

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE



JULY

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



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ME KILL
YOU!**

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NORBERT DAVIS

**DEAD
MAN'S
ALIBI**

A STEVE MIDNIGHT STORY
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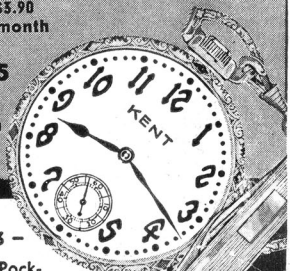
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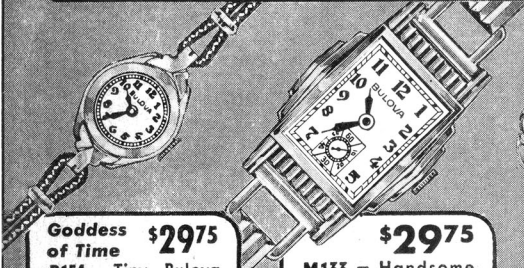


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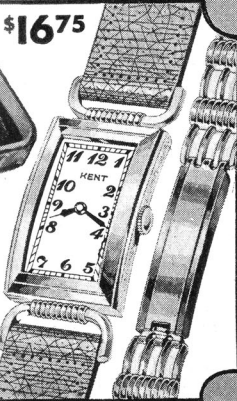
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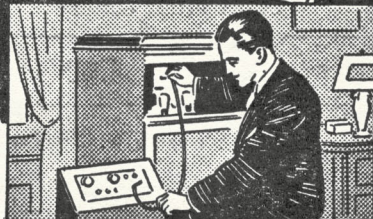
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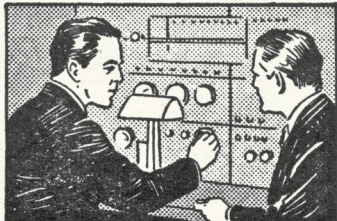
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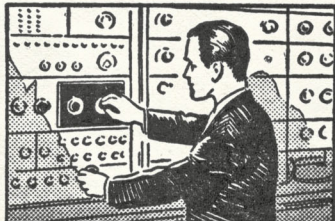
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EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 36

CONTENTS FOR JULY, 1941

No. 4

4—SMASHING COMPLETE MIDNIGHT-MURDER NOVELETTES—4

Stand right there and

- Watch Me Kill You!**.....Norbert Davis 8
I'll do an artistic job of it and everything'll be over and we'll have you all comfortable in your coffin before you know it. We will, that is, if we can keep Latin, the only shamus who might gum the works, sufficiently soaked in brandy till your grave's filled.

Meet

- The Murder Master**.....James A. Kirch 36
Who blew up a prosperity bubble that turned a sleepy coal-country ghost city into a bituminous boom town overnight, then set his wires to explode the whole set-up to kingdom come in a kill sequence that turned the black gold to crimson.

Crack a

- Dead Man's Alibi—A Steve Midnight Story**.....John K. Butler 52
That chiseled Red Owl's hard-luck hacker out of a whole day's meter receipts and tooled his cab straight into a traffic jam of murder, blackmail and sabotage that took an army bomber to blast apart.

Find an antidote for the

- Forty Pains—An O'Melveny and Dugan Story**Cleve F. Adams 79
That afflict crooks, coppers and private peeps alike if they try to play both ends against the middle and sit on the fence when *mal de marriage* rears its ugly head in the middle of murder.

A THRILL-PACKED SHORT DETECTIVE STORY

Invest your money with

- The Wild Man of Wall Street**.....O. B. Myers 97
Then watch it vanish up the flue along with a parcel of bloodstained unmentionables as a young cop who had made the mistake of distrusting the right gal tries to incinerate his way out of a murder mess.

And—

We want to know if you are

- Ready for the Rackets**.....A Department 109
In this revealing series giving the lowdown on currently popular swindle-schemes. Here's a chance to test your ability as a reporter and win \$5.00 at the same time.

Now's the time to catch a preview of

- The August Thrill Docket**..... 6
Some of the sure-fire hits scheduled for production in the next DIME DETECTIVE.

- Cover—"She Whirled, Automatic in Her Hand"**.....
From *The Wild Man of Wall Street*.

Black-and-white illustrations by John Fleming Gould

Watch for the August Issue

On the Newsstands July 3rd

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THE



AUGUST

THRILL DOCKET

DON'T think the boys that make their living outside the law don't have their own social register. And every page repeats the same sermon: it's a life of dog eat dog and nothing succeeds but success. Dorvin Gartell was item one in the underworld bluebook.

Teacher Gartell was the most ambitious crook in the city and, all in all, the most talented. A middle aged ex-principal of a back-country school who had come to the metropolis with some new ideas, he had started cleaning up the instant he had crossed the corporation line. Black-mail, extortion and forgery were his trinity.

He was the last man in the world the Dean and I ever expected as a client.

You know the Dean—fabulous none-such of the genus private detective—and his sidekick Ben, who only knew two things—guns and locks. You met them in *One Corpse Too Many* back in the March issue; in *You're in My Way* in December; and in *Strangler's Kill* before that. Well, the italicized paragraphs above will launch you spang into the middle of *The Puzzle of the Terrified Dummy* in our next issue. It's a gripping complete novelette with more odd angles than any we've run across in months. Take, for instance, the man who had the shooks—no, we don't mean shakes!—and the peterman who used both soup and the torch. It's Dean Rock and Ben at

their best—whittled into shape by MERLE CONSTINER to keep you from putting the yarn down till the last paragraph. We give that to you here just to whet your curiosity.

"Anyplace," she agreed, "where I can pick up a boilermaker!"

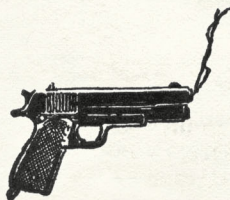
THEN T. T. FLYNN brings back that bland Buddha of the bangtail circuit to watch the gee-gees gallop down the home stretch—at Pimlico this time—in a murder-a-furlong Garrison finish.

It opens with an ancient crone who sells flowers on a Baltimore street corner forcing Maddox to carry a buck bet in nickels, dimes and quarters for her on his hand-book—and ends with a ghost from the golden age of racing turning up to wreck the odds on the favorite and spoil the two-way kill frame in which Maddox and Oscar found themselves the morning of race day. Murder, blackmail and assorted crime fill in the gaps in this gripping complete novelette—Post-Mortem at Pimlico.

HUGH B. CAVE brings back Peter Kane, the dick who drank too much, in *Ding Dong Belle*, to solve the riddle of why Dolores Anderton should have been playing ping-pong in a white bathing-suit the winter night she was murdered.

Plus short stories by JAN DANA, C. P. DONNEL, Jr., and others.

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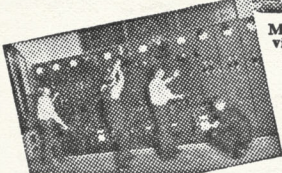
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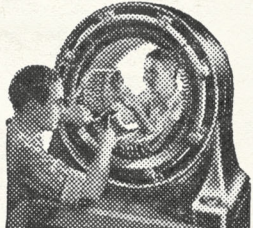
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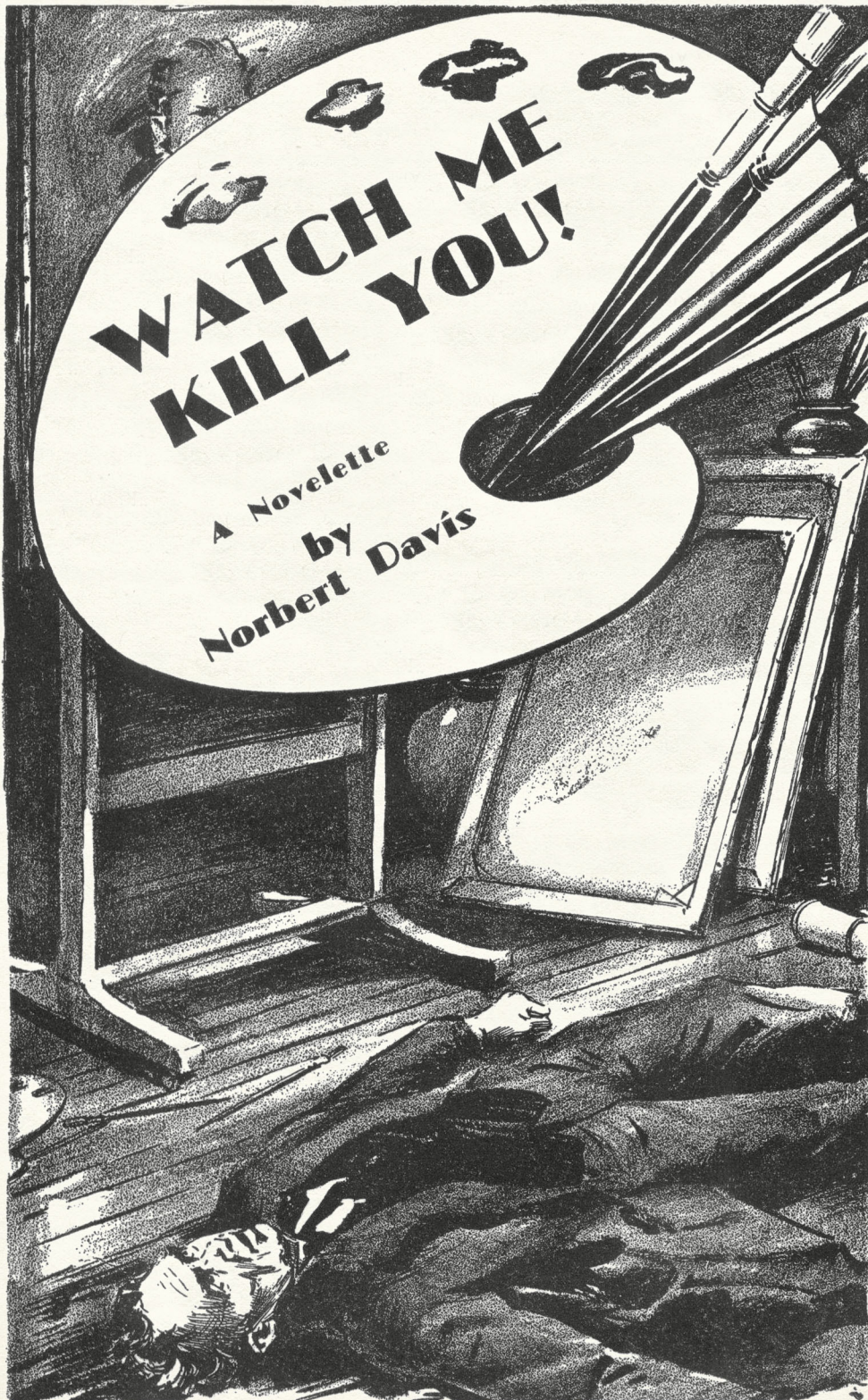
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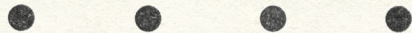




CHAPTER ONE

Latin in Art

GUITERREZ came out of the kitchen in a cloud of steam and slapped the heavy metal swing door violently shut behind him. He was a tall man with a dark, bitterly disillusioned face. He was wearing a white jacket and a white apron, and he had a chef's hat crushed down over his right ear. There was a towel wrapped around his neck, and he wiped his forehead with its frayed end, glaring at Latin.



The man in the overcoat fired without the slightest warning.

"What was the matter with it?" he demanded.

Latin was sitting in the last one of the row of narrow high-backed booths. "Matter with what?" he asked.

"My spaghetti à la crème à la Guitierrez."

"Nothing that I know of," said Latin.

"Then what did you send half of it back for? I suppose it ain't good enough for you? I suppose they feed you better in the county jail, cell three, north tier?"

"No," Latin said judiciously. "As a matter of fact, they don't. You just served me too much. I'm full."

A waiter wearing a baggy grease-stained coat that was at least three sizes too large for him and an apron that would have served for a circus tent came up and poked Guitierrez in the ribs with his elbow. "Out of the way, boss." He was carrying a bottle of brandy and a glass, and he planked them down on the linoleum table-top in front of Latin and went away.

Latin poured himself some brandy. He was a thin man with wide, high shoulders. His features were narrow and carefully expressionless, and his greenish eyes tipped a little, cat-like, at the corners. He had a casual air that was as smooth and polished as an expensive gem.

Guitierrez turned around suddenly and said: "Well, what do *you* want?"

The pudgy little man who had been trying to edge past him stepped back, startled.

"They—they told me at the door that I'd find Mr. Max Latin in the last booth—"

"That's him," said Guitierrez.

The pudgy man ducked his head in an embarrassed nod. "How do you do, Mr. Latin. My name is Bernard Hastings."

Guitierrez tapped him on the shoulder. "Did you know that Latin is nothing but a crook? Did you know he just today got out of the county jail, cell three, north tier?"

Hastings swallowed. "Why—why, no. I—I thought he was a private inquiry agent."

"Also a crook," said Guitierrez. "But probably you are too, and if you want to talk to him sit down in his booth. I don't

allow people to stand in the aisle around here."

Hastings slid gingerly into the seat opposite Latin.

The waiter in the baggy coat came up and looked over Guitierrez' shoulder. "You wanta eat, chum?"

Hastings said: "No, thanks. I don't—"

"So my food's not good enough for you?" Guitierrez interrupted.

Hastings was looking scared now. "Oh, no! I mean, it isn't that. I've just eaten and—"

"So I suppose you think you're gonna sit here and dead-head and take up my table space while you chat with this crook?"

"Why—why, no," said Hastings quickly. "If I could have a—a drink—"

The waiter produced a glass from under his voluminous apron, reached around Guitierrez and planked it down on the table.

"Drink some of Latin's brandy," Guitierrez ordered.

"But—but I don't like . . . If I could have a wine list . . ." Hastings stopped, staring incredulously at the label on the brandy bottle. "Why! That—that brandy is priceless! You can't buy it any more!"

"If you don't like it, get out," said Guitierrez. "I didn't ask you to come here."

"But I do like it! I was just startled at seeing it! It's the best — the very best—"

"Phooey," said Guitierrez, and went on up the aisle toward the front of the restaurant.

LATIN poured some of the brandy in Hastings' glass. Hastings watched him, wide-eyed, and then cleared his throat with a nervous little cough before he spoke.

"Did—did I offend that—ah—gentleman in some manner? I'm sure I had no intention—"

"Guitierrez?" Latin asked. "Oh, he's always offended. Pay no attention to him. He's frustrated."

"Frustrated?" Hastings repeated.

Latin sipped his brandy appreciatively. "Yes. You see, Guitierrez is a very good chef. For twenty years he worked in the topnotch restaurants and hotels,

but he didn't like it. All the time he was saving his money so he could start a small quiet, dignified place of his own where he could serve the absolute best in food cooked just the way he wanted it to a select little group of customers who would appreciate his efforts."

"Why, that's very laudable. I can't see why—"

Latin waved his arm. "Look at this place."

It was one long dingy room with dark-stained walls and beams crossing close against the sooty ceiling. High-backed booths were lined along one side and the rest of the floor space was packed with spindly wire-legged tables. It was still early for dinner, but every seat in the place was taken.

terrible service, makes them stand in line outside whenever it's raining, but he still can't get rid of them. The food he serves is too good. The customers don't mind putting up with a few discomforts if they are allowed to eat it."

Hastings shook his head. "It seems very strange. But if he *really* wanted to get rid of some of his excess customers, he could just stop serving such good food for awhile."

"He can't help making it good. He's an artist."

"Oh," said Hastings, nodding as though that explained everything. "An artist. Yes, I see. Artists are indeed incredible people. I can't understand . . . But, Mr. Latin, I wanted to talk to you about my wife."

An assignment as art buyer is a new one for Latin, the shamus with a shady rep—but he soon discovers that even murder can come under the head of fine art. Sorting among the rare exhibits—a rolypoly art-dealer who's as crooked as a swastika, a sultry sculptress, and a blue-blooded patroness with a brow-beaten mate—the brandy-drinking "thin man" uncovers a couple of cool killers who'd put a hardened gunsel to shame.

The confusion was unbelievable. Crockery clashed and clattered, a juke box howled boogie-woogie from the corner, and the cash register clanged with maddening irregularity. Cigarette smoke floated in eye-smarting layers, and Guitierrez was denouncing a table-full of customers in a bitterly despairing voice while they ignored him and kept right on eating. An incredibly shabby army of waiters dipped and swerved between tables with the breath-taking skill of slack-wire walkers, in the meantime shouting orders, threats, and demands for the right-of-way. Conversational babble throbbed in the thick air like the beat of an immense drum.

Hastings said: "I noticed the atmosphere seemed rather— But certainly Mr. Guitierrez can't complain about the amount of business—"

"Oh, yes he can. That's what's the matter. There's too much business. Guitierrez insults his customers, gives them

"Yes," said Latin. "Five hundred."

Hastings stared at him. "Eh?"

Latin elaborated: "Yes, I will get evidence that will enable you to divorce her, and it will cost you five hundred dollars unless I have to fake the evidence and then the price is seven-fifty."

"But—but it isn't that at all! I mean, I'm very happy. I mean, I don't want a divorce!"

Latin poured himself more brandy. "Oh. Well then, what *do* you want?"

HASTINGS took a deep breath and started over again. "Mr. Latin, you were recommended to me by Walker and Crenshaw, my attorneys. They told me that you were very clever and absolutely—ah—unscrupulous."

"Right on both counts," said Latin complacently.

"Yes, I see," said Hastings in an uncertain tone. "Well, anyway, my wife is Patricia Wentworth Craig."

Latin put his glass down carefully. "Who?"

"Patricia Wentworth Craig."

"The girl with the money bags?"

"My wife is the possessor of an extremely large fortune," Hastings admitted with dignity.

"Yes, indeed," Latin agreed. "Fifty million dollars. I thought you said your name was Hastings."

