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MAY

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THE CASE OF THE KILLER-DILLER

by
CORNELL WOOLRICH

**MOVABLE
ALIBI**

*AN ACME INDEMNITY OP
NOVELETTE*
by **JAN DANA**



**WHOLE HOG
OR
NOTHING**

by **LESLIE T. WHITE**



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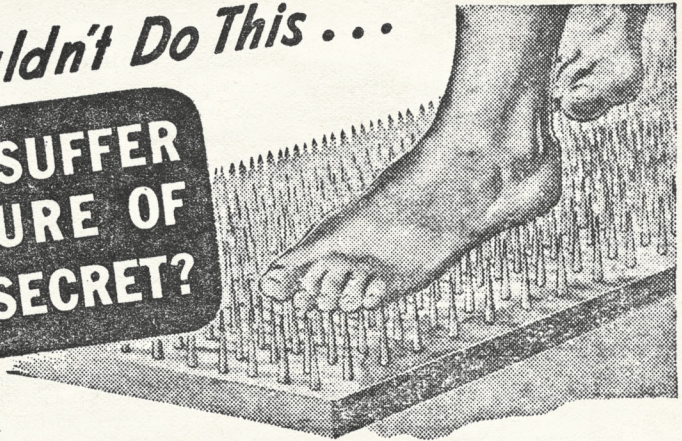
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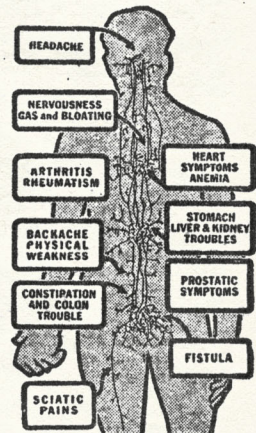
- One reason is, these people do not realize that even the mildest case of piles tends to undermine the general health.
- The second reason is: They do not appreciate the fact that medical authorities recognize that rectal disorders are as common a source of infection as diseased tonsils or teeth, and may be a

contributing cause of many associated ailments such as are shown on the accompanying chart.

- The third reason is that they do not realize that many malignant diseases often develop from the irritation of neglected rectal diseases.
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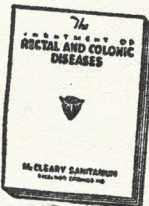
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Vol. 30

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 From Cash on the Line.

Black-and-White Illustrations by John Flemming Gould

Watch for the June Issue

On the Newsstands May 5th

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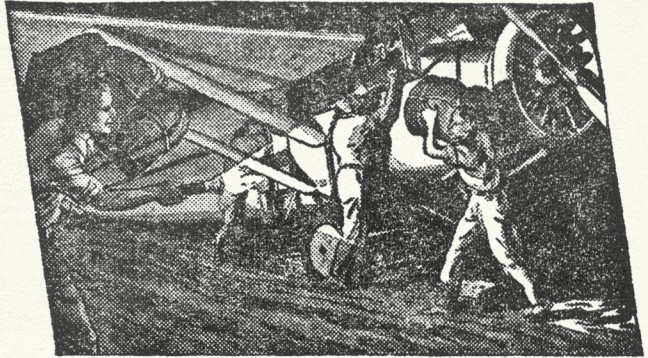
Flying Blind-4 FEET from DEATH

TROPIC DOWNPOUR BRINGS ADVENTURE TO ROUTINE FLIGHT

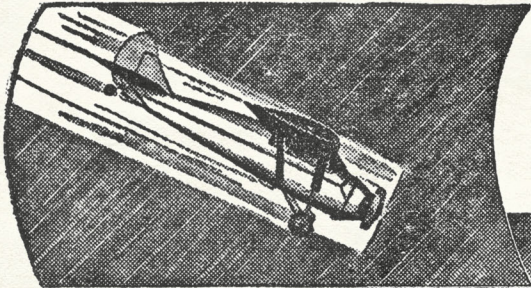


OLEN V. ANDREW

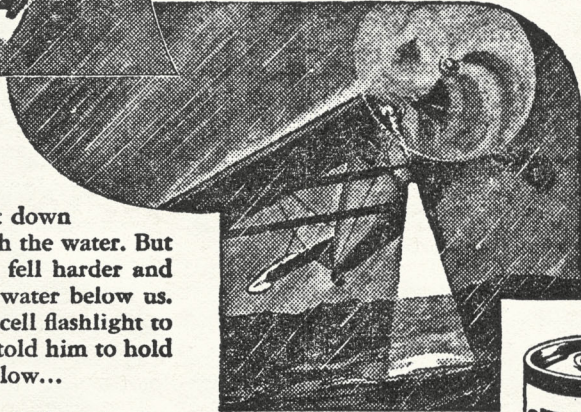
① "I had flown four friends over to Lihue, on the island of Kauai, for a weekend of camping on the beach," writes Olen V. Andrew, P. O. Box 3295, Honolulu, T. H.



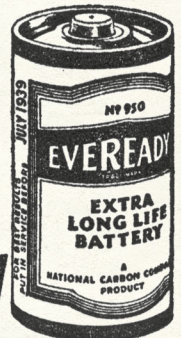
② "We broke camp at three o'clock Monday morning, packed our dunnage in the plane and crawled in for the 100-mile hop back to Honolulu, all of it being over water. There was no moon, but the night was clear when we started. Five minutes later..."



③ "... we ran into a driving rainstorm. I couldn't fly over it, I didn't have proper instruments for flying through it, so the only thing to do was to get down low and keep visual contact with the water. But it kept getting darker, the rain fell harder and harder, till we couldn't see the water below us. I handed my big 'Eveready' five-cell flashlight to the fellow in the co-pilot's seat, told him to hold it out the window and flash it below..."



④ "... and there was the sea, only four feet below us! Those long Pacific rollers were almost lapping at the wheels! My heart skipped a beat to think how I had brought five people within inches of their doom! Certainly it was the power of those 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries that saved us all, and that kept us safe above the sea for the next half hour till the storm lifted. You can take it from me, (Signed) Olen V. Andrew"



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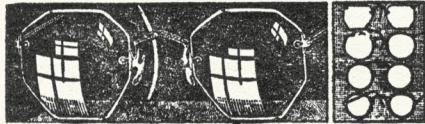
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THE JUNE THRILL DOCKET

IF a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush *A Corpse in the Hand* is worth a winning ticket on the Irish Sweepstakes plus two and a half grand reward money. That's the way Race Williams figured it anyhow, in CARROLL JOHN DALY'S newest novel in the next DIME DETECTIVE and if you don't like the mathematics involved in the equation fight it out with Daly and that hard-as-nails dick he writes about. We haven't been able to find anything wrong with Race's calculations yet, however, and though we'd never have suspected that the fastest drawing shamus who ever unholstered a .44 was also a mathematical wizard, we're about ready to revise our opinion of him. Twenty-odd thousand words of *A Corpse in the Hand* next month will give you an opportunity to form your own conclusions—and whether you get a different answer to the problem than Race did you'll have to agree that the big dick knows the answer to any given gunnery problem—lock, stock, barrel and slug.

Then the Marquis of Broadway, that tough little czar of Manhattan's Main Stem, returns to Mazda Lane via the DIME DETECTIVE short-cut to resurrect a body that could only be bothered with *Death For Twelve Months*. That's the title of the new Broadway Squad novelette JOHN LAWRENCE has woven around a mystery that began when a new neon sign went up over the facade of a hot-spot hotel in the roaring West Forties, and didn't end till a doped girl came alive enough to prove that it takes more than just skipping from 12 to 14 in the floor numbers to take away the jinx that hovered over the 13th.

And FRED MacISAAC brings back that roving red-headed newshound, Rambler Murphy, to solve the murder at the yacht landing. He's operating a swan boat in Boston's Public Garden when—

But this great June issue will be on the stands May 5th, so find out for yourself. . . . There's a Blue Barrel yarn by WILLIAM E. BARRETT coming up too. Plus other great stories and features. So don't miss it!

The Dime Detective Bookshelf

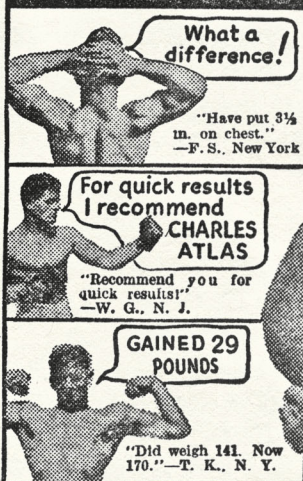
ABOUT once a year we have to break down and say a few words about the DIME DETECTIVE authors who take time off from their magazine writing to do a book. Or maybe it's the other way around and they just take a vacation from book-writing to do stories for DIME DETECTIVE. We hope not—but anyhow, whether it's a novelette for the magazine or a thriller for the lending-libraries, it's a pretty safe bet that the finished product will be a hit and win more readers for the author, no matter in what medium the yarn appears.

Take Frederick C. Davis, for instance, but don't take him too far—we want to see plenty more of him in these pages. He's been engaged, between Keyhole Kerry mysteries, in doing a series of A-1 books about Cy Hatch, son of New York's police commissioner, and one of the freshest detective-fiction characters we've run into in many a year. *Coffins for Three* was the title of the first mystery in this series and we've just finished reading *He Wouldn't Stay Dead*, the second Hatching—forgive us our puns!—in Cy's saga. They're both of the can't-put-it-down-once-you've-started-it genus of murder stories and a credit to the creator of Kerry, Carter Cole and Oke Oakley, all of whom added to the luster of these pages in past months. Incidentally Davis was in the office to see us the other day and promise that another Kerry yarn was on the way!

And Raymond Chandler, whose *Trouble Is My Business* will be along in an early issue of this magazine, has been creating more of a run on the lending-library shelves these days with *The Big Sleep*, his first book, than any newcomer to the ranks of novel-writers could have been expected to. The yarn justifies all the attention it's been getting, though. Take our word for that. It's Chandler at his best and that's something! Plot, characters, action, background—all tops! Sandwich any of these three yarns in between your issues of D. D. and you're in for a thrill a minute.

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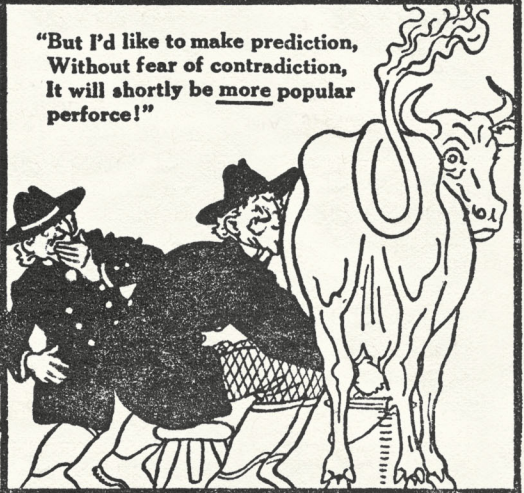
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Mr. Mattingly & Mr. Moore discover a truth about fine whiskey!

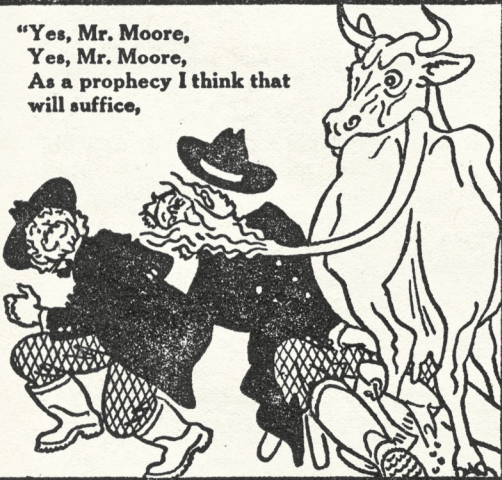
"Oh, Mr. Mattingly,
Oh, Mr. Mattingly,
M & M is very popular,
of course,



"But I'd like to make prediction,
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performe!"



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Yes, Mr. Moore,
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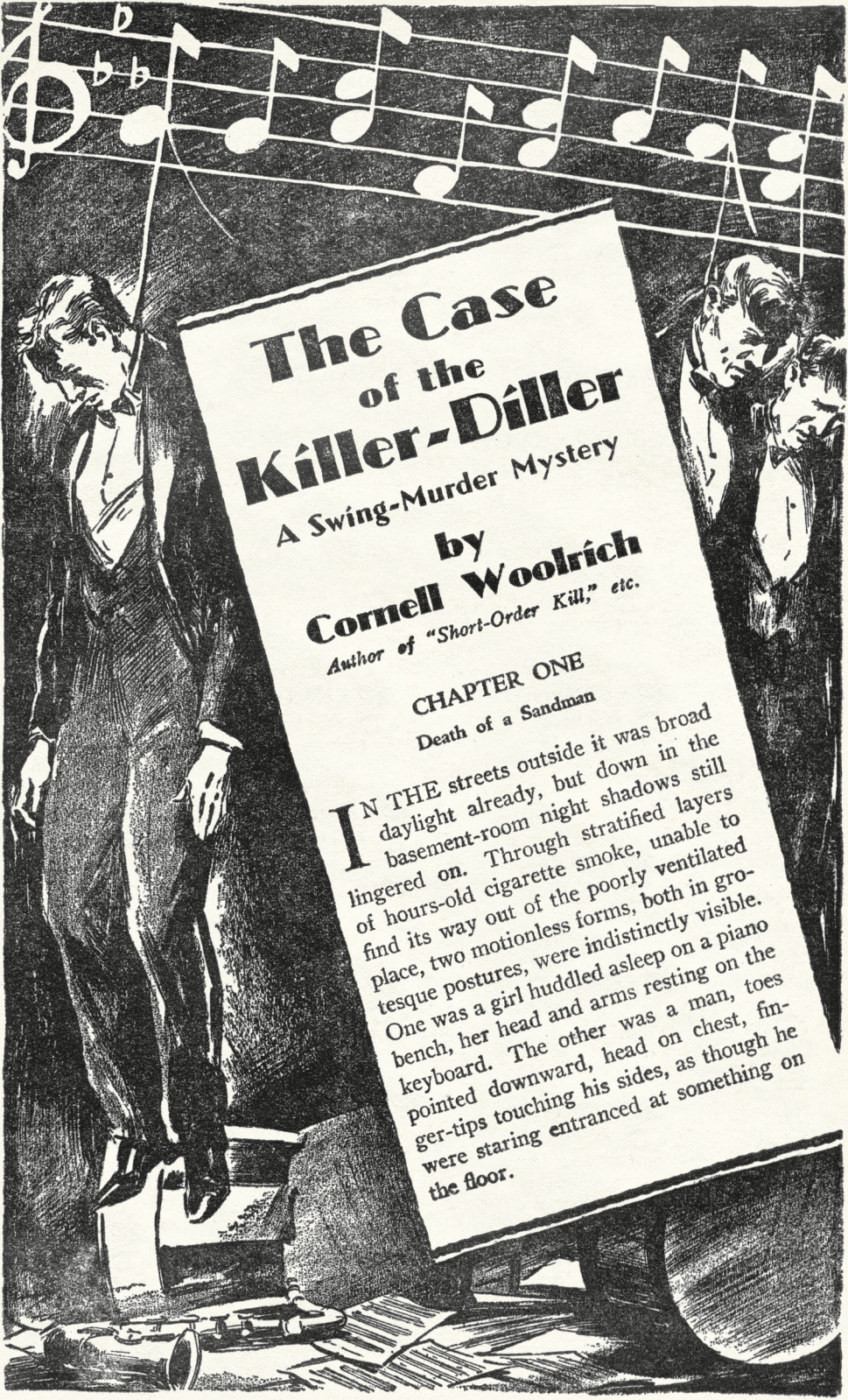
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The Case of the Killer-Diller

A Swing-Murder Mystery

by
Cornell Woolrich

Author of "Short-Order Kill," etc.

CHAPTER ONE

Death of a Sandman

IN THE streets outside it was broad daylight already, but down in the basement-room night shadows still lingered on. Through stratified layers of hours-old cigarette smoke, unable to find its way out of the poorly ventilated place, two motionless forms, both in grotesque postures, were indistinctly visible. One was a girl huddled asleep on a piano bench, her head and arms resting on the keyboard. The other was a man, toes pointed downward, head on chest, finger-tips touching his sides, as though he were staring entranced at something on the floor.

The basement itself was no different from any other sub-street-level space of its kind. Bare whitewashed walls, an oblong vent fitted with opaque wire-meshed glass high up on one side, that looked out at about the level of passersby's insteps, an array of steam and water pipes of varying girths that ran out parallel to the ceiling for half its length, then disappeared through it by means of elbow-joints. It was what the cellar contained that set it apart.

There were numbers of ordinary, unpainted wooden kitchen chairs scattered

AS THE daylight filtered in more and more strongly through the clouded sidewalk-level pane, the girl who slept with her arms on top of the yellowed piano-keys, stirred a little, raised her head. Nearly two whole octaves of pressed-down keys, freed of her weight, reared up into place with a series of little clashing discords. The sound woke her more fully.

"In the groove," she murmured dreamily, and blinked her eyes open.

Her silky butterscotch-colored hair, worn smooth and long, came tumbling

Dusty Detwiller and his Sandmen were undoubtedly the most-hoodooed aggregation of hot-lickers that ever jammed a number from a band-shell. It kept the Warden of the Mad House jumping, trying to furnish substitutes for the swingsters who apparently Dutched it after each of those fatal jam-sessions. But a smart dick who didn't know the Bolero from Dinah, and the little blonde who canaried it for the band proved even the cagiest murderer can go kill-corny once too often.

about, most of them overturned. For nearly every chair there was a complementary gin bottle lying discarded somewhere nearby—empty or with only a finger's-width left in it at the most—and a musical instrument: trap-drum, clarinet, sax, and so on. There was a table too, scalloped around the edges with cigarette burns, some of them with ash cylinders still in them. Loose orchestration sheets and more empty bottles littered its surface, bringing the bottle ratio up to nearly two per chair.

A venturesome cockroach traveled across an orchestration-leaf of Ravel's *Bolero* that had fallen to the floor. It didn't look so different from the other notes, except that it was bigger and kept moving slowly along the clef-bars instead of staying in one place. There was a peculiar acrid pungency in the air that didn't come from liquor, and that no ordinary cigarette ever made either.

down over her face, and she brushed it back with one hand. Then her eyes went upward, took in the other figure, who seemed to be dancing there before her in the hazy air, to unheard notes. She shot up from the piano-bench.

"Hal!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing up—" She choked it off short. He was being dead up there, hanging by his neck from a thick electric cord that looped down between two of the exposed steam pipes.

She stumbled back against the keyboard and her hand struck it, brought forth another discordant jangle. She sidestepped, terrified even by that harmless sound. The exploring cockroach scampered off the orchestration-sheet, scurried back toward its cranny.

"They've all gone, left me here alone with—it," she sobbed.

She stared distractedly at the overturned chairs, turned and fought her way

through the stagnant air toward the closed wooden door at the back of the place.

She threw it open and looked up and down the dim basement passage lit by a single wan bulb. Rows of empty ashcans were pyramided at one end of it. She was on the verge of hysteria by now. It was not alone what she had just seen, it was also partly due to the depression that always set in after the over-stimulation of one of those jam-sessions—a sort of musical hang-over, so to speak. How the men in the outfit must be feeling, she could only imagine. She didn't drink gin or blaze reefers the way they did.

"Fred! Frankie! Dusty!" she whispered hoarsely, standing there in the open doorway. The long brick-walled passage echoed to it hollowly, like a tomb. She shuddered, crouched back against the wall. A black cat slunk out between two of the ashcans and she gave a tinny little bleat, half superstitious reflex, half actual alarm.

A door grated open far down at the other end of the passage and a grizzled old man in overalls looked out at her. Instinctively she reached behind her, pulled shut the door of the room from which she had just come, so he couldn't look in if he should pass by. "Oh, Mr. Hoff, did the boys—did the rest of the crew leave already?" she faltered.

He shrugged as he shuffled down the passage toward her. "If they ain't in there, then they must have gone. I tell you one thing, I be glad if they go undt never come back. Such noise! What the landlord was thinking about to rent them a room down here. With three doors in between I still heard it." He was opposite the closed door now and she was standing in front of it, as though to prevent him from going in. She was loyal to the men she worked with. This was a matter that concerned the entire orchestra. She had to find the others first, consult them, before she let a stranger—

"Have you got a cigarette, Mr. Hoff?"

Her bag was somewhere inside there, with a package of cigarettes in it, but she couldn't bear the thought of going back in again—and facing *that*—to get it. He gave her a loose one from his overall pocket, scraped a kitchen match down the brickwork. The cigarette shook pitifully in her hand and kept on shaking even after she had it lit and between her lips.

"Yah, look at you," he said disapprovingly. "Fine life for a young girl, shtaying up all night banging and hollering with a bunch of drunk musickaners! You bet if you vas my daughter—"

He'd often said that to her, but today, for the first time, she was inclined to agree with him.

"I'd like to give it up myself," she said sickly.

He trudged on up the passage toward his daily chores and disappeared around a corner. She threw down the cigarette she had just lit, tried the door to make sure it was securely closed, then fled up the passage in the other direction. She opened a door, ran up a flight of basement steps, came out at the rear of the ground-floor hallway of the cheap "residence club," that was just a rooming-house under another name. A couple of the orchestra members had rooms here in the building.

SHE ran around to the front, up the main stairs to the second floor—the place had no elevator—and knocked briefly on a door near the head of the stairs. She threw it open—the knock was just for propriety's sake—and looked in.

Fred Armstrong, the outfit's clarinet-player, was lying soddenly on his back on the bed, mouth open to the ceiling, the gin bottle he'd brought up from downstairs still clutched in his hand, as though it were too precious to let go even after everything it had had in it was inside him instead.

She shook him fruitlessly a few times,

tried to rouse him by calling "Fred! Fred!" urgently in his ear. His mouth didn't even close. He'd be that way for hours, she realized. She turned and ran out again, closing the door after her.

Halfway to the stairs again she stopped short in her tracks, turned aside. There was a little enamel sign sticking out at right-angles to the wall—*Bath*. A flicker of motion from the partly open door had caught her eye. She pushed it open and saw a pale-faced youth her own age, standing there looking at her. Strings of damp hair straggled down over his forehead. His coat-collar was turned up around his neck, and he had a black eye.

"Frankie!" she breathed. "What are you hiding out like this for up here?"

He had to swallow a couple of times before he could get his voice out. "I'm not—hiding out. What's the matter, Billie?"

"Hal Thatcher's dead down in that room in the basement where we have our jam-sessions! I woke up just now and—he was right there in front of me, hanging from the pipes." She stared at him. "Frankie! Pull yourself together. Didn't you hear what I just said to you?"

He held up three fingers, looked at her with fear-dilated eyes.

She seemed to understand what he meant by the gesture. "Yes, it looks like we're jinxed. But if we once let ourselves believe it, then we *are* jinxed for fair."

"I'm going to get out of this crew," he stammered. "I'm—I'm quitting right now. I'd rather be out of work than—than—"

"This is no time to talk that way! We can't let Dusty down now, of all times. This is when we should stick by him. Don't be a welsher, Frankie. You haven't told me yet why you were skulking up here, peeping out through a crack in the door at me."

His eyes dropped before her scrutiny. "I wandered up here when the session wound up. I tried to get some sleep curled

up in the bathtub. It was the only thing I could find for a bed."

"How'd you get your hair all wet like that?"

"My head was splitting. I ran some water from the shower on it just now when I woke up, trying to get it down to its right size again."

HER eyes sought the nicked dial of the shower fixture. It was dry as sandpaper. Not a drop clung to it. She didn't say anything.

"What're you asking me all kinds of questions for?" he flared out suddenly, nerves on edge.

"Try to pull yourself together, Frankie," she said coldly, turning away. "Run out and drink some black coffee. I thought I was shot, but I'm all in one solid chunk compared to you."

He took out a pocket comb, ran it through his hair. "What're you going to do?" he asked her apprehensively.

"Where did Dusty go? We've got to get hold of him and tell him."

"Back to his hotel, I guess. Or maybe to a Turkish bath."

"If I can't reach him, I'll have to notify the police on my own."

He dropped the comb, picked it up again, blew through its teeth. "It's not going to look so hot for me, y'know."

"Why should it look bad for you? I suppose you mean because he gave you that shiner last night. What do you suggest we do, *not* notify the police? Bury him under the cellar floor or something?" She dropped her voice and tapped his shirt-front with one finger. "I don't like the way you're acting, Frankie. Before I ring anyone else in on this, you'd better tell me—do you know more about this than you're letting on? Did you know it had happened before I came up and told you just now? Had you already seen him like that? Is that why you ran and hid up here?"

His weak, chalky face twitched spasmodically. His hand started toward her arm, appealingly, then he dropped it again. "N-no," he said, "I didn't."

The girl gave him a skeptical look. "I hope for your own sake that's on the level," she said. "Here goes for the cops."

CHAPTER TWO

Two Out of Three

A DETECTIVE named Lindsey was the first one to get there, even before Dusty Detwiller, the band-leader. She'd put in her call direct to headquarters, without bothering to send out for a neighborhood cop. They'd been through this twice before, and she knew by now the policeman was just an intermediate step. Headquarters was always notified in the end anyway.

She was holding the fort alone, down in the jam-session room, when he got there. Armstrong was still stupefied up in his room, Frankie was around the corner trying to steady himself on coffee, Detwiller was getting an alcohol-rub downtown at the Thebes Baths, and she hadn't been able to locate Kershaw, the fifth member of the Sandmen. Her nerves were calmer now, she didn't mind going back in there as much as at first. Besides, she wanted to make sure that nothing was touched. They always seemed to attach a lot of importance to that, though of course that was in cases of murder. This was plainly a suicide.

She had had no reason to like Hal Thatcher while he was still alive, so she couldn't really feel bad about his going. She wondered what had made him do it. She sat with her back to him, on the piano-bench, looking the other way. She kept her face down toward the floor. It was pretty horrible when you looked squarely up at him. It was bad enough just to see his long attenuated shadow on the basement floor, thrown by the light

coming in more strongly now through the sidewalk-vent.

The voice of Hoff, the janitor, sounded outside, asking questions, so she knew that her vigil was over at last. "Somebody in the house sent for you? Who? That's the first I know about any'ing being wrong. Them musickaners, I bet. I knew it! I'm only surprised it didn't happen already before now—"

The door flung open and this detective came in, a uniformed cop behind him. She looked up relievedly, threw down her cigarette.

He wasn't a particularly handsome individual, but she thought what a relief it was to see a man with healthy brown color in his face for a change, instead of the yeasty night-pallor she was used to. His eyes went up toward the ceiling behind her, came down again. Then they switched over to her.

"You the girl that phoned in?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

"Pretty cool little number, aren't you?" he told her. She couldn't tell whether he meant it admiringly or unfavorably. To tell the truth she didn't care much.

"The boys' instruments are all in here, and I thought I'd better keep an eye on them until you people got here," she explained. "I woke up in here with him, so I didn't think it would hurt to stay a minute or two more."

"All right, let me have his name, please." He took out a little notebook.

"Hal Thatcher."

He scribbled. "You say you found him like this when you woke up, Mrs. Thatcher?"

A circumflex accent etched the corner of her mouth. "No, you don't understand. I'm not married to him. We worked together in the same band, that's all. I'm the canary and he played the slush-pump." She saw his face redden a little, as if he felt he'd made a social error. "Oh, because I said I woke up— No, we were

having a jam-session, and I fell asleep there at the piano, that's what I meant. We rent this room from the building-owner, come up here after work about two or three in the morning every once in a while and play for our own amusement—you know, improvise. That's what a jam-session is."

He nodded almost inattentively, but she had a feeling he'd heard every word. "What went on last night, to the best of your recollection? Better let me have your name too, while we're about it."

"Billie Bligh. The formal of that is Wilhelmina. About last night—nothing any different from any other time. The way these sessions come up is, Dusty—he's our front man, the leader, you know—will say 'How about having a session tonight?' and so we all agree and have one. We left the Troc, that's the club where we work, about three, and piled into a couple of taxis, instruments and all, and came on up. We sat around chinning and smoking for a while, waiting for the spirit to move us—"

He eyed the gin bottles meaningfully, but didn't say anything.

"Some of the boys had a few nips to warm up," she agreed deprecatingly. "Then finally somebody uncased his instrument and started tootling around, and one by one everyone else joined in, and first thing you know we were all laying it in the groove. That's how those things go. In about two hours we were all burned out, they started dropping out again one by one. That's when I laid my head on the piano and dozed off. The others must have left after that, and Thatcher stayed behind, and the willies got him and—"

"Not the willies," he assured her.

"What do you mean?"

He didn't act as though he intended telling her, anyway, but just then the cop who had been left outside the basement door rapped, stuck his head in, and said: "Two of the others just showed up."

LINDSEY motioned at random and Dusty Detwiller came in alone, flaring camel's hair coat belted to almost wasp-waisted tightness around him. He didn't look particularly jaunty at the moment, though.

"This is awful," he said to Billie, shoving his hat far back on his head and holding his hand pressed to it. "What'll we do about tonight? Who's this man?"

"Name of Lindsey, headquarters. . . . No, don't pick up any of those chairs. I want everything left just the way it is. You'll have to stand up."

Detwiller started unfastening his coat, then changed his mind, tightened it up again. "Hope I don't catch cold coming out like this right out of a steam-room," he mourned.

"Do I have to stay in here any longer?" Billie asked, with her eyes on the elongated shadow on the floor. Then she looked up, glimpsed Frankie standing just outside the door with the cop. "That's all right," she corrected herself hastily. "I'd better stay. You may need me, I was the only one who wasn't drinking."

Lindsey just looked at her, then at the doorway, but he didn't say anything. "At what time did you leave here?" he asked Detwiller.

"A little before five. It hadn't started to get light yet."

"Who was still here when you left?"

"They all were. I was the first one to break away. Armstrong and Kershaw were still playing, but they couldn't lay it in the groove much any more. Frankie was here too, but he was high on weed. Billie was already falling asleep over the piano and Hal—Hal seemed all right. He was leaning back there, on two legs of his chair, against the wall. He had a little gin in him, but he seemed all right. He kept shimmying with his hands in his pockets."

"You went where?"

"The Thebes Baths. I always go there after a session."

"That'll be all for just now. Send the other one in, Dugan."

Frankie came in. The coffee didn't seem to have done him much good. He looked nervous and jumpy even before Lindsey had opened his mouth to ask him anything.

"Your name?"

"Frank Bligh."

Lindsey looked at the girl.

"He's my brother," she said, moistening her lips.

"You were under the influence of marihuana, I'm told."

The pallid youth cringed. "So was everyone else except Billie. We all blazed it a little. We always do," he said defensively. "I show it more, that's all."

"Did you stay on to the end?"

"Y-yeah, I guess so."

"Just be definite about it, will you?" Lindsey said tonelessly. "Who'd already left this room and who hadn't?"

"Dusty had left, and Armstrong had gone upstairs to his room already, and Kershaw had stumbled out by that time, too. I don't know where he went." His eyes traveled up toward the ceiling, dropped again "He was still here," he said reluctantly.

"Then you were the last one out, except Miss Bligh and the dead man—" Lindsey broke off short. "How'd you get the black eye? Bump into something while you were high?"

It was one of those verbal traps. Frankie's head started to go up and down affirmatively.

The girl looked up suddenly from the floor. "No, Frank, don't," she forestalled him. "Tell him the straight of it, that's the wisest way in the end. Thatcher gave it to him," she said to the detective.

"Why?" the latter asked quietly.

"He'd been making passes at me for a long time. That didn't bother me, I can handle myself. I didn't tell Frankie. But he found out about it last night for the

first time, and they had a scrap in the taxi coming up here. Thatcher hit him in the eye, but then the rest of us patched it up between them, smoothed it over. Dusty won't stand for any quarreling in the organization. It's bad for our work. We even stopped for a minute outside a lunchroom and they got a little piece of raw meat for Frankie's eye and brought it out to him." She smiled placatingly at the dick. "Frankie's been worried about it, though, ever since he heard Hal did that to himself this morning. I told him not to—" Then as there was no answering smile, her own froze. "Why are you looking at the two of us like that?" she faltered.

"What do you want me to do, smile, Miss Bligh? This man never hung himself up there. He was murdered."

Frankie flinched as though he'd been hit. The girl's face paled.

"I could see that the minute I stepped into the room!" Lindsey snapped. "Either you people are still groggy from your jam-session, or you're trying to cover up something—and not being very good at it either!"

FRANKIE BLIGH'S cheeks were hollowing and filling like a fish out of water. He gave a stricken yell at his sister. "Now see what you've done! Now see what you've done! I told you it wasn't going to look good for me!" He turned and bolted out the door.

"Grab that young fellow, Dyer!" the dick shouted remorselessly after him. "Hang onto him!"

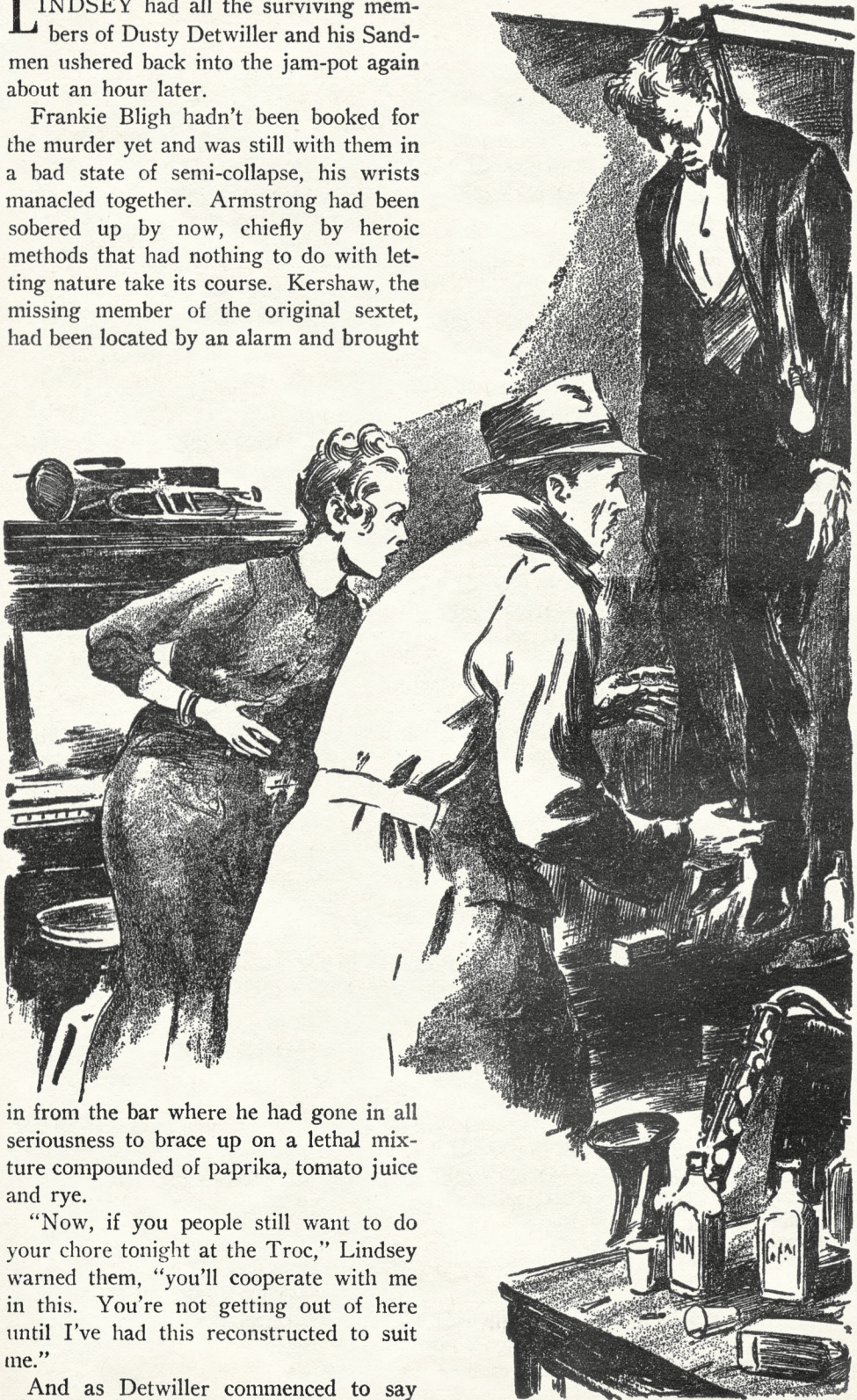
A blue-sleeved arm shot out, fastened itself to Frankie's shoulder, twirled him around like a top.

Lindsey walked leisurely out to the two of them. "What'd you do it for, kid?" he asked gruffly.

The terrified Frankie's eyelids fluttered a couple of times, then he sagged limp as a dishcloth into the cop's arms.

LINDSEY had all the surviving members of Dusty Detwiller and his Sandmen ushered back into the jam-pot again about an hour later.

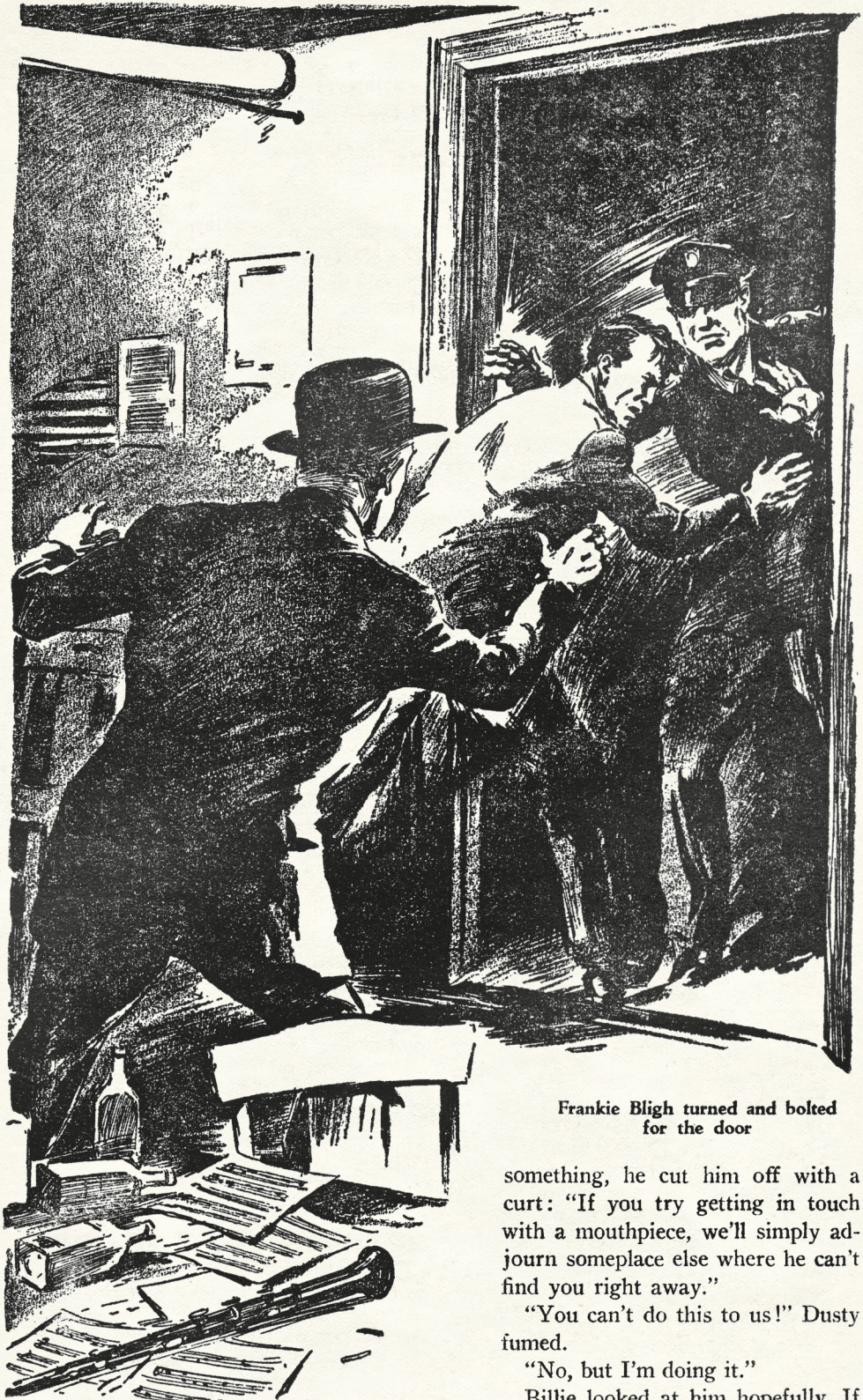
Frankie Bligh hadn't been booked for the murder yet and was still with them in a bad state of semi-collapse, his wrists manacled together. Armstrong had been sobered up by now, chiefly by heroic methods that had nothing to do with letting nature take its course. Kershaw, the missing member of the original sextet, had been located by an alarm and brought



in from the bar where he had gone in all seriousness to brace up on a lethal mixture compounded of paprika, tomato juice and rye.

"Now, if you people still want to do your chore tonight at the Troc," Lindsey warned them, "you'll cooperate with me in this. You're not getting out of here until I've had this reconstructed to suit me."

And as Detwiller commenced to say



Frankie Bligh turned and bolted for the door

something, he cut him off with a curt: "If you try getting in touch with a mouthpiece, we'll simply adjourn someplace else where he can't find you right away."

"You can't do this to us!" Dusty fumed.

"No, but I'm doing it."

Billie looked at him hopefully. If

he put them all through their paces like this together, instead of just concentrating on Frankie and grilling him alone, maybe it meant he wasn't altogether convinced of her brother's guilt yet. But then she glanced at the cuffs on his wrists and her hopes died again.

Lindsey had two other dicks working with him now, but they must have been third-graders. Mostly, she noticed, they just did the errands. Thatcher's body had been taken down, of course, and removed to the morgue, after both he and the room had been photographed.

An ominous loop still remained in the heavy, insulated wiring where his neck had been. A stepladder against the wall showed how he had been disengaged without bringing the wire down from the ceiling, simply by expanding the loop a little and pulling his head through it. That loop, Billie recalled, had always been there, ever since they'd begun using the room—a long oval hanging down between two of the pipes, just clear of the tops of their heads, to take up slack in the wire. Otherwise the heavy hundred-watt bulb in which the cord ended on the other side of the pipe, would have hung down too low toward the floor, been smashed a dozen-times over in the course of their high-jinks.

"Let's talk about this contrivance a little," Lindsey said drily, "before we start getting down to cases. Did a licensed electrician put up such a botched job for a light-extension?"

Several of them shook their heads. "I didn't think so," Lindsey concluded.

"Hoff, the janitor, rigged that up for us," Dusty explained. "You see, there was no wiring for light at all in here when we rented this part of the basement. He tapped the nearest wire, which is outside in the passageway there, clamped on an outlet on the wall by it. Then he had to bore a hole up there over the top of the

door, to pass the wire through to us on this side. He got hold of a long length of wire, ran it through, put a plug on one end and a socket for a light-bulb on the other.

"To save himself the trouble of having to clamp it up against the ceiling, he just threaded it over the tops of those two pipes and let them do the work. But he's a dope. When he got all through, the wire was long enough to lay the bulb on the floor, like an egg. So instead of taking his pliers and cutting it and taping it together again, he just took this big loop he had between the two pipes that supported it, taking up the slack and lifting the bulb about to where it should go. Then to make sure it would stay that way, he made a big knot in the wire just on the outside of the last pipe, too thick to go through the slit between pipe and ceiling.

"Clear enough," Lindsey complimented him. "In other words that knot held it fast on the outside of the two pipes. But on the inside, toward the door and basement passage, it formed a perfect pulley arrangement. That loop could be drawn tight or relaxed at will by someone standing outside the door there, simply by pulling the plug out of the outlet—thereby plunging this room into darkness—taking a good grip on the wire, and pulling it taut out through that hole above the door. And if someone's head happened to get caught in that loop as it contracted, and he couldn't extricate it again quickly enough, it'd be just too bad. He'd probably corkscrew the loop as he threshed around, until his neck broke. A perfect case of garrotting. That's how it was done."

