

"The man's mad," said Aubudon. "You can see he's mad."

"He wanted to marry this girl. He had to have money. He owes everybody in England—even me!"

"I thought you did it," Lee said to Aubudon. "You drove here ahead of me. You found the road all right. I thought it must be you because your car is the only one around here that can go away from my roadster. Just now I found Crail trying to push your car down the road—the back one so he could park it down by the bay where you said you parked it. The proof will be those letters Crail spoke of. They'll be in your pocket. You shot both Martin and Joan Field with Harvey Lake's gun."

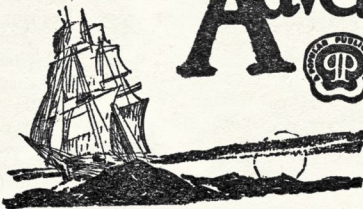
"I have another one," said Aubudon, and he drew a stubby automatic out of his coat pocket.

Harvey Lake moved very quietly on the ground. He hooked the toe of his left foot in front of one of Aubudon's ankles and kicked Aubudon just behind the knee with his right foot. Aubudon made a quick, gasping sound and fell, trying to turn himself in the air, almost on top of Harvey Lake. Harvey Lake sat up and hit him once as he was falling. Aubudon rolled over on his back and lay quite still.

"I've been wanting to do that," Lake said and put his arm around Patricia.

Lee watched them. He felt old now. It seemed that somewhere he could hear Joan Field's voice singing softly.

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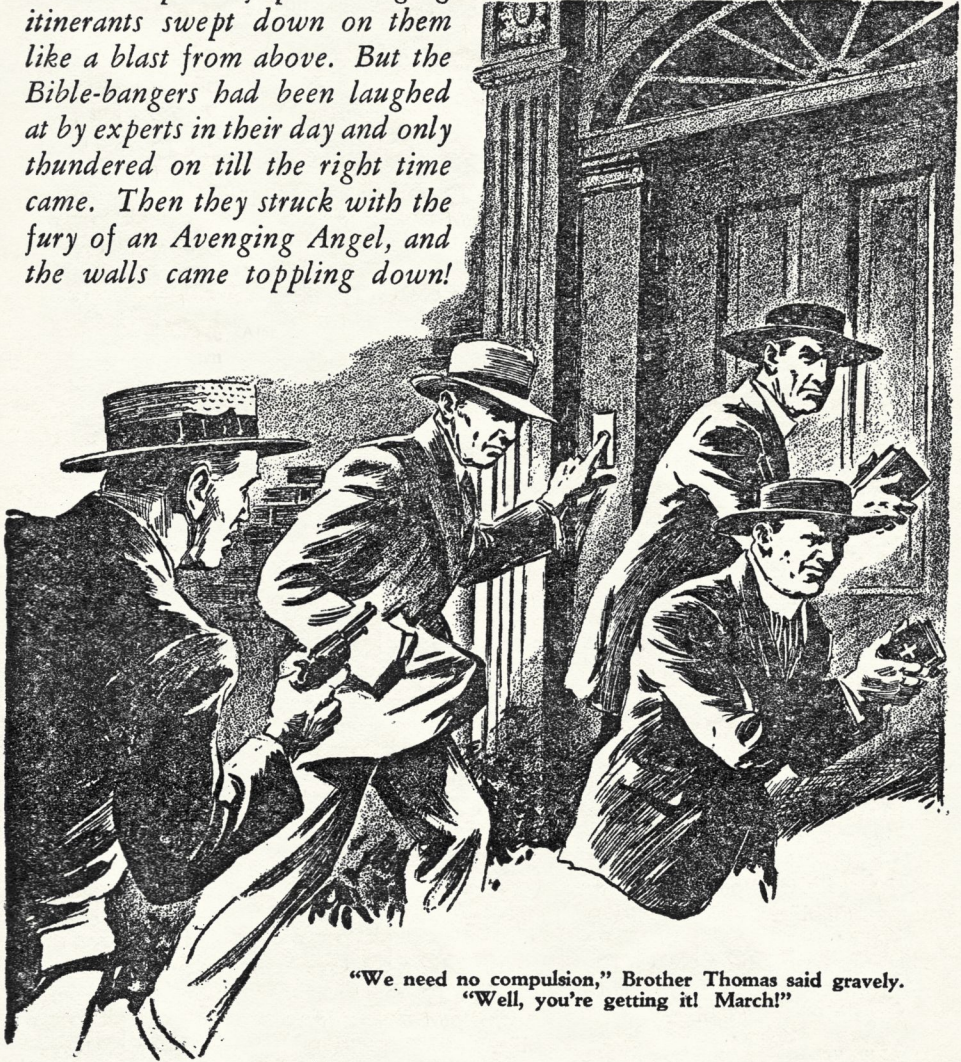
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"West Point Gray," by H. Bedford-Jones; "An Hour in She-Devil's Bay," by Richard Howells Watkins; a Georges Surdez serial of the Legion—will appear in the big July issue of ADVENTURE.

The politicians and chiselers who ran the gang-ridden little town of Bromley to suit themselves, booted and howled with mirth when that ludicrous pair of psalm-singing itinerants swept down on them like a blast from above. But the Bible-bangers had been laughed at by experts in their day and only thundered on till the right time came. Then they struck with the fury of an Avenging Angel, and the walls came toppling down!



“We need no compulsion,” Brother Thomas said gravely.
“Well, you’re getting it! March!”

AVENGING ANGEL

by B. B. Fowler

FOR the sixth evening the voice of the black-garbed preacher made sonorous echoes in the quiet square. He was tall, gaunt, big-boned. His eyes were sunk in cavernous pits under the projecting brow. His mouth made a mellow trumpet as he poured out his message

effortlessly, dynamically. It reached far.

The crowd around him moved restlessly as he harangued them. “The pit yawns for evil-doers.” His voice made deep organ notes. “The fires of everlasting damnation lift up their fiery tongues for the souls of the unrighteous. Repent!

Repent, you sinful dwellers in iniquity!"

Some of the scattered crowd looked slightly uneasy. More were mildly bored. Still more were openly and highly amused. The amused ones flocked night after night to listen. But there were other reactions beyond the fringes of the crowd.

In a window overlooking the square, Fred Butler was staring down. His shrewd eyes were hard and bright. His thin lips were pressed in a tight line. His hatchet-face was pulled into lines of distrustful wonder.

He turned his head and looked at the big man at the mahogany desk. He looked like a model of the upstanding, prosperous businessman. He had a mane of hair flung back from a high forehead, grave, firm mouth over a strong chin, clear gray eyes. He smiled at Butler's concern, a slow, wide smile. It wasn't until you had looked at him a long time that you realized how false and meaningless that smile was or how cold and hard were his eyes.

"I don't like it, Dev," Butler said at last. "I don't like those holy-shouters in the square every night. They've been here a week. I don't like it."

Devereaux's laugh rolled smoothly. "Nonsense, Butler. You're getting old-maidish. A couple of wandering preachers. Forget them."

"Maybe you're right," Butler said doubtfully. "But you know how I am about strangers in town."

Devereaux nodded. "I know. But you have to draw a line somewhere. You can't run every stranger out of town. I don't mind your being careful. But there's such a thing as being too cautious."

Staring down into the square, Butler shrugged. "I guess maybe you're right. I'm overcautious." Watching the tall preacher, he smiled crookedly. "No one could spout that stuff the way they do and be anything but nuts."

"That's being sensible." Devereaux's tone dismissed the preachers as being of

no importance. "How about the other? Is everything fixed?"

Butler nodded, his eyes on the restaurant across the square, his lips twisted in a sardonic smile. "I had one of the boys give Travers a receipt for the money he owes Sibley." He chuckled harshly. "The guy nearly threw a fit. We gave him the old song-and-dance about Sibley knowing he was broke and being satisfied with the bulk of the money the kid had paid on time. He fell for it."

Devereaux didn't smile. He looked calmly contemplative. "The rest all go through?"

Butler nodded again. "A guy went into his restaurant as he was closing last night and gave him twenty dollars to deliver a valuable package to a man named Brown in Tilton. The address was right next door to the Acme Jewelry Company. Anyone who goes there tomorrow will find a vacant house. No one has lived in it for three months. That places him there. Sibley has the five hundred dollars that he swears Travers gave him. The five hundred is part of the marked money that came from the Acme haul. Chief Sloan is set to make the pinch. Travers will go up for the Acme job."

Devereaux's eyes shone. He was smiling faintly but, at Chief Sloan's name, he frowned. "You know, Butler, I'm a little suspicious of that fat crook. I don't trust him."

Butler sneered. "Who does? But he doesn't dare kick over the traces. What I have on him in my safe would burn him, and he know it. Only, he doesn't know the stuff is in my safe. He thinks you have it."

Devereaux shook his head without speaking. But his steady eyes were hard.

Down in the square, the gaunt man brought his harangue to a close. He bowed his head and intoned, "Let us pray." His deep voice rolled over the crowd. "Let Thy thunder, Lord, utter its

terrible voice in the ears of scoffers and evil-doers. Let the lightning of Thy might smite the ranks of the wicked. Lord, give Thy servant strength to carry Thy message and let Thy mercy fall like the dew upon those who repent."

ON THE other side of the square, Jeff Travers had his own reactions to the voice of the preachers. His firm lips twitched in an ironical smile. His gray eyes stared moodily. For the moment, he forgot the unexpected windfall of the receipt for his debt to Spider Sibley. He couldn't believe that the miserly old money-lender had given way to a generous impulse. Yet, there was the receipt in black and white, delivered by one of Sibley's collectors.

He was thinking of this town of Bromley and the veil of mystery that seemed to shroud it. His own debt was an example. After he had opened his restaurant he had two thousand in cash to run his business. He had received calls from sanitary inspectors and building inspectors with lists of things he had to do. He had received bills for over three thousand dollars for work that should have cost no more than two hundred. And there was nothing he could do but pay. When fresh bills had piled up he was forced into Sibley's hands. Now, even with the receipt he was through.

He gazed at the paper in his hand. The black headlines told of the robbery at the Acme Jewelry Company the night before. The lone robber who had pulled the job had gotten away with fifty thousand in cash, two hundred thousand in gems. In the course of the job he had killed the night watchman. The police hinted at clues leading to the killer.

Jeff frowned. That made five major robberies in the state within the year. One job was unsolved. For the others there were three men in prison doing time. But none of the loot had been recovered be-

yond the small amount discovered to fix the crime on the men sent up. It seemed odd that all three of the convicted men had protested their innocence and had not confessed to the hiding-place of the loot.

Yet, it was all of a piece with the pattern of Bromley, a town where mysterious things happened, where honest men paid tribute to crooked police and corrupt officials and guessed that somewhere behind police and officials was a brain that directed the whole business. What Jeff did not know was that three federal men who had been sent into the area had mysteriously vanished, to turn up later bullet-riddled corpses.

He listened to the sonorous voice of the gaunt man and sneered. "John the Baptist crying in the wilderness. That's what it is—a wilderness of crime and corruption and extortion."

A voice behind him said, "Hush, Jeff. Someone may hear you."

Jeff turned his head and smiled tenderly. Grace was lovely enough to make almost any man smile tenderly. But just now the terror in her eyes robbed them of their loveliness. Her lips were too strained and tight.

Jeff shook his head. "I know. I should feel grateful. But somehow I can't. There's something wrong somewhere."

The gaunt preacher ceased his prayer and said; "Now, Brother Jeremiah will sing *The Old Rugged Cross*. Sing, brother!"

Brother Jeremiah was the exact opposite of his companion. He was short, fat and jovial. His bunched cheeks were merry. His blue eyes twinkled and danced. He held his wide hat in his hands, threw back his head and sang in a clear, true tenor. When he had finished, he went through the crowd with his hat in his hand. He jingled the few coins and beamed seraphically. "Thank you, brother. The Lord will bless your generosity. God bless you, brother."

As Brother Jeremiah slid the coins into his pocket the gaunt man threw his arms outward and his voice rolled effortlessly over the crowd. "You have heard the voice of the Lord, brothers. Let it sink deep into your hearts. Let it melt your hard hearts and prepare you for the coming day of salvation. Let it strengthen your minds and souls to wrestle with the evil one who would drag you down to the fiery pit of everlasting punishment."

THE two put their wide hats on and strode sedately across the square to the restaurant. Jeff saw them coming and went behind the counter. He wanted to smile but, somehow, there was something about the earnestness of the two preachers that discouraged it.

The tall man took off his hat and said in his deep sonorous voice, "Let the blessing of the Lord rest upon this house."

Brother Jeremiah held his hat in his hands and intoned, "Amen!" and looked at Jeff with his kindly blue eyes.

"Supper is over," Jeff said tonelessly. "We can give you baked beans and brown bread or any kind of sandwiches."

Brother Jeremiah beamed. "Baked beans and brown bread, Brother Thomas. Splendid! Humble fare for humble men. Splendid!"

Brother Thomas said reverently: "The Lord will provide for his children. Let us eat and give thanks like the Hebrews of old who ate of the bread from Heaven and were satisfied."

Grace came out of the kitchen with the two plates of beans. She slid them across the counter and smiled faintly in response to Brother Jeremiah's beaming benevolence.

Brother Thomas put his hands on the counter and stared at Jeff with the deep-set, glowing eyes that always disturbed him inwardly. "Great good fortune has come into this house today," he said. "It has received the servants of the Lord."

Jeff felt his muscles tauten. He thought of the receipt. But no one but himself and Sibley knew about that. No one had seen the collector give it to him.

Brother Jeremiah said monotonously: "Does a man gather figs of thistles? Does one look to wicked men for good and righteous deeds?"

There was something in that observation that made cold trickles run along Jeff's spine. He could sense the quick tensing of Grace as she stood beside him.

Brother Thomas ate a bite of bread with slow deliberation. He swallowed, then his voice rolled softly. "Did it happen that you journeyed to Tilton last night? A dark cloud is over this town."