"I did, and it is. Due to her enormous business interests and to the legal complications in which they result, she thought it best to retain her maiden name after we were married. It is less confusing."

"Yeah," Latin said absently. "I heard she had a husband kicking around somewhere. How'd you do it, anyway?"

Hastings' lips tightened. "I beg your pardon?"

"How'd you hook her? I've always wanted a wife with fifty million dollars. How do you go about getting one?"

Hastings' round face was red with indignation. "Mr. Latin, if you *please!* My wife married me because she loved me and I loved her. Her fortune had nothing whatsoever to do with it. I assure you that I am myself by no means a pauper. I have never touched a cent of my wife's money and never will!"

"Them that has gets," Latin said gloomily. "All right, what did you want to tell me about your wife?"

"If you'll let me talk without these constant interruptions. My wife's father had a brother who, instead of being as honest and energetic and astute as my wife's father, was nothing but a bum and a loafer all his life. He died years ago of acute alcoholism. He had one son."

"I'm right with you so far," Latin said.

"This son's name is Winston Wentworth Craig. He's an artist. I mean, a real one. He paints pictures."

"All right," said Latin.

"My wife collects pictures—modern paintings in particular. She has a most extensive collection—very valuable."

"It would be," said Latin. "Go on."

"It seems," Hastings admitted reluctantly, "that Winston Wentworth Craig is a very good painter. He's had many exhibits, and his pictures are in all the

most famous museums and art galleries and collections. My wife wants some of them in her collection."

"Why doesn't she buy some then?"

"Because Winston Wentworth Craig won't sell her any."

Latin blinked. "Why won't he?"

Hastings wiggled on the hard bench. "Well, you see, Winston Wentworth Craig's father spent most of his time trying to sponge money off my wife's father. When he managed to get any he dissipated it in riotous living. Winston Wentworth Craig came to my wife several years ago and asked her to finance him while he studied in Paris. She refused to give him any money, and I'm afraid she—ah—laughed rather rudely at his ambition to be an artist."

"I'm beginning to get the idea," said Latin.

Hastings made a harassed gesture. "How could she know he was going to turn out to be good? He has many of his father's—ah—less desirable characteristics, and she thought naturally that this art study business was just an excuse to get enough money from her to loaf a year or two. But her refusal made him angry, and he's a very vindictive sort of a person. Now he refuses to sell her any of his pictures."

"So what?" Latin asked.

HASTINGS leaned forward earnestly. "Don't you see? My wife, over a space of years, has built up a reputation as an authority on modern paintings and as a sponsor of it. Now this uncouth person, Winston Wentworth Craig, goes around telling everyone who will listen that she is merely a rich ignoramus who knows so little about art that she can't recognize talent even in her own relations. It's horribly humiliating. People *laugh* at her!"

"How too bad," said Latin.

"Also," said Hastings, ignoring the comment, "he tells people that she can never acquire any of his work, even with all the money she has, and naturally other collectors—who are envious of her—ridicule her for that reason. It is vital, Mr. Latin—*vital*—that she acquire some of Winston Wentworth Craig's pictures!"

"I can see that," Latin said gravely.

"I want you to get some of those pictures for her."

"Steal them?" Latin asked in a bland voice.

"No!" Hastings said emphatically. "Of course not! My wife will pay any price he asks. I want you to get him to consent to sell some to her."

"I hate to do myself out of a job," Latin said, "but this seems pretty silly to me. All your wife has to do is to buy one of Craig's pictures from some other collector or dealer or museum. With her money, that shouldn't be very difficult to accomplish."

"Please, Mr. Latin!" Hastings snapped. "Do you think my wife is such a fool she didn't think of that long ago? Craig won't permit anyone to sell her one of his pictures."

"After he once sells a picture to someone, the picture belongs to the buyer. The buyer can re-sell it to whom he pleases. Craig couldn't prevent that."

"Oh, yes he can!" Hastings said angrily. "You don't know how maliciously clever he is. He claims that he has a reversionary creative interest in every picture he paints."

"A what?" Latin asked.

"A reversionary creative interest. There is no such thing. I think he just made it up himself. But he says that the mere thought of one of his pictures being in my wife's possession would be such a mental torture to him that he couldn't paint any more and that he would sue her for a million dollars on the grounds that she was robbing him of his talent and means of livelihood."

"He wouldn't get very far."

Hastings tapped the linoleum tabletop. "Far enough, Mr. Latin! Far enough! He couldn't win any such fantastic suit, of course. But he certainly would file it. He's just the type. And if he did file it, the newspapers would get hold of it and put it all over the front pages. Can you think of the dreadful humiliation that would mean for my wife? The whole country would laugh at her!"

"Oh," said Latin.

"So," Hastings said earnestly, "Winston Wentworth Craig must consent to sell her some of his pictures! Her reputation as an art patron and her peace of

mind are at stake! And she must obtain those pictures at once! At once!"

"Why?" Latin asked.

"Because she is having an exhibition of her collection at the Keever Art Gallery in just three days. That exhibition would not be complete without some of Craig's pictures. All of her enemies will laugh at her if she doesn't have some of her own cousin's paintings in her collection. If she doesn't, they'll know why. Craig has seen to that."

"I see," said Latin.

HASTINGS said impressively: "My wife is willing to pay up to five thousand dollars for each Craig picture you can get him to consent to sell her."

Latin sat very still. "I thought you said five thousand dollars per picture."

"I did. They are selling currently for about a thousand dollars apiece."

"One thousand," Latin said dreamily. "Five thousand. Mr. Hastings, you've made yourself a deal. I'll get Craig's consent to sell her some pictures if I have to kill him doing it."

"Oh, no!" Hastings said, horrified. "Mr. Latin! Please! Nothing like that!"

"Half-kill him, then," Latin compromised.

Hastings looked very doubtful. "Mr.—ah—Gutierrez said you had just gotten out of jail. He was—ah—joking, no doubt?"

"He never jokes. I did just get out."

"Oh," said Hastings uneasily. "And—ah—what were you charged with?"

"Compounding a felony."

"I'm not familiar with legal terms—"

Latin said: "I was charged with paying some gentlemen to return some jewelry they stole from a client of mine and forgetting to ask the gentlemen what their names were or where the police could find them."

"Did you—ah—do that?"

"Certainly not," said Latin. "I merely paid a reward for the return of some jewelry that had been inadvertently lost."

"Lost," Hastings repeated vaguely. "Stolen. Reward. Buying back. It doesn't seem to me there is very much difference . . ."

Latin smiled. "Just the difference between sitting here and sitting in the coun-

ty jail, cell three, north tier, that's all."

"Oh," said Hastings. "Well—please look into this matter at once, Mr. Latin. Time is of the very essence. I can't over-emphasize the importance—"

"I'll get right on my horse."

"Winston Wentworth Craig lives at 345 B, Greene Street. You'd best go there now. He works at night, and he's never there in the daytime. I haven't mentioned it, but he has an—ah—unpleasant disposition. He can be most insulting—"

"So can I."

"Then I'll leave you—"

"Not without paying for that brandy, you won't," said Guterrez, suddenly appearing beside the booth. "And I know how much you drank, too, because I marked the bottle. It'll cost you just three bucks."

"Three dollars!" Hastings exclaimed. "But I only had one very small—"

"So you want an argument, do you?" said Guterrez. He called to one of the waiters: "Dick, go out in the kitchen and get me my cleaver. The sharp one."

Hastings swallowed. "Well, on the other hand, rather than make an issue—"

"Three bucks," said Guterrez. "Count it out on the table and no back-chat."

CHAPTER TWO

Murder for Art's Sake

GREENE Street had once been a cow-path, and the city fathers had never taken the time or trouble to straighten it out and brush it off and make a modern thoroughfare out of it. Now, as it always had, it wandered in draggling loops between the river and the sullenly massive factories of the industrial section, crossing more conventional streets at any old careless angle, making blocks as weirdly shaped as the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. It was old and lazy and tattered and nobody cared, least of all the people who lived on it.

The cement blocks that made up the narrow sidewalk had risen in some places and sunk in others, and Latin had the impression of climbing up and down a flatly elongated stairway. The dusk hid the soot streaks, and the houses were

all the same depressed gray color, squatting close together and silent, down a little from the street level.

Latin found 345 by the process of counting from the corner. It was a thin, starved-looking building with brilliantly artificial light gleaming through the tall windows on its second floor. There were no lights downstairs, and Latin groped his way down three cement steps and along a narrow brick walk to the front porch.

A cigarette tip made a sudden bright red dot in the black shadow of the front door, and a woman's hoarsely pleasant voice said: "What do you want, sonny?"

Latin tapped the brim of his hat politely. "Looking for Winston Wentworth Craig."

"He doesn't live here."

"I'm still looking for him."

A light switch snapped, and a bulb in the porch ceiling glowed with weary brilliance, revealing the woman who was standing in the doorway. She had brown hair that was cropped carelessly short and tousled like a boy's. There were blue shadows under her eyes, and her lips were twisted into a cynical half-smile. Her cigarette was in a long ivory holder, and her long fingernails were stained a dark blood-red. She was wearing a cotton hostess coat and open-toed sandals. She regarded Latin with a detached, disinterested air.

"Shall I advance three paces and give the password?" he asked.

"Try it, and I'll stick this cigarette right in your eye."

"Which eye?" Latin asked curiously.

"The left one, I think."

"That's O.K., then. The left one's my glass eye."

Latin came up the steps and on the porch. The woman was lounging against the edge of the door, and she didn't move, but she did smile a little.

"Hello," said Latin.

She nodded her cropped head. "Hello. What's your name?"

"Max Latin."

"Latin," she repeated thoughtfully.

"There was a Latin in the papers the other day—also in jail."

"I'm that one."

"I thought so. Private detective on the shady side, eh?"

"Not shady," Latin denied. "Black as night. Got any minor crimes you'd like committed? I'm cutting prices these days because I owe my lawyer some money."

"I'll think it over. Why do you want to see Craig?"

"Who's asking?"

THE woman smiled more broadly. "Nan Carter. You can call me Nan if you want to be formal. The reason I'm curious is that I'm holding off process servers and bill collectors and such vermin until I can pry some back rent out of my distinguished tenant, Mr. Winston Wentworth Craig."

"You wrong me," Latin told her. "I'm an earnest student of the arts, and I am here to purchase paintings in large quantities."

"Who sent you?"

"Remind me to tell you all about it sometime when I'm not busy."

Nan Carter blew a long plume of smoke at him. "In other words, Patricia Wentworth Craig."

"That would be about it."

Nan Carter said: "Craig won't sell her any of his pictures nor let her buy any. Don't you know the setup? He's a genius, or so he claims. Temperamental and like that. He wouldn't touch any of her money. He scorns it. He'd rather borrow from all his friends and forget to pay them back or let me put his rent on the cuff for six months straight."

"I'll change his mind for him."

"How?" she asked.

"I've got a wonderfully persuasive personality and also a pretty fair left hook."

Nan Carter watched him thoughtfully. "Rough stuff, huh? I sort of figured you for that sort of a gent."

"If people get between me and a nice juicy fee, is it my fault if they get trampled in the rush?" Latin asked reasonably.

"No," Nan Carter admitted, "and I think perhaps our dough-heavy friend has finally figured the right way to approach her dear cousin. He's nasty, but he's yellow as a daisy. The stairs are right there. There's no lock on the studio door.

Don't bother to knock. Just go in and make yourself at home."

Latin went through the door and along the short length of hall and up the steep, shadowy slant of the narrow stairway. At the top there was another and shorter hall with the black well of back stairs at the far end of it. There was a door midway along the hall, and Latin went to it, turned the knob quietly and pushed it open.

The bright light from inside the studio jumped at him, blinding him momentarily, and then he caught the whole scene in one flashing split-second and stepped quietly into the studio and pushed the door shut behind him.

The partitions had been knocked out and the whole upper story of the house was one enormous room with its ceiling the high, peaked slant of the roof. There was an easel against the far wall with powerful daylight floor lamps set in front of it, their reflectors focused so there would be no slightest shadow on the canvas it held.

The man was lying in front of the easel, crumpled up there, with his blue painter's smock making a bright pile of color against the dull black of the floor. His face was turned toward Latin, and his eyes were wide and bulging and glassy. There was no blood, but the man was dead.

LATIN stood against the door apparently relaxed, while he turned his head slowly a little at a time, searching the shadows that clung in the corners of the big room. On the other side of the easel there was an open window, and through it Latin could hear the far-away hum of traffic and see the faint glow of lights from the uptown district.

There was no sound and no movement in the studio. After a moment Latin walked quietly across to the limp form in the blue smock and knelt down beside it. He felt one of the man's bony wrists, and it was warm in his hand, but there was no faintest pulse.

Latin pursed his lips and began to whistle soundlessly to himself. He started to get up and then stopped, staring at an object under the easel.

It was a woman's shoe. A dancing pump delicately made of thin strips of

crisscrossing red leather with a high, stilt-like heel. Latin took a handkerchief from his pocket and, using it to cover his hand, carefully picked the slipper up.

It was an expensive one, hand-made for a short high-arched foot, and Latin was looking inside it for the maker's name when he heard the hinge on the door squeak softly.

Latin moved with instant, cat-like coordination. He flipped the slipper out the open window, came up to his feet and pivoted, crouching warily.

"Hold it right there," the man in the doorway whispered.

Latin stayed rigidly immovable.

The man in the doorway was small and slight, and the overcoat he wore made him seem more so. The overcoat was enormous. It looked as though it had been made for someone three feet taller and two feet wider. It hung in shapeless heavy folds, the skirts brushing the floor. The high collar was turned up and fastened with a strap across the front, hiding everything of the man's face but a pasty white triangle from his chin to the bottoms of the huge dark-lensed glasses he wore. He had a black flop-brimmed hat pulled down low over his forehead.

In his right hand he was holding a thick stubby-barreled automatic. He moved it warningly and then reached behind him with his left hand and carefully closed the door, holding the knob so the latch wouldn't click.

"What did you throw out of the window?"

"You guess," Latin invited.

The man watched him in silence for a second, the lenses of the glasses like shiny blacked-out portholes. "Move over to your right a little," he ordered in the same soft whisper.

Latin moved one step sideways and then another. The other man began to move too, following the opposite rim of the invisible circle that separated them. He moved in light, mincing steps, as gracefully as a dancer.

"Stand still now."

Latin obeyed. The other man had reached the easel. He stood with one foot on either side of the blue-smocked

body on the floor. Still watching Latin, he leaned down and began to grope behind the easel with his left hand.

There was a little scraping clatter, and he brought his hand out holding three small, square canvases.

"Don't move," he whispered, and he began to travel sideways on his mincing circle toward the door.

Latin suddenly realized what was getting away from him. "Oh, no," he said. "No, you don't. I've got first call on those pictures. Put them down."

The man in the overcoat stopped, and his tongue flicked over the thin red of his lips.

"I mean it," Latin said. "You're not walking out of here with those pictures."

THE man in the overcoat fired at him without the slightest warning. Latin flopped flat on his face on the floor, kicked himself over and rolled frantically for the wall. The automatic whacked three times more, and the bullets dug into the floor on both sides of Latin with sinister little snaps.

Latin banged into the wall and sat up, flipping his own stubby .38 out of the waist-band of his trousers. He was just in time to see the studio door close and hear the latch snap with quiet finality.

Latin heaved himself up and charged across the studio. He was blind, fighting mad, and he jerked the door open again heedlessly and jumped out into the hall.

He could see down the front stairs into the empty front hall, and he whirled around and headed for the rear stairs. He had reached the top when the little man in the overcoat materialized out of the shadow against the banister and extended a leg deftly in front of him.

Latin tried to hurdle it and didn't quite get over. He caught one ankle, and he went head-first down into the blackness of the stair-well. He managed to half turn while he was still in the air, and his back smashed against the banister with breath-taking force.

He hit the stairs, sprawled full length, did two complete forward somersaults, and landed at the bottom of the stairway in an awkward heap. For a while he couldn't get up and he couldn't breathe, and red-streaked blackness whirled

around inside his head like a pinwheel.

From the front hall the automatic whacked sharply again, and Nan Carter screamed. A door slammed shut.

Latin got up and fell down on the stairs. He started to crawl upward, still clutching his revolver. His legs wouldn't work properly, and he slipped back two steps for every three he climbed. He kept right on going, clawing himself along by main force and clumsiness.

Finally he poked his head above the last step. Looking at him from the same level on the front stairs was the face of Nan Carter. Her cropped hair was even more tousled now, and her blue shadowed eyes were wide.

"My God!" she said hoarsely. "What—what—"

Latin got up the rest of the steps and leaned against the wall for support. He made three attempts and finally managed to gulp air into his lungs.

"Where'd he go?"

"You're asking me, are you?" Nan Carter said, also drawing a deep breath. "I don't know, and I don't care, and I hope he stays there from now on. I heard the shots up here, and I opened my door to take a look. He was right in front of me. He shot once. That was all the hint I needed. I slammed the door and ducked."

"Did he—have pictures?"

She stared at him incredulously. "Pictures! Are you punch-drunk? He might have been carrying battleships on both shoulders for all I know. I just saw that gun. What in the devil were you two doing up here?"

"Call the police," said Latin. "Craig's dead."

Nan Carter gasped. "Dead!"

"Yes. Got a telephone here?"

She was still staring incredulously. "Dead? Telephone? Yes. Downstairs in my apartment."

LATIN felt his way along the hall and went rubbery-legged down the front stairs. There was a neat round bullet hole in the panel of Nan Carter's apartment door. She opened it, and Latin went into a small cluttered living-room and plopped himself down on the divan with a sigh of relief.

"The telephone is over there," Nan Carter told him, pointing to it.

"You call," Latin said. "I'm out of wind. The number is Madison fifty-fifty. Tell them that Craig's dead and somebody just tried to use me to make it two of a kind."

She dialed the number while Latin held his head in his hands, both palms tight against his temples, trying by main force to dispel the fog that seemed to shroud his brain.