"But he was held fast up there between the two pipes, as high as he could go, when I woke up and saw him," Billie said. "How could he stay up there like that, unless the murderer kept pulling the cord taut out there in the passage, held onto it for hours? And there was no one out there when I—"

"No, he wouldn't have to do that. He only had to hold it long enough to get a good thick knot bunched in it just past that bungle over the door, to keep it from slipping through again with the weight of Thatcher's body. You may have missed seeing that second knot, but I didn't. It's out there big as life right now."

"Well then, that let's Frankie out, without going any further!" she said decisively. "Thatcher may not have been a heavy-weight, but my brother hasn't got enough strength in his arms to hold a cord tight so a man's full weight is kept clear of the floor, and at the same time tie a knot into it."

"That doesn't let your brother or anyone else out," Lindsey let her know firmly. "The pipes acted somewhat on the principle of pulleys, took a lot of the direct strain out of it. And another thing, marihuana, like any other narcotic can lend a man abnormal strength temporarily. Overstimulation. We've got the method now. That points equally at any one of you, except you yourself, Miss Bligh. We've got the motive. And that points only at you, so far, Bligh. No one else had one. All we've got to learn now is who had the opportunity. Two out of three rings the bell as far as I'm concerned," he concluded ominously.

HE TURNED to Frankie. "Now, according to your own admission made to me before you supposedly knew it was a murder that was involved and not just suicide, you were the last one to leave here, except your sister and the dead man. I suppose you want to retract that now." He didn't wait to hear whether he did or not. "I don't need your own testimony on that point. I can get it by elimination, from your yellow-bandsmen. Now tell me who was the first to get up and go out of here?"

Detwiller said, almost reluctantly, as

though he felt it was taking an unfair advantage: "I was."

"Corroboration?" snapped Lindsey.

They all O.K.'d it. "Yeah." . . . "That's right, he was."

"Then you're out of it," Lindsey told him. The band-leader looked apologetically at the others, as though he would have been glad to take the rap if he could have.

"Who was next?"

"Armstrong," said Kershaw, and the girl nodded.

"I was starting to fall asleep already," she said, "but I remember the sound of his slamming the door roused me for a minute. I looked up and Kersh and Thatcher and—Frankie—were still here with me."

"And after him?" He looked at Kershaw. No answer. He looked at Frankie. The latter's eyes dropped and he stared down at the floor. He looked at the girl finally. "I can't help you out on that one," she said almost defiantly. "I was sound asleep by then. That time the door didn't wake me."

"I was pretty binged," Kershaw drawled unwillingly, kneading the back of his neck. "I wouldn't care to get a pal in Dutch by saying something I ain't one hundred percent sure of. It seems to me Bligh and Thatcher and Billie were still in here, though. I kind of remember saying 'Good-night' three times. That's the only way I can tell."

"Don't be so damn noble on my working-time," Lindsey squelched him. He turned back to Frankie again. "How about it? You want to use the out your pal here is giving you?"

He looked up and met his sister's gaze. She stared at him hard without saying a word. "No," he groaned. "I guess what I told you in the beginning still goes. I was pretty high and hazy, but I remember being alone in here with Thatcher at the very end. Billie, too, of course, but she

was asleep." Then his voice rose, he shook his manacled hands pleadingly toward the dick. "But I know I didn't do anything like that! I wasn't in any condition even to figure out that I could snare him by means of the loop in that light cord. It was all I could do to find the stairs and get up them—"

"I'm sorry, Bligh," said Lindsey, "but the opportunity jibes, too. There's my two out of three. I'm going to have to hold you. The rest of you can go."

CHAPTER THREE

Kill Crazy

AS they filed out one by one giving him sympathetic looks, Dusty went to him and rested his hand encouragingly on his bowed shoulder for a minute. "Buck up, kid," he murmured, "we're with you. We'll get you out of this. You'll be back laying it in the groove with us in no time!" Then, all business again, he hurried out, remarking: "I gotta get down to the Mad House* in a hurry and see if the Warden** can find me someone to take his place. That means a rehearsal too, to break him in—"

The door closed and Lindsey saw that the girl was still sitting there on the piano bench, hadn't gone with them. "Wouldn't grasping that wire, pulling it, even though it was heavily insulated, have left burns or marks on the palms of whoever did it? Frankie's hands are smooth and white."

"So are everyone else's. I took a look at them all. That don't amount to a row of pins anyway. It would have been easy enough to slip on a pair of gloves or even twist a folded handkerchief around them."

"I want to talk to my brother alone for a few minutes, won't you let me do that, please?"

He motioned the other two dicks toward the door, and went out after them.

*Musician's union.

**Secretary of the union.

As soon as the door had closed, Billie went over beside Frankie. He was holding his head dejectedly with both hands, even though they were linked. "I'm scared, Sis," he moaned. "I got a feeling I'll never be able to get out of this! And I didn't do it. You gotta believe me!"

"I know you didn't do it. But that's why you've got to answer me. You've got to tell me why you acted so funny this morning, when I caught you behind the bathroom door, hiding up there. You knew about it then, already, didn't you?"

"Yeah," he whispered fearfully. "I came down here again after I left the first time. I was full of weed, but my idea was vaguely to wake you up so we could go back to our own flat together. It must have just happened. I thought I saw a shadow duck behind those empty ashcans, at the end of the passage out there. And then when I opened the door, the light was out in here. He was already up there. I didn't see him, but I stumbled around and went into him face-first. I could feel his legs hanging limp before me. You know how the weed'll give you the horrors over anything like that. I got 'em bad. I forgot about you being in here. I forgot about calling for help. I only wanted out. I beat it upstairs and hid in that bathtub. That's all it was, sis, just bad kicks from the weed. But I can't tell them that. If I tell them, they'll be surer than ever I did do it. I can't prove I didn't, not even to you, but somehow I know it wasn't me. You see, I wouldn't have been so scared if I had done it. The mere fact that I was so scared shows I had nothing to do with it. I didn't turn on any shower. My hair was that wet from my own cold sweat coming out all over me. What am I going to do?"

"You're pretty badly sewed up," she admitted worriedly. "And with every move you've made, you've only made it look worse for yourself. The way you bolted for that door, when he first said

murder, and then fainted dead away in the cop's arms out there."

"Nerves," he said. "You don't know what that weed does to you the day after. And then, knowing that I was the last one down here, and that I'd had that fight with him over you last night when he gave me the black eye—"

The door opened and Lindsey came in again. "Time enough?" he asked the girl. He motioned his assistants. "Take him with you, boys."

Frankie stumbled to his feet, pale and terrified, as though he were going to be executed instantly. "Pull yourself together, Frankie," the girl urged. "The truth'll come out, it's got to. It looks bad now, but remember it's always darkest before the dawn."

Then as the door closed, she turned back to the dick again. "And now it's you that I'd like to talk to."

"Shoot," he consented, eyeing her curiously.

"I know my brother never did that."

"I do too," was the unexpected answer.

It took her a half-minute to get her breath back. "What? Well then, why did you have him taken in for it?"

"There are a couple of good reasons. Officially we've got a swell circumstantial case against him that I can't ignore at this stage of the game. I'd be remiss in my duty if I didn't have him booked for murder, after what's been brought out. Secondly, it'll be a good deal easier to catch whoever did do it, if he thinks he's fooled us, thinks we aren't still on the look-out for him. He'll be off his guard this way."

"How come you're giving Frankie the benefit of the doubt?"

"Simply my knowledge of human nature. He acted so damned, flagrantly guilty, that he couldn't be anything but innocent. That may sound paradoxical but it's true nevertheless. If he'd been guilty, no matter how frightened he was, he'd at

least have tried to cover himself up. He didn't even try. He's a nervous wreck, his control all shot. That made him do and say the very things he wanted to avoid most. Now was there anything more you wanted to speak to me about?"

"Yes," she said. "It may be disloyal to Dusty and the boys, it may wash us up as an organization, attach a jinx to us, but I can't help it. My brother's life is at stake. Mr. Lindsey, this thing's happened twice before."

"What?" His jaw dropped. Then he clamped it decisively shut again. "Let's hear about it," he said.

SHE sat down on the bench, thrust the point of her elbow back on the keyboard. It gave an eery little *plink!* "You notice not a word was said about it to you. That's for business reasons. There's been an unspoken understanding among all of us to soft-pedal it. There's nothing I hate worse than a stoolie, but I think the time for keeping it quiet is past. It wasn't written down as murder the first two times, but now that I look back, I think it was. It must have been. The details were too much like today's. The dicks that investigated were easier to fool, that was all."

She drew a deep breath. "There's a murderer among us in the band, and there has been all along. He only strikes at certain unaccountable times."

He was leaning toward her intently, devouring every word. "Give me everything you can on those first two times it happened. Every little detail that you can remember. Our whole hope of getting the right man, of clearing your brother, may lie in some little detail—repeated three times."

She contorted her face remorsefully. "If I'd only realized what it was at the time! I don't think any of us did—except *him*, of course, whoever he is. It's so long ago now—"

"Try, try," he urged, jack-knifing a finger at her chest. "Don't give up so easily."

"We all knew each other in school," she began slowly. "There was Dusty and Armstrong and Frankie and Kershaw—and the two who have gone now—Lynn Deering and Freeman. They were the charter-members. They'd already formed the band in school, helped pay their way by playing at prom dances and things like that. I wasn't included yet. That was in the early thirties, when crooners were all the rage. This lad Deering used to whisper huskily through a megaphone, and sweet young things would swoon all over the room.

"We all got out of school and went our separate ways, didn't see each other for about a year and a half. But the depression had hit its full stride just about then, and you can imagine how tough the going was. Then Dusty got in touch with all of us and suggested re-forming the band—professionally this time. Well, we did. That was a little over two and a half years ago. Nothing happened the first six months. Then the summer before last we were playing a resort hotel in Michigan, and we started to hold these jam-sessions down in the basement, just like here. I still wasn't a member, but I was there with them on account of Frankie being in the band. I was present at the jam-sessions too.

"There was a society girl there that had been carrying the torch heavily for Lynn Deering all summer, and just two days before it happened her old man showed up and hauled her off by the scruff of the neck. Of course that gave them a ready-made motive to slap on—after it had happened. But here's the thing. I spoke to Lynn about it only the day before, asked him if he felt bad about it, and he told me he was glad to be rid of her, that she'd been a nuisance. And I could see he was telling the truth.

"Anyway, one morning after a session, he was found down there hanging from the rafters. It wasn't nearly as much of a give-away as you found this one to be. An inquest was held, they handed down a verdict of suicide while of unsound mind, and that was that. The hotel had it hushed up, and the boys took me in to canary in Deering's place.

"Well, just about a year later, that's last summer, we were playing the Nautilus Pier at Atlantic City on a season's contract, and we used to hold our after-work sessions in a little shack across the railroad tracks on Arctic Avenue. One scorching night in August we went over there to hold a session. The heat had gotten Freeman down, he was picking fights with everyone—and there again, you see, they had a plausible motive at hand. There was a rigged-up light-attachment in the shack, just like there is here. I didn't stay until the end. I got out just before dawn and went over to the Boardwalk to get a breath of air. One by one all the others followed me."

"Who was the last one to leave?"

"Two of them came away together, luckily for them. Frankie and Armstrong with him. Freeman was left there alone. But none of us ran into each other right away. You know how long the Boardwalk is down there. Any one of us could have slipped back a moment before joining the rest. Freeman never showed up, and when we went back to try to coax him into a good humor, he was hanging there. Again the coroner's inquest finding was suicide while of unsound mind, due to the heat and too much alcohol. That's about all. We took Thatcher in to replace him. And now—"

LINDSEY said: "All right, you've given me the general outline of the thing. Now let's get down to cases. Were there any grudges between this Deering and the others?"

"No, all the fellows liked him. He was a swell guy, even if he was a crooner."

"How about Freeman?"

"All of them had trouble with him that night. But nothing serious enough to create any animosity, just grouchiness. Dusty was the only one he was careful not to talk out of turn to, because after all Dusty is the boss."

"Could there have been some private trouble that you didn't know anything about?"

"No. I was like that with all of them." She crossed two fingers. "I knew the very laundry-marks on their shirts by heart. You have about as much privacy as a goldfish, in our racket."

"How about money?"

"No. We'll none of us die rich and we don't give a rap about money."

"Women?"

"None of them ever stepped on the other boys' toes in that respect."

"No offense, but how about you yourself? Thatcher did annoy you lately. You admit that yourself. Either of the other two do that? Because I've still got to count your brother in on this, after all is said and done."

"Lynn Deering didn't have time enough to tip his hat to anyone while that society deb was around his neck. And Freeman

was a man's man, not much of a chaser. Frankie isn't the protective sort. It's the other way around. I've had to look after him half the time."

"Then I'm afraid any rational motive is out, and we're up against the worst kind of thing—irrational homicidal mania. Doesn't care who he kills when the kill-mood is on him. But what brings it on? If we only knew that, we could set a trap for him. There's some link there that we've got to get. Something that aroused it last night, and the time before, and the first time. And didn't operate all the many other times you've held jam-sessions. We can't sit back and wait another six months for it to occur again! He's smart, they always are. We won't know then any more than we know now, unless we're on our guard ahead of time—one up on him.

"I'll send for a copy of the inquest findings both from Atlantic City and the other place, but I know already they won't tell me anything. If they were able to tell me anything now, they would have told the officials on the spot something at the time. Did any of them ever show any signs of being not quite right? I mean act unaccountably at times?"

She shook her head. "Not that I could distinguish. Of course, it could be that



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I'm with them so much. I've grown so used to all their traits, that I can't tell the difference any more. It would take an outsider."

"Well, were any of them ever in any accidents?"

She looked mournfully down at the floor. "The wrong one was," she said slowly. "Frankie and I were both in a pretty bad car smash-up about a year after we got out of school. His nervous system's never been the same since. But his head wasn't hurt, nothing like that—" She hid her face suddenly behind her hands. "The more that comes out, the more points to him—and yet I'm as sure as I'm sitting here—"

"I can't be, of course," he told her gently, "but I'm hoping. Look, let's not give up yet. I'm afraid he'll have to start going through the mill. It's not in my power to stop that, but if we keep at it, we'll turn up something yet, I'm sure of it. And of course, not a word to any of them that we've had this talk, that the case is still wide open as far as I'm concerned. Do you understand? That would be fatal. Whoever the killer is, he must feel that my colleagues and I are definitely off the scent, are satisfied we have the right man."

"But even so," she whimpered, "he won't show his hand again until—until Frankie's out of the way and it's too late. Maniac or not, he'll realize that if it happens again while Frankie's being held in jail, that's proof-evident that Frankie didn't do it, and the whole thing'll be reopened. He'll lie low—"

"He'll try to, you mean, if we let him. But remember this is something he can't control. If we can find the link, the right impetus that sets him off, he won't be able to."

"Suppose there isn't any?"

"There has to be. There always is, even in the worst cases of this type."

There was a knock at the door, and

Hoff the janitor stuck his head in. Your boss is on the wire," he told Billie. "They got a new man, he says, and they're down at Dryden Hall, ready to begin rehearsing. They want you down there right away."

"My brother's in jail accused of murder, and I've got to make sweet music." She smiled bitterly at the dick.

"Keep your eyes open, now," Lindsey warned her under his breath. "Watch all of them, watch every little thing that goes on, no matter if it seems important to you or not. And keep in touch with me. Give me your address and phone number, in case I want to reach you."

He took out a pencil stub, jotted down her address and number, stuck the slip in his pocket.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bolero

THE new man supplied by the Mad House to take Thatcher's place was named Cobb. He wouldn't have been a union-member if he hadn't known how to handle his instrument, and the tunes were the tunes of the day, familiar to every professional, so it was just a matter of blending him in with the rest of them, smoothing down the rough edges, and memorizing the order in which the numbers came. Even so, Dusty kept them at it until half an hour before it was time to climb on the shell at the Troc. It was, if nothing else, as good a way as any of taking their minds off what had happened.

"We can't keep it from breaking in the papers," Dusty told them while they grabbed a quick bite on their way over to work, "because it's in New York this time and not out in the sticks, but with a little luck we may be able to keep them from digging up about what happened the other two times. Keep your mouths closed now, all of you. Don't talk to any reporters. The agents'll all wash their hands of

us, and we won't be able to get a booking for love or money if we once get tagged as a jinx-band. Those things spread around awful quick, and are hard to live down. People don't want to dance with— with death kind of peering over the musicians' shoulders at them." This was said out of earshot of the new man. "And keep quiet about the first two times in front of Cobb."

The girl just sat there at the end of the counter, sipping her coffee quietly and looking covertly at them one by one. "One of you," she thought, "sitting so close to me I could reach out and touch you, is a killer. But which one?" It seemed so hard to believe, watching them.

There was the strain of what had happened on all their faces, of course, but there was no private guilt, no furtive remorse, no sign of self-consciousness or wariness. "Maybe," she thought, "he doesn't even remember it himself after it happens each time, in which case—Oh Lord, how am I ever going to be able to tell?"

"O. K., ready, folks?" Dusty asked, slipping down from his high stool. "Let's go over and climb in the box."

Everyone paid for himself. There was no Frankie to pay for her now, but just as she was opening her pocketbook, Dusty thoughtfully waved her aside and put the money down for her.

"What'd that dick have to say after we left?" he asked her on the way over.

"Oh, nothing. He's dead sure Frankie did it. Nothing'll change his mind about that."

"I know this sounds like hell, but what do you think yourself?"

"I'm afraid he did, Dusty. Where there's smoke there's fire. He acted too funny about it from beginning to end."

He slipped his arm around her waist, tightened it encouragingly for a moment. "Keep your chin up, pal," he said.

The men climbed right into the box to

play for the rather second-rate supper show the Trocadero put on, but Billie, who didn't have to canary until the straight dance-numbers later on, went down to the dressing-room and dispiritedly changed into evening dress. "If I were only a mind-reader," she thought. "If I could only see behind their faces. One of them is a mask hiding death!"

There was a perfunctory rap at the door. "They're starting number one now." She got up and went upstairs, stood in the entryway to one side of the box, out of sight of the tables in front. Number one was *Sing for Your Supper*. It looked funny to see Cobb sitting up there in Thatcher's chair. She watched their faces closely one by one. Nothing showed. Just guys making music.

Dusty looked over to see if she was ready, then they slowed a little to let her come in and pick it up. She stepped out in front of them and a spotlight picked her out.

THE phone was ringing when she let herself into her flat at half past three that morning. It was Lindsey. "Did you notice anything?" he asked.

"I couldn't tell. He's good, whoever he is."

"Keep watching. It's too soon yet. Anyone come back with you?"

"Dusty wanted to bring me home, but I told him I'd be all right."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing else." She hung up the phone and suddenly threw her head down and burst into tears.

LINDSEY turned away from the window when Billie started to speak. "We've got to do something soon, Lindsey," she said. "It's six weeks now. Do you know what this is doing to my brother? He'll be bugs by the time we get him out of there. I saw him yesterday, and he's ready to fall apart."

"I know. I've tried everything I can think of, and it's no go," the detective answered. "I've been over those coronary findings until I know them backwards. I've communicated with the officials in Michigan and I've interviewed the ones down in Atlantic City. They couldn't help me. I even went over personally and looked at that shack while I was down there. It's still about the same as when you people used it, but it didn't tell me a thing."

She sat down at the piano and started to play aimlessly.

"I've even dropped in at the Troc more times than you know, watching them while they didn't know it."

"You have?" she said in surprise. "I didn't see you."

"I had a get-up on. I couldn't detect a sign of anything on any one of them. It must be so damn deep, so latent, that he doesn't know he's got it himself."

She went ahead playing. "Then what good is it trying to find it? It may never come out again."

He started pacing back and forth. "It's got to, it always does."

"What makes you so restless, Lindsey?" she asked over her notes. "You're as bad as one of us jitter-bugs. Sit down and relax."

He sank into a chair, immediately got up again, began parading around some more. "It's got my goat!" he seethed. "I know I've got it figured right, I'm dead sure of it, but I've got to sit back with my hands folded until he's good and ready to give himself away again!"

He took out a cigarette, lit it, raised his hand at full arm's length above his head and banged it down on the floor a moment afterwards. Then he took a kick at the chair he'd just been in, so that it swung around in a half-circle.

"Lindsey, this is my flat you're in, not the back room at headquarters," she remonstrated mildly. "I never saw you like

this before, what's the matter with you?"

He trod out the sparks on the rug. "I don't know myself," he grunted. "I felt all right until a few minutes ago. I've been plugging away too hard, not getting enough sleep, I guess. I've got a pip of a peeve on right now. I feel like busting someone in the face!"

"Not me, I hope." She smiled as her fingers continued traveling over the keys.

He was stalking around the room behind her with his locked hands draped across the back of his neck. He looked over at her a couple of times, started to say something, clamped his mouth shut as though thinking better of it. Finally it got away from him. His voice exploded in an ungovernable shout that nearly hoisted her clear of the bench. "For Pete's sake, can't you quit playing that damn piano for a minute! It's got me on edge, I can't stand it any more!"

She turned and looked at him in undisguised astonishment. There was a sudden silence in the room.

He was already ashamed of the outburst. "Or at least play something else. What is that screwy thing anyway?"

"Ravel's *Bolero*. It's a long-hair number but we swing it once in awhile."

"I didn't think I could stand it for another minute."

"It is a monotonous sort of thing," she agreed. "The same theme over and over and over. You just change keys."

"It sure is an irritant, I know that much! I'm sorry, Billie," he apologized. "I didn't know a little thing like that could get me that way. Shows you how jumpy I must be." He grabbed for his hat. "I better get out of here before I put my foot in it any deeper, get some sleep. This case has me down. I guess. See you tomorrow," he called back from the door.

SHE stared after him with a puzzled frown on her face. Then she struck three random notes of what she'd just

been playing, with one finger. Suddenly the piano-bench toppled over and she was flying toward the door he'd just closed behind him. She tore it open. Luckily he hadn't gone down yet, was still out there waiting for the elevator.

"I've got it! I've got it!" she shrieked, as though she herself had gone insane. "Come back here!"

He came inside again. "What the hell—"

She was too excited to explain. "Have you got a gun?" she asked breathlessly, closing the door after him.

"Sure, I always carry one," he said, mystified.

"Good! You're going to need one if this works out the way I think it may."

She'd taken him into the bedroom. "Here, get into this closet and keep your eyes open. Can you see me at the piano from in here?"

"No, it's not in a straight line with the door."

"Well, we'll shove it over further. I want to make sure your eyes are on me every minute of the time, through the crack of this closet-door, or it's going to be just too bad for me!"

They shifted the piano, then she jumped up on a chair, unslung a heavy framed mirror from the opposite wall. "Hang this from the molding over the piano, Lindsey. It'll give you a view of the rest of the room, from in there. Now get back in there, leave the door open a crack, and have your gun ready. You're going to have to listen to that thing steadily for the next few hours. Can you stand it? Your own nerves were pretty much on edge just now. Better take a good stiff drink before you get in there."

He got what she was driving at finally. "You mean—that piece? You think—"

"I'm sure of it, and this'll prove it. That's our link, our impetus. We jammed it that night. I think we must have the other two times, too, although I can't re-

member for sure now any more. We never play it for general dancing. You saw what it did to you just now, just from lack of sleep. It's monotonous, insistent, frays the nerves the way it slowly builds to a climax, the same arrangement of notes over and over and over. And he's off-balance to begin with. Conceivably it topples him over completely each time he hears it, starts the wheels going."

"Gin with it, and a few puffs of weed," he suggested, "to give it the same priming as at the jam-sessions."

"There must be a couple of Frankie's muggles still around the place somewhere. I'm going to test them out one at a time, to make sure they don't show any inhibitions. I'll be supposedly alone up here. For heaven's sake, Lindsey, jump out as soon as you see anything. Don't let anything happen to me. It's going to be an awful feeling to sit here at the piano without being able to turn around, not knowing when I'll feel a knife between my shoulders, or a pair of hands around my neck."

"I'll be watching, I'll be on the job, just keep steady."

"Ready?"

"Ready."

She dialed a number on the phone. The closet door ebbed noiselessly back into its frame, without completely meeting it, in the darkened bedroom beyond.

"Hello, Armstrong? This is Billie. Doing anything? . . . Neither am I. I feel kind of lonely. No one to talk to. Why don't you drop over for a few minutes, see if you can cheer me up. Don't bring anyone else, I don't want a mob around me."

ARMSTRONG said: "Yeah, and do you remember that time we were playing that cruise ship, and ran into a norther down in the Gulf, and had to play fastened to our chairs by our belts, so we wouldn't come flying down out of the box on top of

the dancers' heads every time she tipped over?"

"What about me? I wasn't attached to anything. Right in the middle of the second chorus of *I Married an Angel* I go shooting across the ballroom-floor and land square in the fat purser's lap. What a night that was! Have another drink?"

"I've had two already."

She sat down at the keyboard, lightly began the querulous opening measures of the *Bolero*. He was sprawled out in an easy-chair with his back to the bedroom doorway, drink in one hand, half-smoked reefer in the other. He fell silent, listening.

She changed keys. It began to come in a little heavier now, but the same torturing sequence of notes, on and on and on. She glanced furtively up into the mirror on the wall before her. She could see him in it. He'd let his eyelids droop closed, but he wasn't asleep, she could tell that. Just listening. He lifted his glass to his mouth, drank, lowered it again, all without opening his eyes. The closet door, dimly discernible in the shadowy interior of the next room, was slanting outward at more of an angle now. Lindsey probably had his gun out in his hand. Wouldn't it be a joke if it got him on edge quicker than the suspect they were both testing? It wouldn't, though, now that he was on guard against it.

The strain on her was terrific. She forced herself to keep her eyes down on the keyboard. She had to go on playing, just stealing an occasional glance upward. But any minute she might see a reared shadow loom on the wall and feel—

It was thundering toward its climax now. It was a good thing this place had thick soundproof walls, especially meant for musicians and vocalists. She stole another look via the glass. Eyes still closed. Wide awake though. He'd finished the marihuana cigarette and ditched it. Did she imagine it or had his hand twitched

just then on the arm of the chair? No, there it came again. He'd given it a little spasmodic jerk, sort of shot his cuff back.

Her breath started to come faster. There was moisture seeping through the light dusting of powder on her forehead. She tried not to get tense, to keep her playing even. Was he the one? It was nearing the end now. Was he going to be able to hold out, or would he suddenly spring up and across at her?

She went into the last stretch, fortissimo, mounted to the almost unbearable climax, when—if you were like him—every nerve must be crying out, maddened beyond endurance.

It burst like shrapnel, and then there was sudden deafening silence in the room, and she just sat there limp, nearly prostrated herself.

He moved, opened his mouth and took a yawn that seemed to stretch from his eyebrows to his chin. "Gee, that was swell," he said lazily. "I guess I'll shove off now. There was a gnat or something bothering me the whole time you were playing." He slapped the back of his own hand viciously. "Got it!"

When she'd closed the door after him, she turned and faced Lindsey, who'd come out. "Whew!" was all she said.

"Whew, is right!" he agreed. "But we've got something there and we're not giving up yet. That thing nearly drives you nuts, especially when you've got to stand still in a closet listening to it."

"Stretch your legs a minute while you've got the chance. Here goes for number two." She started to dial again.

CHAPTER FIVE

Killer-Diller

DUSTY said kiddingly: "I must think a lot of you. Nobody but you could drag me out of a nice warm steam-room at this ungodly hour of the night, kid."

"You're a life-saver, Dusty. I felt if I didn't have someone to talk to, I'd go crazy. You know it's awfully tough hanging around up here without Frankie."

She sat down at the keyboard. He was in the same chair all the others had been in. She'd fixed it that way, so there was no other handy.

"Have you seen him lately?"

"I saw him yesterday. They let me visit him two or three times a week. The trial doesn't come up until fall." She started to play, as if absentmindedly. Her fingers were nearly coming off by now. "There's a reefer of Frankie's in that box there, if you want one."

"Have one yourself."

"I just finished one before you got here," she lied.

She had to say that, in case he could still detect the fumes from previous ones smoked in the room, although she and Lindsey had opened the windows and aired it out before he got here.

He noticed what she was playing presently, after the first few bars had been gone over. "Don't play that thing, he remonstrated mildly. "I don't like it."

She shot a glance up into the mirror. "Why not, what's the difference?" she said carelessly. "Anything just to keep my hands busy." She went ahead.

"I got hold of a new number today for us to break in. Run over it instead of that one, see how you like it." He came over, put some orchestration-sheets on the rack, went back and sat down again.

She ignored them. "All right, just let me finish this first. I like to finish anything I begin."

Was that a sign of anything, his trying to switch her off the piece? Did he realize himself what it would do to him if she kept it up long enough. Was that why? Or was it just a harmless expression of preference? Anyone is entitled to dislike certain pieces of music and like others

without necessarily being a murderer, she realized.

He shifted around a little in the chair, got up again, went over to the window, stood looking out. Then he came back, sat down once more, poured another drink. She quit breathing each time he passed in back of her, but went ahead playing.

He was showing more signs of being affected by it than either Armstrong or Kershaw had. It seemed to be making him restless. But was it that? She darted another swift glance up at the glass. He was tightening up a good deal, there was no doubt about that. Both his hands were clenched, and the toe of one foot, slung over the other, was twitching a little, almost like a cat's tail does. On the other hand, she reminded herself, she mustn't jump at hasty conclusions. He'd said he didn't like the piece to begin with, and if he was either bored or annoyed by her playing of it in disregard of his request, he might still have shown these very same symptoms, without there being any sinister meaning to them whatever.

And then suddenly, when next she looked, he wasn't moving at all, not even the tip of his foot now. He was sitting there as still as a statue, almost lifeless. His eyes, which had been on her back until then, were on the mirror themselves now. Had he seen something, caught some slight motion or waver on it, reflected by the closet-door? Had he sensed that this was a trap? If he had—

SHE watched at more frequent intervals now. He'd stopped looking up at the mirror after that one time she'd caught him at it, was looking steadily down at the floor now. He conveyed an impression of alert wariness, just the same. It wasn't an abstract, unfocussed look, but a listening, watchful, cagey look.

The thing rose to its crescendo, shattered, stopped dead. The silence was numbing. He didn't move. She didn't

breathe. A single bead of sweat glistened on his forehead, but the gin could have made him warm after coming out of a steam-room with all his pores open.

She refused to break the spell. Let him be the first to shatter it—for in that lay the answer.

He started to get up slowly. She could see the move coming long before his muscles carried it into effect. His overslung foot descended to the floor. Then there was a wait. His clenched hands drew back along the chair-arms, to give his body better leverage. Then another wait. His waist ballooned out and his knees drew in, straightened, carried his torso up to a standing position. Through it all, the position of his head alone did not change, remained tilted downward toward the floor. That managed to give an impression of secretive, furtive movement to his getting to his feet, like he was stalking someone.

Her nerves were stretched to the breaking-point. She wanted to scream with the suspense of sitting there waiting.

Then his head came up, and he said in the most matter-of-fact way, turning toward the door as he did so: "Guess I'll shove off. My leg went to sleep." He limped out into the hall, slapping at it to get back the circulation.

She reeled there at the piano bench, kept herself from falling by grasping the sides of it for a moment. Then she got up and went out after him.

At the door he chucked her under the chin in a big-brotherly sort of way. "S'-long, sweets," he said. "See you at the barn tomorrow night." The touch of his fingers, she couldn't help noticing was ice-cold.

She closed the door after him and looked behind her. Lindsey had slipped out of the closet, was coming up behind her. She warned him to silence, head tilted toward the door-seam, listening. "*Sh!* The elevator hasn't taken him down yet."

They waited a moment or two. Finally he eased the door open narrowly, peered through with one eye. "It must have, he's not out there any more."

"I usually can hear it slide shut." She walked back into the living-room. "Well, it was no good, Lindsey," she told him dejectedly, slapping her hands to her sides. "It didn't work. It was the wrong answer. One time I thought he was getting steamed up, but then he subsided again, almost—almost as though he caught on you were in there."

"If he did, he's uncanny. I didn't move a fingerjoint." He kneaded his thatch baffledly. "Can't figure it at all. It had to be the right answer. I still think it is, but—for some reason it muffed fire. It was the right time too, according to what the psychiatrists say. Just before daylight, when anyone's power of resistance—including a murderer's—is supposed to be at its lowest ebb."

"What is there left? I'm so tired and discouraged. I'll never get Frankie out of there!"

"Yes, you will," he tried to hearten her. "You get some sleep. We'll put our heads together again tomorrow. We're not licked yet."

SHE saw him to the door, closed it after him, and went in again. Almost immediately afterward the elevator door down the hall gave a hollow clang that penetrated to where she was. "Funny I didn't hear that the first time," she murmured, but didn't bother any more about it.

She put out the light in the hall, lit up the bedroom, took off her dress, and put on a woollen wrapper. That took about three or four minutes. It was nearly five now, would be getting light in another quarter of an hour. The city, the streets outside, the rest of the building around her, were all silent, dead to the world. She remembered that she'd left the light

on in the living-room. She went in there to snap it off. The place was still full of the acrid odor of the weed Dusty had smoked. She opened the window wide to let the fresh air in, stood there a minute, breathing it in.

There was a faint tap at the outside door of the flat, little more than the tick of a nail. She turned her head sharply in that direction to listen, not even sure if she'd heard it herself the first time. It came again, another stealthy little tap.

She moved away from the window and went out there to see. Probably Lindsey, coming back to tell her of some new angle that had just occurred to him. But what a way for him to knock, like an undersized woodpecker. He usually pounded like a pile-driver. He must be getting refined all of a sudden. She wasn't frightened. The test had failed, and she didn't stop to think that it might have delayed after-effect.

She opened the door and Dusty Detwiller was standing there. "Gee, I feel terrible bothering you like this," he apologized softly. "I left the orchestration of that new number I was telling you about on your piano-rack. If you were asleep, I was going away again without disturbing you. That's why I just tapped lightly like that."

"Oh, that's all right, Dusty, I'll bring it right out to you." She walked back into the living-room again, started to gather up the loose orchestration sheets and tamp them together. She thought she heard a slight click from the front-door lock, but didn't pay any attention to it.

Suddenly there was a shadow looming on the wall before her eyes, coming up from behind her, from across her shoulder, the very thing she'd been dreading to see all evening long—and hadn't until now. The loose orchestration sheets fell out of her hands, landed all over the floor around her feet. She couldn't move for a minute, even to turn around.

"Don't scream," a furry voice purred

close to her ear, "or you'll only bring it on quicker. It won't do you any good, you're going to get it anyhow."

She turned with paralytic slowness and stared into his dilated eyes. His whole face had changed in the few seconds since he'd come in from the door. He must have been holding the murder-lust in leash by sheer will-power until then. "I would have given it to you the first time, but I had a funny feeling we weren't alone up here. Something told me somebody else was with us. I watched from the stairs going up to the floor above, and I was right. I saw that dick leave."

His hands started to curve up and in toward her throat with horrible slowness, like the claws of a sluggish lobster. "But now you're alone, there's nobody here with you, and I'm going to do it to you. I told you not to play that piece. I don't want to do these things, but that music makes me."

If she could only reason with him long enough to get over to that phone on the opposite side of the room. "Dusty, don't," she said in a low, coaxing voice. "If you kill me, you know what they'll do to you."

His cleverness hadn't deserted him, even now at the end. "The other guys were up here with you tonight too. They must've been—you wouldn't have tried me out if you didn't try them out too—so when they find you they still won't know which of us did it. I got away with it the first three times, and I'll get away with it this time, too."

"But who'll you get to do your canarying for you?" she choked, fighting desperately for time. She glanced once too often toward the phone, gauging its distance. He jumped sideways, like an ungainly dancing-bear on its hind legs, grabbed the phone-wire and tore it bodily out of the control-box.

Then he came back at her again, hands in that pincer-formation aiming at her throat.

SHE screamed harrowingly, unable to hold it in any longer, shifted madly sideways away from those oncoming, stretching hands, until the far wall blocked her and she was penned up in the angle formed by the two walls, unable to get any further away from him. The window she had opened before he came in was just ahead, in the new direction. "I'll jump out if you come a step nearer," she panted.

He was too quick. He darted in, the hands snaked out, locked around her throat just as she came in line with window-frame. For an instant they formed a writhing mass under one of the curtains.

There was a flash. His protruding eyes lit up yellowly as if he were a tiger, and then there was a deafening detonation beside her face that almost stunned her.

His hands unlocked again, but so slowly that she had to pry them off with her own before she was free of them. Then he went crazily down to the floor. His body fell across one of her feet, pinning her there. She just stood there coughing. A man's leg came over the windowsill alongside of her, and then Lindsey was standing there holding her up with one arm around her, a fuming gun still in his other hand.

"Thank God there's a fire-escape outside that window," he breathed heavily. "I never would have made it in time coming up the inside way!"

He had to step over Detwiller with her in his arms, to get her to the piano-bench and sit her down.

"How'd you know I was in danger up here?" she asked.

"I didn't for sure. I just saw something that struck me as a little strange." He stopped, colored up a little. "I may as well admit I've gone kind of mushy. Every time I leave here I—sort of cross over and stand on the other side of the street watching your window until the lights go out. I was down there, and I saw you open this one and then turn your head quickly and stand there as if you were listening or heard something. I waited, but you didn't come back again, and finally I started on my way. But the more I thought it over, the stronger my hunch got that everything wasn't just the way it should be. I knew it wasn't your phone you'd heard, because you wouldn't have to stand there listening like that. You'd hear it without any trouble. So what else could it be but someone at your front door? By the time I got a block away, it got the better of me. I turned around and came running back—and I took the fire-escape to save time."

"So you call that being mushy. Well you can't be too mushy for me." She looked over at the floor by the window. "Is he gone?" She shuddered.

"No, he's not gone. He'll live to take the blame for what he's done. Only for him it'll be an asylum, not the chair."

Detwiller stared at them vacantly.

"So now we know," she murmured.

"Yes, now we know."



LOST—A PET HATE

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MOVABLE ALIBI

An Acme Indemnity Op
Novelette

by Jan Dana

Author of "Single Liability," etc.

When the little red-head playing the wheel across from me raked in the double sawbuck on which my favorite stoolie had written his murder message, I knew I had to get it back—or else. I never guessed that greenback would lead me into three murders, though, or that the preacher's niece who'd won my bill was the movable alibi for the cagiest shrewdster in the Tombs—and the weak link in Daisy Chain's swindle set-up, instead of the strongest.

CHAPTER ONE

Death on a Double Sawbuck

IT WAS a man's death warrant—beyond all argument. A death warrant for as decent a little Frenchman as ever kept his ears open while working on

.....

I pounded the bulbs to pieces as the clock chimed twelve.



a dice table. If you want to call him a stoolpigeon, it's all right with me. The point is, he had slipped me this little item half an hour earlier. I should have—and would have sworn that I had—tucked it in some pocket away from the rest of my money. Instead, by a disastrous miracle, it had somehow slipped in among my other bills. My first inkling of this was when it floated out of my hand, down the blazing, green roulette table, to cover a bet at the opposite end of the board. My hair stood on end.

It was only a twenty-dollar bill, but scribbled on its face, in green ink, was a message. As nearly as I could recall, from my hasty glimpse in the lavatory where I'd gone after the Frenchman had slipped it to me, it had read—*Try Big Joe on H. emeralds. Maybe mobbed up with Harry P. and the Biscuit. Rooms somewhere on Bowery. Fence named Ike.* And it had been signed *Andre*.

It was absolutely damning to the little Frenchman if it reached the eyes of even one of the hundreds of New York grifters who could spot its significance at a glance. It concerned a little matter on which Acme Insurance had me working and the thugs mentioned were big-time. If word of the message reached one of them, the best Andre could expect was to have his bullet-riddled little body dumped in a Jersey marsh within twenty-four hours. I had betrayed him—if ever a man was betrayed.

I almost went fuzzy with panic. I simply had to get that bill back and the wheel was spinning busily, already. I tried to throw a hex on my bet—to *make* it win.

It didn't.

I won't say I wasn't sweating a little as I saw the croupier's rake sweep it in, saw it piled in the little stack against the cushion. I threw a sidelong glance down toward the far end of the jam-packed, vast red-crystal-and-gold gambling salon, and caught a glimpse of the back of the little Frenchman's neck through the crowd as

he functioned placidly at his dice table.

Then I cut out all thoughts except that I absolutely *had* to win that bill back.

MY EYES should have bored a hole through the croupier's stack of twenties, the way I concentrated on it. I played, but don't ask me what, continually watching that pile, waiting till my double saw-buck should again come to the top. In the back of my mind I was reviling myself, damning the carelessness that had let me mix the contents of my pockets. What I should have done was leave the joint immediately after I had collected the bill at the Frenchman's table.

As a matter of fact, I would have been long gone, the bill a charred little heap in some gutter, if it were not for a certain headquarters detective whom ill luck had placed on the premises. I've known some shady cops in my time, but this Herman Cullen was dynamite. A lieutenant, with powerful political pull, he was almost openly crooked. He looked like the old cartoon character of Foxy Grandpa—little mild blue eyes behind half-spectacles, powdery tufts of orange hair, beaming, carefully tailored. But I wouldn't have put it past him to cut a man's throat with his own hands—if there was enough cold cash involved. He had been practically at my elbow at the moment the Frenchman had tossed me the bill and, whereas I did not actually think he had seen us, nevertheless I was afraid to mark the incident by breaking away too quickly. If there could be degrees in disaster, Cullen's knowing that the Frenchman did a little work for me had as dire possibilities as any that might accrue from the thieves on whom he had squealed. Hence my idling around from dice table to chuck-a-luck, from chuck-a-luck to roulette—and so to this ultimate, ghastly blunder.

Up till this minute, I had not even been conscious of the little girl opposite me. I was not seeing her, or anybody else, dur-

ing the time my bill slowly rose to the top of the croupier's stack. And as the bill neared the payoff position, I was all but holding my breath.

When I estimated my twenty to be about four or five from the top, I dared not wait any longer. As the croupier's drone called for bets, I laid out every bill I had, covering the table in all directions. I could not help but win a sizable number of the bets and with even a touch of luck, my all-important twenty would rain down on one of my wins. Damn it, it *had* to. . . .

But it didn't.

The wheel spun merrily, came to rest. The sing-song of the croupier falsettoed off the winning combinations. His nimble thin fingers cascaded out bills, came to mine and—tossed it carelessly down on a bet just across from me.

Some of my now-growing nervousness must have been in my eyes as I watched a dainty little white hand come down on the bill and pull it in. I jerked up to her face to see what she looked like—and let go the breath I had been holding.

SHE was a dainty little girl, in a short black caracul coat and a pert little black pancake hat. Her face was like milk, with tiny, wistful features framed by dark auburn curls, her eyes granite-blue, long-lashed, starry. Her coat was thrown back to show a dress of dark blue silk that stretched across her tight, round breasts and neat little waist. She had the flawless, fresh skin that said she was young, but there was a relaxed charm about her that made me think of her as capable—I don't know why. There were little spots of excitement in her velvety cheeks.

I finally got my eyes down again to her money—she had quite a little stack of bills before her—and considered this new complication to my alarming problem. I had to wait now till *she* lost my bill, wait while it traveled again through

the croupier's stack, pray once again for the twenty to come my way on a win.

It began to look damned serious.

And even while I watched her fingers—watched without realizing what her riffling the corners of her bills actually signified—it got more serious. The fingers suddenly gathered the bills together—and vanished.

I looked up, startled, just in time to see her slip back into the crowd, be instantly swallowed by people waiting to take her place. Then I realized she had been counting her money preparatory to leaving.

I grabbed up my funds and slid away from my side of the table. People were packed almost solid behind me and I had to squirm and wriggle to get through into the less crowded outer fringes.

I got through—and came face to face with the little headquarters conniver, Lieutenant Cullen. He showed up, directly in my path, and his mild blue eyes beamed as he planted himself to block me.

"Ah, Acme. Back in town, I see."

"Some other time, Lieutenant," I said. "I'm late for a date."