Jeff's throat felt dry. He fought for his voice, swallowed and said: "Yes, a stranger came into the restaurant last night and gave me twenty dollars to deliver a big package to an address in Tilton. Why?"

"Last night," Brother Thomas said, "one of the sons of Cain killed the watchman of the jewelry company in Tilton and fled with his ill-gotten gains. Could you prove that it was not you who did this thing—could any man in this sinful area?" He sighed before resuming his meal.

Jeff swallowed again. He was thinking fast. He had a receipt for five hundred dollars, presumably paid to Mr. Sibley. Would there be those who would doubt that Mr. Sibley gave him that out of the great goodness of his heart? Would a court of law believe Jeff, if the five hundred dollars were proved to have come from the safe of the Acme Jewelry Company—especially since Jeff, himself, admitted his presence in Tilton and had no proof of a mysterious errand?

Jeff thought thickly: "The dirty rats! They've framed me for a job they did themselves."

Brother Jeremiah asked vacantly, "Would you know who the children of perdition were, my son?"

Jeff shook his head vaguely. He was thinking: "I'm snared. The man who gave me the bundle was a stranger. I didn't get a look at the fellow who received it. The house was in darkness where I left the bundle. I haven't a thing to go on—except that Sibley is mixed up in it. They've got me."

Grace backed against the wall, the back of her hand across her open mouth, her eyes black pools of horrified misery. The ministerial generalizations had started her mind working, too.

Brother Thomas' voice rumbled on like a deep-toned bell. "The power of the Lord can put to naught the schemes of the wicked. His arm is a shield and buckler to those who trust in Him."

Jeff asked hoarsely: "Who are you fellows? Who are you?"

Brother Jeremiah said unctuously, "Humble servants of the Lord, my son. We've got to go to and fro upon the face of the earth saving those whom Satan would devour. But the time of the unrighteous draweth nigh. The power of the Word moveth on the face of the waters of evil and none may gainsay it nor say it nay."

Grace caught at Jeff's arm. "I don't care who they are," she said passionately. "They are good men. What they say, worries me more than ever about that money, Jeff. It would be awful if—"

Pausing in the back door, Jeff looked back into the restaurant. Neither of the black-garbed men lifted their eyes from their plates. They ate as if they were very hungry and had not a care in the world. They were like figures in a strange comedy, the tall, gaunt man and his jovial, chubby companion. Yet from them flowed a sense of deep and hidden power and strength. This was new stuff to Jeff.

BROTHER Thomas drained the glass of milk and stood up with a sigh. "Come, Brother Jeremiah," he said. "The

field is white with harvest, and the harvesters are few. Let us go to our labors in the vineyard."

"May the Lord give us wisdom and strength," Brother Jeremiah intoned resonantly.

Brother Thomas clasped his Bible to his bosom, bowed his head and said, "Amen!" in his deep, mellow voice.

People watched them with half-amused curiosity as they walked sedately along the main street, sprinkling benedictions on any who offered the slightest excuse.

Butler, coming out of his office, halted and stared at them as they passed. In his eyes was dislike. But, as they beamed upon him and intoned blessings the dislike gave place to frank and open contempt.

Turning into the side street toward their modest hotel, Brother Thomas said fervently, "Verily, Brother Jeremiah, the devil has blinded the eyes of his chosen that they might not see and fear the coming of the righteousness."

Brother Jeremiah threw a swift glance over his shoulder toward the main street and answered soberly: "The wicked shall perish in the darkness of their own iniquity, Brother Thomas."

They walked into the lobby of the hotel and sat in the leather chairs, bolt upright, brass-clasped Bibles held on their laps, as they solemnly watched the street in front and bowed gravely to any who chanced to stare at them.

More than an hour later Brother Thomas inclined his head solemnly as he said, "The harvest calleth, Brother Jeremiah. Let us not be slothful in our habits nor allow the sight of wickedness to turn us from our paths."

The blue eyes of Brother Jeremiah blazed. "Verily," he said, "the minions of darkness shall be utterly cast down before the glory of the Lord."

Brother Thomas' "Amen!" was like a tolled bell.

The clerk stared after them, shook his head with eyes that mirrored his bewilderment. He said in a disgusted voice: "Nuts! The dizziest pair of nuts I ever laid eyes on. I wonder how guys get that way?"

IN HIS office at police headquarters, an hour later, Chief Sloan put his elbows on the desk and leaned heavily on them. He chewed a ragged cigar and stared at the desk with jaundiced eyes. The matter of Jeff Travers' disappearance worried him. No one could have tipped him off. Yet he couldn't be found.

He raised his heavy-jowled head and his dull eyes stared fishily at the two men as they came into the room. He had seen and heard them preaching in the square and, like everyone else, had put them down as a harmless pair of crack-pots. He wondered what the hell they wanted with him.

Brother Jeremiah handed him a long, legal-looking envelope and said solemnly: "A man approached us in the thoroughfare and asked us to deliver it to you."

"Who was he? And why didn't he deliver it himself?" Chief Sloan growled.

Brother Thomas shook his head sadly. "He seemed to be suffering the pangs of fear that come to the wicked. He kept his face hidden from our gaze as a malefactor hides from honest men. But, being men without fear of the law we carried out his bidding."

Brother Jeremiah bobbed his head and said brightly: "We take delight in the law and in the service of the law."

Chief Sloan growled, "Yeah, I know," and reached a fat paw for the envelope. He turned it over slowly in his hand, reading Fred Butler's address in the corner.

Something about the envelope puzzled him. Fred Butler usually delivered his messages in person. But this envelope was addressed to him and marked *Per-*

sonal and Private. Sloan opened his mouth to call Bill Traub from the outer office, then changed his mind and closed it again.

He let the ripped envelope fall to the floor as he stared at the papers in his hand, his jaw sagging. His eyes grew as wide as the rolls of fat would allow and blank amazement filled his little eyes. Then, as he read the papers, his eyes began to glitter.

He laid the papers on his desk and stared at the two men who had sat down sedately in the two chairs by the door. Their faces were pious, serene as they watched him. Sloan sighed and picked the papers up again.

The whole affair was away over his head. Behind the delivery of the envelope was something beyond his comprehension. The papers in his hand were documents that could send him to prison for life. He had imagined that Devereaux held them. Certainly they had been a club over his head for years. Because of these papers, he had been forced to accept the small cut that Devereaux allowed him out of his huge takings. Because of them, he had gone for years in mortal terror. And now they were in his hands.

He examined them minutely, as suspicion punctured the balloon of his elation. Then his heart rose again. They were authentic. There was the evidence he had been forced to turn over to Devereaux. There was the confession Butler had made him sign—a confession that bound him to obey Devereaux at all times.

HE WAS so engrossed that he did not hear Butler come into the outer office and ask for him. He didn't raise his eyes till Butler was through the door into his room. Then he jerked the papers off the desk and held them on his lap.

But something in the shyster's eyes told him that Butler had seen those papers. He had been about to blurt out something

in hot rage when his eyes had spotted the papers. Then his mouth had closed with a snap. His eyes narrowed as he stared from the two street preachers to Sloan.

Bill Traub and two plainclothesmen came into the office behind Butler. They looked mildly interested. They wanted to find out what Butler was excited about. To Butler they seemed menacing and watchful. He glanced from them back to Sloan and his face hardened.

His voice was harsh. "Sloan, two gty's cracked my safe tonight. They cracked it and got away with a lot of stuff belonging to the boss."

Involuntarily, Sloan's hand tightened on the papers in his lap. He said, "Huh!" as if his breath had been knocked out of him and stared from Butler to the two preachers with eyes that were blank and empty.

Butler went on: "The boss is going to be damned good and mad. He's going to demand action and lots of it."

Sloan asked in a dead, flat voice: "How did it happen? Didn't anybody see who did it?"

Butler's smile was deadly. "Two men. They slugged the porter and the guy who was watching my office. They jumped them both and put them out before they had a chance to see who it was. But it was somebody who knew the layout, Sloan. It was somebody who knew what they were after and where to look."

"That's bad," Chief Sloan said heavily. "That's damned bad, Butler."

Butler's voice took on a biting edge. "The boss is going to think so, Sloan. Sure as hell, the boss is going to make it damned hot for someone."

Bill Traub stared from Butler to Sloan. All of them had, for the moment, forgotten the two black-garbed men who sat so silently by the door, and watched the proceedings with wondering eyes.

Traub's face was heavy with mystification. He sensed the tension in the at-

mosphere of the office without having an idea what caused it. But something worried him more. He voiced it when he said: "Who'd have nerve enough to muscle in on this town?"

Butler said harshly, "I was wondering the same thing. Who would dare muscle in?"

Traub went on heavily. "I know for a fact that there's not a red-hot around. The boys check pretty close on those things."

"That's going to make it look all the funnier to the boss," Butler snarled. "The boss knows how closely you check. He's going to be thinking of all that when he finds out."

Still snarling, Butler whirled on the two men by the door. "What the hell are you muggs doing in here? What brought you into the police station? Maybe you thought you'd try to save the souls of these hyenas!"

Brother Jeremiah shook his head. Sloan felt his heart climb up into his throat. If the preachers told now there would be fireworks!

To his relief, the sober voice intoned: "We go where duty calls us, sir. For many reasons we desired to come here. Mostly, we wished to ask if there were not something we might do for the unfortunate young man you arrested tonight."

Sloan's mouth gaped wide. Butler stiffened as if he had been shot. Sloan had already told him that Travers was missing when he had gone to arrest him, and no other arrest had been made that night, for none had been on the books.

BROTHER Jeremiah cut brightly into the foggy silence. "The young man was kind to us, humble servants of the Lord. He and his comely helpmate fed us bounteously. We paid them in coin. Now, we seek to pay them in returned kindness in the hour of their tribulation."

"Great Gawd, what are you blathering

about?" Sloan bellowed. "Cut the damned palaver and talk English."

"Raise not your voice in wrath against the servants of the Lord," Brother Thomas admonished gravely. "Neither take the name of the Lord in vain. For the hand of the Lord is heavy to smite those who take His name in vain."

Sloan roared: "To hell with that. Tell me what you mean about Jeff Travers getting arrested."

"As we returned from our labors in the vineyard of the Lord," Brother Thomas intoned, "we passed the restaurant and saw two of your men bring the young man out to the street."

Sloan's jaw dropped. He felt Butler's eyes on him and went cold inside. Utter incredulity was in his blank stare. "My men taking Jeff Travers? You're nuts!"

Brother Thomas continued solemnly: "They were officers of the law, wearing the same uniforms I have seen on others of your men. So we came to see if there were some slight kindness we might do for those whom the hand of the law had touched. I would intercede for them, if I might. For the Lord has put wisdom in my eyes to perceive righteousness. And I have seen it in the eyes of the young man and his helpmate."

Sloan felt as if the world were whirling around his ears. It was all incredible and incomprehensible—the mad happenings of this last half-hour. He clutched the papers in his hands to make sure of their reality and the feel of them gave him a sense of security and stability.

He raised his voice and growled: "Put these babies in the can, Traub. Hold them till we check on their story."

"You'd better let me handle this, Sloan," Butler said harshly. "Let me take care of these guys." All the sudden fury he felt was in his voice. Sloan had the papers. Now he was starting to double-cross.

"I'm going to put them where they'll

be out of circulation until I find out a few things," Sloan answered harshly. "If you want them after that, you can have them." He dare not let them get into Butler's hands now. If Butler were to question them now they might tell of the papers they had delivered to the police station. And Sloan wanted that kept secret until he learned more, himself.

Butler smiled thinly as Traub escorted the two preachers out the back door toward the jail, then turned on his heel and walked out of the office.

Sloan put the papers back on the desk and studied them again. He lifted his head as he thought of Traub and the preachers and heard no sound from out back. He got up and walked to the door to look. There was no sign of either Traub or his prisoners in the jail.

The mystery of everything began to send chills along Sloan's spine. He stared at the door, then at the papers. After a while he scratched a match and touched it to one corner of the papers and dropped the blazing mass into the metal wastebasket. Looking at the ashes, he felt as if a mighty weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Even the disappearance of the mysterious preachers didn't seem so important. He was his own man now. Thinking about it made a shrewd light come into his eyes.

LEAVING the police station, Butler headed for the nearest pay-station. He didn't notice the black-garbed figure who came swiftly around the corner of the station and followed him. Being the top man around town so long had made Butler careless. Because he was careless, and seething with blind rage, he didn't notice the same tall man slip into the drugstore and stand close to the booth where he was phoning.

Butler's voice was shrill and high as he talked into the phone. "I tell you, Dev, I saw the papers on Sloan's desk. He

jerked them out of sight when I came in. He had that safe cracked. He's starting to get out from under." His voice rose. "And, listen! Those two religious nuts came into the station, telling about seeing the cops pick up Travers. Sloan had already told me that he couldn't find the kid. I think he's got the kid somewhere undercover ready to spring, if we don't come across. I don't trust that fat crook."

He listened a moment. "The two religious nuts? I don't think they've got sense enough to lie about anything. They're just a pair of cranks. But Sloan is smart. He's hanging onto them. I wanted him to turn them over to me but he said he'd hold them. Maybe, he will. But I don't know. I think he's scared of their story. He acted flustered when they told it."

Devereaux's voice was calm and level as it came over the wire. "Now, Butler, don't get jittery. I can still handle things. But Sloan has got to go. We've got to unload him the permanent way. Send out a call for the boys. Have them raid the police station, kill Sloan and grab those two preachers. That's all. Let me hear your report soon, and I'll tell you your next move."

Butler smiled as he walked out of the drugstore. He could picture Chief Sloan with a row of holes across his chest. And the picture pleased him.

He smiled also at the thought of Devereaux's cleverness. Now he saw more clearly than ever just how smart he was. He had always thought so. He heartily approved of Devereaux's system of keeping his men scattered around surrounding towns with their regular jobs. Some of them were salesmen. Some of them were collectors for legitimate concerns. There were no hard-eyed gangsters hanging around Bromley. But they were near, alert and ready to act on word from Butler.