"They're coming," Nan Carter said, hanging up the receiver.

Latin looked up, wincing when the light from the floor lamp hit his eyes. "This Craig—did he have an agent? Anyone who sold his pictures for him?"

She nodded blankly. "Yes. Name of Haggerty. You need a drink or a doctor or something."

"Drink," said Latin.

She opened a wooden-doored corner cabinet and brought out a flat pint bottle that was half-full of cheap whiskey. Holding it in both hands, Latin upended it and took three big swigs. The whiskey was as fast as it was rough. It went down his throat like a powder train and started a raging fire in his stomach, but it took the shroud off his brain instantly.

"Whew!" he said, catching his breath again.

Nan Carter took the bottle away from him and had a drink out of it herself.

Latin said: "Have you got a directory? I want to look up this Haggerty's number."

"Two of them are written on the wall, there above the telephone. Craig was always calling Haggerty, trying to get advances. One is his office and the other is his home. I don't know which is which."

Latin found the pencil scrawled numbers and deciphered them. He called the first, and he could hear the buzz of the phone ringing at the other end, but there was no answer. He tried the other, and after the second ring a weary feminine voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Can I speak to Mr. Haggerty, please?" Latin asked.

"He isn't home."

"Can you tell me where I can get him?"

"Hah!" said the feminine voice. "That I certainly cannot. He's out drinking somewhere with his ratty artist clients."

"When he comes in, please tell him that one of his clients—Winston Wentworth Craig—just died, and that he'd better scamper down to Craig's studio just as fast as he can."

"I'll tell him if he ever comes home and he's not too drunk to understand when he does."

A siren began its eery song somewhere close as Latin hung up the receiver.

CHAPTER THREE

Latin Explains

DETEKTIVE Inspector Walters, Homicide, was a tall, gauntly somber man with a face that was long and lined and cynical. He stood now with his arms folded across the hollow of his chest, gloomily watching the medical examiner work on the sprawled body in the blue smock.

The medical examiner stood up at last and nodded at his two assistants. "O. K., boys. Haul it off."

"Well, what?" Walters asked, as the assistants rolled the body on a stretcher and covered it with a sheet.

"He's dead," said the medical examiner, "or did you know? The reason he's dead is because someone was unkind enough to break his neck for him by giving him a very nifty rabbit-punch with some instrument with a protuberance on it about so square."

He held his thumb and forefinger about three-quarters of an inch apart to illustrate.

"A hammer?" Walters hazarded.

The medical examiner scratched his head. "No . . . I don't think so. Maybe a very light tack hammer. It was a very sharp blow with something that wasn't very heavy. The murderer knew just exactly where to hit to snap a spine. I couldn't have done a neater job myself."

"How about that?" Walters asked, pointing to a rusty hammer the fingerprint men had left on a chair.

"No. It's too big and too heavy."

"Hell," said Walters, disappointed. "The boys didn't find anything else around here . . . How long has he been dead?"

The medical examiner didn't even bother to reply. He simply looked disgusted.

Walters sighed. "Well—anything else?"

"He was a junkie."

"Can you tell what brand?"

"Either morphine or heroin, with the odds on morphine. Call me up after the autopsy and I'll tell you more."

Walters nodded, and the medical examiner went out after his assistants and their loaded stretcher. Walters stood in front of the easel staring at the picture it held, rocking back and forth gently. The uniformed patrolman on guard at the door lounged lazily against the wall, exploring his teeth with a sharpened match. The studio was silent except for the gentle squeak-squeak of Walters' shoe soles.

Finally he turned around and said: "How do you feel now?"

Latin was sitting on the edge of the models' platform holding his head in his hands. "To be frank," he said, looking up, "not so hot. I've got bees buzzing in my belfry."

Walters turned back to the picture. "What do you think of this here?" He tilted the picture so Latin could see it.

"Pretty good," Latin said.

It was a portrait, almost completed. It was unmistakably a likeness of the man who had been lying dead in front of it, and it was a startlingly good one. It had a vigor and a sweep that was life-like. The eyes were half-closed, and the mouth was twisted into a cynical little smile.

Walters observed: "He looks like he was amused because somebody popped him, and I wish he could speak up and tell me who it was, because if the bird that did it sneaked up behind Craig while he was painting, then this Craig in the picture was certainly watching him do it. Kind of a funny thing for a detective to think of, isn't it? I mean, a guy in a picture watching the guy he's the picture of get the old socko."

"Very funny," said Latin sourly.

"A little confusing," Walters admitted. He shrugged. "Oh, well. Off to work we go. Suppose you start talking, Latin. Don't lie any more than is absolutely necessary."

"He," Latin said, pointing at the picture, "is and was Winston Wentworth Craig, and he's the first cousin of Patricia Wentworth Craig."

Walters opened his mouth and shut it. "Oh-oh! The one with the heavy dough?"

"That one."

WALTERS sighed. "Then it's up to me to walk soft and talk small, I suppose. Why do I always have to get stuck with the hot ones? It seems like they could put me out to pasture or something in my old age. So what were you doing up here?"

Latin said: "Patricia Wentworth Craig hired me to buy some of Winston Wentworth Craig's pictures—or rather, her husband did."

Walters looked skeptical. "Come, come. You'll have to get a little more speedy than that, Latin."

"Fact," said Latin. "Winston hated his dear cousin Patricia because Patricia had refused to lend him dough so he could study art, so he studied it anyway and got to be good. Then he refused to sell her any of his pictures and needled her by telling everyone that the reason he wouldn't was because she was too dumb to appreciate them."

Walters looked more skeptical. "I'm listening, but not for much longer."

"Patricia collects modern art, and she's giving an exhibit of her collection in a couple of days. She had to have some of cousin Winston's pictures in the exhibit, because if she didn't everybody would boob her. She hired me to come down here and talk Winston into selling her some."

"Nuts," said Walters. "The crunchy kind. Why didn't she just—"

"Yes, yes," Latin interrupted. "She couldn't buy any of Craig's pictures from anyone else, because he said that would cause him great mental agony and he'd sue her."

"He couldn't—"

"He could start suit, and if he did the newspapers would blow it up big, and that would mean that the general populace would give Patricia the horse laugh along with all the artists and art collectors who were already doing it."

"Ummm," said Walters. "This all sounds very much on the corny side to me."

"Not necessarily. Get the setup. Here's a dame that has probably always been able to buy anything she wanted in the world and in addition is very proud of herself for being an expert on modern art. This Craig cousin of hers was attacking her on both fronts, and people were giving her the old snicker because of it. People aren't supposed to laugh at you when you have fifty million dollars."

"I ain't laughing at her," said Walters. "So maybe this is true, and they hired you to get the pictures. But why? You don't claim to be an art expert, now, do you?"

"I'm crooked. They figured I'd chisel the pictures out of Craig with one of my snide tricks. I would have, too."

Walters rubbed the lobe of his ear, squinting. "You know, when I was a kid back in Iowa there used to be a banker in town who called himself Honest John. One fine day he went south with about thirty thousand dollars worth of deposits."

"Very interesting," Latin commented.

"Yeah. Ever since then I've doubted people who go around claiming how honest they are. I think maybe that works backwards sometimes, too."

"Such as how?" Latin asked.

"You. You talk about bein' crooked so much, I doubt if you are. I think that's just your front. I think maybe you're honest."

"That's slander," Latin said indignantly. "I'll sue you. I'm as crooked as a swastika."

"Uh-huh. You may be a trifle speedy on the turns, but I think that's as far as it goes. But let me tell you that if the boys in the district attorney's office ever catch you in a corner they're going to tear your ears off. They're pretty griped about you slipping out of that compound-ing a felony rap. So you came up here

to buy pictures—then what happened?”

“Craig was lying dead on the floor.”

“See any deadly weapons around?”

“No,” Latin said.

“All right. Go on.”

“Here’s where the story really gets ripe. I’d no more than found out the guy was dead, when in comes a little gent in dark glasses and a big overcoat and sticks me up and grabs some of Craig’s pictures. I tried to argue with him, and he started blowing at me. I know that sounds—”

WALTERS’ eyes looked narrow and shiny. “Little gent in a big overcoat and dark glasses. Did he have a pan that looked like it had just been pushed in a flour barrel and a flop-brimmed hat and sport a Spanish mail order automatic?”

Latin stared at him. “Why, yes.”

“McTeague!” Walters snarled. He paced back and forth across the studio, muttering profanity.

The policeman on guard at the door had straightened up alertly and was watching Latin.

“What’s what?” Latin asked.

“We’re not funning now,” said Walters. “I want that little weasel, and I want him bad. You heard that a cop named Gardner got killed a couple of months ago?”

Latin frowned. “I remember something about it. Trying to stop a store hold-up, wasn’t he?”

“No. That was just for the papers. He was on guard at a school cross-walk on the north side. There’d been reports coming in from that school and others that some of the kids were acting funny. The doctors thought maybe it was dope of some kind, although we couldn’t shake anything loose from any of the kids. So the cops were keeping an eye open. Gardner spotted this funny looking guy with a candy wagon prowling around the school grounds, so he strolls over to take a look. He didn’t even have a chance to say hello. The guy just started shooting. Five times he let go, and the fifth one got Gardner in the stomach. The guy was this McTeague you saw.”

“Five times,” Latin said. “And only one hit. How close was he to Gardner?”

“About ten feet.”

“That’s lousy shooting. I figured that it was a miracle he missed me, but now I’m not so sure.”

“He killed a cop,” said Walters coldly. “A damned good cop. We want that baby. Can you tell me any more about him?”

“No. Except that he talked in a whisper. He did know his way around this studio, though. Probably he was the one who was furnishing Craig with dope. Why don’t you ask the doll downstairs if she knows anything about him?”

Walters nodded at the policeman in the doorway. “Go get her.”

They waited for a moment, and then Nan Carter came in the studio ahead of the policeman. She still wore her cotton house-coat, and she was smoking another cigarette in her long ivory holder. She looked quite cheerful and a little bit intoxicated, and she nodded her cropped head casually at Latin and said: “Hi. Are you pinched?”

“Not yet,” Latin said. “This is Inspector Walters. This is Nan Carter, Walters.”

Walters said: “I’d like to ask you about what happened here tonight.”

“Plenty, ain’t it so?” Nan Carter inquired. “Well, let’s see. Latin came along and asked for Craig, and I stalled him a bit because I figured that girl might have sent him over to put the bite on Craig, and I wanted first chance at any money he might have for his back rent.”

WALTERS asked: “What girl?”

“She used to model for Craig. She got into trouble, and she claimed Craig was the cause of it all. I don’t doubt that he was. He was a trifle on the rat side. She pestered him for weeks, trying to get him to marry her or give her money. I used to ring his door bell when I saw her coming, and he’d dodge out the back way.”

“She been around lately?”

“No. Not for the last week or so.”

“What’s her name?”

“Mona something or other. She didn’t kill him if that’s what’s worrying you. She was crazy about him, and besides she wouldn’t have nerve enough.”

“I’ll just look her up, anyway,” said

Walters. "O.K. Go on with your story."

"Well, Latin came up here, and he hadn't been here a minute before the war broke out. I'd gone in to powder my nose, and I heard people stamping around and shots and the house falling down in general, so I opened my door to see what was going on. That little rat of a McTeague was right in front of the door. He shot and I ducked—but fast."

"McTeague," Walters repeated casually. "So you know his name?"

Nan Carter looked surprised. "Of course. He came around here every week."

"Good friend of Craig's, eh?"

She shrugged. "I guess so. He seems slimy enough to qualify. Anyway, he paid me some of Craig's back rent once."

Walters was watching her narrowly. "How did that happen?"

"I just asked him for it, and he paid."

"You're a liar," said Walters.

"Tut, tut," said Nan Carter amiably.

"You knew Craig was on the dope, and you also knew McTeague was selling

it to him. You shook him down."

"Did I, now?" Nan Carter said.

"Yes. Instead of reporting McTeague to the police."

"Shame on me," said Nan Carter, and blew a long plume of smoke in Walters' face.

Walters reached out and slapped her hand. The ivory holder and its cigarette flipped through the air. The holder snapped in two when it hit the floor. The policeman stepped forward casually to put his foot on the cigarette.

Walters said: "Don't get smart with me."

Nan Carter's eyes looked heavy-lidded and sleepy. "Just for that I'm not answering any more questions."

"You will," Walters promised grimly. "Keenan, take her down to the station."

The policeman came forward and put his hand on Nan Carter's arm. "Come on along, now."

She fell into him. She did it very neatly and so quickly that she slid down to a sitting position on the floor before

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he could catch her. She sat there and beamed placidly up at Walters.

"Carry her," he ordered quietly.

Keenan bent down and picked her up without the slightest effort. He carried her across the studio, and as she went out the door she flipped her hand at Latin in a casual farewell salute.

Latin cleared his throat. "I wouldn't, if I were you."

Walters' face was set grimly. "I want McTeague."

"You haven't got anything to hold her on. She'll hang a suit for false arrest on you."

Walters jerked his shoulders irritably. "I suppose so. Oh, hell!" He went to the door and whistled shrilly. "Keenan! Bring her back up here."

CHAPTER FOUR

A Lady Gets a Lift

KEEANAN'S feet thudded on the stairs, and he carried Nan Carter back into the studio and stood there holding her.

Latin said: "Nan, Walters is a little on the edgy side. McTeague's a cop shooter, and Walters is very anxious to get a good grip on him."

Nan Carter looked at Walters inquiringly.

"All right," said Walters. "I apologize, and I'll buy you another holder."

She smiled. "Never mind. I've got a dozen. I just don't like being slapped around. You can put me down now, mister. Thanks for the lift."

Keenan stood her on her feet and went indifferently back to his station at the door.

"Well?" said Nan Carter. "Ask me more. I honestly didn't know Craig was a dope fiend. I thought there was something wrong with him, but that never occurred to me. I really did shake McTeague down, though. Craig used to throw parties all the time, and they were really dillies. I came to one once, and I left fast. I'm not easy to shock, either."

"Craig used to show dirty motion pictures to his lovely guests. I had McTeague tagged for that racket, although I wasn't sure. I thought it was worth a

throw, though. I was broke. So I put it up to him. I sort of leered like they do in the movies and told him I wanted some of Craig's rent."

"What happened?" Walters asked.

She shivered. "He paid. Fifty dollars. Didn't say a word. He just stood there and looked at me for about five minutes, as though he was measuring me for a coffin. I was good and scared. I kept out of his way after that. I got the idea he could be a very nasty proposition if he wanted to be."

"He is," said Walters. "You don't know how lucky you were that he didn't do more than look."

"Oh yes, I do," said Nan Carter. "I'm getting the chills all over again."

"Did Patricia Wentworth Craig or her husband, Bernard Hastings, ever come up here?" Latin asked.

"She did—once. She and Craig had a whopper of a row. He threw her out finally. I mean—threw. Hastings came around a dozen times or so. He and Craig got very, very chummy."

"Chummy?" Latin repeated, puzzled.

"For awhile. It was easy to figure out. Hastings thought he could butter up Craig and get on the good side of him and persuade him to sell some pictures to Patricia. Craig knew that was the idea. He just played Hastings along—drinking his liquor and borrowing money from him and letting him pay for the parties, and then when he got tired, he gave Hastings the razzberry and kicked him out. That Hastings is soft-brained, if you ask me. He should have known Craig would see right through him. Craig was no fool. What killed him, anyway?"

"Someone hit him on the back of the neck and broke his spine," Walters answered absently.

Nan Carter looked at Latin with raised eyebrows.

Latin shook his head. "Not guilty. He was laid out like a rug when I arrived."

"Was the back door locked?" Walters asked.

"Never," said Nan Carter.

Walters nodded. "I want that McTeague. Anything more you can tell me about him?"

"No," she said. "After the rent incident I didn't want any part of him. Latin said he was a cop shooter. You mean he killed a policeman?"

"Yeah. I want him."

"What else do you know about him?" Latin asked curiously. "You just said he downed Gardner."

Walters was frowning. "He had his reasons. The doctors were right. The kids were getting dope—morphine—and he was selling it to them. He had it fixed up in candy. Very clever fellow. The kids talked fast afterward, because Gardner was very popular with them. McTeague had told them that the candy contained caffeine and that it would pep them up for examinations and stuff but that they shouldn't let on to anyone because even if the stuff was perfectly harmless, parents would be apt to be sticky about it. You know how kids go for secrets like that, and so did McTeague."

Nan Carter looked a little sick. "Morphine—to kids—"

"Yes," said Walters. "Very, very little of it. Not enough to make them goofy—but enough to give them a lift and enough to put them on the habit if they kept at it."

THEY were silent for a second, and then Walters nodded at Nan Carter.

"If you ever see him again, get behind something solid and start screaming. But be sure what you're behind will stop a bullet, because he'll shoot."

She shivered. "Right-o."

Someone shouted something from the lower floor, and Keenan, the policeman on guard at the door, put his head out into the hall.

"What?"

The voice below shouted something else and Keenan turned back to Walters.

"There's a guy down below who says his name is Haggerty. He wants in."

"He's Craig's agent," Latin explained.

"Send him up," Walters ordered.

Keenan relayed the order, and feet thumped raggedly on the stairs. A fat little man with a red, round face came puffing through the door. He was carrying a cane, and he braced the rubber tip of it on the floor in front of him and leaned the soft bulge of his stomach

against it for a support, regarding us all.

"Hah!" he said explosively. "I told him a good many times he was such a louse he ought to go and kill himself, but I never thought he'd do it."

"He didn't," said Walters. "Somebody broke his neck for him. Is this actually Haggerty, and is he actually Winston Wentworth Craig's manager, Miss Carter?"

"Yes," she said. "Hello, you greasy blood-sucker."

Haggerty took off his hat, revealing close-cropped red hair. "Miss Carter. It is delighted I am to see you, even in such sad circumstances."

"You and your phoney Irish dialect. Will you kindly go to hell with my best regards?"

