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COMPLETE



MAY

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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FREDERICK C. DAVIS

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THE KILLER

A SERGEANT LANNING
NOVELETTE
by SAM MERWIN, JR.

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CHAMPION
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SOLAR TAN provides a new simplified way to give you your share of natural sun conveniently, safely and economically. Order yours . . . RUSH COUPON. The price is \$1.00 plus postage C.O.D., or send a dollar and we'll send yours postage paid. Order several for all members of your family. SOLAR TAN is fully guaranteed . . . so don't hesitate . . . you risk nothing. But hurry while this introductory offer is open.

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Many doctors agree VITAMIN "D," which sun rays throw off, are beneficial to the body and helpful to the complexion . . . these healthy qualities are now available through SOLAR TAN . . . the price is so low you can't afford to be without one. Order yours today! Enjoy the thrill of this new invention. You'll look bright and feel right.

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If your doctor ordered you to get more VITAMIN "D" to help relieve head colds and nose sinus disturbances, get it from nature's sun . . . get it with "SOLAR TAN" in just a few minutes a day . . . the sun itself is your lamp.

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There is no substitute for rest for the tired body . . . that's nature's demands. Yet there is a tonic effect that the natural sun has on the body . . . helps to pep you up and increase energy. Get your sun tan almost for nothing by ordering a SOLAR TAN . . . what a difference a few minutes will make.

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Takes only a few minutes a day. In 15 minutes you'll be as brown as a berry. Safe for anyone to use . . . marvelous for kiddies, too! It's portable . . . place it in your grip for trips. Use it for the face, arms, legs or any part of the body.

GUARANTEE Guaranteed to satisfy or money back within 5 days. Fully tested by Electrical Testing Laboratories. 

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ADDRESS

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J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute. Established 25 Years

Many make \$30 \$40 \$50 a week

I Train Beginners at Home for Good Spare Time and Full Time Radio Jobs

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Hundreds of millions of dollars in defense orders are giving Radio its biggest boom in years—are opening new opportunities for trained men. What's more—trained Radio Technicians, when selected for military service, can get in line quickly for better ratings, with more pay, more prestige. Radio Technicians in the Army and Navy can earn up to 6 times a private's base pay.

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Beginners Quickly Learn To Earn \$5 To \$10 A Week in Spare Time

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Learning through N. R. I. to be a Radio Technician is not all book work. Practical experiments with Radio parts we supply is a very important part of our Course. You build circuits as used in Radio receivers, transmitters and test equipment; conduct numerous fascinating experiments which make learning interesting. You learn by doing. You get testing equipment as part of your Course.

to help you earn more in spare time and to make more money when you begin regular Radio work. Find out about this TESTED WAY TO BETTER PAY, BETTER OPPORTUNITIES. Mail the Coupon RIGHT NOW!

Get Facts Without Obliging Yourself--NOW!

Mail the coupon today for your FREE copy of "Rich Rewards in Radio." No salesman will call, and you'll be able to judge for yourself why Radio is today's and tomorrow's field of opportunity. You'll see letters from men who got into Radio this way and made more money. They'll tell you what learning Radio has meant to them; tell you what they are doing and earning. You'll see why the N. R. I. Course is easy to study, fascinating to learn, practical to use. You'll see the opportunities offered in Radio's many fields. You'll see how much you'll miss if you fail to grasp the opportunities RADIO OFFERS YOU! You'll get facts on Television and other fast-growing branches of Radio. Act NOW. Write your name and address on the coupon below. Paste it on a penny postcard or mail it in an envelope—RIGHT NOW.

Draft Registrants!

Hundreds of men who know Radio when they enter military service are going to win specialist ratings in the Army, Navy and Marine Corps. These ratings pay up to 6 times a private's or seaman's base pay, in addition to carrying extra pay and prestige. Whether you enlist or wait for conscription—IT'S SMART TO LEARN RADIO—NOW!

**J. E. Smith, President,
National Radio Institute
Dept. 1ES9 Washington, D. C.**



Broadcasting Stations employ operators, installation, maintenance men and Radio Technicians in other capacities and pay well.



Set Servicing pays many Radio Technicians \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make \$5 to \$10 extra a week in spare time.

I Trained These Men



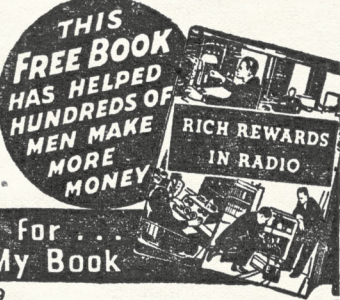
\$10 to \$20 a Week in Spare Time
I repaired some Radio Sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made \$600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of \$10 to \$20 a week—just spare time.—JOHN JERRY, 1529 Arapahoe St., Rm. 17, Denver, Colorado

Makes \$50 to \$60 a Week

I am making between \$60 and \$80 a week after all expenses are paid, and I am getting all the Radio work I can take care of, thanks to N. R. I.—H. W. SPANGLER, 126 1/2 S. Gay St., Knoxville, Tenn.



Operates Public Address System
I have a position with the Los Angeles Civil Service, operating the Public Address System in the City Hall Council. My salary is \$170 a month.—R. H. BOOD, R. 136, City Hall, Los Angeles, Calif.



This Coupon is Good for One FREE Copy of My Book

**J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 1ES9
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

Mail me FREE, without obligation, your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No salesman will call. Write plainly.)

NAME.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY.....STATE.....

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 36

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Cover—"The Girl Sprang Over His Prostrate Form"

From *Bonds to Burn*.

Black-and-white illustrations by John Fleming Gould

Watch for the June Issue

On the Newsstands May 2nd

Published once a month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter June 29, 1935, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyrighted 1941 by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. \$1.20. Subscription Department 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. All manuscripts must be accompanied by a stamped and self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and sent to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd St., New York, N. Y. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although all care will be exercised in handling them * * * * * Printed in U. S. A.

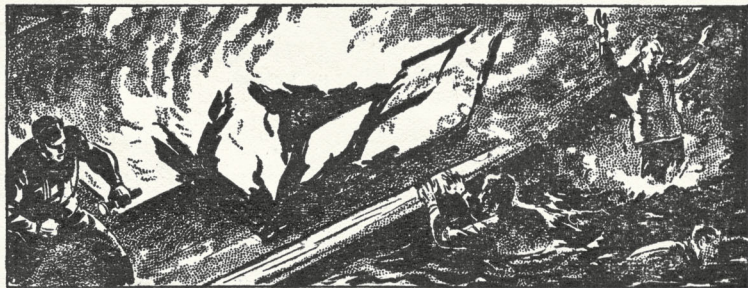
"FLAMES DROVE US INTO THE INKY SEA!"

A true experience of WILLIAM H. CRANE, West Columbia, Texas



"A TERRIFIC EXPLOSION rocked the boat on which we were riding out to an oil drilling rig in Galveston Bay," writes Mr. Crane. "Instantly, the six of us—a drilling crew and the skipper of our craft—were surrounded by flames.

"FIGHTING THE FIRE was hopeless. As tongues of flame seared us, we strapped on lifebelts. Our drill-er grabbed a flashlight. Then we hurled ourselves overboard into the black water.



"AFTER HOURS OF SIGNALLING, the piercing white beam of the flashlight guided a searching party to us. Without the flashlight and its dependable 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries it could have been 'curtains' for us.

(Signed) *William H. Crane*

The word "Eveready" is a registered trade-mark of National Carbon Company, Inc.



FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER... Look for the DATE-LINE

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC., 30 EAST 42nd STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y.
Unit of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation

The June Thrill Docket

THE Marquis of Broadway had run up against plenty of cockeyed set-ups in his career. Trying to keep Manhattan's main-stem in order, and the wolves from dipping into the district that offered the richest pickings in the world, brought all kinds of grist to his police mill. But this was the first time one of Mazda Lane's most successful operators ever begged the little czar of the Tenderloin to boot him out of the section—pour sand in the gearbox of his profit-machine while the long green still flowed in—and bar him forever from returning to his flourishing lettuce bed. *Floater* is the title of this smashing long novelette by JOHN LAWRENCE—and floater is what Nick Swaine asked the Marquis to give him, with all the trimmings, including an axe-squad to smash his dives and a beating for himself.

Remember the *Five Angels of Death* who hovered over the carnival lot where Chisholm's Greater Shows held forth, back in the September issue? T. T. FLYNN has mustered them once more to head a murder parade in which Madame Zorelda and her pet parrot, a State Governor with a past and a newspaper man with no future all march, while Banker Dave Morton, who had inherited the show, and wished he could get rid of it, stews in the mess they make for him—in jail and out. It's a long novelette and FLYNN at his best.

And PETER PAIGE brings back the half-pint holocaust, Cash Wale, and his butterfly-brained sidekick, Sailor Duffy, in *Lady, Can You Spare a Corpse?* The lady is Gwennie, whose hobby is passing out \$10,000 bills to any casual passerby who happens to carry an umbrella when the sun is shining. Quite a character—as you'll see when you read it.

Plus short stories by MAXWELL HAWKINS, CORNELL WOOLRICH and others.

This great issue is going to be on sale MAY 2nd!

Ready for the Rackets

A Department

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a foreknowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in, telling us your own personal experiences with chisellers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your names, if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Racket Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 E. 42nd St., N. Y.

AND still they flood in—accounts of petty swindle schemes that mulct the public of millions of dollars annually. It was inevitable, of course, that the war should bring to light new ones and old ones in new dress. Here's one of the latter type. Not so petty, either, when expensive paintings or other art objects are the bait. But it's been worked with all sorts of goods—linen, lace, "heirlooms" of all sorts.

Columbus, Ohio

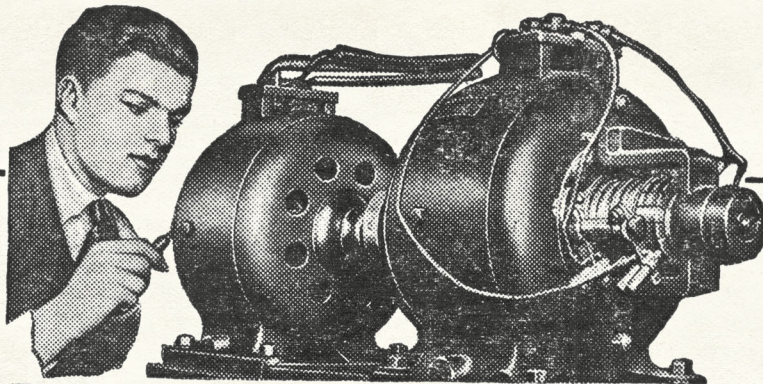
Leave it to the gentle gyps to cash in on all the angles connected with the present state of world affairs. A pair of them made this old relic, all dressed up in new clothes, pay off to the tune of almost \$30,000 in our city.

Both of the men had accents, foreign manners and an ingrown hatred of Hitler. They talked volubly about this latter matter with little or no urging, and having gone through blitzkreig turmoil they had a lot of supposed "facts" that the press had never carried. They also had about every clipping that ever appeared in any newspaper regarding paintings—famous ones—that had become lost, strayed or stolen when the Hitler horde goose-stepped into the Low Countries and France. As proven later, they also had some that never appeared in any paper, but were clever counterfeits designed to further their own purposes.

Glib and convincing, it did not take this pair long to worm their way into the circle of rich families interested in art. Having done that, their horror stories built up sympathy, and ultimately, they were ready. Carefully they produced this raft of clippings. "We know where that particular painting is; it could be gotten for a fraction of its real value. It is all that remains for a man who had a wife and two fine children when the war broke out. . . ."

The cleverness of this approach will be realized when you think of this: It may be utterly wrong to buy something you know has not been acquired honestly; but, somehow, to buy the thing from a man who has

(Continued on page 6)



Amazingly Easy Way to get into **ELECTRICITY** **I'LL FINANCE YOUR TRAINING**

Don't spend your life hoping for a better job and a better salary. *Let me show you how to train for positions that lead to \$35.00, \$40.00 a week and up in the great field of Electricity.* NOT by correspondence but by actual shop work right on real electrical machinery. Then on my "PAY AFTER GRADUATION" PLAN YOU CAN PAY YOUR TUITION AFTER YOUR TRAINING PERIOD IS OVER IN EASY MONTHLY PAYMENTS.

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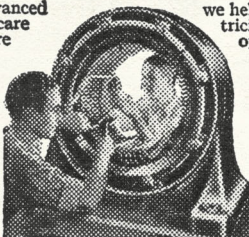
Lack of experience—age, or advanced education bars no one. I don't care if you don't know an armature from an air brake—I don't expect you to! It makes no difference! Don't let lack of money stop you. Most of the men at Coyne have no more money than you have. That's why I have worked out my astonishing offers.

Earn While Learning

If you need part-time work to help pay your living expenses I'll help you get it. Then, in 12 brief weeks, in the great roaring shops of Coyne, I train you as you never dreamed you could be trained...on one of the greatest outlays of electrical apparatus ever assembled...real dynamos, engines, power plants, autos, switchboards, transmitting stations...everything from doorbells to farm power and lighting...full-sized...in full operation every day!

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No dull books, no baffling charts, no classes, you get individual training...all real actual work...building real batteries...winding real armatures, operating real motors, dynamos and generators, wiring houses, etc., etc. That's a glimpse of how



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Our Employment Bureau for graduates gives FREE lifetime employment service.

**Armature Winder
Sub-Station Operator
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Service Station Owner
Air Conditioning
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Radio Servicing
and many others**

we help to make you a master electrician so you can cash in on the opportunities ahead.

Jobs, Pay, Future

To get a good job today you've got to be trained. Industry demands men who have specialized training. These men will be the ones who are the big-pay men of the future. After graduation my Employment Department gives you Lifetime Employment Service. J. O. Whitmeyer says: "After I graduated, the School Employment Service furnished me with a list of several positions...I secured a position with an Electrical Construction Company, paying me 3 to 4 times more a week than I was getting before I entered Coyne and today I am still climbing to higher pay."

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Coyne is your one great chance to get into electricity. Every obstacle is removed. This school is 40 years old—Coyne training is tested and proven. You can get training first—then pay for it in easy monthly payments after you graduate. You can find out everything absolutely free. Simply mail the coupon and let me send you the big, free Coyne book...facts...jobs...salaries...opportunities. This does not obligate you. So act at once. Just mail coupon.

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This is our fireproof, modern home wherein is installed thousands of dollars' worth of the newest and most modern Electrical equipment of all kinds. Every comfort and convenience has been arranged to make you happy and contented during your training.

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H. C. LEWIS, Pres.
COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL, DEPT. 51-76
500 S. Paulina Street, Chicago, Illinois

Dear Mr. Lewis:

Without obligation send me your big free catalog and all details of Free Employment Service, the 4 weeks Radio Course and how you will finance my tuition and how I can "earn while learning." I understand I will not be bothered by any salesman.

Name

Address

City.....State.....

(Continued from page 4)

suffered so terribly—and cheat Hitler at the same time—well, a number of the “better families” jumped at the chance. They bought a modest collection of excellent copies of more or less famous paintings at prices they imagined to be steals. Then came the awakening, the police, the Better Business Bureau to broadcast a warning. But the birds had flown . . . with almost thirty thousand! At this writing they have not been apprehended.

Edgar A. Russell.

AND here's one that's common in the metropolitan areas—and occasionally crops up in small towns, too. Sometimes it's worked close to a state line where a crossing of such brings threat of heavy penalty for the unwitting.

Chattanooga, Tennessee

Here is what seems to be a smooth racket that came to my attention the other day. I don't know how many other cities it has been worked in, but to my knowledge it has been enacted twice here in Chattanooga with apparently the greatest of ease, and it seems there is nothing you can do about it, so it behooves every man to be on his guard.

Inasmuch as both cases were worked practically the same way and, I believe, by the same girl, the description of the first case will suffice.

One night a prominent middle-aged business man drove out to one of the better-class roadhouses about ten miles from town to while away a few hours in relaxation. He was alone. He parked among many other cars in front of the establishment, under a string of dim, variegated lights. He waved away a green-costumed girl who rushed up to serve him, alighted from the car and went inside. As he walked through the door he noticed a well-dressed young girl of around twenty standing to one side gazing out as if she were looking for someone. He skirted the big dance floor, where the crowd was doing everything from the sedate waltz to the jitterbug contortion, by the same music, and sat down at a table. He ordered a drink and drew a bill from his wallet and paid the waiter. When the waiter left he saw the girl he'd seen at the door sitting alone at a nearby table. She was looking at him. Inasmuch as he was a married man and not on a philandering expedition he felt he should discourage the girl from noticing him, so he occupied himself with his drink and began watching the dancers. With the exception of a few brief conversations he had with acquaintances he spent the two or three hours he stayed there wholly to himself. As he was leaving the place to go home he saw the girl again, just outside the door. She looked as if she wanted to say something. He paused.

She spoke. “Pardon me. Are you going to town?” politely.

The unsuspecting citizen was. “Why, yes,” he answered.

The girl inquired if he would give her a lift to town, explaining that the people who were to come after her had apparently had a mishap as they should have come hours ago.

The kind-hearted man was more than willing to oblige. So they got into his big car and pulled away toward the city. Upon his query as to her destination she named the biggest hotel in town and said she would be grateful if he would let her out in front of it. In a few minutes they drew up before the hotel and stopped. It was between ten and eleven o'clock on Saturday night and the sidewalk was crowded with people passing by and the doors in the hotel seemed like a beehive of activity with people entering and leaving.

The man opened the car door, but the girl made no effort to get out. “Don't you want to get out here?” he asked, thinking he had misunderstood the name of the hotel.

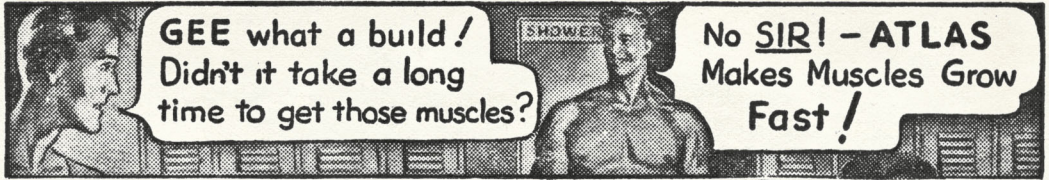
For an answer the girl pulled off her hat, put a hand up to the collar of her dress at the V opening below her neck and said, in a low, nervous tone, “I want fifty dollars.”

The man drew back in amazement. “Why, you're crazy,” he said. “I haven't got fifty dollars.” He started to turn the switch on and drive away from all those people on the sidewalk, but the girl grabbed his hand and said: “If you start this car I'll scream. I'm desperate. I want fifty dollars or I'll tear my clothes and scream and swear you attacked me and are trying to dump me out.” She paused momentarily, then said, in a louder voice: “O God! Why did I ever get in a car with you?”

The victim was certain some of the passersby heard that. He saw some of them looking toward them. He couldn't drive away. That fool girl would carry out her threat to scream. In a moment of great turmoil it suddenly dawned on him that this girl had plotted this thing the moment she had seen him drive up to the roadhouse alone and had made certain that he had some money. And by his kindness he had innocently fallen prey to her hellish scheme. He couldn't turn her over to the police, for if he attempted any move he was sure she would instantly tear her clothes to shreds and cry out a pitiful story of being attacked. He reflected a moment. There seemed no way out. He had his reputation to consider, his family, his business, his friends. For the sake of fifty dollars this thing could possibly tear him down with one stroke, and the road back up is a long, hard grind. He was trapped. He had no alternative other than to pay off and that is exactly what he did.

He emptied his wallet and counted the bills out to the girl, forty-seven dollars. She wanted fifty but she compromised for three shy of her goal. Then, with her keen eyes ever on her victim, she eased out of the car and sweetly said, “Goodnight, darling,” and disappeared up the street around the corner of the hotel.

Elbert Cartee.



Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?



LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE

<p>5 inches of new Muscle</p> <p>"My arms increased 1 1/2", chest 2 1/2", forearm 7/8". —F. S., S., W. Va.</p>	<p>What a difference!</p> <p>"Have put 3 1/2" on chest (normal) and 2 1/2" expanded." —F. S., N. Y.</p>
<p>Here's what ATLAS did for ME!</p> <p>John Jacobs BEFORE John Jacobs AFTER</p>	<p>For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS</p> <p>"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress." —W. G., N. J.</p>
<p>GAINED 29 POUNDS</p> <p>"When I started, weighed only 141. Now 170." —T. K., N. Y.</p>	

CHARLES ATLAS

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest—in competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.

This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add **SOLID MUSCLE** to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system **INSIDE and OUTSIDE!** I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or con-

traptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through "Dynamic Tension" you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the **DORMANT** muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid **LIVE MUSCLE.**

My method—"Dynamic Tension"—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "Dynamic Tension" almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to **BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.**

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LET THE SKELETONS RATTLE

A Bill Brent-Lora Lorne Novelette
By Frederick C. Davis
Author of "Please Pass the Poison," etc.



CHAPTER ONE

Murders Arranged Free

THE thunder of the big cylinders in the basement softened to a rumble and stopped signaling throughout the *Recorder* plant that the mail edition was off the presses and the city final was due to roll.

The rest of the staff were racing the clock in an effort to meet the daily emergency of the deadline, but Bill Brent was preoccupied with a self-appointed task having nothing to do with getting the paper out on time. He was searching into the correspondence, some of it weeks old, that formed an everlasting heap on his table.

"You've been digging away for hours, Bill," Valerie Randall said, pausing at his door. "What in the world are you expecting to turn up?"

"Can't say exactly," Brent muttered, ripping open another envelope. "Don't know just who the letter's from or what it'll say or even if it's been written. But there ought to be something here—some-where—"

Persistently hunting while Miss Randall hustled to her desk—while the battery of linotypes in the composing room sent up an urgent clatter and the advertising department rushed its late insertions and eight reporters belabored their typewriters to produce last-minute copy that went whiffing page by page down the pneumatic tube—he chucked each letter aside after a single worried glance.

There were hundreds, some pink, others lavender, many perfumed. All were addressed to Lora Lorne, the paper's mentor in matters of love—its own Dorothy Dix or Beatrice Fairfax, who counseled her distressed readers as to their wayward spouses, their shattered troths and unrequited raptures. None of them lightened the haunted expression on Brent's face. He reached the last without finding the thing he was hoping he wouldn't find.

Taking a new tack he strode from his cubbyhole of an office, which occupied a remote corner of the big littered room, and ran his anxious blue eyes down the galley proofs trailing from a spike on Garrett's rolltop desk. Almost at once a cold shock hit him. Here it was, finally—a brief item speaking of violence and a girl whose initials were O. Q.

"Well, at least," he consoled himself, poring over it, "she didn't get herself murdered."

He turned to Valerie Randall.

"You covered this, Val. What really happened? Let's hear the straight of it."

MISS RANDALL was probably the world's only girl police reporter and she was conscious of her distinction. She was also the loveliest brunette to be found in any city-room anywhere, in Brent's estimation, and she would seem even more beautiful to him if only she

weren't to be found constantly in this one, particularly at the desk he considered rightfully his own.

"Why, Bill?" she asked, twirling a sheet of newsprint from her typewriter. "Do you know Odelle Quinn?"

"Never laid eyes on the lady," Brent answered, "but I've got to know how badly she's hurt, and what this guy had to do with it."

"Glen Carr, you mean?" Val was preoccupied with her copy—a more pressing matter, she obviously felt, than Brent's uneasy questions. "Is Carr a friend of yours?"

"Never heard of him until this minute," Brent said. "But whatever happened to that girl last night—especially if he did it—I'm concerned."

Val whisked her story to Garrett's desk and her blue-green eyes became curious.

"Odelle Quinn's her professional name. A night club singer, married to Carr, who's usually in the show with her as master of ceremonies. She's a beautiful girl, Bill, but why fret over another man's wife whom you've never met?"

"Is this true?" Brent insisted tapping the news item. "She fell downstairs?"

"The boys at headquarters are pretty sure her husband tossed her down. But with a sprained wrist and an assortment of bruises she wouldn't admit it and wouldn't press charges."

"I was afraid of this," Brent said in a moaning tone. "Did it happen while they were having a spat?"

"That's putting it mildly. More likely he was flying at her throat. But how'd you know? I didn't mention it in the story."

"Never mind," Brent said. "Don't stop now."

"If you insist on the sordid details, Carr raised such a racket that the family next door phoned the cops. It might have developed into a swell front page yarn, but the prowl car got there too soon, I'm sorry to say."

"You're sorry no gore was spilled and I'm thankful!" Brent said fervently. "Because, Val, I'm responsible. This whole thing's on my conscience."

"Really, Bill? But how?"

"No able-bodied man ever had a screwier job. I tell you, Val"—he was intense-

ly earnest about it—"this misbegotten column of mine is not only poisoning my very soul but driving me nuts."

"Don't take it so much to heart," Val said, smiling. "Why not simply pound out the stuff and forget it?"

"I wish I could," Brent said. "But it preys on my mind. I lie awake nights. I beat my brains all day over half a dozen letters of advice given with the very best of intentions, and all night I toss and wonder how many lives I've unwittingly wrecked. I—"

"Lora!" an imperious voice called. Garrett was shouting from his desk in the corner. "Miss Lorne, if you please!"

Blunt chin lowered, Bill Brent responded. He responded while the whole city staff grinned, because he, God help him, was the love oracle who hid behind the phoney name of Lora Lorne.

A portrait graced the column in which

forgotten artist's imagination. Non-existent or not, Brent had a definite feeling for her. He wholeheartedly hated her and he'd lie down under a five-ton truck rather than let the world learn that for months now he'd been forced to wear her saccharine false-face.

"Some day soon, Garrett," he threatened, "you're going to rub it in once too often and I'm going to pull you apart like a bug."

Having come out of the first World War a major at twenty-three, Garrett wasn't intimidated. A ruddy-featured man whose bearing was still stiffly military, his angular jaw was that of a disciplinarian.

"Where's today's column, grandma?" he inquired in the same taunting tone.

Brent had four pages of copy in his hands and for a moment he fought an impulse to deliver them squarely be-

Bill Brent, alias Lora Lorne, the Recorder's gentle and motherly love-counselor, digs into his voluminous and erotic mailbag and comes up with a clue to the Heights Hospital homicides that suggests that some of the staff's ambidextrous medicos may be preserving life with one hand and snuffing it out with the other. So he indulges in a bit of extra-curricular activity—for, after all, Bill's specialty is broken hearts, whether the harm is done by Cupid's darts or small-caliber bullets.

Lora Lorne publicly admonished her family of thousands as to their most intimate tribulations. It pictured her as a venerable soul with wise eyes peeping from kindly crinkles, combs in her snowy hair, eye-glasses dangling from a reel pinned to her sympathetic shoulder—whereas Brent, resembling her not in the least, was a husky who'd once smashed his nose against a Princeton goalpost, who wore size eleven brogues and liked his steaks rare.

"Don't call me by that name!" he said through his teeth, frowning down at his city editor.

SIX days a week the copyrighted likeness of Lora Lorne turned a smug smile upon her readers—and nobody knew who the old dame actually was. Probably she was a creature living in some

tween Garrett's granite-gray eyes. A long succession of seeresses had perpetrated the esoteric fiction of Lora Lorne since the column was begun twenty-two years ago, but Brent was the first man ever to wear her petticoats and the humiliation of it was getting to be more than he could bear. But he took a grip on himself.

"Here. Now let's be reasonable about this thing," he suggested, his manner becoming fraternal. "It's gone on too damned long and I've already suffered out of all proportion to my sins. Besides, look at the harm I'm doing." He placed the galley proof before Garrett. "There's a sample. It's just sheer good luck the girl wasn't killed."

"Ten days ago," Garrett reminded him, ignoring the evidence, "you received certain instructions from our publisher."

"Ten days ago I also received a letter from a worried young wife," Brent said. "She signed just her initials, O. Q. Her problem was one that's flung in my teeth twenty times a day. Her husband was cooling off on her, she wrote, and please, dear Miss Lorne, what could she do to revive the old love?"

"Our publisher, Mr. Palmer," Garrett said, "instructed you to write a six weeks' reserve supply of the column."

"Trying hard to help O. Q. keep her precious husband," Brent continued doggedly, "I answered that she should remind him she's still desirable to other men. In other words, arouse his jealousy. A hoary treatment, Garrett—and dangerous. I've been having nightmares ever since, about how it might be working out."

"So far you haven't even gotten started on those thirty-six extra columns," Garrett said.

"See for yourself just what my inspired guidance adds up to," Brent persisted. "A quarrel, a fight, the cops wading in, a public scandal, the girl hurt. Garrett, he might have broken her neck—murdered her. And if he had, I'd be the primary cause of her death. My God, I get a chill when I think of it—and you just take it as a matter of course, like a rockribbed gravedigger."

"You're over-straining your contract, you know, by neglecting to follow orders," Garrett added. "Do you want me to report that to Mr. Palmer?"

PALING a little, Brent earnestly bent over him, "Listen to me. The people who write in to Lora Lorne are bewildered, in serious trouble. Often their homes, their whole lives are at stake. Some of their problems would give Solomon a headache. I have to dash off hit-or-miss answers to questions that would stump a convention of psychiatrists and social workers."

"Arthur Brisbane once did it," Garrett said calmly. "And Dorothy Dix has more readers than Walter Lippmann, Dorothy Thompson, Hugh Johnson and Westbrook Pegler combined."

"That is not the point!" Brent asserted. "I spend all my spare time reading Freud, Jung and Adler, but the three

of 'em working together personally couldn't do justice to the column I'm expected to concoct. It's all I can manage to sweat out one a day and you torture me with talk about thirty-six extras. Garrett, on my word of honor, this thing's got me punchdrunk. In the name of suffering humanity tell me I've turned in my last Lora Lorne, won't you?"

"Brent," Garrett said, unmoved by his sincerity, "you still need a lesson. I brought you here from New York and contracted to pay you a fancy salary because I wanted the best reporter I could get."

"And you got him," Brent said.

Garrett shook his head. "You let me down. You paid no attention when I warned you to lay off the liquor and three separate times you were missing the biggest part of a week. Your mind was on women instead of your work."

"This town is so dead compared with Manhattan there's hardly anything else—"

"When you finally go back to reporting, if you ever do—I have a very satisfactory police reporter at the moment, you see"—Garrett smiled at Val Randall—"you'll be cured for life and damned glad to handle your job properly."

"At this very minute I'm a reformed character in all departments, and you know it," Brent said. "I swear to you, Garrett, I wouldn't squawk if I weren't sure the lousy column is doing a lot more harm than good. It's an agency of evil, nothing less."

"Mr. Palmer thinks it's our most helpful and popular feature." Garrett's pencil left a blue gash across a page of copy. "And I'm too busy to argue."

"Then don't. Simply turn the column over to Val, put me back on the police trick where I belong," Brent persisted, "and I solemnly promise you—"

"Cut it out!" Garrett snapped. "You've already promised in writing to accept any and all assignments without question, but if you want to break your contract, get sued and blacklisted, go ahead. Otherwise you'll keep on being Lora Lorne exactly as long as I see fit. If that's clear, Lora, you can start rustling up those thirty-six extra columns."

"I warned you, don't call me—"

Brent clamped his jaw, snatched up

the proof Garrett had brushed aside and resignedly carried his worries back to the cubicle, no more commodious than a broom closet, which relegated him to a position next to the morgue and isolated him from those privileged to handle the news.

He dug again into that mound of hated letters and uncovered a telephone directory. There was no listing under the names of Odelle Quinn or Glen Carr. Persisting, he called Information and was told: "The number is Heights four-r three thr-ee ni-yun."

A woman's voice came over the wire with disconcerting vehemence. "It's not true, Glen! You're mad to think it. Especially of a man old enough to be—Hello?"

"Miss Quinn? The Recorder calling. We're making a survey of our services to our readers. Recently, I believe, you wrote to our Miss Lorne. Would you mind telling us whether you obtained satisfactory results, and if—"

"Results!" Miss Quinn wailed. "I'm so overwhelmed with them right now I ache all over and can't even talk!"

The connection crashed off in Brent's ear.

He wagged his head and asked for the number again. The distant bell rang and went unanswered and at the end of a full minute he was squirming in his chair. Suddenly he abandoned the phone and

caught up his topcoat. Despite the scowl Garrett sent after him, he strode out the swinging doors—driven by the fear that his well-meant advice might even yet destroy the life of a young woman he'd never seen.

AS A March twilight settled, gray and blustery, Brent veered to the curb and cut the ignition. The address printed in Val's report, he saw, was that of a duplex dwelling near the corner of Thirteenth and Maple Streets, a section posted with signs cautioning *Hospital—Quiet*. He was crossing the sidewalk when the entrance of the house swung open and a girl hurried out.

"I've had enough!" she flung over her shoulder to someone inside whom Brent couldn't see. "This time I'm through, finished! Say what you please, I'm answering that call, going straight to Doctor Dockery's office—and I'm not coming back. How do you like that, you hot-headed brute?"

Startled by her anger, Brent watched her run off the porch, her coat flying, clutching a purse in one hand, holding an insane hat on her head with the other. Furiously she kept running until, turning at the corner, her high heels flashed from sight.

Someone inside—probably the man she had so heatedly denounced—slammed the door. Not interested in him and assum-

From
the Private
Diary of
Gloria N---



1 Broke a date with Jim for tonight. The way my head aches, I don't feel like seeing anybody! Guess I need a laxative, but I dread the thought of taking one.



2 Aunt Helen told me to try Ex-Lax. I hate the taste of laxatives—but Ex-Lax was a pleasant surprise. It tasted just like fine chocolate.



3 Slept wonderfully all night. Ex-Lax worked fine this morning. No upsets or anything. Headache's all gone, too. Sure hope Jim calls me tonight.

The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet gentle! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.

10¢ and 25¢



ing the young woman was Odelle Quinn, Brent purposefully started after her.

The name of Dr. Dockery, whom she had mentioned, had recently become known to him and fortunately the physician's office was nearby. He turned twice more, first into Twelfth Street and past the Heights Hospital, then to a doorway in the next building where a bronze plaque bore Dr. Seldon Dockery's name above that of Dr. Eric Kenelm. Another sign invited all comers to walk in, and Brent doggedly did so.

The luxurious reception-room was empty. The door of Dr. Dockery's consultation-room was closed and bore a card reading: *Will return at 8:00 P. M.* Another door connecting with a second office in the rear—Dr. Kenelm's, probably—stood open revealing an unoccupied desk. Miss Quinn was nowhere to be seen.

Though the silence in the suite hinted that it was deserted, Brent felt a strange sense of presences. Puzzled, he sat down impatiently to wait. Presently he heard whispers which somehow stirred his apprehension. They were a secretive, sibilant sound that seemed to issue from no certain point.

And suddenly he was chilled by a scream—a woman's choking, throaty screech of terror.

Its echoes ringing about him, Brent sprang up. Now there were scuffling noises in one of the other rooms—feet scraping on the floor, a thump, a clatter. And next—shots! A single cracking small caliber report jarred the walls, followed by two more, closely spaced.

Then a hush.

Brent stood rooted, full of a prickly dread that the thing he had wanted to forestall had already happened.

CHAPTER TWO

Corpse Wanted

BRENT thrust against the door of Dr. Dockery's office and found it locked. Quickly striding through a second door into the other office, he arrived at a third. From his previous visits he recalled that it connected with the treatment-room which separated Dr. Dock-

ery's office from this one. Again Brent tried the knob and again a lock balked him.

Turning back, he stopped short. The middle door, through which he had entered this inner room, was moving. Propelled by an invisible hand, it swung shut. Even as Brent stepped toward it he heard the squeak of a key in the lock.

He pulled at it and pushed. It was immovable. A sweeping glance told him, moreover, that there was no window in the room. Someone had crept silently upon him and made him a prisoner.

His strap-watch read just 5:11, which agreed exactly with the clock on the desk. There was no noise—no slightest sound to indicate that Brent was anything but alone in the suite. He peered about, nerves tight, temperature soaring with the realization that he had a piece of front-page news by the tail—love specialist though he might be—and instinct brought his hand to the telephone.

The dial gave off a waspish whir. Urgently he murmured into the transmitter. "Police headquarters. Make it fast . . . Homicide!" he said while the dead silence continued around him. "Captain Russo? Brent. There's been a shooting. Only one thing I can tell you. It happened in Doctor Seldon Dockery's office ten seconds ago. The sooner you get here—"

"Dockery? Lord!" the hollow voice of Captain Max Russo answered. "Coming!"

Feeling himself swinging into his old stride, Brent spun off the *Recorder's* number. "City desk . . . Garrett, I've got something well worth an extra. While your pretty pet was probably off somewhere powdering her nose, I've been busy—"

"We never put out extras and neither did the sheet you decorated in New York," Garrett cut in. "Anything on police belongs to Val."

Brent alertly watched the door behind which the shots had blasted. "My department is still exclusively *l'amour*, is that what you think? You're going to be very much surprised when I tell you—"

"Quit clowning!" Garrett snapped. "If you've stumbled on any news, I'll send Val around."

"But this would frighten the child," Brent said. "She's never handled a major crime, you know. This is a job for a veteran, so tell her to clear out my desk, Garrett, because I'm going to take over."

"Not quite," Garrett said, his tone bored. "Val will pick it up in the usual way in the morning."

"By that time it'll be far beyond the reach of her lovely but incompetent fingers. If your personal solicitude for the young lady is so great as to mislead you into muffing a hot story, Garrett—well, that's your responsibility and fine with Bill Brent. I don't insist on the police trick exclusively, you see. In fact, I'll settle for your job as city editor."

He cradled the instrument, listened and heard nothing but the ticking of the clock on the desk. Afire with the hope that all this would mean his salvation, he looked about for a means of forcing his way out of this walnut-paneled trap.

There was a hat-tree. He could use it to batter a door down. He grasped it up, gave the nearest knob another tentative twist—and his breath stopped. He stared as the door connecting with the reception-room swung freely open!

BRENT straightened slowly and lowered the rack. The most promising object he could use as a weapon was a massive onyx ashtray. He gripped it and edged over the sill. The reception-room was still empty. It looked exactly the same as before. Cautiously working closer to the scene of the disturbance, he opened the way into Dr. Dockery's office.

It was also deserted. Nothing appeared to be disturbed. Freshly dusted, neatly arranged, it seemed to be waiting for the physician to hustle back to his chair for his evening appointments. Brent moved past a bank of file cabinets, advancing still nearer to the source of the gunshots, and looked into the treatment-room.

Its darkness held him back until, clutching the ashtray in one hand and reaching in with the other, he found the wall-switch. A brilliant ceiling reflected from a metal operating table covered with spotless sheets, from white cabinets containing glittering instruments on glass shelves. Every bottle was precisely

aligned and the waxed floor shone. Nowhere was there a sign of disruption.

Nothing indicated that anyone had been here a few minutes ago, and Brent might have suspected he had dreamed the whole thing—except that there was a faint smell of burned gunpowder already fading out a partly opened window, and something green was wedged behind one of the enameled cabinets.

Brent went first to the window, raised the white curtain and gazed into a bare, sheer-walled shaftway. He turned back, then, to the green thing. Whatever it might be it had evidently fallen unnoticed and lodged against the wainscot, almost out of sight. He was tugging at it when he was surprised by a quick decisive clicking of heels on the floor.

The man who stopped to stare down at Brent was obviously a physician. He had appeared at Dr. Dockery's desk, was halted in the act of pulling several wrapped bottles of medicine from his overcoat. He and Brent, mutually startled, estimated each other warily, without moving. Then, as a strained moment ended, the doctor swiftly about-faced and marched out.

Brent heard his heels beating through the reception-room and into the other office. Quickly there followed the noise of a drawer jerked open. Next, the opposite door of the treatment-room was flung wide and the young doctor reappeared, his right hand lifted waist-high.

Heart spurring, Brent found himself the focus of a huge black automatic's stare.

"I hope you won't move," said the doctor. "If you do, I'll have to shoot you."

His free hand groped for the phone. The deep creases around his mouth gave his face masculine character and a prematurely seasoned aspect. He appeared to be tired but dynamic, a doctor who worked diligently and long, without a thought of sparing himself. In his steady surgeon's hand the automatic had a particularly ominous look.

"I don't want to shoot you, because then I'd have to go to the trouble of patching you up." He said it briskly, nudged the phone so that it fell into its two parts and made ready to dial zero. "I'm too

busy and as far as you're concerned, probing for the bullet usually hurts, you know."

"I can imagine," Brent said. "It's not necessary to call the cops." Though this wasn't the first time he'd contemplated the business end of a firearm, it was still a situation he couldn't face casually. "I've already called them."

The doctor's smile was quick, good-natured and skeptical. "If you're the thief who robbed these offices about two months ago, you shouldn't have thought you could get away with it twice."

"I'm Brent, from the *Recorder*. If Doctor Dockery were here, he'd verify that. I got acquainted with him in the Chase case. Ducky Chase, who covered sports for us—killed by a hit-and-run driver. Remember him?"

Hesitating over the phone, the doctor considered this, but the automatic didn't waver. "Not personally. I was attending a medical convention in Chicago at the time. You might really be a newspaperman, as you say, and still be—"

"A burglar?" Brent turned his head, listening. "Hadn't thought of trying my hand at it."

"Then," the doctor demanded incisively, pointing to the costly ashtray which Brent was still holding, "what are you doing with that?"

Brent could only shrug and put it down. "It seems the cops are arriving right now. You might ask them for a character reference."

HARD shoes ran across the sidewalk and the entrance opened. The two radio bureau men who hurried through the reception-room had their hands on their holstered service revolvers. They paused, glancing uncertainly from the doctor to Brent.

"Hello, Barnes, hello, Filiski," Brent greeted them. "Would you mind telling this chap that my racket is reporting crime not committing it?"