He turned and fell in beside me promptly. "Wasn't there some little discussion last time I saw you—about how it would be best if you had your company keep you operating out of New York?" he asked blandly.

I stopped and faced him. "I wouldn't remember," I told him. "Was there anything else you wanted?"

"No, no." Deep in each of his eyes there was a little pinpoint of red. "No—just that. We—ah—sometimes don't like the way you operate, you know."

"All right. I'll bear it in mind. Is that all?"

He said it was, and I broke away from him, cursing in ten languages. I fought my way to the exit, far down at the other end of the noisy roiling room, bought

back my hat and coat and got to the door.

I asked the three-hundred-pound guardian of the ornate portal: "A little red-haired girl in a short black coat and pancake hat—blue dress—looked like you could eat her with a spoon. She didn't . . ."

"Just went out, pally—a minute ago."

I sweated as the elevator dropped me to ground level, hurried out onto the dark little side street and braced the lookout in the adjoining doorway. He pointed a skinny finger down the street.

"She flagged that hack—the one with the cockeyed tail-light—there—about half a block down. See it?"

I trotted the thirty yards to where my convertible was parked, kicked it into motion and got away, just before the star-shaped, cherry-colored tail-light of the cab vanished around the corner two blocks east.

IT WAS a short chase, but no merry one. I kept turning corners, just in time to see the hack ahead turn one, until we got over to Fifth. Then we made a long run south. I turned onto Fifth six blocks behind her, but by the time we got down around Fourteenth Street, I was ten behind. Her hacker was evidently under orders to hit it up and he seemed to be able to get through one traffic signal after another that snarled me up.

I was sweating in front of a red light when I saw them turn off on Eighth Street, and by the time I could slow my car down and turn in after them, the star-shaped tail-light had completely run away from me.

There was nothing to do but go shooting through the Village streets, criss-crossing and doubling around, in hopes of picking them up again. I did that for ten minutes without the slightest result, trying anxiously—and unsuccessfully—to

convince myself that the girl was no crook, was not likely to know any crooks, and that my incriminating bill would probably pass into safe hands. At the end of ten minutes I gave up the chase and settled down to steady sweating. It was in my mind at least to warn the little Frenchman and gave him a chance to duck out of town.

I swung around a final corner and almost ran into the rear of the cab with the star-shaped tail-light, parked in front of an all-night doughnut-and-coffee shop. The hacker was just pushing into the restaurant.

To my "Hey!" he strolled over, and for my five dollars told me: "I dunno exactly. First she says Sixty-A Jane Street, then when we get down here, she changes and jumps out at the corner of Jane and Eighth Avenue. I dropped her there."

I saw no moving thing on Jane Street as I drifted by the corner where it intersected Eighth. I parked my car just past the corner, hurried back and into Jane Street—a black little slot, lit by hissing blue street lamps. Tall, blank-faced, old-fashioned houses loomed on both sides as I walked along looking for Number 60-A.

It was four doors from the next corner on the other side—four stories of faded red brick. I could read the number from across the street. The corner arc lamp shone brilliantly on its high, parlor-floor-level stoop. I started across toward it—and stopped, with one foot in the gutter. The house had a vaguely dead look. Every shade in the place was drawn, dark. There was a sign on the door reading, *For Sale*, and giving the name of the broker handling it.

In consternation, I damned the cabby. He had undoubtedly given me the wrong number. I swung back the way I had come, with the desperate hope that I might catch him before he finished his coffee at the dirty-spoon and give his

memory a jog, but the futility of that occurred to me before I had gone ten yards. I stopped, turned back—and there was a whine of metal from the areaway of the for-sale house. A door clanged shut faintly.

I stood staring, while a man emerged. He came up on the far side of the stoop from me—an old man, stooped, short, in black felt hat and long black topcoat. In the moment that he mounted to street level his face turned, first one way, then the other, as though surveying the street. The blue-white street lamp caught him full for an instant and I could see a mummy-like face with a long, tubular chin. He tucked the chin down, turned and stumped off silently around the corner.

I stood dopily, wondering if I ought to take after him and brace him about the girl—till it was too late. It didn't make sense anyway. Even through the fog of my own worry, it struck me that there was something funny about anyone coming from a house so obviously unoccupied. Then there was that click of metal again from the areaway and I realized that there was *still* someone inside—someone apparently watching the old man out of sight.

I STEPPED back into a doorway to consider and curse the luck that had suddenly made my twenty-dollar bill a really difficult problem. Maybe sleuthing for Acme for twelve years has colored my viewpoint a little, but—fantastic if you like—I suddenly smelled something off-color about the house opposite me. If the girl *had* gone in there—if she *were* doing business with hustlers, my bill might even now. . . .

This was the first time I'd really considered the girl in a personal light. And I was prepared, the minute I did think of her dainty poise and her winsome, solemn face, to swear that she would not be doing business with crooks—at least, not

willingly. I don't set myself up as any Galahad, but I suddenly had a growing curiosity in my mind about her—a wonder if anything sour was maybe happening to her. I found the possibility unpleasantly getting under my skin and had an abrupt, irrational urge to lend her a hand if she needed a hand. All this quite apart from the fact that her personal safety was vital to me, if I were to recover my twenty.

I considered walking boldly up and knocking on the front door—but not very seriously. For one thing, I was unarmed. My gun was in my car where I had left it before entering the gambling joint where a frisk always awaits the customers. For another, I couldn't figure anything to say to whomever might answer the door—if anyone did answer the door.

Intent on looking the house over from my little recess, I wasn't paying much attention to the street. I did not see where the girl came from—but she was suddenly there, almost at the foot of the steps of the gloomy-looking house across from me, running swiftly.

The rest of it happened so smoothly and with such speed that I could not have interfered then, even if I'd known how to begin.

In the moment that I saw her and came alert, she had reached the steps, was running up them. I opened my mouth, started out of my doorway, realizing that she, too, must have been concealed in just such a spot as mine until this very moment.

I stopped the "Miss!" I had ready to call, as the door at the top of the steps suddenly, silently opened to let a man slip out.

Spotlighted as he was by the blue-white glare of the street lamp, I recognized instantly his stock, gray-clad figure, his dark, shining, round-featured face and little painted rosebud of a mouth. His

name was Chain—known by his own choice as “Daisy”—a cold-blooded, ruthless, professional thief and killer, as deadly as a rattlesnake.

He was obviously taken aback at meeting the girl. He stopped stock-still as they came face to face on the stoop. So did the girl.

I was unconsciously moving toward them—then I wasn't. Daisy Chain's hand had suddenly dipped in and out of his pocket, and the street light caught a flash from metal. The little red-haired girl gasped, put the back of one hand to her mouth.

And in that instant the shots came—two of them—from the upper part of the house.

There was a man's thin scream—then a terrific crash, somewhere on the third or fourth story.

For an instant, both Chain and the girl were frozen, their heads snapped toward the still-open door at the top of the stoop. Then Chain suddenly whirled and started down the steps, pocketing his gun—while I stood like a gawk. But he didn't continue on down. As though something had suddenly occurred to him, he stopped halfway, swung back. The girl was stumbling backward down the steps, her hand still to her mouth.

In one quick motion, Chain again yanked the gun out of his pocket and jammed it into her back, sent her stumbling up the steps again.

She cried out, “Oh, don't . . .” and I was dopey enough—gun or no gun—to be hotfooting it across the street, by now.

Neither of them saw me. The girl, because she was being manhandled, and Chain because he was intent on hustling the girl back into the house as fast as he could. Then he had her in, was in himself, and the door closed softly, swiftly, long before I was even at the foot of the steps.

CHAPTER TWO

The Man Who Wanted to Burn

I'M DUMB, but not dumb enough to go storming into locked houses where gunmen are shooting—unless I can do some shooting myself. I turned and ran down the street, back toward my car, keeping my neck cricked to hold the house in sight. No one had emerged by the time I reached the corner, and I was not out of sight around it more than a half-minute. Then I was hurrying back, a gun in one hand, a steel jimmy in the other.

I sprinted up the steps, yanked at the door. It did not budge and I could see it was not going to. I looked over the railing, slid a hip over the side and dropped to the areaway, landed ten feet down, on cement that did my heels and legs no good. One of my feet skidded and I saw that I had landed on a tiny black silk purse—the girl's, no doubt, lost in the scuffle. Even as I snatched it up to jam in my pocket I squeezed it hopefully, but it held no bulge such as the roll the girl had been carrying would have made.

I went to work on the iron-grille door of the areaway with the jimmy. The thing was a million years old, a simple mortise lock, but it had the strength of Gibraltar. It took me a good minute and a half before I wrenched the latch out of its moorings and ran into the basement hallway of the house.

At the foot of carpeted stairs, I stared up. There was not a whisper of sound above. I slid the safety off my gun as I ran up a flight. Musty smell rolled down in waves to meet me. I paused on the parlor floor. Nothing moved. Doors stood open along the hall and I got out my flash, threw a little light into each—a series of empty, dust-laden chambers. The same went for the second floor. Not till I reached the third did I catch the sharp stink of gunpowder.

I did not have to be psychic to suspect what had happened in this house, and so the dead man did not surprise me too much. He lay, a little man in black clothes, with white goatee and imperial, in the only furnished room in the place—an elaborate little office. He lay on maroon carpet, an overturned swivel chair beside him. He had been shot, high up in one cheek and the glaze in his eyes left no doubt that he was dead or dying—even if the two tiny blue-red holes in his antrum had not told the story. A cupboard and a wall safe in the room stood wide-open, both empty save for tracked-up dust. Of the girl or Daisy Chain, there was no sign. I ran downstairs to the rear of the cellar.

The back door stood open a crack. I ran out and into the back yard, found myself confronting a board fence. I went over it scrambling and was in the back yard of an apartment house. The dimly lit basement corridor of the apartment house stood open, three steps down, and I ran on along it.

When I came up, I was on another silent, blue-lit street. Not a thing stirred on this one either. Chain and the girl were gone—and my twenty-dollar bill.

Now I *was* in a mess. Although, queerly enough, the fact that Daisy Chain was who he was—a dangerous, big-money criminal—gave me respite, at least. The gunman was strictly a lone-wolf—so strictly that even if he did read the damning message on my bill and understand it, he would not be bothered passing it on. In that respect, I had a little time in which to catch up to him. But somehow the bill didn't seem so important at this point. What did worry me was the dainty, frightened little red-head. What was she caught up in? What sort of a mess was this—and what part did Chain expect to make her play?

I had enough intuition, even then, to know that Daisy Chain would not be easy to get to. Not after this. If I were going

to get a line on this thing, get some clue as to what he was planning to do with the girl, where he would be taking her, I'd have to try some other tack.

I WENT back to the house, the way I had come, with my ears open for the sound of a police siren. It was even money whether the two shots and the noise following were loud enough to cause a neighbor to send in an alarm. And, if an alarm had gone in, I had no wish to be caught up in the police investigation.

The police siren came all right—but before it came, I had covered the house. Not as leisurely as I would have liked, but adequately.

In the death room—the corner room on the third floor—black felt was tacked over the windows. A door in the rear wall was nailed shut. The one room constituted the whole apartment. There was nothing in closet, wall safe, or the drawers of the desk but dust. However, in the top drawer the dust showed where a very small pistol had lain for some time. I could not find the pistol.

The dead man wore white piping around his black vest, a bat-wing collar and a maroon tie. He looked a little pompous, rich, and frightened. There were bruises around his neck and two little veins of blood paralleled down his cheek from the two bullet-holes. The holes were small enough to suggest that he had been shot with a small caliber pistol—possibly his own, the one that had lain in the drawer.

I had a feeling that his face was somehow familiar. That was no delusion.

Searching him, I found one paper in his pocket—a rent receipt, in advance, for the use of this room for six weeks. It had been made out—a month ago—to George Grantland Hessian.

He was, of course, the nationally-famous swindler. At one time he had been known as the greatest stock promoter in the business, with a take of thousands

a day. His specialty was the ferreting out of "literary" properties—that is, properties which, while utterly worthless, could, by clever phrasing, be made to sound on paper as though practically adjacent to rich and established oil-fields. Having bought—or stolen—a long-term lease on the property, another glittering corporation would be formed with, if possible, some gullible citizen of outstanding integrity and reputation as a figurehead. From his Chicago, New York, and San Francisco offices, another gaudy prospectus would flood the sucker lists, via the mails. Success had made him incautious and he had plastered the mails with one too gaudy, giving the long-suffering postal inspectors their chance.

George Grantland Hessian became a Federal number, with a long string of years in which to ponder. A hasty dig into my memory and a vague rule-of-thumb calculation made me conclude that he must just barely have gotten out—within a few weeks, at any rate. There was nothing to indicate who had shot him.

I had gone over the rest of the rooms in the house—all completely blank—and was in the basement, when the siren came. I had just recalled the black silk purse in my pocket and was in the act of opening it, when the shrill scream sent me scurrying out the areaway entrance, and back to my doorway across the street.

From there I watched the police circus descend.

I DID not care to make a light to see if I had anything in the purse—at least not till a crowd had formed to give me a little privacy. And the crowd simply did not form. I waited impatiently in my black doorway, while a few scattered curious drifted around, attracted by the car after car of police and officials, but at the end of fifteen minutes, there were actually as many newspaper reporters as idle spectators.

I was intently watching the obscure activity in the house opposite, hoping for some bit of information, some faint clue that would give me a bit of light on the whole business. Naturally, I kept my eyes on the door at the top of the stoop, but when it suddenly opened to let three men out abreast, I really thought I was having hallucinations.

The high stoop was a miniature stage, fully lighted by the corner street lamp. Of the three men, two were Homicide detectives, of Lebaron's command. Light glinted on the handcuffs with which the two detectives held the third man between them. Photographers' light bulbs flared and cameras clicked, while I stared with my mouth open.

The third man was Daisy Chain, the red-lipped, dark-faced little gunman—the one man in the whole world whom I knew could not have fired the two shots that had killed George Grantland Hessian—could not, because he was squarely in my sight on the stoop opposite as the killing was done. Having stored the girl away somewhere, some vital business must have brought him back—brought him back only to be promptly collared by Lebaron and his men. It was fantastic.

But it was not one-tenth as fantastic as what occurred the next moment.

Lebaron—tall, green-eyed, bony-faced—suddenly appeared behind the three men, stepped around them and patted air for silence. When he got it, he said loudly: "Mr—uh—Chain wants to make a public statement—for the newspapers. He'll make it now and you boys can catch the early editions. You better get it down, because he *won't* see you once he gets downtown."

Daisy Chain's face was leaden, shining, his voice dull, flat, carefully enunciated as it came from his little painted-smile of a mouth.

He said: "I came here tonight because I had a tip that Hessian had big dough

around. I got there at eleven o'clock exactly and hid in his closet. I had to wait for an hour and a half before he came in and opened the safe. I came out and held him up but the dough wasn't there. I tried to knock it out of him where it really was. He pulled a little gun on me and it went off and cooled him. Yeah, I know it's first degree—in commission of a felony. The cops caught me fair and square, coming back to look around when I thought nobody'd heard the shots. No, I got no lawyer. Let's go, Lieutenant."

I GOT to my car, sat there with my head buzzing. I had heard some wild monologues in my time, but never anything that ranked with this. There was no question of the cops having beaten it out of him. He was simply not the type. That statement had been a voluntary confession! I racked my brains to try and make sense of it. And it simply would not make sense.

I went over and over that scene in my mind's eye. The girl—barely at the top of the stoop. Daisy Chain facing her. The sharp, staccato sound of the shots. Chain starting to leave the scene—the natural urge for a crook with his record. His sudden decision to herd the girl hastily back inside and—it now became apparent—down and out the basement entrance to—where?

And now his voluntary return, his voluntarily confessing to murdering the recently released ex-convict oil-swindler. Why? What possible compulsion would make Chain literally put his head in the noose to shield the actual murderer? And why had he suddenly decided to abduct the girl? What had he done with her?

The impossible premise that he, Daisy Chain, was deliberately shouldering the crime to save someone else stuck in my mind. It seemed impossible—but what wasn't? And in that light, a possible reason suddenly popped up for his carrying

the girl off. For she—as far as he knew—was the one person who could give him an alibi! She was the one person who could positively give the lie to his confession. She, alone, could smash his attempt to go to jail for a killing he hadn't done—and, for that matter, finally to the chair. This was getting beyond all reason. He had kidnaped the girl, put her out of the way, in order that she might not block his taking the rap for murder!

Who, then, was the actual killer? Was it someone with whom Daisy Chain was tied up? Was his gesture really one of self-sacrifice? Even as I formed the question, I knew it was not any such thing. Daisy Chain was a cold-blooded, heartless little crook, with ice in his veins. He was temperamentally incapable of doing an unselfish thing. Whatever wild reason was behind this move, it was sane, logical, and—profitable for Daisy Chain. That had to be so!

Then I remembered the old, stooped man with the tubular chin, who had stolen away from the house just prior to the shooting. Who was he? Where did he fit in this picture? Not the killer, certainly—any more than Chain—although, on second thought, he might conceivably have circled the block, come in the back way and

Not any of this feverish speculation got me any nearer to the one question that really bothered me: Where was the girl?

Not till then did I open my hand and look down at the crumpled silk envelope. I threw a hasty look out the car window to make sure I was in no danger of being observed, quickly ripped open the purse.

There were two letters within.

One was yellowed with age, cracked here and there. I took it out of its envelope—addressed to a Mr. R. Robinson, Greensite, Texas—and had a communication in rusty ink, meticulous handwriting. It was on a letterhead reading: *O. E.*

Murray—Consulting Geologist. The date line was Fanfield, Texas, thirteen years ago. The letter read—

Dear Mr. Robinson:

Your letter of inquiry regarding Tiger Flow Exploration Company received. I am able to state without reservation that I know every statement to be contained in the company's prospectus to be literally true. An investment in this company (which I myself, incidentally, am making, to the limit of my available funds) is as sound as government bonds. Their properties are definitely proved and await only the proper financing for drilling. I have myself examined their tracts and can positively state that there is oil-bearing mineral in every square yard of it. That the company makes much more modest claims in its literature, is due solely to the conservatism and modesty of its brilliant banker—and my esteemed friend—Mr. George Grantland Hessian.

Yours very truly,

(signed) O. E. Murray, B.Sc.

The other letter, a freshly written, unstamped, unsealed one, was a note addressed to the Chalfonte Hospital, Houston, Texas, to the effect that the enclosed two hundred dollars were to apply against the bill of the Rev. Charles Hare, currently in their care, and was signed, *Respectfully, Dorinne Hare.*

There was no two hundred dollars in it, but it was enough to send me hot-footing it back to my hotel, where I got on the long-distance wire to Houston, where Acme Indemnity maintains an office of sizable proportions. I was lucky enough—after about an hour—to locate Jimmy Poore, an ace investigator out of that office, and get him to go to work.

CHAPTER THREE

Money Man

THE rest of the night ran away from me—and a good deal of the morning—before I got everything that I could. In

all, I got five calls from the West. Between times, I went to work on what stoolpigeons I could locate, dropping the word that I wanted any and all information regarding Daisy Chain. I did not get much encouragement.

By the time all the returns from Houston were in, it was noon—and I was deflated. I had information, yes, but not so much as one active lead in it.

The red-haired girl was the niece of one Charles Hare, I was informed, a retired clergyman of unknown denomination. Sixteen years ago he had become involved in an oil-stock swindle, engineered by George Grantland Hessian, had appeared as executive vice-president of the company. The whole thing had been exposed—in Fanfield, Texas—though no one had ever been brought to trial for it. There had been some mention of O. E. Murray in the complaints entered, as “a brilliant young geologist who had, moved away from the state at about that time, following a scandal with a married woman!”

The Reverend Hare had been so stricken by the exposure that he had suffered a stroke. He was a bachelor, without close relatives, save a niece, Dorinne. Five years ago, this niece arrived in Houston from Chicago to take care of him. They lived in an obscure boarding-house where little was known of them. Recently, the old man had suffered a relapse and had had to be moved back to the hospital. Their former landlady was of the opinion that a telegram the old man received from New York had caused this relapse. The same landlady volunteered the information that, subsequent to the old man's removal to the hospital, Dorinne Hare had done a great deal of searching through old boxes of papers stored in the cellar, and had subsequently left for New York, though reserving quarters against her return.

It gave light, all right—of a sort. It cleared up the girl's motives. Her uncle,

involved with Hessian sixteen years ago, had evidently retained certain papers. Hessian, coming out of prison, had needed one of them—probably the O. E. Murray letter—and had wired, demanding them, probably on threat of raking up the old disgrace. The girl had come to New York with the letter, had found herself short of funds for paying the old man's hospital bill, and had desperately tried to acquire some gambling. She had won—including my twenty-dollar bill—and in making delivery of the letter—or attempting to—had stumbled into the vicious little drama with Daisy Chain.

All of which left me knowing no more of them than I did before about where or what or how to do for the girl.

My stoolpigeons could only report that nobody seemed to have been aware that Daisy Chain was even in town.

The morning newspapers carried nothing that helped. Every sheet gave front-page prominence to Daisy Chain's amazing public confession from the stoop of the murder house. He was in the Tombs, charged with murder in the first, awaiting arraignment.

Futilely cursing the fact that the little gunman was out of my reach, was in the one place where I could not reach him for the purpose of squeezing answers out of him, I suddenly saw the really amazing thing that I had.

Daisy Chain had gone to unbelievable lengths—had connived, schemed, perjured, and even kidnaped, evidently—to get himself into the Tombs. It was apparently important to him that he be behind bars. Whatever the obscure reason, he wanted to be there—desperately.

And I could turn him out! I could come forward, establish his alibi, tell the D. A. exactly what I had seen, omitting, for this purpose, all mention of the girl—and Daisy Chain would be on the street in no time. That is, I could—if he refused to answer my questions!

I JUMPED for the telephone. If I had it right, this was probably a new high in fantastic situations. Daisy Chain had gone all the way—to get himself started for the chair. I stood in position to blackmail him with threats of proving him innocent. It was beyond all belief—and yet it was so.

I got Preeker, the long-nosed, unbelievably shrewd little head of Acme's investigation department—my boss—and gave him a long story, none of it true, ending up in a plea for him to get me permission from the D. A.'s office to visit Daisy Chain in the Tombs. He didn't believe a word of it, but after twelve years he is prone to indulge me now and then, and he grudgingly consented to try.

At that, it was four o'clock before the messenger came up with the pass from the D. A.'s office. I grabbed up my hat and my green morocco box—it contained my spare gun and, for the moment, the two letters and the girl's silk purse—and took it down and deposited it in the hotel safe. I wasn't taking any chances on the cops finding these just at the moment.

I went downtown in the subway, taxied to the Tombs, and took an elevator to the waiting-room.

The red-faced, blue-eyed Scotchman behind the desk shoved back his uniform cap and told me cheerfully: "I can't make him see you. He's refused everybody but his tongue."

"He'll see me," I comforted him. "Give him this."

I had the note already written out—*Talk to me or I'll blow the whole racket sky-high. I can do everything the girl could.*

The turnkey shaped his lips to a worried whistle. "Hey—I don't know—"

"It's all right. It's just a bluff to maybe scare a little information out of him."

"Well—" He shook his head, but waved one of the uniformed attendants over.

"Take this in to Daisy Chain," he told him. "Gentleman waiting."

The attendant said: "His lawyer's in with him now. He ought to be through any minute." He turned and looked at the door at the other end of the musty room. It opened as he looked.

A tall, spare, distinguished-looking man of forty-odd strode out. He had short-curling brown hair, a clipped brown mustache and straight eyebrows over cold blue eyes.

"There he is now," the attendant said.

"Chain's lawyer?" I asked the turnkey.

"Uh-huh. *Some* lawyer, too. Osborne, of Fairfield and Ritchie."

"*Wha-at?*" I gulped.

"Yep."

"The Wall Street . . . ?"

"Yeah. Funny they'd take a criminal case, ain't it? Especially a hood like Daisy."

"Yeah. Listen—I just thought of something I'd forgotten. I'll have to come back later."

I skipped out while he was complaining.

I was struck dumb. The firm of Fairfield and Ritchie were Wall Street's oldest, most supremely exclusive. Their clients were all multi-millionaires. Here was money and no mistake. Fairfield and Ritchie did not represent Daisy Chain. As well expect the angel Gabriel to plead that thug's case. Who did they represent?

I missed Osborne at the elevator landing, rode down in a sort of daze. If I said I wasn't a little shaky in my knees at this unexpected turn, I'd be a liar. There are three things in New York that scare hell out of me. The first is money. The second is money—and so is the third. The cop—private or otherwise—who tries to buck heavy dough in this town might just as well go out and hit himself over the head with an axe. And if ever it looked

like a person was bucking money, I was, here and now.

I looked round the lobby of the Criminal Courts building a little wildly, trying to catch sight of the tall, English-looking lawyer. I had evidently missed him but that was no great blow. I knew where Fairfield and Ritchie had their offices. I started out.

Osborne turned away from a cigar stand, lighting a cigar, and fell in directly in front of me.

I followed him, of course, while I tried to get rid of the daze in my think-machine. What client of this ultra-snob-bish firm could be mixed up in all this? How could one of the tycoons whom Fairfield and Ritchie represented possibly be involved with Daisy Chain—with George Grantland Hessian? It didn't make sense.

I STUCK with Osborne down to the Broad Street skyscraper. The bulletin board gave Fairchild and Ritchie's suite as the twenty-first floor. Naturally, I expected the lawyer to disembark at that level.

He didn't. Instead, as we were passing eighteen, he said crisply, "Nine," and got off at the nineteenth. Hastily I had to call for twenty, get off and hurry back down to the marble stairs at the end of the hall.

I ran down the flight, bent down from the last shadowed step. I was just in time to see the lawyer stop before a ground-glass-paneled door reading: *Private. Entrance 1904.*

A girl opened the door to his knock. His crisp, English voice inquired for, "Colonel Lamson."

A small, twinkling pair of men's feet, crossing the office just above my line of sight stopped, and came back and the owner appeared, urged the lawyer inside. The door closed.

I stared. The owner of the small feet was, I would swear, the stooped, elderly

man with the long tubular chin whom I had seen doing a sneak from Hessian's house the night before—minutes ahead of the killing.

In business clothes, with his strange, yellow eyes visible, he did not look nearly so feeble as he had last night. Multi-millionaire or not, he was one tough little party, if my judgment was worth anything.

Ten long strides took me to the door numbered 1904—the entrance to the suite that comprised the whole floor. Then I knew the worst. The legend on this door was: *C. J. Hollingsworth and Co., Private Bankers*. Down in one corner was, simply: *London, Liverpool, Paris, Berlin, Buenos Aires*.

I placed the "Colonel Lamson" then. Thirty years ago, he had headed his own firm. Lamson & Co. were—like most of our Wall Street demi-gods—at that time plain pirates, freebooters, highbinders. They were behind half the really big, ugly operations in railroads, mining, oil—anything you want to name. A Congressional investigation, a newspaper crusade, had finally put so much of an odor to the name Lamson that he had thought it best to blend with the deaconish, butter-wouldn't-melt-in-their-mouth firm of Hollingsworth & Co. Their saintly reputation, legitimate enough, had been sufficient to smother Lamson's questionable past. No doubt he had promised to reform—why shouldn't he, with all the money he or a dozen like him could ever need?—and the firm had wound up as one of the six largest, most conservative, private bankers on the Street. No breath of scandal had touched them in fifteen years.

I was up against money all right. But how? It was pure madness. How could a firm like Hollingsworth—even if one of the partners had a heart full of larceny—be tied in with plain crooks like Hessian and Daisy Chain? Whatever Lamson's past, his present was as spotless as white

linen. It had to be, for his firm to stand out as it did. One intimation in the Street that he was—in any way—doing business with such as Chain and Hessian, and Hollingsworth's prestige would melt like lard on a hot brick.

I even tried to think up some way I could hold that as a threat over Lamson—that I would reveal how I had seen him stealing from the house on Jane Street, unless he did so and so—but I knew I would never have the brass to try it. He would squash me like a fly under his thumb if I got in his hair—at least, if I showed up without a lot more than I had now.

I BLESSED the chance that had let me run into Osborne, the lawyer, at the Tombs, before I had seen Chain. My little hold on Chain was the one shot in my locker that looked valid. To have fired it blindly, in my present mystified state, would be madness. Once I could grasp—even in a general way—what was going on, I might be able to use it with ten times the effect.

The torment of that was that every passing minute increased my worry about the little red-haired girl, and the fate of my twenty-dollar bill—though the truth is I was more interested in the girl now than in the little Frenchman. Not that I had forgotten him, but my urge was primarily to get her out of danger.

Once again I sorted over the items in my head that might hold—must hold—the answer to what lay behind this crazy merry-go-round. And once again I found myself just where I'd started, my questions still unanswered.

What murderous equation was there between Hessian, Chain, and Lamson? Why had Daisy Chain voluntarily jailed himself? Above all, what had he done with the girl before he surrendered to the cops?

I could get an answer to none of these questions from my buzzing brain

and so I finally got back to brass tacks.

Trying to do anything with Lamson was simply beyond my depth. I might scheme a dozen schemes, work out a dozen gambits on the banker—and the closer I got to the truth, the closer I'd be to a few ounces of lead in my fat head. No, I'd have to work from the other end—on Daisy Chain's trail. I understood thugs like Chain—or even swindlers like Hessian—could cope with them where a Lamson and his money would make me a babe in the wood.

It suddenly occurred to me how odd it was that none of the wires I had out had brought in anything about Chain. I'd gleaned absolutely nothing. I wondered where the little gunman could have been lately that he was a total stranger in his customary haunts in and around New York.

One disadvantage in being moved about the country constantly as Acme moves me, is that you lose intimate touch with the crooks in any one city. I had very little knowledge of Daisy Chain's recent activities, but I did the first thing that anyone would do in trying to dig back. I went down to a pay phone in the lobby and called the Parole Board office. More deadly little killers than you would think possible, somehow seem to manage somehow to be on parole.

I had a good friend—Taylor Hicks—in the parole office, but the best he could do for me was: "No, he's not on parole. I think he's been out of the state for a couple of years. Wait a minute."

I waited and after a bit learned: "Charley says Daisy came to town about six weeks ago with that skinny blond wife of his. I don't know where from. I'll ask around for you, though, and phone you anything I can get."

I hung up, looked at the clock. It was getting on toward five. Workers in this section quit early and the building was draining.

I GOT an inspiration and walked over to the newsstand, bought a city map. I made a quick estimate and circled a part of Greenwich Village lying within a certain radius of the house on Jane Street. I made the circle large enough to include every possible point to which Daisy Chain might have taken the girl last night in the few brief minutes he'd been gone from the murder scene.

Studying the circle got me nowhere. I folded the map, put it in my pocket—and the break came.

As I turned away from the counter, I saw Lamson's lawyer—the crisp-looking Osborne—come out of an elevator, walk briskly across the lobby. The lines on his intelligent face were drawn and unhappy. I had a hunch that he liked no part of having to assist Lamson in this business.

I was watching him so closely that when his expression changed, I caught it before I saw what had caused it. His face suddenly had an even more worried look and he hastily shook his head, ever so slightly.

My eyes jumped to where he was looking and I said "*Unh!*" under my breath. A stocky, powerful little Latin, with a genial, glowing face and warm, liquid brown eyes, had come into the lobby. He had stopped, momentarily, but at the hasty negative of Osborne's nod, he strolled leisurely on. Osborne sailed right on past him and out the door. The Latin continued on, boarded an elevator, while I let this final addition to the cast of characters of this little drama sink in.

He was Jack Enz, a private detective. That was not the half of it. He was shrewd, ruthless, completely unscrupulous. His agency was not even listed in the telephone book. His clientele were ultra-select—as select as were the lawyers', Fairfield and Ritchie, but in a more sinister way. The service his organization rendered—no one but his clients knew just what services he did render. There had been a time when he was a labor-special-

ist, but he'd had sense enough to give that up before it got too hot. I wouldn't have bet a dime, however, that in Colonel Lamson's pirate days, this same little schemer might not have worked for him.

Osborne's apparent ignoring of Enz told more of the story than if he had stopped to chat. Plainly, the stiff-necked lawyer would not go so far as to be publicly seen speaking to the private detective. Just as plainly, that seemed to indicate that Enz was immediately connected here.

I tried to keep the touch of desperation out of my mind as I re-calculated the folks lined up against me. Lamson—Daisy Chain—now Jack Enz—not to mention the lawyer Osborne and probably the police, sooner or later, if they stumbled on my trail. I was in a tough spot and no mistake, but that poor little red-head was in an even tougher one—as was my Frenchman—and I had to stick with it.

I was too late to board the elevator with Jack Enz—which I would not have done anyway as I had no wish to have him see me. But I tried to spot where he got off by watching the elevator indicator. I learned nothing. The car did not stop at nineteen—Lamson's floor—nor at twenty-one where Fairfield and Ritchie were. It did stop at twenty and I assumed the glowing-eyed Enz was merely being cagy. However, that made it useless for me to go up after him.

And as I stood, hastily trying to cook up a move for myself, Osborne came back, walking as stiffly as before, distaste writ large on his face. For a moment I had a foolish urge to brace him.

He barely missed seeing me—I didn't know but that he might recognize me from the visitors' room at the Tombs—and I quickly turned my back, lit a cigarette. Watching the elevator indicator again still left me without knowing where to go, even if I did decide to try the upstairs. The car happened to be packed full and it

stopped at every single floor on the way up.

THERE was nothing for me to do but wait in the lobby till Enz came down—about twenty minutes. I almost got in his way. I was waiting in the niche by the telephone booths, not thinking of the possibility that he might want to use one of them, and when he turned and walked straight from the elevator toward me I had to retreat into one of the two vacant booths, hunch over to disguise my face and begin an imaginary conversation in a mumble.

Jack Enz took the next booth. After dialing a number his lazy voice said quietly: "Check that address. Wait a minute." I heard him tear paper, then, "Go ahead." After a minute he said, "Right," and hung up.

I felt excitement begin to churn inside me. In my bones, I knew that I had finally caught up to something—that the address he was discussing was something I wanted. I eased my door open a crack so that the light would go out.

Enz didn't emerge at once. Instead, he dialed another number, while I held my breath to listen for the second time. This time he said: "Corky? . . . Check back with that address." There was a long period of silence, then, "Right. All right—go ahead the way I told you, and don't miss. . . . Yeah."

He strolled leisurely out, twisting a scrap of paper idly between his fingers. I held my breath, waiting for him to throw it away—but he didn't. He strolled to the door, aimlessly, as though he hadn't any place to go—and casually slid the scrap of paper in his vest pocket.

I groaned, stood first on one foot, then the other. I wanted that slip as badly as I ever wanted anything in my life. Obviously, some important further move was, this minute, taking place. I had no idea what it was. I had no idea where

it was—but I knew that the *where* was on that carelessly crumpled bit of paper. I had to get it, somehow, and quickly. The whole wild business was suddenly focussed, for me, on that slip.

Enz stood there, idly, lit a little cigar and puffed it absently, while I felt sweat on the back of my neck. Minutes were slipping away.

Finally, he strolled out onto Broad Street. It was almost dark now. The sky was heavily overcast. The district—it was way after five o'clock now—was practically deserted. Only a thin sprinkling of pedestrians drifted past us as we walked up to Wall, and then up Wall to Broadway. I was going nutty, trying to figure a play—when he turned absently into a building.

It was a bank, and it was closed. The recess of its front facade was not more than ten feet deep. But I didn't realize it was a bank, or what it was, till I hurried around the corner of it after him—and found him coming back out, straight at me.

There were people fifty yards away, in both directions, but I didn't think there were any close enough to see me. I had had my fingers wrapped around my blackjack from the moment we left the Broad Street building, and now I whipped it out and up under his chin with a whack you could hear. He just folded up and fell forward against me. I jammed the blackjack back in my pocket, eased him into the dark entrance niche, my fingers digging for his vest.

Then I had the slip, and was making tracks away from there fast. I was around the corner of Wall again by the time I heard somebody shout for the police. I swung into a tobacco shop, casually ordered cigarettes and unfolded the paper. It was no false alarm. The address was plainly jotted down. I got my butts, ran out and to the subway.

I had an anxious moment while I

considered the possibility that Jack Enz had recognized me as I hit him. I make no bones about the fact that I was scared of him—plenty. However, it seemed almost certain that the darkness had been too deep for him to get a square look at me and I dismissed the worry. I was too intent on getting where I was going, anyway.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Blue Folder

IT WAS on Fourth Street, not far from Sheridan Square—an artistic-looking, small stone house—and my old pump was speeding up as I realized it was well within the circle I had drawn on my city map. I forced myself to spend minutes in a doorway opposite.

There was no light in the house but, somehow, it did not seem deserted. There were iron bars across the ground-floor windows—ornamental, but still iron bars. There was a scrolled-iron gate at the side of the house, screening a little service alley leading around to the back. There were curtains inside the windows and the shades were not quite drawn.

In three minutes, I could not detect a single sign of activity. I walked up the street a few rods, crossed over and hugged building-fronts coming back. If there were spying eyes in one of the darkened windows, they couldn't have seen me.

Then I got my hand on the little service-gate—and lost some of my starch. The lock on the gate was broken. It swung loosely under my touch. I turned in and ran as quietly as I could, through a cement-floored slot, into a tiny back yard.

A flash from my torch showed a back door—and I groaned. A square piece had been cut from the glass panel in the door. It, too, opened under my touch and I was in a kitchen.

There is a strange feeling about a house that has recently been emptied, and I

knew this one had been. I knew it in my boots—that's where my heart was—even as I ran through into the front part of the house—knew that I had missed the boat. Hurriedly I covered the house—upstairs and downstairs—and finally got the whole heart-breaking picture.

In the living-room, on the ground floor, there was a faded blue kimono and a pair of blue silk mules, scuffed and old. There was a box of blond hairpins, a scanty wardrobe for a slender, tall girl, mixed with clothes that were obviously Daisy Chain's. Taylor Hicks' words jumped into my mind: ". . . *hit town with that skinny blond wife of his. . .*"

Every piece of furniture in the house had been upended, searched mercilessly and destructively, as though for some small object.

The basement was the payoff. I wound up there, staring into a solid box of cement with a steel door—a wine-cellar, by design. The door was open and there was a single bulb burning on a ceiling cord. There was a cot under the light and a table by the cot. The table held a pitcher of water, a tumbler, and a cardboard box of morphine tablets, half spilled on the floor. A tiny, balled handkerchief was on the cot, in the depression where some small person had lain. The handkerchief was daintily scented.

The picture was inescapable. This was where Chain had hidden away Dorinne Hare. This was where she had lain, doped—and re-doped, I didn't doubt—under the care of Daisy's skinny blond wife, until—until what?

Until Jack Enz's men had discovered the hide-away—discovered it and swooped down, cleaning it out, making off with both girls and, apparently, whatever object it was for which they had been searching.

Suddenly, as I stood there with my forehead burning, a little chain of reasoning linked itself into place in my mind.

Daisy Chain—I was almost positive of it now, though the reason was still an utter mystery—*had* snaked the red-head away last night because she was his alibi. Snaked her away and put her on ice. Some scheme had occurred to him in the moment he stood on the stoop with her—some scheme that necessitated his being taken up for the killing. But—now I got it—the scheme also involved his having the girl ready at hand, to produce when needed, so he'd have his alibi only when he wanted out and no sooner. Though I was damned if I could see what he wanted to be in the Tombs for in the first place.

IT DIDN'T take much reasoning to see what had happened now. Someone had stolen his alibi—had coolly taken away his ace in the hole! Someone—Lanson, via Jack Enz—had suddenly pulled away the vital prop that supported whatever scheme the gunman had been attempting! Someone had determined that Daisy Chain should stay in jail—and, with his record, it was more than an even chance that the vicious little killer would face a murder trial! With his alibi destroyed, he was suddenly in a very hot spot.

The ominousness of that word—destroyed—congealed my thinking apparatus for a minute. I could not blind myself to it. If those who sought Daisy Chain's downfall really wanted to ruin him, they could do so only by complete elimination of the lovely little red-haired Dorinne Hare!

The thought gave me a cold wallop. Then I saw a possible out.

Now Daisy Chain would *have* to talk to me—would *have* to throw himself on my mercy! I was now his only chance of avoiding a murder trial. I could give him the alibi he had thought only the girl could furnish. I could get him out of the Tombs. And without me, facing the behind-the-scenes pressure that the powerful Lamson could exert in the D. A.'s

office—well, Daisy Chain would be just as hep as I to what he was up against. Now—and I prayed it wasn't too late—I had the red-lipped little rat in the hollow of my hand!

I ran upstairs, praying that that the turnkey at the Tombs would not get stuffy about my visiting Daisy at this hour, running over schemes to get around him if he did.

I remembered to switch off the lights I had turned on, ran out the back door, closed it quickly—and three electric torches blazed in my face.

Unconsciously my hand went to my hip as I stumbled, trying to stop. I nearly lost my head and grabbed my gun out, I was so demoralized.

A voice behind the middle flashlight drawled, "I wouldn't do that, my friend," and I recognized the soft tones of Jack Enz.

"Move wide, boys, and keep him covered," Enz continued and stepped into the beam of light himself. I could see the welt under his jaw and wished it had been an axe instead of a blackjack I'd hit him with down in Broadway. He dropped his flashlight into a pocket of his belted camel-hair coat and juggled his gun with the other hand.

"Hadn't you better turn around and get your hands out of my way?" Enz inquired.

I turned and put my hands up, while he took my gun and ran a hand over me. Then he said: "All right. You can put them down. You'll have to wait a few minutes, my friend, till I do some phoning. But the boys will keep you company till I get back."

A voice behind one of the flashlights said: "The phone in the house is working, chief."

"I thought it was unoccupied—except for Daisy and his harem."

"Yeah, but it belongs to a crazy woman. She's in a loony bin and the house is all tied up in the courts. Nobody can

sell it or rent it. When Daisy decided to squat here, he had the nerve to have the phone hooked up so he wouldn't have to go out much."

"*Tsk! Tsk!*" Enz said, and walked into the house.

When he came out again, five minutes later, he was still playing with his gun. I couldn't tell from his manner whether he knew I was the person who had socked him downtown. He said to me, "Well, it seems that certain people would like to see you," and then, to the two behind the still-steady flashlights, "You two take that house apart. The blue folder is positively there."

I jumped on that. A blue folder. It could be anything, and—

"You won't mind a little band of felt around the eyes? I promise you I'll drive carefully," Enz was saying as though he really didn't want to offend me.

I gave him a dead-pan and said nothing.

I DON'T know where we drove in the limousine. I was fighting to get up from the depths of hopelessness and not making such a good job of it. I didn't even try to guess where we were going, nor, when we finally tracked on gritty cement in a place that reeked of garbage smells, then rode in a wooden-floored elevator, did I worry about where we were.

Not until we walked down a lush-carpeted corridor from the elevator did it dawn on me that we had come in through the service entrance of a hotel.

"Stop here," Enz said, and his knuckles beat a cadenced tattoo.

A door opened and I was pushed in.

A dry, cackling voice said, "I will let you know when there is anything further, Mr. Enz," and the door closed. The voice then told me: "You may remove the bandage."

The aged, mummy-faced, tubular-chinned little Lamson looked at me with yellow eyes that were like ice, yet some-

how seemed glad to see me in a sardonic way. The cold blue eyes of his lawyer—Osborne stood uncomfortably by a refectory table, with hat and black chesterfield still on—were not glad to see me in any way whatsoever. His English face was still unhappy and bleak and he held a pistol as though it had been stuck into his gloved hand.

I tried to look nonchalant. "A surprise to meet you here, Colonel," I told the yellow-eyed little gnome.

The yellow eyes got a little smaller. "So," he said, without too much surprise. He thought it over and then, "I think it best that we hear exactly what your interest is in this little affair, so that we understand each other perfectly."

"A girl," I told him.

The yellow eyes regarded me expectantly, so I went on: "The little auburn-haired girl whom you had removed from that house a couple of hours ago."

There was a little puzzlement in his eyes momentarily but he blinked back. "Ah, the girl. Yes. Who is that girl, by the way?"