Haggerty beamed at her. "Your wish is my command, and indeed it surely is, my dear."

Nan Carter turned to Walters. "Through with me now? Being in the same room with this fat rat makes me queasy."

"All through," said Walters, "for the moment. Stick around down below."

She sauntered out of the door.

Walters waited until her footsteps had gone down the stairs and then said to Haggerty: "She doesn't seem to like you."

"A pity," said Haggerty. "Indeed, it saddens the heart of me to the point of breaking."

"Why doesn't she like you?"

Haggerty smiled benignly. "And your name, sir?"

"Inspector Walters. Homicide. Why doesn't she like you?"

"It is indeed a great pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir. She does not like me because I won't act as her agent."

"Why won't you?"

Haggerty waggled a fat forefinger at him. "Indeed, my dear Inspector, for the one best reason of all, of course. Her stuff won't sell, and it won't sell because it is no good."

"What does she do—paint?"

"No, no. She's a sculptress—she says. All impressionistic and very, very lousy."

"Why did you come here tonight?"

"Someone called me and asked me to."

"I did," said Latin.

"What for?" Walters demanded.

"Business," said Latin. "Can I talk to him alone?"

"Ha-ha," said Walters.

Latin shrugged. "Haggerty, my name is Latin."

HAGGERTY blinked eyes that were a bright steely blue in spite of being slightly blood-shot at the corners. "Indeed? The gentleman who had some slight—difficulty over some stolen jewels recently?"

"Yes."

"Well, well," said Haggerty thoughtfully.

"Do you have any of Craig's pictures now—on sale?"

Haggerty rubbed his chin. "In a manner of speaking, yes. That is, he had three finished that he was going to deliver to me tomorrow."

"Deliver to you to sell as his agent?"

"Right, sir."

"You can't be an agent for a dead man."

Haggerty grinned. "Ah, yes. The deal was completed before his death. I advanced him money and the title of the pictures passed to me then. I have contracts to prove it. He was just holding the picture temporarily because he wanted to put some finishing touches on them."

Latin pointed to the easel. "Is that one of them?"

"No. It isn't completed, and wouldn't be worth much if it was, as I told him. Who wants to look at an artist's face? But Craig liked himself, even if no one else did."

"I want to make a deal with you," Latin said. "I want you to sell me those three completed pictures for a thousand apiece. That's the current market value for them."

"Ah, no," said Haggerty merrily. "They'll double in value, now there's to be no more of them. If you'd like to bid—"

"No. Take my offer or get nothing."

"Nothing?" Haggerty inquired. "Now I think not, indeed. I'll take the pictures, and there's a strong market—"

"Where are the pictures?" Latin asked.

Haggerty pointed with his cane. "Right over—" He turned around to look at

Latin. His smile was strained at the corners now. "They're supposed to be under that easel. He always kept the completed ones there."

Latin shrugged complacently. He said nothing.

Haggerty's smile was completely gone. "And what is this now, please?"

"I'll be fair about it," said Latin. "Fifteen hundred apiece and five hundred to you for acting as my agent on the resale. Take it or leave it."

Haggerty's blue eyes opened wide. "Indeed, now. But the pictures are really mine, sir. I took title as security for the money I advanced to Craig."

"All right," Latin said. "Hunt for the pictures."

Haggerty puffed out his fat cheeks and sucked them in again. He looked calculatingly from Latin to Walters and back to Latin again.

"They're not here?"

"No," said Latin.

"Are they in your possession?"

"No."

"I warn you that I can identify them."

"Go ahead," Latin invited indifferently.

"And you, sir," said Haggerty to Walters. "A police officer, do nothing but stand there—"

"I'm doing more than standing," said Walters, watching Latin narrowly. "I'm listening, and what I hear I don't like so very well. Where are those pictures, Latin?"

"McTeague took them, like I told you."

"Yes. And where they are, McTeague will be. I want that McTeague. Where, Latin?"

"I don't know."

"Latin," said Walters very softly, "don't get in between me and McTeague or I'll run you down. I mean it. Do you know where he is?"

"No."

Haggerty cleared his throat. "On due consideration, Mr. Latin, I think I'll take your kind offer and thank you."

"Right," said Latin.

"Latin—" Walters said warningly.

The voice shouted from the hall below, and Keenan put his head out the door again.

"What?" He listened and relayed the information to Walters. "There's a guy

and a dame downstairs. Say they're related to the stiff."

Walters groaned. "Send them up—politely, Keenan, very politely. In fact, you may go down and escort them, Keenan. Remember to salute."

"And remember you're my agent," Latin said to Haggerty.

Haggerty put his smile on again. "Ah, yes. And I think matters become slightly clearer."

"Do you?" Walters asked sourly. "I don't."

BERNARD HASTINGS and a woman came in the studio ahead of a suddenly deferential Keenan. Hastings looked really scared now. His plump face was a yellowish white, and he stared right and left with fearful bulging eyes, as though he expected a gory body to leap at him out of any corner. When he saw Latin, his eyes bulged even more, and he flicked a tongue across lips that were suddenly dry and colorless.

The woman with him said in a harsh, high voice: "Who is in charge here?"

Walters stepped forward. "Inspector Walters, ma'am. Homicide."

"I am Patricia Wentworth Craig."

She wouldn't have needed to identify herself. Her thin, arrogant features were pictured in the papers as often as the most popular movie star's. She was blond and tall and very erect, high-shouldered, and she walked and talked and looked as though she was sure she was better than anyone else and that everyone knew it. She was wearing a long chinchilla coat with a black formal dress under it. She had a diamond bracelet a good two inches wide on her left wrist. It was the only jewelry she wore.

"Yes, ma'am," said Walters.

She looked at Haggerty. "What are you doing here?"

Haggerty bowed. "Endeavoring to help in my humble way, dear lady."

She shrugged in disgust and pointed at Latin. "Who is he?"

Hastings said in a croak. "That—that is the man—"

"What man?" she said impatiently.

Hastings swallowed. "The one—Latin."

She looked Latin up and down. "I see.

Then you've apprehended him already, and there's no need for us to stay. My husband is a fool, Inspector, and you'll have to excuse him."

Hastings winced but made no effort to deny the accusation.

"Yes, ma'am?" Walters said cautiously.

"Yes. This man Latin is a criminal. He just got out of jail, as you probably know. My husband, in his stupid way, decided for some reason to hire Latin to purchase some pictures from my cousin. My cousin refused, for reasons that are none of your affair, and Latin killed him, intending to steal some pictures from him, I have no doubt. You will see to it that he is hung, of course. Good evening."

Walters cleared his throat. "Well, ma'am, we're not so sure Latin killed your cousin."

She swung back toward him. "What? Nonsense! If he didn't, who did?"

"Well, we don't know yet."

She stared icily. "Don't be a fool. Of course Latin killed him, and naturally he'd deny it. You police have what you call a third degree, haven't you? Well, use it. *Make* him confess. No matter what methods you use, I'll see to it that no one ever objects to them."

Latin looked at Haggerty. Haggerty was grinning. Latin's greenish eyes began to glow slightly.

Patricia Wentworth Craig was examining the portrait on the easel. "I'll take that one, and Haggerty, you will deliver any other pictures you have to me at once."

"Indeed?" said Haggerty politely.

"He hasn't any," said Latin.

She looked at him. "Did you speak?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I said Haggerty hasn't any of Craig's pictures. He did own three of them, but he sold them to me. I'll sell them to you for five thousand apiece, in accordance with my agreement with your husband."

She laughed mockingly. "Five thousand! What utter and complete absurdity!"

Hastings said: "But, my dear, I—I did—"

"Be quiet!"

Hastings swallowed hard and remained silent.

"Five thousand," Latin said blandly.

"You must be a fool as well as a murderer," said Patricia Wentworth Craig coldly. "You have nothing to show in writing, and in this state a contract involving a sum of more than five hundred dollars is not enforceable unless it is in writing. I can buy all of my cousin's pictures I want now for a quarter of five thousand dollars."

"On the other hand, no," said Latin blandly.

SHE really looked at him, as though she were seeing him as a person for the first time. "Why can't I?"

"Well, you *could*. But I'd have to sue you if you did."

"Sue me for what?"

Latin smiled. "Well, you see Craig's pictures are unique. They are pictures that Patricia Wentworth Craig—the richest girl in the world—can't buy. That gives them a special value, which was why I invested in them. Now if you should buy some of his pictures—from someone else—then that would reduce the value of the pictures I have, because they wouldn't be unique any more. So I'd have to sue you for what I'd lose, and if I did I'd have to explain in my complaint just why you couldn't buy any of Craig's pictures while he was alive."

Haggerty blew out his breath in a long sigh, and Walters began to whistle softly to himself.

Patricia Wentworth Craig hissed at her husband: "You stupid oaf! Did you have to tell him everything you knew?"

"I—I—" Hastings said miserably.

"Five thousand," Latin repeated.

She was biting her under lip. "All right. When and where will you deliver them?"

"I won't. You'll come and get them when and where I tell you."

Patricia Wentworth Craig's thin face was white now, and the rouge showed up in ragged red patches on her cheekbones. "All right," she whispered. "But you—you—" She drew in her breath, turning to Walters. "Is he under arrest?"

"Latin?" Walters asked. "Well—"

"If he is, release him at once."

"Yes, ma'am," said Walters meekly. "Have you—changed your mind about him killing your cousin?"

"Of course, you fool. Release him."

Walters nodded at Latin. "You're released."

"Thanks a lot," Latin said mockingly.

Patricia Wentworth Craig turned on her husband. "Well, what are you waiting for? Take me out of here, you blundering numbskull."

"Yes, my dear," said Hastings quickly. He escorted her to the door as carefully as though she were made of spun glass.

Walters waited until they were gone and then took off his hat and wiped his brow with the palm of his hand. "*Whee!* Join the police and have more fun! It's lucky I didn't have you under arrest, Latin. I wouldn't want to cross that dame. She's really as neat a dose of pure poison as I've ever seen, and she could probably get me thrown off the force before I could light a cigar. I think you're going to be a sorry man, Latin, if you play any of your cute tricks on her."

"Five thousand dollars a picture," Haggerty said in a dreamy voice.

"Don't get any ideas," Latin warned.

"Ah, no," said Haggerty, beaming.

"No, indeed."

"Do you know a guy by the name of McTeague?" Walters demanded. "Friend of Craig's?"

"No," said Haggerty.

"Well, I guess I'll be running along," said Latin.

"I wish you would," Walters informed him. "You're certainly not much help to me."

CHAPTER FIVE

McTeague Meets His Maker

IT WAS an hour later when Latin came into Guitierrez' restaurant again. The crowd had thinned now, and the place wasn't quite so noisy or confused, but almost. Latin sat down in his favorite booth, and he hadn't been there more than five seconds when Guitierrez came through the metal swinging door that led to the kitchen and glowered at him.

"I was hopin' maybe they tossed you in the jail again," he said. "I bet you they got cell three, north tier all cleaned and ready for you by this time."

Latin nodded absently. "Is Pete here?"

"Washin' dishes."

Tell him to go down to 345 Greene Street and wait outside until the police leave. Tell him to telephone you here when they go and also to find out whether they leave anyone on guard. Tell him to keep out of sight."

"Tell—tell—tell," said Guitierrez sourly. "Suppose you tell me who's gonna wash the dishes."

"You."

Guitierrez swelled up. "Me! I'll have you know that I was the master chef—"

"All right. Throw the dishes away and buy new ones. In the meantime, bring me a telephone."

The little waiter in the baggy, grease-stained coat came up with a bottle of brandy and a glass and put them down on the table in front of Latin.

"Get him the telephone, Dick," Guitierrez ordered. "He's pretending like he's important again."

Guitierrez stamped back through the swinging door into the kitchen, muttering to himself. Dick brought Latin a portable telephone, and Latin plugged in on a concealed connection behind the chintz curtain at the rear of the booth.

He sat for several moments, staring absently upward at the smoke layers that floated under the stained ceiling. Finally he nodded once to himself and dialed the number of Haggerty's home.

The phone rang several times, and then the same weary feminine voice said crossly: "Well, hello?"

"Has Mr. Haggerty come home yet?" Latin asked.

"Hah! Twice, no less! You'd think this was the Grand Central Station, the

way he comes and goes. He isn't here now, if that's what you want to know."

"Can you tell me where he is?"

"Hah! Your guess is as good as mine. He said he was going to his office, but if you want him you might as well start looking in the nearest gutter."

"Thanks," Latin said.

He pressed down on the breaker bar to cut the connection and then dialed Haggerty's office. The repeated buzz in his ear indicated the phone was ringing at the other end of the line, but there was no answer. After about the tenth ring, there was a click and then, instantly, another. The buzzing ceased, and the line hummed emptily.

Latin pursed his lips thoughtfully. He dialed a third number, and instantly a voice bellowed cheerfully in his ear:

"Hello there! Happy's All Night Garage!"

"This is Latin, Happy."

"Ah, now! Hooray! You're out, eh? I knew you'd do it! I told my wife they couldn't keep Latin in their flea-trap jail on a bum rap like that. Murder or arson or bank robbery or something decent, I said, why sure. That would be all right, I told her. But this compounding a felony stuff, I said, why that's chicken feed for Latin. He'll spit right in their eye, I told her. Hooray! I'm glad you're out!"

"Thanks, Happy. Send the black coupe around."

"Coming up!"

HAGGERTY'S place was on Claghorn Street, right in the middle of the city's financial district, and it looked as out of place there as a hobo jungle camp



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would have. The office buildings and stores around it were pale and austere and dignified, but the whole front of Haggerty's store was one gaudy splash of blood-red enamel that glistened sinisterly even in the dim light of the street lamps.

There was a wide bronze door in the middle of the enamel. On one side of the door, futuristically cockeyed letters spelled the word *Haggerty*, and on the other the one word *Art*.

Latin, drifting past in the black coupe, decided that Haggerty was probably a pretty good salesman. At least, he knew enough to come where the money was and how to advertise himself and his wares in a spectacular manner when he got there.

Latin parked the black coupe midway in the next block and walked back. He stood in front of the brass door for a moment, looking both ways. The street was deserted. There was a bell beside the door, but Latin didn't ring it. He tried the catch on the bronze door, and it opened with a smooth, soft click.

He pushed the door open and looked into the dim, narrow length of the store. At the back there was the faint glow of light coming through a partially closed door, but there was no slightest sound. Latin stepped inside and closed the door noiselessly behind him.

The darkness was thick now, and soft, heavy with the smell of turpentine. Latin drifted toward the light, his feet soundless on the thick carpeting. There was still no sound, no sound at all.

Latin felt a queer prickling sensation between his shoulder blades, and he stopped and stood still for a full minute, listening. He was frowning in a worried way, and finally he drew his stubby .38 from the waistband of his trousers and balanced it casually in his right hand.

He went forward step by step. The door was just in front of him, and he reached out his left hand, fingers rigid, and pushed it slightly.

It moved on oiled hinges. It moved back like the slow unrolling of a stage curtain and revealed a square, small office with white plaster walls and two narrow blue rugs slantwise in the shape of a lopsided T on the black polished floor and thick blue drapes that covered windows in the far wall.

It revealed Haggerty sitting behind a square desk in the corner. Haggerty's fat face was like a white, strained moon with the bristly red halo of his hair gleaming above it. He was staring at the door with his bloodshot eyes popped impossibly wide.

"Hello," Latin said, and stepped inside the office.

Haggerty heaved in his chair. "*Gaah!*" he screeched in one wordless, breathless sound and fell over backwards into the corner, chair and all.

Latin dropped flat on his face on the blue rug. The drapes blew out as though a gust of wind had caught them, and the smack of the first report blended with the crash of Haggerty's chair going down. The bullet hit the door on the near edge and slammed it shut.

McTeague slid out from behind the drapes, as deadly and quick as a cobra. He fired three times more in a blasting stutter of sound. Two of the bullets went wide to Latin's left and the third tapped his hat and tipped it neatly on the back of his head.

Latin fired once, and the report was a solid bump of sound after the chattering racket of McTeague's automatic. McTeague made a shrill little sobbing noise. He came one step and then two toward Latin, as mincing and neat as ever, and then he collapsed, and the thick folds of his overcoat seemed to settle and blend into the blue of the rug under him, and he lay very flat and small and motionless there.

THE echoes rang deafeningly in Latin's ears. He was sitting up now, breathing in short gasps through his mouth. Very slowly the white moon of Haggerty's face rose above the horizon of the black desk. His eyes, like jiggling coordinated marbles, moved from Latin to McTeague and back to Latin.

"Oh," said Haggerty in a thin, sick voice.

Latin leveled his revolver. "Don't try to duck behind that desk again. I'll shoot through it."

Haggerty's voice went up to a hysterical squeak. "No, man! Don't!"

"How did you know I was coming in here?"

Haggerty gulped. "Bell. Rings in here when the front door opens. He—he heard. He had his gun on me. Said—said he'd shoot if I warned . . ."

Latin stared at him silently.

There were big beads of perspiration on Haggerty's forehead. "Man! You—don't think that I—I would—"

"I guess not," said Latin.

He got up, and Haggerty did, too. Haggerty moved like a man in the last stages of some wasting disease. He fumbled his chair upright and sat down in it with a thump.

"Is he—is he—"

"Dead," said Latin.

Haggerty found a big silk handkerchief and began to mop at his brow with it. "And a good thing it is, indeed! I was sitting in here, you understand, as peaceful and innocent as a new-born babe, when in he came like a snake out of the weeds with that gun of his leveled at my head . . ."

Latin was looking at him, and Haggerty's voice died away to an unintelligible mumble.

"Liar," said Latin.

"Now indeed, sir!" Haggerty protested hastily. "Indeed and I may slip slightly from the strict path of truth on occasion but I swear—"

"You were trying to gyp me."

Haggerty gasped in horror. "I? Haggerty? Gyp you?"