The doctor, in his astonishment lowered his gun a little. "I'm Eric Kenelm," he explained to the patrolmen. "Doctor Seldon Dockery and I share these offices. When I came in a moment ago I found this man sneaking about. Naturally I thought—in fact, I still do." To Brent

he added: "Those rooms are left locked when nobody's here. Since the robbery we've kept everything closed up tight except this reception-room. How'd you get in there? Just what were you doing?"

"I can't exactly say," Brent admitted, "but I thought at the time—"

He broke off at the sound of more footsteps. Again the door opened. Captain Max Russo appeared with three civilian-garbed members of the Homicide Squad at his heels. Prepared to go immediately to work, they reconnoitered through the two offices and the treatment-room and drifted to a pause with expressions as puzzled as those of the other two patrolmen.

"Well, Bill?" Captain Russo said. He was as gaunt and cadaverous as any dead man he had ever officially examined. With his dark, somber eyes and the sepulchral quality of his voice, he gave the impression of having just risen off a slab in the city morgue. "Well, Bill, where is it?"

"Damned if I know, Captain," Brent confessed.

Now Dr. Kenelm put his gun down. "I don't understand this! I come in here, find every door open and a stranger prowling around, and now the place is swarming with policemen. I think an explanation is in order." Of Brent he demanded: "You still haven't said just what you were looking for."

"A corpse," Brent answered.

Dr. Kenelm stared. "Whose corpse?"

"I'm not sure, but I think a lady's."

"Is this your idea of a joke? What led you to expect to find any lady's corpse in this place?"

"Three gunshots," Brent informed him. "When I came in, I'm reasonably certain there was a girl in this room with someone else. At exactly five eleven I heard the sounds of a struggle and the three reports, so I started looking for somebody who'd been shot. Doesn't sound unreasonable, does it?"

"Except for the fact that there's no victim of a shooting in here now, Bill," Captain Max Russo pointed out.

"I know, but don't ask me why not," Brent said. "You're not half as puzzled as I am."

"Who was the girl with?" Captain Russo asked.

"I've no idea."

"Who was the girl, then?"

Brent put on a blank expression and evaded the question with a shrug.

"You don't know anything about it," Max Russo commented dryly, "except you're sure somebody got killed."

"I'm not even sure of that much," Brent muttered, "—now."

Dr. Kenelm turned a baffled glance into every face, then, to Brent's relief, replaced the automatic in the drawer. Briskly entering the treatment-room, he gazed around while Captain Russo and the Homicide Squad crowded after him. None of them saw the green thing lodged behind the cabinet for the reason that Brent had quickly shifted so as to screen it with his legs.

"Not a sign of violence," Captain Russo said. "Not a single speck of blood. You haven't been your old self lately, Bill, but you haven't started having hallucinations, have you?"

"What about Doctor Dockery?" Brent asked, while Dr. Kenelm glanced into two supply closets where no dead body was to be found. "Isn't it possible the girl came here to keep an appointment with him? Wouldn't he know something about this?"

"Not likely," Dr. Kenelm answered. "He had an appendectomy scheduled for five o'clock. In any case, it's ridiculous to imagine he had anything to do with it. All his waking hours are devoted to saving lives, not destroying them."

"Where was the operation to be performed?" Captain Russo asked. "At the Heights Hospital, next door?"

"Yes," Dr. Kenelm said. "He's the head. Probably he's finished by now."

"Let's go over and talk to him," Max Russo suggested. "If he doesn't know anything about it, there'll be nothing left to do but ask him to treat you, Bill, as an advanced case of alcoholic dementia."

"Damn it, I might imagine whispers and even gunshots, but not locked doors," Brent retorted. "Besides, keep the record straight, Captain. I haven't so much as smelled a cork since Garrett made me—"

CHECKING himself there, he lingered as Dr. Kenelm went back to his desk. Brent was still interested in the green

object lodged behind the cabinet, but he had no opportunity at the moment to give it a closer look. With Captain Russo glancing at him dubiously, he was obliged to follow and shut the door between.

"Do you want to examine my gun?" Dr. Kenelm asked.

"The shots I heard were fired by a smaller one," Brent said. The pitch of the reports told me that much."

"Very helpful, Bill," Captain Russo said acridly, "but what we really need is some sort of victim. Unless we find one in a hurry, you'll be shown up as the same sort of maniac who turns in false fire-alarms."

Brent thrust his hands deep into his pockets and stalked out. The two radio patrolmen sped back to their tour and the three Homicide men ducked into their car while Brent walked between Russo and Dr. Kenelm. In a driveway that flanked the hospital and led past the accident ward, an ambulance was awaiting the next emergency call. They crossed it, the sharp wind tugging at their coats and parted the glass doors of the street entrance.

"Who left those offices locked this afternoon?" Brent asked as they crossed the lobby. "Did you lock them, Doctor Kenelm?"

"Yes."

"Then who else but you or Doctor Dockery could have opened them?"

They entered an elevator before Dr. Kenelm answered. "I don't know. No one else has keys, except the cleaning woman who comes in every day—at least as far as I can say. I hadn't been back since noon. As for Doctor Dockery—well, you'd better ask him yourself."

They encountered Dr. Dockery as they stepped from the elevator on the top floor. He was just emerging from the scrub-up room, a huge man with a shaggy gray-streaked head and jovial eyes twinkling behind his rimless glasses.

"Hullo, Eric, Captain Russo, Mr Brent, hullo, hullo!" He hustled past into the elevator and began peeling off his sterile jacket. "An officer of the law and a newspaperman—what's up? Looking for me?"

They were starting down again.

"To ask if you've been back at your office within the past half hour or so," Brent explained.

"I've been operating," Dr. Dockery said, turning his starched cuffs over his hairy arms. "A mastoidectomy immediately followed by an appendectomy. Just finished, both patients doing splendidly."

"Then at five eleven you were in the operating-room," Brent persisted, "surrounded by nurses and assistants?"

"Of course." The elevator stopped at the ground floor level and, hustling again, Dr. Dockery led them into an office located opposite the admission desk. "Dear me, this sounds almost as if I'm being asked for an alibi. What's happened?"

"Nobody seems to know, Seldon, except Mr. Brent," Eric Kenelm answered with a smile, "and even he's a bit foggy about it. He insists he heard shots fired, but we don't seem to be able to learn at whom or why."

"Shots?" Struck with astonishment, Dr. Dockery nevertheless kept moving under the pressure of severe demands on his time. "In my office?" he asked, getting into his coat. "Good heavens, how is it possible? You weren't there, Eric?"

"I've been calling on patients all afternoon, busy every minute," Kenelm answered. "According to Mr. Brent, it was just before I came back—if it happened at all."

"It certainly happened!" Brent insisted. "Didn't either of you gentlemen make an appointment with a young woman for a few minutes after five at the office?"

Now Dr. Dockery was reading several notes left for him on the desk. "I've been operating, as I've said—since four thirty. Did you, Eric?"

"Not I." Dr. Kenelm was inclined to treat the whole matter as an absurdity. "Besides, I don't know, offhand, anyone I'd have liked to arrange to shoot."

"Then," Brent said, with dogged seriousness, "it was done by someone who came in from outside expressly for the purpose of shooting someone else. Do both of you have your keys?"

Dr. Kenelm promptly produced his key-case, and Dr. Dockery, getting into his huge overcoat, fished in his pockets.

"Never can find mine," he said, hustling from the room. "Captain, I've no explanation to offer." Abandoning his search, he impatiently threw up his hands. "Ah, the keys are probably in the car. All this is very puzzling, but so far as I know I can be of no help whatever."

"Tend to your sick, Doctor, by all means," Captain Russo said quietly, "and leave the dead to me—if any."

DR. DOCKERY squared his shoulders. "Thank you, Captain." In his voice Brent sensed a strain. "I make it a point to have an early and leisurely dinner with my wife. It's almost the only chance I have to visit with her, you know. Eric will give you what help he can, of course, and I—I'll be off."

He strode down the corridor, eyes so set and fired with such a strange, deep-burning fierceness that Brent was startled and prompted to follow him.

"Doctor Dockery!"

The physician turned at the emergency entrance, his strong jaw squared. "Yes, Brent?"

"Sorry to bother you with this," Brent said as they stepped out, "but do you have among your patients a young woman named Odelle Quinn, or Odelle Carr?"

"Quinn? Carr?" His bushy eyebrows leveled to a line, Dr. Dockery strode into the dark parking court behind the hospital. "Yes—yes, I have. Recently—two or three office calls, I think. Is she connected in some way with what you say happened?"

"Possibly," Brent answered, studying him. "Mind telling me whether there's anything seriously wrong with her? Anything, that is, to make her give up her night club job and settle down in this dull town?"

"No, nothing like that. An *ulcus ventriculi*—mild case of gastric erosion, common in persons as high-strung as she is. I prescribed antuitrin S and the condition was responding. At least, she hasn't come back within the past several weeks."

"Not last night or this morning, to have a sprained wrist strapped up?"

"Wrist?" Dr. Dockery opened the door of his black sedan. "No."

"Maybe Doctor Kenelm fixed it up for her."

With a scalpel-edged glance at Brent, the physician ducked into the car and found his keys dangling from the ignition lock. "Very unlikely," he answered. "Since she's my patient, he'd have referred her to me. He hasn't mentioned her—don't think he knows her."

"By the way," Brent said, "let me remind you again that you haven't sent us Ducky Chase's bill."

The engine hummed and Dr. Dockery impatiently released the handbrake.

"Don't intend to, Brent. Didn't leave a red cent, did he? His sister hasn't any money, I'm told. You'd have to take up another collection at the office, wouldn't you? Well, you newspaper chaps are underpaid but some of my clients have more money than they can use. Forget it."

"That's swell of you," Brent said sincerely, bending in the window, "considering that you stayed up all night, two nights running, trying to keep Ducky alive. We appreciate how hard you tried to save him."

"Nothing, Brent, nothing," the physician said brusquely, engaging the gears.

"Sorry I didn't succeed. Goodnight."

Thoughtfully Brent watched the car glide up the driveway and turn into the street. He went slowly in the same direction and saw, through the glass entrance, Captain Russo talking with Dr. Kenelm in the lobby. He turned to the next building, his manner casual for the benefit of the three detectives waiting in the Homicide car, and sidled into the reception-room used jointly by the Drs. Dockery and Kenelm.

Standing there in the quiet, he mentally retraced the daring moves made by a murderer who had held him just short of becoming an eye-witness.

He returned to the treatment-room with an ear kept cocked for the sounds of any approach. The green thing remained where he had seen it, lodged behind the cabinet, its existence unknown to anyone but him. He dropped to his knees, slid it upward, then pulled it free—a woman's purse.

IT CONTAINED, besides the usual feminine clutter—lipstick, handkerchief, comb, bobby-pins and vial of ex-

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pensive perfume—a driver's license and an automobile registration issued to Odelle Carr, 715 West Thirteenth Street, blond, violet eyes, weight one hundred ten, age twenty-four.

Both, Brent saw, were dated only two weeks ago, and the car was a 1941 Cadillac convertible. There was also a purse wadded full of banknotes, but he didn't take time to count them. Instead, he stuffed everything back, replaced the purse exactly as he'd found it and, acting on a new impulse, shifted to Dr. Dockery's desk.

He dialed City 1515. "Criminal Identification Bureau. . . That you, Mike? Brent. I'm with Captain Russo on a rod case. He wants you to look into the pistol permit file. Is there a small gun—twenty-two or twenty-five caliber—on record under the name of Dockery or Kenelm?"

"Hold it a minute, Bill . . . Here's a thirty-eight automatic licensed by Doctor Eric Kenelm. I remember, he bought it after his office got stuck up."

"Look again."

"Here's a twenty-five Colt auto, pocket model."

Brent's scalp tingled. "That may be it. Who—"

"Claudia Dockery."

"Claudia?"

"This one's dated years ago, Bill. Name changed. Used to be Claudia Lacroze. New address, too—four ten Sycamore Drive, same as the doctor's home."

"Reason for need?" Brent asked quickly.

"Says here, protection of valuables and sport."

"Sport?"

"We get lots of those, Bill. Usually people with pull. They just like to shoot at targets, that's all, including some dames. I don't mean dames *as* targets. Dames *at* targets. Think it's a bad idea, myself."

"So do I," Brent said. "Thanks."

His nerves felt like high potential wires. Eyes alert, he shifted to the file cabinets—a row of them packed with patients' case histories.

Under *C* there was no folder bearing Odelle Carr's name. Under *Q* there was no data that might apply to the same

young woman under the name of Quinn. Brent even searched for additional reports in the drawers of the physician's desk, and there his purpose again failed.

Not a word of Odell Quinn Carr's pathological record was to be found in Dr. Dockery's office.

Leaving, absorbed in his reflections, Brent saw Captain Max Russo appear at the door of the Heights Hospital. Because he wanted to avoid any more embarrassing questions, he side-stepped and walked down the passageway until Russo's receding footfalls told him the coast was again clear.

Instead of retracing his steps then, he gazed across the parking space behind the hospital. A wall separated the cement court from the back yards of the houses on the next street. One of them, directly opposite, was the home of Odelle Quinn. The kitchen was lighted. Someone was circling about inside, casting a restless shadow on the window curtains.

Brent wound his way past a dozen cars and paused at the wall for a closer look. With a chilly tingle, he estimated a shortcut from the rear door of the Carr home, on Thirteenth, to the entrance of Dr. Dockery's office on Twelfth. Across the yard, over the wall, through the court, then along the driveway and finally a few paces up the sidewalk, and it was done—not more than three hundred feet, a distance easily covered in thirty seconds by a person in rapid motion.

CHAPTER THREE

Do Killers Bake Cookies?

BRENT hoisted himself over the wall. Quietly approaching the rear porch, he crept up the steps and leaned over the rail in order to look into the window.

The man in the kitchen was a lean forty-odd, with a jaunty mustache and thin hair dyed a glistening black. His shirt-sleeves were rolled up, his collar open. Val had described Odelle Quinn's husband as a professional master of ceremonies, and though Brent couldn't guess why he was tarrying so far from Broadway, he looked the part.

Brent watched curiously as Glen Carr drew a shallow baking tin from the oven and shoveled cookies out of it. Carr then

took up another tin filled with white discs and slid it into the oven in place of the first. Next, he spooned little balls of batter from a mixing bowl and flattened them with a tumbler over the mouth of which a piece of cloth was stretched. All the while he whistled a soft, peculiarly mournful tune.

This, Brent felt, was a strange activity for a night-club wit, particularly one who possibly had committed a vicious skooting only a few minutes ago.

His mind buzzing with questions, Brent crept off the porch and circled to the front door. He was about to thumb the bell-button when, again glancing through a window, he saw something that changed his tactics.

On the table lay an uncapped fountain pen, a blue envelope and a sheet of matching stationery half filled with a rapid scrawl. Tilting his head, Brent made out the all-too-familiar salutation, *Dear Lora Lorne*—

He couldn't read the rest because the letter was upside down, but Odelle Quinn had evidently written a new appeal for help. His concern prompted him to try the sash. Finding it unlatched, he raised it, making as little noise as possible, and hopefully put his head in.

Please, Miss Lorne, he read, leaning far over the sill, answer right away or something terrible might happen. I'm frantic because your advice has worked out entirely too well. My husband has a beastly temper, and now that I've made him jealous he threatens horrible things and refuses to believe me when I tell him there really isn't any—

There it came to a dark, abrupt stop, leaving Brent feeling miserably guilty.

Hearing a noise, he looked up. Glen Carr had stepped into the living-room. A bruise marked his chin and a scratch across his nose was healing. In one hand he had a gob of butter which he was applying to another pan. Standing still, he fixed his narrow-set eyes on Brent.

"Won't you come all the way in?" he asked.

Straightening from his embarrassing position, Brent grinned. "I'd like to. But I really came to see Miss Quinn—business reasons, of course."

Carr turned, vanished, then reappeared

at the front door. "People usually enter through here," he remarked with an air of bohemian ease that belied the sharpness of his scrutiny.

"Reason I was reading that letter, I'm from the *Recorder*. Name's Brent. Mind talking with me a few minutes?"

"Why not?" Carr stepped back with a welcoming gesture. "But I've got to watch my cookies or they'll burn."

Brent followed him into the kitchen and sniffed the air. "I go for cookies. Cookies and coffee—nothing better."

"Have a chair," Carr invited. "Have a cookie. Glad you dropped in, even if you took an unconventional route. Up until now it's been a lonely evening."

"Thanks," Brent said, sitting and reaching into the crock Carr proffered him. The cookie was still warm. "Ah, peanut butter. Very good."

"I also have some of the walnut icebox kind. Thin as paper, crisp and delicious. Would you like one of those?"

"Thanks again." Brent took one of the walnut icebox kind in his other hand and nodded his complete approval. "Best I ever tasted. You see, I'm making a survey for the paper and your wife wouldn't talk to me over the phone."

"She's out," Carr said, peeking inside the oven. "Sorry there isn't any coffee ready, but I'll make some. Or how about a glass of milk?"

"Milk will be fine." Brent was estimating Carr and pretending to be unaware that Carr was estimating him. "You surprise me. I'd never expect to find a worldly chap like you puttering about a kitchen."

"Cooking is my hobby," Carr explained. "I love to cook and my wife hates it. Welsh rarebits and *crêpes Suzette* are really my specialties. Seldom found a chance to keep in practice until now, always being on the road. We're entertainers. To me a home is a dream come true."

"You seem to be very nicely settled." Glancing about as he munched, Brent saw that all the furnishings were new and expensive. "Been here long?"

CARR'S eyes grew black and pointed as needles. "We've been here a few weeks."

"Nice place. You had to sign a lease. Got a long engagement in the city?"

"We're retired," Carr said shortly.

"This your home town, or your wife's?"

"No." Carr's voice crackled. "And I can't say I like it here."

"Where'd you live before you moved into this house?"

"An apartment near our work—the Zombie Club." For a moment Carr's mask of geniality dropped and Brent saw a hint of the savagery that might flare up in him. "Just what did you come here to find out?"

"Wanted to ask your wife about a personal matter. Could I have another of those peanut butters?"

"Certainly." Carr brought the crock to Brent. "Help yourself to as many as you'd like. All I can tell you is that she's gone off somewhere and should be back by now."

"Does she often have reason to write to the *lovelorn* column?"

Carr was sullenly silent. He brought Brent a glass of milk from the refrigerator. He rubbed the scratch on his nose and frowned.

"This year's pastime," he answered at length. "Last year it was astrology. She's not for your survey. Count her out."

"Why?"

"She likes to act helpless and bewildered, but she always knows what she's doing. That woman never needed any help from Lora Lorne or anyone else. To look at her you'd think she's just an innocent child, but when it comes to figuring out a fast one she can give Lora Lorne cards and spades."

"I wouldn't question that." Brent said. "But why should she write to our *Miss Lorne* if it wasn't just what it seemed to be—worry over a rift between you and herself?"

Carr smiled thinly. "Maybe it was because she wanted the answer *Lora Lorne* gave her—to help her cover up."

"Cover up what?"

The gleam of Carr's too-white teeth vanished. Now he was scowling at Brent, breathing faster. "You want to know too much that's none of your business. I'm not talking to any newspapermen. And I don't think you came here just to ask about a letter."

Brent met his thrust with candor. "You are right, I didn't. It's a hell of a lot more serious than that."

"Just how serious?"

"As serious as anything can come."

Suddenly Carr was pale, his eyes wide. "Damn that—I told her she couldn't—If something's wrong, I had nothing to do with—" He pressed his lips, fear and fury, on his thin face. "Don't play cat and mouse with me. Come out with it."

"O. K.," Brent said, sipping milk. "Where'd your wife go?"

"I don't know. But don't ask questions. Tell me—"

"You know, all right. She told you when she left. She went to Doctor Dockery's office. Why did she, since she's not one of his patients? And why hasn't she come back?"

"I'm a hooper mostly," Carr said with a click, "not a mind-reader."

"You don't need to be psychic in order to tell me where *you've* been since five o'clock."

"Been?" Carr snapped. "Here. Where else?"

"Following your wife."

Carr's face was getting redder, the jet of his eyes more intense. "Look at the pile of cookies I've baked. It's a job you can't leave. I began right after my wife left and I've been at it every minute since." He took a menacing step toward Brent. "What is this? What's happened to *Odelle*?"

"She hasn't come back," Brent said levelly. "I don't think she'll ever come back—alive. Or maybe I'm telling you something you already know."

Carr stood still, hands hardened into lean fists, face sapped of all color, staring down.

"She was playing too dangerous a game," Brent said. "Too fast and loose and it got her. Or do you already know that?"

HE sat with the glass half full of milk in one hand, a fragment of cookie in the other, tense under Carr's wild eyes. Both of them were utterly unprepared for the vicious noise that crashed between them.

A first sharp gunshot broke out of the silence bringing with it a tinkle of spat-

tering glass particles. Brent began straining up, staring first at the amazed expression on Carr's face, then at the growing spot of red on the side of Carr's shirt. He was twisting to look behind him when the second shot cracked. He leaped away as white-yellow flame licked a third time through the shattered window.

Carr spun about, propelling himself toward the living-room. He stumbled against a chair, knocked it over, sagged against the wall. Scrambling for shelter, Brent saw that the wounded man was leaning across the door frame, blocking the only safe way out, that the whole kitchen was in the line of fire. There was a pantry, standing open. Brent jumped in, pulled the door shut and shrank with a gasp against the loaded shelves.

It was a fearful retreat but Brent had no weapon, no other defense against the gun, and at least he was unscathed. He noticed that he was still holding the milk-filmed glass, that now it was empty. He dropped it. Then he heard quick footfalls somewhere in the rear. As they faded in an uncertain direction, he peered out the small pantry window and saw blackness—caught no glimpse of a killer making an escape.

Brent pushed the door and it wouldn't open. There must be a spring latch on the outside. He shoved harder and grew hot-faced. "Again!" he blurted.

Now there were faltering footfalls inside the house. Brent traced them as they moved across the living-room, then unsteadily up the stairs. In a moment they sounded almost directly overhead.

Drawing back, he lifted one leg and drove his heel against the door. He was out of the pantry a second after the latch tore off.

Bits of glass glittered beneath the broken window. The white streak across the floor was the milk Brent had spilled during his headlong retreat. Thin black fumes were pouring up from the oven. Brent ignored that and snatched open the rear door. The yard was full of quiet gloom. The high windows of the hospital cast down a glow that told him nothing.

He kicked the overturned chair aside and ran through the living-room. Guided by the noises continuing overhead, he mounted the stairs. In the front bedroom

he found Glen Carr kneeling before a chest of drawers.

His movements quick, Carr was trying to twist a key that was stuck in the lock of the lowest drawer. He pushed himself up, turned about as Brent came near and left a few round dark drops on the rug. His side was bleeding. He seemed obsessed with a strange, frantic purpose, desperate to protect whatever the drawer contained. With a gurgling expulsion of breath he threw himself forward, jolted Brent backward against the bed.

Struggling to right himself, Brent saw the chair swinging down. It struck his upthrown arms with a crackling noise and came apart. The overhead light dimmed and swam in a glowing sea. When his vision cleared, Brent pushed the pieces of the chair off him, elbowed up, felt gingerly of the lump forming on his forehead and blinked. Everything was still, except for a thumping inside his skull.

Glen Carr was no longer there.

GETTING to his feet, steadying himself, Brent smelled something burning. He felt his way down the stairs, then into the kitchen. The air there was thick with the pungent smoke streaming up from the charred cookies in the oven. He turned off the gas and, still groggy, set about making sure that Carr was nowhere about the house. He began by pulling the front door open, and there bewilderment halted him.

A girl standing just beyond the porch was gazing at him wide-eyed. It wasn't Odelle Quinn. This girl looked younger—about twenty. She was hatless and her honey-colored hair was stirring in the wind. Breath caught, lips parted, she held a red jacket tightly at her throat and concealed one hand inside it.

Suddenly spinning about, her legs flying, she sprang into the coupe she'd left on the opposite side of the street. It was spurting off when Brent jumped to the running-board.

"Hold it!" he gasped.

The girl, stiff with alarm, let the car roll a moment before she veered back to the curb. Brent clambered in and perched on the seat, estimating her while his forehead pulsed.

"Where is it?"

The girl was afraid but her eyes—they were a smoky gray flecked with gold, Brent saw now—were defiant. "Where's what?" she countered.

"The gun."

Her face pale but perfectly straight she asked: "Which one?"

"The one you used to shoot the man who was shot inside that house a moment ago."

With her left hand she was again clutching the neck of her red jacket and a diamond sparkled on her third finger. "I heard it," she said. "Just as I was about to knock. Not knowing exactly what had happened, I—" Brent could feel her trembling. "Do you really think I shot someone?"

He touched the pockets of her jacket and saw that she wasn't carrying a purse.

"Otherwise how did you happen to be at the Carr place just when the fireworks went off?"

"It's—it's a private matter." More than that, the lift of her chin made clear, she didn't intend to explain. "Shouldn't you be notifying the police instead of asking me all these questions, Mr. Bill Brent?"

"You're Gretchen Dockery," Brent said. "The doctor's daughter. If you were anyone else, I'd probably be turning you over to the cops right now. How does it happen you know my name?"

"I've been in the *Recorder* news-room three or four times in the past few weeks," Gretchen Dockery explained, earnestly searching his face. "You were off by yourself in a corner office, looking so miserable I couldn't help asking about you."

It was Brent's turn to put himself on the defensive. "I noticed you too. You brought in lists of guests. Something about your engagement. I even remember the guy's name. Raymond Lacroze. He's probably luckier than he deserves."

"You're getting off the subject, Mr. Bill Brent," Gretchen reminded him. "You found me running away from a house where a man had just been shot. You seem to think I did the shooting. Well, are you going to do something about it?"

"Yes—advise you to keep on running until you get home, then stay there," Brent answered. He stepped from the car but held the door open. "I'm not going to

tell anyone about this, because I happen to think such a hell of a lot of your father—but I hope I'm not making a mistake."

She pressed her lips tightly together and shook her head.

"You came to the Carr place for a special reason—and I've a feeling you were pretty desperate about it. In fact, you still are. Off the record, what were you after?"

Backed in to a corner, she steadfastly met his gaze.

"You realize you're in a nasty jam, and if the cops should start digging into this it'll get a lot nastier," he insisted. "Why did you go?"

She lifted her chin. "I won't tell you."

"It'd be a big help if you'd trust me."

"I'll never tell you!" She was struggling against anxious tears. "You or anyone else—never. If that makes it even worse for me—well, I think I can take care of myself."

"Better expect to see me soon again," Brent warned her. "I'm going to find out exactly what you're hiding."

"You won't!"

She sent her car forward so swiftly that the door slammed shut. Standing in the gutter, Brent watched it swing from sight at the corner. He was left with a fleeting memory of Gretchen Dockery's white face turned back to him, her eyes wide and tormented.

The entrance of the Carr home was standing open, and Brent slowly crossed the sill. The intense quiet of the deserted rooms seemed secretive. The ache above his eyes spreading through his whole head, he climbed the stairs.

This was Odelle Quinn's bedroom, and Brent wondered dizzily why her husband's first shocked act upon being wounded had been to rush into it. Carr hadn't managed to open the lowest drawer in the chest. The key was still protruding from the lock. Half mad with pain, he'd evidently abandoned the purpose he'd considered so urgent.

Brent crouched and with a sharp wrench freed the key. He turned it in the reverse direction and the lock worked. Opening the drawer, he slowly took out the only thing it contained. It was a hat—a man's gray felt hat of expensive brand, dirty and crushed. And there were brown, crusty

stains on it that might be blood—old, dried blood.

Bending over it, Brent felt an extra-sensory warning of a presence and lifted his throbbing eyes. Captain Max Russo was standing in the doorway, silent as a specter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dead Enough

BRENT rose with a baffled shrug and with excessive deference placed the hat in Captain Russo's cadaverous hands.

"You can have it," he said.

"Much obliged," Russo answered in his hollow voice. "Always grateful for a bit of unofficial assistance. Whose is it?"

"Wouldn't know," Brent said. "Carr's, maybe. Maybe not. But it means something. He was anxious to do something with it even though he had a bullet in his guts. Seemed to think getting rid of it was even more important than dying."

"Another shooting, Bill?" the captain asked wryly. "While we're still hunting around for the victim of the first one? Well, so far I haven't noticed the second victim either."

"If you'd showed up a little sooner, you'd have seen him scrambling out of here."

"All quiet when I came in," Russo said, his spooky eyes narrowing. "Found a purse in Doctor Dockery's office—first thing to suggest there might really be something behind the bedtime story you've been telling."

"You probably won't believe it, Captain," Brent said, "but I got locked in

again. This time I did it myself, without intending to. There were more shots on the other side of the door—three, same as before. Can I help it if people disappear as fast as they get shot?" Grimly he grasped Russo's bony arm. You'd better do your own looking."

They went down the stairs and with a sweeping gesture Brent invited the detective to view the disarray in the kitchen.

"Definitely not a fairy tale. If we ever find Glen Carr, he'll tell you it's real enough, because he's badly hurt—wherever he is."

Captain Russo stooped and touched his long-nailed forefinger to a dark spot on the linoleum.

"You're getting mixed up in too many shootings for one night, Bill," he said, his tone one of mild reproof. "It brings up a lot of questions. To begin with—"

"Look at this," Brent interrupted. He ran his hand over a round hole in the door-frame and another in the wall. "Two bullets missed Carr. Smaller than a thirty-two, but slightly larger than a twenty-two. A twenty-five caliber."

Max Russo's dismal eyes were studying him. "All right. I concede that somebody tried to stage a murder here. I want to talk to you—later."

He stepped out and stood on the back porch, peering about the murky yard. As Brent followed him he went down, walked along a bare, narrow garden plot at the base of the wall, then bent to examine a heel-print in the earth.

"Mine, probably," Brent admitted. "I shouldn't take time to explain now, should I? Whoever did the shooting probably got away through the court. If he isn't

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still inside the hospital, he's probably still going—or she is."

Russo straightened, eyeing him even more intently. "She?"

"I try to keep an open mind," Brent said pointedly. "And why couldn't it have been a woman? After all, it was done with a ladylike gun."

Brent hoped he would scoff at the theory but Captain Russo, busy with his own conjectures, offered no dissenting opinion. His taciturnity and his peculiar unearthly calm weren't helping the condition of Brent's nerves. Brent was further disconcerted when he abruptly ceased his search and, with an agility startling in one who looked so moribund, vaulted the wall.

Brent clambered after him as he turned his ghostly gaze into the cars he passed. All of them were empty. Going beyond the hospital's emergency entrance, they stopped beside the Homicide Squad car, which was still parked near the mouth of the passage.

"Anybody come out of here within the past few minutes?" Russo asked the men inside it.

"Nobody," the detective at the wheel answered, "except a couple of internes in the ambulance."

"Keep watching."

BRENT swung open the street entrance of the hospital. Dr. Kenelm was striding from the elevator into the office opposite the admission desk. Seated when Brent and Russo entered, he glanced up from a clinical report, his smile quick and genial.

"Hello! Still trying to find your elusive corpse?"

"Cops are like firemen," Brent said. "They always expect the worst and answer every call whether it's a false alarm or not. Have you been busy here since we left?"

"Busy all over the place—being the house physician in Medical."

"Is Doctor Dockery still out?"

"He was called back as soon as he reached home. Critical pyrexia in one of his favorite patients." Dr. Kenelm rose. "I must ask you not to distract him any more than you can help. He's twice as busy as I am, with much more important work."

"Are you a married man?" Brent asked him abruptly.

"No." He paused in the door. "See here, isn't your investigation going rather far afield?"

"Looks like it's due to go even farther, and a lot deeper," Brent remarked. "I think Captain Russo wants to make sure you haven't been outside this hospital since he left it. Don't you, Captain?"

Max Russo said neither yes nor no.

Dr. Kenelm's face was fixed into stern lines. "I haven't been outside for even so long as a second, and you can believe me or not, as you choose. You know, you're being altogether too officious and I resent it."

"I don't blame you," Brent said. "But on the other hand there are a couple of people who probably resent having gotten shot up."

"A couple?" Dr. Kenelm's eyebrows arched. "Good Lord, do you actually mean—" He frowned across the admission desk. "Please don't raise your voice, Miss Ruthers. What's wrong?"

The white-capped girl at the switchboard looked exasperated. "Doctor Clark answered an ambulance call with Doctor Adams a few minutes ago. He's saying they brought the patient out and found a body already inside the ambulance, but I can't make head or tail—"

Brent tightened and Captain Russo took a quick step as Dr. Kenelm echoed, "A body?"

"Give me that call!" Captain Russo ordered the girl and grasped up the phone on the counter. They listened as he spoke terse syllables. "Dead? . . . Don't touch it. Bring your patient if you must, but bring that body too, right away."

Brent's lips quirked as Russo disconnected and turned his night-black stare at him.

"Well?" Brent asked. "Which one is it?"

Captain Russo, looking gloomy, didn't answer, and Dr. Kenelm directed a bewildered gesture at Brent.

"Whichever it is," Brent said, "it's it."

"It must be it," Russo agreed ironically.

"Finally, anyway, there is a corpse."

"There's a corpse," and Russo moved to the entrance. "Stay right here, both of

you. I'm going to watch for that ambulance."

Dr. Kenelm gazed at his watch as if calculating how much lost time this development would cost him, and looked up with his eyes anxiously darkened.

"Nothing to do," Brent said, "but follow orders. When it comes to cadavers, Russo's the doctor."

Kenelm shook his head in confusion and returned to the desk. Leaning casually on the counter, Brent waited.

The lump on his forehead was throbbing harder now. Through the street doors he saw Captain Russo pacing along the curb. Dr. Kenelm was busy in the adjoining office. One of the two elevators was open. Brent sauntered and was inside it, sliding the door shut, when Dr. Kenelm sprang after him.

"Just a minute!"

The panel was closed.

"Take me up," Brent ordered the attendant. "Police business and don't waste time asking questions. Wherever Doctor Dockery is, that's where I want to get off."

The operator hesitated. "I just took him back up to Surgery."

"Where from?" Brent asked as the car glided.

"The consultation-room."

"Anything unusual in that?"

"He's up and down, up and down, all hours of the day and night. Busiest doctor in town. And the best, if you ask me. A grand guy, Doctor Dockery is. All the kids love him."

"You're not telling me," Brent said. "What kids?"

"Patients. He's specially interested in rheumatic fever. It's enough to break your heart, watching him working over 'em. They don't live to be more than fifteen years old if it's not stopped right at the beginning. He's doing research too, and some day he'll have it licked."

"I hope so," Brent said sincerely.

STEPPING from the car, he saw a nurse entering a room far down the corridor. Other nurses were hustling about with an efficiency that indicated someone in authority was near. Brent hesitated under a sign reading *Isolation Ward—No Visitors*, then went on.

He peered past a screen door into a

room where Dr. Dockery was bending over a bed and trimming the knots of a bulky packing bandaged about the knee of a tow-headed girl of ten.

"Continue the salicylate," the doctor instructed the nurse in a tone that suggested he regretted its inadequacy. "The dressing must not be removed." He placed his big hand gently on his little patient's hot forehead, and answered her drowsy smile. "You'll be much better soon, Mary."

"I know I will, Doctor," Mary piped faintly. "I always feel better when you come to see me."

"Go to sleep now," Dr. Dockery murmured, "and I'll be back almost before you know it."

The nurse hurried out, brushing Brent aside, and caught the arm of an interne who was carrying several X-ray films down the hall.

"Doctor Dockery's in eight twelve and asked for the X's and I had to tell him they weren't taken yet, Doctor Beasley," she said in sharp rebuke.

Dr. Beasley snapped his fingers. "Sorry. Can't keep up with that man. I'll do it right away," he promised, and went on.

Emerging next, Dr. Dockery halted to gaze at Brent in alarm.

"You're not quite old enough to be immune to rheumatic fever, Brent," he said with genuine solicitude. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to tell you there's been more trouble."

Dr. Dockery set his mouth. "Were those more shots I heard behind the building a few minutes ago?"

"I hope you'll understand I'm not just trying to smell out a piece of sensational news. I'm really concerned. Damn it, I'm trying to say it might turn into a pretty nasty kind of business if you—well, if you hold back anything important."

"Brent," Dr. Dockery said forcefully. "What could I possibly have to conceal?"

"I'm afraid you've already done it. Odelle Quinn wasn't really your patient. You twisted the truth about her in order to cover up the fact that she'd been coming to your office for—for some other reason." Brent rubbed his chin. "Hiding things from me doesn't matter so much. But to try to deceive Captain Russo—as shrewd a detective as ever—"

Dr. Dockery was struck speechless and didn't hear the swift heel-beats coming down the corridor. Dr. Kenelm had burst from the elevator and was upon them, his hand clamping Brent's arm.

"What the devil do you mean by this!" he blurted. "You've no business here. I can't permit your damned snooping to interfere with Doctor Dockery's work!"

"It's all right, Eric," Dr. Dockery said, his tone husky. "Brent meant no harm. Please go down, both of you. I'll join you in a moment or two."

His face was drawn, pallid. Watching him enter the next room with drooping shoulders, Brent submitted to Kenelm's pull at his arm. They waited for the elevator and Kenelm remained indignant.

"Are you his watchdog?" Brent asked wryly.

"That, or his bootblack or anything else he might require me to be," Kenelm retorted. "His work is more important to me than my own. I'm damned if I'll let you worry him."

Their descent began in silence. Brent was astonished, the next moment, to find that Kenelm's good-natured grin had returned.

"Sorry, Brent. I was too harsh with you. It's simply that I can't help being a bit overzealous where Seldon Dockery is concerned."

"Very understandable," Brent answered. "I also want to spare him. Your way and mine are different, that's all. You seem anxious to side-track any trouble headed in his direction, whereas I think the best way to bring him into the clear is to uncover the underlying truth, even if it might mean a temporary upset."

"I feel very strongly that it's not necessary to disturb him at all. He hasn't the slightest connection with what happened. I insist on that."

BRENT shook his head. "Even to the extent of placing yourself in a questionable light?"

"Knowing no more about it than Doctor Dockery does, I haven't given a thought to how I might become involved." Kenelm's smile yielded to lines of sternness. "Look at it from my point of view, Brent. My father was Seldon Dockery's closest friend. When he died I was left

alone with nothing. God knows what would have become of me but for Seldon Dockery's generosity. He not only put me through medical school but shared his practice with me. I'll go to any lengths to repay him, Brent, and don't ever doubt it."

"I don't," Brent said, "but I wouldn't repeat that too loudly, if I were you, considering that your alibi's going to be a tough one to check."

Kenelm's eyes narrowed. "No matter. Even though you say your purpose is the same as mine, I'm going to stop your meddling. I can order you excluded from this hospital, you know—and I'll do it, unless you quit."

"It wouldn't stop me," Brent said.

Dr. Kenelm stared at him stonily, jaw set with resolution. Striding from the elevator, he turned to the accident ward. Brent, shrugging his regret, eased into the consultation-room as Max Russo pushed in from the street. The cold wind had brought no flush to the captain's sunken cheeks. Looking as if nothing could ever warm him again, he resumed his pacing inside.

Brent kept beyond Russo's sight and advanced upon the six or seven overcoats hanging in the corner. He found match-folders in the pockets, keys, a pack of cigarettes, nothing of interest. Still unobserved, he glanced sharply about, then began poking into the desk drawers. The sound of the sliding panel came from the elevator shaft. Quickly he closed the last drawer, his search unrewarded, and sauntered out to join Dr. Dockery.

"Brent tells me—"

"He does, does he?" Max Russo said, snapping a glance at Brent. "He was Johnny-on-the-spot twice tonight, and I keep wondering how come."

"I'm still completely in the dark," Dr. Dockery protested. "Is it necessary to disrupt my schedule?"

The captain's intensely dark eyes settled on him. "I can't believe a physician of your standing could be mixed up in a case of violent death. Besides, you have a perfect alibi—two of them, in fact. There's no good reason to keep you away from your patients."

"That's very decent of you, Captain," Dr. Dockery sighed. Again his jaw was

strongly clenched, a dark fire smouldering in his eyes. Getting once more into his overcoat, he went to the entrance and flung over his massive shoulder: "Good-night, good-night."

The ambulance whirred past at the same moment. Immediately Captain Russo was following it. Brent went after him, noticing that its arrival had not delayed Dr. Dockery's departure, and stopped behind it in the driveway. One white-coated interne dropped from the seat and another opened the rear doors.

"There," the second announced to Captain Russo, pulling nervously on a cigarette. "Intact."

The captain stood gazing in and Brent peered over his shoulder. The dead girl lay huddled on the ambulance floor, her hat spilled off, her hair a yellow splash against her waxen cheek. Her left wrist was bound with bandages and her coat was twisted open, revealing three red-ringed holes in the front of her dress.

"A gun in there?" Captain Russo asked, his voice even more sepulchral.

"No gun," the interne answered.

"There wouldn't be, Captain." Brent pulled his topcoat closer about him. "The murderer saved it to use on her husband. We haven't found it yet, so he's probably saving it still."

"Or *she* is," Russo reminded him. "To use on whom next time?"

"Maybe me," Brent said. "Maybe me."

Odelle Quinn looked childlike in death and alien to the scheming trait which her husband had hinted. Gazing at her still body, Brent shivered with a thought he couldn't shake off—the haunting wonder whether it still might be true that Lora Lorne's advice—his own bungling advice—had brought sudden death upon her.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lightning in the Dark

MAX RUSSO'S face was bleak as a mummy's but his eyes turned upon Brent with a bright, black fire.

"Why is she dead?" he asked disconsolately. "Why?"

"Jealousy, perhaps," Brent said.

"Not her husband's. He was shot with the same gun—according to you."

Brent felt the uncanny force of the captain's gaze. "He could have killed his wife through jealousy, then the other man might have turned the same gun on him in retaliation."

"You know a lot about this," Russo said in a grieved tone. "Too much."

"I also know," Brent added grimly, "that while I was locked inside one room this body was carried out of the other, then along the sidewalk a few yards and put inside the ambulance."