Truth couldn't hurt here. "The niece of a retired clergyman out west. Her uncle is bedridden. He was tied up with George Hessian in some swindle, years ago, and apparently had some papers left over. Hessian sent for them and the girl came to deliver them. She knows nothing about all this business. She just happened to arrive at Hessian's place on Jane Street last night, within minutes of the time you left."

I didn't know if that were the worst possible thing I could say—or the best. I had no guides of any kind, had to play it as it occurred to me. I was down to rock bottom, the way I figured, and I could hardly make things worse no matter what I said.

I went on, casually, as though it were not a very important item: "She was trapped, at the moment of the shooting, on

the steps of the house, just as Daisy Chain came out. He grabbed her, rushed her away. He had his wife keep her doped, a prisoner in the house on Fourth Street, till your henchman got hold of her."

The yellow eyes were boring into my face. There was not the slightest flicker of expression in them. "Scarcely possible," the little tycoon decided after a moment. "Daisy Chain, by his own confession, was not on the steps at the moment of the shooting."

I let that go with a tired sneer—and instantly cursed myself.

"Ah. So you know that he was?"

HAVING fallen into the trap, there was no point in not making the best of it. "Certainly," I said. "If you'll give me a chance to talk without interrupting, I'll tell you. I was across the street in a doorway during the whole proceeding."

"Doing what—if I may interrupt?"

"Trying to keep the girl out of trouble."

About the only hope I had was to get him puzzled about me, unsure of me. And the only way I could see to do that was to try to say exactly the things he wouldn't expect. From his long, careful stare I began to have hopes that I was succeeding.

"Let me see," he said thoughtfully. "You—a sort of detective. . . ."

"A damned good detective," I said heatedly.

"Yes, of course, but—not a police detective. In fact—to my eye—a rather, shall we say, sophisticated individual—know this little lady. You've known her some time, I take it?"

"I never saw her in my life till last night."

"Ummm. Yet you suddenly play Galahad to beauty in distress. You involve yourself. You follow her into a murder. You risk trouble with the police—take various serious risks—threaten Mr. Chain

in the Tombs—interfere with business of which you have no knowledge. You have no motive from first to last, save to shield this young lady. A little odd, don't you think?"

"Why? I'm not forty yet—and she just happens to hit me. Anyway, that's how it is. Take it or leave it."

He nodded as though confirming my words. "Yes. Well, I'm afraid I shall have to leave it. It just won't wash—won't wash at all. Let me suggest an alternative theory."

He took a careful breath, and suddenly there was crackling electricity in his voice. He leaned forward to drive at me: "You learned—through an underworld tip, let us say—of a bit of blue paper. You learned its value—probably through some unwise or drunken talk of Hessian's—and you learned, apparently, of my interest. You went to the Jane Street house last night to steal it. In doing so, you murdered Hessian. The girl knows your guilt. Hence you seek the girl. Meanwhile, you hold the blue folder. No?"

"No."

"You know nothing of a blue folder, I suppose?"

"Who said I didn't? Certainly I know about it."

For the first time I saw a flicker of real uncertainty in the yellow eyes. I jumped on it. "To get down to brass tacks," I said, "how much is it worth to you—exactly?"

"I offered three hundred thousand dollars."

"How much did Chain want?"

"Three times tha. . . ." The old man cut himself off, as he saw that *he* had taken a tumble.

I pretended not to notice it, said carelessly: "Well, we can make a deal, Colonel Lamson. You know, it might just possibly be that that was why I came here."

He did his best to read my eyes, but I

made them bland. He snapped: "That's my price."

"It's not exactly mine," I said. "First and foremost, I want the girl free and unhurt."

The yellow eyes darkened. "We haven't any girl."

"And I haven't any blue folder."

The little gnome jumped up. "Then what in God's name—"

"But I can get it," I assured him.

The yellow eyes suddenly blazed. "Listen, my friend. Lying to me is unhealthy. I have had enough of it."

"Suit yourself," I shrugged. "I can get the folder for you. I'm the only one who can. You can have it—for the girl. All right, we'll say that you haven't got any girl, but put it this way, if it makes you happier. You *get* the girl. Meet me at the bus terminal in Washington Square in a couple of hours and the bargain's made. Otherwise—kiss the folder good-bye. What is the folder?" I asked as though the sudden inspiration had not just that moment hit me. "One of Hessian's old phoney properties that did a miracle and turned out to have oil on it?"

I GOT no answer to that. I didn't really need one. I knew I had hit it. And even the infinitely long minute that he took to look me over carefully did not disturb me. I knew I had got over this hurdle—that I was back in the game again—and more. The mists were suddenly rolling away, one by one. I rattled pictures through my brain—

George Grantland Hessian, suddenly finding himself owner of the one thing his wildest dreams had never embraced—a real oil well, a fabulously rich one, from the price Lamson had quoted. Hessian interesting Lamson in the deal, dickering to sell him the lease on the property. Daisy Chain, getting wind of it, snooping around, hiding—and as I suddenly remembered the front-page stories in the

morning papers I knew there could be no doubt about it—hiding in some spot in that house so that he overheard Hessian's last-night's talk with Lamson. Then—knowing for the first time what the blue folder actually was—snatching it and ducking out while Hessian was down letting Lamson out through the areaway door.

Then Daisy Chain, with a fortune in his pocket—a fortune, that is, if he could make a deal with Lamson. His own shrewd knowledge of the dynamite with which he was playing even in trying to dicker with the dangerous old man—and his equally shrewd knowledge of the power of blackmail he held over Lamson. Above all things, Lamson could not afford to have it known that he would deal in any way with a swindler like Hessian. That would be a jolt to the prestige of his banking firm and would probably infuriate his partners.

The pictures were dropping into place like the symbols on a slot-machine, building up in my brain with incredible speed, once the first barrier was down. Daisy Chain's weird actions were suddenly all clear and sane—brilliantly sane. He wanted to dicker with Lamson. He knew as well as I did that he was flirting with disaster the minute he tried to blackmail the old pirate. So he had concocted, on the spur of the instant, the supremely smart move of getting himself into the Tombs, where even Lamson's influence could not reach him and where nothing on earth could get him out—till he was ready to produce the girl and get himself out.

And even as I cursed him, I had to acknowledge the braininess of his split-second thinking in those few minutes last night. He not only got himself into jail, but he managed to use the newspapers—every paper in town—to carry his message to Lamson as to just what was what. It came back to me—the rather meaningless

insert in that little front-stoop speech—*"I was in the house from eleven o'clock on—in the closet,"* or words to that effect. And, *"I have no lawyer."* If he had written a note to the yellow-eyed little banker saying, "I was in the closet and overheard your entire interview with Hessian. I have the blue folder. You had better send a lawyer to see me and talk it over," it could not have read more plainly to Lamson's eyes.

THIS went through my head like a flash, in all its painful clarity, while I waited for the old man to decide what he was going to say.

He said: "Think very carefully, my friend. You have said enough to make me very deeply interested in you. I do not like people to try to outwit me. It annoys me. For instance, it is in my mind to let Daisy Chain rot in jail for his efforts along that line. And, if I do decide so, I realize fully that I shall have to do something about both you and the girl, who could provide him with an alibi."

He hesitated, and I came back to earth fast under the threat.

"You may imagine that you, too, are playing a crafty game against me," he went on. "Very well. I am going to give you a little rope. As long as I secure the blue folder in the end, I shall be quite satisfied to hold no animosity. But if I do not get it—and get it by midnight tonight—I am going to be damned good and fed up with the lot of you. Is that clear?"

"Oh, sure."

"Need I remind you that there is nowhere in the world you can run to from where I cannot drag you back?"

"Who's running?" I said, "You see that the girl is unharmed and on hand—that's all you have to worry about."

The little czar snapped from the side of his mouth at the lawyer, "Mr. Osborne—kindly get in touch with our friends

regarding that," and the lawyer gave a start, ran a finger inside his collar and nodded.

The old man fixed his eyes on me and said softly: "You are free to go. Maybe this seems like an old man's folly to you—but I have set my heart on having that property. I want that blue folder."

"I believe you," I assured him. I did, too. After all his years of toeing the straight and narrow line, he did not have to tell me he was itching to get at it.

Now, somehow, I didn't care about George Grantland Hessian being killed. I saw my way clear at last—my way out of this mess, and the girl's way out. Ten minutes with Daisy Chain and I would know where to find the blue folder. Ten minutes with the blue folder and this old pirate, and I would have the girl free and clear—and my twenty-dollar bill. Beyond that, I had no interest.

I picked up my hat and stuck it on, turned at the door to say, "I'll see you in a couple of hours."

When I stepped out and closed the door behind me—and ran—I thought I had the thing licked. I suppose that's funny—if you like your humor macabre.

CHAPTER FIVE

Daisy Chain

IRAN off the elevator into the visitor's room at the Tombs with my pass out, waving it in the Scotchman's face, bringing him out of his nap over a newspaper. I was relieved even to find the room open. It was empty, too, except for its custodian, and that was an added break.

"You again? You can't do no business now. Too late," he said.

"It's life and death," I told him. "I've got to see Daisy. I promise you—tomorrow the commissioner himself will thank you for it. And every second counts. Besides that, there'll be a hundred in it for you. You'll be breaking a murder case

and maybe saving two more lives. No—don't phone anyone—you might as well say no. If I have to wait as much as a few minutes, I'm licked." I would have told him anything.

His eyes were ludicrous. He had been shaping words with my last four sentences. "But—but—hey! It could mean my job—"

"Not with Acme backing you—come on, hurry up, there's a good guy."

And then, somehow, I was outside Daisy Chain's cell and the red-lipped little thug was staring at me with shiny, contemptuous eyes. "How did you get in here? Listen, scram—"

"Save your breath—and your life," I told him through the mesh. "Get this—and get it the first time. The whole works are blown. Your life and mine are on the counter. The deal—the oil business is done—gone, napoo. The old boy has decided to pass it up, and to send you to trial. Play with me and I'll get you out of here—"

"Save it, pal. I can get out anytime I feel like it."

"Not now, you can't. Let this leak into that numb head of yours. Lamson's got the red-head. Your alibi's gone! You're in—and you'll stay in—unless I get you out. They found your place on Fourth Street. You're sunk without a trace, except for me. I can give you an alibi. I was in a doorway across from the house on Jane Street when Hessian was killed. I can clear you."

His face had paled a little, but the ugly sneer was still on his face. "What am I? A sucker? Go peddle your papers!"

"Wake up! You asked Lamson too high a price. He got mad and put Jack Enz to work. Enz found one of your hiding-places in jig time. Lamson figures he can find the other presently. So he's giving you the miss. He's going to see you railroaded to the chair. Nobody'll listen to your story about his dealing with

Hessian, while you're in here charged with the killing.

"For the last time—I'm the only one that can save you. The money's gone—forget it! But let me try to save your skin—all of our skins. If Lamson is going to send you over, he'll have to put me out of the way—and the red-haired girl. I can buy us all out of the hole with that blue folder, if I can get it quick. Clam up on me, and we're all done for. And your wife, too. They've got her."

The last of the color drained from his face. "Carol? They've—" he gulped. "You—you're lying, damn you!"

I pounded: "Waste about five more seconds and you'll find out if I am. Why? Does your wife know the hiding-place of the folder? If she does, they'll be working on her now. They'll get it out of her—and then I won't have anything to trade with. You fool—open up! Does she know it?"

"Yes! Yes!" he croaked. "She—but she'll never tell—"

"Do you think—with one murder already on the cards—they're going to be nice about working on her? If you're damn fool enough to want to burn yourself, for God's sake, crack to save her. She'll be getting it—plenty—until I can get to them with the folder."

He blurted out: "It's in the Fourth Street house. Look, copper—you'll play square with me? You swear it? You'll get me out of here?"

"Absolutely. Go on—hurry up!"

"It's in the living-room. There's a table-lamp with three big bulbs—one bulb is phoney—unscrew it. The folder's wadded up inside. For the love of God—"

I wasted no time getting back down the corridor. Flinging a hurried, "Thanks. You did something," to the red-faced Scotchman, I dropped to the street. I made time heading for the subway, too.

Dummy that I was, I thought I had scored the whole way. I was so pre-

occupied with getting the girl safe and myself safe that the grim specter of murder in the background simply didn't get home to me.

And then it did.

I ran in to a drugstore to phone the bell-captain at my hotel. Jack Enz still had my gun and I didn't think this was any time to be without one.

The minute I got Jerry on the wire I knew from his tone that something was wrong. His voice was too careless as he said: "Oh, hello, Mr. Green."

I got it. I said, "Vistors? Cops?" wondering why it hadn't occurred to me that my visit to the Tombs earlier would have been reported long since.

"Yeah, Mr. Green."

"Can you bring my spare gun down for me? It's a matter of life and death—that green morocco box in the safe. Get it to me somehow, on the corner of Fifth and Waverly before eleven thirty and there'll be dough."

"Sure, Mr. Green. Glad to see you."

Even that didn't worry me now—that the cops were closing in on me. I figured I could run ahead of them, be clear by the time they caught up to me.

I hurried out of the drugstore onto the dark street—and was blackjacked instantly into unconsciousness. I didn't even feel myself fall.

I WOKE up to find my fingers dug into a woman's cold flesh, my frame half sprawled across her nearly naked blond body.

I was back in the living-room of Daisy Chain's Fourth Street hide-out and somewhere a clock was chiming midnight—the hour of my appointment with Lamson.

My stomach almost came up in my throat as I scrambled hastily off the woman. She was quite dead. Livid bruises on her throat, her brassy blond hair in disarray, angry red-and-black burns on her naked belly, a small hole over the bridge

of her nose and exquisite agony in her thin tortured face, told me the whole ugly story. The bullet-hole had leaked surprisingly little blood.

My head was dizzy, pounding, and it was a minute before the whole impact of the situation got to me. I stared giddily at the girl. She had on the kimono and mules I had seen here earlier—nothing else.

Unconsciously my hand went up to my cheek and I realized it was smarting.

That brought me to. I jumped for the mantelpiece, ducked to look in the mirror—and saw the three parallel scratches down my cheek. I swung back, dropped down and snatched up the girl's skinny hand.

Under her red-tinted fingernails were black red adhesions—and I knew it was my own flesh. Something new in frames.

Not till then did I really see the tiny bullet-hole over her nose. It dawned on me that it *was* tiny—that it was undoubtedly from a small-caliber gun. It looked—and then I got the picture—it looked exactly like one of the holes that had put a period to the life of George Grantland Hessian.

My scalp crawled. Too late, I realized my criminal folly in not nailing down someone for the murder of Hessian. Now the killer had become a double killer—and I was stuck with both feet in the mess. In a rush of frightened fury I cursed Lamson wildly. I had thought I was out-smarting him and all the while he had been making this kind of sucker of me. Probably he had the blue folder all the time.

I swung round dizzily, saw the three-bulbed lamp on the refectory table and jumped for it.

To identify the phony bulb, I jerked the chain.

That about finished me. All three bulbs lighted! There was no false bulb! I yanked all three out and pounded them to pieces.

All were regular, large-size bulbs. There was no sign of any blue paper.

I started to curse Daisy Chain—and then I swung back again, stared down at the brassy, tubercular looking dead girl on the floor, and I understood. She—Daisy Chain's wife—had told the hiding-place. Told it—and then died—probably thankfully.

Women-torturers always drive me insane. I was half off my nut now anyway and I got a red fog in my brain. Now, too late, I realized that I wanted to get my hands on the killer of this girl—and the killer, incidentally, of Hessian—more than anything in the whole picture. If I had him—and had enough evidence to ram down his throat—then, I could choke safety for both myself and the red-haired girl from him—or kill him in the attempt.

Not till then did the striking of the hour work through to my intelligence. I swung round, saw the hands of the mantelpiece clock at two minutes after twelve—and at that exact moment, the distant, far-off wail of a police siren filtered in.

It was blocks away—but it sent sweat out all over me. Maybe it wasn't coming here—but even as I tried to think that, I knew it was. The miracle was that it hadn't come sooner—that someone had underestimated the thickness of my skull. Nevertheless, I had to get out and get out fast. There was simply no choice. No disaster could be worse than my being caught here now would be. I had to leave the frame—leave it and run, not even knowing what else had been planted here to incriminate me.

I DUCKED out the back door, into the board-fenced back yard, got across that and moved a few houses sideways, going over one fence after another, till I found one with an alley that would put me out on the street above—Waverly Place.

The minute I slipped out onto the street, I realized that the original siren

had been joined by others—two, three, four—I couldn't tell how many. And they weren't all heading for Fourth Street, as far as I could distinguish. They were coasting back and forth, through the vicinity. I got it, then—or thought I did. The alarm was out for me. The bright little mind behind my frame had taken no chances, had dropped a hint somehow to the cops to sew up the district.

I hugged doorways, sweating. Gradually, I slipped across Waverly, reached Fifth after an eternity, not daring to hope that Jerry would be there with my gun box. But he was.

I blessed him, snatched the familiar police positive out and pocketed the papers that were also in the box. Then I told him: "Beat it. Forget you ever knew me!"

I cut off his aghast whisper, "Gosh-hell, are they after you. . . ?" with a push that sent him out onto the sidewalk.

I sent one grim glance down toward the south end of Washington Square—the spot where the little master-schemer had blandly agreed to meet me. I knew, of course, that he would not be there, but how I wished that he were. As things stood now, my goose was cooked—mine and the lovely little red-haired girl's—and Daisy Chain's as well, for that matter. But I could take it without batting an eye if I could have five minutes alone with the cold-blooded little monster back of all this.

Why hadn't I had the brains to get something on him, get some evidence lined up that would tie him to his two rotten killings?

And then, suddenly, I realized why I hadn't.

My brain shot off like a pinwheel and I caught my breath. The whole panorama suddenly spread out before me as I saw the black bulk standing motionless down by the bus terminal at the bottom of the park.

Could it be—and I realized that it had

to be—that this game was not yet played out? There was still one last chance left.

Sirens were shrieking in the blocks all around us, but there were no police cars around the park itself. I doubled over, shot across the street and into the shrubbery. In little sprints I worked my way across, till I was in the bushes ten yards from the black bulk. I could scarcely dare to believe my eyes—to believe that Lamson had actually shown up. But he had. He was standing beside his car, smoking, exactly where he had arranged to be.

Just as I got ready to call him, two green-lighted police cars shot into the square—one at the top, one at the bottom. I had to swallow my tongue. I took a good grip on the gun for I thought I had been spotted, but it wasn't quite that bad.

THEY went away and I got my throat to work. I called out to Lamson: "Stand perfectly still and get your hands away from you."

Even then, I think I would have given it to him if he had made one false move, but he didn't. He obeyed, without showing the slightest expression.

I said, "Turn around and back over here," and he did that too.

I frisked him. He had no gun. He asked innocently: "They looking for you?"

"Go back to your car—slowly—so that I can see every move," I growled at him. "Open the door and turn on the dome light. Then stand clear."

When I was certain there was no one else in the car I told him to turn the light off and stand away. I went across the sidewalk in one smooth motion and into the tonneau of the sport sedan.

"Get in," I told him.

If he was the slightest bit scared he didn't show sign of it. He got in calmly and asked me again: "Are they looking for you?"

"Yeah," I said. "And if they get me,

you get a bullet in the back of your neck. I promise you that."

He was silent a minute. Then he asked: "Have you got the folder?"

"Produce the girl, and it's yours," I said. "But get me through this dragnet first. I want to talk to you a little."

After a second he said coolly: "All right. I have a little private office not far from here. I keep it for confidential meetings. I was going to suggest it anyway. I can get you there, if you'll lie down in the rear there and put the blanket over you."

The sirens seemed to be deliberately congregating around the square. I set my teeth and said: "All right—but don't forget what I said."

I don't know whether I was surprised or not when he made good.

To the copper who yelled us over to the curb, five blocks above the square, the old man said irritably: "What's the meaning of this? My card, officer." The uniformed man stammered: "Oh—uh—excuse it, please, Colonel Lamson. Looking for a killer—somewhere in the neighborhood."

Then we were away, through the Twenties, into the Thirties. We turned east a block and the car came to a stop.

I was up in the seat with the gun in my hand as he climbed out and waved at a modest apartment house of yellow brick. There was a small, obscure door sunk in the gray stone, its panel clouded-glass-and-wire. "This is my private entrance."

I got behind him without saying anything and he produced a key and opened the door. We stepped into a tiny elevator, direct from the street, and he switched on the light.

"I hope there's no monkey business," I told him as we sailed up. "I'm in about as bad a state of nerves as I can remember ever being."

"Why should there be monkey business?" he asked.

Nevertheless, I kept the gun six inches from his back as we stepped out onto a turf-garden-and-shrub-covered roof and faced a darkened Spanish-looking bungalow. Lamson touched a switch in the structure of the elevator shaft and light went on in a living-room at the front of the bungalow. The dew-drenched greenery sparkled.

"All right," I said and we walked across. The door was unlocked and he strolled in, threw his black hat on the table, walked over and touched buttons by the fireplace. Somehow, that lighted an already-laid fire of apple-boughs. Flames crackled upwards. He turned his little mummy face toward me, his yellow eyes thin.

"Now, my friend."

I said grimly: "The price has gone up since I talked to you last."

CHAPTER SIX

The Man With Three Lives

FOR just a second wild consternation flared behind his yellow eyes. He bit shrilly, "What?" and his forehead flushed. His eyes became hot, driving. "My God, have I put my faith in a fool?"

"No. But I've got to have the killer of George Grantland Hessian as part of the deal."

"Killer? I know nothing about any killer. I'll get—I've got—the girl—" My heart dropped as I saw the slip of his tongue. He hadn't the girl yet. "—and I want the blue folder."

"To get the girl, you'll have to take her from the killer. I've just wakened to the fact that you aren't the killer yourself."

"What?" he shrilled. "My God, what drivels are you—"

"I'm no brain trust," I admitted, "but that threatening act you put on downtown, plus what I'd heard about you, would have fooled anybody. Now shut up and listen. You've got to get that killer to get your

blue folder. Getting him, you'll get the girl."

"What? You mean—this thug, Daisy Chain—"

"Daisy Chain hasn't either the folder or the girl. The murderer has them both. He hi-jacked them from Chain. And for God's sake, wake up to this. This killer is desperate! He's tortured and killed one girl tonight. He may be doing the same to Miss Hare this minute. If anything happens to her, I swear you'll get no blue folder—and you'll get everything else you don't want."

"Wait a minute! What's he want to torture her for, if he's got the blue folder?"

"Because he doesn't want it," I stormed. "You fool—he got that by accident—*while he was looking for something else!*"

His eyes were electric, driving. "Who is this killer?"

"A man named O. E. Murray."

"What!"

"If you keep on interrupting," I swore through tight teeth, "you'll ruin us all. I'll give it to you in words of one syllable—and for God's sake get it the first time."

"Yes, but who is this O. E. Murr—"

"He *was* a brilliant geologist, while he was still practically a kid—out in Texas. He got in some jam with a married woman, had to blow town, and, apparently, to raise a stake, he sold out to George Hessian, thirteen years ago, and wrote a letter—nothing to do with this deal you're interested in—which was absolutely criminal, and which could still put him in jail.

"When the swindle eventually blew up, this letter did not come to light. It was with other papers that got into the hands of one of Hessian's stooges—Miss Hare's father. But Hessian knew where it was.

"When he got out of jail recently and found he had this valuable oil-well on his hands—or this blue folder—this lease that had been part of his collection of sucker-bait and had suddenly bloomed—he knew

he had a potential fortune. But being who he was, he couldn't have raised a dime to drill and finance it. He had to sell. There aren't many people with the money to buy that sort of thing these days. He thought of you.

"He got in touch with you. In your position, everything had to be secret. The slightest hint in Wall Street that you were dealing with a swindler like Hessian and your own partners would probably throw you out. Hessian took that secret apartment on Jane Street so you could negotiate privately.

"Unfortunately, Daisy Chain was nosing into Hessian's affairs—keeping very close to him. Close enough so that he, apparently, knew the location of the blue folder long before last night, but didn't know its value.

"Last night, he found out. He was hidden within earshot while you had your final talk with Hessian. While Hessian was downstairs letting you out the area-way, Chain snatched the folder and ducked.

"And the killer came into that house—through the rear, probably—about that time. At any rate, he was upstairs in Hessian's office, by the time Daisy Chain let himself out the front door."

THE yellow eyes bored into mine. "I know all that—but go on. You said this O. E. Murray got the blue folder while looking for something else. For what?"

I swore at him. "I'm giving you the whole picture, so there'll be no questions. Shut up till I finish. I'll clear up Daisy Chain first.

"He is no fool—he's sharp and cunning. He knew exactly to a hair how much of a hold he had on you—not only the folder, but the damaging knowledge of your deal with an ex-convict. He also knew exactly his own danger, if he should try to shake you down. But he got a break—and

thought fast enough to take advantage of it.

"He ran into the girl on the front stoop, just as the shots that killed Hessian were fired upstairs. He saw what he had—a perfect alibi for the killing. So he grabbed it—grabbed the girl, that is—spirited her and the blue folder over to his house on Fourth Street and hid them away in the care of his wife.

"Then he came back and coolly put himself in jail. Because in jail, with an unbailable first-degree murder rap hanging over him, not even all your influence and money could get at him. He could sit coolly in his cell and dictate terms to you. Then, when he had closed with you and felt it safe, he could produce the girl and walk out. He was even smart enough to stage that little speech on the death-house steps, knowing it would make front-page prominence and get his little message to you.

"It worked. You sent your lawyer to dicker with him. But apparently he asked too much and you—or Osborne—turned Jack Enz loose to try and find the little thug's hiding-place. Enz found it, but got there too late. All he caught was me.

"And that is positively the end of Daisy Chain's connection with this mess. He didn't kill Hessian. He was in jail when his wife was killed. This O. E. Murray killed both of them—and wound up, accidentally, with the blue folder. . . . Don't interrupt, damn you!"

I gulped air, went on: "This killer, blackmailed by Hessian, evidently was on hand the moment you left that Jane Street house. He had been promised his incriminating letter back at that time. Hessian couldn't produce it—couldn't, because it was in the possession of the girl on the front stoop at that moment. O. E. Murray thought he was being given a stall, and tried to choke it out of Hessian. In the struggle, Hessian drew a gun and got killed with it. The killer fled.

"Next morning, when he saw what Chain had done, he at once concluded that Chain had gotten the thirteen-year-old letter among his loot. He—O. E. Murray—also set out to find Chain's hiding-place. And did.

"But, after torturing Chain's wife to death, all he could get out of her was the blue folder. He got that—but he is still looking for his letter. He thought I might have it—and waylaid me. Having me, he decided to pin the two killings on me. Now, he must be desperate enough so that he won't be rational. He hasn't anybody he can look to, to tell him where his precious letter is, except Miss Hare. If he has discovered her identity, the chances are that he won't be reasonable—that he'll ignore all the reasons she gives and will simply bear down on her till she dies. Because—make no mistake—this O. E. Murray is an important man.

"He faces ruin, the collapse of a brilliantly successful career. With one career ruined under him—his geology in Texas—he came to another city, learned another business and was good enough to make his way high up the ladder in these fifteen years. Maybe he wouldn't have gone this far in the first place, but he's in blood up to his boot-tops now and he won't stop. He's going to save his career at any cost, now that he's gone so far.

"I've got to get to him—to keep him from killing the girl. You've got to get to him—to get your blue folder. Everything comes down to that. Now—for Heaven's sake—get him and get him fast!"

"But—but I don't know anybody named O. E. Murray. How—who—I—"

I FLUNG at him: "You're not that dumb! It's all obvious enough. How did you get to know George Grantland Hessian in the first place? How in the world could a known ex-convict, a swindler, even get into your presence, let alone interest you in a deal?"

"I—why I was introduced to him—"

"Exactly. And look at the limb the party who introduced you was going out on! Suppose you hadn't been a damned highbinder with a heart full of larceny? You would have tossed this 'introducer' out on his ear! He knew that—but he had to risk it! Had to, because that was what Hessian demanded! Because *that* was the price of the O. E. Murray letter—that Murray should introduce Hessian to you and should father the deal. When the deal was settled, he was to get back the letter—the letter that would have stripped away his new identity, torn down the fifteen years of brilliant work that he'd put in getting himself somewhere—would have exposed him as the conniving, criminal geologist who had written that letter! His being overanxious about it—not giving Hessian time to get the letter—is what caused this whole fantastic business." "Good Lord, it's clear enough!"

"Yes, but—wait! How do you know he *hasn't* got—where *is* this O. E. Murray letter?"

"Here!" I took it from my breast pocket. "He searched me for it a while ago, but it happened to be at my hotel at the time! Now—get him! We've wasted enough precious minutes. Hell and damnation—for a master-mind, you're certainly dumb enough not to have realized most of this before."

His yellow eyes were suddenly crinkled at the corners. He held out a skinny, gloved hand. "What makes you *think* I didn't?" he asked queerly. "Let me see that!"

A voice said crisply from the dark doorway at the rear of the room: "No. Let *me* see it!"

The English-looking, crisp, blue-eyed lawyer, Osborne, stepped into the light, a blued-steel gun in his hand. His eyes were bloodshot, hollow, but there was a wild gleam in them that told me not to try and raise my gun.

I CONFESS I was a fool—I thought we were done for. In tormenting succession, the thoughts went through my mind that this, Colonel Lamson's private little retreat, would, naturally be known to his lawyer, and that the old banker was a damn fool not to have considered it as a possible operating-spot for the lawyer-murderer-geologist. Unfortunately, the hollow, unpleasant truth insisted on presenting itself—that it was I who had known the identity of the murderer, not Lamson, and that I should have thought to look through the other rooms of the bungalow.

Even at that, I think I would have taken a chance and let him have a shot at me. I couldn't prevent his getting in the first one while I was drawing a bead on him. I would have taken a chance that in his wild state his aim would not have been fatal—except that I suddenly realized that I could not kill him! *He was the only one who knew where Dorinne Hare was!*

Sweat came out on my neck. If I killed this maniac, she might die before we could find her, drugged with morphine. If I shot him down and didn't kill him, he could pump half a dozen shots into my carcass without my being able to do anything about it. I was stalemated.

He said, "Drop that gun!" and I let it slip from my fingers.

He said, "Toss that letter over here," and I was about to do that, but changed my mind.

"I'm damned if I will," I said. "Maybe you could shoot me and get away without the cops coming down on you. Listen—" the wailing of sirens were plainly audible. It seemed that the dragnet searching for me had expanded a little, was coming near us. "I'll give it to you, if you can show me that the girl won't be harmed."

"The girl is unharmed," he said through set teeth. "I have been unable to rouse her. She—they evidently kept her heavily drugged. You need have no fear—"

"I'll need more than your word."

Colonel Lamson broke in: "And, of course, the blue folder."

The lawyer's cold blue eyes and stony face did not change. "I am appropriating the folder," he told Lamson. "I do not plan to start my third life as I have the other two—penniless."

LAMSON'S voice was drawling, curious. "What! You're not planning to run away! You're crazy, Osborne—or Murray, or whatever the name really is. I can use you. You don't think I'm a man to let a little mistake made years ago stand between me and a man who—"

The other's British voice was clipped, a little weary. "You can save it, Colonel Lamson. I have been, you forget, in position to observe your cunning from the other side."

Lamson's voice grew ominous. "You think you can antagonize me and run far enough to get out of my reach?"

"No," the other said impatiently. "No. Since you and this gentleman came in, I have known that I could not go through with this—as long as you were alive."

"Oh." Lamson seemed mildly amazed. "You are going to kill me—us?" Then, seemingly irrationally, he said: "Bah! I don't believe you have the real blue folder at that. There were two of them, you know."

The other's lips twitched tiredly under his crisp mustache. With one gloved hand he drew a folded blue paper from his inner pocket. "I'll take a chance on that, Colonel."

The yellow eyes seemed to shine like a tiger's. "Then there is nothing we can do to stop you shooting us?"

"Nothing," the lawyer said. "Damn it—it's no wish of mine, but I've no other course—none whatever—" His calm was breaking. Suddenly, he said in a tired, quick, voice of finality, "I don't know why

I'm waiting," and swung the gun muzzle toward Lamson.

Well, what could I lose? He had declared his weight. I was going to get a blast from that gun anyway. I figured it better to hope for a million-to-one break and make a scrap of it at any rate. I dived for my own fallen gun, tried to whirl myself around an over-stuffed chair.

Flame and roar jumped in his hand and a shower of floor-splinters leaped up in front of me, ripped my forehead open. Blood—my blood—spattered into my eyes and my heart was stone cold. Automatically, I jerked at the trigger of my gun. I could not see—I could only hear—and I was braced for the shock of his concluding bullet.

It did not come. I heard distinctly three thunderous reports while I tried to dig my eyes clear.

A voice said, "Cease firing, pally," just as I got my sleeve across my forehead and could see hazily for the first time. "You got him." I jumped up.

The lawyer was lying on his side. Half his face was blown away, but he was wriggling, squirming in wild agony, both gloved hands clawing at what had been his features. My forty-five at close range had done bad things. A whimpering mewling came from his lips. The blue folder lay a foot away, just out of reach of the spreading blood. I saw Lamson make a catlike dive—and the blue folder disappeared. I was focusing on the man who leaned in the doorway—the stocky, liquid-eyed little Italian private detective, Jack Enz. He was blowing smoke from the muzzle of his pistol, and even as I could see clearly again, he stepped over to the writhing man, aimed down.

I jerked my gun up and cried hastily: "No! No! Don't kill him! He's the only one who knows where the girl is!"

"Oh, no, he isn't, chun. You don't really mean that you thought Colonel Lamson was way behind all this play—"

"Where is she, then? How do you mean—" Below, I could hear the wild congregation of sirens, seemingly just outside the bungalow windows.

"Why, he got most of the picture, just after I brought you down to the hotel to see him. Evidently he guessed, from what you said, that he'd better contact me direct, instead of working through the mouthpiece here. Then we find that I been pulling this rat's chestnut's out of the fire for him, while I was supposed to be working for the Colonel. I trace him here and let the Colonel know so he brings you here to have it all out. Right, Colonel?"

I could hear the humming of the elevator on the roof outside. "But the girl—"

"Try the second bedroom down the hall," he said. Then to the Colonel: "Here come the cops. What's the story?"

"You two are working for me, investigating a swindle perpetrated on one of the bank's clients. You may be assured it will never reach the newspapers so as to involve any of us."

"That all right with you?" Enz asked.

"Positively," I said, and jumped as he coolly fired the final shot into the twitching lawyer.

SHE was lying on the bed, spread-eagled, her mouth taped. Her face was white, her eyes closed. There was a sponge and ammonia beside her on a table. She

looked very still. Her clothes were pulled back, but evidently the lawyer-murderer had not touched her yet.

I grabbed for her pulse and for a moment I failed to find it. I rolled back her eyelid. Her pupils were dilated terribly, but there was plenty of warmth to her soft, satin-like white skin, so I breathed again. A bulge in the breast pocket of her tailored suit caught my eye. Hastily I dug it out. It didn't make me mad at all when I found my all-important twenty on the outside of the roll. I exchanged it quickly, touched a match to the greenback, stamped on the ashes.

I went back to the door, opened it. Feet were slogging around in the front of the house. I suddenly heard my name spoken—in the purring, gloating tones of Lieutenant Cullen.

Then the little banker's chuckle. "Nonsense, Lieutenant. He's been working with me. You'd embarrass me very much if you made trouble for him. Here—on the floor—is the murderer you want."

I closed the door, grinning, as I pictured Cullen's humble little Foxy Grandpa face. I found some witch-hazel in the bathroom to stop my scratches bleeding, went back to the bed, and drew up a chair.

The girl was deep under the morphine, but I could almost feel her pulse strengthening. She would be out for at least an hour more, but that was all right with me.

I could wait.





He escaped from his guards on the way to the prison farm.

Cash on the Line

by O. B. Myers

Author of "The Body in Booth One," etc.

Felder was something new in crooked tellers. He took the bank's money and, instead of the usual, proceeded to double his stake at the roulette table. Then instead of covering himself at the First National with his winnings, he calmly pocketed them, copped a guilty plea and went beaming to the pen. All of which seemed most curious to Detective Ballou—till the murder at the Swiss Chalet cleared up the case and really gave him a chance to earn his fee.

YOU could see that there was something peculiar about the lettering on the opaque panel. In the name up above, *Brace Ballou*, the gilt was bright and shiny and fresh. But down below, where it said, *Private Investigations*, the letters were dull and shabby, the paint peeling away from the glass.

Ballou could hear the phone skirling, inside, while he was still inserting his key in the lock. He threw the door open, kicked it shut behind him, and jumped toward the big, roll-top desk. With his hand outstretched he paused. Who would *that* be? The printers? The landlord? The musical voice at the telephone com-

pany, informing him politely that his phone wouldn't ring any more unless he paid the bill? He growled, "Nuts," under his breath, and swept up the instrument.

"Mr. Ballou, please. Mr. Brace Ballou."

"Yeah, this is Ballou. What is it?"

"Mr. Linterbern, Norristown Trust, calling. One moment, please."

He had time to fish out a cigarette, stick it in his mouth, and scratch a match with one hand before there was a man's voice on the wire.

"Hello. Ballou? . . . Are you the man who used to work for McCray, and now operates an agency at the same address?"

"That's right, mister. What can I do for you?"

"I have a little something here that may be in your line. Can you come over to the bank immediately?"

"I'll be there before—" He caught himself. "Let me see. I'm very busy—several matters. . . Er—how about two thirty?"

"Two thirty, then. I'll be expecting you."

He dropped the phone in its cradle, snapped his fingers vigorously at the opposite wall, and murmured, "Hot damn!" Sinking into the protesting swivel chair, he put his feet up on the desk which held nothing else but a newspaper, an empty inkwell, and an overflowing ash-tray, to wait impatiently for two thirty to roll around.

THE part of the Norristown Trust Building that was visible from the street was impressive in stone sheathing and false half-columns that supported a pseudo-Greek facade of painted iron. But the bank proper ended halfway back in a heavy partition. Behind it was a small lobby which could be reached direct from the side street, and from which stairs went up to two floors of ordinary offices.

A girl with impossibly golden hair and a sullen mouth came to the railing and said, "I'll see if Mr. Linterbern expects

you," as if she didn't believe him, and disappeared through a steel-grilled door at the rear. When she came back she merely nodded, and led him out by the same route, through the steel door into the tiny foyer and up one flight. There were closed doors, unlettered, on his left. On the right a huddle of desks accommodated the clerical department. Beyond a light partition, in a little cubby-hole with one window, a girl sat in front of a telephone switchboard, manicuring her nails. On the next and last door it said in big black letters, *President*.

"You can go right in," said the blonde, her lips losing their sullen twist as she tried the effect of a smile. It drew no response from Brace, whose mind was elsewhere.

Horace Linterbern was somewhat younger than the average bank president, but his dark hair was thinning on top and his overplump limbs were flaccid from too much sitting down. He had the loose and mobile mouth of a man fond of speaking, and his lips appeared to caress a sonorous phrase before reluctantly letting it fall. His sharp gray eyes appraised Brace keenly in brief, repeated glances, dropping to his desk when Brace returned his stare.

"Ah, Mr. Ballou, yes. Would you mind closing that door? So you're McCray's successor, aren't you? He was a fine man, they tell me."

"Tops," said Brace curtly. Six months after Mac's death, he was still discovering that trying to carry on in the footsteps of the great had its disadvantages and embarrassments. "You knew him, sir?"

"Not personally, no. Lieutenant Coape has mentioned his name, and yours, several times, however. A fine officer, the lieutenant."

"None better," said Brace, even more curtly. He wondered if he was expected to chime in, "A fine bank president, Mr. Linterbern." Instead he asked: "There is something I can do for you?"

"It's really quite distressing." Linterbern rose and paced slowly back and forth across the end of the room, giving his words the approved melodramatic emphasis. "A very clean-cut young chap, Felder is. I would never have thought it possible. Naturally, we investigate our employees thoroughly, use every precaution. Seven years he's been with us, but only the last eight months as head teller. Nothing could have surprised me more. I assure you I only hope there is some mistake."

"He's in trouble?" prompted Brace.

"He has been seen in a gambling resort," was the reply, spoken with the hopeless solemnity of a man saying, "He strangled his own grandmother while she was sleeping." Linterbern wrung his hands in grief. "At least that is the report that has come to my ears. I need not betray the source. As I say, I only hope that it is false. That is what I want you to find out for me."

"I see. Have you checked up his accounts?"

"Superficially they're all right. That is to say, his daily cash balances are correct. But he has access to the ledgers, and may easily have concealed large withdrawals by false entries which only a full audit will disclose. I have already engaged a firm of private auditors, Meade & Means, who will start work tonight, after hours, so as not to arouse ugly rumors or suspicions on his part."

BRACE frowned at the ceiling. "Why don't you wait and see if his accounts are short or not? Perhaps he hasn't touched the bank."

"If he has been gambling with his own funds, he has violated no more than a rule of the bank, naturally, which would mean simply his discharge. But if he is guilty of using the depositors' money, it would mean a criminal action." Mr. Linterbern wrung his pale fingers again in anguish.

"We'd be forced to prosecute, much as we disliked it. No other course would be open, you understand."

"I understand," said Brace. This was not strictly true. He understood perfectly everything that had been said. It was the things left unsaid, or half said, that did not register perfectly. The situation was too banal to be interesting. The absconding cashier, the gambling den, the distraught banker. But there was something about it that did not quite ring true. The banker was almost too perfect in his part. He might have picked up that manner of his from an early screen serial. You would have thought he'd caught his own son in a forgery.

Brace pulled out a memo pad and noted down the names and addresses the banker gave him. "I'll report to you here?"

"Yes. But not through the switchboard. Use my private line. The number is Chadwick, 6339. I'll answer in person. If you find beyond a doubt that he has been frequenting any of these places, call me at once. That will be all it's necessary for me to know."

"You going to put the finger on him for me?" asked Brace.

Without a moment's hesitation Linterbern said: "He's downstairs in his cage now—the largest one, against the back wall. The only teller with light hair. You can't mistake him."

Brace nodded gravely and said: "I'll take a good look at him on my way out, while I'm cashing your check."

"My check?"

"For two hundred dollars, on account of expenses, in advance."

"I had the impression—oh, very well." The banker used a personal checkbook that he drew from his pocket. He stopped writing to say: "Won't he remember your face, and recognize you later, perhaps—"

"You don't suppose I'll take this to his window, do you?"

"Ah—of course. . . There you are,

Ballou. You'll have something to report soon? Tomorrow, perhaps?"

"As soon as I have anything definite, I'll call you."

He punched his shapeless soft felt hat into a new outline, put it on, and strolled down the stairs. To the teller at the second window he said: "Split it up in twenties, tens, fives and ones. No silver."

While the man was counting and re-counting the bills, Brace had ample opportunity to swivel several unobtrusive glances into the third cage, next on his left. Lurton Felder looked more like an oarsman or a piano mover than a bank teller. He was stocky and thick-shouldered, with deep-set eyes and a pugnacious jaw. Frowning faintly as he riffled a stack of currency, he had the grim look of a man determined to get ahead in the world regardless of the cost.

BRACE'S first move on returning to his office was to phone police headquarters and ask for Lieutenant Coape.

"Coape's office. . . No, he's not in. Any message?"

"No. It's Brace Ballou. I'll call him again."

He made several more telephone calls, each one on the surface merely a friendly chat. But each time a certain name crept as if by accident into the conversation. "Felder was telling me—you know Felder, don't you?" Or, "Met Lurton Felder yesterday. You remember him, don't you? No?" The results were negative. His last call before leaving the office was again to police headquarters.

Coape was still out.

"Say, you got something for him on that Honeywick case?"

"Honeywick? Oh! No, it's not about that. Is he still working on that job? I thought it was closed a couple of months ago."

"We closed out the two punks that brought the kid back, within a half-hour.

But they only had a couple of grand on them, and neither one lived to reach the hospital even. The big shot behind it has still got about forty-seven or eight thousand of the ransom dough in his possession, and it won't be closed till we get him."