"Yes. McTeague called you up and told you he had three pictures of Craig's. He described the pictures, and you knew which ones they were. You knew they were the ones you had agreed to sell me. But you thought you could void the sale because it wasn't in writing and then go and sell them to Patricia Wentworth Craig on the deal I worked out with her and leave me holding the bag."

Haggerty looked sick. "Oh, my dear sir! Oh, please! That would be unethical, not to say dishonest, and I can assure you indeed that the name of Haggerty is no less than the definition of honesty its very self!"

"Got anything else to say before I shoot you?"

"Shoot?" said Haggerty, gaping. "Me?"

"Yes." Latin gestured toward Mc-

Teague's still form. "Someone's got to take the rap for this, and I can't afford to. I'm hotter than a firecracker in this town. I think maybe he shot you and you shot him with my gun."

"Gaah!" said Haggerty, suddenly becoming incoherent again.

"Well?" said Latin.

HAGGERTY gulped. "Please, my dear good kind sir! If you will only allow me to speak for one short second. I assure you I would never think— No! Wait, wait! I admit it! The very thought of fifteen thousand dollars for three pictures was like a worm crawling in my miserable brain, and when this—this called and said he had the three pictures and would sell them for a thousand apiece—"

"You couldn't resist trying a double-cross.

"Right," said Haggerty miserably. "But please forgive me, my dear sir. Don't shoot me in cold blood and leave my poor wife bereaved and destitute—"

"Did McTeague bring the pictures?"

"No!" said Haggerty explosively. "Indeed, and I think the scum had every intention of cheating me by taking my money forcibly and refusing delivery!"

"My, my," said Latin. "It's surprising how dishonest people are. I suppose it never occurred to you to turn him over to the cops and get your money back—after you got the pictures."

"Certainly!" said Haggerty. "It would have been my duty as a citizen, no less! The return of the money I paid, of course, would have been incidental."

"I can imagine."

Haggerty moistened his lips and grinned in a sickeningly shaky way. "What—what—"

"I want to use your telephone."

Haggerty pushed the desk set gingerly toward him. Latin dialed a number, using the stubby barrel of the revolver. Guitierrez' voice answered explosively:

"No! I don't make no reservations over the telephone!"

"Did Pete call in?" Latin asked.

"Oh, it's you!" Guitierrez snarled. "Where are you calling from—cell three, north tier, county jail?"

"None of your business. Did Pete call in?"

"Yes. He said the joint was crawling with cops, but they all went away and didn't leave nobody on guard. Who was the poor fella you knocked off?"

"Good-bye," said Latin. He hung up and nodded at Haggerty. "You're a rat, but you're still my agent."

Haggerty grinned more confidently. "Indeed, it will give me the greatest pleasure—"

"Write out a bill of sale for those three pictures. Describe them, and be sure you describe the right ones."

"But, my dear sir, I haven't got—"

"I know where they are. Is there a back door to this place?"

"Yes. On the alley . . . What—what do you intend . . ."

"I'm going to wrap McTeague up in your rug and take him away from here."

"But, my dear man! Suppose the police stop you or—or find out?"

"Then I'll tell them that you shot him and hired me to hide the body."

"Huh!" said Haggerty, losing all his breath in one gasp.

"It would be easy," Latin told him calmly. "Your rug, your office. And this gun isn't registered. I could probably scare up a couple of people who would swear it was yours, too. Just remember all that before you start throwing any more curves around here."

Haggerty's moonlike face was as white as a sheet, and he stared at Latin with a sort of horrified fascination.

CHAPTER SIX

A Corpse Goes Home

DARKNESS had fallen over Greene Street and left it as shadowy and deserted as it must have been in its earlier days. There were no cars on the street and no pedestrians, and the house at Number 345 looked as somber and black as though it were in mourning for the death that had occurred within it.

Latin parked in front and stayed in the car for several moments, watching the houses nearby. There were no signs of life from any of them, and finally he got out. He maneuvered the slim, light body of McTeague out of the front seat and carried it up the narrow walk and up the

steps. He used the keys he had found in McTeague's pocket to open the front door and used them again to open the door of the lower apartment.

He went through the living-room where he had telephoned Haggerty such a short, violent time ago, along a dark hallway. He tried two other doors and found a bedroom.

He put McTeague down on the bed and carefully folded one side of the high, thick collar of McTeague's overcoat so that it hid the features.

He stood in the darkness quite awhile, looking down at the bed. Then he shook his head once with a little shivering jerk of his shoulders. He could feel the perspiration wet and cold on his face, and his eyes burned dryly. He drew the shades down carefully, turned on the light. He didn't look at McTeague again. He began to search the bedroom.

He found the hand-made red dancing pump in the closet, mixed in with a confusing jumble of other shoes. He left the bedroom and went on searching patiently. He found the three Craig paintings tacked to the under-side of the kitchen table.

Carrying the pictures, he went back in the living-room and dialed Madison 5050 on the telephone, and when a voice answered, said: "Tell Inspector Walters that he will find Mr. McTeague in the lower apartment at 345 Greene Street." He hung up at once and went hurriedly out of the house, shivering a little.

It took him less than ten minutes to get back to the restaurant. He parked the black coupe in the alley and came in the rear door.

Gutierrez was standing in the middle of the big low-ceilinged kitchen. He opened his mouth, preparing himself for a blast of sarcasm, and then shut it again when he saw Latin's face.

"Well?" he said mildly.

"Pete," Latin said.

Pete was a bald, bandy-legged little man with a long drooping mustache. He had been presiding at a long sink piled high with dishes, and he came forward wiping his huge, reddened hands on his apron.

"Yus, Mr. Latin."

"The black coupe is in the alley. Take it over to Happy's and tell him to pull off

the wheels and start relining the brakes. If anyone asks, it hasn't been out of the place all day."

"Yus, sir."

Guterrez glared at Pete, said dangerously: "Get it right, dope, or I'll bounce a cleaver off your thick skull."

Latin was carrying Haggerty's blue rug bundled up under his arm. He handed it to Guterrez and also gave him the stubby .38 revolver.

"Ditch these."

"O.K.," said Guterrez.

"I've been here for an hour. When I went out awhile ago, I came right back in."

Guterrez went to the kitchen door, opened it slightly and yelled: "Dick. Come here!"

The little waiter in the grease-stained coat slid in through the door. "Yeah?"

"Latin's been here for over an hour."

"Absolutely," said Dick.

"Fix it so he can get in his booth."

"Yup."

DICK went out into the main dining-room again. Latin waited next to the swing door. In about ten seconds there was the jangling crash of a tray of crockery breaking. Instantly afterwards two voices began screeching frantically.

Latin pushed the door open. Dick and a tall, bald waiter were face to face at the front end of the restaurant, howling insults at each other. Broken crockery lay in windrows around them. Every patron remaining in the place was staring at the disturbance in open-mouthed amazement, and Latin slipped unseen into the end booth.

The argument stopped as suddenly as it had started. Dick came back to the booth, carrying an ashtray full of snubbed out cigarettes. He put it down in front of Latin and put the clean one that was on the table in his pocket. From under his huge apron he produced a bottle half-full of brandy and a glass. He spilled some brandy on the linoleum table-top, smeared it expertly with the palm of his hand, and made overlapping concentric rings in it with the bottom of the bottle and the bottom of the glass.

He went away without a word. Latin sat quietly, smoking and sipping brandy.

It took Walters about fifteen minutes to get there. His face was tight and hard and savagely strained. He knew where to go. He came hard-heeled down the aisle and stopped in front of the last booth, glowering down at Latin, his shoulders hunched dangerously, his hands pushed deep in his pockets.

"Hello, Walters," Latin said casually.

Guterrez came out of the kitchen and said: "I don't like cops around here. They stink up the place. You gonna pinch Latin again, I hope?"

"Shut up," said Walters. He was looking at the ashtray and the wet rings the brandy bottle had made. "How long has Latin been here?"

"Too long," said Guterrez. "Over an hour."

Walters jerked around. "An hour!"

"Sure," said Guterrez.

"Where's his waiter?"

"Dick," said Guterrez.

Dick came up and squinted insolently at Walters. "Huh! So it's flat-feet now. Latin sure pals around with crummy characters. What do you want, chum?" he asked.

Walters was breathing noisily through his nose. "Did you serve Latin?"

"Yeah. Me and the other slaves drew lots for him, and I lost. Who wants to know?"

"I do. Let me see your tag."

Dick produced one. "There. See, there's his name and the number of the booth and my number. He had the special dinner with the double broiled steak *à la Guterrez* and soup and salad—"

"All right." Walters handed the slip back to him. He nodded to Latin. "Let me see your gun."

"I left it at home," Latin said. "If you want to go look, it's in the top drawer of the desk in the living-room along with my license to carry it."

"Damn you," said Walters. "You know you've got four or five guns with licenses to fit."

"Oh, no. I lost all but the one."

Walters drew a deep breath. "And I suppose you're having the valves ground on your car?"

"No. I'm getting the brakes relined."

Walters glared at Guterrez and Dick. "Beat it, you two."

Guterrez went back into the kitchen, and Dick sauntered toward the front of the restaurant.

WALTERS slid into the seat opposite Latin. He looked both tired and resigned now.

"All right. You win. I wanted to get that McTeague myself, but I should have known I'd trip over you before I got through. I can't prove anything, and I don't know what good it would do me if I did. Just tell me—off the record—how you spotted her."

"McTeague was a very peculiar looking gent," Latin said absently. "You see a lot of peculiar looking gents here and there, but you seldom see one that paints his finger-nails dark red."

"Damn!" Walters snarled. "Why didn't you tell me that?"

"Listen, I'd been shot at point-blank and fallen down stairs on my head. I didn't notice it at first myself. I just knew there was something wrong with his hands. I didn't realize what until I saw Nan Carter dialing the telephone when she called the police. Her nails were the same color, but that was no sure sign she was McTeague. That color is popular with women now."

"Go on," said Walters gloomily.

"I got to thinking about it, after what you told me, and the whole setup pointed to a woman. I mean, cooking up dope in candy. Would a guy think of that, or know how if he did? She was on her own. She made trips to Mexico, looking for stuff to make statues of, and she probably smuggled the stuff in herself. She didn't want to risk selling it to regular addicts who might lead the police to her.

"And then the shooting. You know, the ordinary woman thinks all you have to do to kill a guy is point a pistol at his general direction and start blazing away. That's just what she did. She was lucky with Gardner, but not so lucky with me. Any man as quick on the shoot as all that would have practiced up a little bit. And the costume was a give-away. It covered up too much."

"Ummm," said Walters.

"And she could have pulled the job off tonight very easily. She wasn't wearing anything under that house-coat. All she

had to do, after I went upstairs, was to shuck it off, put on the overcoat and hat and some men's shoes and the glasses, pat some powder on her face, and hike upstairs. She grabbed the pictures, shot at me, and tripped me up on the stairs. Then she ran down the front steps, took a shot at her own door, screamed, and ditched the clothes in the closet. She was back in the house-coat and part way back up the stairs before I could pull myself together."

"Why?" said Walters.

"The best reason of all. She was broke. Killing Gardner put the kibosh on the dope business. She couldn't sell any of her work, couldn't even collect rent or money for the dope from Craig. She knew I'd spot that Craig was on the habit, and she knew if I did, I'd get the pictures away from him. She wanted them, because she knew just as well as I did where she could cash in with them. She figured that I was a crook, and that if she had the pictures she could make a deal with me to split what I got from Patricia Wentworth Craig. She figured I was tough enough to make Craig consent to the sale."

Walters sat up straight. "What?"

Latin went on casually: "That's why I made a deal with Haggerty. I figured that McTeague—whether it was Nan Carter or who—would try to deal through him because he had the best excuse for having those pictures. I figured right."

"Wait a minute," said Walters. "Are you telling me that McTeague—Nan Carter—didn't kill Craig?"

"No. She didn't know he was dead until I told her. She thought I'd just smacked him one."

"And—who did kill him?"

"I wouldn't know," Latin said amiably. "I think maybe I'll find out pretty quick, though. How about this Mona party?"

Walters' mouth was open slightly. He shut it and swallowed hard and said: "That was straight stuff. She was Craig's model, and she did get into trouble. She kept after him until just about a week ago. Then apparently she got a lot of dough somewhere. Her landlady told me Mona was sporting a whopper of a roll. Then she just up and disappeared."

Latin's eyes were narrowed thoughtful-

ly. "A big roll. And Craig was broke. Well, well."

"Well what?"

"Nothing," said Latin. He chewed on his lower lip. "Sorry about McTeague, Walters. But she had eight setup shots at me, and that's about all I believe in giving anybody—man, woman or child. She was bound to get lucky again if she kept it up long enough, and she didn't give me much of a chance to sit down and discuss it calmly. I should have told you sooner what I guessed, maybe, but—I wanted those pictures. If they had gotten sucked into Craig's estate I would never have been able to prove ownership over his other creditors. Fifteen thousand dollars ain't hay, Walters."

"No," said Walters woodenly, watching him.

Latin snubbed out his cigarette. "I'm going to be busy for awhile. Have dinner on me tomorrow night?"

"What time?"

"About eight, I think."

"All right," said Walters. "I'm getting a little tired of you, my friend. You better make it good, Latin. Damned good."

"The dinner, you mean?"

"No, I don't mean the dinner."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Revenge Is Sweet

PATRICIA WENTWORTH CRAIG said: "Why, it's dirty! It's a horrible place, really!"

"You're telling me, lady," said Dick, the waiter, confidentially. "You should work here for a while. Rats in the stew, cockroaches in the salad, and the second cook has a slight case of leprosy. If we didn't pay off every week, the health department would've closed us long ago."

Patricia Wentworth Craig stared at him in a sort of disbelieving dismay. She and Hastings were sitting in Latin's booth. It was the dinner hour, and the bedlam was in full swing again.

"You waitin' for Latin?" Dick inquired, leaning over the back of the booth.

"Yes," said Hastings. His round face was shiny with nervous prostration, and he gugged at his collar. "He told us to

come here tonight . . ." He hesitated.

"Where is he?" Patricia Wentworth Craig demanded.

Dick took a water glass from under his apron, polished it carefully on the greasy edge of his coat, and set it down in front of her. "Latin? Oh, he's probably off on a bat. He gets drunk every night that he don't load himself up on marihuana. A very low character, that Latin."

"This is absurd!" Patricia Wentworth Craig snapped at her husband. "Why did he ask us to meet him here? Why can't we see him at his office?"

Hastings shook his head apologetically. "But, my dear, he hasn't got an office."

Latin came down the aisle and nodded to them. "Good evening. Sorry to keep you waiting." He slid into the opposite seat of the booth. "I've had quite a lot of running around to do today." He was carrying a paper-wrapped parcel, and he put it down on the table in front of him.

"This is an impossible place!" Patricia Wentworth Craig snapped. "Mr. Latin, if it is your idea that you can safely humiliate me, I will soon disabuse—"

"No, no," said Latin, smiling. "It was quite important that I should see you here for several reasons."

"With this uproar and confusion, no one can talk—"

"You'll get used to it," Latin assured her. "Have you the money—in cash?"

Her thin lips tightened savagely. "Let me tell you, Mr. Latin, that this is nothing more nor less than the most brazen sort of blackmail, and if my husband hadn't been such a stupid fool as to tell you—"

Hastings said uncomfortably: "But, my dear, how could I possibly know?"

"Water under the bridge," said Latin. "Have you got the money?"

Patricia Wentworth Craig took some bills out of her purse, wadded them carelessly together and threw them on the table in front of him.

Latin straightened them out and counted them. "Thanks. Give her the pictures, Dick."

Dick produced the three canvases from under his apron and slid them across the table. "Lousy stuff, if you ask me," he said judicially. "Now I go for these dames in bathing suits like they put on calendars. Guitierrez has got one in the

kitchen that really knocks your eye out."

Patricia Wentworth Craig looked up from the pictures. "Is it really necessary for this—this greasy person to stand here and gape at us?"

"Oh, I can take a hint," Dick said. He strolled back into the kitchen.

PATRICIA WENTWORTH CRAIG examined each of the pictures carefully. "These are Winston's work. All right, Mr. Latin. We'll leave now. You may think that you have put over something very clever, but you'll find that I make a bad enemy."

"Don't hurry," Latin said amiably. "I've got some things I'd like to show you."

He unwrapped the package on the table and revealed two red leather dancing pumps with stilt-like heels and a small square of three-quarter inch soft pine board. The piece of wood had a black circle painted in the center of it, and the circle and the wood surrounding it was pock-marked with dozens of sharp little depressions.

Latin pointed at the pumps. "Your shoes," he said to Patricia Wentworth Craig. "This one I found on the floor beside your cousin's body. This one was in your shoe rack in your bedroom closet."

Her thin face was chalk-white. "You—dared to search in my—"

"Sure," said Latin. "This board was on the top shelf of the same closet. Look at it. Know what I think it is? A target. Somebody has been using it to practice up whacking people with the heel of a slipper. It's quite a trick. I tried it myself. A slipper is light, you know, and you'd think it was sort of harmless. But if you practice up on your aim a bit and take a real full-arm swing, you can hit damned hard. Hard enough to snap a spine—providing you were an art student before you became an art collector and had studied anatomy and knew just where to hit."

Patricia Wentworth Craig said: "Why, you—you—"

"It wouldn't be the first time you and your cousin had come to blows. He threw you out of his studio bodily once and you've handed him a few off-hand slaps at art meetings. You told him a couple of times you'd kill him if he didn't stop tel-

ing people you were a dummy about art."

"You fool," said Patricia Wentworth Craig.

Hastings stuttered: "Now see here, Mr. Latin. I can't have—I won't stand—"

"How did you find out Craig was dead last night?" Latin asked casually.

"Ah?" said Hastings. "Why—why, a person who said he was a reporter called to ask if—if he were Patricia's cousin, and I thought you—you might . . ."

Latin nodded at Patricia Wentworth Craig. "You should learn to manage your temper."