Their positions were all part of Dever-

eaux's smooth plans. He never saw his men. But he planned their jobs—smooth, unspectacular jobs that were always pulled by one or two men. There were no dashes by armored cars with machine guns chanting their songs of death. Devereaux believed that method of striking was outmoded and crude. But that didn't mean that they couldn't be mobilized as he had ordered tonight.

FIFTEEN minutes later, they were in motion, gathering for their swoop down upon the police station in Bromley. He smiled and walked toward the Silver Slipper. He would stay there, have a few drinks and watch the show until the blasting was over.

He was there an hour later when a man burst in and said excitedly to the bartender: "Cripes, give me a drink. I need it."

The bartender shot a bottle across the bar and asked: "What's the matter. You look like you'd seen a ghost."

"Ghost, hell," the man said. "I just saw wholesale murder." He tossed the drink of rye down straight, gagged, sighed and stared at the bartender. "Three carloads of gangsters drove up to the police station and started to rush it. But the cops were waiting. They mowed them down with machine guns. Two cars got away. They say the six gangsters that stayed behind are dead. They were all shot dead but one, and he died before they got him to the hospital."

The bartender said heavily: "Can yuh imagine that—a gang trying to crack the police station? How come they didn't make it? You'd figure they would be such a surprise they'd get right in."

The fellow poured himself another drink and said: "I heard a guy in the street saying that Chief Sloan was tipped off that they were coming after him."

Butler felt as if the world were whirling around his ears as he headed for the

telephone booth. He dialed with fingers that shook and told his story in an excited babble of words.

Devereaux snapped harshly: "Come straight over here. There's something big behind all this. Someone is pulling the strings. It's time to blow. Come over."

Butler snapped the receiver back on the hook and wiped his sweating face. He was trembling all over. He walked like a drunken man as he crossed the floor.

WHILE Butler was telephoning, Chief Sloan was staring down at the face of one of the dead gangsters. His own face was the color of putty as he said hoarsely: "That's Slim Gargan, one of Dev—one of Butler's men."

The man beside him said: "Yeah. What the hell is it all about?"

"It's the blow-off," Sloan said. Color flowed slowly back into his face. He remembered the burning papers and felt better. He lifted his pudgy hands and said steadily: "It's the blow-off. I know what to do now. Come with me. Get a couple more of the boys who are in the know and follow me."

He stalked out, his big feet smacking heavily on the floor. There was a purpose in his stride that hadn't been there for a long time. He was thinking of Devereaux without men at his back, a Devereaux who now had no hold over him. There would be less hold when Devereaux was dead. And there was the hot money and jewels that Devereaux would have hidden somewhere in his mansion.

BUTLER was coming out of the Silver Slipper when he saw the two men. They walked like an ecclesiastical Mutt and Jeff, black-garbed, sedate of stride. He yelled at them and ran toward them. "Hey, wait a minute."

The two men turned slowly. Brother Jeremiah's smile was cherubic. Brother Thomas was as he always appeared,

solemn, gaunt, his eyes glowing in their cavernous sockets.

"Where did you fellows come from?" he asked harshly. He had his hand on the butt of the gun in his pocket. He wasn't taking any chances, even if these fellows did look so harmless, standing there clutching their Bibles in their hands. They stared at him blankly as he asked, "How did you get out of jail?"

Brother Jeremiah beamed. "We didn't go to jail," he chuckled. "The good chief knew that we were but harmless preachers of the Word. He let us go."

"The righteous," Brother Thomas intoned solemnly, "are under the protection of the Most High. No harm comes near their dwelling."

Butler's voice went flat and thin. "We're through playing now! I've got a gun in my pocket. I'll shoot the hearts out of you if you make a funny move. You're coming with me. Get it? You're coming with me."

Brother Thomas said gravely: "The call of one in need is enough for us, brother. We need no compulsion."

"Well, you're getting it. March!"

He was pushing the two black-garbed men up the steps before him to the entrance of Devereaux's mansion when he felt something jab into his own back and a hoarse voice say, "Drop the gun, Butler, or I'll drill you."

Butler recognized Sloan's voice. "Give the ring. Tell Devereaux you picked up the two holy-shouters. Then we'll all go in."

Devereaux, himself, answered the door. Evidently, he had sent his servants away. Butler said, "I picked up the two preachers."

Then Sloan stepped past him and jammed a gun into Devereaux's waist. "Back up," he snarled. "Into the house. Go slow, or I'll let you have it."

Sloan had three men with him. Devereaux and Butler backed to the wall and

stared at Sloan. Butler was shaking like a man with chills. Devereaux seemed cold and calm. His voice was very even when he said: "Do you think you're being smart, Sloan? I can still send you up to burn."

Sloan's fat face twisted in a grin. "A dead man can't, Devereaux. I've got the papers. And when I get through you won't be able to talk."

All of them seemed to have forgotten the two preachers who stood at one side, their Bibles still clasped in their hands.

Then Sloan saw the leather bag by the table. He licked his thick lips. "So you were ready to blow? You had the stuff all packed? Thanks Devereaux. That was nice of you. You got it all ready for me."

A new voice said, "No, Sloan, he got it ready for us."

Everyone jerked around, faces frozen in masks of blank surprise. The two preachers were standing as they had been. But they were not clutching Bibles now. Those were at their feet—not Bibles, but leather cases, lying open and empty. In their hands were big automatics.

Brother Thomas raised his voice. "Now is come the day of salvation!"

Devereaux snarled, "Why not drop that holy comedy?" Then his jaws snapped as the door across the room opened and a blue-uniformed trooper walked in with a sub-machine gun in his hands. Two more crowded in behind him. A window smashed, and another gun appeared there. "Nice work, Parson."

Then, while troopers rounded up the little company, with Sloan shaking like a bowl of jelly, the two men gravely snapped the brass clasps and went out.

At the door, Brother Thomas spoke briefly to a man he pulled to one side. "The stuff is in there. Devereaux hadn't time to get rid of the Acme loot. I wish you'd see that the Travers boy gets the reward. He deserves it. After all, he nearly did time for it. Fix it up if you

can. Traub is in the old basement."

NEXT morning in Washington a gray-haired man, with a mouth that was like a sharp crack in the hardness of his face, read a telegram. Then the ice in his eyes melted. He chuckled and threw the paper across the desk.

The other man read. The telegram was addressed to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It said: "Behold the day of salvation is come stop Now is the arm of the Lord revealed and the wicked utterly cast down stop Behold we shall sojourn in delightful places and rejoice and be glad in green pastures." It was signed, "Yours in anticipation of joys to come, Brother Thomas."

The other man grinned broadly. "You made a clean sweep."

The gray man nodded. "Yes, a clean sweep. Sloan broke down and spilled the works. A few of them will get the chair. The rest will be out of circulation for a long time. It was smart work." He shook his head. "When the two of them cracked Butler's safe they busted the thing wide open. Each one began to suspect the others. Their sending the papers back to Sloan was sheer genius. They knew, of course, that Butler would head for there and hoped he'd see the stuff.

"They knew Devereaux would stage a raid on the police station to get those papers back. So they tipped Sloan off."

The second man leaned on the desk, his eyes on the telegram again. "What do they mean by that 'Behold we shall sojourn in delightful places'?"

The gray man smiled again. "It means that the two of them are going to shed their frocks and go on a bat. And that means in a couple of days I'll have to send out a searching-party for them." His voice took on a note of dry amusement, "'Yours in anticipation of joys to come.'" Does that sound like a couple of hard-boiled G-men!"

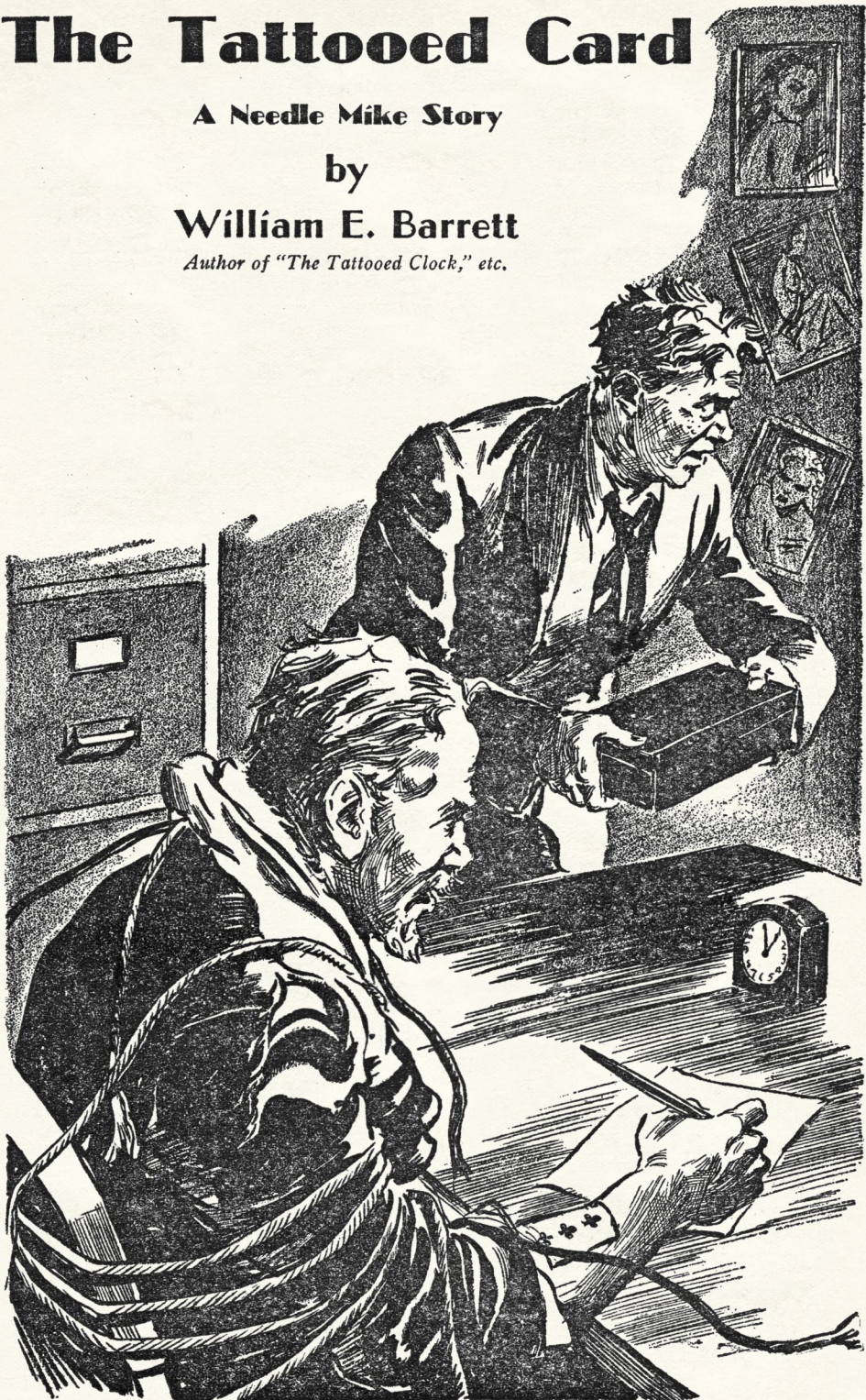
The Tattooed Card

A Needle Mike Story

by

William E. Barrett

Author of "The Tattooed Clock," etc.



He whimpered like a whipped puppy, then took the pen and wrote.



When the tattoo-artist inked that trey of clubs beneath the flesh of the proprietor of that cheap burlesque house, he never guessed he'd bought himself chips in a murder jack-pot, or realized he'd have to collect a pair of human death-cards from a cold-decked suit of fourteen, before beating the hangman to the noose.

CHAPTER ONE

To Be Hanged By the Neck

NEEDLE MIKE'S tattooing shop was a grimy hole in the wall on South Broadway in St. Louis. Over the doorway, a gaudy sign swung—

**Needle Mike's
Tat-2-ing done Neatly
Day or Night**

The window had a large and dirty pane and the shop had a wide assortment of mismatched furniture. The man who ran the shop, and owned the furniture, was the son of a millionaire.

Kenneth McNally didn't look like a scion of wealth. He sat in a wired-together chair, with his feet on a scar-laced table. He looked like an old sailor with a taste for whisky. The powder burns on his cheek were measles scars retouched, and his tangled mop of hair was chemically streaked with gray. Chemicals, too, had given him a slightly yellow complexion. Tiny wads of paraffin had changed the shape of his nose and mouth. His glittering gold tooth was a clever dental bridge. To South Broadway, these things were neither artificial nor unreal. Part of his neighborhood, he was a man whose periodical absences were charged off to drunkenness. He was Needle Mike.

McNALLY looked out of the window. It was a quiet evening, and such evenings made him restless. He had embarked on this fantastic existence along the fringe of the St. Louis underworld to escape the upperworld's boredom and to flirt with danger of a kind to which he had not been born.

Across the street, there was a flood of humanity pouring from the doors of the Apollo Theater. Flaring posters before the Apollo proclaimed the fact that one could see *Real Burlesk. Pretty Girls. Star Comedians. A Feature Picture and a News Reel,* all for the sum of twenty-five cents. The crowd that was leaving now had seen the pretty girls and comedians. They were not tarrying for the feature or the news reels. The weather-beaten clock on McNally's wall bonged the half hour for ten-thirty. There was a shuffling step along the pavement, and McNally's knob turned.

McNally looked up.

The man who slouched in the doorway could have stepped out of a comic strip or magazine cover. He was the tramp artists imagine. His clothes were worn and torn and visibly held together in spots by the free use of pins. Long and lean, all that could be seen of his face beneath the pulled-down soft hat, was dirty and beard-blue. His shoes were broken across the toes. He lacked, however, the usual geniality of his kind. Half crouched there in the doorway, he exuded a sullen air of menace.