"Why?"

"It wasn't much of a risk. Dark street—lonely. The idea may have been to confuse the investigation. Or to delay the discovery. Possibly the murderer wanted to get at Carr before Carr found out his wife had been killed. If so, he was afraid that otherwise Carr would name him."

"Or her," Russo murmured. "And Carr still might do it."

"That's right. He might."

Russo walked like an automaton to the sedan in which the Homicide Squad was still waiting. "Get to work," he said tonelessly, and turned back. Pausing again behind the ambulance he looked about with his ghostly eyes gleaming. "Bill!" he called in a voice which might have been that of Judgment Day itself. "Bill Brent!"

Brent had dodged beyond the cars in the parking court and was crouched behind the wall. Keeping in the shadows, he circled the dead woman's home. His sedan was still parked in front of it. He slid under the wheel and went off at an urgent speed . . .

Turning through a stone gate, Brent was immediately screened from Sycamore Drive by a hedge. The lane led across the landscaped grounds and brought him to the side of a stately Georgian house. Dr. Dockery's car, marked by its green cross, stood at the big garage beyond. Brent had scarcely stopped when a door opened and a young man ran with graceful swiftness down the steps.

"See here, Gret!" he burst out as he neared. "I've had enough of your snooping. I'll thank you to stop poking your pretty little nose into—" Halting, he seemed more annoyed than embarrassed by his mistake. "Oh—I thought you were my fiancée," he said with a faint accent.

Standing erect, he was so amazingly

tall that he seemed almost to be in his own shadow. His sideburns were long in the Latin fashion, his hair curried to a gloss. Brent had never seen, except on a movie screen, any man so sharp in every crease, so impeccably groomed. Effortlessly he bounced back into the house, having shown no interest at all in Brent's identity or purpose.

Climbing after him, Brent saw him again, through a window of the spacious living-room.

"Now what about it?" Brent heard him ask petulantly. "Damned irritating, having that check pushed back at me. Didn't you know your account wouldn't cover it?"

Seldon Dockery was warming his big hands at the fireplace.

"A—an oversight, Ray," he said wearily. "I've been so busy I've neglected to keep my personal checkbook up to date. I—I'll arrange it in the morning."

A young woman rose from a chair near the blaze. Strikingly dark, her skin was the color of richly creamed coffee, and naturally long lashes veiled her eyes. She slipped her arm through Dr. Dockery's in a manner of loyal comradeship.

"Sometimes, Raymond, you're simply too much!" Her voice was throaty, her syllables faintly accented like those of the sleek young man to whom she spoke. "Never do you think of anyone but yourself, never! No matter how generous Seldon is to you, you must ask for more. After all, the check was for a thousand dollars."

"What of it?" Raymond Lacroze retorted. "He said he'd back me, didn't he? Well, I expect him to keep his word. Every day my bills pile up. Delays, delays, there's nothing else. It's enough to drive me mad. I don't ask what becomes of all your money. I merely insist—"

"On having too much of it. You are too selfish, Raymond!" There was dark lightning in the young woman's eyes. "You can't see that Seldon has more important things on his mind tonight."

"More important!" Lacroze scoffed. "What could be—"

"*Al villiano dadle el dedo, tomará la mano!*—Give him an inch and he'll take a mile. Already you have spent twice as much as you said you would need. Per-

haps we will lose all patience with you, then where will you be left? Go away, please! We've had enough of your insolence."

LACROZE straightened indignantly to his towering height, made a spiteful sound through his teeth and strode into another room. Brent, realizing that Lacroze hadn't mentioned him, touched the bell-button as Dr. Dockery turned to frown into the fire.

"Where is Gretchen?"

"I don't know, Seldon. Perhaps she has been trying to learn where all the money is going. It makes Raymond furious when she questions any expense. It may be why he's so unreasonable tonight."

A maid opened the door and Brent identified himself, still listening.

"I regret so many things, Seldon, and urging you to help Raymond with his silly Villa Mañana is one of them," the young woman was saying. "You're so worried tonight. It is something at the Heights? Would you rather hurry back?"

"How you've changed!" and Brent heard the doctor chuckle. "No—you were right. You're young and I'm tied down too closely. Sometimes I think— Well, I'll never again take the risk of losing you, my dear."

"But Seldon, you know it will never happen again. You see, my eyes are open now to the true values of our life together and— Susan?"

The maid whispered and Dr. Dockery exclaimed: "Brent? Here? Why—why, ask him to come in."

They were standing at the fire, the physician seeming even more of a worried bear beside the vital young woman whose slender arm still clung to his.

"Mr. Brent is from the *Recorder*, Claudia," Dr. Dockery said. "You've never met my wife? . . . Is it the same matter you mentioned at the hospital?"

Mrs. Dockery was not many years older than her step-daughter and certainly as lovely as Gretchen. Brent's fascinated gaze clung to her and he reluctantly nodded.

"The police may not be far behind me. I wanted to forewarn you."

With lifted head, the doctor asked:

"Why do you think it's necessary, Brent?"

"The shooting in your office was done with a small caliber gun." He spoke frankly, watching their faces. "And your wife owns one that fills the bill."

Instantly Dr. Dockery challenged him. "And suppose she does?"

"Seldon, you didn't tell me of this!" Claudia said. "What could it have to do with my husband, Mr. Brent—or me?"

Brent pawed his face. "I feel like a fool. This thing's really none of my business. I thought I'd help keep you out of it if I could, that's all. But now that I'm here, may I see the gun?"

"You may," Dr. Dockery assented, his voice deep in his throat. "Do you remember where you keep it, Claudia?"

"I—I think so."

Claudia sent a troubled glance at Brent as she hurried from the room. With questions pressing to his lips, he remained silent. The doctor stood with hands clasped behind his back, profoundly disturbed, eyeing Brent in wordless reproof until his wife returned, walking quickly.

"I had to look for it. It hasn't been touched in a long while, I think. There."

It lay tiny and black on her palm. Brent took it, smelled of the bore and released the clip. It contained six cartridges. Evidently they had been inserted months or even years ago. Several of them were touched with green corrosion.

It would be a smart trick, Brent reflected, to remove the old bullets from the clip, insert new, fire them, then replace the old in order to rule out at a glance an otherwise suspicious piece of evidence—but he shook the thought from his head.

"Now I feel a lot better!" he said. "I'm sorry for this intrusion, Doctor."

"Not at all, Brent," Dr. Dockery answered. "If there's sound reason why we should be investigated, I suppose we must put up with it." He seemed to shrink from the gun. "Please put it away, Claudia."

"Yes," Claudia said. "Once I thought it was such fun to shoot, but somehow I do not like this thing any more."

As she carried it from the room her husband lowered his shaggy eyebrows at

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Brent. "Now, is there something else on your mind?"

"A great deal, but I'm keeping you from your dinner and it's high time I made a discreet exit," Brent said. "Thanks for not throwing me out. Good-night."

Dr. Dockery took him to the door, sent him off with a slap on the shoulder. He was running down the steps when he caught sight of the tall figure waiting beside his car.

"You're quite right," Raymond Lacroze said, his lids drooping. "You've no excuse for meddling in this family's affairs."

"Listening in, were you?" Brent asked. "I don't like that."

"O. K. You don't like it and I don't think I like you."

Unexpectedly Lacroze smiled—a mirthless thinning of his mouth. It was the ominous smile of a man filled with a confident sense of power. He turned away, bounded up the steps, paused for dramatic effect. "Don't do it again," he said softly. Then he disappeared into the house, leaving Brent more coldly impressed with his simple warning than if he had threatened violence.

Puzzled and apprehensive, Brent swung his car out the gate. He was a block away when light struck into his eyes from the rear-view mirror. Another car was leaving the Dockery home. Within the space of two blocks his suspicion that it was trailing him grew strong. As he drove across the city it chose the corners he chose. Not until he swung toward the Heights Hospital did it change its tactics.

There at the last intersection, as if the driver were either satisfied as to Brent's destination or wary of following him farther, the other car hummed straight ahead. A huge neon sign near the center of town seemed to guide it like a beacon. The shining red letters announced: *Opening Soon—Villa Mañana*.

THE ambulance was turning out of the hospital driveway. Having finished their field work, the Homicide Squad were getting back into their car—all except Max Russo. The captain stood alone in the gloom, head bowed, calculating his next move.

Avoiding him, Brent crossed the lobby. The consultation-room was empty and Dr. Kenelm's overcoat was gone from the rack in the corner. A directory was posted opposite the elevators and Brent consulted it. "Second floor," he read to himself out loud.

He chose the stairs and came into a corridor where an arrow pointed to *Röntgenography*. Following it, he opened a door bearing the same word and entered a room filled with weird electrical apparatus. He was alone there.

Another door was marked *Darkroom—Do Not Enter*. Brent knocked on it and there was no answer. Venturing a preliminary peek inward, he stepped into a black-walled light-trap—a short maze which led him into a smaller room filled with an acrid smell and the glow of a single deep-red bulb.

Brent paused, thinking he had heard a quick movement, while his eyes adjusted themselves to the crimson-tinted darkness. Details slowly sketched themselves in—a bench bearing a stack of aluminum film-holders beside a row of developer and fixer tanks—but no one was at work there. Eyebrows knit, Brent saw, resting on the rim of one of the tanks, the handles of half a dozen film-hangers. He took one up, held the dripping negative over the hypo solution—and again his ears caught a quick, furtive noise behind him.

Suddenly the ruby light seemed soundlessly to explode. It became a shapeless blur, a dim scarlet flare floating off . . .

Brent found that his face was pressing against the black floor. Reverberating as if from far away he heard rapidly fading footfalls. The pain in his head was so overwhelming that all his other senses flickered and he groped feebly in the air, not knowing what had happened to him.

He rolled over, found his knees, then his feet. The red blob swam before him again and he tottered to the light-trap. Groping into a white brilliance that blinded him, he heard an exclamation, felt someone grasp his arm.

"What's the matter with you?" a voice boomed through his skull.

Then he was slumped in a chair, squinting into a face he vaguely remembered. It belonged to the interne he had seen earlier that evening in the corridor on the

top floor—Dr. Beasley. A wet, chill cloth was pressed over his face, and when it was taken away he saw more people in the room. Before him, as if risen from a neighboring grave, stood Captain Max Russo.

"Am I hurt?" Brent asked him.

"Just knocked galley-west," the captain answered despondently. "Your hat probably saved you from a cracked cranium."

It was lying on the floor, looking strangely like the bloody hat Brent had found under lock in Odelle Quinn's bedroom.

"What brought you up here, Bill?" Russo was asking in his empty tone. "Who did you run into?"

"I think—" Brent said, "I think he— he would've killed me if he could."

"Or she?" said Russo dryly.

Brent pressed his hands over his head, trying to force its shattered parts back together. "I went in the darkroom. Somebody was already there—probably hiding under the bench, but I didn't know that—and let me have it from behind. How long was I out?"

"Why should anyone jump you in there, Bill?" Russo asked.

"I interfered—interrupted something." He found Dr. Beasley's face. "Better take a look inside—see if everything's as you left it."

Captain Russo remained unmoving, sorrowfully estimating Brent, until Dr. Beasley returned.

"There were six films in the hypo, and now there are only five," he reported.

"Ah!" Brent said, a glimmer returning to his eyes.

"One missing," Dr. Beasley added. "The patient's in eight twelve."

"Why?" Russo asked.

Nobody answered but everybody looked at Brent. He undertook the risk of standing up and pushed away the hands that tried to help him.

"Please, let's skip the whole thing. Maybe I just fainted and fell. Anyway, God knows I've had enough for one night. Would anybody mind if I just sort of went peacefully away from here?"

"The sooner the better, Bill—before you turn this thing into a massacre," Captain Russo said. "Swallow a handful of aspirin and put that head of yours to bed.

I want you to be able to answer a lot of questions at headquarters bright and early in the morning. Did you hear that clearly?"

"I got it," Brent mumbled, and went.

CHAPTER SIX

Find Another Gun

THE city-room came to bustling life while Brent labored, alone in his faintly scented cubbyhole, to bring forth another of Lora Lorne's admonitions to the amorous. His persistent headache wasn't alleviated by the too-familiar problem of a married woman who had taken to coveting her neighbor's husband. While he endeavored to repair the dizzy dame's moral outlook—"The wages of sin are certain to be hard, dear"—he sent side-long glances at Garrett and awaited the inevitable sarcastic call.

"Lora!" it came. "Here, please, madam."

Gritting his teeth, Brent finished his sentence—"clutches of a mad passion that sweeps aside all thought of honor, responsibility, right and wrong"—and took with him a letter he had found in the morning's mail. A rare thing, it was addressed not to a non-existent Miss Lorne, but to him, William Coleridge Brent, Esquire, personally. Unfolding it as he arrived at the city editor's desk, he chose to ignore Valerie Randall.

Val had already hustled in and out and breathlessly in again. Her cheeks flushed, she had handfuls of notes and her smile at Brent was expectant.

"Val's all set to hear your angle on the murder story, grandma," Garrett said.

"Is she?" Brent remarked. "Here's another letter from Middletown, where Ducky Chase's sister teaches school. Is it possible you're so nearly human that you sent her some more bucks without telling anybody?"

"Never mind that," Garrett said. "Val—"

"I'm interested in this phenomenon," Brent interrupted. "When Ducky died we took up a collection and sent his sister Amy the coffin money she needed for him, and she duly thanked us. But here she writes: 'I didn't expect a second gift, and

certainly not such an enormous sum, even larger than the insurance policy Harry dropped a few weeks before he died.' I'll gladly revise my low opinion of you, Garrett, if—"

"I know nothing about it," Garrett said impatiently. "Get busy and tell Val—"

"Though it was sent in cash,' Amy Chase goes on, 'without a letter or even a return address on the envelope, I know it must have come from Harry's friends on the paper.' Well, this is the first I've heard about it. So, Garrett, your heart isn't completely ossified after all?"

"Please, Bill!" Val implored him. "There's so much to cover today, I'm half crazy already!"

"I don't wonder," and Brent eyed her scornfully. "The job's too big and tough for your dainty hands. This is a fine racket you're working, Garrett. Instead of showing this lovely girl your etchings, you gave her the police trick. You spend practically every evening at her apartment, teaching her journalism. Under the same conditions I'd enjoy enlightening her as to how to break this murder story, but as it is—"

"Brent!" Garrett grated, and leveled a threatening finger.

"Besides, you've given me other work to do—remember? I have a large family of readers to guide past the shoals of wrecked homes, illicit desires and past wrongs. Has the chief of the Homicide Squad clammed up on you, Val? Then ask Glen Carr. The guy certainly knows more about these shootings than anybody else."

"He's still missing, Bill, wounded as he is," Val said quickly. "Russo thinks he's keeping under cover in fear of his life."

"Probably he fears exposure even more," Brent said. "If he recovers from those bullets he knows he'll probably wind up in jail. But there are lots of angles you haven't thought of yet, Val, of course. For example, did the Carrs rent that particular house simply because it's in a good, quiet neighborhood, or for some other obscure reason? Probably the former, but I haven't time—"

"You're wasting plenty of it, Brent," Garrett cut in. "Sit down and talk to Val."

"Then too," Brent continued, the post-mortem has shown, as it must, that Odelle Quinn had no stomach ulcer. For another thing, there's only one place where the weapon of murder can be. And that hat I discovered—though there are no initials stamped in the band, it's easy to tell who owns it. Not Glen Carr, and the blood on it's too old, of course, to be Miss Quinn's. Do you now why any of this is true, my child?"

"Why—why no, Bill," Val confessed, wide-eyed.

"I'm glad you don't," Brent said. "I'm sincerely happy that you've got an amateur on the police trick, Garrett. I devoutly hope you never got around to teaching her how to find out all the answers."

"Brent," Garrett said vehemently, rising, "you're to turn all your information over to Val, here and now—and that's an assignment."

Brent shook his head and immediately regretted that he hadn't chosen some other manner of signifying his refusal.

"I won't do it," he stated flatly. "You can rant your loudest. You can fire me, sue for breach of contract. You can even promise in writing to put me permanently back on police and I'll still tell you to go to hell. That's how I feel about the situation now, Garrett."

The city editor's eyes were cold as stone. "You're putting yourself on the blacklist—kicking yourself out of the newspaper game forever."

"If that's my choice," and Brent grimly nodded, "I'd rather sweep gutters. Because I know whom the evidence incriminates—incriminates so conclusively that there'd be scarcely any hope of an acquittal—and I'm damned if I'll smear it all over our front page or any other. As matters stand, Garrett, that's final."

He turned away while Val Randall gaped at him and Garrett's wrathful stare burned his back, and disappeared into the morgue.

SPLITTING open the bound volume of the *Recorder* for February, Brent pored over an item headlined: *CHASE HIT-RUN DEATH ADMITTED BY EX-DENTIST.*

On the seventeenth, the day Ducky

Chase died, after being accidentally run down at the corner of Fourth and Maple, Leslie Danforth confessed. No longer practising, Danforth was employed in the Coombs Dental Laboratory, suppliers to the profession. Upon his surrender it was ascertained that fragment of yellow lens found at the scene had been broken from the fog-lights of his car.

Brent thought he heard his telephone ringing but reviewed, regardless, several peculiar aspects of the accident. The driver had halted long enough to learn that Ducky Chase gravely needed medical aid. Then fleeing, he had again stopped to phone the Heights Hospital for an ambulance. These extenuating circumstances, pleaded by the city's most prominent and expensive attorney, had served to reduce Danforth's sentence to one year.

Checking backward to the first news of the accident—though his telephone was ringing—Brent reread these sentences:

Chase was struck within ten yards of the small apartment building where he lived. The lack of eye-witnesses is accounted for by the late hour and the fact that retail stores stand on the other three corners. Only one room on the street side of the apartment was occupied. When questioned by police, Mr. and Mrs. Olin Dorr said that at the time of the accident they had not yet returned from the roadhouse where they spent the evening.

Olin Dorr? Could Val, stumbling in one of her early assignments, have gotten the name wrong?

Still ignoring his telephone, Brent referred to the small ad run daily by the Zombie Club. Odelle Quinn was featured as "Radio's Sweetest Thrush," while Glen Carr was described as "Your Favorite M. C." A week later both their names had disappeared from the Zombie Club's entertainment bill and the chief attraction was, "Francine—Our Own Dancer Divine."

Tantalized by a feeling that the name of Francine was also somehow familiar, Brent now responded to the persistent clamor of his phone.

"I said bright and early," the unearthly voice of Max Russo reminded him. "Or do I send a troop of strong-arm dicks after you?"

"Coming!" Brent promised.

As he crossed to the swinging doors he saw Garrett glaring over his rolltop desk. Deciding that the city editor was holding his fate in abeyance while giving him a last chance to surrender his inside information, he answered with a dogged wag of his head, pushed out and ran down to the street.

Reaching the lobby of a building two blocks away, he read on the directory board: *Gregory Walsh, Architect—Third Floor*. He was turning to the elevators when a panel slid open and a woman emerged. She was thirty-odd, quietly dressed, pretty and hurried. Her appearance caused Brent to change his plans. Turning about, he followed her out.

She entered the City Trust Company and went directly to the window marked *Savings*. Pretending to be a depositor, Brent stood behind her. She pushed five twenty-dollar bills under the grille and the teller entered the amount in a growing three-figured column. He said, "Thank you, Mrs. Danforth," and she stuffed the passbook into her purse.

Still dogging her, Brent went thoughtfully as far as the entrance of the office building to which she directly returned. There a glass display case was affixed to the wall. Also bearing the name of Gregory Walsh, it framed the front elevations of several of the architect's recent projects. One of them, which Brent intently studied, pictured a remodeled building with an extremely modernized Spanish motif, decorated with a sign proclaiming sweepingly, *Villa Mañana*.

Haunted by the portentous voice of Captain Russo, Brent went on. When he slid into his sedan, which was sitting in front of the *Recorder* plant, he found something more to puzzle over. A note was attached to the steering-wheel with a bobby-pin. The brief message left him baffled.

Bill Brent—You ask me to trust you and now I must.

Please don't print this or mention it to anyone except Father. Tell him he musn't worry—I'm all right.—Gretchen D.

CAPTAIN RUSSO was not at his desk. An inner room of the Homicide Squad's offices was closed, and

through the door came voices. The first Brent heard was a man's, raised in petulant complaint.

"Warrants, searches, stupid questions! You interrupt my practice, and why? What could I have to do with this ridiculous murder?"

Claudia Dockery's throaty voice answered. "If you have nothing to fear, why must you behave like a guilty spoiled child, Raymond? Do be quiet!"

"I've never yet encountered a homicide I could call ridiculous, Mr. Lacroze," Brent heard Max Russo observe. "The fact is that the gun was within your reach. You'll wait here, please, until I've had the report from the ballistic lab."

"This will cost you your job, you fool," Raymond Lacroze warned him levelly. "You'll regret it, I promise you!"

"Oh, hush, Raymond!" said Claudia Dockery.

Captain Russo appeared in the doorway and his spooky eyes settled on Brent. He sank into his desk chair, his gaunt face sorrowful, contemplating the gray, blood-stained hat lying on his blotter.

"Bill, you know a lot more about this than you pretend. You're holding out."

"I've learned a few things I'd rather not know," Brent admitted. "I don't think I'm going to tell anybody what they are. Not unless the situation takes a turn for the better."

Russo sighed. "I like you, Bill. I don't want to jail you—for obstructing justice, at the very least."

Brent smiled wryly. "The justice of the case is what I want most to preserve—but don't ask me what I mean. About that hat. Do you know whose blood is on it?"

"Ducky Chase's," Russo answered.

"That's right," Brent said quietly. "And it's Ducky Chase's hat, of course?"

"No."

Wary of Max Russo's sagacity, Brent chose his words with care. "Then it belongs to the man who ran him down, you think? Dropped or brushed off while he bent over Ducky? If so, Leslie Danforth unknowingly left it there on the bloody pavement when he rushed away."

"Officially that case is closed," Russo reminded him. "Danforth's doing time now. So why should this hat, if it's his,

be so very important to Glen Carr?"

"Danforth's second offense, as I remember," Brent said. "Wasn't he in trouble with the law several years ago?"

"In a different way. It had something to do with the administration of an estate. He was the executor. Under charges of embezzlement lodged by one of the inheritors he was brought to trial. My own opinion is that it was mismanagement instead of theft, but he was found guilty."

"All that has nothing to do with Ducky Chase or Odelle Quinn, though," Brent said.

Max Russo shook his head. "Under the state law Danforth's conviction for the felony automatically revoked his license to practice dentistry, even though he was released on probation. He had to go to work as a laboratory assistant. Having a record, he couldn't hope to get off again when he confessed to hitting Chase."

"Danforth's wife has found herself a job in an architect's office," Brent added. "And though her salary must be small, she's been depositing one hundred dollars in cash in her savings account regularly every week."

Russo's eyes were darkly alive in his dead face. "Blackmail? But how could that be?" Taking up a pencil, he made a note.

"No use grilling her about it," Brent said. "She knows that if she talks she'll lose that income and her husband will stay in jail anyway, under a new conviction for criminal conspiracy."

"What?" Russo stared keenly at him. "Bill, are you deliberately trying to cloud the issue?"

BRENT was watching the detective's reactions. "I'm hoping the truth will turn out to be something different than it seems now. Do you know that Glen Carr was more than ordinarily jealous of his wife? She'd written to Lora Lorne. Acting on our dear Miss Lorne's advice, she may have been pretending to play around in order to keep her husband's interest up. On the other hand, her letter may have been a shrewd feminine trick. Her husband felt she was using it to hide a real affair."

"In that case, who's the other man?"

Russo asked. "Or the other man's woman?"

"Have you checked everyone's alibis?" Brent countered.

Max Russo sat back. "Unquestionably Doctor Dockery was operating when the Quinn woman was killed. He says he was in the hospital when Carr was shot, but there happens to be nobody who can verify that. Doctor Kenelm saw all the patients on the list he gave me, but it's hard to say just when he arrived at and left each one's home. The second time, he was also just somewhere in the hospital. Mrs. Dockery says she was downtown, shopping. No corroboration."

"What about the daughter, Gretchen?" Brent asked as casually as he could manage.

"Haven't even seen her. They keep telling me she's expected home any minute, but she hasn't shown up. As for our hot-headed friend, Lacroze, he says he was at the new night club he's going to open soon which will feature his own dancing. But that was after the decorators had knocked off for the day—no one else was there. Coming right down to it, Bill, there's only one person I'm sure was at each place when the violence was done. You."

"And of course," Brent said uneasily, "I had a powerful motive for shooting two people I'd never seen before."

Russo leaned forward, his eyes black as the depths of a tomb at midnight. "How can I be sure you didn't know them? If Odelle Quinn and Glen Carr were playing some sort of crooked game, what proof is there that you weren't a party to it? With both of them out of the way now, there's no one else you have to cut in."

"I can truthfully say I'm not unfriendly with anyone concerned," Brent answered quietly, "except Raymond Lacroze, whom I'd like to smack on the jaw for a reason not directly connected with the case."

Russo's face was inscrutable. "What were you doing in that darkroom? Where's the film that disappeared?"

"Gone by now," Brent said. "Gone forever."

"You know the reason for it," Russo asserted bleakly. "I think you're cover-

ing yourself with your story about someone hiding under the bench. Isn't it true you went in there with the purpose of destroying that film?"

"Why should I?" A chill crawled up and down Brent's spine, and testing the depths of Russo's knowledge he asked again: "Why in the world should I?"

Max Russo was silent and the door opened. A bald man wearing a stained smock brought to his desk a brown envelope on which a memorandum was pasted. The man withdrew and as Russo read the typewritten lines Brent could look into the gaping mouth of the envelope. It contained a twenty-five caliber automatic.

Russo rose with almost an audible creaking of his joints and opened the connecting door.

"I have the report now," he said, "and you may go."

Raymond Lacroze uttered a triumphant "Hah!" Indignantly swinging his long legs, he strode from the office without waiting for Claudia Dockery. Pale, she paused at Captain Russo's desk.

"For myself I do not care," she said earnestly, "but I hope this means you will not again worry my husband."

Max Russo looked profoundly regretful and placed the automatic in her hands.

"Your property."

Claudia Dockery turned from him with her chin resolutely lifted. After she closed the door there was a moment of uncertain silence.

"The death bullets weren't fired from that gun, then," Brent surmised.

"You may go too, Bill," Captain Russo murmured. "Even you may go—at least this time."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dying Declaration

THE NECESSITY remained that today's paper must contain not only a murder story but another Lora Lorne column. While the tension in the city-room heightened and Val Randall hammered her inadequate notes together on her typewriter, Brent sweated over the tribulations of a husband who felt impelled to leave his wife because she loved

contract bridge more passionately than him.

Advising against a tragic fracture of their home—though in Brent's private opinion it would probably be a godsend—then fishing about for the one more short letter he needed to fill out the day's stint, he heard quick footfalls and looked up into the hotly annoyed face of Raymond Lacroze.

"Where's Gretchen?" Lacroze demanded. "Will you tell me or must I beat it out of you? I can do it, you know."

Brent seized Lacroze's arm and led him to another desk. "That's not my office," he took pains to point out first. "What makes you think I know more about your fiancée's whereabouts than you do?"

Lacroze's jaw was confidently pointed. "No one else knows. Not I, the man who's going to marry her. Claudia doesn't, or the doctor. But you! You've meddled from the very beginning. Now, where is she?"

Sliding his hand into his pocket, Brent closed it over the note he'd found in his car. "After all, it's rather early in the day. If she simply went out this morning and hasn't come back—"

"She's been gone since yesterday afternoon," Lacroze interjected. "Missing all night. No phone call—no word at all. I warn you, my practice has been interrupted too much. Don't waste my time. Don't lie."

"Frankly, Raymond," Brent said, "every time I see you I like you less. Damned if I can figure out why such a swell girl ever let you give her that ring, especially since her father probably paid for it. Anyway, why come to me? Tell the cops."

Lacroze towered over Brent, his eyes narrowing. "I've already had too much trouble from the stupid police. Doctor Dockery doesn't know Gret is gone. Claudia has put him off with excuses. She's trying to find Gret before he must be told. If something's happened to her—if you know—"

"I wish I did," Brent said sincerely, "but I can't help you."

Lacroze's dark lids lowered. "I hope you're telling me the truth," he said in

the same ominous tone that had chilled Brent last night. "And I hope you won't make the mistake of putting this into print." He turned, then, and his graceful, long-swinging stride took him out of the city-room.

Brent still had his Lora Lorne column to finish, but he followed. Reaching the street, he saw Lacroze rapidly driving off. The note in his pocket was a strange trust he wanted to keep, but it wouldn't prevent his questioning Claudia Dockery about Gretchen's disappearance. He ducked into his car—and as he turned from the curb the back of his neck prickled, warning him somehow of a presence.

Glancing into the mirror, watching the rear seat and seeing nothing suspicious, he drove slowly. After rounding another corner he found himself passing the colorful but incompleted front of the Villa Mañana. Lacroze's car was now sitting there, his selfish impatience having probably prompted him to abandon the search for his fiancée. Another sign held Brent's eyes—*Lacroze and Francine, Stylists of the Dance*.

He turned twice more, reconsidering his destination, and stopped at the entrance of the building where he had a one-room apartment.

"It's safer here," he said, cutting the ignition. "You can come up for air now."

He was answered by a soft gasp, a movement, and Gretchen Dockery's face appeared in the mirror.

SHE ASKED quickly: "How did you know I was back here?"

"I just sort of sense it when you're around," Brent said, turning to smile at her. "Where've you been hiding yourself?"

"In a movie, until it closed last night," she confessed. "In parked cars since then. I was watching and saw you get out of this one early this morning. I'll go crazy if I don't talk to somebody, and you're my best bet."

As Brent got out she came to him, her cold hands thrust into the pockets of her red jacket. He led her into his apartment and she sank to the studio couch, searching his face. On the card table, still set up, were his percolator and toaster. He plugged in both.

"You're a tired and hungry young woman—and a scared one, though you've got plenty of stuff, at that." Brent brought a cup from the kitchenette, cream from the refrigerator. "Thinking the cops might force you to say too much, you've been keeping out of their reach."

"They use blinding lights and black-jacks, don't they?" Gretchen asked with a shiver. "And don't they tap telephone wires? That's why I haven't even phoned home."

Brent didn't grin. "You're protecting somebody," he said. "Not yourself, I hope. Who is it?"

"You've got to tell me what's been happening!" Gretchen said suddenly. "Have the police—"

"No arrests so far. But something's due to break very soon now. I feel sure of it. You still won't tell me what you're so worried about, will you? You needn't, though. I think I know."

Distrainly she ran her fingers through her honey-colored hair. "But you couldn't!" Alarm flashed in her eyes. "You—you're not putting it in the paper!"

"Unlike the *Recorder's* present police reporter, I wouldn't wreck anybody's life for the sake of a little news," Brent assured her. "There's more I've got to find out—not for publication. Insurance against disaster, sort of. About Doctor Kenelm, for example. Is he the type who makes passes at married women?"

An incredulous laugh forced itself from Gretchen's lips. "He has no time even for unmarried ones. I thought I was in love with him once, but I couldn't get to first base. He's wedded to his work."

"You came off a bit better with Ray Lacroze, who's equally wedded to himself," Brent observed with a grimace of distaste. "Who the hell is that guy?"

"Claudia's cousin. Their fathers were brothers—Argentine cattle ranchers—their mothers American. I'm sure you've heard of Ray—Lacroze and Roselle, the dancing team that made a big hit in New York last year. He split with Roselle and has a new partner now. He's always been ambitious to have his own night club, and Father's backing him."

"Latins are reputed to have tempers hotter than tamales," Brent observed.

"They're capable of fierce jealousies. Your step-mother, for example. There must be many beautiful women among your father's patients."

"Once Claudia was that foolish," Gretchen said. "But now—" Her voice whispered off.

"Orange juice?" Brent suggested, bringing her a glass from the kitchenette. "You like Claudia?"

"I'm suddenly crazy about her. She's become so swell, Father's so much in love with her, and she's so devoted to him—now. But at first— About a month ago there was almost a terrific bust-up."

"What stopped it?" Brent was watching the brown bubbles in the percolator. "What changed things so greatly and so suddenly?"

Gretchen hesitated. "At first Claudia thought of nothing but entertaining, fitting about to parties. She was jealous of Father's work, furious because he took her out so little. Some trifling thing—a country club dance Father couldn't make—brought it to a head. Claudia had a tantrum, threw her clothes into her bags and started off for Reno."

"While your father was doctoring some poor kid at the Heights, no doubt?"

"Exactly. She left a note and I found it. I remember it began: 'This is a horrible valentine to leave for you, but I'm so terribly unhappy—' Really, she was breaking her own heart by doing it. I phoned Father and he rushed to the airport, reached the plane a second before it was due to take off—luckily, because he couldn't possibly have followed her any farther—and brought her back."

BRENT SOBERLY put a cup of coffee in Gretchen's trembling hands. "A near thing that brought them a new understanding."

"You see, one of Father's patients developed a dangerous condition at that very time, and the hospital couldn't reach him. A grand little boy, and he almost died. Father had a hard fight, saving him. Claudia felt it was her fault and it impressed her deeply. Since then she's been really wonderful—wholeheartedly devoted to Father and his work."

Brent earnestly estimated Gretchen. "It's no new feeling for you. You've

always been for him, in the biggest way possible."

"Of course." She gazed at Brent over her cup. "The look in your eyes! It makes me go cold all over. They seem to know so much! But do you understand how desperately I—I've wanted to—"

Brent came quickly to his feet. There were footfalls in the hall—uncertain, stumbling steps moving closer to his door. They stopped directly outside. Then there were scratching noises—the scrape of fingernails against the panel. Gretchen was breathless and Brent moved cautiously. He gripped the knob, swung the door open.

Glen Carr fell into his arms.

He held Carr a startled moment as Gretchen sprang up. Carr was gasping, his face haggard. His coat sagged open, releasing a bloodstained towel that fell to the floor. The whole side of his shirt was a crusty brown. There was no strength left in him. Trying to speak, he made breathy, meaningless sounds.

Brent carried him to the couch. Gretchen was already hunting in the pantry. She brought a tumbler half full of Scotch and Brent forced a trickle through Carr's pressed lips. Carr was racked with pain. His hand clutched Brent's wrist and he strained up, striving again to speak.

"Easy," Brent cautioned. "You've been on your feet, dodging the cops, when you should have been on an operating table."

"Not—not Doctor Dockery!" Carr gasped. "He'd—he'd kill me!"

Gretchen was still, her fingers pressing against the protest on her lips. Brent stuffed a pillow under Carr's head. Carr's were the white-rimmed, terrified eyes of a dying man. A throaty rattle mixed with his words.

"I told her—she was crazy to do it. But she wouldn't listen. She schemed—found him—I told her there were others—others besides Dockery—to watch out for. Told her they'd get her—one of them would. I tried—tried to stop her but—"

Exhaustion blurred Carr's voice. His fingers frantically gripped Brent's wrist as if to cling to life itself. He pushed the whiskey away and his lips worked.

"Listen, man!" Brent said. "You may

not stand much of a chance. If you know who shot you, now's the time to spill it."

"Dockery—"

Brent stiffened. "Do you actually mean Seldon Dockey killed your wife and tried to kill you?"

"Dockery—"

"Listen, Carr! *Do you mean that?*"

Carr sputtered and went limp. Brent held him a long moment before getting up. He had died with an accusation on his lips, and Brent turned to gaze at Dr. Dockery's white-faced daughter.

"He was wrong!" she flung out. "It isn't true!"

Eyes pinched, Brent crossed the room to the telephone. He spun the zero and said, gazing miserably at Gretchen: "Police headquarters. . . . Homicide. . . . Brent calling, Captain. You'll find Glen Carr's dead body in my apartment. I'll leave the door unlocked for your men. I'm going straight to the Heights Hospital."

He disconnected on Russo's startled silence and firmly took Gretchen's arm.

"I'm sorry. I wanted you to be able to keep your secret. But maybe it's got to come out. The whole thing—now."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sorry, Killer

BRENT ESCORTED Gretchen Dockery into the lobby of the Heights Hospital and his nerves suffered a new shock. Max Russo was already there, standing by the door of the consultation-room, cadaverous and solemn.

"I think you'd better wait here, Gret," Brent said. "And look. This might seem to be turning out all wrong, but so far you've trusted me. Don't stop now, will you?"

She lifted her imploring eyes, not answering, and Brent left her. Max Russo went with him into the elevator. As the car carried them upward the captain uttered a profoundly morose sigh.

"Doctor Dockery is on the op floor," he said.

Brent couldn't look at him. "I think you know all the answers. You even feel the same about it now as I do."

"I've learned more than I like," Russo nodded. "But it's a job to be done—a job I hate."

They walked side by side along the corridor and paused when Dr. Dockery appeared. He strode from one of the rooms and without noticing them entered the next—812. They turned after him and paused just inside. He was bent over the little girl in the bed, snipping the knots of the dressing packed about her knees. A moment passed before he glanced up.

"What is it?" he said, his deft hands never hesitating. "You shouldn't be here, you know. Is the matter so important?"

"What I'm about to say may lead you to suspect me of bad faith, Doctor," Brent answered. "But it isn't that. It's more of a— Well, sometimes you must cause a patient pain in order to help him."

The drowsy youngster lay quiet under the touch of Dr. Dockery's gentle hands. He worked skillfully while his broad forehead took on a few beads of feverish perspiration.

"The corner where Ducky Chase was run down the night of the fourteenth is on a direct line between this hospital and the airport," Brent said. "You were desperate to get there before your wife's plane left and you struck Ducky with such force that he was flung dying into the gutter. It was an agonizing dilemma you faced then, and seconds counted. You chose to hurry on after the woman you loved."

Dr. Dockery bent to his task, seeming scarcely to hear.

"Odelle Quinn and Glen Carr denied witnessing the accident, but they'd seen you from the window of the apartment they occupied then in the same building where Ducky lived. They'd seen the green cross on your car and perhaps even the license number. And they'd found the hat you'd unknowingly left behind—an unusually large one, to fit a big, shaggy-headed man. It was Odelle Quinn who learned your identity and schemed to bleed you."

Max Russo was sorrowfully silent, watching as the doctor loosened the little patient's dressing.

"You were forced to pay her the price she demanded for her silence because exposure was an unthinkable alternative. Hit-and-run driving, particularly when it costs the victim's life, is a felony, and a conviction would mean that your license to practise medicine would be revoked. But you couldn't keep on submitting to blackmail and living under the threat of that danger. It had to be stopped. So Odelle Quinn was called by phone to your office, and the purpose behind the message was to kill her."

Dr. Dockery's fingers were probing into the fluffy cotton.

"As a precaution she'd taken to carrying a little gun in her purse. She was an itinerant entertainer, so it wasn't registered locally. I heard her scream when it was snatched from her hands and turned upon her. But simply killing the woman wasn't enough. Her husband, though an unwilling party to the blackmail, must also be eliminated. He was shot with the same gun, and then—"

Max Russo, silent as a ghost, was moving closer to the bed.

"You know who has been concealing the weapon since then, Captain," Brent said. "*She* has—that little patient."

Now Dr. Dockery's hands were still.

"You'd ordered her knee to be X-rayed, Doctor, and it hadn't been done. At the time you weren't aware of the delay. Once the X-ray picture was taken, a few minutes afterward, there was nothing to do but get rid of the film. Of course it would show very distinctly the silhouette of the weapon concealed—"

Dr. Dockery's hands were deep in the cotton, and Max Russo was jerking toward him. The struggle was sharp and brief. The captain pried open the physician's fingers, and the gun lay there—a vest-pocket automatic, short-snouted and small enough to be concealed in his palm. Russo tore it from his grasp.

Seldon Dockery's great shoulders sagged with defeat and his face was wanly drawn as the detective said: "There's not much more, Doctor. We'll go down to your office now."

FILLED with regret as he was, Brent felt a crazy surge of relief as the elevator carried them down—relief because it

wasn't Lora Lorne's advice, after all, that had caused the death of Odelle Quinn.

Dr. Dockery, crossing the lobby, turned his wretched gaze on his daughter and could not speak to her. He strode out heavily, followed by Max Russo. Brent took Gretchen's arm.

"Chin up, Gret," he said gently. "This is it—the thing you've been hoping would never come out—and it's going to be tough. The best you can do now is keep a stiff upper lip—say nothing."

She ran after her father. Brent accompanied her into the reception-room. Dr. Kenelm had left his desk in the inner office and had come anxiously to his associate's side. Dr. Dockery was now seated tensely in one of the chairs, and Captain Russo's spectral eyes were fixed upon him.

"But there's one fact we can't ignore, Captain," Brent said. "The person who killed Odelle Quinn is undoubtedly the same one who next killed Carr at the first opportunity. She was shot at exactly five eleven, and at that time Seldon Dockery was operating, surrounded by half a dozen witnesses. His alibi is unassailable. He's absolved of these murders."

But there was no hope in the gray lines of Dr. Dockery's face—only anguish.

"They were shot by someone who knew Seldon Dockery was being mercilessly blackmailed, who meant to stop it. The murders were an act of protection, undertaken, of course, without his knowledge.

Brent gazed at Eric Kenelm.

"There's a man, Captain, who hasn't tried to conceal his high esteem for Seldon Dockery, his deep gratitude for everything his friend has done for him. His alibi is weak and he hasn't tried to strengthen it in any way. When he found me prowling about this office after the first shooting, his actions convinced me. If Doctor Kenelm is a murderer, he's far smarter than most—intelligent enough to leave almost no clues at all, to resort to no artifice in order to ward off suspicion. In other words, his behavior has been that of a man innocently involved. What do you think of him, Captain?"

Max Russo said nothing, and Eric Kenelm was as wordless.

"Only one person really knew from the very beginning that Doctor Dockery had

accidentally caused Ducky Chase's death. There she sits—his daughter."