"Do you dare to insinuate—"

A muscle in Hastings' round face twitched spasmodically, but he had control of his voice. "My dear, please don't say anything more. He—he is actually accusing you of murdering Winston. Mr. Latin, I warn you solemnly that this has gone too far for any attempts at evasion on your part. You will find yourself in serious trouble unless you can explain just what you mean clearly and at once."

"You explain," Latin invited.

Hastings stared incredulously. "Eh?"

"You explain. You cooked it up."

THE booth seemed like a quiet, still pocket in the midst of the clatter and racket of the restaurant.

Latin nodded at Patricia Wentworth Craig. "You should learn to control your temper and brush up on your manners a bit, too. Things like this are liable to happen if you don't. Hastings killed Craig, and he had every intention of framing the murder on you. He hates you."

"Slander!" Hastings gasped. "You can't . . . Lies!"

"Why, no," said Latin. "You hate her because you once loved her and you married her because you did. But everyone thought you married her for her money—even she did. Everyone made fun of you—and she despised you. She thought you were a nincompoop and a milksop and a dimwit, and she never hesitated to tell you so. She wouldn't even take your name. You were Mr. Patricia Wentworth Craig."

"Lies," Hastings whispered hoarsely. "I won't listen—"

"Yes, you will. You made your own money, and you had a lot of pride in your

ability. You didn't like being her stooge. But you never had a chance to show what you could do. She wouldn't trust you to buy a postage stamp, let alone consider your advice on any of her business affairs. But this Craig layout gave you a chance. You decided to show her what a smooth worker you were. You would get on the good side of Craig and get him to sell her some of his pictures. Isn't that true?"

Hastings said: "Well, I—I did."

"Yes. But Craig was away out of your class. You'd never dealt with anyone like him before. If he had just pretended to be taken in and then given you the horse laugh, you could probably have stood it. You were used to being laughed at, but he did a lot more than that, didn't he?"

"I—I don't know what—"

"Mona," said Latin. "She was in trouble and pestering Craig, and he got one of his nasty ideas. At one of those parties of his, he dipped a little morphine in one of your drinks. You passed out. Later he sent Mona around to see you. She told you that *you* were responsible. You were horrified. You couldn't remember what happened. You couldn't prove you weren't. You didn't dare risk the scandal. You paid her off. And then the worst thing of all happened. You went to see Craig again, and he told you the whole dirty scheme and laughed in your face. Not only that, but he threatened to tell his cousin."

Hastings' lips moved stiffly and soundlessly.

"So," said Latin casually, "you killed him. You had read about me in the papers, and you thought I was just smart enough and crooked enough to do a Charlie McCarthy for you. After you left me here, you waited until I started to go to Craig's, beat it there ahead of me, sneaked in the back and socked him with your wife's dancing pump."

Patricia Wentworth Craig laughed sud-

denly and shrilly. "Why, you poor fool! You're not seriously trying to tell me that silly, stupid Bernard would have either the nerve or the brains to plan anything as elaborate—"

That did it. Hastings' round face was livid with rage suddenly, and he seemed to swell up until the booth was too small for him.

"Damn you," he whispered. "You and your money and your supercilious air and your smirking rat of a cousin. Yes! I killed him! But you can't prove it—you can *never* prove it! I'm stupid, am I? We'll see. We'll see what you think about that when you face a jury. You think it will make any difference what Latin knows? He's a jailbird and a crook. His testimony is worth nothing. I framed you, and you're still framed! I've got letters, evidence, witnesses—everything!"

"Bernard," said Patricia Wentworth Craig in a choked, horrified voice.

Hastings laughed on a cracked, high note. "I'm leaving you—"

"Yeah," said Inspector Walters, coming out of the kitchen. "With me."

Hastings gasped and choked. "You—you can't prove it—"

He stopped, watching with dazed fascination as Latin reached out slowly and pulled the chintz curtain at the back of the booth aside and revealed the round gleam of a microphone.

"Walters and Guterrez and three or four waiters heard everything you said."

Hastings seemed to melt inside his clothes until he was a fat pasty-faced little man with stiff lips that moved and made no sound.

Patricia Wentworth Craig said: "I see—now. You don't have an office because—*this* is your office. This is your restaurant. You own it. And all these men—they work for you and help you . . ."

Latin was smiling slightly. "Yes, madam. We have a very nice dinner tonight. Would you like to try it?"



THE MURDER MASTER

A Novelette

by James A. Kirch

BLACKMERE MINES TO RE-OPEN! screamed the headline. That meant a boom in Harrington—and the angry mob of miners didn't intend to let that city slicker, Doug Stuart, prick the bubble of prosperity. It's a good thing they didn't lynch him before he had a chance to save them all from being blown to kingdom come!

CHAPTER ONE

Kill and Run

WE CLOSED the door of the Harrington Funeral Parlor, and I shut my eyes to blank out the picture of Johnny Dackman lying in there in a flat, gray box.

Sheriff Tammer dug his fingers into the flesh above my elbow and stood there for a moment, not saying anything. When he spoke, his voice was casual.

"You'll be going back with the body, I expect?"

"You expect," I said, shortly. "That's about as far as it'll go. I'm staying." I felt his fingers relax as I said it, and I moved forward a step, turning my eyes towards the main street of the town, and then beyond, to the long rows of half-deserted shacks with their dirty, grass-

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I hit him in a flying leap while his finger was squeezing the trigger.



less yards. Some place in Harrington, beneath the layers of thick black silt, a rat was hiding. And it was up to me to smoke him out.

Tammer must've read my thoughts, and not liked what he read. He was trying to be easy about it, not wanting me around, but not knowing how to go about getting rid of me.

"He was your partner," he said, slowly. "It's natural you'd feel badly about it. But they ain't nothing you can do. That's the tough thing about these hit-and-run drivers—the guy might be in the next state by this time. We've checked every car in Harrington, and I'm tellin' you it wasn't none of them. We may never find the guy who did it."

"I will," I said, flatly. "I'll find him before I leave this town, if I have to scrape the coal dust off every flivver in Harrington. I'll find him."

"Not likely," Tammer said. "Not likely, in a case like this. Guy gets killed accidental by some drunk driver who don't stop, it's pretty hard tracking it down, especially with no witnesses. Been three-four accidents like that since I been sheriff, and they almost ain't no way of gettin' them."

"That's right," I told him. "When a guy's tearing along drunk and accidentally runs over somebody, he sobers up fast. And if he's a Grade-A louse, he just keeps goin'. In a case like that, if you don't get on his tail fast, you haven't got much chance. Only, this one was different. This guy wasn't drunk."

"No?" Tammer said, doubtfully. "Not drunk, eh? Well, your guess is as good as mine."

"Better," I said, softly. "Much better. Because I'm not just guessing. The guy wasn't drunk, and it wasn't an accident, and I'm betting he didn't high-tail it out of here. This wasn't like those three-four other accidents you've had. This one was murder."

I WENT on down the steps, toward the center of town, leaving the sheriff standing at the door of the funeral parlor, staring after me. I realized then that he didn't want me around, that I was going to have trouble with Tammer before I left Harrington.

I didn't realize, though, just how much trouble I'd have.

Christian Wylie, the man who'd hired Dackman to come to Harrington, had his offices in the Templar Building, smack in the center of Main Street. He had a spread-out suite that looked as if it might have been busy once, when Harrington was an active coal town. Now, though, it had the signs you saw all over town, signs that made you think you were in a morgue instead of a village.

The thing was, Harrington was dying on its feet. And the guts of most of its citizens were dying with it.

Wylie was like that, half scared to death, like a man who has cancer and knows it. He screened his thin body with the top of his desk and stared at me through horn-rimmed spectacles, with quick, jumpy eyes. The jumpiness was in his voice, too—a nervous sharpness that showed the strain of his self-control.

"I realized I wouldn't need your partner's services," he explained. "I told him so, and wrote you to that effect, enclosing a check for services. The accident was unfortunate, but it had no connection with his work in Harrington."

"Your letter was postmarked after his death," I pointed out, carefully. "It occurred to me that you might have changed your mind *after* he was killed, instead of before."

"I wrote the letter before the accident," he insisted. "It had been mailed before I heard of the accident."

That made three times he'd said *accident* in less than three minutes. That was laying it on with a trowel.

"Maybe," I told him. "Maybe you wrote it first. And maybe not. That's what I'm here to find out. That, and some other things."

His little eyes stopped jumping and centered on me for a half-second. "Such as?"

"Why Dackman didn't notify me, if the case was closed. And why he was carrying his gun when he was hit. If he'd been laid off the case and was ready to check out, he wouldn't be likely to've carried his gun. He didn't believe in going around heeled when he wasn't working—when there wasn't any reason for it."

Wylie stretched his thin body across

the desk at me, bracing himself with his right hand. He made his voice low, wheedling.

"You're upset, Mr. Stuart," he suggested. "Naturally, you're upset, because of this tragic accident. But your partner's death could have had no connection with the work he was doing for me. Absolutely none."

"I'll decide that," I told him. "I'll decide what connection it might've had. You just tell me what he was doing for you. All I know is you wrote in asking us to send an operative out here—and Dackman came." That was a mistake. I knew it was a mistake as soon as I'd said it, but there was no use trying to cover. "What was the case?" I finished, shortly.

"There wasn't any," Wylie told me. "No case at all. I'd been nervous lately, reading about holdups, and decided I'd hire a bodyguard—so I wrote you to send a man out. When I felt I was being foolish, I dismissed Dackman. That's all there was to it." He said it with a straight face, almost as if he expected me to believe it. He had that much lying crust.

I wasn't having any.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Wait a minute, Wylie. You'll have to think up a better one than that. Nobody, not even a hick town lawyer, is going to be dumb enough to pay our fancy prices just for a bodyguard. There was more to it, Wylie, plenty more. Give."

Wylie didn't say anything. He sat there, half-crouched across the desk, bracing himself with his right hand and shaking his pinhead back and forth, but he didn't say anything. He wanted coaxing. And he looked easy to coax.

I moved forward, grinning at him. I'd been praying for a chance to get my hands on that skinny neck, and this was it. "Give," I said softly. "Give, buddy, or you'll wish you *had* a guard around." I closed in slowly, betting he'd crack before I touched him. At that, I may've been right.

The door behind me opened with a click, and I spun around fast. That is, I started around fast and made a quarter turn before I checked myself. And just in time too.

THE guy in the doorway was big, maybe two inches taller than me, and twenty pounds heavier. But he wasn't satisfied with just being big. He had a double-barreled shotgun cradled in his arms, pointed my way.

Nobody said anything. The guy with the gun just stood there, staring at me with bright little eyes, not making a move. Behind me, I heard Wylie's breath puff out in a quick sigh. He evidently hadn't been any too sure his new bodyguard would be on the job when signaled. And he'd been damn sure he'd need him.

We stayed that way for maybe thirty seconds, and then I snaked my right hand behind me, getting my hat off Wylie's desk. I put the hat on carefully, not making a move, not trying to turn back toward Wylie. I was afraid the guy with the shotgun might misunderstand any move I made, and I didn't want to give him anything to misunderstand. Not right then, I didn't.

I heard Wylie say, "I got nervous again, and hired Burke," and I said, "So I see," and walked stiffly toward the door, keeping my hands in front of me. When I got within four feet of the gun I said, "Well?" and the big guy moved aside to let me by.

I walked through the hall and down the stairs without looking back. I stopped on the sidewalk a minute, breathing in the dusty air, and then I crossed the street to the Harrington Hotel bar. I had two swallows of Scotch in me before I relaxed enough to try to add it up.

The trouble was, there wasn't anything to add. The answer was there, all right—I was sure of that. Dackman had been murdered. But the rest of it, why he'd been hired, what he'd found out, what had scared the daylights out of Wylie—all the little numbers that might add up to who did the killing, and why—were blanks. I decided if I was going to do anything, I'd have to fill in those blanks first. That much was sure.

I just didn't know where the hell to begin.

I finished the Scotch slowly and ordered another short one. I was still standing at the bar, wondering where the beginning was, when it came right up and

slapped me squarely between the eyes.

The bartender gave it to me. He moved down my way, wiping a glass with one hand. He had the hand wrapped in a towel, and he just spun the glass on it, letting it dry itself. He finished one and scooped up another, spinning it the same way. I could see he was aching to open up, so I threw a feed line his way.

"Neat, that," I told him, nodding at the glasses.

"Getting ready," he said. "This town's going to start living again. Things are going to pick up."

I grinned at him, trying to work out a picture of Harrington picking up. "What'd they do?" I asked. "Sell out to the WPA?"

"Coal," he said, seriously. "Blackmere Mines are reopening. They got some big orders coming in. And at prices they can afford to work the mine for. We'll be having a boom."

I'd understood the mines were through, worked out. It would probably take stiff prices to make reopening profitable. And I hadn't heard about any skyrocketing coal prices. I brought that up.

"Sure," he agreed. "They'd need good prices—plenty good. But they need more than that. They need a sure market." He stopped spinning the glass and leaned across the bar toward me. "There's a guy in town to see Mr. Blackmere—a guy named Sanders."

"Sanders?" I repeated, not following him. "You mean he's buying Blackmere out?"

The guy shook his head. "Nah," he said. "Not that. He don't know mining. He don't give a damn about mining. All

he wants is coal." He straightened, his eyes narrowing. "I figure this guy is from Washington."

I said: "You mean the government may be subsidizing the reopening of the mines. Part of the defense program, eh?"

"I'm guessing," he admitted. "But they're getting ready to reopen. And this Sanders has been in town talking to Blackmere. From what I hear, that's how it shapes up."

"Not bad," I told him. "Not a bad guess, at all." I said it absently, not paying much attention. I was beginning to wonder, to wonder about Mr. Blackmere, and the opening of the Blackmere mine. To me, it sounded like a beginning. The first of the figures that would add up to Dackman's death.

I said, "This fellow Blackmere, he'd be a big shot in Harrington?" and the bartender said, "He's—" and then stopped, scurrying down to the end of the bar. I got my answer, though. Just from the way he acted, I got my answer.

HE WAS small, with a squat body like a crab, and long, spindly arms. He moved like a crab, too, scuttling across the floor with his skinny arms jerking restlessly. He had wicked little black eyes.

The bartender said, "Evenin', Mr. Blackmere. Evenin', gents," and I realized there were four of them, the others trailing a few steps behind Blackmere.

Sheriff Tammer, a slim, dark fellow who I figured must be Sanders, and a husky blond Swede, rigged up in a miner's outfit.

They grouped together at the end of



the bar, ordering their drinks, and then the one I'd tabbed as Blackmere said something in a low voice to the miner. The big Swede nodded his head and moved down my way.

"Even," he said, quietly. "Nice day."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Nice." I let my eyes study him, weighing him in, trying to figure his angle. For my money, he was an average sort of guy, not too bright, but not dumb. And probably a good, honest, fireboss. I decided to play him that way.

"Stuart's the name," I told him. "Doug Stuart."

"Anderson," he said, mechanically. "I'm Anderson. But it don't make no difference, what my name is."

So that's how it was going to be. I shrugged agreement, letting him know I didn't give a damn either, but he didn't seem to notice. He had his own ideas, something he had to get off his chest, and there'd be no stopping him.

"This'll be a clean job," he said, carefully. "Soon's we can decide about opening up, this'll be a clean, union job. And we don't want no troublemakers. We don't want none of you private strong-arm guys bustin' in here."

Nice, that. To a guy like me, who'd never touched a labor job in his life. I told him that was nice, and he dropped his thick hands on the bar and stared at me heavily.

"I've seen 'em work," he said, slowly. "These smart private cops come into town with some phoney story, and pretty soon hell breaks loose among the men. We don't want none of that in Harrington."

"You're not getting it," I told him. "Not from me, you're not getting it. Somebody's been giving you a song-and-dance. Mining is your business. O. K. You stick to it. Murder is mine."

"Murder," he said, softly, and I didn't like the way he said it. I didn't like the rest of it, either. "Listen, Stuart, did you ever see a town die? Men walking around with empty stomachs, and dry bones jutting through their jeans? This town has a chance now, Stuart—a last chance. And we don't want any outsiders stirring up trouble. We've seen too

much of it—way too much in our time."

He stopped and stood there, towering over me, his broad face almost expressionless, except for the eyes. The eyes were the tipoff. This wasn't any dance act he was handing out. It meant the works for anybody who might try to mess up Harrington's comeback, who might come prowling around trying to pick up a few bucks by breaking the mine setup. Especially a little louse who might try boring from within.

And that was me. That was the label they'd managed to hang on Doug Stuart, private detective.

A dirty little louse, boring from within.

I said: "Anderson, you've been sold a sweet bill of goods. I'm no organizer, and I'm no fink. But I'm going to find the guy who murdered my partner, Harrington or no Harrington. I'm sticking around until I do find him."

"With your partner," he said, carefully, "with him it was an accident." He stressed the *him* for me, making sure I'd get it. That's how much he believed me. And it left me right where I'd been, in his picture. A dirty, scheming little louse. It was a nice picture, I didn't think.

I said again, "Anderson, you've been sold a sweet bill of—" and a voice behind me said, "What are *you* selling, mister?"

This was the one. The guy I wanted. I was sure of it.

The voice was a natural for him. A sharp, half-squeaking voice, like an off-key fiddle. I could see him scurrying across the carcass of the town, squeaking orders in that shrill little tone, sucking Harrington dry of life. This would be Blackmere.

I turned slowly, casually, like you do when some grimy kid hawks his papers in your ear. And I made sure he'd know I placed him, before I spoke.

"Boxes," I told him, finally. "Little black boxes, cut to measure. And I do the measuring. Any orders?"

SSHERIFF TAMMER cut off his squeak almost before it started. His voice was cold disinterested. I had a sudden hunch that he didn't get much kick out of backing Blackmere.

"You're causing trouble, Stuart," he

said, flatly. "And we don't want trouble in this town. I could ask you to leave."