"Oh, I see. The law never forgets, eh? Well, I can't help you any. It's just a personal matter I wanted to talk to Marty Coape about. I'll ring him again."

He did ring again, later in the day, twice. Once the lieutenant was out. The next time he was in conference and not to be disturbed unless it was very important. "Skip it," muttered Brace, hanging up with a shrug.

SWISS ED'S place was called the Silver Chalet, and its location on a bend of the Acqueduct Road had been very shrewdly chosen. In a sparsely built district halfway between Norristown and the city, it was actually only a few hundred feet outside the city line, thus dodging both high city taxes and the trained scrutiny of the metropolitan police. Originally a rambling, twelve-or-fourteen-room residence on several acres of ground, it had been transformed into a roadhouse by glassing in the veranda and adding a bar on the first floor. The alterations upstairs were more extensive, though not quite so obvious to the casual glance.

There was an orchestra downstairs, and a dance floor. The food was said to be excellent. It was even conceivable that certain naive folk might come in, eat, drink and be merry, and depart without ever wondering why so many of their fellow customers wandered up the stairs that were never left unguarded by a headwaiter. The machinery ran as smoothly as that, for Ed Duloska was very, very smart.

Brace checked his hat and coat and strolled into the bar to order Scotch and soda.

"On second thought, I'll wait and drink it upstairs," he told the bartender.

Without waiting to see if the bartender transmitted any sign, he started across the foyer. He was no more than halfway when the man at the foot of the stairs bowed slightly, smiling.

"Good evening, Mr. Ballou. You are taken care of?"

Taken aback, Brace said: "Have I been here before, in my sleep? Or does the laundry mark show on my collar?"

"Mr. McCray used to eat in my place on Court Street, remember? You were with him sometimes. It is two or three years ago, but I do not forget. It is part of my business not to forget names, and faces."

Brace grinned. After all, there were some advantages to a former association with a man who had enjoyed the respect of everyone, even the underworld. Mac's ghost was at his shoulder.

"You wish to see Ed?" inquired the headwaiter discreetly.

"No, no. I'll just ease around, enjoy myself."

The man whipped a blue card from the pocket of his tuxedo and made cryptic marks on it with a pencil. "This will admit you to any of the rooms. Good luck, Mr. Ballou."

Two successive closed doors at the head of the stairs opened like magic before the blue card, and he was in a wide corridor from which arched openings gave easy access to several rooms on either side. Indirect lighting and heavy drapes gave a subtle air of clandestine respectability, heightened by the rigorous rule of evening dress for both ladies and gentlemen. But the stiff, intent expressions of those who crowded around the tables betrayed the fact that they were gamblers first, and ladies and gentlemen second. The play was fairly high.

The chuck-a-luck game had only a few customers. Brace passed on into the next

room and watched a bald man with a hatchet face deal faro. That is, he appeared to watch the dealer. Actually, the dealer was the one person in the room to whom he paid no attention.

Crossing the hall to the roulette layout, where most of the crowd was, he paused abruptly just inside the door. Then he went on as if he had seen nothing. After a few minutes he bought a ten-dollar stack of chips and began to play the red. Neither his mind nor his eyes were on his own bets. The croupier had to call his attention to his winnings. But after ten minutes winnings and stake were swept away together by a run of black capped by a double zero. Turning away, he was not surprised when an attendant touched him on the arm.

"Ed would like to see you for a moment, sir."

HE followed the man down the corridor and up a few steps to a landing from which a small door opened into Swiss Ed's office. The attendant closed it noiselessly behind him. From behind a massive, glass-topped desk the proprietor gazed at Brace inscrutably. He had the cold eyes and inflexible facial control of the born gambler, and his voice was like oiled silk.

"You are enjoying yourself, Ballou?"

Brace shrugged. "As much as could be expected."

"You do not enjoy roulette very much?"

"Not against that wheel of yours, Ed."

The gambler's eyes fenced warily. He assumed an attitude of complete frankness. "Ballou, you are a young man. You have excellent prospects, in your business, having learned it from a master. May I offer you a suggestion? If McCray had come here seeking information, he would have come first to me, and his questions would have been answered. He would not have wasted time trying to bribe the croupiers, or to discover for himself what I could tell."

"I haven't tried to buy your hired hands," retorted Brace. "It wasn't necessary. I've already learned what I came to find out."

Ed's eyes flickered for an instant with what might almost have been apprehension. "Would it interest me, what you've learned, Ballou?"

"No more than it interests you to know where any of your customers get their money to spend." He jerked his head toward the side wall. "It happens that one of your guests is a bank cashier."

The gambler studied Brace with evident displeasure. Then he rose and drew back a curtain. A broad window gave a full view over the heads of the people in the playing-rooms below.

"Two-way glass," he explained. "The other side is a mirror. They don't see us, but we see them. . . Where is he playing?"

"The far table, on the left side. The big blond chap, with his hand up on his lapel."

Ed murmured: "Rahman? You are checking up on Rahman?"

"Is that the name he uses here? Rahman, eh?"

Without replying immediately, Swiss Ed drew the curtain and moved back to his desk. There was no visible change in his features, yet something in his manner had altered. The defensive wariness had departed, or had merged imperceptibly with sardonic amusement.

"We are careful always to avoid scandals, as you must know," he said evenly. "The man came to me more than a month ago, well vouched for, I assure you. But mistakes will happen. . . What would you like me to do? Tear up his card? Refuse him the rooms? Throw him out?"

"No rough stuff necessary, Ed. In fact, nothing at all. I have an idea you won't see him much more. If there's a stink, I'll do what I can to keep the name of the Silver Chalet out of it."

Swiss Ed caricatured a bow. Had he

just picked up aces back to back, his fleshy face could not have been more blankly expressionless. "I will be grateful for your discretion. . . By the way, you have lost at the tables? Tell me the amount—" His hand reached for a check-book, but Brace shook his head. "A bottle of champagne, perhaps?"

"Some other time. I'm not thirsty tonight."

He paused in the corridor just long enough for a glance into the roulette rooms, then headed for the stairs. At the foot, the watch-dog with the photographic memory raised his brows.

"So soon, Mr. Ballou? Not bad luck, I hope?"

Brace grinned. "If all your guests had as good luck as I have, Vincent, you wouldn't be in business long. . . It is Vincent, isn't it?"

"You're developing the memory yourself, Mr. Ballou."

"It's my business, too."

BRACE had waited for the traditional busy hour before paying his visit to the Silver Chalet, so it was after three A. M. before he rolled into bed. With his objective reached, he allowed himself a night's sleep with a clear conscience, and it was nearly noon when he reached his office and called Chadwick 6339. Linterbern's voice answered promptly.

"Ballou calling. I've got the goods for you. Your information was correct. Our man has been operating at the Silver Chalet for something over a month, under the name of Rahman. He was there last night."

The banker's tone was almost eager. "You saw him? You will be prepared to testify in court, if necessary, that he was gambling?"

"Absolutely," stated Brace.

"Very well. That is all that is necessary, I believe. Thank you for your efforts—and, er—stop in here this afternoon

about three and I will take care of the balance of your fee."

Brace hung up, limp with astonishment. From what he had seen of Linterbern, he had half expected to get an argument over keeping the balance of the first two hundred. But his astonishment didn't keep him from appearing at the bank promptly at three o'clock. The president nodded a greeting and lifted a sheaf of bills from a desk drawer. There were ten of them, and Brace saw that they were all twenties as the other man slipped them discreetly into an envelope and sealed the flap.

"Very satisfactory work, Mr. Ballou. I won't forget you."

"O. K., Mr. Linterbern. Thank you." Brace pocketed the envelope. "By the way, did your accountants uncover a shortage?"

"I'm sorry to say they did. We aren't sure of the exact amount yet. But there's no question of the fact. A terrible thing. Poor Felder. I'm really sorry for him. But what can I do? If a man—er—excuse me a minute." He lifted a buzzing phone. "Yes? . . . Who did you say, Lieutenant Coape? Yes, I'll see him immediately. . . Very well, Ballou. Thank you again. If you'll pardon me now—"

He opened his office door, but before Brace could step out another man bolted in—a little round-shouldered individual with a bird-like face and frightened eyes behind tortoise-shell glasses.

"Mr. Linterbern, you must tell them!" he cried pitifully. "They won't believe me. That money, last night. I knew I shouldn't have taken it—the company rules—now here I am in trouble, it's awful—"

"For heaven's sake, Willis, what is all this?" exclaimed Linterbern, backing away. He looked blankly at Coape, who followed. The police lieutenant was in plainclothes, his bony face as sour and hard-bitten as usual. He nodded curtly toward Brace.

"They picked up one of the Honeywick ransom bills at the First National this noon. Teller caught it by the serial number. It was traced to a deposit made by this man Willis, who is employed by Meade & Means, the auditors. He says you gave it to him personally, last night, as a gratuity after he finished a piece of work here at the bank."

The little accountant was wringing his hands in anguish. "Yes, that's right, isn't it, Mr. Linterbern? Twenty dollars, it was."

Linterbern never looked at him, but kept his eyes riveted to the lieutenant. His face was a mask, but his eyes were very bright. After a long moment he turned and crossed behind his desk.

"He's mistaken, Coape," said the banker in a dry tone. "I gave him twenty dollars, yes. But if I remember correctly, it was four fives. In any event, I took the cash from our vault, and for marked bills to be in there would be utterly impossible. Our own tellers have the serial numbers listed, too, of course, and check every deposit."

"But it was the only twenty I had!" wailed the accountant.

"You must be mistaken, Willis," said Linterbern icily.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," nodded Coape. "You got that twenty somewhere else. How about remembering where?"

"But—but I can't remember anywhere else," protested the clerk in terror. "It was here—Mr. Linterbern, I tell you—"

"Nuts." Coape jerked his head toward the door. "Take him down to headquarters, Shaley, until his memory improves a bit. . . All right, Mr. Linterbern. I was pretty sure his story must be screwy. Let you know if anything comes out of this."

DOWN in the lobby Coape growled at Brace. "You've been calling my office, they told me. What's on your mind? Lookin' for a job?"

Brace laughed gaily. "Always the same, aren't you, Marty? On the outside all hard-shell and vinegar, but underneath pure gold. No, I was trying to thank you for giving me a build-up in the right spot. I understand you mentioned my name to Linterbern."

"Did I? What did I say about you?"

"I don't know exactly, but it must have been complimentary."

"*Humph!*" The police officer's lip twisted. "I remember now. He asked something about McCray. I told him there was never a straighter man lived, nor a keener detective. I added that the bird trying to fill his shoes at present was a young whipper-snapper still wet behind the ears, who might possibly learn to find his way around in the dark after another ten or fifteen years experience."

Brace could fairly feel his jaw drop. He deflated like a punctured balloon. "You—you said that, Marty?"

"Or words to that effect," scowled the cop. "Why wouldn't I? It's what I think, isn't it?" With which he stamped out to the street, leaving Brace gaping, muttering: "Why, the old cockroach."

As he started for the door himself, a girl touched his arm. "Mr. Ballou? Mr. Linterbern sent me to catch you. There's something he forgot. He wants to see you again for a minute."

Brace strode upstairs again, still frowning angrily.

"Ah, Ballou? Glad she caught you. Sit down a minute." The banker pushed aside a telephone and drew the small personal checkbook from his pocket. "On second thought, Ballou, I decided that I had not been overgenerous. Don't want you to feel that I'm, er—close-fisted, you know. Very confidential work. Rely on your integrity. So if you'll just give me back that envelope, and accept this instead. . . ."

He tore out the check he had just written. Brace made the exchange, and stared at it. It was for three hundred dollars.

His frown vanished. "Why, that's fine, Mr. Linterbern. Thanks. Very much."

"Not at all, my boy. I feel you've earned it. Hope we can do business again. Any time you need a reference, call on me."

HE WENT out, feeling slightly dizzy. At the corner he bought an afternoon paper, the ink damp enough to smudge off on his fingers. By rule of habit he moved from one headline to another as he walked along, giving as close a glance to the small, half-hidden paragraphs as to the full-column leaders. Thus it was that he was brought up short at the bottom of the third page.

Bank Teller Arrested, was the only headline.

Lurton C. Felder, head teller of the Norristown Trust Company, was placed under arrest today at the bank on the complaint of Horace Linterbern, president of the institution, who stated that a shortage of over ten thousand dollars had been discovered in his accounts. He was arraigned at the North Side station, and held pending application for bail.

It was divulged that Meade & Means, auditors, have been checking the teller's books secretly for the last two days, and uncovered the deficit. Mr. Linterbern stated that it was not large enough to affect the status of the bank in any way, and was covered by insurance.

He read the piece through a second time, standing frozen in the middle of the sidewalk. Then he bunched the paper under his arm and walked faster than before. Immediately on reaching his own office he grabbed the phone and called a reporter friend, Joe Dowling.

"Joe? Listen, what time does that afternoon edition of yours go to press? . . . It does, eh? Well, that item on Felder, the Trust Company teller. Do you know what time that came in? All right. I'll hang on. . . . What? Just before eleven? It couldn't have been later? . . . No, I was just curious. Thanks, Joe."

He replaced the telephone in its cradle and sat staring at it as if he expected it to sprout tendrils at any moment.

Why did he have the sensation of being half out of focus with events? What was it that tasted sour? The actual arrest had taken place at the bank before eleven o'clock, at the latest. In other words, more than an hour before he had telephoned Linterbern. The president must have decided to go ahead without waiting for his report. Understandable, perhaps, after the auditors had definitely pinned down the fact of missing funds. But in that case, why had Linterbern hired him at all—and then paid him off so munificently?

Brace pulled out the second check and looked at it. A total of five hundred dollars for less than two days' not very strenuous activities.

Why, even a private detective, accustomed to charging coldbloodedly whatever the traffic would bear, had to admit that it was exorbitant. His frown deepened when he thought of Lieutenant Cope. Far from recommending him strongly, the cop had told Linterbern that he was an inexperienced young squirt with more ambition than brains. Whereupon the banker had promptly retained him for a job that might easily have turned out to be delicate, and then grossly overpaid him. Brace bit his lip in chagrin. Perhaps that was the very reason. Perhaps the banker wanted a man who was not too bright, who would discover what was obvious, but no more. Perhaps he was playing the part of a dumb stooge all the time.

After staring moodily at the check for some time, he picked it up and shoved it in his pocket, muttering to himself. Nuts. What was he worrying about? He had been retained to do a certain piece of work. He had done it, with undeniable success. He had been paid. What more did he want? There was no squawk. The whole case was rounded, perfect. Too perfect—but he thrust that thought aside.

AS IF one break brought another, he got a tailing job the very next day that took him into the city, and eventually to Boston. It was ten days before he returned to Norristown. His first act was to call up Joe Dowling and ask about the Felder case.

"There is no case. It's all finished. They had the goods on him, and he knew it, I guess. He refused the services of the lawyer the court assigned him, and copped a plea of guilty. As a reward Judge Gorham gave him five instead of ten, and he went up the river yesterday. We only printed a couple of lines. Not good publicity for the local bank, you know."

Brace hung up thoughtfully. Well, there it was. If that didn't clinch it, what could? With overwhelming proof staring him in the face, Felder had wisely pleaded guilty.

That ended that.

IT WAS a week later when, coming out of a cigar store on Lincoln, he saw a vaguely familiar face coming toward him under a pearl-gray fedora. He racked his brain for an instant, then got it.

"Hello, there, Vincent. How's your memory today?"

"Fresh as a daisy, Mr. Ballou! How've you been? I haven't seen you lately out at the club?"

Brace grinned. "I don't go in for that kind of entertainment—for pleasure. I guess mine is not the only face you've missed, is it? You saw what they did to your friend, Felder. Or was it Rahman to you?"

The watchdog of the stairs at the Silver Chalet laughed shortly. "We'll never miss that bird's face, around there."

"No? You'll never miss a ten-thousand-dollar sucker, eh?"

"Oh, wouldn't we, though? But he never dropped any ten grand in the Silver Chalet, that guy. He ended a heavy winner."

Brace could not repress his astonishment. "A winner!" But then he smiled ironically. "You get a kick out of kidding me, don't you?"

The other man immediately became icily serious. "Listen, Mr. Ballou. We're fixed all right. We don't have to kid anybody. Certainly not a man like you, who might some day be in a position to do us a favor. I'm giving it to you straight. That fellow who called himself Rahman quit with almost fifteen grand of our dough in his pocket."

"He won fifteen thousand?" repeated Brace. "But then he must have lost it somewhere else—and ten more on top of it!"

Vincent looked skeptical. "If he did that, he must have worked at it twenty-four hours a day. Because he was in the Silver Chalet every damn night, until we closed up. Figure that out."

BRACE tried to figure it out. For a week it rendered his nights sleepless. Added to the insignificant but fantastic details already in his mind, it was the last straw that drove him crazy. Then one night, after he had gone to bed to toss fretfully, a possibility began to dawn on him. He puzzled it out doggedly. If true, it was certainly an outstanding example of the infamous double-cross. If Felder had won, instead of lost, he had been in a position to cover up his defalcations at the bank, and come out ahead. Why hadn't he done so?

It all hinged on the actual results of the teller's play at the tables. Brace resolved to have another talk with Swiss Ed. There was no time like the present. He got up, threw on his clothes, and backed his car out into the sleeping street. Five minutes later he swung into the parking space alongside the Silver Chalet.

"Mr. Ballou!" Vincent was plainly surprised. "You're pretty late. The crowd is leaving. And you're not dressed—"

"I didn't come to play," said Bruce curtly. "I want to see Ed."

"Sorry, he's not here tonight. Monday's always slack—"

"If you're stalling me, Vincent, you'll regret it."

"I'm telling you, Mr. Ballou, he left right after dinner. He may be in later, he may not. I couldn't tell you, for a fact."

Brace scowled at him for a moment. "I'll stick around."

He went over to the bar and ordered a drink, which he sipped slowly. Several couples, and then a group of four men, mildly drunk, came down the stairs and departed. At four A. M. Brace gave up.

"Tell him I'll see him tomorrow," he growled at Vincent.

"Right, Mr. Ballou. I'll tell him if I see him."

Brace drove slowly into town and drew up at a lunch wagon in Hornby Square, where he lingered idly over a hamburger and several cups of coffee. When he rose to leave, he ran into Joe Dowling coming in.

"Say, Brace, we got a flash at the office an hour or so ago that will interest you. Remember your pal Felder? He escaped tonight."

"Escaped! From State's Prison?"

"Not exactly. He was being transferred, with a number of other convicts, to the State Farm at Molkdale. Around midnight, as the train was pulling out of the village at Shakleton, he eluded the guards that were traveling with them and leaped off. Up to the time I left the office, he hadn't been recaptured. He was in prison-gray clothes, and had handcuffs on his wrists, so it's hard to see how he can stay on the loose very long, unless he had a confederate waiting for him with a car."

Brace stared, his mind beginning to grind out possibilities.

"Shakleton? How far's that?"

"Thirty, forty miles. He'll never head this way, of course."

Brace made no reply, but strode back to the telephone booth. He looked up Horace Linterbern's home phone, and after several minutes raised a sleepy butler, who insisted that Linterbern was not at home.

"This is the police department," lied Brace unblushingly. "There is reason to believe he may be in danger. Do you know where he's gone?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, sir. He said he might be late, but would not be out all night. He had only a briefcase with him, sir."

Brace hung up on that, and dialed Chadwick 6339. There was no answer. After several minutes he gave up and hurried out to his car. Suspecting that the butler might be lying, he started for Linterbern's residence. But then he remembered the briefcase, and a shrewd guess popped into his mind. Only a guess, a mere hunch. But he had nothing better to go on. He swung the car around in a sweeping turn at an intersection and headed out the Aqueduct Road toward the Silver Chalet.

THE neon lights were all out on the front of the building. Inside on the ground floor only feeble lights showed. The guests were no doubt all gone, leaving a few of the help to clean up. The second floor windows were all dark, but whether that was due to draperies or absence of lights within he could not be sure. Three or four cars stood in the parking space. One was a long, black sedan of an expensive make that he was almost sure had not been there when he had last pulled out. If not Swiss Ed's car, it looked suspiciously like it.

He parked his own car on the far side of the road and crossed the lawn on foot, keeping off the gravel. He was trying to get a clear glimpse into the ground floor from the side, where the bar was located, when he noticed a bright oblong of illumination upstairs. It was around on the

west side, where it was not visible from the front, and he had a quick hunch that it came from Ed's private office. If there was one room he wanted to look into right then, that was it.

The broad verandas ran all the way around the three sides, and the tables inside the glass were now deserted and dark. At the rear corner there was a drain pipe that followed a column down from the roof, and Brace tackled it boldly. The brackets creaked and groaned at the strain of his weight, but after a few perilous moments he inched himself over the edge of the veranda roof and drew a deep breath. Thanking his stars that it was sheathed with wood shingles and not noisy tin, he crawled cautiously on hands and knees toward the lighted window.

Before he was within ten feet of it, he saw that he had been mistaken about its being Ed's office. It was a small chamber on the same level, just over the lower stair well. In the middle of the floor was a high, oblong piece of furniture that he recognized after a moment for the back of a telephone switchboard. In front of it, facing the window, a girl sat in a swivel chair, yawning and glancing frequently at her wrist watch. Her tour of duty probably lasted until five, and she was impatient to see it end.

Behind her a door stood ajar. It led into the end of the corridor. On her right was another door, which evidently had to open into Ed's private office. This one was closed. Brace could hear no sounds from inside, although the window was half open at the bottom. Anxious to see more of the interior, he crept softly nearer.

When he was within no more than two feet of the pane, a split shingle under his knee betrayed him with a sharp crack.

The girl looked up, surprise and then alarm painted on her face. Though Brace shrank back, he could not get out of the stream of light quickly enough. She must have seen him as a vague, ominous shad-

ow against the night. She uttered a faint squeal, and clapped her headset to her ear with one hand while she snatched at cords with the other.

"Police headquarters!" she shrilled at the fixed mouthpiece. "Police! Quick, police, there's a man—"

Before Brace could decide whether to back away or plunge in, he heard two short, sharp smacks from inside, like the sound of a door being slammed twice in rapid succession—not in the room before him, but somewhere nearby. At the same moment a figure appeared as if by magic in the operator's room, right at her elbow. A man in drab gray, wearing a visored gray cap, rose abruptly from behind the switchboard, where he must have lain concealed without the girl's knowledge, for her eyes widened in terror at sight of him. He was a huge man, with shoulders that bulged his coat, and even from the back Brace guessed his identity.

HE lifted one elbow, clapped his arm around the girl's neck, and tugged her away from the board. Her words were reduced immediately to a choking gurgle, and her headset slipped to floor, though she still grasped its plug in one hand while the other tore hopelessly at his strangling hold. As he swung around, Brace caught a glint of steel, and saw that the man's wrists were shackled by handcuffs. Brace scrambled frantically toward the window.

The door on the side of the room flew open. Swiss Ed appeared, pushing someone before him. The man he pushed toppled awkwardly to the floor as Ed released his grip.

"There he is!" barked the gambler. "Give it to him!"

Felder swung a little, and Brace saw that his right hand held a blunt revolver. Its nose was on Swiss Ed. "You double-crossed me," croaked Felder hoarsely. "Why is she hollering for the police?"

"Police, hell!" cried Ed angrily. He had not heard the girl's squeals. "There's Linterbern, you fool! Take that rod off me, and give him what you came here for! You yellow—"

"Shut up, you double-crossing snake!" rasped Felder. "You've bumped him already. You can't pin this on me. And she called the cops. Where's that dough? My dough! Cough up the dough, or—"

Brace got to the window, threw the lower sash up as far as it would go. "Drop that gun, Felder!" he barked.

Felder did not turn. Swiss Ed snatched at his armpit, produced a gun the twin of the one in Felder's hand. He shifted his tactics like an eel. "This way, officers!" he yelled.

"Why, you dirty heel," snarled Felder.

His shot, and Brace's, slammed within a tenth of a second of each other, so that the room roared with one shattering reverberation. The rod flew from Felder's hand, and some of his fingers with it, but not before it had hurled a slug into Swiss Ed's stomach. Felder jerked sideways with the stab of pain. Ed reeled backward to the wall, his flabby cheeks the color of putty. Brace got a leg over the sill.

"Let go that rod, Ed, or—"

Brace's words were in the air when Ed squeezed the trigger. But he was neither looking nor shooting toward the window. His eyes, venomous, flaming sheer hatred, were on Felder, and you could see that he relished the way his bullets tore into quivering flesh. Three times his gun spoke deafeningly, before Brace's second and last shot cut him short by spattering his brains on the door jamb. He slumped quietly then, to collapse half across the huddled gray heap that was Felder's shuddering corpse. The girl, still locked in Felder's manacled grip, screamed in hoarse and strangling terror.

Brace lunged over the sill and freed her. She was unscratched, but for nearly a minute was too terrified to speak.

"The police," he barked at her. "How the devil do you call them?"

"I—I did," she got out finally. "They—they must be—"

There was a wail of a siren in the distance. Within sixty seconds the wail resolved itself into Lieutenant Coape and three others plunging into the room.

"A lot of work for the undertaker here, Marty," said Brace. "How's for a shot of Scotch before we hash things out?"

OVER his third drink, somewhat later, Brace retraced his line of reasoning. "Felder started filching from the bank to gamble with, until he got in to the tune of ten grand or so. Then, probably, he began to win. But Linterbern caught him at it before he had replaced any of his shortage. Felder swore he could make it up. Linterbern said, 'All right, turn it over to me personally as fast as you win. I'll take care of squaring your account, and say nothing.' Felder continued to win. He was a smart gambler, and lucky. But Linterbern was a smarter crook. He never put that money back in the account at all, but simply pocketed it. When he had milked Felder to the limit, he simply turned me loose on him, and the auditors on the books. Result—Felder safely stowed in prison."

"But why didn't Felder speak up, tell us that story?"

"What was the use? It would be his word against the president's, and all the circumstantial evidence was against him. The best he could do was lighten his sentence by copping a plea of guilty."

"Where does Swiss Ed come in?"

"He was the brains behind the Honeywick snatch, and was holding the bag with nearly fifty thousand of marked bills. He had begun to work them into circulation gradually by paying off winners with them. Felder was made to order for that purpose. Ed figured the ransom money would appear at the bank without a trace.

Felder was one man he didn't mind seeing a winner. But after the teller was jailed, there was Linterbern with about fifteen grand in marked bills on his hands. He must have been sore when he discovered that, but he used his head. He got hold of Ed, and made him a proposition. 'Replace these with honest greenbacks, and I won't spill to the cops where they came from.' Ed was in a spot. He saw that Linterbern would have to be put out of the way. So he stalled for a time, until he got a chance to maneuver Felder's escape. And Ed had set a date with Linterbern for tonight, too, to close their transaction. His idea was simply to show the banker to Felder, and let revenge do the rest. Only to play absolutely safe, he plugged Linterbern himself first, being careful to do it against that steel wall in his office, so that the bullets wouldn't mean anything to the ballistics boys."

"But what upset the party?"

"Me," grinned Brace. "The girl saw me on the roof, and yelled for the cops. That upset Felder, who had been smuggled into the switchboard-room earlier, while she was out for a minute. He jumped up and grabbed her, and it gave him a suspicion that Ed was planning to double-cross him, which was probably perfectly correct. Ed would double-cross his own mother. After that it was just a question of fire at will."

"Break out your axes, boys," snapped Coape. "The rest of that Honeywick dough is around here somewhere. Find it. How the hell do you suppose Ballou here is going to collect that five-grand reward?"

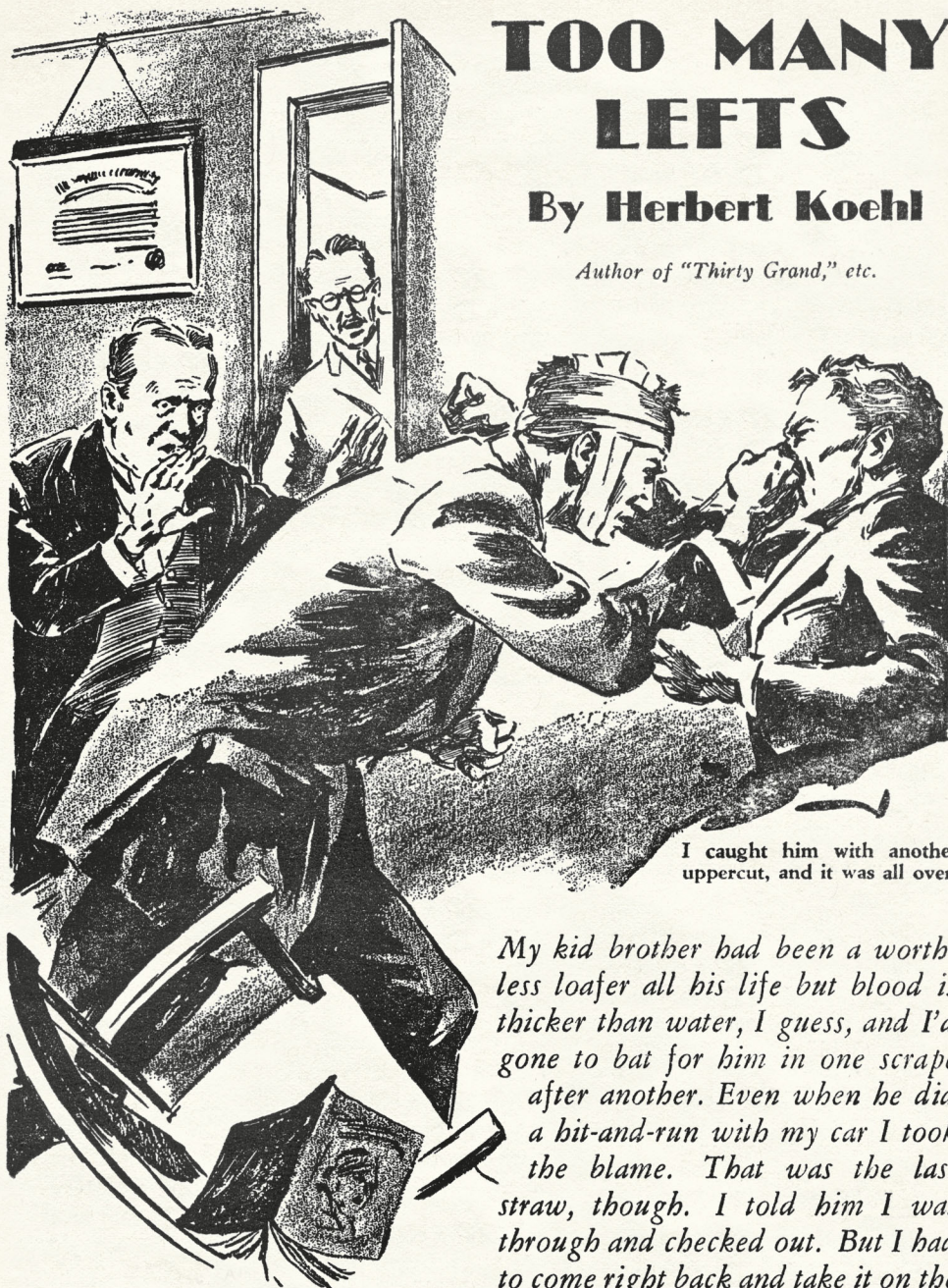
"To tell you the truth, I wasn't thinking of that," grinned Brace. "I was just trying to finish up a case that looked too simple to be true."

"You finished it," said the lieutenant shortly. "You know, something tells me that you aren't going to rattle around in Mac's shoes quite as much as I thought you were!"

TOO MANY LEFTS

By Herbert Koehl

Author of "Thirty Grand," etc.



I caught him with another uppercut, and it was all over.

My kid brother had been a worthless loafer all his life but blood is thicker than water, I guess, and I'd gone to bat for him in one scrape after another. Even when he did a bit-and-run with my car I took the blame. That was the last straw, though. I told him I was through and checked out. But I had to come right back and take it on the chin for murder—his murder—which left me holding a ten-grand bag just before he died.

THE only ones in the office were Amy Browning and Bill Smith. I nodded at her and dropped into a seat beside Bill. "How they going, Smitty?" I said.

He just stared at me and then, without saying a word, got up and walked to the other side of the room and stood there looking out the window. I felt my face get hot.

"I'd like to see J. B.," I told Amy, trying to keep my voice steady.

She nodded and said something into the telephone. Then she looked at me. "He'll see you now, Mr. Matthews."

I'd talked to her almost every day for the past eight years and now she called me *Mr. Matthews!* Well, what the hell. I got up and went into J. B. Welliver's private office.

He was a short, gray-haired man with a bulging midsection that gave away his weakness for steak and potatoes. A jovial old cuss, too, always ready to pass along the latest story, but today he was different. He shot me one quick look, then turned away and began to fiddle with a letter-opener on his desk.

"I suppose you want to know whether your job is still here for you," he said. His voice was funny, sort of cold and formal.

"That's right," I said, but I knew what the answer was going to be. I might as well walk out without waiting to hear it, but I sat tight.

"Well, it isn't," he said. He kept his eyes away from mine and went on: "A job like yours depends a lot on good will and—well, there isn't any good will left for you in this town. I'm sorry, Matthews, but you just wouldn't be worth anything to us."

"I see," I said and got to my feet. "Thanks for past favors, anyhow."

His eyes met mine for the first time. "I still can't understand it," he grumbled. "A reliable, hard-working fellow like you. I can't see how it happened."

"Neither can I."

"The police say you weren't drunk."

"I wasn't. You ought to know that, J. B."

"Yes. And you've told all there is to tell about it?"

I hesitated. It was pretty tough to see everything I'd worked eight years for shot to pieces, but there wasn't anything

to do about it. "Yes. I've told all there is to tell. Well, good-bye, J. B."

"Good-bye," he said. "And good luck."

"Thanks." Good luck, I thought as I went out, was something I was going to need plenty of.

I STEPPED into a restaurant a few doors from the office building, found an empty booth and ordered a beer. It didn't taste good, but it wasn't the beer's fault. Nothing had tasted good to me for a week.

It was all like a nightmare. It had started last Friday night. I'd been sitting in the living-room of our apartment, drinking beer and reading a book and thinking about the date I had with Mary Lou for Saturday night. Everything had been pretty nice up to the time somebody started fumbling with the doorknob.

Then the door swung open and Gary stumbled in. He staggered across the room and flopped on the davenport. I saw that his face was wet, like he'd been crying. I stuck a piece of paper in the book to keep my place and laid it down. That was good, keeping my place in that book. I haven't looked at it since.

"What's the matter, kid," I said.

"It's terrible," he moaned.

"What is?"

"I had an accident."

"Is my car wrecked?"

"No. I don't think so. But I'm afraid somebody was hurt." He smelled like he'd been taking a bath in whiskey.

"Where'd it happen?"

"About two blocks down the street. Near Sixth and Walnut."

"What did you do?"

He buried his face in the pillow and when he spoke his voice was muffled. "I went into a safety zone. I think I hit some people. Don't know how many."

"And you drove away?"

"No. I left the car there. Got out and came here."

"Why didn't you stay?"

He turned his face from the pillow and looked at me. He was a good-looking kid and the trouble was, he knew it. Brown, curly hair, a nice straight nose, big brown eyes with long lashes. He should have been in the movies. He knew how to dress, too. Always looked like an ad for what the well dressed man should wear. He'd been living with me for a couple years while he tried to find a job. At least he said he was trying, but he'd never found any.

"I couldn't stay," he cried and then I knew what was wrong with him. His mouth was weak and pouting. It wasn't all his fault. Mother had always spoiled him. He was her precious darling and me—well, I was the big good-natured guy that was supposed to look after him. And I always had.

"Why couldn't you stay?" I asked, but he didn't have to tell me.

"I was drunk," he moaned, just like you'd say you had a bad cold. "Still am, only—" He grabbed my hand. "Jim, you've got to get me out of this. You've got to go down there and see how bad it is. Don't let them get me. They'll send me up. They—"

"Shut up," I said and put on my hat and coat and went out.

IT WASN'T hard to find my car. There was a crowd around it and an ambulance was leaving as I got there. A police car was at the curb. I pushed through the crowd. A uniformed policeman had one foot on my running board and was writing something in a little book.

"Anybody badly hurt?" I asked.

He scowled at me. "Badly hurt!" he snorted. "That's good! Who are you?"

"James R. Matthews. This is my car."

He looked at me like I'd just crawled from under a rock. "Were you driving it?" he rasped.

That was the spot, the tough spot. Gary was drunk and they could prove it. If anyone was dead he could get twenty years for manslaughter. I was sober. I had a chance.

"Yes," I said and looked away from him.

"Where you been?"

"I—I went to call an ambulance."

"Nice of you," he grunted

Somebody in the crowd yelled, "We ought to lynch him!" and others took up the cry.

"We better get out of this," the policeman grumbled. Another cop came up and as they led me through the crowd I wondered just how bad it was.

At headquarters I found out, but it was too late to change my story then. The "death toll," as the newspapers say, was three. Two had been killed outright. The other died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. They were kids, two girls and a boy.

Bad as it was, there was worse to come. When they told me the names of what they called "my victims," I knew that nothing worse could ever happen.

"That last name," I said. My knees trembled and I felt a sick emptiness at the pit of my stomach.

"Jane Bryan."

"How old?"

"Twelve."

"Where does—where did she live?"

"Fairlawn avenue."

That's when I wanted most to tell the truth—that it was my drunken kid brother who had driven my car—and let him get what he deserved. But my mother stopped me. She had died five years before, but I could never forget her begging me to look after her precious Gary. And so, like the fool I was, I let my story stand, even though it meant that Mary Lou would always believe I'd killed her little sister.

In the end, it was insurance that saved

me—kept me from going to jail, I mean. The insurance and all the money I'd saved in eight years. I had a good lawyer and the insurance company went to bat for me. The families of the children got handsome financial settlements and there wasn't any criminal prosecution. But it was beginning to look like I'd be better off in jail.

I FINISHED the beer, laid a quarter on the table and went out and got in my car. There were things to be done and none of them pleasant.

As I left my car at the curb in front of Doc Sanborn's house and went up the sidewalk I knew pretty well what was going to happen. But I hadn't counted on Bill Smith being there. He was sitting on Mary Lou's desk talking to her and when I came in they both looked at me and said nothing.

"How do you do, Mr. Smith," I said. "You dirty heel."

He handed me a sneer. "I never killed anybody," he said.

"We used to be friends," I said, "but I won't go into that. Some day I'm going to break your jaw for you, but right now I want to talk to Mary Lou—in private."

He shrugged. "I'll leave."

"No," said Mary Lou, "we'll go in the living-room." She'd worked for Doc Sanborn a long time and was like one of the family. I followed her into the living-room and we sat on a davenport and looked at each other.

She was only about five feet two and she had a mass of the dark red hair that beauty experts call auburn. Her eyes were big and very blue and had the longest lashes—oh, I could go on raving about Mary Lou for hours.

"I have a feeling," I said, "that everything is off between us."

For a while she didn't say anything and then she nodded. "I'm afraid that's right, Jim," she said softly. "It isn't that I

blame you altogether. It could have been just an accident—though I still can't understand it. But it would always come between us. We could never be normal and happy. I would look at you and then I'd think of Jane— Oh, Jim, I loved her so." Her cheeks were bright with tears.

I stood up. "I see your point," I said roughly, "and I guess you're right. That's all there is to say. Good-bye." I turned and barged back into Doc Sanborn's waiting-room.

The doc was there talking to Bill Smith. When he saw me he smiled and came toward me holding out his hand. We shook and a lump came into my throat. This kind of friendliness was something I needed and needed bad.

"Glad to see you, Jim," he said. "I'm terribly sorry about your trouble." He was tall and broad-shouldered and had dark hair that was beginning to turn gray at the temples.

"Thanks, Doc," I said and swallowed hard. "How the horses been treating you?"

He laughed. "Not so good. You know, Jim, I'm beginning to think I don't live right."

He was a fine doctor and had a good practice, but he had a weakness for gambling. The horses and the galloping dominoes kept him broke, but he couldn't quit.

"You ought to start putting your dough into bonds instead of feeding the bookies," I said.

"You're absolutely right," he came back. "Some day I will."

"Well, I got to be going," I said.

"Drop in any night," he said, "and we'll play some chess. I still think I can beat you."

"I'll do that," I said and went out, knowing that I never would.

GARY was at the apartment when I got there. He was in the bedroom, standing in front of the mirror, knotting a

flashy tie. How that kid loved to dress!

"Hi there," he said. "Any luck?"

I sat down on the bed. "All bad," I said. "I want to talk to you, kid."

He finished with the tie, gave it a little pat and faced me. "Talk away."

"I'm leaving town," I said. "I've got to get a job and I can't get one here. I'm going to Midland and try for a fresh start."

He stared at me and his lower lip came out in a pout. "You know how sorry I am about everything," he said.

"Oh, yes."

"I mean it. Some day I'm going to make it all up to you."

"I'm sure of it."

"You don't have to be sarcastic."

"Never mind. The point is I'm leaving and you're not coming with me. The rent here is paid for about a week and you can stay that long if you like. But from now on you'll have to shift for yourself."

"I'll get a job."

"I've heard that before. But this time you better mean it. Now I've got to pack my things and get going."

He shifted from one foot to the other. "You got any money, Jim?" he said, finally.

"You know I haven't got much."

"Well, could you spare me twenty?"

I couldn't. As a matter of fact I couldn't spare a dime but I gave him a ten-spot. He grumbled something and stuck it in his pocket. A swell kid brother I'd had wished on me.

That night I slept in one of the cheapest hotels in Midland. The bed was lumpy and I had so much on my mind it took me quite a while to get to sleep, but for a wonder, I woke up feeling swell. I took a shower and shaved and even caught myself whistling while I did it. The idea of starting a new life seemed pretty swell.

Downstairs in the restaurant I ordered breakfast and a morning paper. There might be some want-ads that would give

me something to start on. But I looked at the front page first and never got to the want-ads. A headline jumped at me—

MIDLAND OFFICE ROBBED OF \$11,000

I was reading about that when the girl brought my coffee and grapefruit. I never touched either. I didn't care, just then, whether I ever ate again, because somebody had got into J. B. Welliver's private office the night before, and had opened the big safe there and got away with eleven thousand dollars in cash. I knew right away who had done it.

There was a line in the story, down in the second paragraph, that said *A former employee of the company, recently dismissed, is being sought.* I knew who that was, too.

I got up from the table just as the girl was bringing the bacon and eggs. "Put this stuff on the bill," I told her. "I'm checking out in a few minutes."

Back in my room, I put a phone call through to the superintendent of the apartment house where I'd lived. He was pretty sleepy at first, but he finally got through his head who was talking and what I wanted to know. No, he said, my brother wasn't living there any more. He'd turned in the keys the night before and left. No, he didn't know where he was going. I hung up. He didn't know, but I did.

TEN minutes later I was driving back toward Grafton—and a young louse who should have had his pants warned regularly fifteen years ago, instead of being coddled and petted and told what a sweet kid he was. Back toward Grafton and a showdown.

I knew where he would be. A couple of months before I'd rented a summer cottage along the river. We'd had a lot of good times there. I'd forgotten about the place during the last week, forgotten

that the rent was paid for this summer, but I was sure Gary hadn't.

There wasn't much, I had to admit to myself then, that Gary did forget. Except getting a job and making some honest money. And he didn't forget about that, he just never thought of it. He'd remembered about my key to the office and about the combination to the safe that I had written in a little notebook, because when I'd looked for them among my things in the hotel room, they weren't there.

Normally, it was about a two-hour drive from Midland, I made it in an hour and forty minutes. It was a quarter after ten when I reached the cottage, walked up the steps and across the porch.

Gary was in the front room, lying on the couch smoking a cigarette. He started up when I came in, swung his feet to the floor and leaned back against the wall staring at me.

"Where is it?" I said.

"Where is what?" He took a drag from his cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke, but his eyes told me he was pretty scared.

"You can cut out that stuff. You know what I'm talking about. The money you stole from Welliver's office last night. I'm taking that and turning it over to the police and you're going with it. This time, you little rat, you're going to jail and you're going to stay there."