McNally looked him over with the uncompromising hostility of Needle Mike. "What am I supposed to do, take your photograph?" he growled. "Or do you talk sometimes?"

The man came into the room behind a baritone grunt. He fumbled in the pocket of a greasy coat, that had once been gray, and brought out a single playing-card. He tossed it face up upon the table between McNally's feet.

"How much would you charge to needle that on me, as is?" he asked.

McNally got a glimpse of the card, and his feet came down from the table with a bang. It was the trey of clubs. He looked up sharply. The tramp was standing so that his back was to the low-powered lamp inside the door, and his shoulder half turned to drop light above McNally's workbench. His face was deep in shadow, but McNally felt the burning intensity of the man's eyes.

McNally frowned at the card. "As is, with the little pips in the corners, I'll do it for five bucks."

The ragged man didn't move a muscle of his body. "On my chest and on my forearm—both."

McNally looked up again. He was startled, and, for a second, he showed it. The bulking shadow of another blotted out for a moment the glare of the theater sign across the way. He was coming toward McNally's window from the curb.

The tramp took a scarcely perceptible step, threw a look toward the window. McNally looked up, too. He suppressed a growl of annoyance. Rex Milligan was coming over for one of the visits that lately were almost a nightly occurrence.

The tramp tugged at the brim of his battered hat and sidled toward the door. "Check it, professor," he said. "I'll be back."

He squeezed past Milligan in the doorway, without looking at him.

Milligan looked after him, removed his hat and passed a handkerchief around the sweatband. "Hope I'm not driving away customers, Needler," he said.

McNally turned the tray of clubs face down on the table. "Nope," he said. "Lots of 'em shop when they haven't got dough. Once a guy gets the bug for needlework, it's like collecting stamps. He either gets needled or he goes around getting prices."

"Is that a fact? I'm glad I never let you get started on me."

MILLIGAN sat down without invitation. He was a blocky man, a few years past forty. His hair was thinning but he was in good shape physically. He grunted and groaned and planted himself around like a fat man, but had no bay window. He wore a Vandyke beard, blond, inclined to be straggly, and a source of annoyance to McNally. There was a tradition behind Vandyke beards, but Milligan had the beard without the tradition. He wore ill-fitting clothes badly, had stubby fingers with dirty fingernails, and collected dirt in the large pores of his face. He was a partner in the Apollo Theater.

"I'm tired, Needler," he grunted. "I came over to take a drink. I can't start doing it in my place or the customers will start doing it, too. It's bad enough now. Have one?"

He set a pint whisky bottle on the table.

It was bonded whisky. Milligan always had good whisky. It was his one high-grade trait, and he explained it by the fact that he had been poisoned badly once by whisky that wasn't good. He never drank in any of the South Broadway saloons.

"Don't care if I do," McNally accepted the invitation.

He picked up the bottle. Needle Mike had to live always in character, and Needle Mike wasn't the type to refuse a drink of bonded liquor. He drank, and wiped his lips.

Milligan drank right after him, and set the bottle down with a sigh. "I get wore out these days, Needler," he said. "I got to keep checking up on Walker. Getting absent-minded, he is. Got something on his mind, and acts like he's worried as hell. Queer kind of a guy. Keeps bottled up. I don't know nothin' about him, and I'm his partner."

McNally looked out of the window. He could see Walker out in front of the theater removing the framed photographs of the "pretty girls," preparatory to closing up. McNally didn't know much about Walker, either. The man was surly and unsociable, about the same age and build as Milligan but seemingly without Milligan's interest in people. In their Apollo partnership, the men split duties according to their talents. Milligan was the front office and handled the crowd; Walker was stage manager and handled the properties.

"Another?" Milligan held out the bottle.

"Sure." McNally appeared to drink deeply, but he was cautious.

Milligan took the bottle back and corked it. "I'd like another myself," he said, "but I've got a dirty headache. I'm going down to the drug-store for an aspirin. Sorry about the customer, Mike."

"Think nothin' of it. He'll be back. Probably thought you were a dick." Mc-

Nally laughed in the deep bellowing fashion of a tattoo artist with a couple of drinks.

He watched Milligan walk stiffly down the block toward the drugstore on the corner. The laugh died out of his voice and manner as soon as the necessity for it was past. His eyes were thoughtful. He had come very close to telling Rex Milligan that the tramp had been asking him about the price of a design similar to the one that he had tattooed nearly a year ago on the arm and chest of Phil Walker.

McNally turned, and hobbled over to the table. His limp was the last careful touch to his adopted identity. There was an ovular device of cork and rubber, on his right kneecap, that held his leg stiff. He could never forget, even in a moment of stress, to walk like Needle Mike. While he wore the clamp, he could walk no other way. He reached the table-top, and stopped short.

The tray of clubs stared up at him. He had turned it face down, when Milligan entered. Sometime during the visit, it had been turned around. He picked it up thoughtfully, and put it in his pocket. He went back to the window and looked out.

IT WAS one of those dull quiet evenings that come along so often when spring is early and people aren't ready for it. There were a few more stragglers drifting out of the Apollo, and all of the sign lights were out. The feature would be over in a few minutes, and Walker would close up the theater. McNally wondered about Walker, and also about the bum, but this puzzling didn't hold his interest. There was no drama in it.

"As far as excitement goes, I might as well be home," he growled. "Somebody might drop a teacup, or something, and give a man a hell of a flutter."

He stretched wearily and started back to the chair in which he had been sitting

when the tramp came in. He got halfway across the room when the lights went out. There was just the short warning flicker, and, after that, darkness. He swore softly. Both lights had gone simultaneously so that he knew it wasn't a bulb burnout.

"Fuse probably."

He hobbled toward the back room where the fuse-box was. It was misty-gray in the shop, and it got darker the farther he went from the window. At best, he got little illumination from outside on Broadway once the theater lights went out. He was reaching in his pocket for a match, as he opened the door to the back room. He never lighted it.

Powerful hands reached for him out of the darkness, and he felt strong fingers at his throat.

McNally tried to turn and break the grip, but the fingers pressed harder against his windpipe, and his eyes seemed to pop. The room spun, and, out of the spinning mist, he tried to ram his fists into his assailant. The man was behind him, and McNally's fists beat against the air. The other's weight seemed to bear him down, legs twisting in a scissor-grip. Then the bottom dropped out of everything, and McNally's brain was a whirling pinwheel of light in a pit of darkness.

There was a blank, then, out of which McNally roused briefly to the completely physical sensation of a rough rope against his neck and his body lifting free of the floor. He choked and tried to fight, and the blackness crowded back over him. Some part of his brain, impervious to the punishment of his body, mocked him as he slipped off into unconsciousness.

"Hanged by the neck until you are dead," it said. "Until you are dead—dead—"

There was movement behind Needle Mike—sinister, powerful movement—but he knew nothing of it at all. He was out, like a man drowned in a bottomless sea.

CHAPTER TWO

Bloody Burlesque

THE tramp was bending over him when he opened his eyes, and there was a candle flame dancing upon the table-top.

"Swallow it, bo—you need it." His voice came from afar off.

McNally swallowed because it was too much effort not to swallow. It was vile whisky, and blazed its way down his gullet but there was life in it. McNally felt warmth flow back into his veins. He choked, strangled and raised his two hands to his throat. His fingers gripped the rough strands of a rope, and the shock of the contact snapped his brain back out of the darkness. He sat up.

"Yep, I left the rope on yuh," said the tramp. "I cut it in the middle."

He was down on one knee. He took a short pull at the bottle from which McNally had been drinking.

McNally blinked and looked up. The light from the candle was a dancing light, but he could see the end of rope lashed fast around the transom frame. He touched the loosened noose around his own neck, and looked down upon the cut length of rope that matched the rope-end above. He felt as sure of himself as a dizzy man balancing on a window-ledge about thirty floors up, but the mist was clearing from his brain. There was a chair lying on its side in about the position that it would be if a man stood on it to hang himself and then kicked it away.

McNally opened his hand. There was something in it. It took seconds for him to recognize it as a clipping from a newspaper and seconds more before he could focus his eyes well enough to read it. It was a verse with a simple title—*The Bum*. McNally read—

A man gets weary of life sometimes,
Of the endless swim upstream,

And he yearns to float where the current
goes,

To rest and to drift and to dream.
The world shouts, "Weakling" and, "Swim,
fool, swim!"

But the current pounds at his breath
And he wants to go with the stream in life
As he'll go with the stream in death.

McNally grunted. It was bad, maudlin verse, but the kind that a shabby down-and-outer might read when his cup of despondency was about filled to the brim. He passed it to the tramp.

"With that in my fist, I'd be a clean case of suicide," he said. The words rasped from his lips, as he forced the air through his tortured windpipe.

The shabby stranger scarcely glanced at the clipping. "Sure," he said. "I figured that. Somebody fixed your clock, and the cops wouldn't fuss with no murder clues. There you'd be, and you'd be dead. Suicide goes nice on a blotter, and it don't make a cop much work." There was bitterness in the man's tone. He rose slowly from his knee.

McNally loosed the noose and dropped it on the floor, a cold feeling moving along his spine. "How did you suspect?"

The tramp was standing, and the candlelight flickered over his ragged outfit without touching the face beneath the pulled-down hatbrim. "I saw a guy doing a fast fadeout from the back of your joint, so I came in for a look," he said.

"What kind of a guy?"

"Just a guy. It's dark outside."

The shabby man was evasive, but he was studying McNally from under the hatbrim. He shot his question suddenly. "Professor, I done you a turn. O.K. Do me one. Who's the guy that you needed the two treys on?"

"What two treys?" McNally frowned.

The man spat. "Don't be like that. You were remembering to beat hell, when I showed you that Trey and told you where I wanted 'em put. Who'd you put them on?" He was crouched, grim. His eyes

gleamed out of the shadow beneath the hatbrim.

McNally shrugged. After all, it didn't make a lot of difference. The man who had the marks had never tried very hard to conceal them.

"I needled them onto a fellow named Walker, over at the Apollo across the street," he said. "About a year ago, I guess."

The tramp straightened up. "I figured that," he said.

"Figured what?"

"Skip it!" The man snapped his fingers. "Hope you come along O.K., professor."

He turned on his heel and headed for the back door. He didn't shuffle now, but stepped out with a long stride. McNally tried to rise quickly, and dizziness swept over him like a wave. He had to spread his hands out on the floor to steady himself, and, when the whirling motion stopped, he was alone. He swore softly.

"Maybe it adds up," he said huskily. "But I'm too dumb to get the answer. Why try to rub me out?"

WHEN he succeeded in gaining his feet, he crossed the room unsteadily and found the fuse-box. One fuse had been screwed out part way. He tightened it, and the lights went on in the other room. He rubbed his throat gingerly. There was a wash-basin in the front room. It took effort to reach it, but the cold water felt good on his face. There was less feeling of bulge behind his eyes.

The door of the shop opened, and he turned with the wet towel still in his hands. Detective Sergeant Mort Dickinson, of the homicide squad, was standing just inside of the door.

"What's the matter with you?" Dickinson growled.

McNally drew a handkerchief around his throat and knotted it. He didn't favor police investigations, whether in his favor

or against him. He wanted none of them.

"Bad cold," he answered huskily. "Sore throat."

Dickinson sniffed. "And too much bad liquor to cure it. Put a hat on, Mike."

"What for?" McNally was startled.

"Identification. No pinch."

"Right away." McNally hobbled into the back room. He didn't know what was in the wind, but he was thanking his luck that Dickinson was on the job while Corbin enjoyed a vacation. Corbin, his old Nemesis, would have had him foul tonight. Dickinson was a routine kind of a dick who took things pretty much as he found them without sniffing out wild angles.

In the process of being hanged, McNally had lost the pieces of paraffin that reshaped his mouth. Dickinson stayed in the front room and gave him an opportunity of replacing them. He was just a minor witness in the case, to Dickinson; everybody from the mayor on down would have been a suspect to the absent Corbin. McNally took time to pass a grimy towel over his face to make up for any ravages caused by washing. He jammed a hat on his head, limped into the front room again.

They went across the street to the Apollo.

PHIL WALKER was lying on the floor in the cluttered office backstage. He had a hole in his face, just under the cheekbone, and a small automatic clutched in his hand. A fleshy woman, with dyed red hair, sat slumped in an old-fashioned swivel-chair that faced the visitor's side of the office desk. The front of her green dress was soaked with blood, and her eyes protruded glassily.

The office was filled with people, but they made room for Dickinson and McNally. There was a police inspector who had dropped in unofficially, a cop in harness, several newspaper reporters and a

couple of people from the Apollo theater.

Dickinson waved his hand. "Know 'em, Mike?"

McNally looked down at the man. Walker's sleeves were rolled up, and the tattooed trey of clubs stood out on his right forearm, six inches or so above the gun that he clutched with dead fingers. He had been a light-haired man with a blond mustache, husky but not fat.

McNally nodded. "I know him. He's Phil Walker—one of the fellows that own this dump."

"How about the playing-card? Did you needle it on him?"

"Yep—about a year ago."

"Why?"

"He wanted it."

"What's it mean?" Dickinson was shooting the questions.

McNally shrugged. "I wouldn't know. It was his idea."

Dickinson grunted. "How about the woman? Ever see her before?"

McNally looked at the lined face beneath the dyed hair. The rouge stood out with dark ghastliness against the pallid skin of death. Here was a woman of forty-five, or fifty, who had fought hard against the years. He shook his head.

"I don't spot her."

Dickinson crossed the room and lifted the woman's limp arm. "How about that playing-card? Did you do that, too?"

McNally stared. On the woman's right forearm was the six of spades. "I didn't do that," he said.

Dickinson sighed. A cop's life was being constantly marred by such disappointments. He'd gone after McNally, personally, because it would have been a nice break for him if he could walk in with an identifying witness while the inspector and newspapermen were in the room. Identifying Walker hadn't been a problem.