I knew damn well he could ask me to leave, but I didn't say anything. I was pretty sure he wouldn't do it. I figured he was too smart a guy.

The thing is, he was even smarter than I'd figured.

"You'd be back," he went on, quietly. "A man like you'd find some excuse for coming back. You might as well stick around."

"Thanks," I said, grinning. "Mighty nice of you, Sheriff." I started to turn back, to finish my drink, but his next words stopped me.

"I'll take your gun," he said. He said it like he was asking for a butt, as casual as he could make it. Like that, he'd take my gun. The hell he would.

Anderson was frowning, his thick hands opening and closing, as if he'd just realized I was carrying a gun, and figured he knew the reason for it. Blackmere had stopped his squeaking and was half hidden by Tammer, but his wicked little eyes were bright with victory. The other one, Sanders, looked puzzled. Tammer was the only unconcerned one of the lot.

"Your gun," he repeated. "I'll take it."

"Easy," I told him. "Easy now, Sheriff. I've got a permit for this gun, and it'll take more'n you to decide I can't carry it. I'm within my rights, buddy."

"You're within Harrington," he pointed out. "Village and Township of Harrington. You've got to have a local permit to carry a gun here."

I began to get it, then. Like I figured, this guy was plenty smart. Too damn smart. I said, "You wouldn't be the man who O. K.'s the permits, Sheriff?" and he nodded, reaching out his right hand, waiting for the gun.

He got it.

He had to get it, with a setup like that. I'm a private dick, not Jesse James. And when the law says give—I give. But I don't have to like it.

I slipped off my coat and slid out of the shoulder holster, dropping the works on the floor in front of him, not saying a word. I put the coat back on again,

slowly, taking my time about everything, then walked toward the door. I stopped, looking back, not saying anything, just standing there staring at them.

It was the Swede who broke the silence.

"No trouble," he said flatly. "We won't stand for no trouble in this town. We can take care of anybody who starts it."

"Yeah," I told him. "Yeah, you can take care of them. And any time you want to start, you'll find me. I'll be pretty easy to find. Any time, buddy, any time." I spun around and walked out, leaving it at that.

I was sorry the minute I'd finished saying it. I had Anderson figured as an honest guy, trying to get along, and trying to help his pals. And if I'd been what he thought I was, he'd have been right.

I was sorry I'd said it, but there it was. I didn't figure it would make a hell of a difference.

It probably wouldn't have, if he hadn't been an honest man. I he'd been a cheap little crook, they'd have bought him off and forgotten it.

As it was, they murdered him.

CHAPTER TWO

Lynching Party

IT HAPPENED sometime that afternoon, while I was wandering around trying to fit the pieces together, to find the why of the whole setup. I had the pieces, all right. I had to have them—but I couldn't make them jell. I had to add them up before I got the picture.

There was only one thing in Harrington that Dackman could've jammed into enough to start a murder wheel spinning. That was the black diamonds they pulled out from beneath the town's streets—the Blackmere Coal Mine. And there was only one murder angle there, for my money.

Blackmere was reopening. And the mine had been abandoned for years. There was money in that—money just in the knowledge of it. And that's all you need for a murder wheel—just that, and no more.

Money.

It was shaping up for me now—the picture that had started when the bartender told me the mine was reopening. The bartender knew it, now—the whole town knew it, now. It was old stuff.

But the first of them, the first guys to know it, were Blackmere and Sanders, the buyer and seller. And Blackmere would be in a spot to reap a nice profit. That would be pie, for him. And it might've been a nice juicy pie, too. Except for one thing.

Wylie. Wylie was the fly in the pastry. The smart little lawyer must've found out somehow that Blackmere had orders coming in. He'd hired Dackman to check on it for him, and when the kid had, he'd started the fireworks going.

Only he hadn't had the guts to run it right. He'd made a deal with Blackmere, agreed to keep it quiet for a share of the take—forgetting, maybe, about Dackman.

So they'd had to fix it so Dackman would forget about it—would forget about everything.

That was it. That was the murder motive, the "why" I'd been looking for. You could build it up from there, just as well as I did, starting with the murder motive as a base. You could do it, just as easy as me.

And you could be just as wrong.

I was sure of myself now, sure that I had the cards laying out on the table in front of me, with only one part missing. And I had a damn good idea where I'd find that missing part.

I spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around Harrington, studying the layout and feeling sorry for the town. It was a bleak, barren section, with few trees, and virtually no grass. There were some large buildings in the center of town—the skyscrapers of Harrington's heyday—but even they seemed covered with a thin film of black silt.

I couldn't get used to that, to the burned-out grass and the dirty blankets of dust, any more than I could to the idea of walking around on top of the mine. I knew it was common, that a lot of towns had been built next to the mines, and that gradually they'd burrowed under them, leaving pillars and roofs of coal to support the streets, but I couldn't get used to it. I felt the ground

shake a little under my feet, from the force of a trial blast, and once the sound of a pick rose eerily from beneath the street, and my heels clicked faster on the pavement as I moved away from that spot. By evening, my nerves were pretty ragged.

They quieted down, though, when I needed them. It was the chance for action, I guess—the chance to do something on my own, instead of letting everybody in town polish their shoes on me. Maybe the idea that before the night was over I'd have everything I needed, stamped and ready for delivery.

Whatever it was, I was quiet enough getting into Wylie's office, and I was quiet enough going through his files. And I was fast about it, too. I'd been there less than than twenty minutes before I found what I wanted.

It was a file listed "Blackmere," and it showed the payoff.

I SWITCHED the light on the desk, to study the papers, but nothing happened. I ran my hand up under the shade, testing the bulb, and yanked it out fast, swearing, shaking broken glass from my fingers. I found a flashlight, finally, in the desk drawer, and brushed the glass fragments from the desk top with a paper. From the way they'd scattered, and from the smoky tinge of the lampshade, I could figure that Wylie must've blown a bulb, and blown a fuse with it. Which was a break for me, in a way. It meant he wasn't likely to come barging in on me unexpected.

A few minutes later, though, I'd have been glad to see him barge in. Because, by then, I thought I had what I wanted.

Wylie had done all right for himself. He hadn't done quite what I'd figured, but he'd done all right. And he'd shown smart business sense doing it.

There was no mining stock in the files, like I'd expected to find. No direct proof that he'd been cut in on the gravy of the mine comeback. But there was plenty of indirect proof.

Transfers of deeds of the Harrington Hotel, the Templar Building, and four other pieces of business property in town. All of them changed from Blackmere to Wylie, "for value received." Nice idea!

Not as profitable as cutting in on the stock, no. But a lot safer. If there was any mix-up, they could point out that Wylie had bought the property, and Blackmere had sunk the money in re-opening the mine. And, if the coal deal went through, Harrington values would skyrocket, from rock bottom to a decent level.

That was the payoff, the little lawyer's sell-out to Blackmere. He'd sold out, all right.

And he'd sold Dackman to the graveyard, with it.

This was it. This was the tie that would unravel the whole murder mix-up. I leafed through it rapidly, making sure I had enough for what I wanted.

I was halfway through when I heard the noise outside.

It was like water, at first, roaring down the streets, picking up volume and slamming against the windows with a dull, booming sound. It broke off suddenly in shrill little gusts, and then picked up again, fanning itself to a high crescendo. It was like a hundred furies howling in the night.

I stood there in the middle of the room, listening to it, for a full minute. Then I dropped the file on the desk and moved to the window. Even before I got there, I'd figured what it was.

It was a mob.

A growing, bulging mass of humans, wriggling its way down the main street, feeding itself from the grimy miners' houses, fattening up feverishly, ready for the kill.

It was when they stopped in front of the hotel that I realized who the kill was.

Me.

The leader was the big one who'd been in Wylie's office—Burke, the guy with the shotgun. But it wasn't his shotgun that worried me this time. Not much, it wasn't.

It was the two hundred guys behind him. The little guy with thin gray hair, the fat man in worn overalls, the long skinny bartender. And the shout that went up with deadly finality.

"Rout him out!"

That was me they meant. Little Doug Stuart.

"Rout him out!"

I never realized how big a pick handle looked, until I saw two hundred of them massed in the street below me. The palms of my hands were damp with sweat and I rubbed them along the seams of my trousers without even realizing it. I let my right hand shift up toward shoulder holster before I remembered that there wasn't any shoulder holster, and there wasn't any gun. And even that didn't seem important, then.

For at least five minutes, I was scared stiff.

The big guy broke it for me. He leaped forward, out of the mob, pushing himself to the roof of a car, and his shouts started the needles clicking in my brain again. I dropped down below the window, flat against the wall, and edged it up an inch. I had to hear this, had to find out who it was.

I heard "cold-blooded murder" twice, but that didn't help me. I could figure it was murder. I could figure they'd measured me for a frame, and drawn back the curtain on it. And that the miners had fallen like sheep. I could figure that, all right.

But there was still an out. There was still a chance I could blow it apart on them, and wind up with Wylie over a barrel.

Wylie was my out. With just the dope I had on him, I could crack the guy wide open, if I could get my hands on him.

That's what scared me most. That's why I could feel my hands digging into the polished floor of his office, my whole body tensing, waiting for the name.

I was afraid they'd murdered Wylie.

THE men who'd gone into the hotel, looking for me, came out, trotting like hunting dogs across the street. One of them leaped swiftly to the roof of the car, pushing the giant with the shotgun aside. His voice was harsh with excitement.

"Not there," he shouted. "The louse isn't there. But we'll find him. Don't worry about that. We'll find him, all right." He stopped a moment, taking the shouts of the crowd, then went on.

"We'll show him Harrington knows how to deal with his kind. When we find

him, remember one thing—that's all. He's the guy who murdered Swede Anderson."

I felt the stiffness go out of my arms, then. I pushed back from the window, standing erect, watching from an angle at the side. I was back in the game.

They'd made a mistake there, a bad mistake. Wylie was the weak link in the chain, the one who'd crack when the pressure was on. And the pressure was going to be on—heavy.

Sheriff Tammer came around the corner of the street and reached the center of the mob before I saw him. He walked slowly, not crowding his way, just moving steadily forward and letting them break apart in front of him. When he reached the car, they closed in behind—close, but not too close. They weren't fooling with Tammer.

He rested one foot on the running board, staring upward at the man on the roof, speaking very softly, and I could see the man shake his head arrogantly. Tammer put one hand on the hood, readying himself, and the man turned swiftly and jumped off the other side, disappearing into the crowd.

Nice, that. They respected the sheriff, and weren't crossing him, yet. Which was all right, as far as it went. The trouble was, it didn't go far enough. It wasn't much of a test.

The real test would come when they sighted the game. And I thought I knew the answer to that one.

Tammer was looking upward, toward where the man had been standing, and I moved in front of the window, waving my hand slightly.

It was a gamble, sure. Tammer might've missed it, and somebody else have caught it. If they had, Doug Stuart would've looked damn silly dangling from a tree. That's if they had.

They didn't.

Tammer stepped back from the car and moved easily across the road. From where I stood, back from the window, I could see his slim straight figure disappear around the side of my building.

I got back into the middle of the room and sat down at the desk, waiting for him. My eyes were getting used to the dim light now, and I didn't need Wylie's

flash. It gave me a little edge in studying the sheriff when he first came through the door.

His gaunt face was a little more drawn than before, his eyes were a little sharper, a little keener, but there was no nervousness in the man. He was sure of himself, sure of his ability to carry out his job. Right then, his job was to protect me, and he figured on doing it.

I was hoping he figured right.

He said: "Somebody beat Anderson's brains in with a pick handle. No witnesses. The boys are looking for you, Stuart—they heard about your row. You're in a tough spot, mister."

"I can see that," I told him. "I can see my spot, all right. And I can see how it was made for me, and who made it."

"So?" His voice was interested, but not too much interested. He was waiting to be shown. And he'd take a lot of showing.

"Wylie," I said softly. "Wylie and Blackmere, in a nice little murder racket. That's what it is." I kept my eyes on his face, watching him, waiting for some sign that he was on their side of the fence, that I was signing my own death warrant in spilling to him. I needn't have worried.

"Any ideas you got'll need proving," he said, flatly. "And this would be a good time to prove 'em." He hesitated a minute, his eyes hardening. "I'd rather not try to buck that crowd with you, mister. They mean business." He was telling me.

"Listen," I said, rapidly. "Listen to this, and then add up the score for yourself. Wylie is a shrewd little lawyer, who keeps his finger on what's happening in town. He finds out something is stirring, but he can't figure what, so he hires Dackman to come out and check up."

THERE was a sudden roar from the crowd in the streets, and then the shrill, piercing cry: "*Rout him out!*" I tried to forget who it was they were yelling for, tried to keep my mind on putting this over with Tammer. This one *had* to be good.

"Dackman was killed," I went on. "Killed because he found out what was

up, and reported to Wylie. That's what he was hired for. But Wylie had a new idea. He made a deal with Blackmere, and they quieted Dackman. When I came on the scene, they had to quiet me. And they had to find a new way of doing it." I stopped a minute, listening to the hungry yells of the crowd, letting Tammer hear them too.

"This is it," I told him. "This is meant to shut me up, for keeps. I was ripe for a murder frame. Especially an Anderson kill."

I stopped again, waiting to see how he was taking it. I could still hear the uneasy shouting outside, beating like the wind against the windows, warning me what was coming if the sheriff didn't follow this through.

"It's that simple," I finished, quickly. "I've got proof here of what Wylie was paid for—deeds to business property here in town. That's enough motive for Wylie's sell-out. And if we can face him with it, he'll crack. I'm damn sure he'll crack."

"With what?" Tammer asked. "Face Wylie with what? What is it you figure your man uncovered?"

He hadn't gotten it. In spite of what I'd told him, he hadn't figured the play. I decided Tammer wasn't as smart a guy as I'd thought.

"The mine," I explained, patiently. "The Blackmere mine. Dackman found out they were planning to reopen, that they had a deal on with this Sanders for government orders. Anybody with advance info like that could clean up plenty buying the stock. There's your motive."

Tammer moved forward a step, frowning. "Say that again," he said, quietly.

I said it again, patiently, wondering what the hell was wrong with the guy, why he couldn't follow it. I found out, soon enough.

He crossed the room, past me, to Wylie's desk. He reached into a basket on the left hand side and picked up a newspaper, unfolding it in his hand.

"Ten days old," he said, evenly. "The Harrington *Dispatch*, ten days old. And there goes your motive."

Even in the semi-darkness, I could see the bold-faced headlines. That was all I could see, from where I stood, but it

was enough. *BLACKMERE MINES TO OPEN!*

I just stood there, staring at it, not believing it. It was right there in front of my eyes in black type, but I didn't believe it. It wouldn't fit. I got a flash of the two hundred miners prowling through the streets, searching me out, and then the headline—changed to red letters — with *DOUG STUART LYNCHED* blazoned across the front of the sheet, and I still stood there, staring at the paper, not moving.

Tammer's voice seemed to come from way off, and the words were half-jumbled, meaningless.

"Done my best," he said, softly. "Figured there was trouble brewing here. That's why I made you turn over your gun. But I never figured it would break this way." He shook his head and his gnarled hands dropped to the holster at his waist. "We'll make a break for it, Stuart. Out the back way. Stick near me, and walk slowly. There's an even chance we'll make the office before they see us."

I said: "You mean I'm under arrest?" I don't know why the hell I said it—it didn't make any difference, now. That crowd outside wasn't interested in juries, or trials. They were interested in getting the murderer of Swede Anderson. And it was going to take more than a sheriff and a country jail to stop them.

Tammer knew it, he had to know it. But he was going down swinging.

"We'll wait a minute," he said easily. "We'll wait until they line up out front there, then we'll duck out the back way." He hesitated, studying me with his quiet eyes. "You ain't been tried yet," he pointed out. "And you got a right to a trial. In case they spot us, and we get cut off, keep going straight back. My car's parked there. But that's just if they see us. Get it?"

"Sure," I told him. "I get it, all right. And so will you. You'll never hold 'em out."

He grinned, a tight little grin, with no humor behind it. "I can try," he said, flatly. "I can try." He straightened, the grin vanishing. "Might as well start now," he suggested. His voice was even, unafraid. The guy had guts. But I

wasn't so sure about myself any more.

WE WERE halfway to the door when the phone rang, and I had my hand on the receiver before Tammer had taken a step back. I was that fast, that much keyed up.

"Burke," the voice said. "This is Burke." That would be the big one, the guy with the shotgun. I said, "Well?" in a shrill voice, aping Wylie, but he hardly waited for me to finish. He was in one hell of a hurry.

"You better clear out, boss," he said, swiftly. "You better clear out and meet Blackmere. And, listen, boss, I can't move this mob. I can't make 'em do a damn thing. Maybe we oughta tell Blackmere they're here, huh?"

I said, "Yes," in that same shrill tone, and then I heard the sharp click of the receiver as Burke cradled it. I reached the window angle just in time to see him dart from the drug store and start a blue roadster, driving east out of town. Tammer was at my elbow.

"Who was it?" he asked "Him?"

"Yeah," I said. I told him what Burke had said and he shook his head studying me oddly.

"It don't make sense," he told me, slowly. "Like I said, the news about the mine was out, long ago. So somebody knowing about it in advance wouldn't be no better off. It don't make sense."

I said, no, it didn't make sense. I said nothing in Harrington made any sense, but his slapping me in jail made less sense than any of it. I told him if he thought he could hold that mob out for ten minutes, he was even dumber than I figured. I said I could break the case wide open, if he'd give me a chance. I said plenty.

It was a mistake. He'd been giving me a break, playing along with me. He'd really hoped I might have some dope, and I'd fallen down on him. But he wasn't letting me tell him how to run his job. I could see from his eyes that my play was over.

I picked up the file on the desk and went through it carelessly.

"Here it is," I told him. "Here's the deeds to the property, made out like I said . . ." I stopped, studying a new

sheet, a map of the Blackmere. I picked up Wylie's flash, half-covering the beam, and let it light the map with a thin ray.