Gretchen's hands gripped the arms of her chair.

"Being deeply sympathetic with her father, she sensed the real meaning of the deep agitation in him that night. She must have noticed that when he came back from the airport with his wife, he lacked his hat. The newspaper stories of Ducky's death confirmed her fears, and his drained bank accounts told her he was being bled. Perhaps by watching her father's office she learned who was blackmailing him. Last night she even set out for Odelle Quinn's home in a desperate effort to find some way of releasing him, and—"

The outer door quickly opened. Claudia Dockery's quick steps slowed and she gazed uncertainly from face to face. Her husband's warned her of a crisis. Raymond Lacroze, entering behind her, ignored everyone else after an impatient glance around the room and frowned his annoyance at Gretchen.

"It's high time you decided to give a thought to someone besides yourself. Claudia was coming to tell the doctor—"

"Please, Ray, not now!" Claudia interrupted. "Seldon, what are they doing to you?"

She hurried to her husband, fell to her knees at his side and clasped his hand. He managed a smile for her and his tortured eyes again turned to Brent.

"No one, certainly, feels a stronger devotion for Doctor Dockery than his wife," Brent said. "And nothing that Gretchen learned was beyond the scope of her own observations. Perhaps she felt even more strongly protective, suspecting that another woman was threatening not only her husband's life-work but her home. Doctor Dockery is a man who inspires staunch loyalties—even loyalty of a sort in his prospective son-in-law."

Lacroze flushed. "Whatever you're driving at, be careful of what you say to me."

"I'm being as careful as I know how. So painfully careful that I wish Captain Russo wouldn't let me go on with this—but I've got to. Being an entertainer like Odelle Quinn, did you know her?"

"Slightly," Lacroze snapped.

"And who is Francine?"

"Fah! A cow."

"She's a lovely, talented young woman," Claudia Dockery said at once. "A local girl, a dancer. Francine Danforth is the daughter of one of my husband's dearest friends."

BRENT still confronted Lacroze. "You were more than slightly aware of what was happening. At least Gretchen confided her fears in you. You saw the money you needed for your Villa Mañana—and you could look to no one but Doctor Dockery for it—being drained away by someone else. You could safeguard your own interests only by cutting off the flow. To a man of your selfish ambitions, a mere murder or two—"

There was a quick knock, and again the door opened. Brent suppressed a moan at sight of Valerie Randall. Directed by Garrett, beyond doubt, she was seeking to pick up the crumbs of Brent's information. Grimly gratified that she hadn't come sooner, Brent led her to Dr. Kenelm's desk, where she would be not too conspicuous an interloper.

"A reporter from the *Recorder*," he said, "and I suppose we must put up with her."

Lacroze caught his arm. "I don't care for the way you talk. You can't speak to me like that. I won't let you accuse me—"

"I haven't accused you," Brent retorted, "and frankly, I'm almost sorry to admit that with all your self-centered ruthlessness, you haven't the intelligence to have done it so well."

He turned his back on Lacroze, while Gretchen and Claudia watched him closely, and met the eyes of Captain Russo.

"There's only one person who could have convincingly called Odelle Quinn to this office. Next, when Doctor Dockery heard the shots fired behind the hospital and realized what had happened, there was only one person from whom he could have taken the gun for the purpose of concealing it. Only one person who could have learned about the X-ray, who could have gone into the darkroom confident of not being noticed—"

Eric Kenelm spun about. Before Captain Russo could move, the door of his office was closed, the key was twisting in the lock. Brent's last glimpse was of Val's startled face. At once he ran past Dr. Dockery's desk and into the treatment-room. There he was stopped. A lock also fastened the connecting door.

"Val!" Brent called. "Are you all right?"

Russo's bony hand stopped him. "Take it easy, Bill. He's got a gun in his desk."

"Val!" Brent insisted. "Can you get out?"

There was no answer.

"Captain," Brent said quietly, "some of the fault of that accident must have been Ducky Chase's. He liked his night-caps and was always wandering around in an absent-minded fog. Certainly no one could have regretted it more than Seldon Dockery, a man who day and night fights sickness and death. I'll never believe it's right that one mishap should condemn a physician of his stature and rob us all of the good he can do."

Russo watched the door and there was silence in Eric Kenelm's office.

"Seldon Dockery called an ambulance at once and was very soon doing every-



"GREAT WITH A SANDWICH"
 "PLENTY FOR A BIG THIRST"



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thing in his power to save Ducky's life. He sent Ducky's sister a small fortune. A friend agreed that it would be a tragedy if he should lose his license, and went to jail in his place—switched the broken fog-lamp to his own car and confessed. Doctor Dockery retained the best attorney in the city for him, and Danforth is being paid more money now than he earned as a laboratory assistant, and his sentence is short. Besides that, the doctor negotiated a good job for Mrs. Danforth. Even more, he's backing Lacroze's Villa Mañana only on condition that Danforth's daughter dance there. God knows the man has made retribution."

The shot was a heavy, muffled boom. A wailing cry followed it and the knob of the connecting door frantically rattled. With the turn of the key Val Randall appeared, so stricken with fear that she could scarcely stumble across the sill. Brent caught her, steered her to a chair.

"He—he warned me not to move and kept aiming the gun at me!" Val gasped, clinging to Brent's arm. "All the while he was writing and pointing the gun. Then he turned his back—"

Brent closed the door behind him. Max Russo was bending over the desk, reading the scrawled page that lay within an inch of Eric Kenelm's lifeless hand.

"It's a confession," Brent said. "He's taken everything on his own shoulders—not only the two murders, but the accidental death of Ducky Chase. What answer can you make to that, Captain?"

"I can't doubt a dead man's word," Max Russo said.

THE roar of the big presses in the basement decreased to a rumble, warning the *Recorder's* staff that again the deadline for the city final was at hand.

While eight newsmen pounded their typewriters and Val Randall, still deeply shaken, rapped out a new lead to her murder story, Bill Brent dug into his everlasting pile of correspondence. The day's Lorne column was still unfinished. He still needed one brief letter to fill it. He was chucking aside one missive after another when the copy boy pushed a telegram into his hands.

As he read it his eyebrows climbed. It was the first time anyone had ever ap-

pealed to Lora Lorne's wisdom by wire.

DEAR MISS LORNE: I NEED YOUR HELP. I'VE JUST LEARNED THAT I DON'T REALLY LOVE THE MAN I'M ENGAGED TO MARRY. ANOTHER MAN HAS CAPTURED MY HEART AND THIS TIME I KNOW I CAN'T BE WRONG. TELL ME QUICKLY, MISS LORNE, WHAT SHALL I DO?

—G.D.

Brent stared at it, remembering that Gretchen Dockery had called at the city-room, had even asked questions about him. And had someone betrayed him by divulging the horrible truth that he and Lora Lorne were one and the same?

Garrett interrupted Brent's conjectures. This time the city editor hadn't called derisively over the heads of the rest of the staff. He had personally come on a mission so earnest that he even used Brent's right name.

"Listen, Brent. Val's so upset she's writing practically nothing but typographical errors. Compared with Russo right now, a clam is positively garrulous. The paper's going to be late. This story's the biggest in years and you know all the inside of it. Get busy, will you? Give me one of your old hundingers!"

"You forget, Garrett," Brent said, smiling slowly. "This is the rapture department."

"Don't quibble, man! I've got a feeling about that story as Val's handling it. It sounds straight, but somehow it isn't. There's more behind it than she dreams. I want the real lowdown, a story twice as big as she's giving me. Write it for me, Brent, and you'll go back on police tomorrow—you'll never be Lora Lorne again. I give you my solemn word."

Brent dabbed paste on the back of the telegram, slapped it on a sheet of copy paper and under it scrawled his injunction to G. D.

By all means follow the dictates of your heart, dear. Break your engagement at once and let nature take its course.

"Here's today's column, Garrett, and no, thanks," he said with a grin. "I prefer to stay right here in this flowery little cubbyhole. You see, I'm just finding out that after all there are certain peculiar advantages to being Lora Lorne."



CURTAIN CALL

By
D. L. Champion

Author of the Inspector Allhoff stories

Dearer than life to Larned was the siren call of Fame—and not to be ignored. Even though it cued him on-stage for the final curtain-call of his dramatic career with the grisly gestures of a ghoul.

In some thirty-five years of beholding the drama, these ancient eyes have observed countless *Cyranos*. From the day when an exhibitionistic high school confrère essayed the role until the period of Walter Hampden's more professional but no less tedious rendering, the character of *Cyrano de Bergerac* has affected this reviewer's pulse much as an overdose of opium.

Last night at the Lyceum Theater, Frederick Weldon donned boots, sword, and plumed hat, rattled his larynx and went to work on M. Rostand's alleged masterpiece. Until the final act he achieved all that this disillusioned critic expected him to achieve—another *Cyrano* with all his sleeping draught qualities intact.

Then, in the last act the first miracle since the New Testament came to pass.

Somewhere, during the entr'acte, Mr. Weldon found the mantle of Edwin Booth and flung it about his own shoulders. *Cyrano de Bergerac* came to life, to a life that even Rostand never dreamed of. He was suddenly and vibrantly real. Every gesture, every nuance was exploited to the hilt by Mr. Weldon. I am not qualified to say that never before has the American theater seen such a performance. I shall content myself with saying that I certainly know the way to bet.

In short, my little drama lovers, your reviewer was laid precipitately in the aisle where he bounced enthusiastically on his amply-padded posterior until dawn.

LARNED read Winston's review with shining eyes and an odd mixture of frustration and exultation in his breast. He cast the *Tribune* aside, snatched up a second paper, a third. Unanimously, the lesser critics echoed

Winston, dean of the dramatic reviewers. Weldon, they said, had taken most of the evening to warm up, then, in the final act, he had delivered the greatest performance New York had seen since the fabulous days of Richard Mansfield.

Larned sat back in his arm chair. The floor about him was littered with newspapers opened to the theatrical page. He had not bothered to read the funereal black headline on page one—the headline above the story of Weldon's death—of how he had been found by the night watchman, high in the flies of the theater, stabbed, several hours after giving the performance of his career.

For the moment, Larned was not living in the present. His mind had jerked back into the past.

Twenty years ago, a starry-eyed youngster, he had met Weldon. Together they had danced in the chorus of some long forgotten turkey. They had been friends. Friends who shared their dreams and their dollars, who never doubted that day when their names would shine brilliant from the marquees as did Ulric's, Jolson's, Bainter's, then.

Yet even when Larned felt no enmity for Weldon he held one secret in his breast alone. Weldon had talent, true. But Larned had genius. Then, and all his life, he had never doubted that. He did not doubt it now.

But Weldon had the luck. He had his first small part while Larned was yet in the chorus. He was playing second leads when Larned was an understudy praying a plague down upon the star. Weldon signed his Hollywood contract at a time when Larned was in Wilkes-Barre stock.

Abruptly, Weldon was a star, copy for the columnists. No one, save his unenthusiastic agent had ever heard of Larned. Envy ruined his digestion and ate at his heart.

Three weeks ago he suffered the penultimate indignity. Two days before, the last. God knew he hadn't wanted that tiny walk-on, in Weldon's *Cyrano*. Just a bit in the first act, after twenty years in the profession! But he'd been without a job all summer and had less than ten dollars in the bank when Weldon made the patronizing offer. Besides, Edith had

a small part, too. At least he could be near her.

But, he discovered in short order, so could Weldon. He could still hear her tiny voice, tearful and pleading for understanding, as she told him that her affection for him had never been the heady love she knew since meeting Weldon.

Again Weldon had touched his life with his heavy second-rate hand. But this, Larned swore, was the last time. He knew what he must do. He laid his plans and did it. But his plan had not provided for the ironic dilemma he found himself in this morning.

He got out of the armchair and paced the floor. He stooped, picked up the papers. He read, reread the reviews. He banged the table hard with his clenched fist, donned his rakish Homburg, went downstairs and hailed a taxi.

"Police headquarters," he said to the driver, hitting each vowel beautifully with his tremendous baritone.

It was on the way downtown that he decided he would first visit the pressroom. It was meet and fitting that the newspapers should know the truth first.

Twenty minutes later he stood in the doorway of the pressroom and bowed.

"Gentlemen," he said in a vibrant head-tone, "I have come to give you news. I offer it to you first, before I apprise the police."

The pressroom looked at him curiously. Not one of them, Larned reflected bitterly, knew who he was. But they would, by God! The whole city, the nation, would be aware of him before he died.

"Gentlemen," he said again, "this morning my colleague, Mr. Frederick Weldon was found murdered in the flies of the Lyceum Theater."

The pressroom was suddenly alert. Larned felt the blood course glowingly through his veins. He had their interest now. He held the pause for a dramatic moment. Not too long. That was the mark of the ham. Then, when he saw them hanging on his next words, he threw it full in their faces.

"Gentlemen, I killed him!"

THE pressroom gasped and that gasp was meat and drink to Larned. He went on at an accelerated pace.

"I play a minor part in the first act. Just before the final act, I stabbed Weldon. I carried his body into the flies. He was dead before the play was over."

He stopped dead now, awaiting the question they must ask.

"You're crazy," said Lewis of the *American*. "Weldon was alive for the last act. Everybody in town's raving about his performance in it."

Larned smiled a beautifully restrained smile. "Naturally," he said and, considering the frustration of his life, he was not too arrogant. "I played the last act. I wore his costume, his sword, his plumed hat. With Cyrano's mustache and gargantuan nose, I remained unrecognized. I played that last act, gentlemen. Be sure to tell your papers that."

They stared at him. Durant, of the *Times*, said slowly: "Then you were the guy who was so terrific in that last act? That's why they all said the character was played differently up till then?"

"That is why," said Larned simply.

The *Sun's* Rawson had already picked up the telephone. "But why did you kill him, buddy? What did you do it for?"

Larned shook his head. "At the moment that doesn't matter. Tell your paper I killed him. *Before the final act.*"

He stood in the doorway, smiling benignantly as the pressroom sprang to the telephones. Then Lewis, of the *American*, in response to a question over the wire, asked over his shoulder: "If you won't say why you did it, chief, maybe you'll tell us why you confessed? Hell, you could've had a perfect alibi. Everybody figured Weldon was killed after the last act. What are you confessing for?"

"My God," said Larned, showing emotion for the first time. "Did you read the notices? Did you see what they said about my performance? Weldon couldn't have got those reviews in a thousand years. That was *my* performance. Those were *my* notices. Weldon, in the grave, can't steal them from me. Tell the country, tell the world, that I, Ronald Larned, played that final act. Tell them! Tell them!"

He stood perfectly still for a moment, then he smiled again. He bowed gracefully, turned on his heel and marched up the corridor to make his confession of murder, proudly, to the proper authorities.



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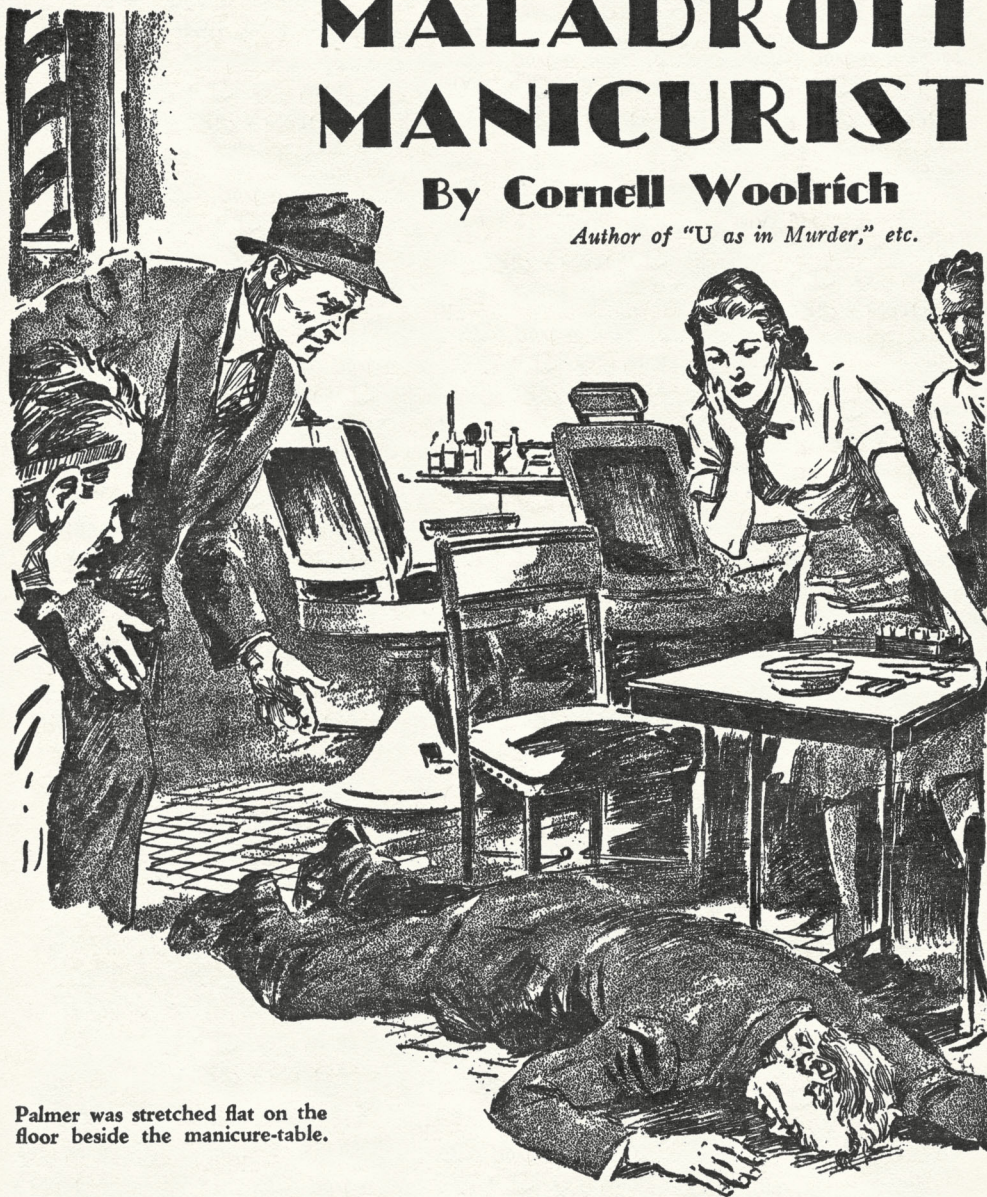
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THE CASE OF THE MALADROIT MANICURIST

By Cornell Woolrich

Author of "U as in Murder," etc.



Palmer was stretched flat on the floor beside the manicure-table.

No wonder they called her "Joan the Ripper"—that delectable digit-pruner whose orange stick was a lethal weapon and whose buffer brought doom. And who could blame Detective Scanlon if he decided she was cut out to be his cutie instead of his cuticle-cutter? Hadn't her last customer died with his fingers still dripping from her suds-bowl?

CHAPTER ONE

Joan the Ripper

THE PALMERS were sitting there chummy as a pair of clams across the breakfast-table. They hadn't said a word since they'd first sat down. A newspaper was stretched vertically between them like a curtain. He was staring intently at one side of it, Hedda Palmer at the other. He was doing the holding. He was reading his side but she wasn't reading hers. Her eyes were slits of malicious appraisal, taking in the eight highly-polished, impeccably-rounded nails that showed along both margins of the paper, holding it up. His thumbs were on the inside. Of the eight, at least four bore tiny nicks in various stages of healing, just at or below the cuticle. Two were so old they were dried brown scabs already. The other two were more recent, still an angry dark-red.

Her eyes narrowed still more as they dwelt on them. From slits they became threads. Suddenly the paper flopped over and he rose. "'Bye," he grunted. If he could have shortened it any more than that, he probably would have. The street-door closed after him.

She stood up, went into the next room, and lit a cigarette. One of those resolve-fortifying cigarettes that are dinched after just one puff. Then she pulled out a classified directory, thumbed rapidly through it, smacked it closed and picked up the phone decisively.

"Is this the Beacon Detective Agency?" she said when she'd gotten her number. "Send someone up here, will you? Someone good. . . ."

Scanlon handed her his card at the door, and she read it holding it diagonal to her, motioned him with it. "Come on in. You got here quick."

He took off his hat, followed her down the hall. He went into the Palmer living-room after her, glanced around at it appreciatively. Dough.

She had sat down, so he sat down too. "What d'you have in mind, Mrs. Palmer?"

She felt for the back of her head embarrassedly. "I'm sort of new at this, don't know how to begin."

"I am too," he blurted out without thinking.

She gave him a disconcerted look. He saw immediately that he shouldn't have said that, he'd shaken her confidence.

"The agency wouldn't have sent me up here if they weren't satisfied I was competent," he hastened to reassure her.

She didn't waste any more time over the preliminaries. "It's the same old story. I suppose nine out of ten of your company's assignments are of this same type. It's my husband. And a girl. Now in the fifteen years I've been married to him, he never once got a manicure, to my knowledge. And his shoulders were always full of dandruff. And I used to powder my nose by the reflection on the back of his serge suit. Now all of a sudden he's getting manicured once, sometimes twice a week. I've caught him purposely blunting and dirtying-up his fingernails in the soil around my geraniums, just so he can go back and have them manicured some more.

"And it's serious, I can tell that by the effect it has on her precision. He must be rushing her so she doesn't know what she's doing at all, cuts him each time he goes near her. He probably doesn't even feel it. You can't expect her to see where she's going with her instruments if she keeps staring into his pretty brown eyes the whole time." She was so full of venom a rattlesnake probably would have died from biting her just then.

She got up. "I'll show him to you."

He flung his hand disgustedly at her back, after she'd gone out, meaning the assignment didn't appeal to him.

She came in again with a silver-framed photograph, handed it toward him corner-first. "Will you know him by this? It's not so new. I'll tell you where his office is, and you'll be able to pick him up there."

He took that down. "Do you want evidence for a divorce, Mrs. Palmer?"

"No," she said querulously. "I want to know who the girl is. Where she works and all about her. I'll buy her off, get rid of her in some way."

She started him toward the door. "This is one of his days for coming home with a finger-jag, so you better not lose any time. He's been getting them at the rate

of every four days, and I can tell by the scratches he hasn't had one since Monday." She opened the front door for him. "Do you want any retainer or anything?"

"My agency will bill you."

"I'd like to know as soon as possible. By tonight, if you can. Remember, I want to know everything about her you can find out."

SCANLON was new enough at his job to feel let down at the particular slant his first assignment had taken. To him it seemed not much different from peeping over a transom or raiding a hotel-room. He'd hoped for something clean-cut and breezy like tracing missing jewelry. Not this sex-stuff—he hated this sex-stuff.

"What am I kicking about anyway?" he had to remind himself finally. "What did I expect, a murder-case with all the trimmings? Last week, before Beacon took me on, I would have been glad even to do the bookkeeping in their office."

The building which housed Palmer's office looked expensive. You could tell that by the amount of black onyx trim in the lobby.

Palmer and Cosgrove had no less than five doors in a row along the corridor on the fourteenth floor. Even allowing for the fact that two were dummies—they had "Kindly Use Other Door" stenciled on them—that still was a lot of office space. Scanlon went in and accosted the receptionist through an arrangement that resembled the ticket-booth of a movie house, only it didn't have admission prices on it.

"Excuse me, are there any openings here, do you know?" He should have sounded convincing, he'd been doing this in dead earnest until last week.

The girl looked startled. "Is this in answer to our ad already? Why, I only phoned that in a couple of hours ago! You must have a friend in the advertisement department of the paper."

Holy smoke! he thought, aghast. Just because he didn't want it there was one. He figured he was safe enough. He didn't have any references. He didn't have any experience. If worst came to worst, he could demand five dollars more than the best they offered and thus make sure of not getting the job.

He sat down and waited—for a job he didn't want and didn't intend taking even if it was offered to him. After awhile two or three others came in and joined him on the bench. That was all to the good, that made him less conspicuous. He was willing to admit his technique was cumbersome, but it was his first tailing job after all, and everyone has to learn.

Suddenly the receptionist spoke through her porthole. "Mr. Cosgrove will interview applicants now. One at a time, please."

Scanlon stayed where he was, said out of the corner of his mouth to the job-hunter next to him: "You can have first lick, bud. My foot's gone to sleep, he might think I'm lame if I should walk in there now."

Suddenly a door opened and a nattily-dressed man emerged, on his way out of the offices. He stopped for a minute by the receptionist and Scanlon did his homework all over him. Palmer didn't look ten years older than the photo his wife had shown Scanlon, he looked ten years younger. The private dick thought with an inner chuckle: "If this mitt-repairer has been able to do that to *him*, she'd put a guy her own age right back into short pants."

He overheard Palmer say: "I'll be at the barber's for the next half-hour or so, I have to get a haircut."

There wasn't anything he needed less. The back of his neck, from where Scanlon sat, was smooth as the skin of a new-born baby. He turned and went out, and Scanlon, after counting ten, got up and left in turn. He got a puzzled look from the receptionist, but it was no skin off her nose after all.

He was just in time to see Palmer step into one of the cars and go down. He took another—the building was well serviced, and it was better than riding down in the same one with him—and picked him up again from the street-entrance. Palmer was walking briskly toward the next corner.

HE SET out after him with an unavoidable little tingle. For the first time he was tailing someone professionally. He still wished it had been something a little more dramatic and snappy, like a murder

case. But beginners couldn't be choosers, he supposed. He'd probably get something more to his liking after awhile.

About four blocks away from the office a palatial barber shop showed up. Palmer had already passed several less swanky ones, but what told Scanlon this was unmistakably it, was the way the man ahead stopped ahead of time to look into a showcase and straighten his tie and adjust his hat. "I'm catching onto the tricks of the trade quick," thought Scanlon, pleased with himself.

Palmer went up to the entrance, stopped short, stood looking in for a second in obvious annoyance, and then much to Scanlon's surprise continued on his way without entering at all. When he had reached it himself a moment later, Scanlon saw the reason why. It was staffed up to the hilt, twelve chairs and three manicurists. Only one was busy at the moment, two were free. Palmer's change of mind about going in just then tipped him off as to who the busy one was. Palmer had decided to stay outside until she was free, in order to save himself the embarrassment of having to refuse the services of the other two and thus make plain his personal interest in her.

Scanlon, on a sudden impulse, turned and went in then and there, deciding he might as well tackle her ahead of time, if he could. There was no further point to his tailing Palmer, now that he knew who the girl was. And as far as feeling any embarrassment at singling her out, this was just an assignment to him, not heart interest, so he didn't share Palmer's self-consciousness. The sooner he got through with it, the sooner he might be given a job more to his taste.

Four barbers sprang to attention beside their chairs while he was hanging up his hat. "Nope, the paws," he said, motioning them back. This brought the two idle manicurists, a gold-blonde and a platinum one, to their feet. Again he dismissed them. "I'll take mine black, without cream," he said, with a meaning look at the brunette busy at the little manicurable offside. He sat down to wait.

Daggers slashed at him from two pairs of eyes. "Get the courtplaster and the basin for the blood ready," he overheard one say nastily to the other.

He saw the brunette's face flush a little. "If she's that easy to rib," he thought to himself, "she can't be such a hardboiled digger after all." She was a lovely-looking thing, about nineteen, with cornflower-blue eyes and glossy black hair. The side remark seemed to bring about the very result she was trying to avoid. He saw the customer she was working on give a little jump and pull his finger away. She was evidently fairly new at the work and easily rattled.

The two on the sidelines didn't show her any mercy. "Joan the Ripper," one remarked in a stage-whisper.

"Maybe she was cut out to be a surgeon."

"Yeah, she'd be a big help at a blood-transfusion."

She was near the point of tears. Her under-lip was quivering and she had to steady it by catching it under her teeth. Scanlon felt like growling at the two wisecrackers: "If you'd yuit kibitzing, maybe it wouldn't happen so often." But after all, it was none of his business, he wasn't here to take sides in a manicurists' feud.

HER other customer stood up and she nodded to Scanlon to show him she was ready for him. The departing one went over to the rack to pick up his hat on his way out. Scanlon glanced at him briefly as he went by to take his turn at the table. There probably never yet was a customer who left a barber shop without first stopping to primp for a minute in its wall-mirrors, if only to straighten his hat, adjust his tie. Some examine their skin closely for blotches. It's simply human nature, that's all.

This one threw up his guard and jabbed amiably toward his own reflection in the mirror, as though highly pleased with himself.

It was just a momentary gesture, discontinued as quickly as it had been begun.

Scanlon didn't give it a second thought. He sat down and clumsily extended his sinewy, unsculpturesque hands for improvement.

The girl was obviously nervous. He tried to put her at her ease.

"Don't let those two dames see they've got you."

She smiled her thanks for the en-

couragement. "I took a course for this, but it's different doing it at the beauty school, where they don't mind if you make mistakes, and doing it here."

He saw her take up a sharp-edged little scalpel, and drew his hand back inadvertently.

"Never mind that. Just round off the tops and let it go at that. I'm not much on fancy trimmings." But he took the sting out of it by grinning at her.

He caught her looking past his shoulder to the front of the shop. Then she quickly lowered her gaze, pretended to be very busy doing what she was doing. It was easy to tell whom she must have just caught sight of, passing the shop a second time in growing impatience, waiting for her table to be free.

Luckily, she wasn't using that sharp-edged little thing on him right then but only an emery board. As it was, she missed the nail she was aiming at and hit the next one over. If the emery had had a sharp point it would have drawn blood. If Palmer could do that to her from *outside* the shop, no wonder she tattooed his fingers when he was right across the table from her.

Scanlon said to himself: "Mrs. Palmer's barking up the wrong tree. She's never going to be able to buy this girl out in a hundred years, because this girl isn't *in* at all. She doesn't like him, she dislikes him—probably because he's pestered the life out of her."

Well, that wasn't any of his business, he was here simply to get a few straight facts for a client of his agency. He supposed when he was more broken into harness, he'd learn to keep his emotions out of a job.

She finished finally, and he had a sneaking suspicion she'd been prolonging the job as much as she could. "Thanks," he said insincerely, "that was great," and slipped something under the plate for her. She handed him a tab to take over to the cash register.

Palmer's impatience, by now, had reached a point of steam-valve compression. He barged in through the door as soon as he saw that the way was clear, singled Scanlon with a fiery look as he passed, and sat down in the place the latter had just vacated. "Well, it's about time!"

Scanlon overhead him say to her testily. "You knew I was coming in at eleven, I phoned you two days ago! Why didn't you let one of the others take care of that young whippersnapper?"

SCANLON, pretending to adjust his tie in a mirror nearby, watched the two of them covertly. He saw the girl glance at the hand her customer had extended to her, sigh in remonstrance. "I don't know what I can do for you, Mr. Palmer. Your nails don't need—"

He couldn't catch Palmer's low-voiced answer, but he could imagine its tenor by the way her cheeks flushed. He drifted over toward the cash-desk, turned in his tab. "What's the name of that girl just manicured me?" he asked casually. "I'd like to make sure of getting her again next time I stop in."

The proprietor beamed. He probably mistook this for another case of personal attraction, which was all to the good as far as business was concerned. "That's Miss Joan Blaine," he purred. "Just ask for her next time you come in and we'll be glad to oblige you."

That completed half his job. He could find out where she lived simply by tailing her away from here when she quit work. Nevertheless, he still liked the assignment as little as ever, in fact less now that he'd met her.

Just before he stepped outside to the street, he glanced back at them for the last time. Palmer had her so rattled with the line of talk he was giving her, she didn't know what she was doing any more. One of the little metal implements clicked as it slipped through her fingers to the tabletop. Palmer gave a slight hitch in his seat, as if she'd nicked him again. "Good for you!" Scanlon thought approvingly. "Give him one for me!"

He drifted out to the sidewalk, stopped just beyond the entrance to light a cigarette with his uncomfortable, strangely-shiny digits. He never had a chance to complete the act. A girl's cry of alarm, accompanied by the crack of an overturned chair striking the floor, reached him from the shop behind him. He whirled around and looked in. Then he dropped match and cigarette, at what he saw, and pushed his way in again at double-quick

time. Palmer was stretched flat on the floor alongside the manicure-table. His chair had gone over with him, but the table itself had stayed up.

The Blaine girl had sprung to her feet, on her side of it, was staring down in frozen horror at her suddenly-inert customer.

And he was very, very inert. That fact stood out ominously even in the few seconds it took Scanlon to reach him. He wasn't threshing, he wasn't twitching, he just lay there like a toppled sack of potatoes.

"Pick him up, see what it is," Scanlon ordered, tilting his own shoulder to the job and scooping an arm under the hollows of the limp legs. One of the barbers gave him a hand. They carried him into a little curtained booth at the back used for sun-tan treatments, stretched him out on a metal cot it contained.

"What is it, a faint?" the proprietor asked.

"It looks to me like worse than that, boss." The barber, who had the sort of face that goes with bad news anyway, took out his pocket-scissors, severed them, and held one burnished blade close to Palmer's parted lips. The steel remained unclouded. "He's gone, boss. Look at that. You've got a dead man on your hands."

Scanlon had never seen the exhalation-test made in just that way before—nor did he ever again—but it was valid just the same.

He listened for any heart-action, and not a murmur reached his ear through the stilled chest-cavern. He raised his head and nodded corroboration. "He's dead. Better get the cops."

One of the feminine nitwits huddled in the booth-entrance immediately bleated: "Gee, there goes her eight-bit tip!" The Blaine girl, who had remained standing motionless by her table the whole time, suddenly crumpled back into her chair and buried her head in her arms. Scanlon approached and laid a clumsy but well-meaning hand on her quivering shoulder. She was sobbing softly.

"Don't let it get you, kid," he murmured under his breath. "It's just one of those things—liable to happen anywhere, to anyone."

CHAPTER TWO

Murder by Manicure

BUT it wasn't just one of those things. At least the plainclothesman named Hacker, who came in the wake of the police and the medical examiner, didn't act as though it was. His first act, after a brief blanket questioning of everyone, in general, was to put the skids under Scanlon in a less than tactful way. "All right, outside. No amateurs wanted!" It was the beginning of a beautiful enmity.

Scanlon hovered around the doorway from then on. For one thing, he didn't have any assignment any more, so there was no place else for him to go. For another, he didn't like the length of time this Hacker detained the Blaine girl, and made up his mind he was going to await the outcome and escort her home if he had to wait all night. Everyone else came out but she. The medical examiner came out. Palmer himself came out, under a rubber sheet, and went into a morgue ambulance.

The two other manicurists came out next, sent home for the day. "Did I lay it on thick!" Scanlon overhead one of them gloat to the other as they brushed by him. "When he ast me, I said: 'Brother, there wasn't a customer come into the shop that she didn't carve up like that!'"

Scanlon sent a dirty look after them but held his peace.

Finally, when he'd about given up hope, she emerged, head lowered and handkerchief to nose. She went by without seeing him at first.

"I'll walk you over," he offered, falling into step beside her.

She looked up, and smiled her gratitude through tear-clouded eyes.

"What was the big hitch in there?"

"I don't know. He kept questioning me, and questioning me."

"Aw, don't let it bother you, he was just trying to make a noise like a detective," he assured her. He didn't altogether believe that himself.

He glanced around casually once or twice. "Did he take your address?" he asked her finally.

"Yes."

Well, he intends to make sure you gave him the right one, he thought, without

saying anything about it to her. They were being tailed.

She stopped at the brownstone stoop of a plain but tidy-looking rooming-house. "This is it. Thank you for your encouragement. I already feel a lot better. By the way, I don't even know your name."

"Scanlon," he said, lifting his hat. "Or, if you're in trouble and in a hurry, just Scanny."

HER first words showed him Mrs. Palmer hadn't been notified yet. "Back so soon? Fine! Did you get what I want?"

He followed her in without answering. She was holding a thick sheaf of currency, he noticed, as though intending to look up the unknown girl then and there, as soon as she found out who she was.

"You won't need that, Mrs. Palmer," he said. "You haven't heard from—anyone downtown yet?"

"No, what do you mean?"

"Your husband's dead. He passed away suddenly in a barber shop early today."

She shot to her feet as though a spring had been released inside her. But then that could have expressed any emotion at all—grief, triumph, or just plain galvanic shock. The hand holding the greenbacks knotted into a fist, ground into the hollow of its opposite. Her first words were: "Well, at least I've won after all! *She* doesn't get him!"

She smiled bitterly. It was the smile of a victor by default, who gives no thanks for her laurels. "What happened to him? He was all right when he left here—"

Before he could answer, the phone rang. She went to it. He heard her say: "Yes, I'm his wife." Then, with utter calm: "I was just told." She looked across at Scanlon, inscrutably. She bore up remarkably well under whatever it was that was being said to her—for a newly-made widow, he thought.

The last thing she said was: "What are you people going to do about it?" Then she nodded slowly, in malign approval.

She was smiling again when she returned to him. She did a lot of smiling for someone who had just been bereaved, it occurred to him. Her eyes were narrowed to slits of vindictiveness.

"That was the police, just then. He was murdered."

It was now his turn to jolt to his feet. "They're crazy!" he brayed. "I was right there when it happened! What're they trying to do, make something out of nothing?"

She see-sawed the edges of her hands with almost calloused casualness, as if to say: "Why wrangle with *me* about it?" It was easy to see grief played little or no part in her feelings. She had already lost her husband before death had taken him from her. "They just received the report on his autopsy," she stated flatly.

That must have been why they'd delayed notifying her until then, he figured. "But murdered?" he said open-mouthed. "How? By whom?"

"They didn't tell me how. They only said by whom." She waited. She gave a smile of utter, complete satisfaction, as though this was the part, that really mattered to her. This, and nothing else.

"By that girl," she purred. "They're on their way to pick her up right now."

The rest was all sheer reflex action on his part. He didn't stop to think whether what he was doing was the most advisable or sensible thing, he didn't waste time to stop and think at all, he just left. He didn't even take leave of her—and she was so wrapped up in her own Pyrrhic victory, of woman over woman, that she probably didn't even notice. He bolted out of the room, out of the front door without closing it after him, and down the street. At the first likely store that he came to he plunged inside and into a pay-phone booth. He knew he'd never have a chance to get down to her place ahead of them. Maybe it was even too late from here.

He got the number of her rooming-house from Information, dialed it in frantic haste. It seemed to take forever before some other roomer called her down and she came to the phone.

"This is Scanlon. Listen, do you trust me?"

"What do you m—"

"Do you trust me and will you do what I say without stopping to ask questions?"

Her own voice caught some of the tension from his. "Yes, but what is it?"

"Is there a back way out of your house?"

"Yes, there's a sort of open garden-plot that all these houses share alike—"

"All right, go out the back way right now, fast as you hang up. There's probably someone already watching the front. Don't waste time going back to your room for your hat and coat, just *leave!* Get out of that house! D'you know Fremont Park? Well, meet me at the east entrance, where the bandstand is." He heard something, stopped short.

"I can't hear you, there's somebody pounding at the door—"

He raised his voice to a bellow so it would carry. "Fremont Park, east entrance! Hurry up, get out of there!"

THE line went dead, and he mopped his own brow, as though it had been he they were after. Then a peculiar afterthought occurred to him: "What makes me so sure she *didn't* murder Palmer?"

The answer, which was forthcoming immediately, may have been weak on logic but it was strong on conviction. "Hell, you only have to look at her to be able to tell!"

He arrived panting at their rendezvous, and had an awful, heart-toppling moment of dismay. There was no one there. They must have broken in before she could get out, stopped her dead. He started pivoting around in all directions, like a jittery weathervane, gouging fingers through his hair.

Suddenly his own name reached him, in a throbbing whisper. He turned and ran up the steps and in under the sheltering gloom of the bandstand-cupola. She was standing there waiting for him, her face a pale oval in the blue-black obscurity.

They sat down together on one of the long benches used by the musicians when they gave concerts in the summertime.

"Sorry I had to scare you like that. That pounding on the door you heard just now was your friend Hacker, from this afternoon. They showed up there to take you in with them."

"But what do they want me for?"

"The wrong thing. Or at least, the wrong party, for the right thing. Murder."

She jolted as though he'd stuck a pin in her. "Oh, no! It couldn't be—they must be mistaken!"

"No, they wouldn't be," he corrected gently. "That's their business. If they say murder, it's murder. But they certainly are mistaken about—you. Just tell me one thing, are they or aren't they? That's all I want to know."

She had started to cry a little. That was only to be expected. He could only tell by feeling the motion of her shoulder against his. "They are," she faltered.

"I knew they were! Suppose you tell me about yourself and this Palmer fellow. I know I got no right to ask you, but I'm only trying to help you."

"There isn't much to tell. He showed up one day at the last place I worked, and from then on I couldn't shake him. As far as I was concerned, he was only a nuisance from the beginning, but he was never—even to the very end—improper or insulting in any way, so I simply endured him the best I could. I remember I even laughed at him to myself at times. Then suddenly I found out he had a wife, that was the first I'd heard about it. And by that time he was already talking about divorcing her and my marrying him instead, and dropping hints about changing his will in my favor, and his life insurance, and creating a trust fund for me—after I had become the second Mrs. Palmer, of course.

"Well, I got the fright of my life. I saw that I'd let myself drift into a situation that was highly dangerous. But when I tried to cut the whole thing off short, I found out that it was too late for that, it had grown too strong for me. When I refused flatly to go near him the next time he walked in, I lost my job.

"When I finally managed to get another, he followed me there and started the whole campaign over again. I couldn't afford to lose that. Well, from then on, what it amounted to was really a form of moral blackmail. To keep my job, to earn a living, I had to go through the ordeal of being besieged by him once or twice a week. And it was such a strain on me, he gradually wore me down so, that before I knew it I was cutting every-one right and left. I couldn't understand why they'd keep me on there, myself. Today I found out the reason, when Hacker was questioning the manager. Palmer was paying him my wages out of his own

pocket. In other words, subsidizing me while he patiently waited for my resistance to wear down through sheer nervous exhaustion."