There was a stir at the door. A plainclothesman came in with Rex Milligan. Milligan was mopping his hatband with

a handkerchief and seemed highly agitated. "This is terrible, gentlemen, terrible. How did it happen? This man wouldn't tell me anything, and—"

"Do you know the woman?" Dickinson snapped the monologue in two with the question.

Milligan stared at the dead woman, shuddered and shook his head. "Stranger to me," he said. "Didn't she have a bag or—or anything?"

"She didn't have a damned thing." One of the reporters supplied the answer, when Dickinson turned his back.

Dickinson turned around again fast. "Where were you when it happened?"

Milligan blinked. "I don't know. Walker was all right, when I left. I had a headache. I stopped and got some aspirin, and I went home."

Dickinson looked at the plainclothesman.

The man nodded. "He was in bed," he said. "He lives about six blocks away."

Milligan was patting his forehead with the handkerchief. He turned appealingly to the reporter who had answered his previous question. "What happened?"

The reporter jerked his thumb toward a collarless man in a gray suit who was holding a towel in his hands. The man was pale-faced, thin, smooth-shaven, and now stepped forward.

"I'm Padgett, comedian in your show, Mr. Milligan," he said. "You wouldn't know me. We saw Walker, usually. I went out and sat through the news reel, after the show, without taking off my make-up, so I was late cleaning up. Belle, over there, was late, too." He jerked his thumb toward a plump girl in a pink dress who was scrubbed clean of make-up in the presence of the press, and very unhappy about it.

Padgett cleared his throat. "I heard the shots—three of them. I ran up to Walker's office here, and the front door was locked. Belle was with me. I left

her there at the door, yelling, and I ran down that short flight of steps to the stage and around through the prop-room to your office. This is how they were, and they looked dead to me. I phoned for the cops."

"But the woman. Where did she come from? How did she get in? There must be some clue." Milligan was looking around wildly as if he had a chance of seeing a clue and catching it on the wing.

The reporter cut in: "She sat through the show, and asked for Walker while the picture was on. We got that from an usher that they picked up in the saloon down the block."

MCNALLY drew back against the wall. He was conscious of the fact that his disguise, simple thought it was and proof against ordinary mishap, had taken punishment tonight and might gain him unfavorable attention under close police scrutiny. He was conscious, too, of the fact that he was a more important witness in this murder case than anyone suspected.

The fact that there was a shabby tramp asking about that trey-of-clubs design tonight before the murder was committed had heavy implications. That he, himself, was attacked murderously was somehow significant, too. But he couldn't add the facts up, himself, and he was willing to bet that the cops couldn't add them up. If he opened his mouth, they'd hold him as a material witness. Material witnesses were often sweated at H.Q., and he didn't kid himself that he could stand the process without revealing himself as a man in disguise. Once let the fact of his disguise come out, and he was lost. The cops would hang every unexplainable fact around his neck. He shook his head. His play was to keep buttoned up.

Dickinson looked across the room at him, nodded his head and waved.

McNally sighed, and turned to the

door. Let them yammer about the case all they wanted to. Dickinson said that he could go, and there wasn't anything that he wanted more than that.

Dickinson was a routine cop and the case would blow over. Dickinson would sift the facts that he had and go before the coroner's jury probably with a clean case of murder and suicide. The woman had come out of Walker's past. She'd found him, and they'd quarreled. Walker had killed her, and then taken his own life. It was as simple as that, and the tattooed playing-cards were just bits of business that the Fates had tossed in to make it tough for cops.

McNally hobbled across the street to his shop. "Me and Walker both," he muttered. "I committed suicide, too—but it didn't take."

CHAPTER THREE

Death Dealt from the Deck

MCNALLY sat a long while with his thoughts behind the grimy window that faced South Broadway. The bugles were blowing in his blood, but he couldn't answer them. Adventure had flitted past him, yet he had barely touched the fringe of its shining garment, as it passed. There had been a bum, a trey of clubs and a hangman's rope. Out of less than that, he had sometimes had experiences to curl a man's hair.

But there was no place to go from where he was now.

It would be foolhardy to mess with a murder case still fresh in the minds of the police, and he had no clue that would lead him to the ragged stranger who was, somehow, the key to the mystery of what had happened in the Apollo. McNally felt his throat. It still ached from the pressure of a strangler's fingers. He frowned at his own hands. Who had done that?

He thought of Milligan and the turned

trey of clubs. Milligan was strong enough to be the strangler, if he had wanted to strangle him. McNally stiffened suddenly, and snapped his fingers.

"The bum!" he muttered.

Faulty reasoning starts from such obscure facts. Simply because the ragged stranger cut him down didn't mean that the man was innocent of stringing him up. The tramp had traded a favor for a favor. He had found out about the clubs that McNally had needled on Walker. He had found this out while McNally was still groggy, and probably under no other circumstances would he have found out so easily. The result might have justified the effort. Right after the man got his information, Phil Walker died.

The clipped poem, that McNally had had in his hand, was the type that a down-and-outer might have in his possession. McNally walked up and down.

"It adds up roughly," he said. "But there are holes. Why in hell should Walker be killed for a trey of clubs that I needled onto him? If it ever meant anything to him, except another skin-picture, he never showed that it did."

He went back and sat by the window. The street was quieting down. The morgue-wagon had come and gone. The morbid crowd had drifted away. One by one, the principals came out. Padgett, the comedian, who had found the body, left the darkened theater with the girl called Belle, and parted with her out front. Rex Milligan made his exit in conversation, with one of the detectives, but walked down South Broadway, alone. Dickinson and the others left in police cars, and the theater brooded in black darkness.

McNally watched it for a while and smoked. Then he rose and went into the back room. He had left the severed rope in there, and he wondered what the police would make of it if they should decide to take a look through Needle Mike's.

He turned on the light, and stopped short. In the center of the room, there was a batch of newspaper clippings in a broken envelope held together by string. He picked them up gingerly and took them to the table. Before untying the string, he locked the rear door, and closed the door that opened on the big room in front. He could feel the stir of excitement in his blood.

He took the clippings out of the envelope and spread the top strip across the table. It, like the others in the envelope, was yellowed with age. The type face was typically small-town and from some paper that McNally did not recognize. The headline across the page read—

**FOURTEEN DIE IN EXPLOSION
AT HILLTOP MINE**

His eye raced through the account. The Hilltop Mine was a coal mine in a western state. Prior to the writing of this news story, there had evidently been some labor unrest. At three-fifteen in the morning, an explosion had destroyed two buildings in which a group of visiting company executives were temporarily housed. Four company executives, a newspaper man, three engineers and six employees of the Hilltop Mine were killed in the explosion. The first account carried very little more information than that. The other clippings told most of the story in headlines—

**FOURTEEN MEN MURDERED
AT HILLTOP**

COUNTY ATTORNEY CLAIMS EXPLOSION WAS RESULT OF TERRORIST BOMB.

The clippings fell in order, according to dates—

**DUPE OF TERRORISTS CONFESSES
MURDER PLOT**

BOMBING PLANNED BY AGITA-

TORS, SAYS MINER. STRANGE SECRET SOCIETY PLANNED MORE ATROCITIES.

TWENTY TATTOOED TERRORISTS ARRESTED

MEN NAMED BY TOM FENNER TAKEN IN CUSTODY. EACH MAN TATTOOED WITH THE DESIGN OF A PLAYING-CARD.

MORE ARRESTS IN HILLTOP BOMBING

TOM FENNER TELLS HOW HE WAS FORCED TO JOIN TATTOOED SOCIETY KNOWN AS THE "DECK".

THE clippings ran on for nearly a year, with many dates missing but with the story fairly complete. McNally read through them, his face growing more grim with each unfolding detail. It was a tragedy of ten years ago, but there was a vivid reality to it in this dingy little room with a noosed rope coiled beside the yellowed pieces of pulp paper.

FENNER TELLS HOW HE BECAME THE TREY OF CLUBS AND LEARNED PLAN OF THE TATTOOED TERRORISTS, AS THIRTY FACE TRIAL FOR BOMBING.

The feature story covered the ground pretty well. There had been a labor lock-out three months earlier at Hilltop Mine, and a group of miners had been fired upon by armed company guards. When the survivors gathered together, after three of their number had been killed, they found that there were exactly fifty-two of them. Out of that meeting had grown the idea of the "Deck"—suggested by the deck of cards. Each man had been dealt a card and was known by that card, thereafter, to avoid the dangerous use of names in the organization. Tom Fenner, the young miner who turned state's evidence, claimed that he was forced to join the organization under fear of death, and that, when one of the miners who under-

stood the art, tattooed the members, he had to submit.

There were clippings, too, of denials—

ACCUSED MEN SAY THAT FENNER LIES

NO PLOT, MINERS CLAIM. THE DECK ORGANIZED AS NUCLEUS OF LABOR UNION.

FENNER SET BOMB, SAYS ORTH

LEADER OF DECK SAYS VIOLENCE WAS NOT IN ORGANIZATION PLAN.

Back and forth, through many papers, the controversy raged in type. Fenner stuck to his story and had company support. The miners were incensed at Fenner, and he was given armed protection. No place was there a picture of him, but again and again his identifying mark was mentioned. He was the trey of clubs.

The climax was a series of sentences. A miner named Orth and two associates were named as the actual bombers, and sentenced to hang. Twenty-seven other men went to jail for sentences averaging ten years. The last clipping was a picture of a woman with one hand in her hair, her other hand upraised. The caption read—

DEATH TO THE TREY OF CLUBS

MRS. FRANK ORTH, KNOWN AS "BIG SADIE" TO THE MINERS, SNAPPED AS SHE SWORE VENGEANCE ON TOM FENNER, STATE'S WITNESS AT THE TRIAL OF HER HUSBAND WHO WAS HANGED TODAY FOR HIS PART IN THE HILLTOP MINE BOMBING.

McNally stared a long time at that photograph, and the tragedy of ten years back moved into the room where he sat. The face that stared out of the time-dimmed picture was the same face that had stared across Phil Walker's desk tonight in the stare of death.

The *Trey of Clubs* had been the betrayer of his mates, and the woman who died in Phil Walker's office was the widow of a miner who hanged.

The story of tonight's murder, then, had been written ten years ago in a little Western town about which few people in St. Louis had ever heard. McNally shook his shoulders against the chill that moved along his spine. It was deathly still in the back room of Needle Mike's, but the ghosts seemed to move there through the yellowed clippings and about the noosed rope.

"Somebody made a mistake," McNally thought. "Phil Walker wasn't Tom Fenner."

MCNALLY stacked the clippings neatly and put them away in the worn envelope. There were no identifying marks on that envelope, unless there were fingerprints on it, and the odds were that any fingerprints would be badly smudged. He rose from the table.

"Who dropped them?" he muttered.

There had been two men in his back room, unless the tramp had played two rôles. It had been the height of carelessness for anyone to lose a clipping-collection like this—but here they were. He wrinkled his brow with concentration.

Something was eluding him—something that should be obvious.

He wished that his head didn't ache quite so hard and that he could remember a little more about the half hour before Dickinson came over after him. He had been very close to death, and a man who dangles over the brink of eternity does not come out of the experience with his brain clear and observant. The memory-pictures that McNally was capable of calling back were blurred around the edges.

And he couldn't remember if that envelope had been on the floor when he recovered consciousness. He had been on the floor, himself, at about the point where

the envelope had lain. He measured it off.

He went into the front of the shop, with a prescience of danger. It was well after midnight, and South Broadway was quiet except for the occasional engine throb of a passing car. A man desperate enough to try for his life once, when the neighborhood was alive and nervous, could be expected to return.

Somebody, too—either the man who had attempted murder the first time, or another—would have an inducement to come back. There were the damning papers. They were dynamite, of course, to McNally. But how could the other man know that?

The police were entitled to those papers. The man who lost them would expect Needle Mike to turn them over and curry favor at H.Q. He wouldn't know that Needle Mike couldn't stand police scrutiny and police examination. As result, he would be back.

The warning bell rang again in McNally's consciousness, to remind him of a slipped cog somewhere in his reasoning. But he couldn't pin the error down. He shook his shoulders irritably, locked his front door and put out the light.

He sat, then, in his rickety chair and stared across the street at the darkened front of the Apollo Theater.

Needle Mike's clock had just bonged once for the half hour of two-thirty, when he saw Rex Milligan.

The theater man came up South Broadway warily, and his heels didn't click on the pavement. He had his head held stiffly forward, like the head of a man who is listening, and his right hand was rammed in his pocket. He stopped just a few yards short of the theater entrance, took a quick look up and down the block. Then he plunged into the black areaway that led to the stage entrance.

McNally sat where he was for a long five minutes, and no living thing stirred along the block. He took a deep breath,

and rose to his feet. The weariness and the indecision dropped away from him. He had something to do and a beat in his blood that promised him excitement in the doing.

He left his place dark, and went across the street.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Corpse for a Corpse

THE stage-entrance door was locked. McNally had expected that but he felt strangely baffled. His brain wasn't functioning well. He had neglected the little kit that he had assembled for dealing with recalcitrant locks. He didn't want to go back after it, and he moved cautiously around behind the theater. There was a jutting platform there, on which props were unloaded, and a sliding door that led to the backstage area. McNally tried the door, more in hope than in faith. It slid back soundlessly.

He stepped into the thick darkness and stood with his back to the door. His heart was hammering. By no stretch of the imagination could he conceive of Rex Milligan entering the theater by so clumsy a route as this. Milligan would have a key to the stage door, off the areaway, and would go in by that door. The police weren't in the habit of leaving the scene of violent death with doors unlocked.

"So the facts add up to two people ahead of me," he decided.

McNally moved slowly forward. In the entire catalogue of buildings there is none as completely spooky as an empty theater. The stage curtain, that had been dropped for the showing of films, was still down, and he was spared the sight of ghostly seats stretching off into blurred distance. The stage, itself, was a hazardous passage. Sections of scenery, that had been the walls of a stage room, were standing at cockeyed angles to one another. There

were odds and ends of paraphernalia scattered around, as well as coils of rope that were part of the scene-shifting system. He tripped over an end of rope, and then heard the scraping sound above him, to his left.