He dropped his cigarette on the floor and stepped on it. Then he stood up and came toward me. His eyes were wide and had the same pleading expression I had seen the night he ran over the three children.

"You can't do that to me, Jim," he cried. "After all, the only reason I took it was that I—I wanted to get enough money to pay you back. I—"

"Never mind that. I don't want that kind of money. Where is it?"

He turned and pointed at a little black satchel setting at the end of the couch.

"That's it," he said. "But you're a fool if—"

"I've always been a fool, but I'm stopping now. That money goes back to Welliver and you're going to jail. So—"

His mouth dropped open and he was staring over my shoulder. I remember thinking what an old trick that was. Trying to making you think somebody was behind you so you'd turn around and—

Something hit me hard on the side of the head. A million lights exploded behind my eyes and then I saw that Gary was way out across the water with big waves between us and I was swimming out to him, only I couldn't swim and I started going down and the water came into my mouth and through my nostrils, and then there wasn't anything but blackness.

FINALLY the light came and I was lying on my stomach looking at a big crack in the floor. My head felt like a balloon ready to burst. I put my hands to the floor and pushed myself up. The first thing I noticed was that the satchel wasn't at the foot of the couch any more. And then I saw Gary.

He was lying on his back with his head tilted to one side and on the front of his shirt was a spreading red splotch. As I staggered toward him I knew that I could never put him in jail, no matter how much he deserved to be there.

I got my hands under his arms and lifted him. He wasn't heavy—he'd always been a runt—but the exertion sent new waves of pain through my head. For a few seconds I thought I was going to faint, but somehow I got him through the doorway and out to my car.

There was only one place to go and for a while I didn't think I'd get there. I could hardly see the road, but I drove fast anyway and luck was with me. Finally I put on the brake in front of Doc Sanborn's house. I knew I could never carry

Gary in alone so I got out on the left side of the car, weaved around and wobbled up the steps.

Mary Lou was in the waiting-room pounding her typewriter. When she saw me her fingers stopped like they were frozen. "You're hurt," she cried.

"Never mind me," I said. "Where is Doc? My kid brother—"

She got up without a word and ran into Doc's private office. She came right back out, with him on her heels.

"In the car," I said and they ran out the door. I tried to follow them, but my legs gave way then and I just managed to land in a chair and sprawl there.

Pretty soon they were back, with Doc at Gary's shoulders and Mary Lou holding his feet. They passed by me without a word. I hate to admit it, but that's when I passed out.

I came to with somebody shaking my shoulder. It was Mary Lou. "Come in the living-room," she said. "The doctor will be able to take care of you in a few minutes."

I let her help me into the living-room and stretch me out on the davenport. My head felt like a construction gang was driving spikes into it with sledge hammers.

Pretty soon Mary Lou came back and led me into Doc's office.

"Could you give me a drink?" I asked.

"Water?"

"Fire water."

She smiled and got me a jigger of whiskey. I drank it and the throbbing in my head seemed to let down at little.

Doc Sanborn came in then, whispered something to Mary Lou and she went out.

"How's Gary?" I asked.

"Let's worry about you right now," he said gruffly and started to work on my head. I must have had a bump the size of a golf ball and when he touched it I nearly jumped out of the chair.

"Take it easy, son. You seem to have

a nice thick skull. You're lucky it's still in one piece. You'll be all right, only you'll have a headache for a few days."

He finished bandaging me up, then pulled a chair over and straddled it. He fished out a pack of cigarettes and we lit up. "Now let's have the story," he said.

I let him have it all. How I'd read about the robbery, guessed at once that Gary had done it and where he would try to hide out. How I had gone to the cottage to get the money and turn Gary over to the police and been cracked on the head for my pains.

"And you didn't see who hit you?"

"No. I had my back to whomever it was. But it's pretty clear that whoever hit me also shot Gary and took the money. And I have a hunch who that was. Nothing definite. Just a hunch."

"Go ahead."

"It's like this. Whoever did it knew about the cottage. That is, unless it was some haphazard intruder and I can't believe that. Now the only ones who had ever been there were Gary and myself, you, Mary Lou and—Bill Smith. Bill is my choice, though I don't see how I could ever prove it."

HE FROWNED and flicked ashes onto the floor. For a minute he just sat there pulling at his lower lip. Then, "Is Bill Smith left-handed?"

I stared at him. He seemed to be serious about it and I had to think. "No," I said finally. "I'm sure he isn't. I've seen him write many times and he uses his right hand."

He shook his head. "Then it couldn't have been Smith," he said positively.

"Why not?"

"Look," he said, crushing his cigarette out on the floor, "you were hit—probably with the butt of gun—on the left side of the head, about an inch in front of the ear. And you were hit hard—make no mistake about that. You had your back

to whomever it was and I'm willing to bet a million he swung at you with his left hand. If he used his right it would have had to be a back-hand blow and I can't imagine that. Do you get it?"

I nodded. "That let's Smith out and it leaves me sunk." I laughed. "It leaves you out too, Doc. I've seen you write too many prescriptions. Maybe it was Mary Lou!"

He smiled and got up. I realized then that he still hadn't told me how bad Gary was hurt. He must have read my mind.

"I hate to tell you this, Jim," he said slowly. "Guess that's why I've been putting it off. But—well, your brother hasn't a chance in the world."

"He's not conscious?"

"No and I doubt if he ever will be. I've done all that can be done for him and it isn't much. It's just a question of time and not much time at that. Mary Lou's with him now. Do you want to see him?"

I shook my head and tears burned in my eyes. "I guess I can't take it, Doc," I said.

He patted my shoulder. "I know how you feel. I'm sorry." He cleared his throat and turned away. "Maybe you'd better go in the living-room and wait."

I stumbled out of the office, thinking about the good-looking, worthless kid I'd looked after for so long. He'd never been any good—but then that old line about blood being thicker than water is something you can't get away from.

Bill Smith was in the living-room, thumbing through a magazine. He looked up when I came in and didn't seem surprised. "Do you live here?" I said.

He smiled. "No and neither do you. The truth is I'm waiting for somebody."

"Mary Lou's busy."

"I'm not waiting for her just now. I'm waiting for Mr. Welliver."

"What's he coming here for?"

"To see you. I called and told him you were here."

"How did you find out I was here?"

"That's simple. I drove by and saw your car. What's happened to you—another accident?"

"Never mind that. What's the idea of calling Welliver?"

He stood up and stretched his arms. "Just giving you a break. I could have called the police but I decided to leave that up to him."

"I'm going to give you another kind of a break," I said. "Right now." But just then Mr. Welliver walked up the steps, waddled across the porch and stopped at the door.

Smith laughed and pulled the door open. Then he pointed at me. "There he is, sir," he said, talking like the hero in an old-fashioned melodrama. "The case is in your hands."

WELLIVER sniffed, took his hat and walked across to the davenport and sat down. He took out a handkerchief and mopped his fleshy red face which was wet with sweat. Then he looked at me like a father would look at a son who had just been pinched for holding up a gas station.

"I never thought you'd do a thing like that, Jim," he said.

"You thought right."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't do it."

He shook his head sadly. "That line won't help you. The office door was opened with a key. The safe was opened by someone who knew the combination. There—"

"And since I had a key and knew the combination and had just been fired, you're positive it was me."

He nodded. "Now Jim, I want to be easy with you. Your accident was a terrible break and I can understand your desperation. So if you'll just return the money I'll do all I can to keep you from going to jail."

"That's thoughtful of you, it just happens I didn't take the money, so naturally I can't return it."

Smith snickered. "What'd I tell you, J. B."

"You'd better tell the truth," Welliver said, frowning. "I'm trying to be fair, but—"

"I'll tell you the truth," I interrupted him. "Here it is. My brother, Gary, took your money, but he'll never go to jail. He's in another room of this house and he's dying. He was shot and the person who shot him got the money."

"Your brother!" Welliver gasped.

"Yes. I found him this morning at a cottage I'd rented for the summer. Smith knows where it is—he's been there. I meant to turn Gary over to the police and give the money back to you. But somebody else entered the picture then and the result is, Gary is dying and I'm nursing a banged-up head—and the money is gone."

"You're not going to fall for this, are you, J. B.?" Smith said.

Welliver ignored him. "And you don't know who it was?"

"No. But I'm going to find out. And I'm going to get that money back."

Smith laughed. "And, of course, you had nothing to do with the robbery!"

"I was in a hotel in Midland at the time and I can prove it."

"Oh, certainly," he came back. "But you could have put him up to it. You could have arranged to meet him at the cottage this morning." He sneered at me and then, licking his lips, looked at Welliver. He turned back to me and let me have it. "You might have got in a fight with him over the money. He might have cracked you on the head, just before—just before you shot him!"

I WASN'T in any shape to fight. My head was throbbing and my legs felt like a couple of water-soaked bath towels.

Besides I was too mad to be any good. But a man can't always pick his time and place. I walked over to him and slapped his face, plenty hard.

He stood up then and squared off. He was grinning but my fingers had left red marks on his cheek. I threw my left fist at his jaw but it didn't land. His right flicked out and caught me on the chin. It wasn't a knockout punch, but it was enough to set me back on my heels. He didn't follow it up, just stood there grinning, and I threw a roundhouse right and missed. His right shot out again and landed, this time full on the mouth. My lips were numb and I felt something trickle down my chin.

I'd done a little boxing in gymnasiums, just enough to learn a few fundamentals, but there was something here I'd never come up against before. Nobody had ever hit me with a right hand that way.

"Stop it, you fools," Welliver yelled.

I shoved him out of the way and went for Smith, but that right caught me again—and then again. Both punches landed on the jaw and things began to get hazy. He threw his left then, from away back. I just managed to pull my head back and his fist whistled by. And then it came to me—the reason why he could hit me with his right so easily and why his left swing, when he threw it, was his Sunday punch.

Something else came to me then—something I'd been told by a boxing instructor about how to fight against a style like that. The thing to do was to crowd him, work in close and uppercut with my right. I shook my head and braced myself and his right caught me under the eye. I rushed him then, met him coming in and brought my own right up from the waist with everything I had behind it.

The boxing teacher was right. The punch landed under the chin and his head snapped back. Then he sagged forward and I caught him with another uppercut and it was all over.

I LOOKED at him as he lay there on the floor and I was feeling happy for the first time in more than a week when Doc Sanborn rushed into the room.

He looked at Smith and then at me. He was plenty mad. "What is all this?" he snapped. "Don't you know that a man is dying in this house?"

"I'm sorry, Doc," I said, "but I couldn't help it. And I know now who shot Gary and who hit me and who got the money."

He stared at me and old man Welliver's three chins fell against his chest.

"What are you talking about?" Doc asked.

"It was Bill Smith," I said. "I thought he was right-handed, but I was wrong. He was taught to write with his right hand and that was all. When he fights he's a left-hander and I ought to know. I just had a demonstration."

Doc frowned. "I hope you're right," he said. "You're pretty much banged up but I'll take care of you later. Right now I've got to get back to Gary." He turned and walked out of the room.

Welliver pulled at my arm. "What makes you so sure it was Smith?"

"Whoever it was," I told him, "had to know about the cottage. That narrowed the field considerably. And then Doc Sanborn pointed out—and I'm sure he's right—that whoever hit me was left-handed. A right-handed man doesn't use his left when he wants to be sure of knocking somebody cold. That narrowed the field some more—in fact it seemed to clear Smith. Only I discovered—and you saw how—that Smith's really left-handed."

He was beginning to stir now and I knelt down, felt in his hip pocket and came up with a bunch of keys. I handed them to Welliver.

"It's just barely possible," I said, "that he has the money in his car. Anyway, it won't hurt to look."

He nodded, took the keys and went out the front door.

Smith moaned and then sat up. He put his hand to his chin and took it away quick. "You've broken my jaw," he mumbled.

I had to laugh. "I told you I would. And that isn't all. I've done more than that."

He didn't say anything, just struggled to his feet, wobbled over to an easy chair and flopped in it.

Mary Lou came into the room, followed closely by Doc Sanborn. I stood up and they came over to me.

"I'm sorry, Jim," Doc said. "Gary has just died."

I was still pretty wobbly and his news didn't steady me any. I braced myself by putting my left hand on his shoulder. "Poor kid," I muttered. "He never meant to be the way he was. He just—just never had a chance."

Welliver came back across the porch and into the room. He didn't say anything.

"You know you have my sympathy," Doc said. His eyes were kind as ever, but they looked tired.

"I know," I said. "You've been a real friend. Did he say anything before—before—"

He nodded. "He said something very important. Mary Lou heard him, too. She knows, and I know, just how fine you've been—how fine and how completely foolish."

My fingers bit into his shoulder and his lips tightened and he jerked away.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Didn't mean to hurt you. What did he say?"

Mary Lou answered. "He said he was driving your car the night the children were killed. He said you took the blame to save him from prison. Oh, Jim, you *were* a fool but I love you all the more for it."

I looked at Doc. "Is that all he said? Couldn't he tell who shot him?"

He shook his head. "He wasn't con-

scious long. And the accident was all he seemed to think about."

I shrugged. "Oh well, I think the rest of it is all taken care of." I turned to Welliver. "Find anything?"

"No. It wasn't in the car."

"He had plenty of time to hide it, but don't worry, we'll find it."

Smith was looking at me. "What are you hunting for?"

"That eleven grand you stole from J. B.'s office."

He sank back in his chair and stared at me. "I never stole anything," he muttered.

Doc Sanborn spoke up. "I'd like to stay," he said, "but there's a patient I have to call on." He went back into his office.

IT WAS then that Welliver took charge of things. It wasn't hard for him to do. He'd been a big shot for a good many years.

"This thing shouldn't be hard to settle," he said, fixing his slightly bulging eyes on Smith. "Have you an alibi? Can you prove you weren't at the cottage at the time of the shooting?"

Smith was silent and J. B. turned to me. "Just what time was it that your brother was shot?"

I had to think. I had arrived at the cottage about a quarter after ten. And I hadn't been there long before it happened. "It was about ten thirty," I said.

"All right," Welliver said. "Where were you at ten thirty this morning, Smith?"

Smith looked at him and then turned his head away. "That's my business," he said sullenly.

Welliver shook his big head. "Oh no, it isn't. At ten thirty in the morning you're supposed to be working for me. So it's my business. Where were you?"

Smith just looked at him with his lips pressed into a thin line.

Welliver stood up. "O. K., then," he said. "I think it's about time the police were called." He looked at Mary Lou. "Where's the telephone?"

"In the office."

Welliver got up and walked out of the room.

Smith started to get to his feet and I came over and stood in front of him. "You're staying here," I said.

He shrugged and leaned back in his chair. Pretty soon J. B. came back. "They're on their way," he said.

Smith was chewing on his lower lip and looking at Welliver out of the corner of his eye. Finally he let out a long breath and sat up straight. "I guess I'm fired," he said.

Welliver snorted. "You're worse than fired. You're going to stand trial for murder."

Smith shook his head. "I'm not worrying about that. I can prove where I was at ten thirty this morning. The only thing is, I'll lose my job doing it." He looked at me. "That ought to give you some satisfaction."

"You're talking Greek," said Welliver. "Get down to brass tacks."

"I will," Smith said. "You warned me to quit playing the market. You told me you'd fire me if I didn't. Well, I didn't. That's where I was at ten thirty this morning—in fact I was there from ten till nearly eleven—watching the board at Brown and Weston's. All you have to do is call them and ask for Billy Clark. I was with him all the time."

Welliver rubbed his upper chin. "You're fired," he said finally, "regardless. But I'm going to check up on you anyway, just for luck." He got up and left the room.

I knew it wouldn't do any good. Smith would never give that kind of an alibi unless he knew it would stand up. And with Smith out of it, who was left? Nobody but me. And what chance would I

have to prove myself innocent with Gary dead? The evidence against me was circumstantial but there was a lot of it. I was sunk.

I GOT up and followed J. B. into the office, but I didn't get very far—just past the doorway. There I stopped, frozen in my tracks, looking at Welliver who hunched over the telephone. He was dialing with his left hand!

I stood there watching him, saw that his lips were moving, saw him put down the receiver, get up and walk toward me shaking his head. I stood in his path.

"He was there all right," he said. "His alibi is good." He stopped and looked at me, like he expected me either to step aside or go into the living-room ahead of him. I didn't move.

"How about your alibi," I said. "Where were you at ten thirty this morning?"

His eyes bulged more than ever. "You haven't lost your mind, have you, Jim?" he asked softly.

"Maybe I have," I said, "but I'm still rational enough to notice that you're left-handed."

"Of course I am," he snorted. "Always have been and always will be. That doesn't mean I killed your brother. And it doesn't mean I robbed myself."

"Where were you at ten thirty?"

"I was at police headquarters all morning," he said. "That's where I was when Smith called me. The police will be here in a minute and they'll tell you the same thing."

I tried to pull myself together. My head felt like a giant bomber ready to take off with all twelve motors throbbing. "I believe you," I said, "and I need a drink."

I walked into the living-room ahead of him, then turned to the right and opened the door that led into Doc's private office. He was coming toward the door as I went in. He had his hat and coat on and his medicine bag in his hand.

"I need a drink, Doc," I said.

"Help yourself, Jim." He waved his hand toward the counter that ran along the outside wall and stopped at the sink. "I'm in a hurry."

There was a bottle of whiskey, three-fourths full, on the counter. And there were other things. A lot of little round, squatty bottles with pills of various colors in them, and a stethoscope and one of those businesses a doctor uses to take a patient's blood pressure. I didn't stop to take a drink.

Doc was at the front door leading to the porch when I got into the living-room.

"Just a minute," I called, hurrying up to him. "This head of mine is giving me fits. Haven't you something in that case that would help me?"

He looked exasperated and it was the first time I'd ever seen him that way. Then he sort of shrugged his shoulders and came away from the door.

"Come back into the office with me," he said, "and I'll get you something."

But I stood in his way. "I don't want anything in the office," I said. "I want it out of your medicine kit."

He stared at me and moved back toward the door. "You must be crazy, Jim," he said.

"I wouldn't be surprised," I told him. Then I grabbed the medicine case out of his hand and shoved him away. I pulled up the little silver clasp on the case and opened it. It was crammed full of greenbacks.

I walked across the room and tossed the case into Welliver's lap. "There's your money," I said. "And now I'm through with this whole business."

SOMEBODY was walking heavily across the porch by this time and Doc Sanborn had come back and dropped into an easy chair. As Smith opened the door for the police I saw Doc's hand move from his vest pocket to his mouth. I didn't say anything, didn't even look at the officers. I was watching Doc.

He was leaning back in his chair looking at the ceiling. The lines seemed to have gone out of his face and his lips were stretched in a smile.

"I never meant to hurt you, Jim," he said. "We've always been friends. But when I heard about the robbery I knew—just as you did—who was responsible. And I knew where he'd be hiding out. I went there and—well, you know what happened. I didn't think it would end in murder, but it did. It was the gambling—the one thing that's mastered me all my life. I could never get away from it. I owed them so much—the gamblers, I mean. They had threatened me and I was afraid, desperate. But I'll be safe—very safe—very soon."

And then he was smiling and a second later the smile was gone and his lips were twisted out of shape and his whole face seemed to break up into pieces. His eyes stayed open, but only the whites of them showed. Mary Lou ran over to him, felt for his pulse, then dropped his arm.

"He's dead," she said.

He'd killed my kid brother, he'd nearly fractured my skull, he'd come close to sending me to jail for robbery or murder. But—

"I'm sorry," I said—and I meant it.

Welliver was on his feet, holding the medicine case in his left hand. "What I can't understand," he said, "is how you guessed it was Doc—how you knew his medicine case had the money in it."

"It wasn't a guess," I said. "First I

thought it was Smith and I broke his jaw—at least I hope I broke his jaw. I suspected him because he fought left-handed—but he had a perfect alibi. Then I suspected you, because you are left-handed—though why you should rob yourself was beyond me—and you had a perfect alibi. But I never suspected Doc at all until—"

"Go ahead," said Welliver.

"It was the way he jerked away when I pressed my fingers into his shoulder—his right shoulder—a while ago." I turned to Mary Lou. "Had he hurt himself?"

"He was in an auto accident last night," she said softly. "His shoulder and arm were pretty badly bruised."

"Bruised enough," I said "so that when he swung on me at the cottage he had to use his left hand. But there was something else. When I went into his office a few minutes ago I saw that he'd emptied everything out of his medicine kit. That was all I had to know."

Welliver was shaking my hand. Bill Smith was sitting on the davenport looking sullen. The officers were just standing there. They seemed to know that it wasn't their turn to talk. And Mary Lou was holding my hand and standing very close and looking up at me.

"Your job," Welliver said, clearing his throat with more noise than was necessary, "is waiting for you."

"Thanks," I said.

"I mean, of course," he went on, "it will be waiting for you after the honeymoon."



Everyone went to Ogammeran's annual fashion show—even, as Inspector Conway discovered, a nude girl and a corpse! But the suave Inspector took it all in his stride—until it began to look as if the theft of the golden slippers was the start of a murder trail that had no ending. **DEATH ASKED FOR GOLDEN SLIPPERS** is

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My fifth slug laid him out cold.

BLACK IS WHITE

by
Jackson Gregory Jr.

If you're a smart gambler and know the percentages it's easy enough to win a murder jack-pot. All you have to do is play your slugs close to your chest and bet on the black when Death deals the cards.

IT WAS about eleven thirty that Tuesday night when I got word of the killing. I was in a game in the back of Mick Ryan's place, three hundred bucks on velvet and a pat flush in my hand. Smitty, the bartender, came in and tapped me on the shoulder just as I was tilting the pot ten blues.

"Listen, Black." Smitty's voice was jumpy with excitement. "I got news I figure you better hear."

"Yeah?" I hitched around in my chair to face him. "What is it?"

"They got Fowler!" When Smitty said that, one of the guys at the table started to laugh. I looked at him, and he shut up.

"Got Fowler did they?" I chucked my flush into the middle of the table and stood up. "Where'd you hear that, Smitty?"

"Dodo told me. He guessed you might be here." The barkeep's eyes were bright like two shiny black buttons. "They just now found Fowler out on Mesa between Hillgard and Pine."

"Thanks, fella." I went across the room and got my hat and overcoat down off the hook.

While I was pulling on the coat, Smit-

ty sidled up to me, whispered: "Listen, Black, I got a thirty-two up front if you ain't got a gun on you."

"You're a little young to be getting ideas," I told him. Then I went out the back way to where my car was parked.

IT WAS cold out, and dry with that wind that comes in off the desert. I rolled the windows of the coupe shut as I swung out into the traffic. The engine coughed a couple of times before it began to pick up speed.

Mesa is a forty-foot-wide concrete street where twenty grand gets you a nice little cottage. It's lined with boulevard stops, so I took it fast. The expansion joints clipped by under the tires, making a sharp snapping noise.

By the time I got to Hillgard, there was a prowler car in the middle of the intersection. The harness cop out in front of it was waving me right on Hillgard with his flash. Ahead I could see an ambulance and another radio car. Their headlights showed half a dozen people grouped around a black form that was sprawled on the sidewalk.

"You can't go through here," the cop yelled at me as I slowed down. "Turn right and keep moving."

I rolled down the window and poked my head out.

He turned the flash in my eyes, got a good look at me. Then he came over, saying: "Hell, Black, I didn't know it was you. If—"

"That's O.K.," I stopped him. "My brother here?"

"No, not yet. He's on his way, though."

"Yeah, I guess he would be." I looked at the ambulance. "Isn't he dead?"

"Dead!" The cop let out a grunt. "The guy's practically cut in two with a Tommy gun. The people in the house over there called the ambulance when they heard the shooting."

"What the hell!" I said. "They kill him right here?"

"I guess so." The cop stepped away from the running board to signal a car up Hillgard. When he came back, he said: "Nobody saw it happen, but it looks like they pushed Fowler out of the car, then got him in the back when he was trying to run away."

I swore under my breath, thinking of Harry Dessler, and thinking of him made me get cold inside like I had ice in my belly. Plain enough this was Dessler's work. It was going to be hard for the kid brother to swallow.

"Thanks, copper." I slipped the car into gear, pulled up behind the ambulance.

Fowler was a mess. Without counting, I could see that at least ten or fifteen slugs had been pumped into his back. Dum-dums they must have been, because the whole front of his chest was a caved-in, bloody wreck. Nice guy, Dessler.

"Hello, Black." I looked up and saw Jerry Kittner on the other side of Fowler's pool of blood. Jerry was the ambulance doc. I nodded to him.

My ears picked up the sound of a siren coming from the west. While it was getting louder, I asked one of the radio cops that was standing around: "How long ago did they get him?"

"About twenty minutes," the cop told me. "That's the time the bird in that house heard the shooting." He jerked his thumb toward the sprawling mansion across the street.

"Where's the guy now?"

"Hell, he took one look at Fowler and got sick," the cop explained.

"Do you blame him?" I turned to look back down the street where the siren was getting loud now. I could see the car coming fast, its red spot glowing above the glare of the two headlights.

Its tires squealed on the pavement as it braked up alongside of us. Nat Free-

man was driving, the kid brother riding with him. Nat's a homicide dick, and they don't come any better in this city or any other. But I could already see that this wasn't a case for him to crack, or for the kid brother either.

I COULD see the kid's face as he piled out of the car. It was pale as hell, and his lips were set tight against his teeth. He had worked like hell for something, and now it was all ripped to blazes with Tommy slugs.

"Hello, Blackie," he said when he saw me. He stuck his hand out, and I took it. He's a good-looking youngster that brother of mine. Just opposite from me, blond and built light and full of smiles most of the time.

His eyes went from me to Fowler. He didn't say anything, just stood there looking while Nat Freeman strode around the car and came up alongside of him.

"Son of a b——!" Nat swore. "I'd like to kill that guy with my own hands!" He was talking about Dessler.

The kid threw back his shoulders, took a deep breath. Then he snapped: "Any witnesses?"

"No sir," the cop I'd been talking to answered. "Just a guy that heard the shooting."

While we watched, the kid got down on his knees and went through Fowler's pockets. They were empty. All he got was blood on his hands. He stood up, wiping his hands on his handkerchief. Then he wadded the handkerchief up, pitched it into the gutter.

"Like I told you, Nat," he said, shaking his head wearily. "We'll never pin it on him. We wasted our time coming out here."

"Yeah." Nat turned on Kittner, the ambulance doctor. "Since you stuck around so long, Jerry, you can take Fowler in. The M.E.'ll be over to see him."

"I want to talk to you a minute, kid,"

I said, starting up the sidewalk. He stared after me a minute, then followed.

When we were alone, I asked him: "This shoots your case against Dessler all to hell, doesn't it?"

"What do you think, Blackie?" he said, shrugging. "Fowler was the one witness that would testify tomorrow, and—well, there he goes." I looked and saw he was covered with a sheet now. They were loading him into the ambulance.

"Yeah, there he goes." I fished out a cigarette, rolled it, unlighted, between my fingers. "Too damn bad that isn't Dessler they're packing off to the morgue."

"He can't keep it up forever," the kid said. "He'll get what's coming to him."

"Think so? He's a wise hombre, kid. He knows all the ropes. He was running the rackets in this town before you ever thought of being D.A. Fowler wasn't the first guy to think of putting the finger on Dessler, and they're all just as dead as he is."

"So what, Blackie?" the kid snapped his words out bitterly. "Telling me I should lay off?"

"Hell no, not that." I gave the cigarette a twist so that the paper ripped and the shreds of tobacco spurted out. Then I tossed it out onto the street. "You're just going after him the wrong way, that's all. He's smart enough to go on beating the law, to keep from paying up for what he's done. Maybe some day you'll land him for six months or a year on some dinky charge, but that don't pay for murder, kid. There's only one thing that can make him square up his debt."

"What's that?" he asked.

"A little of his own medicine. There's no guy that ever put off paying up when death came asking for a settlement."

"Blackie." The kid's voice was all mixed up, like he was trying to be hard and couldn't. "I don't want any of that, Blackie. My job is to get Dessler and

all the rats like him, but not that way. Don't go off thinking you'd do me a favor killing him. Then it'd be my job to see you swing for it."

"Hell, I know that." I laughed as though I'd been kidding. "What're you going to do now—about Fowler?"

"I don't know." He raked his fingers through his hair. "Damn it, Blackie, I just plain don't know."

"What do you think of this, kid?" I asked him. "How about you and me and Nat Freeman going around and paying Dessler a visit."

"What good would that—" He stopped and looked at me. "All right. It won't hurt anything."

I HAD three good reasons for wanting to see Harry Dessler. First, there was a chance, though damn small, that we would get something on him that would save me a lot of trouble. Then, too, I was sort of curious what kind of place a hoodlum with a million dollars would live in. But mainly I wanted to spot the layout of his place—how to get into it, and how to get out.

He lived in the whole top floor of the Montaine Apartments up on Dently Avenue. A swank place, the Montaine, where a single meant one-fifty per month. Dessler owned it.

I drove out there in my own car, following behind Nat and the kid. They parked in front of the place with me right behind them. There wasn't any doorman that late at night, so we had to let ourselves out.

When we were all out on the sidewalk, I asked: "Doesn't this place have a garage or something?"

"Yeah, sure," Nat said. "Figure you want a look at Dessler's car?"

"Why not?" I asked.

"Sure, why not?" he echoed. "Come on."

He led us to a driveway at the side of

the building. Halfway back it ramped down into a basement garage.

It was a big place with bright lights and white painted walls. There were maybe two dozen cars in it, and all of them spelled money on the line. A smart-looking, freckled kid of twenty was the attendant. He was reading a magazine, but when he spotted us he jumped up quick.

"Good-evening," he said. "Can I help you?"

"Sure thing, sonny," Nat told him. "Is Harry Dessler's car here?"

"Yes, they're both here," he answered. "Why?"

"Was he out in either of them tonight?" my brother asked quickly.

"No." The boy looked at each of us, trying to figure out what it was all about. "What does it have to do with you anyhow?"

"Just this." Nat peeled back his coat, flashed his badge. "Now which are Dessler's cars?"

"Well. . . ." He looked doubtful, then shrugged. "Those are his." He pointed out two sedans.

We looked those two cars over. Not by just standing and staring at them, but by going over them inch by inch—behind the seats, on the floor, anywhere that we might find some trace of Fowler. And we found just what we expected—nothing.

"Thanks, sonny," Nat said to the attendant. Then we went back up the ramp and around into the building at the front.

A thin-shouldered guy in big glasses was behind the desk. He stared at us owlishly, asked: "Someone you wish to see?"

"Sure," Nat told him. "Santa Claus."

The guy started to squawk about us having to be announced, but I shut him up by leaning over the desk and giving him the once-over. Then Nat led us straight on back the hall past the regular elevator.

"Dessler's got a private elevator," he

explained, "and I've got a key that'll open it."

"You got this place pretty well cased," I said.

"Sure, why not," Nat grunted.

At the back of the hall were two doors, both locked. One led outside, the other was to Dessler's elevator. I spotted both the locks as Yale. Nat got his keys out, fished around for the right one. When he turned it in the lock, there was a humming noise as the elevator came down to us. After about a minute the humming stopped, there was a click, and the door swung automatically open.

WHEN we got up to Dessler's floor, the door there swung open on a small room. Standing there, looking big as hell in the smallness of the place, was Harry Dessler. He was dressed like he always did, all in black except for a white shirt. Good-looking as the devil, he grinned at us.

"Hello boys," he said. "Glad to see you." Nat grunted at this, and the kid brother looked at him like he was some kind of snake. Me, I grinned at him because I was figuring out how I was going to kill him.

"Just in time for a drink," he said mockingly. "Come on in."

He led the way into his living-room. It knocked your eye out, that place. The walls and floor were jet black. Spread out on that floor was a huge rug, white and soft and fluffy. Half the furniture was white, and half black. It gave a screwy effect and would have driven me nuts in no time at all, but it sure was different.

"Just had some guests," he excused the empty glasses that were strewn over the place. "You should have been here an hour ago—we had quite some party."

"I suppose they were here with you all night," the kid observed caustically.

"Yes, right here all night." Dessler laughed. Then he set out four clean

glasses, filled them with whiskey and soda. The kid wouldn't touch his. I took mine and walked over to where a fire was still crackling in the big fireplace.

"How do you like my place?" Dessler asked.

"Swell," Nat told him, sinking down into a soft chair and looking at the bubbles in his drink. "Crime must be paying."

"I don't get that crack," Dessler said, and laughed again. Then he turned to the kid brother. "Tough about Fowler," he said. "I just heard."

"Did you?" the kid shot back.

"Yes." Dessler shook his head as though he was sad about it. "I'm going to miss hearing you try me on that extortion charge."

"Maybe you didn't hear right," the kid said softly. "Fowler isn't dead."

A smart guy, Dessler. He did his own killings, and he knew they were done right. When the kid pulled that one, he raised one eyebrow and smiled.

"Why don't you cut out this foolishness, Hall," he said. "Fall in with me and I'll make a big shot out of you. Give me the same breaks you give that big brother of yours."

"What the hell do you mean by that?" the kid snapped.

"Any sucker knows Black makes his money gambling," Dessler said. "Why don't you clean him out, and lay off me?"

I swallowed the last of my drink and set the glass on a table. Then I walked over, pushed the kid back, stood facing Dessler.

"You know, Harry, I don't like you," I said to him.

"So what!" His mouth was twisted in a sneer. "I'm going to bust you and that kid brother of yours clean out of this town."

"Got a gun on you, Harry?" I asked him.

"To hell with you," he snapped. "Think

I'm going to give you a chance to—"

I swung my open hand and slapped him across the face, hard. Then I gave him a push with my left that sent him staggering back, sprawling into a chair.

His face blanched white, except where my fingers had left red welts. He didn't say anything, just stared at me with cold hate in his eyes.

"If you ever want me," I said, "you know where to find me. And here's a tip, Harry. You better come soon before I come after you."

We left him still sitting there. Going down in the elevator, we kept our thoughts to ourselves. I didn't show it, but inside I was quivering like I had a strong electric current running through me.

IT WAS nearly three when I got home, and the bed looked mighty damn good. I still had one thing to do, though. I got out the old .38 from the drawer where it had been for nearly a year. I wear it way around on my left side in a special holster that fits up against my short ribs. I learned that trick from a killer in Havana. As long as you're standing up, the gun won't show under your coat, and it makes for a thirty percent faster draw than a shoulder clip.

I strapped the holster on, slipped the .38 into it. For half an hour I practiced drawing it, practiced standing up, lying down, even sitting on the floor. Then, satisfied that I hadn't gone rusty, I called it a day.

It was eleven thirty and raining when I woke up. I took my time getting dressed—and until Dessler was out of the way, the .38 was as important a piece of clothing as my pants. Then I called a cab, rode across town to the Gotham for a real breakfast.

Feeling good with the food in my belly, I went shopping. What I got was a black, snug-fitting overcoat, a soft black felt hat, and a black tie. Harry Dessler always

dressed all in black, except for his shirt.

I took those things home myself, because I didn't want anybody remembering that they had been delivered to me. Not that it would have meant anything, but I was playing a pat hand for all it was worth.

About four in the afternoon I splashed across the rain-drenched sidewalk into Mac's shop. He's a short-legged, stocky little Scotch locksmith, Mac is. He should have been in the can twenty years ago, but I'll give any man odds that he never does see the inside of a jail-house.

He was sitting behind his work-bench, a short-stemmed, smelly pipe in his mouth and a newspaper clenched in his hand.

"How you doing, Mac?" I leaned my elbows on his bench and looked at him.

"Well, damme if it ain't Black Hall." He tossed his paper onto the grimy floor and stood up. "What're you doing down this way?"

"Just thought I'd say hello, Mac." I stared idly at the keys that were hung on their nails on the wall behind him. "You got a lot of keys there."

"Yeah." Pulling the pipe out of his mouth, he tamped the tobacco down with a blunt middle finger.

"I've always liked keys," I told him. "Now if I had a set of master keys that'd open any Yale lock, I'd be happy."

"That ain't legal, Black," he said.

"I'd pay you for them, Mac." I took out my pocketbook and laid two tens on the table. "Of course if you didn't give them to me, I might beat the living hell out of you."

"Yeah, I know, but I can't do it." Then he winked at me and picked up the two tens. Fifteen minutes later I had the keys.

With them in my pocket, I was ready to start the ball rolling. First thing I did was to get Dodo Falls on the phone. Dodo's a little, dried-up crook that I did a favor for once.

"Spread this around pronto," I said.

"Harry Dessler is gunning for Joe Larados."

"O.K., Black." And I knew I could count on Dodo.

Joe Larados runs the Silver Slipper Club out on Temple. It's more of a dive than a nightclub. Upstairs he has a room with a couple of wheels and a crap game. That's about all he has, that joint and three or four bookie shops. Not much for a guy that used to be the racket king before Dessler squeezed him out.

I dropped into the Slipper after dinner for a drink. I took my whiskey in a booth where nobody noticed me. When I left the place, I had one of the menus tucked under my coat.

I TOOK another drink around at Mick Ryan's place. Smitty was at the bar, and while he watched me drink my whiskey, he said: "Find out who killed Fowler?"

"I could guess," I told him.

"Yeah, and so could I." He picked up a glass and began to polish it. "It looks like he's really got his killing blood stirred up."

"Meaning Dessler?" I said.

"Meaning him." Smitty leaned toward me across the bar. "Hear what the boys are saying about him and Larados?"

I shook my head.

Smitty told me: "Don't pass it on, but Dessler's out gunning for Joe."

"Yeah?" I shrugged. "So what? They're both rats. One of them's a killer and the other's a murderer, and me, I don't like either breed."

Smitty looked at me and grinned.

When I left Mick Ryan's, I drove my car up Dorraine. This street, part of a boom subdivision that went broke six or seven years ago, winds up the side of the hills back of the city. The street-lights are all busted, and the only cars that go along it at night are occasional neckers.

I parked my car up a dead-end side

road that was paved. It had to be paved so that I wouldn't be leaving any tire tracks. Then I started walking back toward the city.

The rain had petered out, leaving the air clean-washed and clear. The clouds were still hanging on, red from the light of the city. It seemed lonesome as hell up there, with just the sound of my heels clicking on the pavement. Inside of me I was already getting that tight, cold feeling that comes on when I'm out to kill a rat.

It took me better than half an hour to reach a cab stand. I took the taxi to my house, had it wait while I got dressed. When I came out again everything I had on was black except for a white shirt. My gloves were black, my scarf, my soft felt hat, my overcoat, everything. Tucked underneath my coat was the menu I had taken from Larados' Silver Slipper.

I got out of the cab six blocks from Dessler's apartment. My wrist watch showed eleven thirty. I walked those six blocks thinking of nothing but the fresh smell of the air. I was through planning—everything was ready. If things didn't work out tonight, they would tomorrow night or the next.

Every window on the top floor of the Montaine was lighted. That was swell. It meant Dessler was home.

There was a car coming so I kept on walking until it was out of sight. Then I went fast across the street. There was a big house there, directly opposite the Montaine. It was set well back from the street and screened off by a high, thick hedge. I squeezed myself back out of sight into that hedge and waited.

The branches were cold and wet with the rain. They pressed into my sides and scrubbed across my face. My muscles got cramped and then numb. I wanted to smoke and couldn't.

It was a quarter after two when five couples came out of the Montaine, drove

away. Twenty minutes later the lights in the top floor began to go out one by one.

I waited half an hour after Dessler's apartment was dark before I moved out of the hedge. The street was empty. I crossed, went back along the driveway at the side of the Montaine. The garage was lighted, the same freckled kid in there, dozing in a chair. I followed the drive on around to the back of the building.

MAC'S keys worked O.K. After a couple of tries I got the back door open. The hall was empty. A different key opened the elevator. The car was on the ground floor. While I rode up in it I got out my pencil flash and my .38. Halfway up I smashed the elevator bulb with my gun.

The elevator door opened automatically and I stepped out, listening. Dessler was asleep all right. Even from where I stood I could hear the sound of his heavy snoring.

I went through that black-and-white living-room, using the flash only enough to keep me from banging into furniture. The sounds Dessler made led me to the right bedroom. He was sleeping in black pajamas, sprawled on his back.

I stood there beside the bed, letting the flash shine on his eyelids. His mouth was sagging open, and I could smell the liquor on his breath. But even like that he was a good-looking devil.

I tried to figure out what made a guy like that—smart, good-looking, with everything on the ball—turn into a rotten crook. Me, I'm no saint, but even if I do make my living gambling I do my damndest to shoot square. But not Dessler. He was plain crooked all the way through.

While I looked at him, he began to stir restlessly under the beam of light. His snoring choked off and his mouth shut with a snap. His eyes flew open.

"Quiet, pal," I said.

He reared up in bed and tried to make me out past the glare of the light. He was wide awake. tense.

"Who the hell are you?" he hissed.

"Get up, Dessler!" I shoved my right hand forward. The flash glinted on the blue steel of the .38, showed my gloved finger tight against the trigger.

I hadn't counted on him doing what he did then. He turned yellow, whimpering for me not to kill him. So that was the answer why he was a killer and a crook. It made me sick.

"Get up!" I told him again. He did, shaking with fear. Covering him with my flash, I made him dress. I made him put on his black overcoat, hat, scarf and gloves.

I didn't give him a chance to get a look at me, kept the flash shining in his eyes. Just in case, I even pulled the black scarf I was wearing up over my face. He was so damn scared he couldn't think straight enough to even guess who I was.

With my .38 in his back, he called the freckled kid downstairs in the garage, had him take the car out to the back door. Then, while I was giving the kid plenty of time to get out of the way, I made Dessler dig up his gun. It was in a drawer of his bedroom, and I grinned when I saw it. It was a .38 revolver, the same make as mine, and I knew I could use it O.K.

I sat for another ten minutes on the edge of his bed, watching him chew at his lips. Then I said: "All right, pal, let's get going."

We got down the elevator and out the the back door without anybody seeing us. I still kept the scarf over my face—I didn't want Dessler to recognize me.

With him at the wheel and me in back, we slid out of the driveway. As I growled directions at him, I kept wondering what was going on in his mind. Maybe he was so scared that he wasn't thinking at all.

We went up Dorraine Drive into the hills. When I made him pull over to the side of the road about half a mile from where I had left my car, he turned around, pleading: "For God's sake, don't kill me! I'll square it up with you! I'll—"

I shut him up by bringing the barrel of my gun down hard against the side of his head. He grunted, slid over sideways on the seat.

I drove on the rest of the way to my car. Before tying him up and dumping him in the back part of my coupe, I spread his prints all over the menu from the Silver Slipper. Then I left him there, drove his car back down into the city.

NOBODY paid much attention to me when I first went into the Silver Slipper Club. It was nearly four and everybody there was pretty well liquored up. They were still serving drinks, though it's against the law after two thirty.

I went straight to an empty booth where I could keep an eye on Joe Larados' office. Keeping the brim of the black felt down over my eyes and my overcoat collar turned up, I stared at my menu when the waiter came over.

"Rye," I grunted at him, not looking up. "Straight." As soon as he left, I stuffed the menu into my pocket, put out the one that had Dessler's prints on it.

When the waiter brought me the whiskey, I gulped it down. I could tell by the way he stood there that he was trying to get a look at my face. I didn't let him. Swaying a little in my seat like I was drunk, I sent him after another rye.

They began to spot me then. Out of the corner of my eyes I could see the people at the tables staring my way, whispering. My waiter was talking hard to the bartender. They were both looking me over.

They were certain to think I was Dessler. I was built like him, and I was wearing the same kind of clothes he always wore. By now Dodo would have

spread the word that Dessler was gunning for Larados.

I was all ice inside because I knew just exactly what Joe would do. He was a rat and a gunman, but he was more afraid of what people would say about him than he was of death. He wouldn't send his killers out to get Dessler. He would come himself.

Dessler's gun was in my holster, my own .38 in my hip pocket. When I unbuttoned my coat and slid Dessler's gun up and down in the holster, the people in line with me and the door to Larados' office moved quickly to other tables.

I laid both my hands on the table in front of me. Inside their gloves they were cold and steady. They had to be steady. Larados would be coming out with his gun in his hand, and he wasn't an amateur. During prohibition he had been a rodman for a Chicago mob.