"Well, I'll be— What was that supposed to be, love?"

"Infatuation, I suppose. I hear it's akin to madness. It must be."

"Of course," he let her know as tactfully as he could, "he's placed you in a dangerous situation. There is a motive of a sort there, even though it's a far-fetched one. I mean as far as this slug-brained Hacker is concerned. In desperation, to rid yourself of his unwelcome and unending attentions, they might think you actually capable of doing such a thing. But I don't! And I'm going to make it my business to find out who the darky in the woodpile is."

"But haven't I made it worse for myself by—by running away like this and hiding from them? Won't that make it look as though I really did do something to him?"

He sawed a finger back and forth under his chin without giving her a straight answer on this. He was half-willing to admit now, himself, that maybe he had acted too hastily, made a tactical error in snatching her away from under their noses. But now that he had, he was going to stick to his guns, see the thing through. "There's no sense in your giving yourself up now, just to be clapped into a detention-cell and badgered for hours on end about something you didn't do. You're out. All right, now stay out. Let me find some place for you to stay for the next day or two, lie low and let's see if I can't clear it up for you. I can't take you back to my own place, it's one of the first places they may look for you. We were followed when I walked home with you from the shop. I'll find a room for you, under another name. You stay in it, don't stir out of the door until I give you the word. Just give me a couple of days to see what I can do."

IT was just as well he hadn't tried to take her back to his own place. That would have simply been handing her over to them on a silver platter, as he found out when he got there himself after safely escorting her in the temporary refuge he

had picked for her. He keyed his door, punched on the light, and the supine length of Hacker slowly uncoiled itself from his favorite—in fact, only—easy-chair.

"Come in, make yourself at home," Scanlon invited caustically.

"Well, well, well," Hacker leered. "Little man, you've had a busy day." He got up, drifted toward him with treacherous lethargy. "But you're going to have an even busier night!" he rapped out. Something that felt like a high-powered rocket exploded against Scanlon's chin, and he was looking at the detective from another angle—flat on the floor.

"What was that for?" he growled aggrievedly, wavering to his feet.

"Where've you got her? Come on, what'd you do with her?"

"What'd I do with who?" Scanlon winced, edging his lower jaw out of joint and back again. "Don't you believe in using nouns at all?"

It took him on the other side of the jaw this time, or a fracture would have probably resulted from the double impact.

Scanlon sighed groggily, blew his overhanging hair out of his eyes. "Look," he said patiently, "if I get up again, are you going to keep on doing that each time?"

"Until you break out with what I want."

Scanlon relapsed on his elbow again. "Then I may as well stay down, because I haven't got the answer to what you want."

"Come on. The Blaine girl." Hacker couldn't reach him with his fist this time, so he backed a foot, poisoning it to punch it in.

Scanlon eyed the rug-pattern bleakly. He did a little acting—for an audience of one. "The Blaine girl. The Blaine girl. Oh, I bet I know who you mean. That little finger-sharpener. Is that her name—Blaine?"

Hacker was too disgusted to go ahead. There are some witnesses too dumb even to be kicked in the ribs. "Get up!" he spat. "Yuh lame-brained dope!"

The door opened and one of his teammates looked in. Must have been posted outside. "Anything doing?" he asked Hacker cryptically, with a hitch of his head to indicate Scanlon.

"No dice. We just been wasting our time around here. He didn't even know

her name. Come on, I may be able to get a line on her in some other way. It's a cinch somebody tipped her off—" He gave his hat-brim an angry tug and went jogging down the stairs. His assistant turned around to go after him.

Scanlon, on an impulse, halted the latter with a confidential slice of his hand. "Hey, was he on the level just now about the way she killed him?" he asked guilelessly.

The assistant fell for it. "Sure," he said incautiously. "The lab analysis on that little bottle that was supposed to have cuticle softener in it on her table, came back pure undiluted nicotine. She got it into him through that little nick she made in his finger. You know how they're supposed to dip a stick with cotton around its head into the cuticle-softener and then push back the overgrown skin at the base of each nail? Well she kept dipping it into nicotine instead and sluicing it in until he got enough. The autopsy report says he died from it."

"Well, but look," Scanlon whispered, still in that same confidential undertone, taking him by the lapel to make sure he didn't get away from him. "What does he figure her motive is? Palmer hadn't made her his beneficiary yet. She had everything to lose by doing it now and not waiting until later, after he had—"

"Naw, that ain't the angle, you got the wrong angle on this," the leaky one let him know. It probably made him feel important to be discussing the case with an outsider. "She didn't stand to gain anything from Palmer by it, direct. It was from somebody else. Somebody else paid her for it. We've got the evidence. Hacker impounded her bankbook, from the bank. He has it on him right now. Every week for months past she put away twenty bucks, never more. Today all of a sudden the bank got the book through its night-depository with five thousand cash marked for deposit. Three o'clock, just four hours after she got rid of Palmer for whoever it was. So it couldn't have come from him, you see, he was already dead by then—"

Hacker's voice sounded up the stairs with truculent impatience. "Come on, Carter, whattaya doing up there, holding hands with that guy?"

Scanlon closed the door and turned back into his room.

"I still don't believe it!" he muttered doggedly. "And I'm not welshing on her until I do!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Woman-Hunt

HE gave them a quarter of an hour before he set out in turn. If they believed him and had really gone away, that was plenty of time. If they didn't and were keeping him covered in hopes that he'd lead them to her, then they'd probably stay in position all night long, and he couldn't wait, he had to chance it, he wanted to see her right away and find out about it.

The room he'd found for her was only about six blocks away from his place in a straight line, but he boxed the compass in order to get to it. Went six blocks over the other way, then six blocks down, then hopped a bus for another twelve blocks back again, then covered the remaining six blocks by a sort of stagger-system, in and out. He couldn't have made it any harder for them to find her, except in one way—that is, by not going near her at all.

She smiled wanly when she saw who it was. "I—I'm sort of glad you came back. I wasn't able to sleep, the room is strange to me, and I got to thinking about the mess I'm in and—you know that feeling, like you haven't a friend left in the world."

He sat down awkwardly, fiddled around with one cuff for a minute to figure out his moves.

He shot it at her like a pellet out of a sling. "How much money have you got in the bank?"

She came back like another pellet out of another sling. "Exactly two hundred and three dollars and eight cents. That's an easy one. I know every nickel of it by heart, the way I had to scrape them together."

He glued his eyes to hers, and came out with another question. "Know of anyone who might be likely to give you five thousand dollars?"

"You're joking."

His set face, with its look of grim determination, killed her own smile.

"Know of any reason why anyone should give you five thousand dollars?" he repeated.

"No, of course not. I don't know what you m—"

"Well, someone did, right today. Several hours after Palmer's death."

She was so bewildered she could hardly find words to answer him. "But it couldn't be—I have my passbook right here, in my handbag. I'll show it to you—It can't be my account, it must be somebody else by the same name—"

"Hacker's a police official. He wouldn't trip up on a detail like that."

She was probing into her handbag. When you live in a furnished room, and you're called to answer the telephone, you carry your handbag right under your arm if you're smart. That was how she'd happened to bring it with her.

She kept digging into it, at an accelerated tempo of desperation. She didn't come over to him with it. He could tell by her face—

"Gone, eh?" he grunted gloomily. He stared down pessimistically through his own interlocked hands at the floor. "Where'd you usually keep that handbag while you were working?"

"In a little drawer right in the manicure-table itself. On *my* side of it—"

"Then I don't see how anyone could have opened it, gotten the handbag out, and filched the passbook out of that without your—" He didn't exactly mean it the way it probably sounded to her: as a discrediting of her veracity. He simply meant it as a statement of honest mystification.

He kept staring down at the floor, trying to puzzle the thing out. Suddenly he realized the room-door was open and she wasn't in there with him any more. The handbag was gone too. He jumped up and ran out to the head of the stairs. She had just finished clearing them as he got there. He sprinted down them and caught up with her just outside the street-door. He stopped her, turned her forcibly but not roughly around toward him. "Don't come out here like this, someone may be watching! Where are you going?"

"To the police," she said in a muffled voice. "To Hacker, to give myself up and get it over with!

"How can I expect anyone to believe me the way—the way things keep piling up against me? First that bottle of nicotine, right in my manicure-kit, and now five thousand dollars added to my account! My passbook gone from right under my nose! What right have I to expect you to stand by me? My story must sound pretty flimsy, even to you. You'll end up by believing I did it too, and I wouldn't blame you!"

"I thought that was it. Give me a little credit. Any fool can believe in you when the cards are all stacked your way. It's when they're not that a real friend does his rooting for you." He slipped his arm around her waist and led her back inside. "Even if I wasn't sure you were innocent before—and I was, from the time I first heard about it—what you tried to do just now would have cinched it for me. Nobody who was really guilty would make a move toward going back and sticking their head into the lion's jaws like you just did."

He closed the upstairs room-door after them again. "You've been beautifully framed. It's a work of art, it's so perfect. But that's just why I know it *is* a frame. It's too smooth, it's too perfect, it hangs together too well! That five thousand was deposited, on a forged deposit-slip, probably through the night-depository of the bank, for one purpose and one only: to have it come to light in just the way it has, in order to lead the police to think—just what they do. That you were hired to get rid of Palmer, and that's the blood money."

She just stared at him with horrified incredulity. "Somebody must hate me awfully bad."

"Naw, somebody hates the electric chair they've got coming to them for murdering him, even worse—that's all it is. I'm going to clear out now, let you get some sleep. But before I do—are you good at keeping promises?"

"I've never broken one yet."

"Then I want you to promise me you'll sit tight after I'm gone, won't try to turn yourself in for a burnt offering, like you wanted to just now."

"I promise."

"You're all tangled up, I know. Give me my chance to unsnarl you. These beau-

tiful patterns all have a dropped stitch in them somewhere, if you only look close enough."

IT was Hacker, when he answered the knock on his door late the next day. "You can come out with the Blaine girl now. All bets are off."

"I thought I told you last night I haven't got her. Who's your new entry?" Scanlon had his nostrils twitching for a trap. But even if it was on the level, he wasn't making any admissions, he was playing it straight through now his own way.

The detective gave him a cagy smile. "You don't want much. Since when are you on the squad?" But he wasn't as deep as he gave himself credit for being. He couldn't keep it to himself very long, came out with it little by little, by indirection. He was one of those dicks who like to sound darkly mysterious. "We're willing to admit she was framed. Oh, we still want her, got to have her. She was the instrument. The nicotine-bottle was found on her table. She can't get away from that. But new evidence has turned up since last night that changes the look of things all around. There's a very good chance she wasn't even in on the thing at all, was just picked for a catspaw—"

"I'm with you so far," Scanlon agreed, still wary. "And what brought on this big about-face in my general's plan of attack?"

"The deposit was made without her knowledge. Someone swiped her bank-book and sent it in with five thousand dollars. There's a forged signature on the deposit-slip. I had that and one of her former ones compared by a handwriting expert. They weren't written by the same person. It was close enough to pass muster with a hurried teller working after hours. She's got a short name and—unfortunately—a very childish sort of writing, easy to imitate successfully."

"That's your new evidence?" Scanlon queried cautiously.

"No, no. Just a fractional part of it. Now late yesterday morning, just around the same time Palmer was getting his, a certain party went into quite another bank, in quite another part of town, and made a sizable withdrawal. All right,

people are doing that all over town, all hours of the day. *But*—this withdrawal happened to amount to exactly five thousand dollars cash. And this payee happened to be—someone that's pretty close to Palmer."

Scanlon caught on without too much trouble. His own mind had been sending flashes of suspicion in that direction, intermittently, for over forty-eight hours now. He continued to play dumb and inscrutable. "Well, but suppose that was just a coincidence? I mean suppose that five thousand was withdrawn for an entirely different purpose? Suppose this person still happens to have it on them, and can produce it, when you tackle him?"

"That's what we're on our way to find out about, right now!"

Scanlon let him get as far as the door. "I can't figure out who it could be," he said with mimic bafflement.

"Just think this over: who had the best of all possible motives for getting Palmer out of the way *before* he changed his will and insurance policies and everything else in the Blaine girl's favor? You made that very point yourself, in her defense, yesterday."

"I will," Scanlon promised docilely. "I'll try to figure it out—" And then as the door closed after his caller: "That, and a few other things."

He hesitated for a moment or two, scratching the back of his neck. Finally he muttered: "I can't be in any deeper than I am now! Here we go again, boys!" He quickly made up his mind, stepped over to the phone, and picked it up.

CHAPTER FOUR

Trapped

THE room was full of cigarette smoke, though Joan Blaine was not a smoker and Scanlon had run out of them hours before and was not a moocher. It kept drifting out from behind the lowered window-shade, which was rounded-out in the middle, where it enfolded someone's motionless form. Joan Blaine was sitting at the table, hand to head. Scanlon kept pacing the floor back and forth in front of her. There was one of those silences or lulls that crop up when people have been

talking about a thing interminably and run out of ideas.

Scanlon resumed finally, taking up where he had left off. "How many people did you wait on that morning, before Palmer came in and sat down at the table with you?"

"About five. I'm not sure, that's as close as I can break it down by the total of the tips I found in my handbag, after Hacker had released me that day. What good will that do?"

"I'm trying to find out at what point that harmless cuticle-solution on the table in front of you turned into deadly nicotine. Were any of them repeaters, or was that the first time you saw them?"

"Every one of them that morning was a first-timer. Someone I'd never waited on before. That's what makes it so—"

"Wait a minute, I've got it!" He made a sudden cat-like swing around as though he was going to pounce on her. "I know which of them it was now! Why didn't I think of that before?"

Even the window-shade burgeoned at this point, as though someone's head had turned, to be able to listen better.

Scanlon pushed his face down closer toward the girl's, all lit up. "Look. From the time the switch was made and you were dipping that orange-stick in nicotine, anyone you cut would have had the same thing happen to them that happened to Palmer, right? Now I was the guy right before him. You didn't cut me because—no offense, but I wouldn't let you use that sharp thing on me, remember? Probably saved my own life without realizing it. But you *did* cut the guy just ahead of me—I only thought of that now, I saw him jump—and yet he lived to walk out of the shop. *He's* our guy. He's the one worked the switch on you, probably at the very last minute, just before he got up from the table. You kept an appointment-book, for certain special customers like Palmer, didn't you?"

"Yes, the manager made me."

"Well, he was tipped off just what time Palmer's appointment was for, and he was supposed to be the last guy in that chair ahead of Palmer. I unexpectedly sandwiched myself into it in between—you saw how burnt up Palmer got at that. But the fact that this sleight-of-hand gent

didn't show any surprise or perturbation when he saw me do that, just calmly walked out, proves one other thing: he didn't even know Palmer by sight, he took me to be Palmer and thought everything was still in order. Proving he was just hired for it himself, sight unseen. Somebody else pulled all the strings."

The shade flopped aside and Palmer's widow came away from the window she'd been staring pensively out of for the past half-hour or more. "Well, I'm glad you've got that much figured out," she said bitterly. "Now if you could only help me figure out whether that missing five thousand I took from the bank was simply stolen from me by some sneak-thief, or purposely removed by someone with the idea of incriminating me, then maybe I could go back and face them, instead of hiding out here for the rest of the night."

"You stay where you are," Scanlon advised her. "If I can clear her, I automatically clear you with her." He turned back to Joan Blaine again. "Now, this guy. You're sure you'd never seen him before?"

"Never. I'm positive."

"Can you remember anything about him? Any distinctive characteristics?"

"No, he was just ten fingers to me."

"Did he have much to say?"

"No, he hardly spoke at all, he was unusually quiet."

"Too busy figuring out his plays, I guess. Try to remember something about him, you've got to! That's our only chance of getting a line on him—"

EVEN Hedda Palmer had forgotten to smoke, was standing there beside them listening absorbedly. A cone of ash gathered at the end of her cigarette, dropped off of its own weight, and strewed across the edge of the table.

Joan Blaine eyed it, raised her head suddenly. "Wait, I just remembered something about him! That helped remind me, just then. It won't tell you what he looked like, but—"

"Never mind. What is it?"

"He deliberately dropped ashes into the little bowl of sud-water on the table. I had to get up and change it. I remember I was very put out—"

Scanlon said: "That was to get you

away from the table. Both to switch the bottles and dredge your bankbook out of your handbag. Can you remember where the handbag was at the time?"

"While I worked I usually kept it in a little drawer, on my side of the— No, wait a minute, something else just came to me. Soon after he sat down he took out a cigarette and asked me for a match. To accommodate him I took out my handbag and gave him one—"

"And then left it out on the table?"

"Yes, I guess so. I didn't take time to put it away again—"

"That was his play, then. That was how he worked both dodges. But that doesn't help us to remember what he looked like. I saw him myself. He was over at the mirror, as I passed behind him. There's something that I'd like to remember. He was doing something there, but I can't recall what it was—"

He started to walk back and forth again. "Got a mirror? Maybe I can trick my memory into coming across with it by visualization. I've heard that that sometimes helps."

"There's one on the inside of that closet-door. It's not a full-length mirror, though."

He swept it back flat against the wall, so that it faced out.

"Now I'm him. I've just gotten through getting manicured. I'm on my way out. Don't laugh now," he cautioned his two onlookers. "This may look screwy, but I'm not just doing it for fun."

He backed up to the other side of the room, turned, and came toward the mirror again. He stopped before it and carefully adjusted his hat. Then he turned away. "No, it was something more than just that."

He repeated the pantomime. This time he carefully pinched the knot of his tie. Again he turned away. "Nope, that wasn't it, either. It was something you don't see everyone do. Something just a little out of the ordinary. That's the only reason I recall it at all."

He came back a third time, and this time he shrugged and straightened the shoulders of his coat more evenly in place. Then he primped at an imaginary handkerchief in his breast-pocket.

He shook his head frustratedly. "Just

don't watch me if you get bored. I'm going to keep at this if it takes all night."

They evidently weren't bored. They couldn't take their eyes off him. This time he came up to the mirror, folded over the fingers of one hand and inspected them. Then he polished them off against his coat lapel.

"If she just got through shining them he wouldn't have to do that," Mrs. Palmer pointed out.

"Sh-h," Joan Blaine warned her tactfully.

He let his hands flop down baffledly. He was running out of maneuvers. "I'll never get it," he grimaced. He backed one arm toward the glass resentfully, started to turn away. Then he froze, stayed that way.

"Is that what he did?" Mrs. Palmer breathed.

"No, but doing that got it for me. That brought back what he did. He did *this*." Up went his guard; down went his chin, and he feinted with his right. "He made a shadow-boxing pass at himself!" He swung back toward the two of them. His fist landed on the table-top with an unexpected crash that made them both jump. "I may be wrong, but I'd bet even money he's some kind of a pug—a boxer! He gave himself away by doing that, when he was off-guard, when he thought no one was watching—"

He ramméd his hat on again, this time not for scenic effect but to go some place. "Whether he's retired, or still active in the ring, or never was anything but just a broken-down sparring partner, don't matter! I'll know where to look for him now. There are only two sporting clubs in this town. They can't stay away from those places, any of them. It gets in their blood—"

"But how'll you know him for sure, out of so many others?"

"I may remember him by sight, when I see him again. But if that don't work, I have a surer way of singling him out. He will have nice polished nails, which aren't so common around gyms and athletic clubs, and he'll still have that little nick you gave him—those things take time to heal. I'll run him down—if I've got to shake the hand of every guy I come across!"

THE figure that Scanlon admitted to his place a little less than twenty-four hours later was meant to be a lady-killer. He probably would have killed any who happened to see him, but not in the way he intended. A game of checkers could have been played on the pattern of his suit by any but the most near-sighted. He held his derby hat anchored against one biceps, in unintentional travesty of an old-fashioned photo pose. "What took you so long?" he queried. "Bell out of order?" He withdrew a package from one topcoat-pocket. "I brought another bottle, just in case—" Then he looked around him disappointedly. "Where's the babes you said would be here?"

Scanlon gave an unnoticeable little turn of the wrist, behind his back, and took something out of the door. "There's not going to be any party, Rocky," he said with a taut smile. "That was just a come-on to get you up here." He moved across the room, negligently draped himself against the edge of a table, one knee up. He reached into his jacket for a cigarette, only when it came out it wasn't one. It was a snub-nosed automatic, so foreshortened it barely cleared his trigger-finger. He didn't point it at his guest, he just let it rest along his thigh.

Rock's face had whitened. "Then that line about being a fan of mine from the old days in Havana was just the bunco?" "Strictly," Scanlon said tersely. "I asked you up here to see if—maybe we couldn't talk business."

The prizefighter eyed the quiescent weapon uneasily. "Wh-what're ya going to do with that?" he faltered.

"That's my business. That's what I want to talk to you about."

The prizefighter, still pale around the eyes, relaxed nervously into a chair.

"You just did a little job for someone," Scanlon stated matter-of-factly. "Get much out of it?"

Rock tugged at his collar. "Oh, you mean refereeing the Dillon fight—"

"I mean a different kind of a job." Scanlon made a scornful pass with his hand. The free one. "Cut the run-around. I'm working for the same party."

The prizefighter shot him a startled look, but didn't answer.

"He hired you to do a little job—on

someone—then to make sure it didn't get around, he hired me to do a little job—on you."

Rock jolted to his feet. But he still kept his lower jaw tight against his upper one, even though it was working wrathfully.

"Don't you believe me?" Scanlon said innocently. "Who d'ya suppose fingered you to me? How was I able to pick you out of all them other camp-followers so easily? Now keep your trunks on, let me finish first. I don't like the amount I was offered for doing it, I thought I'd like to put it up to you first, see if maybe you can't top it. I got nothing against you personally, maybe we can make a deal."

That was as far as he got. The prizefighter exploded with palsied rage. "That dirty double-crossing——! I'll break every bone in his body! So he couldn't trust me, huh?"

"He don't trust anyone," Scanlon purred. "You ought to know that by now. Is that the first job you ever done for him?"

The inflamed stooge wasn't subtle enough to keep the name under cover. "Who, Cosgrove?" he brayed incautiously. "Yeah, the dirty rat!"

"What was his idea?" Scanlon asked idly, as if he was simply one hired killer comparing notes with another.

"You know how heavy he plunges at all the races and events. I guess he went in over his head, and had to dip into the firm's money behind his partner's back. Then when he saw he couldn't recoup and put back what he took out, to stay out of jail he figured he better get the jump on the other guy first.

"He looked me up and asked how I'd feel about doing a little favor for him. He had something on me, and I couldn't very well refuse, but outside of that, it sounded like five hundred bucks for doing nothing. He tells me this guy Palmer has an appointment to be manicured for exactly eleven A. M. next day. He tells me where it is and which girl it is. He tells me to watch from across the street, and the last guy that gets up from that chair *before* eleven, to dive in there after him and sit down ahead of Palmer. All I had to do for my five hundred bucks is two things. First, to switch a little bottle he give me for the matching one on the jane's table,

and leave off the stopper as I did so. Second, to get my hands on a bankbook that he knows from his partner she always carries with her in her handbag."

ROCK was getting angrier as he talked. "I didn't know the stuff was going to kill this guy! I only found out about it when I read it next day, and by that time it was too late. The way he lined it up to me, it was just some kind of dope, like they slip horses or pugs in a fix, to knock him out, keep him away from the office for the rest of the day, so Cosgrove could doctor up their account-books, before the examiners or auditors or whatever you call 'em came around!" His face twitched with convulsive rage. "The double-crossing punk! So he not only gets me mixed up in a killing, but then he hires you to shut me up so I won't squeal on him! Well now I *will* yodel! I'll sing to the cops plenty! I'll shoot the whole works!"

"You have already," Scanlon said quietly, pocketing the gun. He raised his own voice. "Come on in, Hacker. This is as far as I go. You can take over from here."

Hacker and Carter showed up in the opening, came through from the next room. Hacker was taking some sort of a wired headpiece away from his ears. The prizefighter, losing his nerve at the last moment, made a frustrated, scampering lunge for the locked outside door. Carter hauled him away from it.

"Were you able to hear in there?" Scanlon asked the Homicide man.

"More than I thought I was going to," Hacker admitted dryly. "As a matter of fact, do you want to know the only reason I let you talk me into coming up here and hiding out in there?"

"No, what was it?"

"Our next move was going to be to pinch you, pal. After all, it wasn't a very good recommendation for you when we happened to uncover the fact that Mrs. Palmer had hired you to tail her husband the very day of his death, and get a line on this girl for her. How did we know but what she didn't make the very same kind of a deal with you that Cosgrove made with our flat-nosed friend here?"

Scanlon said: "Well I'll be— First the Blaine girl. Then Mrs. Palmer. Then *me* and Mrs. Palmer. Isn't there a com-

bination or two that you overlooked?"

"We're not story-book detectives," Hacker grunted surlily, "always right the first time. We go by trial and error."

Scanlon remarked, "Mostly error," under his breath.

Hacker was manipulating a U-shaped piece of steel. He bent it into an O around Rock's wrist. "All right, baritone, you said you wanted to sing, here's your chance. Let's all go down to the concert-hall. We'll provide the music and you supply the words. Then we'll chase up and bring in Cosgrove and his firm's books, and have a nice cozy get-together. Not forgetting those two women. The Blaine girl, it's true, was just an unwitting instrument, but we'll need her for a material witness."

"I got an idea where you might find them," Scanlon admitted reticently.

Hacker stopped short in the doorway and glared. "You know, I don't like you. I only wish there was something I could hold you for."

"I don't like you either," Scanlon said matter-of-factly. "But if you want to come along, I'll show you where they are. I shouldn't have left them alone together this long. They'll probably be tearing each other's hair out."

Scanlon threw open the door of the furnished room. Then he stopped short on the threshold and just stared. Joan Blaine and Mrs. Palmer were sitting across from one another at a little table covered with towel, a bowl of water, and various manicuring accessories.

"It was my suggestion," Mrs. Palmer said defensively, looking up at the two men. "We borrowed the kit from the landlady. We had to do something to kill time, holed up in here the way we were—" She jarred slightly, stopped short. She raised a finger, slowly nursed it between her lips.

Joan Blaine threw down the little implement. "Every time anyone watches me—" she lamented. "It's no use, I just wasn't cut out to be a manicurist!"

On their way down the stairs to the departmental car he and Hacker had come over in, Scanlon slipped his arm through hers, murmured confidentially: "Would you consider chucking it for a different kind of a job, like, for instance, say, an agency-man's wife?"

CAVIAR FOR THE KILLER . . .

A Sergeant Lanning
Novelette

By Sam Merwin, Jr.

Author of "A Matter of Policy," etc.

Socialite Martin Van Buren Brogard was slightly annoyed to find himself snarled up in murder. Razor-blades were all right for shaving, but spilling blue blood along with ordinary crimson was a bit thick.





And then a feminine cyclone burst through the door without warning.

CHAPTER ONE

A Shot in the Dark

MMARTIN VAN BUREN BROGARD lit a cigarette, cupping his hands to hold the flame in the cold wind that swept up First Avenue at Fifty-seventh Street. Successful, he threw the match away and turned to his companion, whose ungloved hands were hugged tight to his sides in the pockets of a worn tweed topcoat.

"Well, Johnnie," he said, "we part

here. Going to be anywhere in particular tonight?"

Johnnie O'Brien shrugged his shoulders. His prematurely lined, nondescript face was whipped into patriotic red, white, and blue by the icy air currents. "Just around," he said. "Just trying to get something stirring. How about you?"

"I'm picking up the old man," said Marty, "and taking him to dinner at the Porters'. It's his idea. I'm planning an early duck and a visit to Sheila's. And take a reef in yourself. Things won't always be like this."

"You're telling me," said Johnnie. "My number will be popping up in the draft any minute now. So will yours if

you don't get yourself some dependents fast."

Marty's smile faded, and the corners of his eyes grew tight. "I wouldn't mind," he said. "I wouldn't mind a crack at them at all. Well, babe, see you back in the hotel. Good luck."

"Give my love to the fair Virginia," said Johnnie. He paused, turned back. "See here, Marty, it's none of my business, but why don't you and Virgin—"

"It's none of your business," said Marty. He smiled, and his lips were cynical. "Have you ever been shoved into a girl's lap? Oh, forget it. So long."

"So long," said Johnnie. He walked away to the west. Marty stared after him moodily. He wasn't looking forward to what lay ahead. Ever since he'd gotten back from France in August, he'd been acutely aware of pressure exerted by his father and Mrs. Porter to get him and Virginia married off. Wise beyond his twenty-nine years with the wisdom of inherited wealth, he understood too well the motives behind the match and wanted no part of them.

His father was broke as usual, and so was he, thanks to the war. His father wanted money, and Amelia Porter, Virginia's mother, had it. The Porters could use the Brogard name in their assault on Manhattan's social citadels. But apart from a wholly natural resentment at being pushed into a marriage not of his own choosing, Marty found the thought of raucous, brazen, dominating Amelia Porter as a mother-in-law appalling.

TOSSING away his cigarette, he entered the huge apartment building in which Brogard Senior made his home. A visit to his father was pretty appalling in itself. In the first place, the apartment which housed his sire was a great deal more costly than the family income could afford. Reckless Laurence Brogard, after blasting his way through two inherited fortunes and one made freakishly in the market, had been on his uppers for years. So the luxury of the oversized East Side duplex provided constant and un nourishing food for filial worry.

Then the luxury itself was embarrassing. It had a decidedly flamboyant feminine cast—satin cushions that seemed to

get under one wherever one sat, garishly decadent modern paintings, seraphic porcelain cats perched about here and there. Having an old rip for a father was fun in fiction. In fact, it was not so hot—not when one's mother had died abroad, a refugee from scandal, nor when the current paternal delight was a "protégée" as obvious as the opulent Mona Correll.

She was stretched out on a low divan as Marty entered, brunette, beautiful, unbrassiered in unsubtle white and gold house pajamas, her lower lip protruding in a pout expressive of anything but weakness. Her eyes snapped at Marty as he took off his coat and hat. Mona was mad.

"Marty," she said, "Carl won't give Laurie any money. So I've got to sit at home while Laurie and you go out. If anybody thinks I'm going to sit home and knit, he's nuts." She tossed her dark look at the other two men in the room like a catcher threatening men on bases.

Carl Lovatt, attorney for the Brogard estates, gave her a quiet smile and stirred his highball with a gold-mounted pencil. Shaking it dry, he returned it to his pocket. "It's fine whiskey," he said after sipping his drink, "but I can't go on paying for it with money that isn't there. It will be a scrape to cover taxes as it is." His tall forehead crinkled in its iron-gray frame as he shook his head.

Laurence Brogard, who stood by the fireplace, swore succinctly and to the point. He looked absurdly young for his fifty-odd years. His hair was dark, his flanks were lean, and such lines as dissipation had planted in his handsome face served only to add to his native distinction. He grimaced at his son over a well-cut custom-made blue shirt collar.

"It's ridiculous!" he said peevishly. "I've proved I can make big money when I want it. And Carl won't give me a single groat. Not even for a starving landlord. But you, Marty, who haven't made a dime in your life, can get it out of him. Even with your own money hopelessly tied up. I don't get it."

"Maybe I think Marty's a better risk," said Lovatt slowly. "That's my privilege. I understand you're having dinner with Amelia Porter. She's a mighty well-served woman, Laurie. And she's rolling

in it. You could do a lot worse with that well-known charm of yours. Think it over."

Mona had picked up one of the porcelain cats and was hefting it, her gaze steady on the lawyer beneath menacing if plucked brows. Marty, familiar with her explosive temper, stepped quickly across the carpet and relieved her of the potential weapon. His father exhaled through his lips disgustedly.

"Come along, Marty," he said. "Let's get out of here." He sniffed. "This air is bad." He blew a kiss to Mona, who tossed her head scornfully, and led the way to the hall. A bright spot of red showed on each of his cheekbones.

"Damned interfering old fool!" he growled at his son as they ensconced themselves in the rear seat of a cab. "Amelia Porter! I've got enough troubles now without adding that braying female jackass to my morning headaches. Maybe I shouldn't talk to you like this, Martin, but you're old enough to know the score. As a matter of fact, son, it's pretty swell having you back."

He patted Marty's knee and smiled at him with quick friendliness. Marty smiled back, but warily. "How much, Dad?" he asked. "Make it light, because I'm about out of cash, and I can't count on a job until week after next anyway."

"But you draw that weekly dot from the British government," said Laurence Brogard. "It's about—"

"Five quid exactly," said Marty quietly.

His father did some mental arithmetic with knotted brows. "Why that's—"

"Just under twenty dollars at present rates," said the younger Brogard, grinning. "Not much to support both of us in the style to which we're accustomed, is it? So go easy."

HE waited while his father did more tortuous inward addition, even counting on his fingers. He caught Marty's amused glance, smiled, unembarrassed, and said: "I never was any good at sums. How about fifty? I've got some things coming up, and—"

He paused, moistening his lips, as Marty dug into a large, gold-trimmed ostrich-skin wallet. pulled out two tens,

and gave them to him. "This will have to do, Dad," said the young man. "At least until Carl gets something better out of the British. And you know about how the percentages lie there."

"Bless you, my boy," said Laurence Brogard, carelessly thrusting the bills into a trouser pocket. The feel of the money, rather than its amount, seemed to restore his equanimity. "That will keep me in cigarettes for a day or two. I could feel Carl gloating back there. Damn it all, *why* did your dear mother have to tie up all your money in England?"

"I always understood," said Marty evenly, "that the idea was to keep it safe from you."

Laurence Brogard shrugged. "Probably," he said unabashed. "Hitler made it a bad guess. Here we are." He darted from the cab as it drew up before the East River apartment house, leaving his son to pay the fare.

Being received by Amelia Porter was an experience—at least when she deemed you worthy of being received. A living monument to the foundation garment, she answered the door herself, wrestling a pair of Pekingese dogs at the same time. Both animals growled viciously at Laurence Brogard, who scorned any pet under the size of a mastiff or a full-grown young woman. Put down, they tugged at the trouser cuffs of their sworn enemy, yammering like a pair of electric razors on someone else's radio.

"Yang! Chang!" snapped Amelia Porter through raspberry lips. The dogs slunk away, and their mistress turned the full force of her personality on her guests. If her figure was a tribute to lastex, her face was a shrine to the technique of live embalming. Beneath her curly dark hair, only a few wrinkles betrayed her years.

Her voice, however, was a live offering to a buzz saw. No pretense of culture could obscure its graveled tones. Amelia claimed the theater—pronounced *thaahter*—as a background, but both Brogard's scented a solid base of burlesque or carnival or both. Yes, Amelia was an overpowering character.

"*Daahlings!*" she squealed, giving each a moist and somewhat doggy palm. "I'm *sooo* glaahd you're heah. You *must* sit down and try Akota's new Whombies or

whatever they are. He's mixing them now." Pirouetting gaily, she led them to an expensively overstuffed living-room done in fantastic flowered chintzes.

"My deah!" she beamed at Marty. "Virginia will be down in a moment." A giggle here. "I have tickets for that thing at the Belasco. Would you *believe* it, I could only get *two*! So I thought it would be *sooo* heavenly if you young people could go while your deah father and I have a quiet game of backgammon."

Marty risked rudeness and begged off. For one thing he'd seen the show and imagined Virginia had, too. For another, he had business of his own to attend to later—business named Sheila Gerome. And for a third, he had no intention of letting his father lose that twenty dollars to Amelia across the backgammon board. Her luck was as fantastic as her chintzes.

"Virginia will be *sooo* disappointed," said Amelia. She sighed, looked down at her still shapely legs, snapped her fingers. "God damn it!" she snapped. "There goes another rup in these lousy stockings! Seven dollars a pair! That comes to about a dollar a minute. That damned salesgirl clipped me!"

Virginia appeared in the doorway then, clucking her tongue in sham shock at her mother. Tall, blond, engagingly awkward, she looked, in her skirt and sweater, as if she'd prepared for the evening by getting off a ski train. She winked at Marty, listened indifferently while her mother made an elephantine joke of the monkey wrench the younger man had thrown into her plans. To his relief, she wrinkled her nose at mention of the play.

"That stinker!" she said. "I saw it last week with the Cohranes. Amelia, I'm pooped. Thanks, Marty, for ducking it." Grabbing a full glass from a tray, she sat down sprawingly. Marty had a fiendish idea and flicked an eyebrow at her.

"See here, Dad," he said. "Why don't you and Amelia see it yourselves? It's really a funny show. Not worth seeing twice, but a good evening's entertainment. How's that?" He sat back, enjoying Brogard Senior's panic.

AMELIA was all for it, and that was the way it worked out, despite the older man's attempts to wriggle clear.

After dinner, when their parents had left, the younger pair returned to the living-room and lingered over coffee and liqueurs.

"You know, Virgin," said Marty as he lit a cigarette for the girl, "if we hadn't been slammed at each other so obviously, it might not have been so bad. From my side anyway."

She inhaled, looked at him with half-lidded quick blue eyes, blew smoke through her nose. "That's rather nice of you, Marty. I think you really meant it," she said. "If you were only—oh, hell, skip it. Tell me—what's all this Virgin business?"

Marty laughed. "Just a nickname," he said. "Virginia—Virgin. It was Johnnie O'Brien's idea. He thought it would make a good name for you because you don't look like one."

The girl raised a quizzical eyebrow. "I suppose he thinks it's funny," she said. "Maybe it is. But what in hell am I *supposed* to look like?" Marty saluted, and she went on. "I don't see how a girl with a mother like mine has much of a shot at innocence. We're always being told to be realistic about things—like marrying for this or that reason. *Never for laahve!*"

"I get it," said Marty. "It wasn't really meant to be a slam. You just said something about if I were only—come on, give."

He waited while she pondered him again with those blue eyes. She took another puff on her cigarette. "I guess Latins are my dish," she said. "You like little actresses, I like Latins. And you couldn't pass for a Latin in a London fog in an air raid."

"Don't be wise," he snapped at her. This girl could bite him. So she knew about Sheila. He wondered about the Latin business. Sounded sleek and a bit unpleasant. Unaccountably he was curious. "Got a male Conga line on the string?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Maybe," she said. "Manoel is pretty near a Conga line by himself." She lapsed into silence, and they dawdled over a game of double solitaire. All at once she jumped up. "It's eleven o'clock," she said. "You'll be late at the alley. And I've got to get dressed myself." She grinned, gamin fashion.

He got up, feeling betrayed, spied upon, and thoroughly annoyed. Damned girl! With a show of false graciousness, he said: "May I drop you anywhere, my dear?"

She shook her head. "I like to keep *my* affairs private," she said. "After all, a girl has to think of her reputation, even in these parlous times."

Once outside, he wasn't angry. Virginia and her obvious nuisance-making seemed trivial. He hopped in a cab and had himself driven over to Times Square. As he wanted to be, he was just ahead of the main after-theater rush, and made his way into the alley that led to the stage door without difficulty.

Shiela had only a bit in the play, and did not hang around for the final curtain call. Which had been annoying Marty for some weeks now. She was a good actress. He'd seen her work in London in days that now seemed decades ago, before the war, and he had a good critical backing to bolster his own judgment.

The girl could do a real job. But here she was lost in the shuffle. They'd met on the boat coming back, and Marty had found an across-the-footlights crush ripening quickly into something much more tangible and interesting. Submarine scares and tension had broken the usual barriers quickly. They'd made plans.

And then he'd found his money, so carefully invested through the Bank of England, tied up by the war, his father's financial and domestic situations even worse. She'd found that her work in London didn't rate her above the local producer's pets. So, here she was, playing little more than a walk-on and glad to get it, while he lived on a pittance from the British government and struggled to get launched in a paying job.

More than her looks, her inherent dramatic quality drew him. He could feel it surge to his fingertips as he paced up and down the alley in the gloom. Yes, she was a girl, all right. And he ought to know. You didn't have as much money as he'd had without finding out a lot.

Wishing she'd come, he turned his back on the stage door, walked to the lip of the alley, and flicked his cigarette across the sidewalk. The block was beginning to

fill up with cabs. He counted to ten, then turned around to see if she'd come out while he wasn't looking.

Just then, with a crack that sounded like an automobile's backfire, something tugged sharply at his left elbow—something that whined past him like a giant hornet, spat viciously against the wall beside him, and then sang itself to sleep in a double ricochet. Someone had taken a shot at him!

CHAPTER TWO

Your Life or Mine

HE DUCKED back into the alley, but no second shot came. The theater across the street chose that moment to disgorge its occupants, and the block became a scene of mob confusion. Peering hopelessly into the mass of cabs and limousines and toppers and evening wraps, Marty felt another tug at his elbow. He turned around. It was Sheila.

She wore a polo coat with the collar up and no hat. Her reddish hair fell smoothly to her shoulders, and her green eyes were hazel in the dim light. "What's the matter, darling?" she asked. "Playing hide-and-seek or something?"

"Something, I guess," said Marty, offering no explanation. He had no explanation to give. Why anyone should take a pot-shot at him was beyond his ken. He could think of no one who hated him sufficiently to risk the electric chair, and certainly, since his money was tied up, wealth could be no object.

The girl looked up at him curiously, then grinned. "Poor old Marty," she said. "Maybe it's termites. Let's go to my place. I'm dead, and there's a little Scotch left. Lousy house tonight. Like playing to Cain's warehouse. And that's no gag. The way things are going we'll be closed in two weeks."

"Ouch!" said Marty. "Between you and me and my father and Johnnie O'Brien, we aren't doing so well."

They walked along toward Eighth Avenue, and he felt himself shaking. Reaction, he supposed. It wasn't fun to be shot at, even by mistake. She felt his tremor, eyed him keenly. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing," he told her. They walked on a way in silence. She took a cigarette from him, let him light it.

"Darling," she said, and her wide cheekbones cast fascinating rounded triangles of shadow as they passed under a street light, "why don't you get away from Johnnie? He isn't your type, and he isn't mine. He's—well, he's pretty crude."

Marty shook his head. "Johnnie's my friend," he said. "He'll get going here. And he's quite a guy when he's in high gear. Next to Jeff Dickson, he had more promotions going on the Continent than anyone else. You should have known him in Paris."