It was a slight noise, but the empty theater magnified sound. McNally stopped and he could hear—or thought that he could—the pounding of his own heart. He moved in the direction of the sound and, although something within him was urging speed, he was forced to move at a snail's-pace. There was no light. He could not see obstructions until he was squarely upon them.

An iron-stepped stairway loomed ahead of him. He stretched out his hand to a railing that was cold to the touch. This would be the back stair to the little above-stage balcony upon which the two offices of the theater were built. He was remembering the account of Padgett, the comedian, who had found the bodies. Padgett had gone up the front steps, that duplicated these, and, when he found the door to Walker's office locked, he had had to circle the stage—with the scenery, no doubt, still in place—then charge up these stairs to Milligan's office.

The murderer—if there were a murderer, and it had not been murder and suicide—would have had plenty of chance to run down these stairs and out into the alley behind the theater.

These thoughts flashed through McNally's brain as he moved softly up the steps. The slight scraping of his feet, and the metallic response of the stairs to his weight, stirred echoes backstage and took on the characteristics of clatter.

There was no response to the sound, save the scraping noise again—closer now and punctuated with an occasional wooden thump. McNally crossed the short landing, and opened the door to Milligan's office. The office, like the rest of the theater, was dark but the scraping

sound became intensified at his entrance. He reached out, fumbled along the wall till he found the switch, and flooded the office with light.

Rex Milligan was securely trussed up in a straight-backed chair that had been shoved against the wall. His heavy, flat-topped desk had been moved so that its edge rested hard against his chest and robbed him of any chance that he might have had to squirm loose. A towel had been forced between his teeth, its ends tied with twine and looped around his head to a knot at the nape of his neck. His eyes blinked rapidly in the sudden light, then bulged with effort as he tried to flash a message of appeal to McNally.

MCNALLY'S eyes took quick inventory of the room. There were signs of struggle in the broken desk-lamp, the pile of photographs scattered around the room, the two torn books of Apollo Theater press clippings on the floor. The door to the ill-fated Walker's office was closed, but near that door was a small pool of blood.

The top of Milligan's desk had been cleared of everything save a small clock and a black, rectangular box a trifle larger than a cigar box. McNally moved the desk toward the center of the room, cut the gag-cord with his pocketknife and removed the towel from the theater manager's mouth.

Milligan's face contorted like the face of a man with a sudden spasm. He gagged and sputtered, and drool flooded down upon the untied blond Vandyke. McNally's eyes were narrowed speculatively. He had been doing some clear thinking, since he entered the theater, and he had literally stumbled into one vital clue that he should never have overlooked, in the first place.

"What in hell's it all about, Milligan?" he growled. He was Needle Mike to the hilt now. The natural caution of an old neighborhood character, who is on the

fringe of the law, was his best card to play. He was in a position to trade for information.

"Let me loose and I'll tell you." Milligan's voice was thin and strained. There was agony in his eyes, and he kept looking at the clock.

McNally shook his head. "It's been a funny night," he said. "I ain't stepping into nothing till I know what's what."

"I'm your friend, Mike. Let me loose. I've got to—"

"Who tied you up?"

"Intruders. Two prowlers—"

"Yeah. They left your watch and that fancy chain and a ring on your finger."

"They got scared. I put up a good fight."

McNally was relentless. "What were you doing down here?"

Milligan squirmed impatiently. There was fire in his eyes and an angry twist to his lips. "Don't play copper, Mike. Cut me loose."

McNally had taken off the knee-clamp to facilitate fast action when he crossed to the theater, but he remembered to hold the leg stiff when he moved up and down. He was in motion now, walking back and forth within a tight circle.

"Milligan, somebody tried to hang me tonight and make it look like suicide," he growled.

Milligan stopped squirming, body suddenly rigid. "Who?"

McNally stopped and leveled his forefinger. "The rope that was used on me is the same kind you've got outside for shifting scenery."

"That don't mean—Crysnake, Mike—let me loose!"

Milligan was looking at the little clock again, and fighting the hard-tied twine.

McNally's jaw set grimly. "This slaughter up here was made to look like suicide, too." He jabbed his forefinger at Milligan's chest. "I figure it was the same guy's mind working both times.

I figure that guy was planning the slaughter a long time. I figure that he tabbed me as dangerous because I was one guy who knew that Phil Walker wasn't Tom Fenner. I needed the tray of spades on Phil Walker, a year ago, and Tom Fenner had his ten years or more."

Rex Milligan's eyes were wild. He ran his tongue around his lips. "Mike, you've gone nuts. I don't know what you're talking about—"

"Sure, you do. If Tom Fenner was a smart guy, he'd know that the lads out West, who drew ten years, would be coming out pretty quick. He'd want to be dead in a big way—dead in headlines, so they wouldn't look for him. Maybe he'd be smart enough to fix it up a year in advance and pick up some dumb sucker who was about the same build and coloring like himself. He'd talk that guy into getting a tray of clubs tattoo with some gag or another and make him a partner in a business where he could watch him and keep him handy."

"Cut me loose, Mike. You're crazy—"

"If I'm crazy, you're not Tom Fenner."

McNally's eyes were narrow slits. He took a step forward, snapped the button off the man's shirt cuff with one thrust of his finger and rammed the shirt sleeve back to the elbow.

Stark-blue against the man's hairy flesh was the tattooed tray of clubs.

"Very cute, professor, but I'm running this show." The voice broke softly from the door to Walker's office.

MCNALLY spun around. The ragged man was leaning against the door jamb, his shabby hat pulled low. In his hand, he clutched a short and ugly automatic, its muzzle unwaveringly upon McNally.

McNally backed up. "So what?" he said.

"So you're a good guy if you don't get in my way." He flicked a bitter look at

Milligan. "You, Fenner, will I take this guy away and let you listen to the tick alone, or will you write it out?"

The sweat was pouring down Milligan's face. He looked frantically at the clock. "I'll write it—anything," he whispered hoarsely.

"Write the truth and remember that I know what the truth is." The tramp still leaned against the door. He nodded to McNally. "Take that box off the desk and set it on the floor," he said. "Treat it gently."

McNally shrugged. He picked up the black box, and Milligan gave a gasp of terror. "That's a bomb."

McNally almost dropped the box out of sheer surprise. He bent over it and could hear a steady ticking like that of a clock. He looked toward the man in the doorway. He was between the man and Milligan. He couldn't see the man's eyes, but he read the mocking twist of the lips, or thought that he could. There could be no more racking third degree than a ticking mystery in a box. He set the box down.

"Now, loosen his right arm, professor. He's tied so that you can do that. There's pen and ink and paper in that left-hand drawer."

McNally obeyed instructions. Milligan had been cleverly trussed up by a man who knew knots. There was an egg-shaped lump over the man's temple, too, which indicated that he might have been knocked out pretty cold before he was tied.

Milligan whimpered like a whipped puppy and cursed futilely. Then he took the pen and wrote. McNally stepped back and watched him. The room was suddenly silent, save for the faint scratching noise of the pen against the paper. Milligan finished, and sat back.

The man with the gun gestured wearily. "Read it to me, Mike—as is."

McNally took the sheet and read the

contents aloud, pausing to wonder—

"I am Tom Fenner. In 1926, I worked in the Hilltop Mine. Fifty-two of us, who were fired on by company guards in July, 1926, formed a society called the 'Deck'. We each drew a card. I was the trey of clubs. The idea of the Deck was like the idea of a labor union, collective bargaining. If any of us left Hilltop, we swore we would start another Deck wherever we went. Frank Orth, our leader, had a notion that the Deck idea would take and that we'd grow big."

McNally stopped reading and looked toward the man in the doorway.

The man nodded grimly. "O.K., so far. Read on."

McNally read slowly. The words that followed were a bad taste in his mouth—

"The state had a big reward for the arrest of anyone using explosives to damage private property and the company had rewards, too. I went in on a scheme to set off two bombs and blame the Deck for it. A private detective, named Messner, figured out the scheme. He's dead now. We didn't mean to kill anybody, but the bombs were too strong. Messner and I set off the bombs. Thirty members of the Deck were convicted for it. I testified against them.
(Signed) Thomas Fenner."

McNally threw a look of contempt at the man he had known as Milligan—a fiend who had schemed and betrayed for his own ends and who had never reformed, who had formed a partnership with another man for the purpose of killing him and who had worked with that man for a year before he acted. He had deliberately built up a friendship with Needle Mike so that he'd know his habits and be able to eliminate him, too, when the time came to die as an identity through the deaths of others.

MILLIGAN had quieted down. His eyes were watchful now, craftily confident, somehow. There was no shame apparent in him over the reading of this confession that had been so despicable to the man who read it. He was like a poker player who had made a bet, and watched the other players.

The man in the doorway didn't move. "Address an envelope to the governor of the state that we both came from, Milligan," he said. "I'll mail it. The governor's name is Andrew J. Baker."

Milligan addressed the envelope without hesitation. McNally sealed the confession in it and passed it over to the ragged man.

Milligan's voice broke the sudden silence. "A bargain's a bargain," he said. "Let me go."

"I didn't promise you anything, rat. Think back. Tie him up again, professor. I'm not through with him."

McNally hesitated, but he was remembering the man who held the whip hand had not commanded any confession or admissions about tonight's killings. There was merit in admitting the wisdom of the man who held a gun. He tied Milligan up against protest and invective.

"He was figuring that an unwitnessed confession isn't any good and that neither of us want to talk to cops, professor. You tipped your hand, when you didn't report that hanging. Come outside a minute."

MILLIGAN was almost hysterical, but McNally went out with the ragged stranger. The man had showed headwork so far. They moved slowly out of the theater and down the alley. Where the light from a street lamp filtered in through the alley's mouth, the tramp stopped and sat down on the paving. He took a clipping from his pocket and handed it over. It was a personal clipped from a paper.

TREY OF CLUBS ST. LOUIS APOLLO THEATER NAME OF WALKER.

"That ad's been running for months in the mining towns out in our country," the man said. "Fenner put it in, himself, of course, but nobody was expected to figure that. They were supposed to figure it was one of the Deck passing a tip." His voice softened. "Poor old Sadie figured that way. She was the one who spotted it

and came on here. Her husband hanged." He stopped for a moment. "I spotted it myself, but I was careful. I didn't want anybody to die but Fenner. I was too late to save Sadie." He sighed deeply. "You knew I was dying, didn't you?"

McNally was startled. "No."

"Sure. That dirty son shot me when I jumped him. I knew that he'd come back to the theater. He was worried because the cops didn't find those clippings he'd planted. He wanted those bodies identified. He came back because he was worried—"

McNally was barely listening. He was opening the man's shirt, examining the wound in the chest that was tattooed with the eight of diamonds.

The man shook his head. "I've been bleeding to death, inside, for an hour. I'm just waiting a while. Nothing you can do, professor. Mail the letter."

He passed it over, and brushed the hat off his face. McNally gasped. Seen thus, the face was that of a man wearing theatrical make-up. Under the skilful make-up was the lean face of Padgett, the comedian, who had discovered the bodies.

He smiled wearily. "I was a tramp comedian. This was a cinch. Varied my make-up. Swiped those clips and dumped them in your place, after the cops let me go. Figured you'd hang onto them. Smart figuring. You're all right, professor—"

The man closed his eyes. "I did ten years," he whispered. "Innocent as a babe. Good men, with kids, did time. Men hanged. Nothing could do any of us any good now—not even that confession—"

"What about Milligan? What'll I do?"

Padgett roused himself, stiffened. He held his watch up and strained to see it. "The mine blew up at three-fifteen A. M.," he said grimly.

McNally had a horrible tight feeling in his scalp. He looked at the watch. The minute hand was quivering on the quarter hour of three-fifteen now.

There was a blast that rocked the block, and a blinding sheet of flame. The whole back end of the theater seemed to go out.

For a stunned second, McNally crouched there.

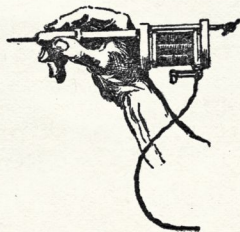
The man smiled faintly. "You don't think I'd bluff with that killer, did you?" he whispered. "O. K., professor—"

He was dead before the minute hand hit three-sixteen.

The neighborhood was banged out of slumber, and McNally had only split seconds. He faded into the side street, and, at the corner, he mailed the envelope to a governor of a western state. He didn't think that it would do any good, but Walker would probably be buried as Fenner, and there wouldn't be any of the real Fenner found.

"That body in the alley will be a headache for the cops," he muttered shakily.

He was heading for the haven of Needle Mike. He wasn't a cop, and he was glad of it. This case would never be solved, and only he could tell the truth of it. If he did, who would believe an old tattoo artist with a reputation as a drunkard—or believe a man in disguise? His hand closed on a playing-card in his pocket, and he tore it up before he threw it away. He didn't look at it because he knew what it was. It was the trey of clubs.



THE GHOST in the BOTTLE

by Madelyn Ralph

Gregory's wife had whined about her ailments for years and Gregory counted on her keeping up her plaint when he put those poisoned pills ready to hand. A couple of capsules to Effie were like a red flag to a bull and he knew she'd bite. What he didn't guess was that she'd shriek her hypochondria out, even from beyond the grave, to brand him killer.

BRIAN gave the superintendent's boy a quarter and said: "Mrs. Gregory will show you where to put the bags in the car. I'll be along directly." Everything was going just as he had planned it—smoothly, naturally.

"Don't forget your driving gloves, darling," Effie said.

"I won't—my dear," Brian assured her, and closed the studio door. He stood for a moment smiling, listening to Effie's footsteps hurrying after the boy. Then he went back into the bathroom.

With deft movements, his hands followed out the plan. Take the bottle of chocolate-colored liver pills from the cabinet. Empty the remaining tablets into the envelope he had ready. Replace them with the two deadly brown-coated strychnine pills. Then place the bottle conspicuously on the glass shelf over the basin.