All of a sudden the orchestra caught on to what was happening and stopped their piece in the middle of a chorus. The whole place turned quiet, breathless. The people kept looking from me to the office door. I pulled my scarf up around my face. Then I felt again to see that the gun was loose in its holster.

For two minutes it was like that. When the knob to the office door twisted, a rush of pent-up breath like a sigh came from the people in the room. Then the door swung open. Larados stepped out.

His eyes shot straight to where I was, clamped on me. His right hand was behind his back—holding a gun. The first move I made he could kill me and call it self-defense.

I had wondered why Dessler had gone crooked. I never wondered that about Larados. His cruel, pig eyes, the thin line of his lips stamped him a born criminal. That guy never did understand anything but murder and crime.

"What the hell do you want here, Dessler!" he snarled at me.

"Not much, Joe." I stood up slowly, my eyes steady on his face. My right arm was swinging free at my side, my shoulders hunched forward to keep my coat open. I swayed a little from side to side like I was drunk.

"The boys say you been looking for me."

"That's right, Joe," I said. My voice was disguised through the scarf on my face. "I came to kill you, Joe."

"Yeah?" His eyes glittered hate. His right arm twitched behind his back.

Suddenly I saw his body tense, knew it was coming. As his hand whipped from behind his back, mine streaked under my coat.

He flinched! The sight of my gun coming into line with his chest made him flinch just as he pulled the trigger. The stab of flame from his automatic leaped straight toward me, but the slug cracked by, a foot to the left of my head.

I shot him then, sent four carefully placed slugs ripping into him. The first smashed his right shoulder, staggered him backward. The second smashed his left elbow. The other two I fired into his knee caps. He flopped to the floor screaming in pain. Nobody in the place moved while I walked over to him, pointed my gun at his head. He saw me and screamed louder. I took careful aim before I fired. That fifth slug just creased the side of his skull, laid him out cold.

I staggered going out of the place. Nobody trying to stop me. At the door I took one last look at Larados. Lying there in his blood, he looked plenty dead. I was the only one who knew he wasn't.

BACK up on the hill, I hauled Dessler out of my car, untied him. He was half crazy with fear. I had to slap him around for five minutes to get any guts into him. Then I set to work to beat the hell out of him.

He was big and he managed a pretty

good fight, but before I finished, I had battered him into a senseless wreck. Every time my fist connected I thought of Fowler, and of the other guys like Fowler. Then I planted the finish blow on his chin.

I worked fast after that. His gun with the five empty shells in it went into the side pocket of his car. Standing on the running board, I drove the car along Dorraine to where the side hill sloped steep down for three hundred feet. Giving the wheel a twist, I stepped off. It made a hell of a noise going down.

I went back and got Dessler, rolled him down the same bank. If they found him there before he came to, it'd look like he was thrown clear of his car.

Then I went home.

IT WAS an easy case for the kid, and he handled it swell. Nobody paid any attention to Dessler's story. It sounded like a nightmare. And there were plenty of the guys at the Silver Slipper that hadn't even seen my face to swear that they had clearly recognized Dessler. With the gun in the side pocket of the car, the menu with his prints, and no alibi, the kid sewed him up tight. What looked like a cold-blooded attempt to finish Larados off with a shot through the head went just right with the jury.

Larados himself didn't appear. He was too crippled up. As a big shot he was already washed up, and now as a gunman he'd never be any good again.

I was there when the judge gave Dessler ten years to life for "assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill."

When they hauled him out I went over, shook the kid's hand. "Nice work, fella."

"Thanks, Blackie," he said, grinning. "Remember the night he killed Fowler, how you told me he was too wise for the law to get? I told you then, Blackie, that he'd slip up some day."

"That's right, kid."

I slapped him on the back.

WHOLE HOG or NOTHING

by
Leslie T. White

Author of "Dangerous But Passable," etc.

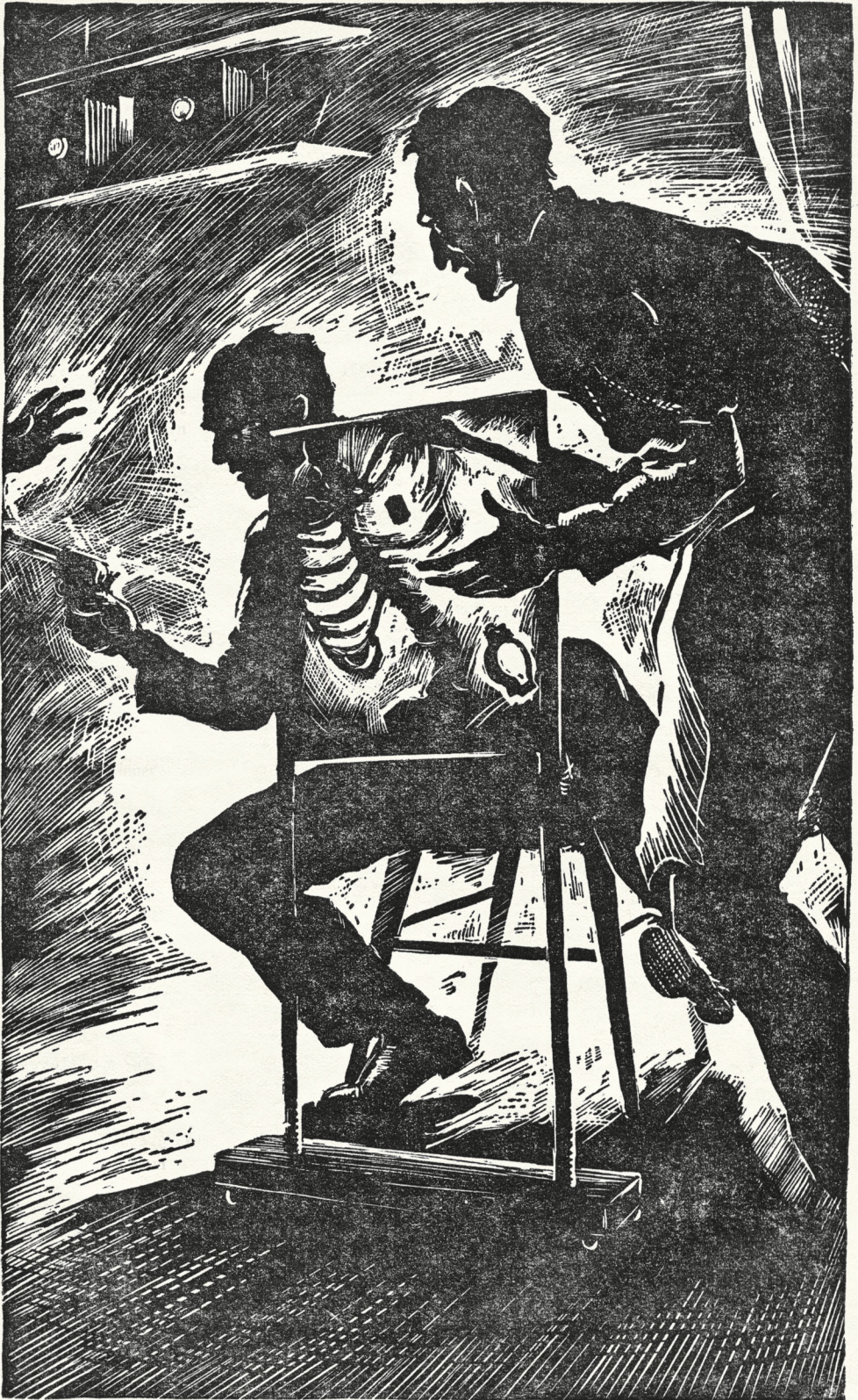
"If I haven't cracked down on the killers who framed Pete Stuart within twenty-four hours, I'll come into headquarters and confess to the murder myself." That was the bargain Sergeant Markey made with the cops—and simple enough it was. All he had to contend with was a busted appendix, a crooked political machine and the smartest shyster legal light in town. Easy enough for one man if he had guts—and the will to kill or be killed!

CHAPTER ONE

Silent Partner

I **C**OULDⁿT get any satisfaction from the nurses, or the doctors either, for that matter. They just kept saying, "In a few days now, Sergeant Markey," until I nearly had a relapse. Every afternoon they let me go up and sit in the solarium for a while, but they wouldn't let me read the newspapers or talk business, even with my partner, Pete. I was almost nuts with worry, but from the glint in Pete's eye, I knew he was doing a swell job. His lean face was haggard, though, and I knew that was my fault. He was carrying his end and mine too, and it looked like he'd be in the hospital along with me, if I didn't get out soon and lend a hand. I'd just about decided to tie the bed sheets into a rope and ease out the window, when the doc let Pete break the good news.





A skeleton with a police badge pinned on its chest!

"Now get this straight, you mug," he grinned down at me. "The croaker says you can roll this afternoon. You can drop by the station just long enough to say hello to the gang in the squadroom, then you're comin' out to my house. Karen will baby you for a couple of weeks, then maybe I can get a little work out of you."

"Nuts to you, ape! If you think I'm going to hang around with a couple of sticky honeymooners, you're crazy."

"You'll come an' like it," Pete swore, "or stay here."

"But look, Pete, be reasonable. Maybe I am a little woozy on my pins. That doesn't need to keep me from riding around in a squadcar with you. Hell, I want to get on the job!"

"No dice, Dave. That's why the doc got me to deal with you. Don't think they want you around here a day longer than they can help. You've been nothing but a pest as a patient. But the doc figured I could talk your language, so you do like I say, or so help me, pal, you stay here."

I threw back the sheets and started to sit up, but Pete flagged me back. "Ixnay. They got to check you out right. Doc says you can leave at three."

"Five more hours! You'll call for me?"

"I'll try to make it. But, boy, I got a hot lead this afternoon, so if I'm not here by two thirty, call the station and have Cap Block send over one of the boys to wheel you home. I'll have some ripe news for you tonight, pal."

Pete grinned and beat it.

I had a funny feeling when I saw Pete tramp out that door. It's peculiar the way police work cements friendships. Maybe it's because partners go through so much together. I dunno. Pete and me had grown up together. We'd tried for the same girl, and even when Karen chose the big mug, I still felt the same about him. Then we got our stripes at the same time. This case meant a lot to both of us. Pete wanted more dough so he and Karen

could plan a couple of additions to the family, and I was hoping for a precinct captaincy. Then this damn appendix of mine had to bust.

The operation came at the worst possible time, for the district attorney had squawked because Pete and I had been assigned to a major graft investigation for the special Grand Jury. He said we were too young and not sufficiently seasoned, but the Old Man had stuck to his guns and insisted we had what it takes. And we weren't tied up with a lot of departmental politics, like most of the old veterans around the station-house.

We got away to a flying start by getting a line on Velvet Marquand. That smooth shyster had his fingers up to the elbows in the political pie, and we were getting someplace in a hurry when I got the pain in my side. I gave it a couple of punches and kept going—and then it busted wide open. That put me out of the picture for a month. The croakers wouldn't even let me discuss the case with Pete. The Old Man wanted to assign another cop to work with Pete, but he put up a howl and begged to carry on alone till I got back on my feet again. The poor guy was doing the work of four men while I loafed around the hospital, and it was showing on him. You wonder why I was a pain in the neck to all the internes, nurses and saw-bones around the joint?

I WAS all ready and dressed by two o'clock. At two thirty I had my head cocked listening for Pete's hard-heeled walk in the corridor. I put off calling the station-house until nearly three thirty.

Maybe I should have got wise from the skipper's tone when I talked with him. He said he'd send over a car, and in ten minutes little Eddie Durkin walked in.

He said, "Hi'ya, Dave!" without looking straight at me, and picked up my bag. "Hack's parked in the ambulance entrance."

We went down there, and as Eddie eased in the clutch, he asked: "Where you livin' now, Dave?"

"I'm going out to Pete Stuart's for a couple of weeks, but right now I want to drop around to the station-house."

Eddie drove a couple of blocks before he said: "Maybe you ought to drop by your own place for tonight, Dave."

"What's wrong, Eddie? Let's have it!"

He began to stall. "Now take it easy, Dave. You're still rickety. You—"

"Come on, let's have it." Something hit me. "It's Pete!"

Eddie nodded without taking his eyes off the road. "Dead! They left him propped up against a call-box down in River Precinct."

"Shot?"

"An' beaten. Couldn't recognize him at first. Now maybe I better take you home, Dave, because you ain't—"

"You get me to the station, cop, an' stop on it!"

Death strikes like that. You talk to a guy one minute, laughing and planning for the future, then death double-crosses you and the guy is just so much cold pork. Pete and death and me had been partners on lots of cases. We rode fast-wagons and fought gun-fights together. It takes a while to grasp a thing like that.

WE GOT to the station and I walked in. Eddie offered me his arm, and I needed it, but I didn't take it. In the squadroom the boys all gave me a welcome salute, but it wasn't natural. They all liked Pete, but every once in a while one of the boys went away like that, so they couldn't say much. But they knew how I felt, I guess, and tried to express it, like coppers do.

Eddie followed me into Captain Block's office. The skipper got up and put one hell of a lot of feeling into a handshake.

"I'm reporting for duty," I told him.

Eddie slammed a chair against my knees

so I had to sit down quick. The skipper walked around the desk and sat on the corner above me.

"You got another couple of weeks sick-leave, kid."

I shook my head. "I heard about Pete. I'm going to work now."

The captain ran a horny hand around the back of his neck. "Look, Dave, you go home. There's complications. I can't go into 'em now, but there's a change of plans. Now you—"

"Has anybody told Karen?"

"I was just going out myself." The skipper grimaced. That's one of the toughest assignments in police work. This one would be especially tough because those two kids had only been married a few months, and Karen hadn't acquired that fatalistic attitude a cop's wife gets after the first couple of years.

I was going to argue the point when the chief himself and young Coats, one of the deputy D.A.s, walked into the office. This guy Coats is a quarter-size punk whose great-grandpappy got a monument for doing something or other, so he thinks it gives him the right to act like a deputy of God.

The Old Man looked at me and nodded. His face looked pretty grim. He said to the skipper: "Mr. Coats has some rather unpleasant news."

Captain Block glanced at me, and I started to get up, but Coats blurted right out: "You might as well hear this, Markey. We shall be asking *you* a few questions, I'm sure."

The skipper lifted his hand. "Sergeant Markey is just out of the hospital, Mr. Coats." To me, he said: "All right, Dave, Durkin will drive you home."

"What've you got to say?" I asked Coats.

"We've found out why this investigation wasn't getting anyplace," the deputy D.A. snapped. "Your partner was being bought off!"

"Say that again.

The Old Man wagged his head. "Easy, Markey, easy."

"Pete Stuart was a grafting crook!" Coats flung at me.

I came out of the chair swinging a long one from the floor. I needed that arc to make up for muscle. It took that little punk in the eye, splitting his cheek across the bone. Durkin and the Old Man grabbed me before I could let go another. I noticed the Old Man was particularly gentle. The skipper hauled Coats off the floor.

The deputy was blating his head out about charges, but the chief waved him quiet. "Let's forget about it," he said. "We got troubles enough. Cool down, Markey. You won't be implicated in this. What Pete did was done when you were in the hospital."

"Pete never took a crooked dime in his life, an' you know it!" I roared.

THEN they laid it on the line. The D.A. had got an anonymous tip just before Pete had been found. Coats had been sent to a suburban bank and found that Pete Stuart had an account under the name of Charleston. The cashier identified Pete from a photograph. The deposits had started shortly after I went to the hospital. They totaled nearly fifty thousand. There was a safe-deposit box with securities in it, and some personal letters and a small snap-shot of Pete and a blonde. The letters were hot stuff, so Coats declared.

They showed me one of the letters. It was from a woman, and pretty intimate stuff. They even showed me the picture. It was Pete, all right, and while I couldn't recognize the dame, she looked vaguely familiar. The skipper admitted that Pete hadn't turned in a detailed report, but had told him the case was going like a million.

"He meant he was going to chisel a million out of it!" put in Coats.

I tried for another pass at him, but they eased me out of the office. The skipper came out with me.

"It's going to be tougher than I thought—telling Mrs. Stuart," he said. "She's going to read about that blonde. What the hell went wrong with Pete?"

"It's a lie! A dirty frame-up!" I swore.

Captain Block shrugged. "Believe me, lad, I'd like to believe it. Pete was a grand boy. But these things happen. Probably he got jammed up with that blonde an'—"

"Go to hell!" I snarled. "I'll tell Pete's wife myself!"

He walked back into his office, wagging his head. Eddie took my arm and we went out to the squadcar. We got in and I said: "Eddie, do you believe that. . . ?"

He blew his nose hard and began to hem and haw so I said: "O.K., heel! Drive. To Pete's place, too."

Little Eddie didn't speak till we were almost there. "You got to be practical, Dave. I had a partner once—one of the swellest guys I ever knew. I guess maybe I felt about him like you did about Pete Stuart. Now that guy is in the state pen. For graft, too. Pete's better off like he is now."

"Don't ever crack like that again to me, Eddie," I said jerkily, "or I'll sap hell out of you."

He dumped my bag on the porch of the house and ducked before Karen opened the door. She gave a squeal of delight when she saw me, and threw her arms around me for a big hug. Then she looked around for Pete. She figured he was hiding or something because she laughed and asked: "Where's the ogre?"

Then she stopped laughing awfully sudden when she saw my face.

"Why, Dave! You're almost crying! Are you sick?"

I shook my head and went into the living-room ahead of her. She had the radio tuned in on a news broadcast and I guess

I got there just in time. I snapped it off and took her hand and we sat down on the couch together. This was going to be plenty tough!

"Karen, you know Pete's favorite phrase—*Keep your chin up, kid*. Well—Look, Karen, I can't get started. But—Pete's gone away for a little while."

I was holding one of her hands between my own, and she put the other on top of mine and closed her eyes. Her backbone was very straight.

"Tell me, Dave!" she whispered.

"He went out like he'd want it—fighting," I told her. I was sure of that, too. "Nobody knew Pete like we did, Karen. No matter what anybody ever says, we know Pete was the straightest, swellest guy that ever drew breath."

Her eyes came open. "What do you mean by that?"

Lord, I didn't know how to tell it! "This city is rotten with graft and corruption, Karen. It goes right to the top. You know what that means. You know what a thing that is to buck. Well, Pete was bucking it."

"You were too, Dave."

"I didn't get started. Pete did. He almost had 'em, Karen. If I'd been on the job maybe it wouldn't have happened, but—"

She understood. "Oh, my poor Pete! Dave, they aren't saying that something was wrong?"

"Karen, you'd better go up in the country to your mother's place. I'll straighten things out."

"I'll stay right here," she said. "Until I know what's happened."

CHAPTER TWO

The Blonde and the Pom

NEXT day I took a cab to the station-house and they gave me the other barrel. The skipper let go first. "I can't

put you on the case, Dave. Pete was your pal, an' all that, but there's a stink about it. You'd better take another couple of weeks an' lay low, boy, before Coats and District Attorney Hammond drag you into it. Take my advice, boy—"

"Listen, skipper, I'm not after any advice."

The Old Man was tougher. "It's a damn shame, Markey! I reckon it's my own fault. You lads were pretty young."

"Do you believe that stuff?"

"Believe it?" barked the chief. "Good Lord, you saw it yourself! That dame, those letters, the bank account! What more do you need? It's put the whole department on the spot. Hammond has told Coats to hire a couple of special investigators to make an independent investigation. The papers are giving us a swell ride."

And weren't they, though! One of the tabloids ran the picture of Pete and the blonde. They found out who she was, too. A dame known around the hot spots and night clubs as Dolly Vance. She was an ex-flame of Tim Piel, who was known as the Baron of Vice, until the state put him away. This tramp admitted she was pally with Pete Stuart. The paper also ran a photostatic copy of a canceled check signed *Charleston*, which was supposed to have paid the rent on Vance's apartment.

The doctor came around and forbade me going out, but I couldn't take it on my back, so I taped myself up best as I could and strapped a binder around my middle so the cut wouldn't sag too much, and grabbed a cab to Karen's. Along the way I picked up a cane, and believe me I needed it for my pins were woozy.

She'd seen the papers—all of it.

"Tell me on the level, Karen," I begged. "Just between us, do you believe it? The evidence is all there, kid."

She took my hands and looked me square in the eye. "Dave, there are some things that cannot be explained, that are

not, perhaps, legal evidence. But a wife knows, if she's any good at all, whether she possesses her husband, or is sharing him with another woman. I don't care if they had five reels of movies—I *know* Pete had nothing to do with any other woman."

"Well, I'd hate to believe this stuff was true," I said, crumpling the paper. "I *don't* believe it. But that picture worries me. It's damning, Karen. The press have convicted Pete without even a trial. I've got to get a starting point."

"You can start with the supposition it's all an abominable frame-up," she said huskily.

I nodded and pushed up on my cane. "Keep your chin up, kid," I said, and went out to the cab. I told the driver to beat it for headquarters, then I sank back and tried to think.

Bucking a graft machine is like grabbing at a greased pig. It's a smooth, slippery surface with no finger grips to hang onto. Corruption has always been in the saddle in this town, and it's organized. Reformers blat their heads off every few years, but if they make too much squawk, the Grand Jury indicts a couple of poor old mick cops and lets it go at that. The public's seen a couple of sacrificial goats led to slaughter, and after that they don't care.

Pete's death, instead of whipping up a demand for action, just satiated the sadistic nature of the average citizen and he wanted peace until he digested it. That made a nice thick hide for me to pierce. But there are always square cops dinging away, and maybe it don't do much good, but it keeps things alive. Old Cap Block was that kind of a guy. So now I went right into his office and laid 'em on the line.

"Look, skipper, Pete was my pal. I'm going after this case."

"I got to forbid it, lad," the skipper said wearily.

I tossed my badge on the desk. "O.K. I'm just a citizen now."

He threw it back at me. "You file off them points before I shove it down your throat," he growled. "You'd still be a flat-foot if you were dead an' buried. I'm only forbiddin', not stoppin' you."

I grinned. "Where did Pete leave off, skipper?"

"I dunno, lad. Pete was workin' night an' day, an' he didn't make out any reports. But he was getting hot, I know that from what he told me. He lays it all right on Velvet Marquand's doorstep, which don't surprise me none, though for twenty years, Velvet has stayed on top of the pile. The reason Pete didn't want to make out a report was, he says some of the uniformed force are cuttin' in on the graft through the bail-bond racket. I don't doubt it, although it's tough to prove. Inspector Benson ain't friendly to the bureau, so I dunno if it's a good idea to stir up trouble right here in the department."

"Pete wanted to get to the top, not hound a couple of cops."

"Well, I can't help much—officially. But you know my home address, boy."

"This blonde. What about her?"

"She was a pal of Tim Piel's. After we sent him up, she sort of kept an eye on his rackets. She looks dumb, but she's smart, boy."

"Dolly Vance sounds like a phoney handle."

"We never bothered to check. She's small stuff."

"She don't look very small in this stink. Where's she hang out?"

"Still at the apartment Pete—well, this guy Charleston—paid for. The Bryden, on Park Heights. But look, lad, don't go messin' around in your condition. . . ."

THE BRYDEN was one of those clandestine apartment houses cozily secluded on a maple-lined side street. It

was so discreet it didn't even have a doorman. But the big brass-barred front door had a tenant control and you couldn't open it with a crow-bar unless the little mama upstairs pressed the button.

The taxi driver knew the joint, I guess, for he gave me a warped smirk, an' asked, "Want I should wait, guv'nor?" and when I wagged my head, he glanced up at the drawn shades and observed pointedly: "Kinda early." It was eleven thirty A.M.

The slice the doctors had put in my middle felt sore as hell as I hobbled across the sidewalk. I waited until the hack driver reluctantly pulled away, then I started with the first button and pushed six in a row. Then I picked up the round receiver and when I heard a sleepy feminine voice say, "Who is it?" I squeegeed my voice to a high tenor and cooed: "Can't you guess?"

The first three dames said, "Nuts!" in three different ways. The fourth voice was a man's, so I cut off quick. The fifth panted, "Oh, honey!" and released the door control and let me into the lobby.

I took the elevator to the sixth and a good-looking Negro maid opened the door. I grabbed her arm and yanked her into the hallway and gave her a good look at my badge.

"Look, Mandy, beat it down to the basement and sit tight for a while if you enjoy good health. Don't blat, and don't get out of line or so help me I'll jug you!"

"You're costin' me my job, mister," she said quietly.

"Tell her I squawk you. Now beat it."

She was an intelligent gal. She shrugged and walked slowly down the hall. I stepped into the apartment and closed the door. As it clicked shut, a querulous voice whined: "Who is it? What's all this noise about in the middle of the night?"

I followed that squawk into a bedroom. A Pomeranian pooch about the size of a package of cigarettes started to yap. I saw

a mess of silk and satin bed covers, and behind and under it all—Dolly. She didn't look much like the snazzy blonde in the picture. She had a lot of stuff on her face and hair and she looked like a cigar-store Indian. She started to bleat when she saw me, but I flagged her quiet. She shut up when she saw the badge.

"You got a warrant?" was her last yelp.

I leaned against the foot of the bed and eased some of the weight off my legs. "Look, Dolly, have you ever been to the morgue? You know, where they take dead people—stiffs?"

Her eyes got big. "Say, you're nuts! Get out, or I'll yell my head off!"

"You yap just once, and I'll knock it off," I warned her. "Well, I was tellin' you about the morgue. They lay you out on a drainage table, then a guy cuts a slice down the middle of your belly to see what made you tick, and then—"

Her voice went mushy. "What's the angle, mister!"

"That if you don't talk right, tramp, s'help me, I'm going to beat you insensible," I barked at her. "Pete Stuart was my partner—"

She recovered enough to murmur: "You must be Dave Markey—he used to speak about you!"

That jolted me for a second. "You're a liar!"

She began to cry then. I gave her a prod in the leg with my cane and the damned Pom started to yap again.

"Cut it out!" I told her. "You never had a decent emotion in your life. Pete never had anything to do with a gutter bum like you, an' you know it."

THIS baby could sure change like a chameleon. She pulled a tigress on me. "How do you know? You lay in a hospital all the time!"

Boy, she had that right! It was like cold water thrown in my face.

"Pipe down before I sap you to death! This was a good build-up, blondie, but it was a little too smooth. I knew Pete too well to fall for it. Where'd you get that picture faked?"

"It wasn't faked!"

"Get up! Stick that carcass into some rags, baby. We're going for a ride, you an' me."

"You can't arrest me!"

"Arrest? Say, when I get done with you you'll wish—"

She suddenly twisted around and grabbed under the pillow, but I was expecting a move like that, so I rapped her hand with my cane, and caught her by that nice white throat with the other hand. I hung on until she started to gag, then I let go and picked up the pearl-handled automatic she'd been reaching for. She coughed a couple of times and then started to sob. I sat down on the edge of the bed and let her have it out. The Pomeranian quit yapping and sidled over and made friends. He wasn't a bad little guy, at that. I liked him right away, I like any sort of a mutt, but I couldn't say as much for his mistress.

"All right, blondie, let's get going."

She threw back the covers and stuck a leg onto the floor. If you want to be technical, she had on a nightgown, but a puff of cigarette smoke would have been opaque by comparison. Ordinarily I'd be gentleman enough to turn my head after one good look, but this baby left me cold, and I didn't trust her as far as I could throw her. She sat on the edge of the bed and twitched the muscles in her throat where I'd grabbed her.

"What are you going to do with me?" she whimpered.

"You're going to talk. You're going to tell me all about who framed this set-up, and why."

"You're insane!"

"Sure I am. I'm nuts. That's one reason why you're going to talk. I got every-

thing to gain, and nothing to lose. If you don't talk, I'm sunk. I'll get kicked off the department. And already I lost the best pal a guy ever had." She began to look triumphant as hell, but I blasted that right away. "But you'll be beaten to death, blondie, so it'll be a hollow victory for you. The guys that staked you to this layout can't put your face together after I kick it apart. The coroner won't even try. Nobody is interested in you, Dolly. Nobody except me."

She believed me. Terror is a funny thing when you watch it seep over a person's face, especially a dame. In repose she had kitten eyes, but now they glazed to a kind of yellow. Her skin looked moist and feverish and her breasts heaved up and down under that veil-like nightgown.

"I can't talk!" she whispered huskily. "You don't understand—"

"Dead martyrs don't have no fun, baby. You'll be better off alive."

"Look, cop, I don't want to die. Honest! Get me away from here some place. I got no interest in this business. It's only a job. They promised I wouldn't be pinched, but—"

"They didn't promise you wouldn't be killed."

She looked at me a long time. "You would kill!" She shuddered. "You would, you would—"

The dog yapped once in surprise. Dolly opened her eyes, looked at some spot behind my back, and threw her hand across her mouth in terror. For an instant I thought maybe it was a gag, but when the dog yapped again, I started to turn my head. . . .

WHEN the hydraulic pavement cracker quit working on the back of my head for a minute, I felt soft hands stroking my face and a voice that seemed to come from a long way off spoke my name. I tried to think, but a hefty rap on the

base of my skull had paralyzed the gears. Then suddenly I remembered that look on Dolly Vance's face, the yap of the dog—and that's where I went out.

What she was crooning to me now about I couldn't figure. I forced up the lids, but my eyes wouldn't take focus. I could tell light from dark, that there was a figure bending over me, and that I was being hoisted to my feet.

"Dave, Dave! Come out of it. Dave!"

I started to fall down again but my hand caught the foot of a bed so I hung on until the fog lifted. The first thing I saw was the body on the silk spread. There were four little-black rimmed holes in the bared breast, and the way they were spaced on that soft creamy surface, made it look like the ace of diamonds. Jerkily my eyes dropped to the green rug, just under the trailing arm, to the little pearl-handled automatic. And then they shifted back to the face of the dead woman. It was Vance, all right.

I was puzzled, but I still couldn't get it. I couldn't figure out how she'd lifted me to my feet and called my name, yet be so awfully dead. Her eyes were like a kitten's now. I started to sway down again when soft hands steadied me, and a lovely voice whispered.

"Come, Dave, come!"

I turned my head, and it was Karen. She had on a black coat and a black hat with a thick veil. But it was Karen.

"Karen! She's dead!" This was me talking, even if I couldn't recognize my own cracked voice.

"Oh, Dave! I know! Let's get out of here."

That was mistake number one. But I was still half out, so I let her pilot me down the back way to the delivery alley where her own car was parked. We didn't meet anybody, so I figured we'd got away with it. It wasn't until we were a couple of miles from the Bryden that I got so I could reason things out.

I slumped in the front seat beside Karen, puffing a cigarette she had slipped into my lips already lighted. She was driving with her eyes held rigidly on the road. The city was slipping away behind us. I took a long, oblique glance at her profile, and the old ache twisted my heart. It hurt even worse now. You can't steal from a dead man, not a pal.

Why had she killed Dolly? Why in hell hadn't she left it to me—the case, I mean? Here I had the little tramp all ready to crack, and Karen had walked in and killed her! I didn't condemn her from a moral angle. It's easy to pull that old crap about *thou shall not kill*, or in this case, *the ways of sin is death*, if you lead a life untouched by tragedy. But here Karen had taken a lease on a life-time of happiness, and a tramp like Vance had helped foreclose the mortgage before the note was due. No, I couldn't blame Karen for blasting Vance, but it wasn't like her, and I wished she hadn't.

Then Karen said in a strange, cracked voice. "Oh, Dave! Why did you kill her?"

I sat up straight. My mouth sagged open and the cigarette flopped onto the floorboards. "Me kill her? Are you kidding, Karen?"

She slowed the car, and looked at me. Her eyes were clear and blue, like deep water. "It is not something one kids about, Dave."

I PRESSED my fingers against my temples. That seemed to steady my head a little, like I was holding it together. "Tell me what happened. How come you went up there?"

"I read the papers," Karen said slowly. "I read all the lies they printed about Pete and that woman. I knew they were lies, and I knew the thing was cooked up to discredit Pete."

"The quickest way to finish a guy is involve him with a woman," I grumbled. "A woman like Vance."

"It was the reason I went to her. Lying is purely a matter of sex, Dave. A woman can fool a man quite easily but she can't fool another woman. I went in the back way and up to the apartment. I rang the bell, but nobody answered. I was going to go away when I heard a faint whimper. It sounded like somebody crying, so I touched the doorknob and found the door was unlocked. I went in. There was a pathetic little Pomeranian, crawling up the rug with a broken back. I picked it up, and it died in my arms. Then I went into the room, and found—"

She paused.

"Go on," I told her. "What did you find?"

"The woman was dead. You were lying by the edge of the bed."

"You thought I killed her?"

She gave a couple of jerky, dry sobs. "Oh, Dave, I don't know. I hardly know what I thought. She was dead—dead! There was a gun on the floor in front of your hand. I kicked it under hers. There was cold cream and powder on your left hand, Dave."

I looked at my paw instinctively. My fingers *were* greasy. Automatically I wiped them on my pants.

"Look—Karen! We shouldn't have lammed! We better beat it back right now!"

"Then you didn't—"

"Hell, no! I didn't croak her. I—" I was just going to say I'd thought she had rubbed Dolly off the earth, but now with my brain functioning, I knew better. So I tapered off with: "I was talking to her when somebody sneaked in behind me, and that's all I know until you picked me up."

She swung the car in a retching U-turn. "Then we will go back and tell the truth." She drove faster now. I knew she felt better, and it was a cinch I did. It came to me now, no matter what hap-

pened, I didn't want to believe Karen could kill.

THE run back was a short one. The first think I saw when we swung onto Park Heights Drive was the squad-cars and the coroner's cold-meat wagon parked in front of the Bryden. There were at least a half dozen press cars, too. Karen started to slow, but I flagged her on.

"Drive, kid! Get on past there in one hell of a hurry! It's too late to go back. Don't argue with me now. Keep on going!" And when she obeyed, I slumped low in my seat so none of the harness bulls or reporters would spot me.

"What's the idea, Dave? We have nothing to be ashamed of?"

"Yeah, I know all those noble sentiments, but let's get out of this neighborhood until I get a chance to think."

"If you run they'll think you're guilty," Karen pointed out.

"If I don't run," I warned her, "I won't get a chance to think. The sentiment was for a clean-up against graft and corruption, and dames like Dolly Vance, but now the pendulum is swinging the other way."

"But, Dave, if you didn't kill her, I can't see—"

"You're trying to be logical, Karen. This isn't logic, it's politics. Slimy, dirty, framing, murdering politics, kid."

"And we're caught in it! What are you going to do?"

"Think. They killed Pete—forgive me, Karen—and they killed Dolly. But they didn't kill me."

"Why?" she whispered huskily.

I was thinking out loud. "Pete knew something, Dolly knew something. I knew nothing. It's a case of knowledge being death, Karen."

"Oh, Dave. It was awful! And that pathetic little dog. It would have wrenched the heart out of you—the way

you love dogs. Somebody must have deliberately stomped it and left it to die slowly, because it couldn't talk."

"I'd like to get the guy that did that. He may have figured he had a reason to knock off Vance, but that little tyke. He had guts, that Pom."

"The murderer probably thought you were dead, too, Dave."

"I doubt that. Look, Karen, can you get police calls on that radio?"

She shook her head. "No. This set came with the car, and Pete meant to get it changed to a short-wave set for police calls, but—" She swallowed. "Why?"

"Let's go over to the house. I want to see if there's any pick-ups ordered on this."

CHAPTER THREE

Twenty-four Hour Deadline

WE DIDN'T say anything the rest of the drive. She ran the car up to the back door so I wouldn't have much of a walk into the house. She steered me into Pete's den, just off the living-room, and poured me a drink. It was just what I needed. She started for the radio, when we both heard the car stop out in front of the house. Karen turned pale, and I admit I had a funny feeling, like I was caught doing something I shouldn't have been.

She said, "Wait here," and ran into the living-room. She was back in a second, her face white with fright. "Dave, it's a police car. It's Captain Block."

"That's O. K. The skipper's a right guy. He'll—"

"He's not alone, Dave. There's a big, tall man in uniform with him. Inspector somebody."

"Benson?"

"That's the one."

Just then the door bell rang. I started to get up. "Well, what's the difference? I got nothing to hide."

She pushed me gently back into the chair. "Dave, stay here, please. Let me talk to them. It might look a little funny, you're being—well, with Pete—"

I knew she was lying. Karen never had a sneaking, guilty emotion in her life. She was afraid for me. She knew what I was beginning to sense, what I found out mighty fast in a minute. So I shrugged, and she pulled the door so it was almost shut, yet open enough for me to hear what was said in the other room. Then she opened the front door and let them in.

It was Benson. I knew his harsh, strident voice and that hard-heeled walk. He always entered a room like he was raiding it. I didn't have to look to see him. I could guess what he doing. A big, hard-faced flatfoot with a visor that cut off part of his eyes. He wore it that way always. He had risen to his post by sheer ruthlessness and brutality, mixed with a certain animal cunning which is a big help in politics. Benson was a killer, and a handy guy for the machine to have on the department.

I heard Captain Block say, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Stuart," in that kindly old voice of his. "May we come in for a few minutes?"

"It's a business call," the inspector said coldly, just in case Karen had any illusions about it.

"Of course, come in," Karen said. "I'm so glad to see *you*, Captain Block." She put that over neat, but it would be lost on Benson.

The skipper began quietly. "I reckon you know how the boys all feel about Pete, ma'am, especially those of us who worked with him. I want to come around real soon an' have a talk with you about things, but right now, like the inspector says, this is a business call."

"I don't quite understand," Karen said.

The skipper murmured something reassuring, and I heard them all sit down. It must have been tough on him to come

here to Pete's home the day after he'd been killed, with a stinker like Benson. For Captain Block was everything Benson was not. The skipper was anything but a politician. He was forthright, but he never hurt a person any more than his job forced him to. He always reminded me of an old-fashioned country doctor. Sometimes his medicine was pretty strong, but he always sugar-coated it when he could. He began talking in his slow, confiding tone.

"Mrs. Stuart, we're trying to find out where Dave Markey is. You see—"

"He's wanted for murder," Benson barked. "Where is he?"

Karen said: "Inspector, I don't like your tone, or your manner."

"Let me handle this," the skipper said, with more than a trace of impatience in his voice. "I'm sorry this has to come up," he went on to Karen. "You see, this woman that— This Dolly Vance has been murdered."

"But Dave Markey? Oh, that's ridiculous!" Karen exclaimed. "Why Dave is a sick man, just out of the hospital."

"We know all that," Benson put in again. It was like him not to keep his big mouth shut. "We have already found a taxi driver who took him to the Vance woman's apartment house, and the maid who let him in the suite. He shot her with her own gun, and if you're interested in technical details—being a detective's wife—we found his fingerprints on the pearl handle of the gun and marks on her throat where he choked her. Now stop beating around—"

"Inspector Benson, unless you adopt a different tone of voice," Karen clipped, "I must ask you to leave this house. As a detective's wife, as you so sarcastically pointed out, I know, also, something of my rights."

"Believe me, I'm sorry," the skipper said gently. "Dave isn't himself since the operation."

"Do you believe this fantastic thing, Captain Block?"

There was a pause before the captain answered. "I never jump at a conclusion, Mrs. Stuart. It looks mighty bad for Dave right now, the way things are, but I wouldn't go so far as to say it's conclusive."

"Well, I would!" Benson said. "Where is Markey?"

Karen apparently ignored him, for after a pause the skipper said: "He may get in touch with you, Mrs. Stuart. The lad's sick, and he needs care. He should be in bed."

"He should be in jail!"

"If you should hear from him," the skipper went on, "tell him to get in touch with me. No matter what happens, Dave knows he'll get a square deal from *me*, an' I don't give a damn—excuse me, Mrs. Stuart—what some of the others think about it."

"I'm sure Dave knows that, Captain," Karen said. "That is all Pete or Dave, or any honest officer, could ask for—a square deal."

"I asked you a plain question," Benson butted in again. "I asked you where Markey is? And don't lie to me!"

The chair's squeaked as they gave up their burdens in the other room. Karen said: "This is one of those rare moments, Inspector, when I wish I was a man. I'm ashamed of the reaction you arouse in me. Nothing that I can think of at the moment would give me more pleasure than throwing you out. Now please leave."

Then Karen's voice softened until you'd hardly think it was the same person. "I must apologize to you, Captain Block. If I speak to Dave, I will tell him what you have said."

"Tell him not to try to carry on alone. He'll get hurt."

"He'll get shot or hung!" snarled Benson, and they tramped out.

KAREN didn't come in right away, and after a minute I heard a sob, so I walked out into the living-room and found her slumped in a corner of the chesterfield, crying softly. She jumped up when she heard me.

"Oh, he knew. He *knew* you were here, Dave!"

"Who? Benson?"

"No, no, Captain Block! He was trying to tell me that he didn't believe what Inspector—"

"I heard the conversation. If it hadn't been for putting you on the spot, I'd have walked out and belted Benson."

"I'm ashamed of the way I acted," Karen said, "but I couldn't help myself. It was something deep, Dave, something you *feel*. That man hated Pete, and he hates you."

"Benson hates everybody he can't bully. He probably hates you, Karen."

"I hope so. I'd hate to have it so one-sided." She put her hands on my shoulders. "Dave, you'd better go to Captain Block. You didn't kill Dolly Vance, and they don't convict innocent people. You've nothing to be afraid of."

"That's the original magnificent illusion. They do convict innocent people. They convict them in conversation, in the newspapers, on the streets. They convict them without trials. They've convicted Pete. Right now the presses are grinding, Karen, wasting ink and good pulp paper convicting me. I can't hang it on Cap Block, any more than I can on you. I'm getting out of here until I can work this out."

"You can't, Dave! You're sick!"

"I'm alive, kid, and I want to stay that way. If Benson catches up with me first, I won't be."

"Why is he so vicious? Why is his interest so personal?"

"Benson heads the uniformed division of the department. Most of the harness bulls are square, honest guys. But most

of the lice in the force are behind the brass buttons. Benson is the grafters' representative on the department. That's why he's got it in for me."

"Oh, Dave, it's a wonder they didn't kill you!"

"No, it's not. They wanted me alive—for a while. They want to spread the story that I killed Vance to cover Pete. They want to heap on the dirt so thick that everybody will forget there ever was a graft investigation. That's the reason I'm alive, Karen. But once that's firmly implanted in the mind of the public, I'll get the axe."

Karen was sobbing. "Don't, Dave! Don't try to buck it! Don't leave me all alone—"

"Karen! What are you saying!"

"I don't care, I don't care! You and Pete were all I had in this world, Dave. They've taken Pete from me, and now before he is even buried, they're trying to take you! For my sake, Dave, go someplace and hide. You're sick, Dave! You've got the public, the underworld, the police—all against you. You can't win!"

She sank into a chair and my knees buckled and I sat down on the arm beside her. I put a hand on her shoulder, and tried to think of something to say.

I jerked away and crossed over to the desk. I took out my check book, glanced at the balance and wrote out a check for eighteen hundred dollars. I'd been ten years saving that much dough. I gave it to Karen.

"Look, kid, take this and don't argue with me. I'm buying your car. It's worth about three hundred, so hang onto the rest in case I ever need it again. I got a couple of hundred in my pocket. That'll see me through for a while."

"Then you are going away?" she said relievedly.

"From here anyway," I said evasively. I didn't want an argument. "I'll keep in

touch with you. Don't let Benson shove you around. I'll probably get in touch with the skipper."

She took my hand. "God bless you, Dave. I'll pray for you."

WHEN I backed the car into the street I half expected to be pushed over by a squadcar, but I got away from there O.K. and went out to the harbor district to make my call. Leaving the motor running, I walked into a small drugstore and called Captain Block.

"Don't give me an argument, skipper," I stopped him when he started to coax me down to the station-house. "I just want to enter my denial to the murder rap. I heard about your visit to Pete's wife. Well, she's not involved, so keep away from her, especially if you've got to lug around guys like Benson."

"I regretted that, Dave. Now, lad, why don't you—"

"Horses! Listen—" And I told him just exactly what *had* happened up at Dolly's apartment, except I didn't mention Karen. I told him I'd stumbled out under my own power.