"I knew him in Paris," she said. She turned away. "Wrestlers, strip-teasers, anything. It's not our world." She turned back, smiled quickly, said: "I'm sorry, Marty. He just gets under my skin." Then: "Marty! Your sleeve is torn."

He twisted his arm, looked at the jagged tear in the cloth over his elbow. It had been plenty close. "I must have caught it on a nail coming over. You should have been at dinner tonight." He told her how he'd shunted his father off on Amelia.

"That was a bit rough," she said smiling again. Her lips stayed full when she grinned. They turned into the semi-shabby entrance of her apartment house. "Hello, here's Stan. Hi, Stanley."

A thick-set, broad-shouldered man of medium height stepped out of the shadows. Beneath his light fedora, his face was square and swarthy, his manner forceful.

"Hello, kids," he said. "Hoped I'd catch you." He fell into step beside them. Stanley Freeman was a Broadway agent. A long-time friend of Laurence Brogard, some of whose ill-fated theatrical ventures he'd backed in the past, he had taken hold of Sheila's career on Marty's insistence a few months earlier, had wangled her the spot which paid her room, board, and the few dresses she had been able to afford. They rode up together to the girl's modest one-and-a-half room apartment. She went into the kitchenette to prepare the drinks, leaving the men alone.

Freeman watched her until she'd closed

the door behind her, a faint smile on his dark, incisive features. Then, whirling swiftly, he crossed to Marty, lifted his left arm, examined it closely. His face was a mask of steel, his eyes streaks of black light.

Embarrassed, Marty tugged his arm free. Freeman was an old acquaintance, and he'd been swell to Sheila, but still, the younger man felt no rush to confide in him. He had an innate distrust of anything tinged with Broadway. "I caught it on a nail," he said lightly, holding out a cigarette to the agent.

"In a pig's eye!" snapped Freeman. "Or was it this kind of a nail?" With a swift motion, he palmed a blue-black automatic in his hand.

Marty gasped. "Put that thing away," he said. "Where'd you get it?" The floor felt unsteady beneath him.

"From the tomato who took a pot at you," Freeman said, his voice low. "I clipped him before he could fire another and he dropped the gun. He got away in the crowd. He shot at you over the rear tire of a cab. What goes, kid? You'd better level."

"I don't know," said Marty. Feeling shaken, he sank into a threadbare arm chair. "I don't know a thing. He must have thought I was somebody else."

He paused, and the agent cut in. "Yeah?" he countered cynically. "He tailed you all the way down the block when you left the cab. I was on my way to pick up Sheila, and if I hadn't been, you'd be gefilte fish now. So level off. Maybe I can help." He slid the gun back into his pocket.

MARTY shook his head helplessly. All at once, for the first time since he'd left Europe, he felt afraid. Afraid of nothing and nobody—of everything and everybody. Recognizing the onrush of panic, he checked it firmly. "I still don't know," he said. "But thanks, Stan. I seem to owe you one life."

"Skip it, kid," said Freeman softly. "You're only one of my worries. It's close to Sheila, too. And she's important to me. You kids were in Europe together and came back on the same boat. You didn't get in any Gestapo jams or anything, did you?"

Marty managed to laugh. "Hardly," he said. "We only wanted out, and no one wanted to hold us. Americans aren't popular on the Continent these days. We barely knew each other till the boat. It was probably one of the murder syndicate on a busman's holiday. Anyway, he missed me."

The agent shook his head doubtfully. "Maybe," he said. "But I think not. I got enough of a look at this hood to know he's no kid. And these syndicate torpedoes are babies. They don't last. If the cops don't get 'em, their own friends do. This was a man. What's more, he wore a tuxedo."

"Anybody we know?" asked Marty with a jocosity he did not feel.

Freeman shook his head. "I didn't get that much of a look. Hello, Sheila. Thanks. That's a nice dark drink."

"I know you like a lot of proof," said the girl, smiling. She handed Marty a milder-looking mixture, took an even weaker one herself. "Here's to the old name in neons." She raised her glass. The toast finished, she perched on the arm of Marty's chair and ruffled his short brown hair. With a quick intake of breath, the younger man realized for the fortieth time that she had a smashingly good figure. Her legs were long and not too lean, and did not bulge at the thighs.

"Listen, kids," said Freeman. "I hate to be sordid, but I take it we're all interested in promoting the career of one Miss Sheila Gerome. Well, this turkey you're in now, kid, is folding Saturday. If the speculators hadn't bitten too deep in the first place it would have been a dead dog two weeks ago."

"I figured on another week," said Sheila. "Tell me, Stan, what's happened to playwrighting? Oh, hell, I suppose it's the old story. Hollywood has them all. Get me there, Stan."

"Not so fast, babe," said Freeman. "I'm not sending you out there at any one-fifty per, to be dropped at the end of six months. You've got what it takes, Sheila, and it's my job to get it out where those blind bats can take it in and pay for it."

"Thanks, Stan," said the girl softly. She was leaning forward now, a line of

concentration between her softly arched brows.

Freeman made a derisive noise. "Can it," he said. "You know you've got it, and I know it, and Marty here knows it, and so does London. Which gets us nowhere. But I've got a play. No one knows the author, but he's good, and a kid always stands a fair chance these days. I planked down half a grand for the option today, and it's made to order for you, kid. Even if it flops, I can peddle you for enough on the strength of it to cover."

"What's the hitch?" asked Marty quietly.

Freeman opened his arms, managed not to spill any of the drink in his hand. "What do you suppose it is?" he asked wearily. "Dough, mazuma, the old buckaroos. I'm strapped. This kid playwright claims he can dig up eight grand or so. Which leaves us ten grand short. How about it, Marty? You've got to smell us up an angle."

"I don't see how," said the younger man. "You know I'm on a dole from the dear old British government. I can't draw out a cent." He sipped his drink thoughtfully, puffed his cigarette.

"It's funny," said Freeman, his low forehead knotted, "that your old man's folks didn't have something in the old sock when they died. I knew your granddad, and he was a pretty shrewd old boy where the shekels were concerned."

"You knew my father, too," said Marty succinctly.

Freeman winced. "That's right," he said. "Still, it doesn't add to four. That was an awful lot of dough. And if the till's empty why should anyone want to take—"

He paused, and Marty knew what he'd been about to say. Why should anyone want to take a pot at him with a pistol? That *was* one for the quiz programs. Marty shook his head, and Sheila looked from one to the other of them. "Want to what?" she asked.

"Never mind," said Freeman firmly. "Think it over, will you, Marty? Maybe you can see an angle somewhere. It's a two-way lead pipe cinch. In the first place, the play should go. If it does, we cash in. If it doesn't, we still cash in with

Sheila. We peddle the play with her."

"I feel like a cross between a ball player and the well-known Christian slave," said the girl. The telephone rang, and she rose gracefully to answer it. With a grimace, she beckoned to Marty, handed him the instrument, and turned away.

THE voice was feminine and deep. "Marty? Is that you, Marty?" it asked. He groaned silently. When he'd packed his father off to the theater with Amelia Porter, he'd forgotten entirely the explosive Mona Correll. She was probably on the warpath.

But her next words belied this. They came as a gasp of relief. "Thank God!" she said. "Thank God you're all right! I've got to see you—right away." Her usually vibrant tones sounded low and flat as if her vocal chords were paralyzed.

Marty decided she'd been drinking. "I'm tied up with friends just now," he said. "Maybe later on. Take it easy, Mona—"

"You can't," she said, and her tone was a plea. "You can't. It—it's a matter of your life, perhaps mine. I'm in your room now. I talked the elevator boy into letting me in. Hurry!"

Something in her voice—its lack of histrionic volume, perhaps—convinced Marty she was not acting. His life—perhaps hers. He thought suddenly of the tear in his sleeve. "Hold the fort," he told her. "I'm on my way." He hung up.

As soon as he turned around, he knew that Sheila was angry. Her eyes were flecked with yellow. Freeman shook his head reprovingly. "Mona Correll's bad business," he said. "She's your father's worst yet. And he's had some beauts. I ought to know. I've handled some of them for him. Why don't you forget the whole thing?"

Marty went to where his coat and hat lay over a chair and put them on. "I can't," he said. "She's in my rooms and she's scared. I'll let you know what's what. Thanks, Sheila. I'll do what I can on the money. But don't expect too much." He left a hard silence in the room behind him.

Riding back across town, he swore softly to himself. Sheila was sore at him now, and so was Stan. If Mona had

nothing important to say to him— He didn't even want to think about it. While Sheila was a well-controlled person, she had plenty of temperament. Fire and ice. That was Sheila. Mona was just fire, and not his fire either. Oddly, he thought of Virginia. Ice, just ice.

But Mona had sounded scared. He visioned her lush brunette beauty, her full-mouthed, volatile vitality. His own relationship with her was odd, inherently difficult. Had she not been so inextricably tangled in his father's affairs, he might have liked her well enough. She was an amiable if unscrupulous sort of girl, a born courtesan of the type he'd grown to know in his years abroad. Fairly intelligent, basically shrewd, explosively beautiful.

She'd had a hard time, of course. Perhaps half as hard as Laurence Brogard had made it in his labored explanations to his son. Which was hard enough. Small-time night clubs, tawdry rooming houses, unpaid salaries. Marty didn't blame her for tying onto his father, though he thought that, from her worldly point of view, she'd made a ghastly mistake.

Once she'd grown out of being scared of him, she'd tried hard enough to make friends. For which he was grateful. She could have made things a lot more unpleasant all around and still been within her human rights. Emotional, she wasn't yellow. If she were really scared, she probably had good reason for it.

Which brought him back to his starting point—somebody'd taken a shot at him. Deliberately, if Stanley Freeman were to be believed. And why should anyone murder him? He had no special enemies, no money. Or had he? But even if he had his wealth under his hand, what good would his murder do anyone? He gave it up.

Still, the tear in his sleeve was real enough. And Freeman's appearance with the gun had been opportune. Or was it more than that? Though, of all people, he failed to see why the agent should want him dead. He wasn't interfering with Sheila's career. Which reminded him that the girl was angry with him. Which in turn brought him back to Mona's purpose in calling him there. For that matter, how had the latter known

where to reach him? He gave it up, decided to let her tell him in person. Settling back in the cab, he lit a cigarette.

AS HE left the elevator and walked along the corridor to the rooms he shared with Johnnie O'Brien, his fear returned, gripping the base of his stomach, turning his knees to gelatine, and making him want to look behind him. Suppose someone were to pop out of a room and shoot him in the back? It was like that horror of childhood—being afraid of something that one knows is not there. He shrugged it off.

The lights were on in his living-room. He took his coat and hat off, looked around. Yes, and there was a little cluster of half-smoked magenta-tipped cigarettes in the ashtray on the end table by the sofa. A faint wisp of blue smoke rose from a still-smouldering butt. But where was Mona? He scratched his brown hair.

Perhaps the bathroom—but no, the door was open. He looked in, switched on the light. Everything was in order. The towels hung neatly on the racks as the maid had left them, and the mirrors on the walls returned his questing glance inscrutably. Puzzled, he turned away.

It was then that he saw the dark spot on the white tile floor, half in the shadow cast by the basin. In his irritated bewilderment, this annoyed him. The maid might at least have done a decent job of cleaning up the place. He took a face towel, stooped down, and brushed at it hard. It came away easily, and he rose.

Suddenly, as he looked at the towel, he felt the back of his neck prickle. In the full light, that stain was bright red. Bright red! If it had been a spot of blood left by Johnnie or himself while shaving earlier, it would have been black and hard. And it was blood, all right. No doubt of it. He'd seen enough in war-torn Europe to know it when he saw it.

His eyes picked up another round dark stain on the hall carpet close to the bathroom threshold. He bent, stuck a finger in it. Yes, it was still damp. And there was another grisly spot on the rug near his bedroom door. Tongue cleaving to the roof of a suddenly dry mouth, he went into his chamber, pressed the switch.

He half leaned, half fell against the

door jamb. Mona Correll was sitting on the floor, her back against the bed. Her eyes stared at him, but they did not see him. Her hair showed smooth-combed in its brunette brilliance. But the lower half of her face was a crimson beard. There was blood on her shoulders, down the front of her dress, in a pool on the floor where she sat. From the way her head sagged, Marty could see the gash that started down in a rapid arc under her right ear.

CHAPTER THREE

Little Man From Homicide

THE next twenty minutes went by like an especially unpleasant nightmare. Marty gave the alarm, handling the phone with a handkerchief to save fingerprints, then sat down in the living-room and waited for the police. After what seemed like a good two hours, actually less than ten minutes, the first harness men arrived, followed quickly by Homicide detectives and experts, who swarmed through the three rooms like a crew of worker bees, quiet and efficient. None of it seemed real to Marty after that first shock of finding Mona lying murdered in his bedroom. All the while, he reproached himself for taking her call lightly.

When the fog finally lifted, he found himself seated on Johnnie O'Brien's bed, smoking a cigarette. A thin little man, remarkable for his lack of distinguishing features, was gazing at him quizzically. "I thought that cigarette might help," he drawled in a pleasant, rather high-pitched voice. "For awhile there I figured we'd have to cart you away with the corpse. Who does your killing around here?"

Things crashed back into focus. Marty looked at his questioner searchingly. "Who are you?" he asked.

The little man laughed without mirth. "I'm Lanning," he said. "Sergeant, Homicide Bureau. At the moment, I'm in charge of this case. O. K., Mr. Brogard?" He chuckled at the mixed expressions on Marty's face. "If you want to know how I knew your name, I asked. Need a drink? I do."

Marty gulped and nodded. Sergeant Lanning was unexpectedly disarming.

"There ought to be a bottle in the closet over there," Marty said, nodding toward it. "On the lower shelf. That is, if my roommate hasn't killed it."

Lanning got up and found the bottle. His eyes gleamed briefly as he read the label. "Need a chaser?" he asked.

The younger man shook his head, unscrewed the stopper, and took a healthy pull. He needed that drink. Lanning took the bottle from him, held it to his lips, and swallowed a good five ounces of Scotch without flinching. "Never could stand the sight of shock," he said with a flicker of thin lips that might have passed for a smile. He put the bottle down. "O. K., Brogard," he said. "Let's have it. Who are you? Who's the corpse? Who's your roommate? How did it happen? Only you'll probably be wanting a lawyer for that. You guys don't often want to talk—at first."

"Why not?" countered Marty. "I didn't do it."

He felt quick anger as Lanning groaned: "Don't give me that routine, boy. It's corny." Then he forgot his anger as the real questions came. Since his father's life had always been an open and much too widely read book, he saw no use in holding it back.

"My name is Martin Van Buren Brogard," he said. "My father is Laurence Brogard, and the dead girl, Mona Correll, was—well, she was his protégée. But, for Pete's sake, soft pedal that if you can." He went on from there to tell his own background and the curious pattern of events into which the evening had fallen.

"Who's this O'Brien?" Lanning asked him.

"He's my best friend," Marty said. "If you haven't heard of him, it's because he's lived mostly in Europe."

"One of these expatriate beachcombers?" asked the detective sharply.

Marty shook his head. "Hell, no," he said. "Johnnie works. He's promoted everything from resorts to bearded ladies. And made them pay. He knew enough French to make a stake for himself there and stick. He'll get off here pretty soon. His only trouble is that the Nazis have his money in Paris."

"Worse off than you, eh?" said Lan-

ning. "Now here's one you won't want to answer." He paused, looking for words. "You weren't, by any chance, jealous of your old man over this girl, were you?" he said finally, watching Marty to see traces of surliness or anger. But the younger man merely shook his head wearily.

"Lord, no," he said, grinding out his smoke. "I got along with her and that's about all. Same difference with her, as far as I know. This was her first visit here. I've been running with a swell girl—keep this quiet too, will you, sergeant? Her name's Sheila Gerome, and she has a bit in *Yesterday's Lace* over on Broadway. I didn't see any more of Mona than I had to, naturally. You should be able to understand me when I say it was a bit on the delicate side for both of us. I was surprised when she called me at Sheila's and told me she was over here."

"How'd she know where you were?" Lanning asked. Marty shrugged helplessly. The detective tapped his foot. He let it go for the time being. Then, "What made you come here?" he asked.

MARTY hesitated. So far he'd kept agent Stanley Freeman out of his story. The ten per center wouldn't want to be involved in a murder case. But it was strictly every man for himself, and Freeman would have to take his own chances. Marty told the detective how Freeman had turned up after the shooting in the alley, showed again the tear in his sleeve. All he left out was the gun.

"Naturally then," he concluded, "when Mona called and said it was a matter of my life, I was in good shape to believe her. I rooted down here fast, found her like that, and called the desk. I used a handkerchief on the phone and was careful. Then I guess I went sort of *non compos mentis* until just now."

He lit another cigarette, waited for more questions. But none came. Lanning got up and paced the floor. Then he opened the bedroom door, called to another detective, and gave him a string of rapid low-voiced orders which Marty could not hear. After which, he returned to his chair and reached again for the bottle.

Marty was beginning to realize that

he was very close to being in a bad spot. He eyed the little investigator anxiously. "How about it?" he asked. "What are you going to do?"

Lanning took his time with the drink, handed over the bottle. "We're taking it easy until Carruthers checks up," he said. "There she goes."

Tramping feet in the foyer indicated that the medical examiner's men were taking away what had been, not many minutes before, the opulently lovely Miss Mona Correll. Marty shivered, and Lanning smiled again. "Kind of gets you, doesn't it, I hope," he said without emotion. Marty nodded, wondering what the words implied. A sudden unpleasant vision of prison danced before him.

"I don't get it," said Lanning suddenly, as if talking to himself. "Everybody goes along happy and broke, and then, out of a clear sky you get sniped at, and this—er—friend of your dad's calls on you and gets her throat carved. Nobody has a motive, unless there's a hooded stranger around. Brogard, either you're lying like hell or I'm going out of my head. How does it sound?"

"Lousy," said Marty. "But that's the way it was—at least, as far as I'm concerned. I don't like it either." He reached for an ashtray, ground out his cigarette, and prayed that the investigating Carruthers would uncover no flaws in his story. Even though it was true.

Marty took another drink to ease his nerves, but it had no effect. Lanning just sat there thinking, wreathed in smoke, and his silence was wearing on the younger man. Finally, someone knocked on the door. Lanning answered it and stepped outside, stayed there for a good ten minutes by the alarm clock on Johnnie's bureau. It wasn't a pleasant wait.

Cold sweat broke out all over him as he sat there. The more he thought about it, the worse it got. Every time he tried to find an answer, he ran smack into that wall of incomprehensibility. He felt desperately alone. Sheila, his father, Johnnie, and the Porters were all well out in the clear. He wondered frantically how long it had taken him to call the desk after coming to his room. He'd pattered around a bit before finding

Mona. If the police decided he'd had time enough to do the job, he'd be in for it and no mistake. With which thought he perspired some more.

When the detective came back, his face was not encouraging. All friendliness had gone from his manner, and Marty saw that the little man was probably a very tough cop indeed when he had to be. He didn't even cast an eye on the bottle of Scotch which still sat on the bedside table. He stood over Marty, scowling.

"You'd better go out and buy yourself some new friends, kid," he said.

Marty gulped. "How come?" he asked, with what was intended to be a smile, but missed.

"Some of them say you weren't at Sheila Gerome's at all tonight," the detective said quietly.

Marty gulped again. "Who says so?" he asked, and his voice cracked a little. "Good Lord, Sergeant, I was there all right. Sheila, Freeman, the elevator man. They must have seen me. You're trying to bluff me into a frame!"

"Shut up!" snapped Lanning viciously. "I never framed a guy in my life. I never had to." In anger, his voice dropped a full register. "Miss Gerome says she's still waiting to hear from you, that you stood her up. Freeman says he wants to talk business with you when you come. Something about raising dough to angel a show for Miss Gerome. The elevator man just says you haven't shown up tonight. 'Yes,' he says, 'I know Mr. Brogard. Mr. Brogard hasn't come up with me.' How do you like those apples, Mr. Brogard? Got anything to say?"

ANGER, a sense of betrayal, and utter defeat battled within him. But there was little he could say. A denial of the testimony would make him sound more foolish than he already did. And if he didn't deny it, he was up against it. Then a ray of light burst through the blackness of his thoughts.

"What about motive?" he asked. "I had no reason to kill her. We may not have been friends, but we weren't enemies. And what about a weapon? I'd have needed something to kill her with." He paused, his face intent on Lanning's.

The detective merely smiled, and his smile was crooked and unpleasant.

"I'm not worrying about motive," he said grimly. "I got a good look at Miss Correll after they washed her face. That gal was enough motive for twenty murders on her looks alone. No jury'd count to ten. They'd think you were a lucky dog and shake your hand and send you to the chair with a leer.

"As for the weapon, we have that down in the laboratory now undergoing a checkup. But it's no mystery. What's more, you use it every day of your life." He paused, looked closely at Marty's jowls. "No, probably every other day in your case."

"You mean," said Marty, jumping to his feet, "that my razor killed Mona?" He waited, incredulous, until the detective nodded.

"That's our baby," said Lanning. "No doubt about it. Whoever did it put the blade back in the razor, but didn't wipe it off so good. Any more questions, Mr. Brogard?"

"For God's sake!" said the younger man. "If you're going to arrest me, get it over with. I didn't do it, but I know when I'm licked. I'll need a lawyer to solve this one."

He waited, angry at the world, sick about the murder, but Lanning produced no handcuffs, gave no orders. Instead, he reached for the now depleted bottle and offered Marty a drink. "You'll need this," he said quietly, "when you hear what I'm going to say." Marty took it without comment, floated some down.

"I'm not arresting you," said Lanning, taking the whiskey himself and eyeing its remnant disapprovingly. "I'm letting you go." He smiled, no longer angry, as the younger man sank stupidly down on the bed.

"I don't get it," said Marty.

"Sorry, kid," said the detective. "I had to make the pitch in case you were covering anything up. I couldn't make a case against you if I tried. Not a case any fresh young law school graduate couldn't punch full of holes."

"I thought you said you never framed a guy in your life," said Marty reproachfully. "You mean Sheila and Stan Freeman came through for me, and you let

me believe that—" He shook his head.

"That's the screwiest part of it," said Lanning. "They *didn't* come through for you. That part was on the level. No one remembered seeing you at the girl's apartment house tonight." He stopped, enjoying Marty's obvious confusion.

"Then how do you figure I was there?" the younger man asked. He wondered if he weren't dreaming after all. Nothing going on seemed to make sense.

"Did you ever hear of a switchboard?" Lanning countered. Marty nodded. "O.K., then," the detective went on. "This hotel has one. It so happens that the operator has Miss Correll's call to you written down in her book. This room number's on it, so is Sheila Gerome's number. What's more, she listened in to some of it—to make sure the connection was made—she *says*. It checks with the yarn you spun for me. So we know that your pals are telling fibs."

"I still don't get it," said Marty. He was suffering from an acute case of let-down. "Sheila's supposed to be my girl. I thought—well, maybe I'm just another sap with delusions, but I thought she liked me. So why would she do a thing like that?"

"Don't ask me," said Lanning quietly. "I'm not Sheila. And people do funny things in a murder case."

"How'd she know it was a murder case?" Marty asked.

Again Lanning shook his head. "She *says* she didn't," he replied. "But you'd better hear the rest of this while I feel like talking. First, you called for help less than two minutes after the elevator boy let you out at this floor. Second, whoever did it, must have got some blood on him. Carotids have a way of spurting like grapefruit when you slice 'em. Third, that tear in your sleeve looks authentic. Only a bullet could cut the weave of that cloth so clean. Now it doesn't look like I can pin much of a case on you, does it?"

MARTY said: "I guess not." He took another quick drink, offered the rest of the bottle to Lanning, who took it. The younger man wondered how he did it. Now that the pressure was off, he could feel the whiskey he'd imbibed. But little Lanning, who had absorbed

twice as much, appeared to be unaffected. Marty's respect for the detective sergeant was growing in long strides.

"Now in letting you go," said Lanning earnestly, holding the empty bottle like a scepter on his knee, "I want you to get a couple of things in your head and keep them there. I'm a Homicide dick, but it's part of my job to keep people from getting knocked off. So I'm putting a tail on you, and I don't want you cutting any capers with my boy. One slip, and you go into protective custody so fast you'll think it's all a dream. Somebody's after you. I don't know why, and you say *you* don't, but it's no game of polo."

He paused to light a cigarette, shook out the match. "You may be live bait, get it? So keep your eyes open. I only want you in the clear so whoever took a pot at you and killed this gal here will make another pass. If you get even a smell of trouble, no matter how foolish it seems, don't wait for developments. Call me at Spring 7-3100. I've made arrangements to have the call routed through to me wherever I am. Can you remember that?"

"Spring 7-3100, Sergeant Lanning," said Marty dutifully. This little detective was the one pleasant thing that had happened to him all evening. Why had Sheila let him down in what had come so close to being a disastrous spot? He shook his head.

As he did so, the little sergeant studied him. Brogard was a good-looking trick, he reflected with a twinge of envy for his youth, height, and general stamp of breeding. Plenty of class. He smiled as he saw the muscles tighten in the younger man's cheeks.

"Going out?" he asked.

Marty nodded. "I hope your man is ready," he said. "I'm making tracks in about two minutes to get the answers to a couple of questions. Maybe I'll make more sense when I find out what's what."

"I hope so," said Lanning. "You wouldn't, by any chance, be paying a second visit to Miss Sheila Gerome?"

Marty nodded curtly. "You're on the beam," he said. "Miss Gerome and a certain not-so-young man are going to have to answer a lot of things."

"You can put the young lady aboard for all you want to," snapped Lanning, his eyes alight. "But you'll pass Freeman."

"The hell you say," said Marty. "I have a solid idea that he's the cause of Sheila's behavior. And as her boy friend—I hope—I don't go for the way she's been behaving. So I'm going to pin Stan Freeman down and get me a box score."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," said Lanning. He chuckled. "Yes, Freeman's in jail. We picked him up at your girl's place, getting out of a cab. The driver said he'd brought him down here and then taken him back. When we frisked him, we found a gun on him. It had been fired. So we locked him up. Know anything about the gun?"

Marty hesitated, thought of the spot the agent had put him in. "No," he said, shaking his head slowly. "He never told me about any gun."

CHAPTER FOUR

Marty Learns About Women

MARTY went to Sheila's door unannounced. The elevator operator turned a pale green when he saw him, but neither man spoke. Much as he desired to plant a fist on the point of the lift runner's receding chin, Marty kept his hands in his pockets, where they unconsciously clenched themselves into fists.

When Sheila answered her door, her tawny eyes opened wide. Still fully dressed, she stood aside to let him in. He walked to the center of the room, lit a cigarette, and said: "Hello, dear. Surprised to see me?" His voice was thin with sarcasm.

She stared at him for a moment, then parked herself in a chair. "Yes," she said quietly. "I *am* surprised to see you."

She paused, and he blew smoke through his nose. "I don't know why you should be," he said. "I promised to come back and tell what went. I usually keep my promises. Maybe I'm a bit different."

"Stop it! Stop it!" she said, blazing. "I've just been through a session with the police. And something's happened to Stan. I won't sit here and have you browbeat me. Can't you see I'm tired?"

"Take the ham from your center layer," said Marty quietly. Just now he was in no mood for histrionics. "If anybody has a right to be mad, it's me. Or maybe I'm just allergic to having people I trust try and hang murder raps around my neck."

She was silent for a moment, staring at him, her forehead wrinkled in thought. She bit her lower lip. "I didn't try to hang anything on you, Marty," she said quietly. "It was just—oh, hell—it's hard to explain. It was just what seemed to be the best thing to do—for you, I mean. Can't you understand?"

"Frankly, no," he said. He heard his voice rise, pulled it back under control. Shouting wasn't his line. "Maybe I'm a little stupid," he went on. "But let's see if I can get it straight. You tell me that you fixed things so that I'd look like a killer for my own good? That it would be better for me to burn in the electric chair than poor Mona's real killer? That it would be good for my soul to find out you're a far more slippery article than I've ever dreamt of being? Sheila, Sheila. It just doesn't add."

She rose, clasping her elbows, and moved to a window with all of her trained grace. "I'm awfully tired of all this," she said without looking at him. "I want publicity, yes—but not the sort that goes with the murder of a middle-aged man's mistress. I suppose you think that will help me get parts. Anyway," she paused effectively, "the cover-up idea was all Stan's. He did it for you."

"Good God!" said Marty. He went over to her and spun her around. "Career, career, career! Even in a jam like this one. Who do you think you're kidding? Not even Stan can convince me that this cover-up was good for my health. Come through, Sheila. What's it all about? I have a right to know."

"I suppose so," she said listlessly. "I still think the whole thing is a sordid mess. Stan told me that he'd seen somebody shoot at you. He was worried. When you left, he followed you to be sure nothing else happened. Then he called me, said that your father's friend had been murdered, told me to fix the elevator boy so that it would look as if you hadn't been here. He said you'd be

a lot safer in prison for a few days until the case was broken. I've been waiting for him to come back. You came instead. Satisfied?"

Marty sat down again, trying to think it out. Sheila stood over him, her arms still crossed, her face a mask betraying no emotion. Her story was fantastic. Yes, almost fantastic enough to be true from her point of view. But what about Freeman? Marty was still far from satisfied as to his role in the earlier attempted shooting. And how had he found out so quickly about Mona Correll's murder? Or what could have prevented him from getting to the hotel first, committing the murder, and then calling Sheila? It made no sense as to motive, but neither did any theory so far, and it was certainly feasible. Marty shook his head, looked at the girl.

"I don't suppose," he said slowly, "that it occurred to you just how damaging that little 'cover-up' of yours nearly was to me. If, largely by luck, the police hadn't been able to expose it, I'd have been sunk. No one would have believed you when you came forward to tell the truth. You'd have looked like any other girl trying to save the life of a boy she likes by grabbing at a lot of fictitious straws. You can see how helpful Stan meant to be."

THE girl turned pale beneath the light freckles that spanned the bridge of her nose. Her knuckles showed white where they gripped her elbows. "I didn't think of that," she said shakily, then turned back to the window. "But I was really trying to help. And so was Stan. He'll explain it all when he gets back here."

"Yes, *when* he gets back here," said Marty, and his voice was hard. "That's very good indeed. I wouldn't keep a lamp in the window for brother Freeman tonight, Sheila."

"What do you mean?" she asked swinging around quickly and dropping her arms. "Has something happened to him?" She waited, her face tense, a Marty nodded.

"That's right," he said. "The police caught up with him after they found you both were lying about me. He had a gun on him, so they took him downtown."

"I know about the gun," she said. "He showed it to me."

Marty laughed. "To me too," he said, "but I didn't tell that to the police. See here, Sheila, how do you know that your pal Stanley isn't the one who's trying to put the crusher on me? He's been getting to just the right places. And he's certainly acted the part."

"Don't be a bigger fool than nature made you!" snapped Sheila. Her eyes were once more flecked with yellow. "Why should he? I hope you realize what you've done. You've gotten him in expensive trouble just when he'll need every cent he can beg, borrow, or scrape together to get this play started for me!"

"Don't be a bigger heel than nature made you," said a voice from the doorway. Both of them jumped, turned, saw Johnnie O'Brien standing there, a crooked grin on his young-old face. He closed the door behind him carefully. "You left it open," he said mildly, "so I couldn't help hearing. Still on the make and nothing else, aren't you, babe? It seems like old times."

The girl blazed, her arms rigid by her sides, her fists clenched tight. But before she could find words, Johnnie was by his roommate, patting him on the shoulder. "They told me you were here down at headquarters," he said. "Boy, what a going-over I got! It's tough luck, kid. How's your old man taking it?"

"I don't know," said Marty, reminded of his parent and his probable grief. "I haven't seen him yet. As you can see, I've been busy." He paused, and Sheila found words.

"Marty!" she snapped. "If you're a friend of mine, get this phoney promoter out of here. I've endured him for your sake, but I'm not going to stand for him a moment longer. Get him out of here. He'd never leave by himself."

"You're God damn well right I won't," said Johnnie. "Not while you're pulling your act-two finale on any friend of mine. Look here, Marty, I've been keeping shut, because you're old enough to come in out of the rain, and I believe in giving a girl a break as long as she keeps in line. But I'm not keeping shut any longer—not now."

Sheila shrugged her shoulders. "I've

been expecting this," she said. "I knew he'd play rat sooner or later. I suppose it's better here where I can listen in." She leaned back against the wall and folded her arms once more.

Marty was puzzled. "What in hell is this all about?" he asked.

"Not so much," said Johnnie. "Just Sheila. I picked her up in Paris five years ago. She was part of a trick bicycle act. I got her started, made an actress of her—she's got talent and a desire to learn, I'll have to grant her that. But she left me flat for a fat English producer who could get her a part. And left me with a flock of busted contracts in Paris. I'm not letting her do the same thing to you, thank you. Ambition's her only trouble."

Marty looked at her. "Is this straight?" he asked.

She nodded. "I guess so," she said, "though it isn't as bad as Johnnie makes it sound. I had a big chance, and I took it. If you'd been kicked around as much as I've been, you wouldn't be too choosy about the way you get to the top. And that's where I'm going—with you, Marty, or Stan, or anyone who'll lift me up there."

"You're not going with Marty," said Johnnie evenly. "Not after tonight. And you're not going with Freeman if he gets out of jail. Remember those pieces of paper you left me with—laughingly called contracts? Well, I was so fed up I laid off you. But I'm not fed up now. I'm scaring up some money somehow, and taking you with me. I don't care whose money it is—yours, Marty, or Freeman's—because I'll see to it that no one gets robbed. How do you like that, Sheila?"

"I haven't much choice, have I?" she said. She sat down and lit a cigarette. "I'll do my best to clip you, you know, Johnnie. Point of honor." She looked at him shrewdly, and Marty, suddenly tired, got up. He still had his coat on.

Johnnie gave him another pat on the back. "Don't be too sore at me, babe," he said. "It's better this way. I can handle her and like it. It would be just hard work for you. I failed before because I let my emotions get mixed up in it. But never again. Where are you going to stay?"

"I don't know," said Marty. "Not home. The police will know. I guess I'd better find my old man." He didn't feel like shaking hands with Johnnie just then, even though he knew his friend had done him a great service. The whole affair, coming on top of Mona's murder, had put an unpleasant taste in his mouth. Outside, the night air felt clean in his lungs. He decided to go to the hotel and pack a few things, then stay somewhere else. When he got there, the policeman on guard at his door stood aside to let him pass.

HE'D barely thrown his suitcase on the bed, when the blue-coated officer stuck his head through the door. "There's a lady here to see you," he said.

Marty passed a hand through his hair. "What is this?" he asked. "Visiting day? O. K., show her in, if she doesn't feel like getting murdered here. I don't want it to become a habit." He waited, wondering, as Virginia Porter came in with a rush.

She stopped short when she saw him, her mink coat flying about her in soft heavy folds. "Oh, Marty," she said, surprised. "You went right by me in the lobby without seeing me. I've been waiting for hours. Ever since the police asked me about tonight. I'm so damned sorry, Marty. Is there anything I can do?"

"Go home to mama," he growled rudely. He was in no mood for Virginia at that moment.

Her eyebrows rose. "Go to hell yourself," she snapped back. "Mama isn't home." In spite of himself, he grinned.

"Then go to Manoel," he said. She laid a long white, rose-tipped finger on her lips, turned on the portable radio by his bed. A swing band sent its brassy cacophonies through the room.

"Ah, Manoel," she exclaimed, doing a dance turn with unexpected grace. "He find Amereeka veree sharmeeng. Ze so sharmeeng girls. But none so sharmeeng as—" She stopped, lowered her eyes modestly. "See what I mean?" she said. "See what I'm giving up for a dog like you?"

"Veree sharmeeng," snorted Marty. "You're not giving up anything for me, darling. Not if I see you first." Then,

suddenly, he grinned and sat down on the bed. Virginia, her mother and sharp tongue notwithstanding, was a lift. Even with this Manoel business. "Hey," he said. "Call down and see if the bar's still open and order up a couple of double Scotches. I need a drink before I move."

"That's more like it," she said, and went to the phone. She asked him no questions about the murder, though he could read the curiosity in her eyes. And for that he was grateful. He didn't feel like talking about it just then. The drinks came, and they sipped at them while the dance music droned on in its endless four-four beat. Marty was too tired to do much thinking. But he could not shove the murder and the shot at himself from his thoughts. Sheila was not so difficult to erase. The last scene in her apartment had been unpleasant, but he guessed now she'd been more an idea of his than the real thing. So he knew about women! He snorted.

"Come again?" said Virginia.

He grinned at her sheepishly. "I'm just laughing at myself," he said. "We'd better get going. I want to find dad. He must be pretty broken up."

"You should be with him, I suppose," said the girl. She bit her lip. "Was it right here?" she asked. Marty glanced at her, saw the dark spot on the rug where she stood.

"Right where you are now," he said. "Leaning against the bed. Call the old man for me, will you, Virgin?"

She stepped hastily off the bloodstain, went again to the telephone. "He doesn't answer," she said after awhile.

Marty shook his head. "That's funny," he said. "You don't suppose my dad and your mother . . . No, that doesn't make sense." He shook his head, finished his drink, and set down the glass.

"It's a thought, isn't it?" the girl countered. "What a clambake that would be!" Her blue eyes gleamed brightly. Then she saw the lines of fatigue on his face, and her gaze softened. "Poor Marty," she said, putting an arm on his shoulder.

He looked at it, saw the inside of her sleeve. "Hey!" he said. "You've had a moth."

"You're telling me," she replied, pull-

ing her mink-swathed arm away. "This coat is four years old."

He glanced at her quizzically. "How come?" he asked. "I thought you wore ermine pajamas and drank coffee out of sapphire cups at breakfast."

"Mother's myth," she said, laughing. "We've been living off our principal for years."

Her face was serious. Marty screwed his forehead up, trying to figure this out. "But I thought," he said. "Oh hell, then why the big effort to get you married to me, or vice versa? I haven't got a bean either, the way things are now."

"It's a theory of mother's," said Virginia. "She thinks prestige is more important than money. Why? Does it matter?" She looked at him with an odd little-girl expectancy in her face.

"Oddly enough," he said, "it does. Though not, I fear me, in the way you'd expect it to. Come on. Let's get going."

IT WAS five minutes to two o'clock then, and the radio came on with its news flashes. Marty was busy jamming the top of his suitcase closed, paying no attention, when the girl grabbed his arm with a sudden tense grip. He looked around, surprised, then listened.

". . . And now for developments in the local story that has crowded the war and the mayor's speech over to the side of page one. I'm speaking of the murder of Mona Correll, former night-club and theater entertainer, who was found with her throat cut this evening in the hotel bedroom of the son of her closest friend, clubman and socialite Laurence Brogard. Martin Brogard, Laurence's son, himself reported the killing to the police and was released after questioning.

"At the moment, police are still hunting Brogard Senior, who attended a Broadway play last night at the Belasco Theater in the company of Mrs. Amelia Porter, herself a well-known member of Gotham café society, but vanished during the first-act intermission. Mrs. Porter, who has since disappeared herself, could shed no light on his whereabouts. Detectives working on the case say they expect an early solution to New York's latest upper-crust killing."

"God!" said Marty. "We're in the

same boat. We'd better do something. The police must be watching the old man's place, so let's drop my bag there and go on a hunt for your mother. Why on earth would she want to do a fade-out?"

"If your daddy walked out on her at the theater," said Virginia, "she'd have been mad enough to pull anything. Come on."

They hurried from the suite, nodding to the police guard, who was talking to a tall man in plain clothes near the elevators. The latter nodded to them, got into their car with them when it arrived to take them down. Virginia's eyebrows went up again, almost dislodging her hat from its forecastle perch.

"By courtesy of the police department," said Marty, nodding toward the stranger. "Let's let him ride with us. Then he can graft the taxi fare on his expense account. He's supposed to tag along anyway and keep nasty men from shooting at me."

Virginia's eyes went wide, and he had to tell her about the attempted shooting in the cab. She seemed genuinely upset. "But why should anyone want to kill you, Marty?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "That's what Sergeant Lanning and this officer and I would like to know," he said. "Got any ideas?"

"It's horrible," she said. "Don't joke about it." They rode in silence the rest of the short distance.

"I'm just leaving this bag at my father's," said Marty to the detective. "You can wait here." He and Virginia rode on up. Marty had a key, and with it he opened the door.

The apartment was dark, and he reached for the light switch. As he turned it on, with terrifying suddenness somebody groaned.

CHAPTER FIVE

Human Clay Pigeon

AMELIA PORTER, her clothes rumpled, her usually impeccable hair disheveled, was sitting in a straight chair in the living-room. Her ankles and wrists were bound to the chair-legs and arms

with strips of cloth torn from one of the window drapes, and a similar strip was tied tight around her lower face. As Marty pulled it away and took the handkerchief from her mouth, he saw an ugly purple bruise on the side of her jaw.

She had to be helped to her feet, no longer the pseudo grande dame, but a rough, raging, profanely articulate female. "The dirty so-an-so!" she rasped. "He slugged me from behind when I came in here and left me like this in the dark."

"Who did, Mother?" Virginia asked.

Mrs. Porter shook her head. "I never did see the blankety blankety blank," she barked. "I told you it was dark. But if I ever lay my two mitts on him—"

"Excuse me, Amelia," said Marty quietly. "How did you happen to be here?"

Amelia, sinking onto the divan with her daughter's aid, snorted. "Look who's asking me?" she said to no one in particular. "Why that lily-livered, skirt-hunting excuse for a father of yours left me higher than a kite at the theater," she said. "And then I find the police waiting to ask me a lot of questions about some dirty little tramp he's been keeping here.

"Nobody can do that to me, I don't care who he thinks he is," she went on. "I learned a thing or two about locks in my carnè—my early thaahter days. So I came in here to wait for him. And then somebody hits me over the head with an outhouse!"