He knew Effie! She'd see the pills and decide she needed some. It was one of the traits that annoyed him beyond en-



It was easy to get at the pill, hidden in his handkerchief.

durance. Great, robust creature, she was always examining herself for symptoms and expecting him to be concerned.

He looked at the bottle again and wiped his lips with satisfaction.

DOSES
Children, one tablet
Adults, two or three tablets
TO BE TAKEN BEFORE RETIRING

There were only two tablets so Effie would take both, and there would be none left to tell the tale. He'd be in Boston with a cast-iron alibi, and she'd be home, alone, having returned after the week-end with him in New York.

Effie, herself, had arranged the trip—a birthday present to him so he could see some Picassos that were on exhibition in Boston. She'd simply oozed revolting, self-conceited satisfaction that she could "give her darling this opportunity that would mean so much to his art." His art! He snorted. Art, when she had arranged for him to stay with her stupid Boston cousins! Well, after this it would be different. Effie's income, thanks to her thrifty father, would keep him comfortably, even luxuriously, now that none of it need be spent on Effie!

And curiously enough, it was Effie's farther, a research chemist, who had first possessed the strychnine. In disposing of his effects, Brian had come on the tablets. He'd kept them, at first, because of their intriguing similarity to ordinary remedies and a certain sense of power in the mere possession of deadly poison.

At first the plan had been only a theory. This last year, however, it had been hard to wait—but he was glad, now, that he had. This was the perfect set-up. Alone, Effie would take the tablets and go to bed. By the time she realized anything was wrong, she would be unable to summon aid, for the tetanic convulsions, once they started, became severe very quickly, and the slightest attempt to move intensified

them and induced paralysis. Almost too good! It was so gloriously simple that Brian wondered why hundreds of persons hadn't thought of it before. But perhaps they had. He thrilled with quick, heady excitement. Perhaps they had, and hundreds of murders had passed as suicides, and no one had ever suspected!

THE LONG distance telephone call coming through before midnight Monday gave Brian a bad moment. He hadn't expected to hear until Sadie came to clean the studio Tuesday morning. On the train, however, he managed to rationalize himself into calm. The pills were gone, Effie was dead. There was no way they could prove he had been implicated. By the time he reached home, he felt he looked the very picture of a bereaved and horror-stricken husband. He actually did feel a little sad. Poor Effie, she'd been cheated of her favorite audience for her one real and final pain. He would gladly have done her that service.

Even the three plainclothesmen didn't unnerve him. They didn't seem particularly interested in him, anyhow, though one of them did say: "Ah, yes—Mr. Gregory. We'll have to ask you a few questions. I'm Inspector Shawn."

"Naturally," Brian replied quietly. "Anything you wish. Shall I sit down now, or may I wash up a bit?" He managed a faint smile and straightened his shoulders with visible effort. "A bit shocking," he added apologetically.

"Go ahead. We'll be right here for some time," the inspector said.

Brian put his coat away and presently went into the bathroom. The bottle was not on the shelf. Nothing to be alarmed about yet. He opened the cabinet. Ah—there! He took it down and peered inside. Then, with sudden, fascinated horror, he watched his shaking hands turn the bottle upside down and drop one brown pill into his palm!

Effie had taken only one! But she was dead—

Dead, yes, but now he wouldn't know what had happened first! Still, this tablet had been left in the bottle, untouched, so they must not have suspected. He began to stop shaking and, in a moment, felt more confident than ever. Even with a slip like that, they hadn't guessed!

BRIAN sat down on the couch outside. The inspector got up and began to pace back and forth. He looked, Brian thought, rather ridiculously like a buzzard, circling like that and never taking his eyes from his prey. It was funny, giddy.

"Mr. Gregory," the inspector said suddenly, "your wife took only one pill."

It was a bombshell—a bolt from the blue—but Brian held on. "Only one—pill?" he repeated. His voice was perfect—sad, puzzled, as a husband's should be. "You must remember that I have not been informed of the circumstances as yet," he added, very low.

The man peered intently. "She was still conscious. We almost saved her."

Brian's mouth turned dry. Waves of panic were rising from his stomach, but, even at that moment, his eyes narrowed. This might be a frame or pure guessing!

"You put those pills in that bottle, Mr. Gregory," the inspector rapped out. "You did it, *knowing what would happen!* You might as well spare yourself the ordeal of a third-degree. The case is water-tight."

"You're taking a great deal for granted," Gregory said. "My wife and I were happily married. If she took anything—But I can't imagine!"

"We have her word for it," the inspector remarked blandly, "plus substantiating evidence. You see, Mr. Gregory, your wife shouted that she'd been poisoned—that you had done it. A half dozen of your neighbors heard her. Then, of course, we found the bottle."

Brian sat very still. The bottle—with the strychnine in it! Effie shouting with pain! He might have known she'd do that. It was perfectly inevitable. The very characteristic he had counted on had defeated him by its very infallibility!

Brian reached in his breast pocket for his handkerchief, and smiled faintly. What fools they'd been to leave that pill there for him if he needed it! And how lucky he had remembered they sometimes examined traps for residue and so had not disposed of the tablet that way. He wiped his brow. Easy, then, to press the handkerchief to his mouth. He bit through the linen to free the pill from the inner fold. There. Twenty minutes—no more. "Very well, Inspector," he said.

Inspector Shawn nodded to his assistant. "That makes it much easier, Mr. Gregory," he said. "You see, your wife did shout you'd poisoned her, but she was alone at the time. It might have been mere hysteria. We had no real evidence that you'd placed the strychnine in the bottle—or even that it had ever been there—though it was a fair guess, since strychnine tablets sometimes look very much like the larger sort of liver pills."

Brian stared. Partial comprehension, confusing and horrible, began to blacken his mind. "But it was there," he shouted wildly. "The pill was there!"

"Oh, quite," the inspector said. "We thought there must have been two tablets, judging from the effect, but, when we found the bottle, it was empty."

"Empty!" Brian cried, frantic now.

"We put the tablet in there, knowing that if you were guilty you'd examine the bottle at once and remove the remaining evidence."

Brian clutched at his throat.

"But you're not going to die, Mr. Gregory, because we also thought you might try to take that pill. So we put in a quite harmless one. You may be just a little uncomfortable for a while."

Ready For The Rackets

A Department

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a foreknowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in telling us your own personal experiences with chisellers and con men of various sorts. We will publicize—withholding your names, if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all communications to The Racket Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 E. 42nd St., N. Y.

NOW that summer's here, vacation time, with hordes of people changing their residence, or becoming transient touring folk for varying periods of time, it seems pertinent to print a couple of letters exposing rackets that are apt to be worked successfully by or on itinerants. The first is one resorters should beware of.

University, Virginia.

I would like to describe a little racket that was worked in Virginia Beach, a summer resort near Norfolk, about two summers ago. The set-up was a small store which carried the usual line of curios found at summer resorts.

At first the store sold the stuff over the counter, then, all of a sudden, there appeared at the store a man who took it over and announced an auction of the stock.

This is how the auction was run. To begin, the man would offer a box that he did not open and ask for bids on it. Of course there are people who are eager to take a chance at something like that. The bids would go up to perhaps half a dollar. The auctioneer would then ask the bidder to put up the money. He would then ask if there were any more people willing to put up the same amount on a like box. He would offer a certain number, usually a dozen. If he did not get bids on the dozen he would give the first people back all but a dime of their money and then open the box. It would be a fairly nice crystal necklace or something on that order. He would then get enough people to fill out the dozen at a dime apiece for the necklaces.

Next he would announce that the people who had bought the necklaces were the only ones eligible to bid on anything offered. The next piece offered would be something very attractive and worth about five dollars. The bids would run up and perhaps stop at three or four dollars. He would then ask how many people wanted one at the same price and would get one or two responses.

He would ask for their money, then go into a spiel about the goods. Finally he would thank the people for their confidence in bidding for the goods and would give back the money and also give them the goods—free! He would carry out the same procedure for about two articles and then he would ask for people to get in on the auction by giving him a dime for one of the necklaces before mentioned. After he was sure that all the people that had money were in, he would start off on a variety of

articles, usually a lot of vases worth about two dollars. People, remembering the free gifts, would bid a little higher than the articles were worth. This time he would not take the money and hand out the articles, but to keep the show going would ask for the person giving the highest bid to hand up the money, and if the bid was high for the article he would ask if there were any more that wished to get in on the bargain, and would ask them to hand up the money. He would go through about ten articles, getting high bids on some cheap stuff. For example, I saw twelve dollars bid on a vase that cost about five, at the most expensive place in town. Then after about two or three dozen lots like that he would give those people the surprise of the evening.

I think that you might guess what it was. He would keep the money and give the people the article and not hand back the money as most of the people expected, and there they were, stuck! You might think that the racket wasn't profitable, but he would give away about twenty dollars' worth of merchandise which cost about ten, and charge double on about two hundred dollars' worth which might have cost him twenty-five to fifty dollars. The auction lasted three months and must have averaged fifty dollars a night, so you figure it out.

Yours truly,

EJL

And here's one the gas-station-owning natives should watch out for when they cater to the transient traveller.

Edinburg, Indiana.

In this day of the automobile, the gasoline stealing and swindling racket has become serious. Here's one worked in our county.

A man drove to a small country filling station and purchased five gallons of gas. When the operator had put the gas into the car, the man produced a fifty dollar bill.

When the filling station operator was unable to cash the bill, the man suggested he drain the gas from the tank, saying he had enough to reach the next city.

Acting upon the suggestion the operator found a small valve on the bottom of the tank, and drained his five gallons from it. Upon investigating further, after the customer's hurried departure, the operator found he had been tricked into draining five gallons of water from another tank.

Yours truly,

Dale Parmelee

US-TARGET!

AS all you DIME DETECTIVE fans know we've never been ones to dodge issues, shy away from any brick-bats you might choose to hurl at us or evade responsibility when we've pulled boners or let an error slip into our copy. We wish we had more room in the magazine each month to set ourselves up as a target and let you sharpshoot to your heart's content.

Here's a letter that should have been printed months ago—and would have been except for crowded quarters in the back of every issue that's gone to press since it landed on our desk.

Philadelphia, Pa.

Editor, Dime Detective Magazine.

Dear Sir,

I read your Bones To Pick section (Feb. '37 issue) last evening with amazement, and some danger, for I have recently had pneumonia, and my heart is in bad shape. By the red headed Canadian Apostle Paul,—an editor who does not palter, wiggle, squirm and bluff, but comes out calmly and admits that errors do appear in his magazine! Never heard the like of it.

Once read a story in another magazine where the author had the sheriff cut off the firing pins of six revolvers with a meat saw, but the writer bluffed and the editor backed him up: Just the usual thing.

Too much of this.

I have read iodine gas described as colorless and odorless—and I remember it as purplish-blue with a most pronounced smell. A man hides a huge diamond in a glass of water—just drops it in and no one can see it—despite the fact that the index of refraction of water and a diamond are quite different. And so on, ad nauseum.

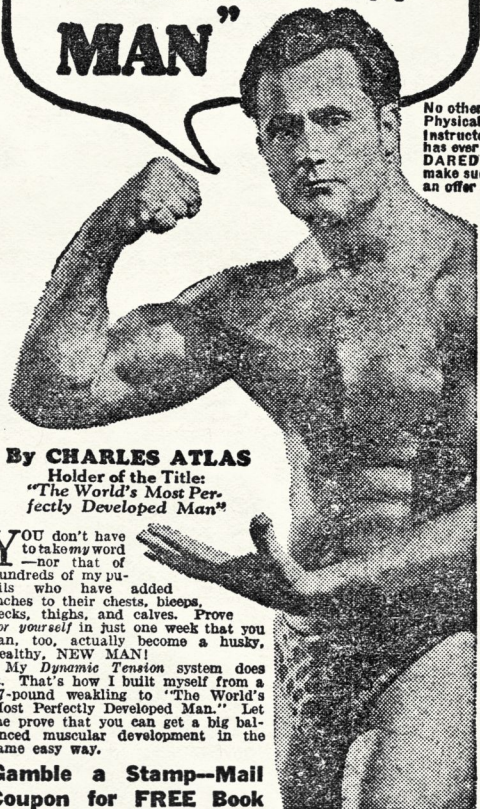
And the blackjacking and tying up that is so popular with some dick writers. Holy cats! In one magazine I read, each story had a dick in it who was blackjacked, tied up, and who then escaped, and went right back to detecting.

So damn silly, even if the repetition was not asinine, for a man who had been knocked unconscious has had, of course, a concussion of the brain, and neither thinks or acts with facility for some hours, usually about 24. And a man tied up by the ordinary 15 year old boy stays tied until someone comes and unties him, even with rope. Twist a little bale wire around his wrists and ankles, put him in a room with a tool-maker's bench and outfit, and he'll still stay tied!

My suggestion would be for authors who go for this blackjacking and tying up stuff to print it in italics, so that the experienced reader can skip it. This also applies to the clumsy descriptions of the hand to hand battle the brave dick has with the crooks, all nine of them.