"You don't trust me, eh, boy?"

"Sure I trust you, skipper. That's why I'm telling you this."

"Then why in the devil don't you tell the truth?" he snapped back. "Dave, who was that woman in the black coat and veil?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The maid was in the basement, looking out the back window," the skipper said wearily. "She saw the woman half carrying you out."

"Does Benson know about that?"

"No. The maid told me alone. I've got to find that woman, lad. If you didn't kill Vance, then she did."

That caught me like a blow in the stomach. "There was no woman, skipper. You've got to believe that—take my word for it."

"Dave, I'm a cop. You can't ask a thing like that. I'll have to start the search for her, lad, unless you tell me. Come in, Dave. Give yourself up and I'll guarantee you a square deal! I don't believe you killed Vance, but I can't help you while you're a fugitive from justice. The call is out for you. The district attorney wants you dead or alive. His boys, and the uniformed division have itchy fingers."

"I'd rather be shot than hung. I can't come in. Won't you hold up that maid's tale. Give me twenty-four hours, skipper?"

"I'd be tempted if you had a chance, even though it would mean the axe for me if it leaked out. Suppose the maid squawks to someone else?"

"Take her out in the sticks. Have the boys ride her around in a squadcar. Give me twenty-four hours."

"And then?"

"I'll come in. Keep that maid's testimony out, and I'll come in and plead guilty."

"But you didn't do it, lad!"

"What the hell do you care? Pete didn't take the graft, but he's dead, and they gave him the credit. All right, it's whole hog or nothing with me, too. Is it a deal?"

"It's a deal. And meanwhile I'll pray to God they don't bring you in dead before this time tomorrow. Good-bye and good luck, lad."

I swayed back to the car and drove slowly for a couple of blocks to a nice quiet place along the docks where some longshoremen were hoisting freight onto a tramp. She was settling to her plimsol mark and the Blue Peter was flying, the little flag that says she is to sail today. It would be easy to slip aboard her, either as a stowaway or a passenger. On her bridge I could see a couple of officers. They looked like Spaniards. With the dough I had in my pocket I could sneak off and maybe get a new start in life. No-

body would follow me. There would be a big stink in the papers and they'd crucify me in effigy, but I couldn't go. They'd nail Karen to the cross. And there was Pete, still lying on a slab in the morgue, with his face unrecognizable. He should be buried tomorrow, and he should be buried clean. With the force proud of him, according him the honors he deserved. No, I owed that to Pete, and to Karen.

Don't think I wasn't tempted! And I was scared, just plain yellow. Maybe you don't know the sensation of being hunted. Panic gnaws at your guts until it makes you physically nauseated. You want to run, run, run. Blindly, like a poor dog with a can to its tail. Anywhere. My operation, that nice six-inch slice up my abdomen, commenced to throb and my head whirled. I pressed the heels of my hands against my temples, trying to force myself to think.

I suddenly saw a cop watching me. He was standing in the shadow of the dock. He began to saunter towards me, and I reached for the ignition key. When I did that, he quickened his stride. Then I did go sick. I climbed out and sat on the running board and the cop came up and slapped me on the back a couple of times.

I was wondering whether I could slug him before he shot me to death, when he said: "You oughta stay away from the water, mister. I been watchin' you for the last five minutes. I knew you was getting sick."

That was my cue. "I been trying to break myself of it," I mumbled. "My wife wants me to take an ocean voyage, but I can't stand to even look at a ship."

"My cousin's first wife was like that," said the cop. And he went on and told me about his family in Peoria, or some place. That cop was just plain lonesome, and talking to him made me feel good. It made me realize that most of the lads in brass buttons were O.K. That I shouldn't

hate the whole uniformed division because of guys like Benson. That cop won't ever know what he did for me, he and his cousin's first wife in Peoria. It turned out that he wanted a lift uptown, so I was glad to oblige. We crossed town with him hulking up in the front seat in all the barrel-chested majesty of the law.

WHEN I dropped the big harness bull, I bought all the papers and read about the Vance murder. They didn't mind saying in black and white that Pete and I were of the same stripe. Well, I couldn't sue 'em for that. It was a compliment whether they meant it or not. But they didn't. Newspapers keep their fingers on the public pulse. They knew the wind was changing, so they changed their tune. They heaped it on Pete, and on me.

That twenty-four hour deadline I'd given myself loomed before me. I must have been crazy to agree to a thing like that. What could I do in twenty-four hours—me, half dead—that Pete couldn't do in two months? I'd made that crazy promise to protect Karen. Yet it wasn't quite as hopeless as it looked. The other side was taking the offensive. They were cocky and taking long swings. Maybe I could sway up close, like a groggy fighter, and slip over a punch that would stop 'em. It was either that or lay my own head down on the chopping block.

The papers didn't have much for me. A lot of supposition, but nothing to sink my teeth into. I read all the news, and then in one of the tabloids I found a special feature, entitled, *The Life and Loves of Dolly Vance*.

I waded through it. The gay butterfly stuff. Awful hokum, but the thread of her life was there. I found one item that interested me. Her first husband had been a ventriloquist, but her second husband had been an insurance adjustor who had been sent to the state penitentiary on a charge of grand larceny. She'd started

riding high after that, for she'd met Piel who was opening his joints on the current wave of vice that accompanied prohibition. She had been born Annie Schultz, in the old Haymarket district. Her family still lived there.

Twenty-four hours wasn't long enough to waste a minute on history, but Dolly had been murdered because she knew too much, and might talk. So Dolly's life might give me my first clue. I was only a couple of miles from the section that used to be known as the Haymarket, so I drove over that way. It took me twenty minutes to locate her brother who was a partner in a tiny plumbing shop. I looked him up.

He wasn't cordial. He was a family man and he didn't want anyone to know he was related to the notorious Dolly. I told him I was an insurance man, that Dolly had left a small policy made out to him.

I figured he'd fall all over himself for that, but he only snarled: "I wouldn't touch her dirty money. Annie was a tramp. We Schultzes ain't got much, mister, but we worked for it. Say, you ain't connected with that rat husband of hers, are you?"

"What husband is that? I thought her old man was a ventriloquist?"

"Ah, the first one was, but she married another bum. Al was a good, hard-working guy—that's the ventriloquist—but no, Annie couldn't be satisfied with a decent guy. She had to pick on a dirty forger like—"

"Forger?"

"Go ask the cops about Nat Lucas, mister. They sent him up for forgin' a claim for some dead guy. He was playin' around with counterfeitin' too. The cops got him ahead of the Secret Service, that's all. We don't want no part of it, mister. Give the dough to charity."

"What prison is this Lucas in?"

Joe Schultz was disconnecting a rusted

float in a water-closet. He took it out, and tossed it over his shoulder.

"He ain't in—he's out. He got out about two months ago, an' so help me, mister, if he comes around here tryin' to drag us into this stink, I'll slug him. An' that goes for anybody else who mentions our name. Get it?"

"I don't blame you, fella. I know what it's like to get messed up in a thing like this." Boy, didn't I though! I wished there was a chair I could squat on. I wasn't used to standing up. But I was getting some place, although I wasn't sure just where. "Just one thing more, Schultz. You can take my word for it I won't mention you in this. We're not interested in publicity. But I'd like a record on this guy Lucas. Maybe the money will have to go to him. Where is he?"

"I don't know where he lives, an' I don't care. He used to hang out around the West Side Social Club. That's a lot of thieves like himself. It's over a photographer's gallery on Dombey Street."

CHAPTER FOUR

Walking Skeleton

BACK in the car, I did a little head-work. I was working on the hypothesis that Pete was one hundred percent on the level. All right then. The other side, the D.A., and officially the police department, believed the evidence that Pete had deposited fifty thousand bucks in a suburban bank under the alias of Charleston. They had a picture of Pete and Dolly. All right, I say he never posed for a picture with Dolly. I say he never deposited a dime in the bank under a phoney handle. Their evidence? I say it's faked. The bank-slips and the check for Dolly's rent were forged, I say. Now I find Dolly's second husband is a forger. Check! I say that picture is a set-up. This guy Lucas plays with counterfeiting. For a guy that can fake United States green-

backs, faking a snap-shot would be taking candy from a baby. Check!

I wanted to see this guy, Lucas!

I went over to Dombey Street and found the photographer's studio, but the Social Club had moved. A couple of cautious inquiries got me the news that the club hadn't felt very social since repeal had opened up three saloons to the block. I parked the car about a hundred yards from the place and leaving the engine running, walked back. It's a break I left the engine running, too.

It wasn't really a studio. They took passport pictures, but the store specialized in used photographic equipment. The window was hung with every kind of a camera from the ancient 8x10 plate commercial to the modern Contax. Through all this mess, I could glimpse an old Bell and Howell silent motion-picture camera standing in a dusty corner, and next to it a dulled brass telescope on a stand. The sign on the door said—*J. Ichabod. Developing and Printing. X-ray laboratory work. If it uses a lens—we have it.*

I pushed the door open and walked in. The place was stuffy and the stench of acetic acid nearly lifted my hat off. A bell tinkled somewhere behind a partition and a wheezy voice croaked: "Just a minute, just a minute."

The store part was very small, and the dusty shelves were loaded with equipment that must have lain there for years. I edged over and glanced at the lens of a Graflex. The glass was fogged with fly-specks. Instinctively I had the feeling that this joint was a phoney. This stuff wasn't here for sale. I remembered what Plumber Schultz had told me about Nat Lucas and his counterfeiting. And then I whipped around suddenly and found the old guy looking at me from the curtained arch.

He had a face like a turtle—an old turtle. If he owned any teeth, he must have mislaid them. His sleeves were rolled up, and his unusually long, tapering fingers

were tip-stained with pyro. At first glance the brownish color looked like dried blood. He had a high, stiff collar, and an old-fashioned cravat. His bald head had little purple veins bulging in relief, like mole tracks on a lawn.

"Well," he demanded, "what do you want?"

I had meant to ask him about Lucas, but that didn't seem smart right now. The way he stood gave me the impression he was trying to guard the part of his joint behind that curtained passageway. I said: "I want a picture for a hack license."

"Can't you come back later? I'm developing."

"I got to have the mug, brother. I'll wait."

He jerked his neck impatiently and stepped aside. "Come in, come in," he snapped. "We'll get it over with now." He sidled crab-wise across the dim-lit room, and I followed.

IT WAS larger than the reception-room out front, and littered with screens and reflectors and miscellaneous junk, most of which I didn't recognize. There was something so predatory about the old duffer, I kept one eye on him all the time. He grabbed a camera on a studio stand and wheeled it across the floor to an immovable seat in one corner. The thing looked like the seat they got down at headquarters in the Identification Bureau, so when he waved impatiently and squeaked, "Sit down, sit down! I'm in a hurry," I never thought much about it.

"So you want a hack license, eh?" he sniffed.

I began to feel uncomfortable. The thought struck me that maybe this old coot had seen a picture of me someplace and recognizing me. He kept eyeing me with that smug air like he had me where he wanted me. I was just going to tell him to go to hell and walk out, when this other guy walked in.

He was a husky lad in his early thirties, about my build. His face was thin, but not hollow like the old man's. It was the leanness of the wolf. He had the same burning eyes with an impersonal luster that I didn't like. He stood in the archway, liping the end of a cigarette.

The old man gave him a sidelong glance and croaked:

"He wants a picture for a hack license."

"*Humpf*," said the young guy, unimpressed.

THERE was a metal-framed business pushed in front of me that seemed like something to keep me in focus. But the old guy didn't turn any more lights on in the room, and you can't take pictures in the half-dark. He was fiddling with the camera in front of me, but his heart wasn't in it. Both he and the young guy kept their eyes on that plate in front of me.

Suddenly I saw it start to glow. I saw the reflection of it first in their eyes, so I craned my neck forward and looked down. I saw the dim outline of a skeleton—a skeleton with a police badge pinned on its chest!

They'd fooled me! Ichabod had sat me down in front of a fluoroscope—one of those X-ray machines doctors use to see if you swallowed a nail the last time you ate chow-mein! It was a swell way to find out who was calling at the little studio on Dombey Street!

"Copper!" shrilled the old man and reached out those long stained claws for me.

I shoved my foot hard against the plate and swung it against him then I flopped sideways off the stool onto the floor. The appendix cut felt like it had ripped wide open and I must have screamed aloud. But that yelp of mine was fused with the dapper guy's first shot which ghosted right across the stool where I'd been an instant before. I got my gun out.

I was trembling so hard I couldn't steady the gun. I braced it against the camera leg, and tried for his arm. I shot the gun out of his hand.

Old Ichabod came at me like a big spider, his filthy rubber apron swaying over me. I took a long swipe at his legs with my gun and cracked him on the knee cap. That put him wailing in a corner. Then I groped my way to my feet.

The young guy was standing uncertainly, stupidly glaring at his hand where his gun had been. Then he saw me weaving to my feet. He pushed a big screen in front of us, and then I heard his footsteps. A second later the front door slammed.

That was O.K. with me. I'd had enough. The old man was still howling, and I knew the street must already be filling with people wondering what the yapping was about. I didn't want to be there when the cop on the beat barged in.

"I'll see you later, Icky," I promised, and limped for the back door. Halfway up the alley, I heard the siren of the radio car.

I stood flattened against the alley wall until it sailed passed, then I hobbled across the street to my own machine. Somebody saw me piling in and they started to yell. That's where the motor was a blessing. It was purring like a cat, ready for action. Before the cops could make a U-turn in that narrow street, I had ducked around a couple of corners and was on my way.

It was starting to get dark, and I remembered that I hadn't eaten since early morning, and that was nearly twelve hours ago, so I pulled up to a beanery and ordered a steak. While the short-order cook was taking the chill off it, I went into a booth and called up Captain Block at his home.

"My Lord, lad, what've you been up to? I just got a flash you shot up some poor old guy's photograph shop."

"Poor old—hell! Look, skipper—knock that joint over right away. Shake it down good, and take along a couple of Uncle Sam's boys from the Treasury Department. But *you* look for a faked negative of Pete. Get it?"

"You're barkin' up the wrong tree, Dave. Why don't you accept the inevitable?"

"Skipper, I want help, not advice. If you don't want to do that—say so. I'm sorry I asked you—"

"Oh, pipe down," he said, like his old self. "I'll bust it wide open, lad. Anything else?"

"Maybe. Did you ever hear of Nat Lucas. He went up on a fraud rap."

"Sure. He's up at the state pen right now."

"The hell he is! He's been out two months. What's he look like?"

There was a short pause as the skipper raked his memory. He had the biggest mental mug-file on the department. "About your build, lad. Sharp features, like a coyote. Off-hand, I'd say about thirty-one. Poker-faced. Snappy dresser. Dark hair, ears flat against the—"

"I know the rest. I just shot a rod out of his hand. Pick him up, skipper."

"On what?"

"On what?" I yelled, so loud the guy at the grill nearly flopped my steak onto the floor. "Forging bank-deposit slips, impersonating an officer, carrying concealed weapons, assault, conspiracy to commit murder. If that isn't enough—charge him with double parking. You better get him before I do."

"You're toying with dynamite, Dave. Call the whole thing off."

"You itching to attend another wake? Look, skipper, Pete gets buried tomorrow—with honors. You arrange that."

"Believe me, I'd like to, but—"

"Skip the buts. Can you put a wire tapper on Velvet Marquand's telephone lines?"

"You're not goin' to call *him*, boy!"

"No, I'm not going to *call* him. But after all, I may need a lawyer."

"But Marquand! He's the dirtiest shyster, the slickest crook—"

"His clients don't hang, copper!" I reminded him, and hung up.

CHAPTER FIVE

Whole Hog or Nothing

THE house was set back from the street with a wide lawn lighted by powerful floodlights surrounding it like a moat. To the average tourist, it looked like a pretty swell layout—and it was. But it looked like the home of an influential citizen who was proud of his home. I knew different. I knew that lighted lawn was there for protection, so some poor sap who'd been sold out couldn't sneak up and stick a slug in the smooth hide of the famous criminal lawyer who resided there.

There were a lot of guys would like to pay their debts in lead to Joseph Z. "Velvet" Marquand.

This time I ditched the car. It was too hot. I figured I'd got my three hundred bucks' worth of use out of it. It had saved my hide a couple of times so far this day. And that walk up the stone flagging under those glaring lights was the longest haul I ever made.

At last I stood in front of the massive oaken door. It might have been recovered from a castle. I'm not ordinarily an imaginative guy, but when I pressed the buzzer, I expected to hear bugles blow and guys in armor start clanking two-edged swords.

The butler was a mild-looking guy with a positive manner. I wrote *Urgent* across my personal card, sealed it in an envelope, and sent it in. Sure it was a long chance, but Velvet was confident. What did he have to worry about in his own castle?

The butler ushered me into the library. Marquand was a slim, classy little guy

with the warmest smile I ever saw—and the quickest. His hair was very white, and curly. He wore a tux. There was a fire crackling in the grate and a perfectly swell English setter stretched luxuriously on the rug.

Marquand came over with his hand outstretched. "Hello, Dave. I'm delighted to see you. How's the operation getting along?"

You couldn't help grinning. "Hello, Velvet. I'm O.K."

"You look like you could use a drink. Name it?"

"Scotch. Plain water."

"Haven't seen you since the Lackey case," the lawyer said, pouring my drink. "You gave me a trimming there, Dave. Got your stripes after that, I hear."

I took the drink and sat down. It was swell Scotch. I wondered what poor sucker had paid for it. The whole house was a monument to the fallibility of justice. Marquand sat smiling genially. No wonder juries were charmed until they couldn't tell black from white. It was hard for me, cynical as I was, to sit across from this smooth little man and realize that he was the general behind the armies of graft and corruption which regularly looted the city.

"We had Lackey cold for murder in the first," I reminded Marquand, "but you got him off with manslaughter."

"I call that losing a case," the lawyer said, smiling.

I had to shake off the lethargy that gripped me. My abdomen had ceased to throb. It was numb now and my whole body ached. I was tired. I wanted to sink back in that deep chair and close my eyes. Nothing seemed very important at the moment. The room, the setting, the man before me was like a narcotic. It seemed incredible that this man was my worst enemy, that he was directly responsible for the death of Pete, and Lord knows how many others. Like a man

freezing to death wants only to be left in peace, I wanted to shut my eyes and sink into oblivion.

It was Pete who called me back. Pete lying cold and battered on a morgue slab—and Karen. Pete ghosted into that library and I heard him whisper: "*Take care of her, pal.*" I'm not giving you a lot of spiritual hokum. I know it was imagination. But I was raw in the nerves, and it *felt* like that. I shook the dope out of my brain, and swallowed the drink.

"You know I'm being hunted, Velvet?"

"I read the papers, Dave," he admitted.

"You know, too, don't you, that Pete and I were concentrating on *you*. I went to the hospital, and Pete was killed."

"I'm sorry about Stuart," Marquand said softly. "I never have any personal animosity towards a political opponent. He was a fine boy."

It was hard to fence past that suave guard of words. Velvet words and velvet manner. "Well," I said bluntly, "I'm in a jam. Your fees come high, Velvet, but I need a mouthpiece, and I need him bad."

He made a deprecating motion with his empty hand. "Forget it. I'm always happy to take a case for the boys in the detective bureau. I'm at your service, Markey."

I TOOK out a couple of hundred bucks and tossed them on the table near his chair.

"I pay as I go, Velvet. That'll be a retainer. I don't ask favors of . . . *political opponents.*" I put emphasis on that phrase. I wanted him to remember it. "You're the smartest lawyer in this town. Well, I need a smart lawyer. I'm wanted for the murder of Dolly Vance."

"Where were you when she was killed?"

"Sitting on the edge of her bed. About three feet from her."

He poked the bills with his finger. "See anybody besides Vance?"

"Nobody. Nobody except a pint-sized pup. Look, Velvet, it's a small point, but it's important. Whoever murdered that dame don't like animals. The killer deliberately, and for no good reason, stomped a small Pomeranian and left it to die in agony with a broken back."

I was watching his face. It went hard as flint. He gave a growl in his throat, and the setter got up off the rug and walked over to lay its head on Marquand's lap. He stroked the sleek head absently, his eyes on my face.

I said: "I could have killed Vance with sheer pleasure, Velvet, but I couldn't be swine enough to break that pup's back."

"That was fiendish!" he said with more feeling than I would have thought possible. Dog lovers are that way. I knew the instant I saw that setter loafing in such quiet confidence that Marquand would get upset about the dead Pom.

"It's a point," I went on. "I got another idea. A guy named Nat Lucas, an ex-husband of Dolly Vance, is a forger."

"I don't see the connection," he said, trying to concentrate on what I was telling him.

"He may know something about her business, Velvet. He just got out of the can. He's hot. I had a talk with him a little while ago."

"You did?" Boy, he was concentrating now!

"I didn't get much, but I'm going to see him again."

"When?"

I grinned, but didn't say anything. He gave a shrug, and finished his drink. "What do you want me to do for you, Dave?" he asked.

"Cover me. If I get picked up, slap down a writ. I got a couple of damn good witnesses. If I can get their testimony, I'll turn the town inside out."

He smiled, and his eyes retreated into the friendly wrinkles.

"It's strange you should tell me this,"

he said frankly. "You must have a lot of confidence in me, Markey. Pete Stuart wouldn't have done what you're doing this night, poor lad."

"I'm not in a position to choose, Velvet. I'm gambling in a stacked game. It's whole hog or nothing."

He gestured resignedly with his hands. "Usually my clients seek advice, but then of course few of them have your experience with law." He laughed. "At least not your side of it. However, I'll do as you ask."

"Have you a better suggestion?"

He pursed his lips. "Well, Markey, you are running a risk of being picked up. If you wish, I might call the district attorney and make a deal with him to let you out on bail. In that way, you wouldn't be a fugitive."

"Thanks," I said, getting up. "I'll give myself another"—I looked at the clock on the mantel and made a hasty computation—"another thirteen hours."

"Then what?"

"I'll give myself up."

I kept facing him in case he'd try to stop me, or maybe signal that hefty-looking butler. But he acted like I was a regular guest. We went to the big front door, and he shook hands.

"Good luck, Markey."

I WALKED down that long flagstone path, under the brilliant artificial lighting, to the street. I tried to tell myself they wouldn't dare murder me on Marquand's doorstep. That would be too raw. Yet I had to fight off the panic that made me want to run. I glanced back over my shoulder. The big door was closed. I reached the sidewalk, and it seemed as if the drawbridge over the mythical moat had been lifted. I couldn't go back, even to the doubtful shelter of that spacious library.

I had ditched my car, intending to abandon it for good, but now I changed

my mind. It was about two blocks away, cached in a pool of deep shadow. It was a long walk. There were thirteen hours more of my self-allotted freedom, but I knew my time was nearly up. I was weak, and the toxic poison which had permeated my system was getting me down.

It was that knowledge that made me go on to that car. Instinct and plain common sense told me to scam the other way. I knew when I left it there I was inviting trouble. But now my worst enemy was not Marquand and his satellites—it was my own waning strength. So I forced myself to walk straight up to that machine.

There were no other cars in sight. There was nobody around, as far as I could observe. As I drew near the car, I reached into my hip pocket and took out my handkerchief. I made quite a job of blowing my nose, then when I returned my handkerchief to my pocket, I slid my service revolver into my hand as inconspicuously as possible. I reached the car.

With my left hand I opened the door away from the wheel, then I slashed down into the darkness with all my remaining strength!

The man wasn't expecting it. He had a gun, for I heard it clank against the gear shift as it bounced on the floorboards. He gave a startled moan and toppled forward so that the nearest street lamp gave him an outline.

I didn't stop to satisfy any curiosity. I pushed him away from the wheel, went around to the other door and got in. Then I drove away fast. Although I checked behind me a couple of times, I couldn't see any tail, but even at that, I circled the block to make sure. That satisfied me, so I glided up another side street and stopped near a lamp so I could take a gander at my companion.

It was Nat Lucas. That wasn't much of a surprise. I expected as much. I took that risk when I went into Marquand's lair, and I invited this when I hobbled

back to the machine. My wallop had been a good one. I'd laid a four-inch gash diagonally across his forehead almost to his right ear. It wasn't very deep, but I figured he'd stay quiet for a while. As I reached for the shift, I glanced out the rear window and spotted the red eye of a police car sliding up behind me.

MY FIRST impulse was to slam her in gear and lam. but the police car would have more power than mine, so I waited until it pulled up alongside and two cops got out. Then before they reached my wagon, I gave her the works and we rocketed down the street before the startled cops got back into their own hack.

But they rolled fast, and I began to have an idea who was in that buggy when they started to catch up to me. Inspector Benson had one of the best fast-wagon drivers in the department.

Don't ask me how they found me! Car trailing is a racket in itself, and some of those babies have pure genius. Only it didn't just happen. They must have stayed on my tail from the moment I left Marquand's castle. But it caught me off guard, caught me just when I began to hope again. I wanted just a quiet half-hour with Nat Lucas. I'd make him talk, or I'd fix him so he never would talk to anybody. For a few minutes I had tasted success, at least I could see it in the distance. But if Benson got me. . . .

I was in a bad district, dark, deserted, full of gloomy warehouses. If Benson caught me I wanted it to be where there were plenty of witnesses. I caromed around a corner and headed uptown. Maybe I could hold this lead for a half-dozen blocks. The throttle went down to the floorboards and stayed there.

I risked a backward glance. I was holding my own. I held my hand on the horn to clear the intersections. The territory was beginning to get familiar. There was an alley I knew down here that

might give me a break. I boomed around another turn, and started to slow for the narrow mouth.

That's when Lucas reached forward, snatched the ignition key and hurled it out the window!

The compression slowed the car to a walk almost before I slammed out the clutch and let her roll as far as she'd go. In the rear-view mirror I saw that red eye fume closer and I took time out to beat Lucas unconscious again before the big police machine rolled in front of me and I found myself squinting into the business end of a riot gun.

Benson growled: "Drop that gun an' step out, Markey!"

For just a fraction of a second I debated. If there was the slimmest chance of knocking over the inspector, I'd have taken it. But Dyke Healy, Benson's right-hand man, was standing on the other side of the hack and he was watching me over the sights of his revolver. So I crawled out with my hands high.

Healy called: "Hi, Inspector, Lucas is out cold. His head's been worked on."

"Drag him over," Benson grunted. "We'll take him along for the ride."

"That ride better be straight to headquarters, louse," I told Benson. "None of your fancy hide-outs for me. I got a mouthpiece on the job."

Benson laughed, the first laugh I'd ever heard from him in the ten years I'd been on the department. And that laugh told me what I already guessed. If I had had any illusions about Benson and Marquand belonging to the same litter, that laugh would have wiped them away.

For answer, Benson shifted his gun to his left hand and deliberately let go a round-house swing. I saw it coming, but I was too weak to duck. At least it would be an anesthetic for the torture I was undergoing. It didn't even hurt. Just a crashing impact . . . darkness . . . and peace. . .

I CAME to for a brief spell when they were carrying me down a flight of stairs, then my head banged against a door jamb and I went out again. The next time I knew anything, I was lying on bare cement, with my head canted forward against my chest and that head was just one big live ache.

The room was obviously in a cellar of some kind and, from the dampness and seepage, near the water-front. A trolley rumbled by almost overhead, and then everything was very still. A drop cord with a dirty bulb hung directly above, illuminating the corner with a sickly yellow glow. There was a peculiar odor permeating the cellar. It seemed vaguely familiar, but for a long time I couldn't recognize it. Then I remembered—oakum. We were apparently in one of the ancient shipyards which littered the outer edge of the harbor. A swell place for murder!

Benson was sitting on the edge of a packing case, watching me. His eyes glistened from the black mask of shadow cast by his visor. Healy sat on a nail keg, picking his teeth. The driver was not in evidence, but Nat Lucas stood behind Healy with his head wrapped in an improvised turban. From the mess his face was in, I figured he'd remember me long after the others. He would every time he looked in a mirror.

"I've got just one question to ask you, Markey," Benson clipped. "Who was that dame who left Vance's apartment with you?"

I wagged my head. "You're wacky! If there was a dame, I wouldn't tell you. There wasn't."

"Lemme work on him a minute, chief?" Lucas whined. "Just lemme pay him back for this head!"

Benson ignored him. "Come on, Markey. You were seen leaving with a woman."

For a split second, I wondered if Cap Block had sold me out. Then I knew dif-

ferent. Maybe Benson got the colored maid himself. He was a crook, but he was no fool. And it would set him in right with the machine if he could pin the Vance kill on me. I couldn't quite figure Lucas. He had a crazy light in his eyes that I hadn't seen before. It struck me then—Lucas was the killer!

Benson said abruptly. "It was the Stuart dame who was up there with you!"

"You're a liar!"

That was too quick. He'd trapped me. He gave a smug half-smile. I stole a look at Lucas. His face was a battlefield of mixed emotions. I wasn't sure whether he was relieved by Benson's declaration, or upset. But I did know that Karen was in danger.

"Look, Benson, take me in to headquarters and I'll cop a plea to manslaughter. I'll take the rap on the Vance murder."

"You'll take it O.K.," Benson grunted, "but not in court."

"I made a deal with Marquand," I pressed him. "Let him handle it. That'll satisfy you're rotten political bosses."

"We're satisfied right now," the inspector said.

"You call him. You call Marquand. I tell you I made a deal with him."

He thought that over. Lucas piped up: "Lemme knock him off, chief. I don't want to risk a court for this guy."

Benson got off the box and looked at Healy. "Keep your eye on him. I want to make a call." To Lucas, Benson said: "You keep your mouth shut and stay away from him until I'm done with him."

He went out through a door and I heard his hard walk on the stairs.

Healy took the pick out of his mouth, ran his tongue over his teeth with a sucking noise and sighed. "Well, Dave, you should have stayed in the hospital. It wasn't your marbles we was playin' with. But, no, you hadda butt in like the big-mouth you are."

BENSON stalked back in. He reached down, lifted me clear of the floor and then drove his fist into my mouth, and let go. I flopped back in the corner like a fish out of water, tasting my own blood.

"So you've got a couple of damn good witnesses whose testimony will turn the town inside out, eh? Let's have the names!"

"You go to hell!" I managed.

He grabbed me again and I fainted in the middle of his pasting. They must have dumped a pail of dirty water on me, because I came to fighting for air.

"Talk?" Benson demanded.

I shook my head, and the merry-go-round started again. It wasn't until he kicked me in the kidney that I went out again.

When I came to this time, Benson had his coat off and his sleeves rolled up. I saw the coat on a box, with his gun on top of it, but it was hopeless even to think of reaching for it. I was through. Benson was lighting up a cigarette. I knew what that meant, for Benson didn't smoke.

"Take off his shoes, Healy!"

I got in one good kick which almost closed Healy's left eye before Benson stepped on my shins, pinning me down.

They had the shoe off and were working on the sock, when Captain Block kicked the door open and said gently: "Please make a move, Benson. Just one!"

I could make out little Eddie Durkin behind the skipper and a couple of other dicks. Everybody seemed to move very slowly, like slow-motion pictures. I saw Benson back away from me. Then the skipper handed his gun to Eddie, methodically peeled off his own coat and gestured to his men to stand clear.

The skipper was no chicken anymore. There was a lot of gray in the iron of his hair. Benson was younger and bigger and better conditioned, but the captain chopped the inspector down like Paul

(Continued on page 124)

This Is A True Story

TWO glistening periscopes and half the conning tower of a submarine broke water almost under the destroyer *Paulding's* bow, and then came a tremendous crash! Alongside, the tapering tail of a submarine shot briefly into sight, vanished as the *Paulding* drove over her.

The S-4, planing upward toward the surface, shook under the terrific impact, rolled crazily to port, and immediately started sinking bow first as the sea gushed into her ruptured battery room.

And then another shivering crash! Head on, the S-4 smashed the bottom, plowed along there in a huge wave of mud, and finally slowly came to rest on an even keel.

On the bottom in 110 feet! Staring at the depth gauge, the men amidship saw a glimmer of hope. The survivors were in complete possession of the undamaged control room, its precious machinery, the priceless air still left in banks No. 3 and No. 4. Wholly unaided, they might float up the undamaged stern of the S-4, emerge from it. Hadn't their shipmates on their sunken sister, the S-5, escaped that very way from much deeper water only six years before?

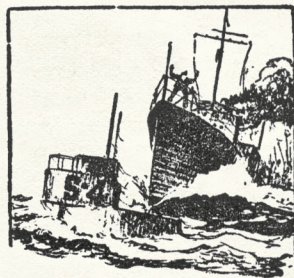
A sudden eruption of freezing salt water, deluging them and the burnished copper contact on the huge switchboard, told why not. Agonized eyes saw that the ventilation main overhead had ruptured directly above the switchboard and was drenching it with water!

"Close off the forward ventilation valve!"

The seaman at the forward door groped for the valve lever overhead, heaved it shut.

But that deadly stream of water did not cease! Electric circuits commenced to short all over the board; livid green lightning danced weirdly over the contacts, seared the electrician at the switchboard.

And still the water poured through. Unseen by the men in the control room, that ventilation duct in the flooded battery room had flattened out under the pressure and torn away from the bulkhead. And as luck would have it, just forward of the bulkhead was a green baize curtain draping the room to the captain's stateroom. As the water in the punctured battery room rose, it floated upward this curtain on its surface until, reach-



ing the level of the smashed ventilation duct over the door, it poured aft through that newly exposed valve toward the control room, carrying along in the torrent the folds of the curtain to wash them into the open valve and block it against closing.

That unseen green baize drapery in the clogged valve was deadlier now than high explosive bombs.

Thwarted by the valve they could not close, Jones and his struggling men abandoned the control room with its compressed air banks, its machinery, its chance of floating up their undamaged stern—abandoned everything that to a pigboat sailor spells a chance for life, and fled helplessly aft into the engine room.

As the last man stumbled through and the engine room door dogged closed, thirty-four trapped men regarded that door. Were they safe at least here from quick drowning?

Then, before their terrified eyes, as the full sea pressure came finally against the bulkhead, the door sprang from its seat on one side and a flat sheet of water sprayed on through into their last refuge!

THE story goes on—it's told by Commander Ellsberg, hero of the S-51, master of diving and master of yarn spinning, author of "On the Bottom", "Hell on Ice", etc. Divers went to the S-4, through freezing waters, from a gale tossed ship, tapped code on the iron hull and heard answering code from the doomed men, were themselves snarled in wreckage and had to be saved by other divers—the whole frantic and losing struggle for the S-4 is told in "Men Under the Sea", in *Adventure* magazine for April, which is on sale now at all stands.

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28x4.75-19	2.45	30x5.00	2.75
28x4.75-20	2.50	32x4.50	2.85
28x5.00-19	2.55	32x5.00	2.95
28x5.00-20	2.55		
4.25-17	2.90		
28x5.25-18	2.90		
28x5.25-19	2.95		
28x5.25-20	2.95		
31x5.25-21	3.25		
4.50-17	3.35		
28x5.50-18	3.35		
28x5.50-19	3.35		
4.00-17	3.40		
28x5.50-20	3.40		
31x5.00-19	3.40		
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32x5.00-20	3.45	32x5.50-20	4.05
32x5.00-21	3.65	32x5.50-21	4.05
32x5.50-20	3.75	32x5.50-21	4.05

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(Continued from page 122)

Bunyan would fell a tree, and he kept him conscious right to the end of the beating.

When he reached for his coat, little Eddie pleaded, "Can I have Healy, can I have Healy?" but the captain shook his head. "This was personal, Eddie. I been wanting to do that to Benson for twenty years." He came over to me and lifted me gently to a packing box.

"Dave, you've done it! We found the faked negative and old Ichabod confessed. He's implicated Lucas here, but we won't have to try 'em. The Secret Service found a couple of plates, and they'll take care of Lucas and Ichabod on a counterfeiting rap. It's lucky Benson telephoned Marquand. We was cut in on the wires, or we'd never have found you."

"That wasn't luck," I told him. "T'd planted that. I made him call. They were worried about the two witnesses."

"I wonder about that myself, lad."

"I meant Benson and Velvet themselves. You heard their conversation, didn't you? You work on Lucas, skipper. He knows. . . ." I looked at Lucas and saw a puzzled, bewildered look on his face. "Wait a minute—jerk off Benson's shoes, skipper. I got a hunch!"

Benson put up another scrap, but Eddie Durkin clipped him once back of the ear and he quit. Around the stitching near the toe of his right shoe, I found a light brown hair.

"It wasn't Lucas who killed Vance!" I shouted. "It was Benson! He kicked that Pomeranian to death!"

"Look out!" screamed Healy.

The skipper dove for Lucas, but not fast enough. Lucas scooped the gun off Benson's coat and got three slugs into the inspector before Captain Block knocked him cold. I didn't see anything after that. I had fainted!

THEY kept me in bed, but they moved the bed out onto the porch and the funeral procession was routed especially

Whole Hog or Nothing

for me. The skipper and Karen both stayed with me, and watched the boys parade past. When the band came around the corner, the skipper stepped behind the bed so I wouldn't see the tears in his eyes. Me, I didn't care. I bawled plenty.

Karen stood straight and proud. When the hearse slid by, she said: "Good-night, sweetheart!" I said, "So long, ape," and then I couldn't see anything.

The pendulum had swung the other way. The press made up for the unkind things they had said about Pete. Benson was dead, and when the news came out, Marquand showed how smart he was by committing suicide. But Lucas told enough. He had loved Dolly, and he had really believed that I had killed her. He was the Charleston who had impersonated Pete in the clever build-up to discredit the investigation by smearing Pete Stuart. When he learned that Benson had killed his Dolly, he went haywire. I knew how he felt, and I was glad the D. A. decided not to prosecute him for killing Benson. The government counterfeiting rap would keep him out of circulation for the best part of his life.

The music died away in the distance finally, and Karen stood perfectly still until Captain Block cleared his throat and muttered: "It don't seem possible Pete has gone."

Karen turned and her eyes were starry. "Gone, you say? Pete hasn't gone, he'll never go, Captain. Pete will live with us all the rest of our lives."

The skipper ran his fingers through his hair. "I guess you're right, ma'am. I guess Pete just sort of divided himself up between his friends. I'll trot along now. By the way, Dave, the Old Man asked me to tell you there's a captaincy waitin' for you if you can stay out of fights long enough to come down an' get it." He paused at the door and looked from Karen to me.

"Good luck. Good luck to you both."

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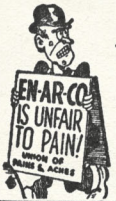
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HERE'S one even T. T. Flynn's smart-bookie character, Joe Maddox, might be taken in by unless he happened to be in on the know. It's an unfortunate thing that the Sport of Kings has so many crooks hanging around the chisel-fringe of the race tracks, but the bangtails seem to attract them along with the horse flies. Watch for such phoney tipping services, all you track fans. You'll be more apt to win by picking the name of a horse out of a hat at random, or letting your three-year-old child tell you what nag to lay your dough on.

Woodcliff, N. J.

Editor, Ready for the Rackets.

Dear Sir:

Here is a racket which, although pretty old, still snares plenty of suckers, and what's more, it is done just a shade within the law! Here's how it goes:

A letter is received by the boys and girls who play the horses to the effect that through reliable information, the winners of any race can be predicted in advance, and to prove that this isn't hot air that is being spouted, a "tip" is enclosed. And should more tips be desired, well, a few dollars will bring more of the same. Now, naturally, a recipient of this kind of letter is not gullible enough to play this tip, but being a follower of the horses, he is downright mystified, pleased, and convinced when he learns that the tip he received was absolutely bonafide, and immediately thereafter hocks his watch to subscribe to this service. If he's lucky, he'll get another good tip, but soon thereafter he'll be out of luck. Here's how the racket works:

Four or five racketeers get together (the number is in relation to the number of horses in a race). They have a sucker list of every horseplayer in the state. Each one of them picks a horse—no two of them will select the same one—for legal reasons. Then each one of them will mail his selection, say to 100 suckers each. Under this set-up, one of the racketeers is sure to advise his customers correctly, and it is only natural

Ready for the Rackets

to expect a fee from these 100 suckers for additional tips. Out of this number 20, or one out of 5, will get good tips, who in turn will kick back for another tip which will procure 5 winners, and at this point the racketeers start on another group—with immunity, as in some states there are no laws prohibiting one from giving advice on one horse. It is only when a person attempts to work the above scheme alone that the law can step in—hence the above partnership.

Very truly yours,
David Thomas

AND here's another one, highly ingenious in mitigation and almost sure-fire because of the type of professional man on whom it's worked. We can imagine that a lawyer who has fallen victim to the following would be more than reluctant to talk about it to anyone—friends, other legal "lights" and especially the police who are so often trampled on in court when some clever attorney with a criminal practice tears down a case they have carefully built up against some public enemy, winning an acquittal or dismissal. The police would welcome an opportunity to see the shoe on the other foot for a change, and what a laugh the Racket Squad would get when Mr. Lawyer walked into headquarters to confess to his gullibility!

Rackets Editor.

Dear Sir:

Here is one with whiskers, but it seems to work as well as ever—due largely, as you will learn, from lack of publicity—with the lawyers upon whom it is worked.

An attractive young woman comes to a lawyer's office with a song and dance about a sum of money that is owed her by an old friend of her father, a business associate when her father was living. She needs the money desperately, but doesn't want to sue unless there is no other way to recover. Letters, which she exhibits, are in themselves an admission from the man himself that the money is owed, but he pleads inability to pay at that time. The stationery carries the imprint of a small business in a town a thousand miles away. After some questions are answered the legal gentleman will usually agree to attempt collection, for without suit being instituted all he can do is write a registered letter or two. The girl is so glad he is willing to help her.

She is glad to the point of being tickled pink when she has lined up a half dozen different attorneys with the same story. All that remains then is to sit back and wait. In answer to the letters the attorneys direct to the supposed debtor, they receive replies voicing indignation that Miss So-and-So

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The entire scheme operates on the erroneous assumption that a certified check is as good as cash. In this instance, the girl's confederate merely draws a good check for \$60 in favor of one of the attorneys, has it certified, and then raises it to six hundred dollars! The manufacture of duplicates, with only the name of the payee changed, is a relatively simple process.

It is seldom indeed that anything about these operations get into the newspapers. Lawyers are reluctant to admit that they, perhaps engaged in criminal law and supposed to know the ropes, have been taken in by such a common, garden variety short-con game.

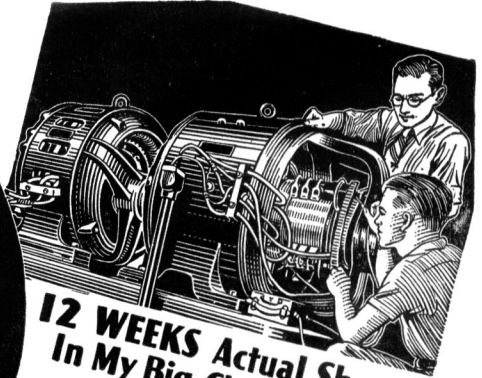
One victim of my acquaintance took the girl to dinner after she accompanied him to a bank to cash the check, and she was so charming, and grateful for his help, that he passed up a fee. He was glad he did when the girl invited him to call at her apartment the following evening, managing to make the invitation sound like a half-promise. She plead a headache as an excuse to get away in a hurry, and was his face red the next night! The bird had flown, and whither, no one knew.

Very truly yours,
Don J. Johnston

AND now just a final word of warning to all those who are planning to go to either or both of the great expositions this summer in New York and San Francisco respectively. The police of both cities will be alert to protect you from the petty racketeers who will swarm to the fairs, and expect crime to be kept to a minimum. However, you yourselves can cooperate immeasurably by exercising caution in dealing with strangers and reporting immediately to the authorities any evidence of fleecing. And this department will be happy to have quick word of any new rackets that are being worked at the fairs so we can give them immediate and extensive publicity through these pages.

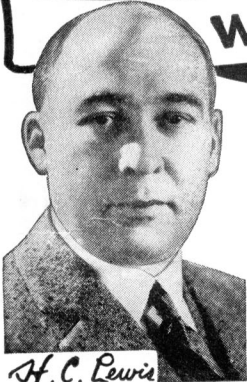
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