"Count ten, Mother," said Virginia. "It wasn't Marty's fault. And his father didn't do it. The police are looking for him now. And nobody invited you in here, anyway." The girl handed Amelia her pocketbook. "Here. You'd better brush up."

But the wrath of Amelia Porter was magnificent in its profane persistence. She hurled the evening bag from her to skitter along the floor, stamped her foot, and indulged in loving invective anent elderly rakes whose manners included standing her up and unseen excuses for gentlemen who would clout a lady over the head from behind.

Marty, worried, was taking a quick look around before calling the police. It was not hard to find the weapon which had given Mrs. Porter an unwanted snooze.

One of the porcelain cats lay on the carpet minus an ear. The ear he found on the floor under the chair to which the woman had been bound. With Amelia's crescendo of baffled rage still rising behind him, he moved toward the foyer telephone. Unquestionably, the assault lay in Lanning's province.

But as he stretched his hand toward the instrument, which rested on a table at the foot of the stairs, he hesitated. The sweet-sharp smell of smoke was in the air. And as he hesitated, it grew stronger. Looking up, he saw its white mist dulling the vista of the upper hall. The duplex was on fire!

Yelling at Virginia to call the fire department, he raced on upstairs, paused briefly to discover whence the fumes were coming, darted toward the bedroom which had been poor Mona Correll's. There the smoke was white and blinding and choking with a core of flame at its base. With his arms folded across his face, he ran to this core, found that it was the wastebasket. Set between the closed windows, the flames in the basket had ignited the curtains nearest, and all were blazing away merrily.

Marty didn't bother to open the window. Coughing and with his eyes streaming, he jabbed an elbow through the pane, picked up the basket, and hurled it through. When he turned his attention to the curtains, he found Virginia was beside him, that she had already torn down one set and was stamping out the blaze. It was but the work of a moment for him to rip off and trample out the other set. He got the other window open then, and they leaned out, shoulder to shoulder, gulping in the cold clear air of the night.

"Thanks, Virginia," said Marty. He coughed, and his hands felt wrong as he put his weight on them. A glance showed him that both palms were solid blisters.

Virginia whistled. "Let's get those fixed," she said. "You won't be shinnying up ropes for awhile. Do they hurt much?"

"Not yet," he said, "but give them time. Now who in hell would want to be setting Mona's room on fire? And why?" They ran quickly through the still smoke-filled room to the nearest bathroom, where, thanks to a well-equipped cabinet, the girl

was able to apply first aid. She was just tying the final bandage when the beat of heavy feet on the stairs announced the firemen.

"Very touching," said a voice in the door, and both of them looked up to see Sergeant Lanning. "What in hell is going on here, anyway? I told you to call me if anything came up, Brogard. So what happens? I get my information from the fire department."

MARTY explained that he'd been about to call the detective when he smelled smoke, which mollified Lanning to some degree. The smoke had thinned out by then, and the firemen took their noisy leave, so Lanning led the way into Mona's room for a look around. "Come along," he told Marty over his shoulder. "Since your father is among those missing, you'll have to help me with this."

Marty shrugged and looked at the girl. Her eyes red from smoke, her face smudged, her hair awry, she carried an appeal of her own. She winked back at them, and they followed the little detective, who came to a stop in the center of the carpet, put his hands on his hips, and gave vent to a sharp, monosyllabic curse. Seeing Virginia, he blushed, said: "I'm sorry, Miss Porter. I didn't know you were with us. But this room's been thoroughly gutted."

It was obvious that he didn't mean gutted by the fire, which had done little more than smoke damage. But the bureau drawers had been emptied on the bed, those of the vanity on the floor, and their feminine contents mused in a way that showed they had been thoroughly gone over. Quick search revealed that not a scrap of paper, not a letter, not a photograph, nor any of the written mementos women like to collect remained . . . with one rather odd exception.

This exception was a half-dozen summonses, all of them made out to Laurence Brogard, all of them for different unpaid-for items. Lanning pursed his lips as he scanned them, handed them wordlessly to Marty, whose eyebrows rose. They were expensive items. Rouveron, the furrier, wanted a three-thousand-dollar final payment on a mink coat, Cortet, the jeweler, demanded eleven thousand for a set of

diamond clips, Maniere, the couturier, twenty-six hundred for dresses. The others were smaller, but sufficed to bring the total up over the nineteen-thousand-dollar mark. Marty rubbed his aching eyes.

Mona had certainly been piling adverse credits. Knowing his father's situation, this seemed incredible to the younger man. With all her faults and occasional crudenesses, Mona had never seemed to him the type who would deliberately drive a man to ruin. He didn't understand it, said as much to Lanning, who watched him warily. Virginia's fingers felt cool on his wrist.

"See anything screwy about this?" the little detective asked.

Marty nodded. "Plenty," he said. "I don't see how Mona expected dad to pay for any of this. Almost twenty thousand dollars! Dad borrowed twenty dollars from me today and seemed glad to get it."

"That isn't what I meant," said Lanning. He took the summonses back from Marty and slapped them with the backs of his fingers. "How come every scrap of paper here except these things was destroyed? Does it make sense to you? Or does it—"

He paused, and his eyes narrowed. "Come on," he said. "Let's go on downstairs. Miss Porter, your mother seems to have had some sort of an accident. Can you tell me about it?"

"Certainly," said the girl. To Marty's amazement, she was smiling at the little detective. Detached, bored Virginia. She was, he decided, either playing up to the law, or else her fondness was genuine. He wondered if Lanning were one of those men whose attraction for women is invisible to the male eye.

"I think," the girl said simply, "that I'd better tell you up here. Mother can be pretty difficult when she's angry, and she's—well, she's not quite herself just now." She launched into a clear, straightforward description of the events of the early morning as far as they had gone. Lanning listened intently, asked her no questions, simply nodded when she had finished.

"Of course," he said wearily, "it would be too much to ask that watchdog of mine downstairs to identify this break-in baby. Damn it! This is the screwiest business

yet. Well, I'll have the experts give the place a combing later on. You kids had better get some sleep. You'll need it, the way this case is going."

"Marty," said the girl, holding back. "Why don't you stay the night with us? You can't be very anxious to sleep in your own room after what happened, and now this place is out of the question. Then I can put a decent dressing on your hands."

The younger man looked at Lanning, who nodded, and accepted gratefully. Virginia might be annoying in her general lack of interest, but he had to admit she was worth a lot more than her weight when the chips were down. He was worn out with shock and fatigue and worried about his father. Being shot at, finding Mona's corpse, being grilled by police, breaking with Sheila, and now getting into this latest set of complications had provided a pretty full evening. Furthermore, his hands were beginning to hurt, and he was in dire need of a little care and attention.

AMELIA, when they got downstairs, was arguing hotly with a flustered Carruthers, demanding the arrest and, if possible, the execution of every person connected with her mishap. When she saw her daughter's disheveled condition, she screamed. "My precious darling!" she squawked. "What have they done to you?" She whirled on Marty, her eyes blazing. Involuntarily, that young man lifted his bandaged hands in a gesture of self-defense.

"Take it easy, Mother," said Virginia quietly, but with a ring of authority in her voice that muffled Amelia's wrath. "Marty's going home with us. Whoever hit you set fire to one of the upstairs rooms, and I helped Marty put it out. He's the one who got burned. Are you ready to come along now, Mother?"

Still muttering vague accusations, Amelia came. Back in the Porter's living-room, she announced that her night had been ruined, that she intended to sit up until morning. At which Virginia led her firmly away to her room, returned fifteen minutes later with the casual announcement that her mother was sound asleep.

"You seem to know how to handle her," said Marty from the depths of the

sofa in which he lay sprawled. She shrugged her eyebrows, and he saw that her face had been tended to. For the first time he realized that Virginia, in an unorthodox, intelligent way, was close to beautiful.

"I can handle her when I have to," she said, talking through smoke as she lit a cigarette, "but ordinarily it's too damn much trouble to bother about. Why do women have to get so out of hand?" She paused, shook her head, then laid her smoke down on an ashtray. "Damned if I intend to," she said, half-humorously, then, "Get up, Marty. I'm going to tend to you now. I've got some stuff that will take the sting out of those poor paws of yours."

They walked the width of the living-room, past the French windows through which, beyond the terrace balustrade, the scattered lights of Queens glistened beyond the East River, and went to her bathroom, where she unbound his bandages. Her brow was troubled as she looked at the raw mess of his palms, but she went about her business expertly and in silence. He felt better when she'd finished and was washing the soot from his face.

"You should have been a nurse," he said.

She laid down the cloth and used the towel carefully. "I wanted to be one," she said. "I did what I could at school and in charity work these last few years since I came out. But mother thought it was *too*, *too* repulsive." She paused, grinned with sly amusement. "I don't suppose," she concluded, "that mother realized how many nurses grab wonderful husbands for themselves. Sick men are pushovers."

"I have an idea," he said, half smiling, "that from Amelia's point of view, she was entirely right. I can't quite picture you as a husband hunter. If you'd gotten into medicine, you'd probably have married the profession. So, for my sex, I thank your mother."

She put the towel back on the rack. "I don't know," she said, still grinning, "whether that's a compliment, or just another of those cynical cracks of yours. Don't let this mess soften you up, Marty. I liked you well enough the way you were. Come on, let's get out of here. I'll mix us

a drink, and then we can fold. O.K.?"

"O.K.," said Marty, following her thoughtfully. Was it possible that he *was* softening up? Virginia was still an enigma to him, but for the first time since he'd met her, he found the prospect of solving the puzzle she presented attractive—increasingly so. With a feeling of guilt, he realized that he'd barely thought of Sheila in the last hour or so. Was it because he'd been busy or just that he didn't want to? If it were the latter, he must have been playing games with himself about the hazel-eyed actress.

VIRGINIA handed him a long strong drink, which he sipped with relish. She sat in a chair, half facing him, cigarette in one hand, glass in the other. "I wonder," she said finally, "just what that little detective meant when he said there was something screwy about those summonses not being burned with the rest of poor Mona's papers. Do you get it?"

"I don't," said Marty. "I'm scared stiff about dad, and I don't know what to do. Oh, what the hell, Lanning was probably just trying to hang onto anything he could find. I don't see how the fact that those summonses weren't burned can have anything to do with poor Mona getting killed. Lord, that poor girl!"

"Don't talk about it if you don't want to," said Virginia. She got up, crossed to the radio, and turned on the Milkman's Matinée program. "Still," she said as she finished turning the dial, "I liked your friend Lanning, if that's his name. I feel a lot better about a lot of things since I met him. For one thing, I don't believe he goes around just hanging onto anything he can get as you put it."

"I *thought* you went for him," said Marty. "As a matter of fact, so do I. He seems to know his trade. I don't mind telling you he scared the pants off me when he raked me over after Mona's death. So I suppose you're right. But it's too deep for me. Plenty."

"I don't like to think that someone we know may be going around killing people," said the girl coolly. "It doesn't come under the head of what I consider amusing behavior. So I'd like to give all the help I can to solving this. I wish they'd find your dad. He really shouldn't have

run off the way he did—if he ran away."

Then the girl seemed to realize the implications of what she had said, for she bit her lower lip. To Marty, the thought of his shiftless, ineffectual father as a murderer was beyond belief. And, of all people, why would his old man take a shot at him? It didn't make sense. Still, Brogard Senior's behavior since going to the theater with Amelia was curious to say the least. If he weren't implicated, there was always the chance he'd met with trouble. And this thought didn't add to Marty's peace of mind.

The radio beat out its four-four beat and frequent commercials endlessly. "Virgin," he said peevishly, his nerves stretched taut, "do you have to have that thing on *all* the time? It's driving me nuts." He dipped into his drink, while she regarded him owlishly, her left foot beating out the endless rhythm on the carpet.

"Manoel likes it," she said gravely. "He find 'Amereeka veree sharmeeng. Ze so sharmeeng girls. But none so sharmeeng as—'" She stood up with an odd little smile that might have meant anything. "However," she said, "if it bothers you, darling, I suppose I must turn it off. After all, Marty, you are my guest."

"Manoel!" he growled. "I'd like to meet this rumba dancer of yours sometime." He felt a flush of real resentment—real enough to make him wonder. What the hell, he thought, looked up with a grin—and his mouth opened with astonishment.

Virginia was standing, her hand close to the dial, standing like a suddenly created statue. Her eyes were on the French windows at the end of the room, and they were wide with terror. Her mouth began to open slowly, open wide as if for a scream.

He was slow in following her gaze. Her mouth clamped shut, and instead of yelling, she dove forward toward the window, her hand outstretched. And as she dove, there came a flash and a tinkle of glass from the terrace, noises that mingled with the sickening thud of a bullet that whined on viciously past Marty's ear and thudded into the sofa behind him.

She screamed then as he flung his drink at the single lit lamp, sprang forward to aid her.

CHAPTER SIX

Angel Without Wings

SOMETHING exploded in Marty as he scrambled for the French windows. He wasn't being brave, he wasn't being anything but angry. All he wanted was to get his hands on the killer, wrap his blistered fingers around the man's throat, and throttle him. But as he lunged through the darkness past the girl, who was half sitting on the floor, she stuck out a foot and tripped him. He fell heavily to the carpet, slid against the wall with a crash that shook his entire frame. Lying there, he could hear fading noises of running feet, the distant slam of a door. Softly he began to swear.

"Why'd you do it, Virginia?" he asked. "Are you hurt?" He put out his hand to touch her, but she was no longer there.

Just then a light went on. She said, "It's all right, Marty," from the doorway, moved to the telephone in the hall. "Get me the detective downstairs," he heard her say coolly. Then: "There's been another shooting here. You'd better tell Sergeant Lanning to come over. And get a doctor."

"You're hurt!" said Marty, scrambling to his feet and running to her. Her left hand, which she was holding above her shoulder, was dripping with crimson. He felt sick and dizzy from the shock of this newest horror and from the impact against the wall. But the girl merely grinned.

"I'm all right," she said. "It went clean through. Bad night for hands, isn't it?" With which she fainted in his arms. Helpless, he looked up to see Akota, the servant, clad in a long nightshirt and blinking at him through sleepy Oriental eyes. He carried a carving knife in his right hand as if he knew how to use it.

"Missy hurt?" he asked. Then: "I hear shootings. I come to see everything all right. I help. No?" He came forward, showed surprising strength as he assisted Virginia to the living-room sofa, carefully holding her bleeding hand so that it would spill a minimum of blood on the chintz cover. "You hold," he told Marty. "Akota get towel." He disappeared with swift, silent efficiency, returned a moment later

with towels and wrapped the girl's injured member.

"You shoot missy?" the servant asked with such malevolence in his almond eyes that Marty felt panicky.

"No," said the younger man. "I no shoot missy. But she saved my life. Someone took a pot shot at me through the window there. Why in hell doesn't the doctor come?" He ran to answer the doorbell, but it was only Carruthers, his face tense, a gun in his hand. Marty blinked at him.

"Did you get him?" he asked. The detective blinked in turn. "Did I get who?" he countered. "What goes? Hello, this isn't nice." He took a quick look at Virginia, who was still unconscious. "O.K., Brogard, what happened this time?"

Marty was in the midst of telling him when Lanning arrived, looking harried. With him, in full evening dress, was Carl Lovatt, and the doctor was immediately in back of them. So while the girl was receiving medical attention, Marty repeated his tale. The sergeant listened, his brow furrowed, his lips tight. As the younger man recounted the girl's heroism, he smiled faintly. The story finished, Lanning shook his head admiringly. "What a girl!" he said quietly. "You've been miraculously lucky twice tonight, Brogard. I wouldn't bet on it again." He turned and scowled at Carruthers.

"Nice work," he said sarcastically. "You'll be a good bodyguard someday if you grow up—to a mouse maybe. You not only let the killer in here to do some more shooting, but you let him get away. This sort of thing won't do your rating much good."

"I'm not Superman," said Carruthers wearily. "If you don't know who the killer is, how the hell am I supposed to spot him? And as for letting him get away, I can't watch the whole building alone. This place ain't no shack. I done what I could."

LANNING ignored him, walked out to the terrace for a quick look around. Carl Lovatt took the opportunity to talk to the younger man. "This whole affair is an incredible tragedy," he said shaking his graying head. He was distinguished and handsome in evening clothes. "I never thought when I talked to you and Mona

and your father this afternoon that you'd have been nearly killed and this poor girl injured, Mona dead, and your father vanished like this."

"Do you know anything about dad?" Marty asked in a low voice. Carruthers had followed Lanning to the terrace.

The lawyer shook his head. "I haven't laid eyes on him since he left his apartment," he said. "A friend of mine heard about it on the radio and called me. I got in touch with the police to locate you and offer my services if needed. Needless to say, I'm terribly sorry."

"Needless to say, so am I," said Marty sharply, then regretted it. "Sorry, Carl," he said. "I've been through so much I don't know what it's all about. God, what a night!"

He stopped as Lanning came back, still looking worried. "Easy to see how the guy got away," he said. "There's a door from the terrace to the service hall and the back elevator." He paused. "Is Mrs. Porter here? If she is, it's funny she didn't wake up in all this uproar."

"She couldn't," said Virginia, who had opened her eyes. "I gave her something to make her sleep. She was—well, I guess 'overwrought' is the usual word for it. You saw her, Sergeant." Over the doctor's clucking protests, she sat up and grinned at Marty. "Unless memory fails, you lug, you were sore at me for tripping you. You'd have been a lot sorer if I hadn't. That heel was loaded. He'd have cut you down if you'd gone after him. Thanks, Doc, this hand feels O.K. Any bones broken or can't you tell without an X-ray?"

"It went between the second and third bones and chipped them both. I have the chips out. You're in luck," said the physician. "With care, it should be as good as new in a month or six weeks. Until then, I must prescribe a diet of constant rest."

"Nuts to that," said the girl, sitting up. "If you think I'm taking this lying down, you're crazy. Chipped bones!" She smiled at Marty a trifle shakily.

Lanning shook his head again. "My hat's off," he said, removing it as he spoke. "You not only saved Brogard's life by taking the bullet yourself, you saved it again by keeping him from walking into more lead. If he's not grateful

enough to suit you, just let me know. I'll bat some gratitude into him."

"Don't worry, Sergeant," said Marty. "I'm grateful all right and then some. What I still don't get is why anyone should be so damned anxious to knock me off." He paused, and Virginia smiled again.

"That shouldn't be too hard to figure out," she said and passed out once more. Akota and the doctor carried her to bed. The Japanese returned a moment later to get his knife.

"I'm sleeping Carruthers on the couch here," said the little detective. "And I'm putting another man in the kitchen." He paused, and Akota bridled.

"No copper sleep in kitchen," he said. "I stay up and watch back door. No one come in unless Akota get killed. And I make plenty noise first, wake up Officer Carruthers."

"O.K., Akota," grinned Lanning. He dismissed him with a nod. "Now," he said, "to get back to your query, Brogard. I still don't know why anyone should want to kill you. It seems obvious that Miss Correll went to warn you and was slain for it. But she didn't get her warning through to you. So that fact, in itself, does us no good. Mr. Lovatt, can you shed any light on the situation?"

The lawyer shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't. Despite, or perhaps because of, an intimate knowledge of the Brogard affairs. There is no money that isn't already entailed by taxes. Martin's fortune is tied up in England. And his father has wasted his. Furthermore, if you'll forgive me, Martin, I'd say your father's personal life would be more conducive to murder than what I have seen and know of yours. No, Sergeant, I'm stumped."

"You and me both," said Lanning. "Well, I guess that's all we can do. But I'd feel a lot better if we had both your father and Stanley Freeman under lock and key. A lot better."

"I thought Freeman was locked up," said Marty, startled. "You told me—" He stopped as the little detective shook his head savagely.

"We couldn't hold him," he said. "He turned out to have a pistol permit and a mess of friends. This Gerome girl was

one of them and she told a story that made you look bad. Said you both knew all about the pistol. Got anything to say to it, Brogard?"

"You don't have to answer that, Martin," Carl Lovatt interpolated smoothly. "You're not on the stand." Lanning glared at the lawyer, but Marty merely grinned.

"You just spoke my answer for me," he said. "I thought I'd feel a lot better with Stan behind bars tonight. And after that cute trick he played on me in the first place. . . Well, I leave it to you, Sergeant. What would you have done?"

"That's what I figured," said Lanning. "Nobody wanted to press any charges against him, and we didn't have enough of a case to hold him ourselves with the pressure he brought down. You can't hold a guy for saving a man's life. A couple of cab drivers saw the whole thing. The heel we're after wore a dinner jacket and got away."

"Stan told me," said Martin. "Well, I'm going to have to turn in. I'm poohed out." He stood up sleepily and shook hands with Lanning and Lovatt.

The lawyer patted his shoulder. "We'll do our best to find your father," he said. "Don't worry about a thing."

Marty didn't. As he stumbled into the smooth sheets of the Porter guest bed, he wondered if Virginia hadn't slipped something into the drink she'd given him, gave it up quickly as slumber closed his eyes. He was too tired even to worry, too tired to dream.

HE AWOKE when Virginia, clad in a decorative blue house-dress with a long row of little blue buttons down the front came in to dress his hands. "Hello," he said sleepily. "What time is it?" Then: "Holy smoke! How's the hand?" She held it up, and he saw that it had been freshly bound and was wrapped around a wooden brace shaped like a miniature crutch. She grinned at him.

"I came to look at your wounds," she said. "The doctor's been and gone and Carruthers is eating Akota right out of his kitchen. Come on, let's take a look at those blisters of yours." She could use her left hand only sparingly, but somehow she managed to make the job seem

deft. It was painful, but the throbbing palms felt better when she had finished. They had swelled during the night.

"Thanks, Virgin," he said. "Thanks for everything. Is there any more news I should know. About dad or anything?" She shook her head, and he thought she looked pretty well in the morning.

"I'm sorry," she said. "There's still no word. Sergeant Lanning called up a few minutes ago and told me I could let you sleep awhile."

"I'm glad you didn't," he said. The events of the night before swept through his mind in shocking panorama. "I know there isn't much I can do, but I don't feel right about staying in bed when maybe. . . . Oh, skip it, kid. How's your mother?"

"Still mad at your dad—and I'm not writing poetry this morning," said Virginia. "Well, see you at breakfast. Unless you'd rather take over that rest prescription the doctor gave me last night. Personally, I'm afraid of missing something."

"I told you I didn't want to sleep," said Marty. "How in heck do I take a bath with these bandages on?" He lifted his padded mitts.

Virginia stood up. "I guess you'll have to go dirty," she said. "Do the best you can with your clothes. I'll finish the job when you come out." She saluted and left the room.

Dressing proved an awkward business, not only because of his hands, but because of an acute all-over soreness which made him feel as if he'd taken a terrific physical beating the night before. Come to think of it, he had. However, he managed to comb his hair, only failed when it came to tying his tie. Virginia took care of this for him in the dining room. Never had the hot aromas of breakfast smelled sweeter. He waded in and filled himself.

He was just putting down his coffee cup empty for the second time when Akota appeared with the news that a Mr. Freeman wished to see him and was waiting in the living-room. Marty and Virginia exchanged a significant glance. "Don't worry," he said. "This is a little open—even for *this* killer."

"I'll be listening," the girl said, grinning. "Take care of yourself." He

grinned back at her brazenness, left the table. Freeman, his dark face darker than usual, was standing in the center of the living-room carpet. His black brows were joined in anger.

"Nice trick of yours last night," he snapped. "I do my best to save your damned pink hide, so you have me locked up. If a couple of the boys hadn't come through, I'd have been out on a nice long limb. What the hell kind of a razzle-dazzle are you giving me?"

"What kind of razzle-dazzle were you giving *me* last night?" Marty countered. "You and Sheila just missed hanging a murder rap around my neck. And how in hell did you manage to find me here anyway?" He waited while the agent shook his swarthy head.

"Will you get it through your thick head that I'm trying to keep you in one piece—though that's no fault of mine or your own. They tell me you're the only clay pigeon outside of a shooting gallery these days. And I don't intend to see you knocked off. As soon as I found out about the girl getting sliced, I figured life in the open was too hot for you. So I rigged that phoney frame. Anybody but a screwy young dimwit would have liked the sight of a cell."

"Skip that," said Marty, his own temper rising. "Who told you about Mona? And once again, how did you find me here?" His anger made his hands hurt worse, and he fumbled for a cigarette. Exhaling through his teeth, Freeman stuck one in his mouth and lit it for him. Then he stared at the carpet, hands in pockets.

"O.K., O.K.," he said. "I'll have to draw pictures for you. I was in the Kipp lobby when you called down about the murder in your room. The switchboard girl screeched it to the manager and the rest of the world. Finding you here wasn't so simple. The police were not exactly playing ball. But I know my way around, pal, and you're hot stuff in town today. A chum of mine owns a hack line."

It made sense. Marty shrugged and turned away. One thing still puzzled him. He couldn't see why Freeman was so anxious to keep him alive. So he put it to the agent point-blank. Freeman smiled enigmatically. "I'll tell you," he said. "I want to keep you alive for the same rea-

son some other tomato or tomatoes want to rub you out. Does it add, pal, or does it?"

"It doesn't," said the younger man. He looked at the agent, puzzled, but saw that Freeman's gaze was directed past his shoulder toward the door that led to the bedrooms. Disbelief, amazement, then something that could only be mirth crossed his features. "Amy!" he exploded. "Amy Botts! Old bump 'em Amy! I'll be damned!"

A STRANGLED squawk went up from the region of the doorway, and Marty turned to see Amelia Porter standing there, her eyes wide in what appeared to be fright. She drew herself up then and looked down her nose. "I'm sure I don't understand," she said haughtily. "Martin, perhaps you will be kind enough to explain exactly what this signifies."

Freeman exploded with laughter. "Don't give me that," he snorted. "Good old bump 'em Amy. Remember the time you were on the Midwest Carny time doing a cooch dance and your G-string fell off? Sure you do. It was your G-string. And I was barking for you. I even remember what the guy down front said. Want me to remind you?"

"God damn it, Stan, cut it!" snapped Amelia. "I ought to break a chair over your head for that. I've been out of the business for fifteen years. I keep my nose clean and mind my own business. I'll thank you to mind yours. So we'll skip what the guy said. Marty, if you have any trades on with Mr. Freeman, remember his nickname used to be Clipper. Stan. I'll send out the Scotch, but I don't want to be around."

Turning on her heel, she walked away with more honest dignity than Marty had ever seen her possess. Freeman was still gasping with mirth, and the younger man felt a strong desire to hit him in his wide stomach, bad hands and all. Even then it seemed odd that he'd be wanting to go to bat for the raucous Amelia.

But Stan stopped laughing, contented himself with a reminiscent shake of the head. "That was a shock," he said. "Amy Botts on Beekman Place. I had to see it to believe it. Well, listen, kid, I'll make it brief. I got things to handle but fast

"Somebody wants to get you. It might be any one of a lot of people. Your pal Johnnie for one. He cut in nicely on Sheila while you had me in the clink. It could even be your old man. It could be a lot of people, working alone or on your own.

"But me, I got to keep you alive. I'm sinking plenty in the kid, even if I have to cut your pal in, which is like cutting off my own right arm. Sheila has plenty to show. But you're my love, my life, my all, my ace, my angel. You, pal, are my bucks. And I don't let my bucks get found on the sidewalk full of lead."

"But I'm broke," said Marty. "You're out of your head, Stan. Even with the war over, I don't know when I'll get my money back. So I don't see how you figure it. What do you know?"

"Not much yet," said Freeman. "You slowed me up by putting me in clink. But I knew your grandpa, and I still don't believe he was dumb enough to sink all his dough where your papa could blow it. It can't be anything else. And I'm going to dig. Pal, when you hear from me again, you'll be a fat guy—fat with bucks!"

Turning on his heel, Freeman strode out, passing a bewildered Akota, coming in with a tray bearing whiskey, soda, and glasses.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Love After Breakfast

VIRGINIA, entering the room then, said, "It's too early, Akota," and the Japanese did an about-face with his tray. Smoking a cigarette, the girl sat down in an armchair, looked steadily at Marty. She was obviously suppressing a smile. Her lips twitched.

"What's the matter?" Marty asked.

She giggled. "It's mother, poor soul," she said. "She must have had even more of a shock than she got last night. If she didn't have an iron constitution, I'd be worried about her. Society dame unmasked as—well, dame."

"Then you knew all about it?" he inquired.

She nodded. "Of course," she said. "I usually find out things I want to know,

and the origin of my own parent is one of them. I only hope," she went on, "that it hasn't been too much of a shock for you."

"Good Lord, no," said Marty. "I—well, I've had a pretty good picture. Amelia's front isn't exactly perfect. But you know, Virgin, Freeman was pretty rough about it. And Amelia took it rather wonderfully. I wanted to hit him. She won my respect this morning for the first time."

"That's pretty swell of you," said the girl. She got up, bent over him, and kissed him. It was unexpectedly pleasant for both of them as neither, in the rather dreary sophistication of their previous relationship had bothered to exchange an embrace. She slipped quite naturally onto his lap, and he found her far lighter than he'd supposed her to be. Her arms went around his neck, and their lips clung softly as if they'd always belonged together.

Long minutes went by. Finally she pulled away with a little laugh of satisfaction, struggling for breath. "It's too bad we only have one good hand between us," she said.

He shrugged his shoulders, glanced at an electric clock on the table. "And it's eleven Ack Emma," he said. "I'm suing those promoters of moonlight for a good many billion wasted human forenoons."

"The moon does his best," she told him gently. "Personally, I like rainy nights. It makes being indoors so much more natural. And *al fresco* amour was never my style." She paused, grew serious. "If this is important to you, Marty, we've got to get your life cleared up. I'm not taking anybody under a sword of Damocles."

"You're right, damn it," he said ruefully. "For a while there I forgot everything. Tell me, what did you think of Freeman?"

"I don't know," she said. "He looks rough, and he talks rough. His story might make sense, and then it might not. But his theory that you must have some money holds more water than any other."

"What other?" he asked. "There haven't been any others. The only thing wrong with it is that it can hardly be true. If there were any money, it would be in the estate, and we'd all know about

it. We'd have to. You can't just make money in large sums disappear."

"Your father did," said the girl.

Marty grimaced at her. He found it hard, now he knew he wanted her and she him, to keep his mind on the case. "That isn't what I mean, and you know it," he said. "Probate courts aren't gullible institutions. Somebody'd know."

"Somebody evidently does," she said. "If your grandfather was as ingenious an old pirate as he was supposed to be and wanted to keep some of his wealth from your father, mightn't he have hidden it in some way from the eyes of the courts? Even Mr. Lovatt wouldn't have to know necessarily. His friendship with your father could have kept him on the outside. Gee, wouldn't it be swell to have a rich husband. I'm supposing you want to marry me."

"You suppose a lot," said Marty. "But how about ze so sharmeeng Manoel?" He lit a fresh cigarette.

Virginia looked hurt. "How about Sheila Gerome?" she asked. "Or in your code are only little boys supposed to have things like that? We might as well settle it."

"I finished with Sheila last night," he said. "So, how about Manoel ze sharmeeng?" He waited while she got up, went to the radio, and turned it on. "Another thing," he said. "You seem to have a mania for lesser radio stations. We'll do something about that right now. And then I'm calling Lovatt and Lanning to tell them about Freeman's big idea. Between them, they should clear it up fast."

SHE snapped off the radio before he could reach it, and he held her in his arms again for a brief second. Then he went to the telephone and called the detective. It took some time to make the connection, but at last he heard Lanning's thin tones on the wires.

"Who's dead now?" the sergeant asked him.

"Nobody so far today," said Marty, and went on to tell him of Freeman's visit. To his surprise, Lanning seemed more than interested. He asked a number of questions as to the agent's exact phraseology, wound up with some quiet but extremely fluent cursing.

"I don't like this Freeman getting this slant," he said. "I want you to keep it quiet with everyone else. I suppose the Gerome girl knows and that Porter kid you were making eyes at last night. Well, don't tell anyone else. I don't want the whole town gunning for you. Things are tough enough as it is. Don't tell *anybody*."

"Yes, sir," said Marty, feeling chastened.

The little detective rasped on. "I'm going to be out of reach for a couple of hours, so stay home and keep that nose of yours clean. Don't leave the Porters. Not that I imagine you want to. And don't worry too much about your father. We'll find him some time today. And we'll find our killer too. Just sit tight and think it over and get some ideas."

They sat tight and did just that. But hash over the case as they would, they couldn't make it add. They even stripped themselves of family prejudices, but two and two stubbornly refused to make four. They boiled it down to four people—Freeman, Johnnie O'Brien, Laurence Brogard, and, of all people, Amelia. It was her daughter who suggested the last-named, saying evenly that no one should be left out.

Freeman was still chief suspect, despite his visit of the morning. He had had the opportunity, and he'd acted suspiciously. Though his motive was still hidden, it might lurk in some devious Broadway deal, possibly regarding Sheila. And Mona had known and disliked him as he had her. Furthermore, his visit to the Porter ménage could have been a blind.

Johnnie O'Brien had had the chances, too. He knew Marty's habits, his schedule for the evening. If Freeman were right, and he'd had the chance to work out, as Marty's roommate, some fake claim against a big estate, it would make sense. And then there was Sheila. Johnnie obviously loved the girl. It could have been a motive in itself.

Marty simply couldn't see either his father or Amelia as the killer, his father because he refused to admit it in his heart, and because he could see no motive—Amelia because, if Freeman's theory as to his wealth were true, it was to her interest to keep him alive and kicking. But Virginia spikd him on both counts.

"Suppose, Marty," she said, "that we forget about the buried treasure. Has it occurred to you that Mona might have fallen for you? I, for one, see nothing strange in that. In that case, your dad might have gunned for you and cut her throat when she came to warn you. And as for mother, the facts that you're broke and that I fell in love with you might account for it. Well. . .?"

"Bellywash!" said Marty. "What's more, you know it. Our parents may have their faults, but they aren't killers. Here's Akota. Let's eat." He got up, escorted her to the dining-room. Amelia, still upset, did not put in an appearance.

They were about halfway through the meal when the telephone rang, and Akota came in to announce the call was for Marty. It turned out to be Freeman again, and his tones were taut and incisive. "Marty," he said, "I've got something. Now listen carefully."

"O.K.," said Marty. "Shoot."

"First," said the agent, "I want to make a deal with you. If I clear this up and you come out ahead with a few bucks, thanks to me, I want you to back this show of mine for, say, fifteen grand. It'll be a drop in the old bucket. How about it?"

"If it works out that way, it's a deal," said Marty.

"I'm not giving too much over the wires," Freeman went on. "They may be tapped, and I don't want the whole police force in on this until we've made our pitch. So meet me at the corner of Lexington Avenue and Sixty-sixth Street. I'll be waiting in my car."

"I've got it," said Marty evenly, though he felt a stir of quick excitement. "I won't guarantee not to be followed, but I'll make it as fast as I can."

"That's all right," said Freeman. "I don't mind one or two detectives along. It's just that I'm not anxious to have the whole force along. Make it fast."

MARTY hung up, looked at Virginia, who was standing by his elbow, her face expressive of healthy curiosity. Without speaking, he picked up the house telephone, asked for Detective Carruthers. Since Lanning could not be reached, it seemed the best move. He explained to

the detective what had happened, told him he intended to meet Freeman, and suggested that Carruthers follow him closely.

"Thanks, Brogard," said the detective. "If we break it, my rating won't suffer. I'll be waiting out in front." Marty rose to take Virginia in his arms.

"It's all right, darling. I'll be careful," he said. "Carruthers will be along, and if Freeman *has* found something, it's worth taking a chance or two to find out what."

"I know," said the girl. "I'm not being silly. But I'd feel a lot better if Lanning were along instead. Things don't seem to happen when he's around. Wait a moment." She darted from him, returned a moment later with a small automatic, an eight-shot .32.

"I couldn't hit a barn with this," he told her. "What's more, I haven't got a permit. Are *you* going to try and get me pinched now?" He hefted it hesitantly, found the safety catch with his thumb.

"I'll feel better if you have it," she said. "Good-bye and good luck. I'll be praying for you, Marty." She pressed him close against her with strength he had not suspected she possessed.

A moment later, he was downstairs on the sidewalk, explaining things again to Carruthers. He explained about the pistol, and the detective winked. "I didn't see it," he said. "But if there *is* any trouble, don't be afraid to use it. A guy that's taken what you have since last night, has a few rights. Let's get on our way."

It was a short ride to the corner of Lexington and Sixty-sixth, and Marty found himself frankly wishing it were longer. He had a curious feeling that the swift rush of tragic events which had started with the shot in the alley the night before was drawing toward its climax. Cautiously he reached beneath his overcoat, pulled out the pistol again, tried the catch, and put it in an outer pocket.

His driver pulled to a stop and knocked his flag up all too soon.

Marty was out then, paying his driver off. He could see Freeman sitting behind the wheel of his sedan just around the corner. Good-looking car, he thought irrelevantly. Blue and gray-blue paint job, streamlined, with chromium trim. As he walked toward it, he kept his hand on the little pistol, somehow reassured by its

presence in his overcoat pocket. Carruthers had pulled up ahead, and his cab was engaged in the difficult business of backing around to be in position to follow the agent, should he take off quickly.

Freeman seemed wrapped in thought, for he did not look around as Marty approached. His brows were knotted beneath the brim of his gray hat, and his hands rested on the wheel. His eyes were bright in profile. Whatever his mood, Marty realized it must be deep, for the agent did not turn his head even when he opened the door.

The younger man was half in the car before he saw what the trouble was. He stopped there, bracing himself with his hands, one on the door, one along the back of the front seat. For the second time in a little over twelve hours, he was looking at a dead body—the body of a man who had died a sudden and violent death.

Wearing a heavy fleece overcoat, Freeman was wedged in the driver's seat so tightly that he could not fall. But he was dead as a herring. There was a black hole in the side of his overcoat, and blood was dripping from his trousers to overflow his shoes and make a puddle on the floor.

Marty stepped back out of the car carefully, for he felt none too steady on his pins, and beckoned to Carruthers, who made a spectacular broken-field run through the traffic on the Avenue to reach him inside of five seconds. He glanced at the body, shook his head, then exchanged a hopeless look with Marty.

"There goes the first real lead," he said mournfully. "I'd better report this. You stand by while I phone." He ducked into the corner drug store, leaving Marty alone by the car. The younger man felt sick and gloomy.

He shook off his despondency and tried to figure it out. Why had Freeman picked this corner on which to meet him? Obviously he'd been close to the source of the crime when he called. He looked up and down the Avenue, saw nothing save the usual Lexington Avenue run of small shops, restaurants, and rooming houses. Then he turned his attention to the cross block toward Third Avenue.

Somehow, this block with its varied row of solid house-fronts was familiar. He couldn't for the moment figure out

why. He studied the north side, his brows close together in thought, seeking an answer. It was like that much-discussed, "I have been here before" sensation—

And then he had it. Three brownstone four-story structures stood side by side in the center of the block, proud in their abandoned shabbiness with windows shuttered and front entrances double-doored. On each of them was a sign—*For Sale or Rent. Apply Douglas White Inc., Fifth Avenue*. Douglas White was the company that handled the renting of the remnants of the Brogard real estate! Those three houses belonged to his family.

Of course! He'd spent his four earliest years in the nearest of them before his mother and father had separated. His grandfather had resided in state in the center of them. A long dead uncle had lived till his death in the one farthest east. Three great houses, once proud palaces of a Manhattan dynasty, now antiquated, shabby relics, unsalable tax eaters.

Carruthers came out of the drug store then, and Marty motioned to him, told him about the houses. The detective looked at the body, then at the boarded-up fronts. He was torn between routine and an aggressive desire to solve the case. "Come on," he said finally. "This is probably a wild-goose chase, but let's try it."

Their first look was not encouraging. The wooden outer doors were nailed securely to the frames, had obviously not been opened. Nor had the first of the grilled basement entrances beneath the front steps been tampered with. The rusty lock was cobwebbed.

But the second cellar door was not. Marty tried it, but the metal door would not move. Carruthers stepped forward without a word. He crouched to examine the lock through the grating, then grunted, pulled a bunch of keys from his pocket, and began to untwist the wire that bound them together. "Old-fashioned," he muttered. "This should be easy. But I'll probably be broken for entering."

"It belongs to my family's estate," said Marty. "Go to it." So the detective went ahead. It didn't take long. As sirens sounded behind them, they pushed the door open and walked in. A wooden door was unlocked, and they moved quietly along a dark hallway. Under a door, near

the far end, a wavering line of light showed. This door was unlocked too.

They entered a dingy room, once evidently a servants' dining-room. It was furnished with a plain wooden table, some old chairs, and a broken-down sofa which was apart in a dark corner. On the table an oil lamp flickered dully. And by its light a man sat playing solitaire. He looked up, saw Marty and the detective.

"Hello, son," he said. "Come on in and sit down." It was Laurence Brogard!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Life-Saving Party

MARTY sat down silently, his knees knocking. The shock of finding his father here was overwhelming. Laurence Brogard shuffled the cards together, put them back in the pack. He glanced at the bulky Carruthers, who remained standing warily near the door.

"I suppose," he said to Marty, "that your friend is a detective. It seems a bit odd to be caught up like this by my own son. Still, I've been expecting it, and I can't say truthfully that I'm sorry. The last fifteen hours or so have been a bit hectic."

"But, Dad!" his son burst out. "Why did you do it? Why have you been trying to kill me? And what about Mona? Why have you murdered her? I—well, I don't understand. I don't get it. And Stan Freeman. If you're ready to give yourself up, why shoot *him*?"

Laurence Brogard gripped the table, his face an ashen white. "Wait a minute," he said, and his knuckles yellowed under the pressure he put on them. "Did you ask me why I tried to kill you, and why I murdered Mona and Stanley Freeman? Is that what you said?"