I've known a lot of dicks, city, private, a few Pinks, a few D. J. men during the

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30x38 1/2	\$16.15	30x38 1/2	\$0.75	32x38 1/2	\$3.45
30x39	\$16.35	30x39	\$0.75	32x39	\$3.45
30x39 1/2	\$16.55	30x39 1/2	\$0.75	32x39 1/2	\$3.45
30x40	\$16.75	30x40	\$0.75	32x40	\$3.45
30x40 1/2	\$16.95	30x40 1/2	\$0.75	32x40 1/2	\$3.45
30x41	\$17.15	30x41	\$0.75	32x41	\$3.45
30x41 1/2	\$17.35	30x41 1/2	\$0.75	32x41 1/2	\$3.45
30x42	\$17.55	30x42	\$0.75	32x42	\$3.45
30x42 1/2	\$17.75	30x42 1/2	\$0.75	32x42 1/2	\$3.45
30x43	\$17.95	30x43	\$0.75	32x43	\$3.45
30x43 1/2	\$18.15	30x43 1/2	\$0.75	32x43 1/2	\$3.45
30x44	\$18.35	30x44	\$0.75	32x44	\$3.45
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30x46	\$19.15	30x46	\$0.75	32x46	\$3.45
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30x47	\$19.55	30x47	\$0.75	32x47	\$3.45
30x47 1/2	\$19.75	30x47 1/2	\$0.75	32x47 1/2	\$3.45
30x48	\$19.95	30x48	\$0.75	32x48	\$3.45
30x48 1/2	\$20.15	30x48 1/2	\$0.75	32x48 1/2	\$3.45
30x49	\$20.35	30x49	\$0.75	32x49	\$3.45
30x49 1/2	\$20.55	30x49 1/2	\$0.75	32x49 1/2	\$3.45
30x50	\$20.75	30x50	\$0.75	32x50	\$3.45
30x50 1/2	\$20.95	30x50 1/2	\$0.75	32x50 1/2	\$3.45
30x51	\$21.15	30x51	\$0.75	32x51	\$3.45
30x51 1/2	\$21.35	30x51 1/2	\$0.75	32x51 1/2	\$3.45
30x52	\$21.55	30x52	\$0.75	32x52	\$3.45
30x52 1/2	\$21.75	30x52 1/2	\$0.75	32x52 1/2	\$3.45
30x53	\$21.95	30x53	\$0.75	32x53	\$3.45
30x53 1/2	\$22.15	30x53 1/2	\$0.75	32x53 1/2	\$3.45
30x54	\$22.35	30x54	\$0.75	32x54	\$3.45
30x54 1/2	\$22.55	30x54 1/2	\$0.75	32x54 1/2	\$3.45
30x55	\$22.75	30x55	\$0.75	32x55	\$3.45
30x55 1/2	\$22.95	30x55 1/2	\$0.75	32x55 1/2	\$3.45
30x56	\$23.15	30x56	\$0.75	32x56	\$3.45
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30x57	\$23.55	30x57	\$0.75	32x57	\$3.45
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30x58	\$23.95	30x58	\$0.75	32x58	\$3.45
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30x59 1/2	\$24.55	30x59 1/2	\$0.75	32x59 1/2	\$3.45
30x60	\$24.75	30x60	\$0.75	32x60	\$3.45
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30x65	\$26.75	30x65	\$0.75	32x65	\$3.45
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30x66	\$27.15	30x66	\$0.75	32x66	\$3.45
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30x68	\$27.95	30x68	\$0.75	32x68	\$3.45
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30x69	\$28.35	30x69	\$0.75	32x69	\$3.45
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30x70	\$28.75	30x70	\$0.75	32x70	\$3.45
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30x72 1/2	\$29.75	30x72 1/2	\$0.75	32x72 1/2	\$3.45
30x73	\$29.95	30x73	\$0.75	32x73	\$3.45
30x73 1/2	\$30.15	30x73 1/2	\$0.75	32x73 1/2	\$3.45
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30x74 1/2	\$30.55	30x74 1/2	\$0.75	32x74 1/2	\$3.45
30x75	\$30.75	30x75	\$0.75	32x75	\$3.45
30x75 1/2	\$30.95	30x75 1/2	\$0.75	32x75 1/2	\$3.45
30x76	\$31.15	30x76	\$0.75	32x76	\$3.45
30x76 1/2	\$31.35	30x76 1/2	\$0.75	32x76 1/2	\$3.45
30x77	\$31.55	30x77	\$0.75	32x77	\$3.45
30x77 1/2	\$31.75	30x77 1/2	\$0.75	32x77 1/2	\$3.45
30x78	\$31.95	30x78	\$0.75	32x78	\$3.45
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HARNESS BULL

A Review

WHEN we picked up Leslie T. White's first book-length detective story we had, we must confess, certain qualms. It was not that we thought the author would fall any farther short of fulfilling the jacket blurb—"Here is a new kind of detective novel"—than any other writer. In fact, knowing Mr. White and his shorter stories of old, and having read and liked *Me, Detective*, his biography which appeared last year, we felt that he'd probably come as near or nearer to the goal hinted at on the dust-cover than almost anyone else of whom we could think. It was just that we didn't have any faith in there being any such animal as a "new kind of detective novel." To an old crime-fiction editor that was just like saying to a cook "a new kind of hardboiled eggs."

Having finished the book, to say we were pleasantly disillusioned would be putting it mildly. We were, frankly, bowled over.

We knew, of course, a good deal about Mr. White's backgrounds in the law-enforcement field. His experiences as a ranger in the West, a deputy sheriff, and finally as special investigator and identification expert in the Los Angeles district attorney's office, were perfectly familiar to us. We were conscious that his work was far from being the synthetic, vicarious or second-hand result that the fiction of so many of his contemporaries is. And we knew that he drew upon those backgrounds to the limit in writing. But we also knew that, being a good craftsman and canny fictioneer, he often felt it necessary to temper, to gloss over with a palatable veneer, to disguise and distort certain situations, in order to make his stories fit the requirements of his reading audience. In fact we had, on more than one occasion, suggested revision ourselves which would, we felt, make a story better fiction even though we were conscious that it mightn't be particularly true to life.

In *Harness Bull* Mr. White has had no such restraint put on him and that is exactly what makes the tale that "new kind of detective novel" we never hoped to see. It has no plot, it has no climax, it has no dénouement, it has none of those other cardinal ingredients which a short story or novelette seems to have to have before it is a "well-rounded" publishable magazine piece. But it never lags in the telling and moves with the speed of a squad-car racing to the scene of a homicide.

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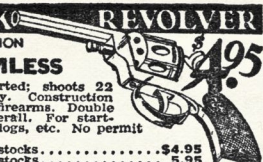
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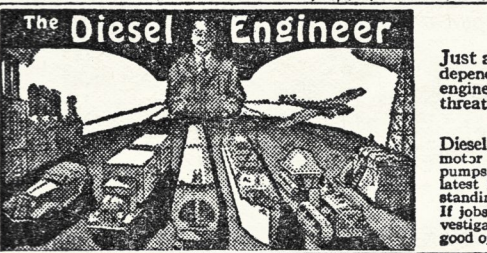
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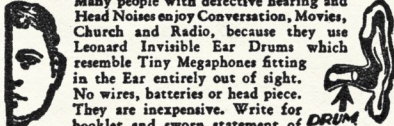


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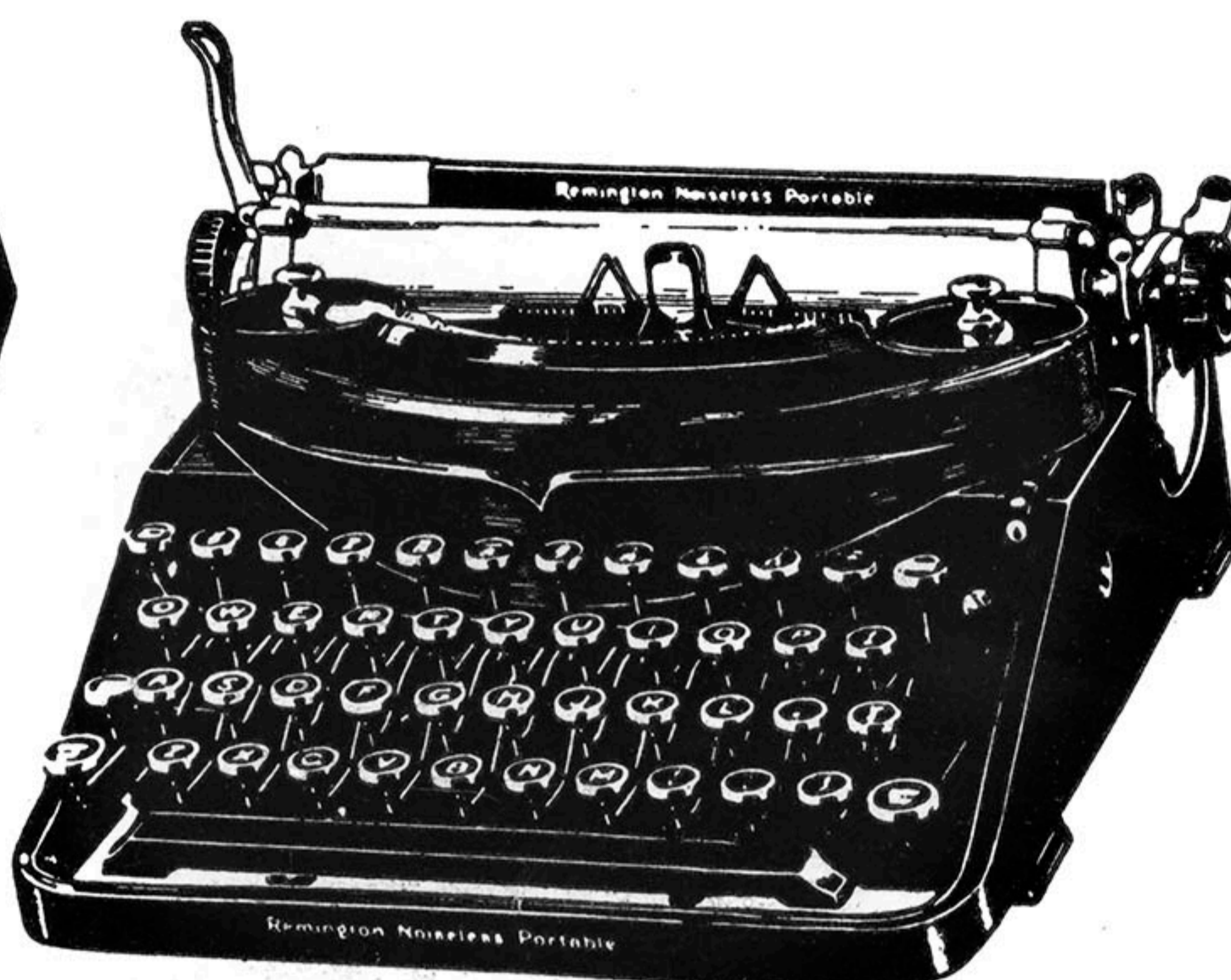
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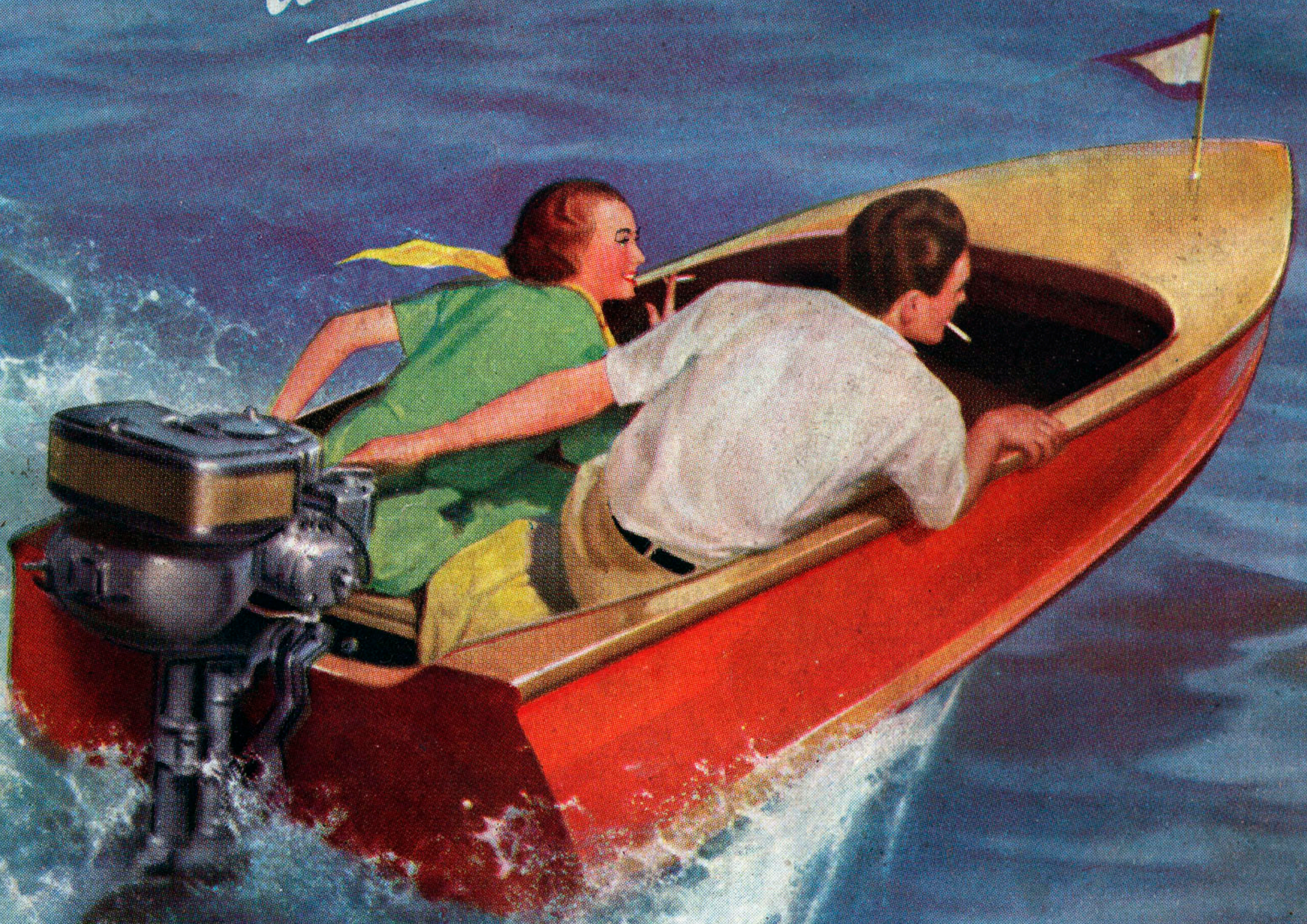
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