"That's right, Mr. Brogard," said Carruthers, stepping forward. "You'd better give us the answers downtown. And you'd better not make any trouble." His gun was in his hand, pointing at the older man's heart.

"Just a minute," said Laurence Brogard. "I don't understand this. I don't understand it at all. I haven't killed anybody. I haven't tried to. I've been ducking a bunch of warrants that Mona hid out

on me for things she bought in my name. I was called away from the theater last night and told to lie low until some sort of a settlement could be made."

"You mean, Dad," said Marty, recharged with hope, "that you've been here all along?" He felt sick with relief, for Brogard Senior was a poor liar, and his astonishment had rung true.

"Naturally," said the older man. "Where else would I go? I still own these houses, to my cost." His voice changed then. "Did you say," he asked in strained tones, "that Mona was dead?" At his son's nod, he buried his head in his hands. Carruthers, now uncertain, looked at Marty, who nodded toward the door. The detective put his gun away and slipped into the hall.

Marty thought of the summonses left so inexplicably in Mona's room. They fitted into place now as proof of his father's innocence. Had he been the man who burned the other papers, he certainly would not have left such damning evidence behind. Nineteen thousand dollars made a sound motive for a bankrupt man, especially when the bills had been run up by the woman he was supposed to have killed. But the fact they had been used to cause his disappearance pointed plainly to someone else. But who?

"Dad," said Marty. "This is important. Who got you to disappear? You're on a hell of a spot, and whoever did it must be the devil behind all this. You don't know what's been going on."

Laurence Brogard lifted his face. He looked older than he had a few moments before. But there was grim comprehension in his eyes—and a desire for revenge. "I don't know what it's all about yet," he said, "but I know who must be behind it. . . . Hold on! What was that?"

"It's just Carruthers," said Marty. "Come on, Dad, tell me. I'm sorry about Mona, but I'm damned glad to find you alive and to know you didn't do all this."

But the old man was staring at the door, his mouth a trifle open, looking past Marty, who caught the alarm in his eyes and whirled, reaching for the little gun in his pocket. Carl Lovatt was standing there, a cynical smile on his lips, an automatic pistol in one hand, Carruthers' police positive in the other. He poked the

latter into Marty's stomach, checking him.

"I wouldn't," he said, put his own gun away, and frisked Marty deftly. "Pretty little toy," he remarked, testing the weight of Virginia's weapon. "No, you don't, Laurie! Not yet." This as the older man threatened to lunge at him over the table.

"We're going to have to wait a few minutes," he said. "The block is crawling with police. I've been watching upstairs. I saw you and your detective friend, Martin. You've managed to solve a problem that was getting close to hopeless. I couldn't get at you at the Porters' again, and I couldn't get you out over Lanning's orders. But you saw fit to disobey them yourself. Thanks."

"What have I ever done to you?" Marty asked. "I had a foolish idea we were friends. And what has dad ever done to you? Nothing except to pay you a fat income every year. What's it all about?"

CARL LOVATT laughed. Even with a gun in his hand he was distinguished, under control. It was his very control that was the most frightening. "That's a bit naive," he said quietly. "I think your friend Freeman had a pretty good idea. He called me up an hour or so ago and told me. I offered to make a deal with him. He thought *he* was setting a trap. You know what happened."

So Freeman had been right! So there was money in the estate, big enough money to justify a chain of mass murders. Marty was still missing on several cylinders, but he at least knew what it was all about. Lovatt looked briefly at Laurence, and Marty sprang.

He didn't get far. The world exploded in a blaze of light as the police positive raked his forehead, sent him stumbling to his hands and knees. He lay there, trying to shake his thoughts clear, stunned and helpless as Lovatt backed away from him toward the door, keeping him covered.

"I wouldn't," said the lawyer quietly. "It will only make things more unpleasant—for you. I guess it's safe enough now. These old houses don't let much noise out. Say your prayers, Laurie. You get it first. I didn't want to kill you. But first Mona welshed, and then Martin butted in."

Marty, finally able to lift his head, saw

him standing, just in front of the door, taking careful aim. He tried to launch himself again as his strength returned, but even as he prepared to dive, he knew he would be too late.

And then a feminine cyclone came through the door without warning. Virginia was there, and her mother, and both were active. Stealing up silently from behind, the girl brought a heel sharply down on the lawyer's foot, causing him to fire into the floor as he doubled over in involuntary agony. At that moment, she brought her injured left hand, gripping its crutchlike splint, against his chin, snapping his head back. Amelia, appearing from the shadows, swung her handbag once, there was a sound of cracking glass, and Lovatt pitched forward on his face. His guns clattered free of his hands, and he lay there without twitching.

Amelia opened her bag, revealing a shattered jar and a welter of face cream from which edges of purse, lipstick, eyebrow pencil, and compact emerged in gooey fashion. "Elizabeth Arden's private mixture," she said succinctly. "This little life-saving party cost me twenty dollars and a ruined bag. Now, Laurence Brogard—" She advanced toward him, hands on hips. "How about that little stand-up you dealt me at the Belasco last night?"

"Hold it," said another voice, a thin, tired voice that still carried a ring of authority in its tones. "I see you've cleaned up my case for me with a jar of cold cream!" Sergeant Lanning stood in the doorway, a look of sardonic disgust on his tired face. Then, as he took in the full picture, he grinned. "O.K., ladies," he said. "I surrender. Nice work. I don't know how I'm ever going to explain it, but I'll have to say that. Come on, men. Take him away and lock him up before he comes to. You can lock that dumb Caruthers up with him."

For a few brief and efficient moments, the house basement swarmed with bluecoats, who took away the unconscious killer and detective. When they'd gone, Lanning looked at Laurence Brogard keenly. "You wouldn't," he said, "have a little whiskey cached here, by any chance?" His expression relaxed as Brogard Senior opened a wall cabinet, revealing a small nest of bottles.

"I'll make a trade," said Laurence Brogard. "All the whiskey you want for the score on what's happened."

"It's a deal," said the little detective. "I was never more pleased with myself for wrapping a case up in quick time. And a bunch of you beat me to the punch. Either I'm getting old or I had a swelled head. Thanks."

"It's a bit primitive," said Laurence Brogard, getting out an assortment of jelly glasses to go with the bottle he'd just handed the detective.

"O.K. then," said Lanning, running his tongue over his lips to get the last drop of his drink. "Here's what happened. Even if I didn't break this case, I solved it. Carl Lovatt, Mr. Brogard, was a slick, tough, smart lawyer. A little too smart. He spotted the big crash in time, invested everything he had during the depression. And got caught in the business flop of the last three years.

"He needed cash, plenty of it, to carry on with, and he knew only one way to get it. Your father, Mr. Brogard, didn't trust you too much. He wanted his grandson to get some of his estate. So he put aside a cool two-and-a-half million bucks and had it sealed in a vault in the East Side Guaranty. The bank contracted not to open the box until Martin Brogard's thirtieth birthday, which is less than a week away. How does it sound, son?"

MARTY and Virginia exchanged a quick glance. The girl blushed and turned away. "Rich guy," she said under her breath. He grinned and put an arm around her, drawing her to his side. The three older persons in the room smiled, and Lanning put the bottle down.

"Maybe you'll buy me a drink after next week, what?" he said. Then: "But old Mr. Brogard made one mistake. He left a sealed copy of this disposition in Lovatt's hands, not to be opened until the same date. But Lovatt opened it years ago, when his cash began to run short. He needed that money, part of it anyway, and he set out to get it. Say, Mr. Brogard, some of this is a bit tough to take. You don't mind if the kids listen?"

"It's all right," Brogard, Sr. said.

"O.K. then," said Lanning. "Lovatt was shrewd. He knew he couldn't break

the will. But he had a way around that. Martin was living abroad, showed no sign of coming home. In his absence, Lovatt would get the money with Laurence as witness. Now he couldn't keep it a secret from you, Mr. Brogard. The bank would see to that. So he figured out a way to handle you. He dug up a girl named Mona Correll and planted her with you. Paid her for it and promised her a cut.

"The plan was to drain you so dry, you'd be willing to split the dough three ways—with you and Lovatt taking the big slices, I guess, and Marty getting a token payment which would still be large enough to keep him happy abroad. But through Mona, he planned to milk you dry all over again, Mr. Brogard. Get it?"

Laurence Brogard nodded and again buried his face in his hands. Marty felt uncomfortably sorry for him. Virginia moved a bit closer, caused him to look into her level blue eyes. Amelia, her eyes snapping sparks, took a drink that rivaled the little detective's usual copious slugs.

"The war smashed that in its original shape," said Lanning quietly. "It brought Marty home temporarily flat. So, for awhile, Lovatt studied you, kid. At least he made no moves and he was with you a lot, so I figure he must have. Because you'd get all the money, and he must have tried to work out a set-up like the one he rigged for your father. But I guess he couldn't see how.

"So he decided the only way out was to kill you. In which case, your father would have gotten the money outright. Which would have made things simple. Remember, he had Brogard Senior used to letting him handle the funds. Furthermore, by using those warrants on him, he could implicate him as an apparent accomplice in his own son's murder and force him to keep quiet or burn.

"Those things Miss Correll bought, by the way, Mr. Brogard, were kept out of sight. As were the warrants. He didn't want you to have a breath of suspicion. So, last night, he arranged for your disappearance by simply telling you in the theater lobby that the police were after you and you'd better lie low a few days."

"I must be the world's prime sap," said Laurence Brogard, but Amelia gave him a glance of encouragement that

caused him to preen himself slightly. Marty and Virginia exchanged another quick look, this one of astonishment. Sergeant Lanning took another drink.

"I guess Miss Correll wanted to double-cross him at the last minute," he said. "He talked with her after you and your father left them yesterday, remember, Marty? She must have given him a cue that she couldn't go through with it. But he went ahead, scared Laurence into hiding, then tailed you to your date with Miss Gerome and tried to carry through. Freeman spoiled that. When Lovatt checked with Mona, I guess they had it out. He let her get to the Kipp, then killed her there.

"The girl must have had papers implicating him with her in her room, so he went up there and burned them. But he left the summonses to point a finger at Laurence Brogard. He was going to wipe out the Brogards now, so that the money would revert to the estate, or to him. Then he tailed Marty to the Porters' and tried again. And again, this time thanks to Miss Porter, he missed. Which put a crimp in his plans as he couldn't get at you, Marty, from then on."

VIRGINIA said: "How did he get in the hotel and in the two apartment houses and out again without being seen?"

Lanning nodded. "It's a good point. And that gave me my second clue. The first one was those summonses. Anyone gutting the papers in that room in a panic would have tossed them in with the rest. Which meant that this arsonist left them with a purpose.

"The only people who can find a purpose in legal documents of this type are complainants or lawyers. Obviously none of the complainants were involved. Which left lawyers as an alternative. And Lovatt was the only lawyer around. I got suspicious of him then.

"One of the reasons he wasn't identified as having been at all three buildings was that in the hotel there's too much traffic to identify anyone surely, and in your apartment, Mr. Brogard, he knew his way around enough to use the freight elevator. In getting to the Porters', he went to the wrong floor and walked a few flights. I've been able to check that.

"But more clinching, the Brogard who appeared in the theater lobby wore a dinner jacket, I believe. According to Freeman, the man who shot at Marty did. Is that right?"

Laurence Brogard nodded thoughtfully.

"Later, you'll remember," the detective went on, "he wore full dress. Now once I found out that he'd been seen in a dinner jacket in the theater lobby—the attendant who summoned you, Mr. Brogard, was positive—I knew he was our man. Remember I said, Marty, that whoever killed Mona would be covered with blood?"

"Well," he went on as Marty nodded, "he must have found this out for himself. And a change into street clothes would have been conspicuous. So he got into white tie and tails as the only alternative. He'd be registered in both cases as being in evening clothes.

"So I had my man last night. But I didn't have a case. It took a lot of digging to put it together. I just about had it when I got a message from Miss Porter telling me to get up here. Freeman, apparently, knew enough about the background to have a smell of the truth. He must have traced Lovatt through Miss Correll. She wasn't unknown on Broadway. All I can say is, ladies, you beat me on as neat a case as I've ever handled." He turned sadly to the bottle and drained its final two inches.

Later, as they rode downtown in a taxi alone, Marty pushed Virginia gently away. "What made you follow me today?" he asked.

She chuckled. "We Porters follow our men," she said. "I know where mother's useful, so I brought her along. I didn't trust Carruthers, and I was right. O.K.?"

"Everything will be O.K. when my head goes down," he said, fingering the lump on it. "Come to think of it, I'll be able to back Johnnie in this show Stan wanted for Sheila. D'you mind?"

"I don't care," said the girl. "You'll have a full-sized job on your hands, if you ever want to two-time me."

"Pretty cocky, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh. But, Marty, what about mother and your dad? I'll bet she gets him on the rebound."

"If she does," said Marty, "I'll double his allowance."

BONDS TO BURN


By

O. B. MYERS

Author of "Give Him Enough Rope," etc.

Wherein Ned Hollister, curious sleuth, asks for cherry pie and gets, instead, a choice helping of mystery in the strange drama of the robbery with nothing missing, the murdered messenger without a message, the luckless hackie whose fare paid off in lead, and several others in the cast—including Ned's broken leg.

There was no time to stop her movement—nor even turn his head aside.



NED HOLLISTER said quietly: "And a piece of cherry pie." "Cherry pie—yes, sir," snapped the white-jacketed soda-jerker behind the counter. He spun on his heel and reached out his hand for the inverted bell-jar on the shelf. But he never lifted it, for it jumped as if alive, right out from under his fingers, and the pie beneath it spurted up and out to spatter him with thick, goeoy crimson. At the

same instant the tinkle of glass was drowned in the close-pent roar of a revolver shot from behind him. He promptly fainted.

Ned whirled off his stool and landed on the balls of his feet. The side of the store was glass, facing the arcade of the Colby Building. The bank of express elevators, in one of which he had just descended from his office, was off to his right. From that direction came running figures. First a heavy-set man in a soft hat that was pulled down tight on top of his ears. He ran awkwardly on the flat of his feet, and held an automatic in his hand. It blasted deafeningly just as he passed the open door of the shop. Ned could not see what he was shooting at.

Close behind him came a girl who sprinted lightly on her toes, like a dancer. Her dress was extraordinarily short, or else her running lifted it. Ned caught a flashing glimpse of silken knee. She had striking features with dark eyes under penciled brows which were probably stunning in repose. Just now they were distorted with excitement and physical effort, giving her a malevolent look. She was clutching against her side an armful of heavy manila envelopes—on one of them he could see printed in black letters, *Government Bonds*. In her other hand she, too, carried an automatic, but she was not firing.

Half a dozen steps behind the girl came another figure, a young fellow in the semi-official uniform of a bank guard or securities messenger. A foot of broken chain dangled from his heavy leather belt, and he held one hand to the side of his head. Although he reeled slightly as he ran he seemed to be losing little ground, and he was yelling thickly: "Robbers! Stop them! Robbers!"

By the time Ned had seen this much the leader was dashing through the doors at the end of the arcade, which stood wide open. The shop had windows at the front, facing on Broad Street. He had only to turn his head to see what went on outside. It all happened very quickly, but afterward he remembered the details quite plainly.

As on any afternoon, Broad Street was jammed with a hurrying crowd. Emerging onto the pavement the stocky

man fired two more shots in close succession, at a downward angle into the asphalt. His purpose was apparently to frighten people out of his path. He must have succeeded less well than he had hoped—a few pedestrians sprang for doorways, but the majority froze in their shoes, staring in amazed curiosity, and the quick-witted set up a cry of "Police!" which ran like wildfire in both directions. The shots echoed between the building fronts.

A taxi stood at the curb in front of the Colby Building. The first thug ran straight to it, with the girl at his heels. Before reaching for the door he spoke to the driver. The driver replied. Ned could not overhear the words, and it developed later that not a soul caught what was said. But he saw the expression of rigid horror that contorted the driver's face, and the next second the girl was shooting. With the muzzle of her automatic lifted shoulder high she pulled the trigger three times. The bullets almost jerked the driver's head off his neck.

Without hesitating an instant the two of them ran around the back of the cab to the middle of the street. The messenger, close behind them, had darted around the front of the cab and got in the open first. Even in these few seconds the shouts and the shooting had roused the alert guardians of the financial district. An officer in uniform was coming down the middle of the street from the corner, gun in hand—another had appeared on the opposite sidewalk. But they were likewise, and more seriously, handicapped by the crowds. The first fired a couple of times into the air, then he crouched low and took careful aim.

WINDOWS rattled as several guns spoke at once. A figure pitched to the street, rolled over, and sprawled on its side. To his horror Ned saw that it was the messenger, who had lunged between the cop and his target. The girl sprang over his prostrate form with never a glance. In fact she seemed to be looking back over her shoulder at the cab driver whose brains she had just splashed over his windshield. Another cab was right there, either by accident or design, rolling slowly down the middle of the street. Without stopping to speak to the driver

this time, she jerked open the door and jumped in.

The man in the soft hat had a gun in each hand now. Side-stepping nimbly, he blasted a perfect fusillade in several directions at once. The girl had left the door swinging open behind her. He whirled and leaped for it. With a shattering report the cop fired again. The escaping bandit's foot seemed to slip on the running board, but he pulled himself in with his hands, and the cab accelerated smartly. Amid a swelling roar of rage and excitement from the awakening crowd it swung around the corner and disappeared.

Ned darted for the front door of the shop. By the time he emerged on the sidewalk, pandemonium reigned. The departure of the principal actors in the drama released the horde of spectators from the grip of the terror that had held them, and they found their voices. They surged in the street like an angry sea, all shouting at once, each describing to his neighbor what he had seen or heard, and what ought to be done about it. Meanwhile the police were going into action.

Whistles shrilled in every side street, and it was only a few moments before the rising hum of a siren echoed weirdly through the canyons. Uniformed men appeared in droves. Four P.M. was the hour when the beats changed shifts, and there were almost double the usual number in the neighborhood, though of course fate could not have permitted a patrol to be passing the Colby Building at the critical moment.

"Get back!" they were crying. "Get back—clear this space!"

The first one on the scene, who had opened fire and probably wounded one of the bandits, had taken a quick look at the unfortunate cab driver and turned away, growling under his breath. With the smoking service revolver still in his hand he dropped on one knee by the messenger, whose head was rolling weakly.

"What's your name, buddy? Who do you work for?"

The man on the ground stared straight up at the blue sky, far over his head. His lips moved, as if he were trying to speak, but they only produced a faint froth of blood. The hard-boiled cop wiped it away gently. Error or no, he had shot this

man, and Ned could see that he didn't feel too happy about it. The other police wore grim expressions—they prided themselves as a body on giving the district below the deadline immunity from robbery by violence, and a blow at that tradition was a stab at the honor of each one of them.

The cop, on his knees, was searching the pockets of the wounded man for a clue to his identity, but he had apparently found nothing before the ambulance gongs were clanging at his shoulder.

"Don't bother with that one!" he grunted, jerking his head toward the cab. "Speed won't do him any good. See what you can do for this fella. He needs it."

The interne and his assistant worked deftly, swiftly. In less than a minute they had slipped a stretcher under the limp figure, slid it into the rack, and the ambulance was clearing a path through the curious mob by means of its gong. Ned noted the name on the side—*Beekman Street Hospital*—and began to elbow his way backward toward the entrance to the Colby Building. But then he changed his mind about going up to his office. The sooner you started following these things up, the sooner you settled them. What he had seen looked like an open-and-shut case, of course, but he'd have to do his stuff anyway.

He had to walk almost to the corner before he came to a free cab, waiting, and the driver looked a little white around the gills.

"Geeze," he croaked, "did you see that guy get it?"

Without replying to the question Ned merely said: "Beekman Street Hosiptal." The cab started up toward Wall.

"He's a damn fool, that cabby," continued the driver, his tongue loosened by excitement. "Just because one hacker got his name in the papers for pitchin' in and helpin' the cops, last January, now they all think they got to be heroes. Nix for me, mister. When some bloke shoves a gun in my ear, I do what he says, pronto."

"You mean you'd help a thug to escape?" said Ned sternly.

The driver suddenly seemed to sense some connection between Ned's manner and his destination. His face paled as he peered over his shoulder, and he de-

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DO THE DEAD RETURN?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," tells of astonishing experiences in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. Here he lived among the lamas, mystic priests of the temple. "In your previous lifetime," a very old lama told him, "you lived here, a lama in this temple. You and I were boys together. I lived on, but you died in youth, and were reborn in England. I have been expecting your return."

The young Englishman was amazed as he looked around the temple where he was believed to have lived and died. It seemed uncannily familiar, he appeared to know every nook and corner of it, yet—at least in this lifetime—he had never been there before. And mysterious was the set of circumstances that had brought him. Could it be a case of reincarnation, that strange belief of the East that souls return to earth again and again, living many lifetimes?

Because of their belief that he had formerly been a lama in the temple, the lamas welcomed the young man with open arms and taught him rare mysteries and long-hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which have enabled many to perform amazing feats. He says that the system often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, can be used to achieve brilliant business and professional success as well as great happiness. The young man himself later became a noted explorer and geographer, a successful publisher of maps



and atlases of the Far East, used throughout the world.

"There is in all men a sleeping giant of mindpower," he says. "When awakened, it can make man capable of surprising feats, from the prolonging of youth to success in many other worthy endeavors." The system is said by many to promote improvement in health; others tell of increased bodily strength, courage and poise.

"The time has come for this long-hidden system to be disclosed to the Western world," declares the author, and offers to send his amazing 9000 word treatise—which reveals many startling results—to sincere readers of this publication, free of cost or obligation. For your free copy, address the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 304N, Los Angeles, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

(Continued from page 100)

manded huskily: "Hey, are you a cop?"

Ned shook his head, grinning, but the man at the wheel shut up like a clam and drove at redoubled pace.

AT THE hospital Ned produced one of his cards. "Conistar Indemnity," he told the interne in the reception-office. "We cover the liability on these bank runners, messengers who carry securities, and so forth. This man who was brought in a few minutes ago, from Broad Street—can I find out something about him?"

"What is the patient's name, please?"

"Well, that's the first thing I want to find out."

The interne, who would have been filling a more important position if he had been brighter, looked puzzled. He consulted a small card file. "If he's just been brought in, he must still be in Emergency. I can't give you any information until he's transferred to a ward."

"Of course he's in Emergency," snapped Ned. "That's why I'm here. What do you think it is, a case of hives? He's been shot in a hold-up. There are going to be claims, and I've got to find out—"

There had been hurried footsteps in the office behind the ante-room a moment before, and a voice asking for a number. Now Ned heard the same voice speaking urgently.

"First Precinct? This is Doctor Nelson, at Beekman Street Hospital. That shooting case that just came in—if you people want to ask him any questions you'd better hurry. He won't last long. . . Right."

As the receiver clattered into place, Ned stepped briskly around the desk and met the doctor emerging into the corridor. "I'm the insurance investigator in that shooting case," he explained quickly. "I can take his statement, while the police are getting here."

The doctor nodded and led the way.

The victim had been carried into a small emergency operating-room, but they were not doing any operating. It was plainly of no avail. Some of his clothes had been removed, and Ned could see that the heavy slug had entered low in his side to rip up through abdomen and lungs to a point

just behind his collar bone. The bleeding had been checked by temporary dressings, but the internal damage was beyond reach.

When Ned had seen him running along the corridor of the Colby Building he had appeared a young fellow. Now he looked a dozen years older. His angular features seemed to have fallen in upon themselves, his skin was flabby and gray, and his eyes, fixed stolidly on the ceiling, held the certainty of the death that loomed over him. He was breathing in long, bubbling gasps—each one was more painful than the last, as his lungs slowly filled with blood. He didn't even know it when the nurse slipped a hypodermic into his arm.

The doctor lifted a limp wrist, feeling for a pulse. Ned stepped to the other side of the operating table, and leaned over it to intercept that fixed stare. There was no recognition in the eyes.

"Can you tell me your name?" he asked softly.

The man's head seemed to roll a little, from side to side, but he made no attempt to speak. Ned leaned lower. "You're badly hurt. But we'll take care of you all right. The doctor will fix you up."

He wondered if he had conveyed too much false encouragement, for the eyes suddenly focused on him, gleamed with an unearthly light. The lips moved, quivering with the effort to form words. The voice was a reedy whisper.

"Other . . . man . . . cab driver? . . . Shot . . . hurt bad?"

Ned's throat tightened, so that for a moment he could hardly speak himself. The unselfishness of a dying man who with almost his last breath inquired for another victim nearly brought tears to his eyes.

"He was shot, yes. I'm afraid he was killed."

Ned backed away, the blood freezing in his veins with horror. The form on the table gave one convulsive jerk, and fell back. The doctor and the nurse busied themselves frantically, but it was no use. A crimson froth bubbled between the clenched teeth, the staring eyes glazed, and went blank and cold. The messenger was dead.

It was not, however, the shock of see-

(Continued on page 104)

don't Worry about Rupture

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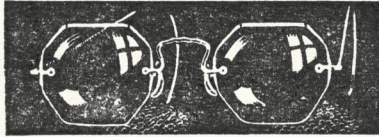
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Dime Detective Magazine

(Continued from page 102)

ing a man die that had congealed Ned's blood in his veins. It was the fleeting expression that he had caught for just an instant, the flash of intelligent reaction that had followed his answer to the doomed man's last question. For a moment there the fellow had been quite conscious, quite aware of what he was asking. And when Ned had reluctantly admitted that the unlucky cab driver had been killed, the dying man on the table had been glad!

It took Ned a minute to recover his sense of reality. He looked toward the table again, but the face there had fallen back into its former shapelessness and showed no expression whatsoever.

"Is he dead?" he asked.

The doctor nodded. "Nothing we could do for him."

Ned moved closer and lowered his voice. "Doctor, did you notice the way he looked at me? That strange expression, when I told him—"

The doctor shrugged. "They all make faces, when they kick off."

He had apparently noticed nothing unusual. Ned glanced toward the nurse. She was professionally imperturbable, busy with dressings. He, then, was the only one who had seen it—or had he been dreaming? It was so incredible, so fantastic, that now when it was gone beyond recall he could hardly credit his own memory. He decided to say nothing about it.

WHEN the detective arrived from the Old Slip Station it took him only a few minutes to go through the dead man's pockets. He found, oddly, no formal identification as bank messenger or employee at all—only a wrinkled and soiled picture postcard from Mexico City, addressed to Anton Dolman at 268 East 9th Street. The postmark was six months old.

"If this is Dolman," he muttered, "you'd think he'd have more on him than this. Aren't these runners all bonded?"

"We're the people who bond them," agreed Ned. "Probably left his tag home—or else it was in his satchel."

He fingered the broken end of chain thoughtfully, wrote down the name and

Bonds to Burn

address, and went back to his office on foot.

"We're one jump ahead of a claim, this time," he told his stenographer, tearing a leaf from his memo book and tossing it to her. "Keep that name handy—we'll be hearing from his employer."

But there was no call before he left for the day, and to his astonishment there was still no call the next morning. Busy with routine work, he waited until afternoon and then dropped into the Old Slip Station. The detective lieutenant in charge of the case was surly and short.

"You were in the drug store, eh? Tell me what you saw."

Ned described the scene with the detailed precision of an expert witness.

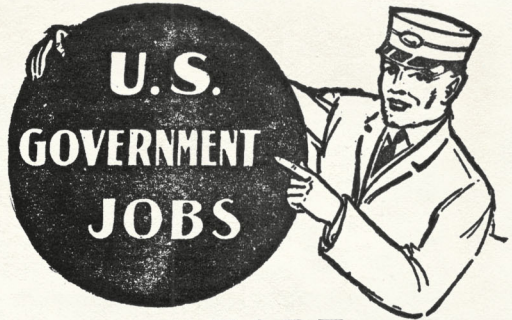
"That makes it unanimous, for the four hundredth time," growled the police officer. "Everyone saw just what you did. A couple of hold-up artists clipped a messenger and ran off with an armful of government bonds. You'd think the first thing we'd hear would be a loud squawk from the owner of those bonds, wouldn't you? But no. We can't find out who they belonged to—can't even find out who the messenger worked for. If we didn't have a couple of dead men on our hands, I'd begin to think there hadn't been any shooting at all, witnesses or no witnesses."

Ned was staring. "There's been no claim put in at all for the missing securities?"

"Never a whisper." The lieutenant's eyes narrowed. "It's my theory that it's an inter-gang job. They were stolen bonds to start with—or maybe counterfeits. One mob had them—a different mob pulled a hi-jack to get them. Only, so far we can't pin it on any mob we know, because not a single witness has been able to pick a mug out of the rogues' gallery."

"Not even the runner who was carrying them?"

"He seems to be a stranger to New York," shrugged the detective. "He lived alone in a hotel room, only took it three weeks ago. God only knows where he came from before that. We've called every bank and bond house in the city, but no one knows an Anton Dolman. If he was a crook, he only got what was coming to him when he ran into Hannigan's bullet.



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The guy I feel sorry for is the little taxi driver."

"That's right," agreed Ned. "Which one was Hannigan?"

"He's on traffic at Broad and Beaver, afternoons."

Ned stopped at that corner on his way back to the office.

"Sure I knew the little cabby," said the traffic cop in answer to Ned's question. "He lived over near me in Brooklyn, and frequently gave me a lift home, when he had no fare. So I used to give him a break at the curb in front of the Colby Building. He was a foreigner of some kind. Voder, his name was—Joe Voder."

"Where did you say he lived?" Ned wrote down the address.

"It's a boarding-house," the cop explained. "I stopped by last evening, to see if he had any relatives. If he has, the landlady don't know about them. He lived alone, and all the dough he had was in his pockets. If no one turns up, I guess the pension fund will have to bury him. He deserves better than potter's field."

WHEN nothing developed in the next three days to lighten the mystery, the police began to turn their attention to other matters, but Ned only found his interest heightened. Leaving the office on Tuesday, he took the subway over to Brooklyn, and after a little hunting located the address given him by the traffic cop. It was one of a row of old brownstone fronts, seedy and down at heel. Through the dingy lace curtains in the ground floor window peeped a sign: *Vacancy*. He mounted the worn steps and pushed the bell.

The woman who answered had stringy gray hair and wore carpet slippers and a soiled apron. She peered at him suspiciously.

"If it's about that Joe Voder," she said quickly, "I can't waste no more time. I got enough to do, without every day standing here—"

Ned revised his intentions promptly. "Joe Voder?" he said. "I never heard of him. I'm looking for a room."

"Oh! Well, come in, then."
She led him through a gloomy carpeted hall and up two flights of stairs, throwing

Bonds to Burn

open the door of a small room at the rear.
 "Only four dollars, mister. Joe paid me five, but I'll let you have it cheap. It's just been fumigated, too."

The odor confirmed her statement. Ned's eyes smarted as he glanced in at the plain iron bed, the scratched dresser, the paper peeling from the wall between the windows. He looked over his shoulder, and noticed that a door stood open at the other end of the hall.

"You haven't one in the front of the house, have you?"

"The front room is seven dollars, mister," she said stiffly, as if she had not the faintest idea of getting it.

"I'll pay in advance—if it suits me," said Ned.

In two minutes, rather to her astonishment, the deal was closed and the first week's rent in the pocket of her apron.

"You don't work nights, do you, mister?" she asked suspiciously.

"No," he assured her. "I'll be in before ten, every night."

He was as good as his word, too, but after a week had passed and he had forked out another seven dollars he began to feel like kicking himself for deserting his comfortable little apartment in Tudor City and holing up every night in this dump, just on a hunch. Curiosity, he told himself, was a useful virtue in an investigator, but sometimes it led a chap into making a damned fool of himself. He resolved not to waste a third week's rent on this will-o'-the-wisp game.

It was his second Thursday evening in Brooklyn when he passed a face in the street that looked vaguely familiar. He was up in the front room before he recalled it. That was because Officer Hanigan, off duty, was in civilian clothes. But the cop's memory for faces was at least as good as his own—he had given Ned a very curious stare, and might have noted the house he entered by looking back over his shoulder. Ned wondered what he would say if any questions were asked.

As was his habit, he undressed only partially, removing coat, vest, tie, and shoes, to shrug into an old dressing-gown that sagged lumpily even after he knotted the belt. For a while he sat on the edge of the

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Dime Detective Magazine

bed reading the evening paper. Then he threw it aside and unlocked the suitcase that he kept in the closet. From it he took a coil of silk-covered wire with ear-phones on one end and a peculiar sort of plug on the other. He inserted the plug tightly in a recess in the base-board of the inside wall, a recess he had carved himself his first night there. Clipping the headset over his ears, he switched off the light, lay down on the bed, and went to sleep.

WHEN he awoke he had no idea of the hour, except that he knew he had been asleep for some time. The room, and the street outside, were very quiet, yet he heard quite plainly a scratching, squeaking noise. It reached him through the ear-phones, which were really nothing more than a magnified version of a stethoscope. With the plug inserted firmly in the framework of the partition, the faintest sound in the adjoining room was magnified a dozen times in his ears. The room behind his was not occupied by any lodger—he had seen to that by paying its rent as well as his own, explaining that he expected a friend to arrive from St. Louis any day. Yet now he heard the sound of movements in there.

He slid off the bed very cautiously. It did not creak because he had long since taken the precaution of oiling the springs. Crossing the room in the dark in his stocking feet, he knelt close to the partition. He still heard a scratching noise, but no plainer than before. When he lifted the ear-phones he could not hear it at all.

He lowered his head until it was level with the edge of the molding. With his knife and a long-bladed chisel he had pried a tiny crack here, not enough to actually see through, but enough for him to tell if the light was turned on in the next room. Even so, for a moment, he was uncertain. He decided that the electric fixture could not be lighted. Perhaps a candle, or a flashlight.

Crouching there, he listened intently to the queer sounds that came to him. Their very enlargement made them difficult to recognize. Some were perhaps the creaking of boards under footsteps, but there was something else as well. He shook his head in doubt, and slipped off the headset.

Immediately there was nothing but silence. Leaving the ear-phones on the rug, he straightened up and moved to his own door.

He had practiced with the knob, and could open it without a click or a squeak. The darkness was like a blanket. The air in the hall was slightly cooler, and the odor of cabbage perceptibly stronger, if possible. Fingertips on the balustrade guided him, and the newel-post at the head of the stairs warned him that he was near the door of the rear bedroom.

He paused, breathing deeply. From a distant street came the hum of an automobile engine and the slish of tires on damp asphalt. From inside the house he heard not a sound. But along the base of the door ahead of him, where the threshold had been worn down in the middle, he saw a tiny sliver of light. Very faint, so that he only noticed it because it moved—but still, there it was. Someone was in that room—the room that had belonged to Joe Voder, and that had belonged to no one else since his death.

For a moment he paused, rehearsing his movements, as he had rehearsed them a dozen times already. He knew precisely where the light switch was, which way the door opened, how the furniture was arranged. He knew exactly what he was going to do, and how.

He took two quick steps and grasped the knob. The door did not open. Of course, the intruder or intruders had locked it behind them. But he had long ago taken the precaution of reaming out the holes in which the screws held the bolt-strike. When he threw his weight against the door, it gave before him.

Whatever light there had been in there before was gone now. In the Stygian darkness he heard a muffled phrase, and the scramble of hurrying feet.

"Stand where you are!" he barked brusquely, and reached along the wall for the light switch. His fingers snapped the button—nothing happened. The bulb had been unscrewed in the socket.

HE STARTED across the room and almost fell headlong over a chair. The furniture had apparently all been shifted to new locations.

"Stop, or I'll shoot!" he commanded,

fumbling in the pocket of his dressing-gown for his pint-size automatic. The gown had been twisted half around his hips by his contortions as he fell, and he could not get his hand on the gun. There was no reply to his command, but he heard the window rattle in its frame as a body brushed against it.

At last he got a grip on the automatic, and sidled past the chair. With his first step the darkness exploded in a blasting roar, and the oblong of the window was dimly outlined by a reddish flicker. Someone else, without giving warning, was doing the shooting, and Ned felt terrifyingly naked. He was no coward, but he had no more relish for being fired at in the dark than any healthy man, especially when he could not see well enough to return the compliment. The other gun belled twice more in abrupt succession, and Ned felt a faint breeze fan his cheek. With the intention of putting the bed between him and the gun in the window, he side-stepped nimbly, and his foot seemed to go over the edge of a precipice.

Where there should have been solid floor, there was for some inexplicable reason no floor at all. His foot went straight down, actually less than twelve inches, but enough to completely destroy his balance. He pitched onto his side, and heard a sharp, brittle crack as an excruciating pain shot up his left leg.

He caught his breath with a gasping groan. The room seemed to be reverberating to a wild fusillade of shots, the muzzle flicker dancing like highlights on the furniture. For a moment he was physically sick, unable to move, and in that moment the shooting came to an abrupt stop. There was a strangling moan that ended in a thud that shook the floor—then the sharp, quick patter of running feet. He pushed himself half erect, and the runner fell headlong across him.

By sheer instinct he grabbed, and caught a leg. It jerked savagely, trying to pull away. He twisted it toward him. His own pain seemed to enrage him. For a brief moment he felt the strength of seven men. Writhing and clutching, he improved his grip, clamped his arm around a torso. Then a strange horror seized him in the dark, his muscles turned to water, and he almost let go entirely. The feel

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of that form in his grasp was unnatural. He was stupefied to realize that he was wrestling with a woman.

A sudden glare of light showed him that he was right. One of her hands was locked under his elbow, the other clawing at the floor. Her face was close to his, her eyes glaring like those of an animal at bay, her teeth bared in a snarl. He recovered his sense of imperative necessity and stiffened his hold, but she wrenched to reach past his side. He had forgotten his automatic, which had slipped from his fingers when he fell. Now he was horrified to see it in her free hand. There was no time to stop her movement, nor even to turn his head aside. In one age-long second of agonizing helplessness he saw her jerk the muzzle up, thrust it beneath her chin, and pull the trigger. Blood spurted into his face, half blinding him.

The shot was fired so close to him that his ears rang dizzily. He heard a voice without distinguishing what it said. Stupidly he pushed away the quivering corpse in his lap and strove to sit up. The light, which had been a flash, multiplied in brightness as a hand tightened the overhead bulb in its socket. Lifting his head he stared in amazement into the heavy-jawed countenance of Officer Hannigan.

"Don't tell me I got the wrong one this time!" growled the cop.

WHEN he came to, he was lying flat on his back looking up through a mist at a face, and as the mist slowly cleared he was horrified to recognize Dr. Nelson, of Beekman Street Hospital. The associations of his last sight of that cool countenance swept over him, and his expression must have betrayed his fears.

"Easy, son," said the doctor. "You've nothing worse than a broken leg. Hannigan brought you here because it's convenient to the precinct, and the lieutenant wanted—ah, here he is now."

Two more faces swam into his range of vision—Hannigan, grinning, and the detective in charge of the hold-up case.

"I couldn't figure why you took the room next to Joe Voder's," explained the traffic cop, "and paid for his to keep it vacant. I knew you must have some reason, so I took post on the fire-escape.

Bonds to Burn

Good thing I was there to intercept your Russian friends last night, eh?"

"We've had time to go over the papers that were hidden in the hole in the floor under the bed," the lieutenant told him. "That's the hole that broke your leg, when you stepped into it. Joe Voder was originally Colonel Maurice Mastik, Ogpu agent in Italy. He came to know too much about certain big shots over there, and decided to quit before they liquidated him. He got to the States all right, but when he splurged some of his choice secrets in magazine articles, they sent a couple of their best agents to get him. They wanted to cover up their murder job, make it look like an accident, so they staged that phoney hold-up."

"It was all phoney, wasn't it?" murmured Ned.

"From the word go. The messenger was one of their crowd. There never were any bonds, only empty envelopes. The only genuine part was the shooting of Voder, alias Mastik—whose real name, incidentally, was Jacob Kornstein. They had learned that he racked his cab in the line in front of the Colby Building every day at that hour, and they had him cold. Hannigan plugging the fake messenger was an accident, of course, but not one he need feel sorry for. He plugged the other one in the window, last night, and the girl finished herself off rather than be taken alive. Tough specimens, some of these women Reds, aren't they?"

Ned, remembering the way she had blown off the roof of her skull, shuddered.

"Incidentally," continued the detective, "there was almost fifteen thousand dollars in cash in that cache under the floor, left out of what he got for the magazine articles. That's what brought his former playmates back there, as well as his private papers. Washington gets the papers, but the money might be used as a reward, if anybody outside the police department were to put in a claim."

"A claim?" began Ned, raising his head. "That's my business—"

"All right, gentlemen," said the doctor briskly. "You can finish your discussion later. We're going to prepare this leg for a cast now . . . Breathe deeply, please."

Ned breathed deeply.

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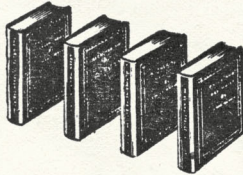
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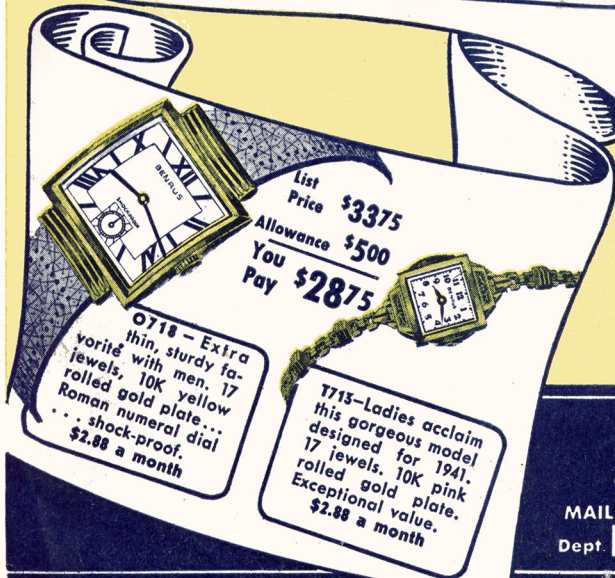
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