There was a large X marked on the spot labeled *North Center Shaft*, and another, a small x, down in the eastern corner, marked *CR*. *CR*, according to the code at the bottom, meant Control Room.

Tammer said: "Evidently shows where they were figuring on digging." He bent over the sheet, studying it closely. "Up," he said, finally. "That's it. That's the last shaft they had, before they had to close down. Come right under town with it, too. Must be gettin' nice prices for that."

I just sat there staring at him, not saying anything. I was waking up. Now, with two hundred men howling for my blood, I was beginning to think.

"In the dark," I said, finally. I reached my hand up and jerked the light switch on the desk, the broken lamp. "I been sitting here in the dark, and not seeing it. Adding 'em up, like that. Two and two, and I been figurin' it as four."

I felt Tammer's hand on my arm, squeezing the flesh. "We're movin'," he said. "You can do your talkin' later. We're movin'."

"Zero," I told him, blankly. "Zero, and I been figurin' it as four."

"Sure," he said. "Sure, you been figurin' all wrong. You might as well quit worrying, Stuart. You'll get a trial, if I have anything to say about it." He knew damn well he wouldn't have anything to say about it. It was out of his hands, now.

But it wasn't out of mine.

I came up from the desk fast, with a lead paperweight in my right hand. Tammer moved back, but he moved too slow—way too slow. He grunted once, when the lead block caught him across the side of the jaw, and he tried to move towards me before his knees buckled and he slumped out across the desk.

He must have been still slumped across the desk when I reached his car, on the back road. At least, there was no shout, nothing to send the mob out front on my trail. That would come later.

How much later, I didn't know. Crouching over the wheel of the road-

ster, I caught myself wondering whether it would be too soon.

Two hundred of them. Two hundred ill-clad, half-starved miners, milling through the streets of Harrington, begging for a chance to take my life.

And me praying for time enough to save theirs!

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Switch

I HAD the answers now—all of them. They'd been in front of me from the beginning—right out in the open, where I could see them. And they'd been brought to a head by the murder of Anderson. That's where I'd muffed it.

I'd figured Anderson's murder was a frame—for my benefit. Which was all right, as far as it went. But it was more than a frame, more than just an angle to put me on the spot.

It was a key card to the whole setup.

It was the card that was going to break their hand wide open, if my timing was right. If I made it, I'd be in the clear, with the whole crooked deal fanned out in front of me. If I didn't—I didn't like to think about what would happen, if I didn't.

There were two hundred men back in Harrington who'd be thinking about it, then.

It was those two hundred men who made me keep my foot down to the floorboard of Tammer's roadster, made me burn up the road so fast that I almost missed the quick blue flash of Burke's car, pulled back under the trees. Almost, but not quite.

He was parked not thirty yards from the heavy wooden door that was the eastern entrance to the mines. A door that for me might lead farther underground than any coal mine was ever dug.

I went through it fast, not stopping, not looking around. The cold, dank air of the mine slapped across my face, chilling me, and I stopped a second, trying to adjust myself to the semi-darkness.

The framework of thick wood was covered with soft black silt, beyond which gleamed the polished coal, and I remember thinking there must be a light, some-

place, to set off the gleam. I saw the light, then, a bright, staring eye, on a ledge halfway down the shaft.

That was the control room.

It had to be the control room, according to the map, and my figuring. If I'd slipped—but I hadn't slipped.

I went down the creaking wooden stairs at a trot, bracing myself against the side of the shaft, against the thin metal sides of the elevator. The dark breath of the shaft hit with smothering force, and the rickety stairs snarled under my feet, but I didn't look down. I didn't want to look down.

There was two hundred feet of blackness beneath me.

I was within ten steps of the ledge when the thick bulk of Burke appeared on the landing below. He'd been napping on guard, maybe, and just heard me coming.

He was just thirty seconds too late.

I hit him in a flying leap while his finger was squeezing the trigger of the shotgun, and the roar echoed and re-echoed through the stillness. Clouds of year-old dust whipped across my face, half choking me as I slid towards the wall.

It wasn't until I stopped against the black sides that I realized that Burke had gone the other way, toward the dark hole of the shaft.

He almost caught himself, on the edge. His thick fingers clawed wildly at the soft dust, and his mouth opened wide, as if to yell. He didn't yell, then.

His first scream came when he was halfway down the shaft, the second an instant later. The third one, I hardly heard.

I was at the door of the room by then, and half across it before the pinheaded figure had risen to its feet. One hand dropped to the low flat desk, but it didn't come up with a gun. It didn't come up at all.

I caught him where I'd been aching to catch him from the first, flush against the side of the jaw, and he stood up straight, leaning toward me. I caught him again, in the middle, and his body started jerking, bending over, then trying to unsnap. He seemed to sit down slowly in the chair, and his head fell forward onto the desk, with a snap.

Mr. Christian Wylie would be out for a long, long time.

Behind him, on the wall, I saw the master switch marked *Shafts*, the switch that controlled the lighting in the main sections of the mines.

The switch was still open.

I said, aloud, "I made it," and then walked towards it, reaching up to rip the wires from the lower half, killing the chance of a connection. I said again, "I made it," and the voice behind me said, "So it seems."

I TURNED slowly, easily, not making a quick move. I knew what I'd find without turning, but I kept going around that way until I faced him.

Blackmere was crouched in the doorway, a revolver in his hand. He scuttled forward a few steps as I turned, out of the light, letting his squat figure melt into the darkness of the walls.

"A pretty picture," he said, almost squeaking the words. "Sabotage. And caught in the act. A very pretty picture indeed."

I didn't say anything. I just stood there, watching him, damning myself for getting caught. From now on, whatever happened was my fault, nobody else's. I'd had my chance. And this is what I'd done with it.

He moved forward a little, squeaking in his thin, piping voice, but I couldn't make out the words. His queer body began moving up and down in little jerks, and suddenly I realized he wasn't squeaking, or talking.

The guy was humming to himself, keeping time to it with those quick, jouncing movements. At a time like this, the guy was humming!

I said: "You'd better call it off, Blackmere. You can't put it over. There'd be an investigation. You'd better call it quits."

He stopped moving and the humming stopped with the movement. His wicked little eyes were wide with amusement, and his thin lips were drawn back from his teeth. He was having a damn good time.

"You wouldn't call it off," he reminded me. "You had ideas, lots of ideas. Most of them were wrong."

"Not now," I told him. "Not now, they're not wrong. This is a setup." I took a step toward him, and the gun shot up, covering me.

"Go on," he squeaked, sharply. "Go on. Show me how smart you are."

"You don't have to be smart," I said. "That's what I'm trying to show you. Anybody can figure this out, now." I was hoping I could show him that, make him call it a day. I didn't figure I could, but there was no harm trying. There was no harm in anything, now.

"Take 'em all," I went on. "Take all the figures. The coal mine is opening. This guy Sanders appears in town. It's rumored that he's from Washington. Words gets around."

The little louse had started humming again, waving his gun in the air to beat time. But he was waving it up and down, not sideways. He was keeping me covered, all right.

"Wylie got suspicious and hired Dackman, who dug up the dirt for him. Dackman is murdered, and Wylie comes up with a big chunk of real estate. Then Anderson is murdered, and I'm framed. Those are the figures, Blackmere. Anybody can get 'em. Anybody can see 'em. You can't hide that."

"You had them," Blackmere pointed out. "You had them as soon as they happened. But you didn't guess." He had something there.

"No," I admitted. "Not then, I didn't. But I started out wrong. I started adding, and that threw me off." I stopped a minute, wondering if this was going to work, wondering if I could convince the little screwball to call it off.

He took a step toward me, grinning, and I wound up fast.

"Two and two is four—that's what I figured. And that's where I muffed it. Two *minus* two is zero. And zero is the answer. There isn't any more coal, Blackmere. Not worth mining, anyhow."

"They'll never find it out," Blackmere said, softly. "They'll never be sure."

"Dackman found it out," I told him. "Dackman found it out, and so did Anderson. Maybe they recognized Sanders, realized he was a phoney. That's the logical answer."

His shrill voice was rising now, shak-

ing with the fear that I might be right—that his plans would blow apart on him. But he wasn't changing them. I could tell from his eyes that he wasn't changing them. It was all or nothing for Blackmere. And that meant nothing, for me.

"Sanders will go," he said, quickly. "They'll never prove anything on Sanders. He had money, he made deposits. They can't prove he was phoney. And they won't even try, after this. There won't be any reason to try." His little eyes narrowed and he moved closer to me, circling the room.

"You'll pull the switch," he said, softly. "You'll pull the switch, and light the lights for me." He motioned with his gun to the wall behind Wylie. "Just pull it down," he told me. "That's all you have to do. Pull it down."

THAT'S what he thought. I knew what would happen when that switch was pulled. That's what the X had meant on Wylie's map of the mine—what Anderson had discovered, and been killed for discovering. And that's what Wylie had been trying out at his desk, when he'd blown the lamp.

There'd be a short in the North Central shaft, a tiny spark that would shoot the works. A shaft full of coal gas would blow skyward, forcing itself to the sur-

face. There'd be other explosions, maybe, as other pockets were ignited, but they wouldn't matter. The main one was the North Central shaft.

The shaft that was smack under the center of Harrington!

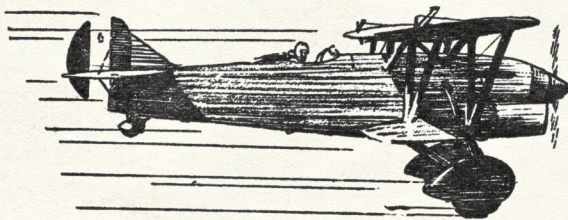
And I was the guy. I was supposed to pull the switch that would blast the town's guts out from under it. He had it all planned for me.

I said: "The insurance company won't pay off, Blackmere. There'll be men killed in that blast. There are hundreds of miners in town now—any of them may be killed. You can't pull a stunt like that, buddy."

"They'll pay off," he said, savagely. "Those buildings are covered against explosion. And they'll pay off." He stepped back away from me, steadying his gun. "And they'll never suspect me," he said, gleefully. "They can't ever suspect me. You're the one."

I was beginning to get it, now. He'd figured an out—a good out. Too damn good, if you asked me.

I was a fall guy. He and Wylie and Burke had caught me in the mine, after a fight. And if they proved the explosion was faked, then I'd be blamed. That's what he'd been humming about. That's what he'd meant by his first crack, "Sabotage." And I wouldn't be around to argue about it.



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I said, "Blackmere, you'll never pull this off," and then I saw his little eyes narrow to slits and the thin lips draw back over his teeth. There was no humming now, no dancing around of that squat little body.

This was the business.

I said, again, "Blackmere, you can't—" and then his knuckles showed white against the gun butt and I was halfway through the air towards him.

I was going to get my hands on that skinny neck and snap the humming out of it, if it was the last thing I did. I forgot about Harrington, and the miners who would be caught in the middle of the blast—I forgot about everything except me and Dackman and this scrawny little louse who thought he was a murder master. I was going to get my hands on that skinny neck and twist it, just once, before he got his gun operating. I was pretty sure I could manage it.

I was wrong. The slug caught me when I was halfway to him, slamming me back across the room. There was no pain—just the sudden force of that slug ramming through my shoulder and sending me into the black dust. I was worse off than I'd been before. And Blackmere moved out into the light, his gun still steady in the thin white hand and aimed at me.

He said, "Nobody'll figure this out," and then he crouched forward and a shot blasted through the air.

That was the one. The one that had my number on it, ready for stamping. It should've been the kill shot.

Only it wasn't.

It came from behind Blackmere, from the darkness outside the doorway, and the sound of it roared through the smoky room.

Blackmere's thin body straightened up stiffly, and then it jerked twice, like when he was humming. But he wasn't humming, now. He moved forward a quarter step and his knees dropped out from under him and slid down into the dust, swirling a whirlpool of black silt over his shoulders. He stayed there a half-second, the dust covering him like a cloud, and then he fell forward, under the whirlpool.

The dust settled back on him slowly,

covering his crab-like figure with a dark cloak, but he didn't notice it. He was past noticing it.

SHERIFF TAMMER said, from the doorway, "I never saw such a guy for trouble," and then the sheriff was in the room, his gray-white hair standing out eerily against the dim light.

"Wylie," I said, weakly. "Wylie's alive, I think. He'll confess, under pressure. They figured on blowing up the main shaft with an electric short in the coal gas. There weren't any orders to reopen. It was a racket to collect on the building insurance."

Tammer's voice was cold. "I heard 'em," he said. "I been standing here listening to Blackmere tell you about it. Wylie'll confess, all right."

I pushed myself to my feet, clinging to the edge of the desk. "You've been listening?" I said, shortly. "You've been standing, just listening, and damn near letting me get killed, eh?"

"Sure," Tammer agreed. "Sure. Soon's I came to, I figured where you'd headed. You'd be following Burke, looking for his car. I did the same."

I was half sitting in the chair, my arm stretched out across the desk in front of me. It was beginning to hurt like hell. "You took your time about it," I said, evenly. "You took your own good time about butting in. And I damn near lost an arm over it."

Tammer grinned. At least, I figured it was a grin. It was the first time I'd ever seen the guy try to smile, so I couldn't be sure.

"Kinda slow," he admitted. "Couldn't rightly get a good shot at him from where I stood, and you jumped him before I figured it." He stopped a minute, and his lips spread wide enough so I could be sure about the grin, this time. It was a pleasant grin.

"Besides," he finished, quietly, "I mighta been kinda slow in figurin'. I got a hunch I'm just about gettin' over that sock in the jaw you handed me. I got a feelin' that may've had somethin' to do with slowin' me up." Before he'd finished, he was laughing out loud.

Like I said, that guy Tammer was one smart boy.

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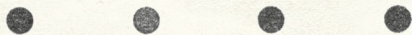
Author of "The Killer Was a Gentleman," etc.

They laughed when Steve sat down in the station-house—and told his tale of woe. So Red Owl's cheeky charioteer set out on a solo chase after the chiseler who'd taken him for \$56.45. But the flatfeet didn't think it was so funny when Steve's ill-fated hack wound up in a traffic jam of murder, blackmail, and sabotage that took an Army Bomber to break up.

CHAPTER ONE

The Lady from the Night

NOBODY cares when a cab driver gets robbed, so all I rated was a twenty minute interview with a cop who yawned, and a quarter column space-filler in the back pages of the afternoon papers. You could just about find the news item—if you were a careful reader and used a magnifying glass.



I made a grab that was a combination high-jump and tackle.





What really burned me up, aside from the lack of newspaper space and the casual attitude of the cops, was that I had a bruise on my jaw the size of a stevedore's fist, and a debt to the Red Owl Cab Company of fifty-six dollars and forty-five cents. And the debt, of course, caused more pain than the bruise.

Our company employs a certain chief dispatcher named Pat Regan, and he's the kind of guy who'd have his wife arrested if he found a spoon missing from the household silverware. The kind of guy who believes all robberies must be inside jobs. So he holds his drivers personally responsible for their meter receipts. A very wonderful guy. Among ourselves we sometimes refer to him as *Rat Regan*, which is short for Pat.

I'd been held up, actually, on a rainy Thursday between midnight and dawn. The fare was drunk—or anyway put on a good act. He said he wanted to go to San Fernando, and I took a five-buck advance on it, took him clear out to the valley—and then, out there, on a dark muddy street, he took me. Fifty-six dollars and forty-five cents, including his own fiver. When I woke up I had my cab, my pockets turned inside out, and a jaw that felt like Babe Ruth had mistaken it for the ball.

The lone cop on duty in the sheriff's office at San Fernando was polite but sleepy. After twenty minutes of yawning, he decided it had to be an L. A. job—so I spent most of the next afternoon in downtown headquarters, going through the mug books with a couple of tough dicks named Chadwick and Carnes. To them, the robbery of a cab driver was a common occurrence, and when I failed to identify my "drunk" from the faces in the mug books, I knew for sure there wouldn't be much action.

Chadwick said: "Well, if you ever run into this guy again, let us know. We'll take care of him."

"I'll let you know, all right—after I twist him into a pretzel and wash him down with beer."

Chadwick laughed. "Don't worry, Steve, we'll pick him up one of these days."

"You better pick him up before I do. For his sake!"

LATE that night, Friday, I dropped into the corner drug store for a quick black one between fares. There was nobody in the store except Eddy, behind the fountain. He said: "Hi, Steve. I seen in the papers where you got stuck up last night."

"You didn't see it without your glasses. I'll take coffee—no sugar, no cream, no cracks."

He drew a cup from the big steaming urn and shoved it toward me over the marble. "You hackers sure lead a tough life. By the way, there's been a lady in here looking for you."

"Fare?"

"Yeah. She asked where the cab was that has the corner stand. I told her you must be on a run but that she could phone another. No soap. Said she'd wait."

I tossed another glance around the warm empty drug store. "Got tired, huh?"

Eddy wagged his head. "Uh-uh. Said she'd wait outside."

"It's raining like hell outside."

"Yeah. That didn't seem to matter. Kind of a queer dame. Good-looking, though. You see Bette Davis in that movie?"

The front windows of the store were silvered with steam, speckled with pattering rain, but I saw the shape of a woman come up to the glass and peer inside. Then she moved away toward the corner.

I said to Eddy, "Put the coffee back in the kettle," and when I got outside she was standing beside my cab, a small woman wearing one of those light, pliofilm raincoats that keep the rain off but don't conceal the charms beneath. The collar of it, like a monk's cowl, came up to make a transparent hood that shielded dark wavy hair from the weather. Only her face remained unprotected, and clear to see under the street lamp—a face mostly eyes and lips. And really just eyes. Large eyes, sensuous, selfish, hauntingly sinister—the eyes of Bette Davis in *The Letter*.

"Are you for hire?" she asked.

I told her I was, but before I could reach for the door handle, she'd unlatched it herself and stepped into the dark interior of the cab.

I thought she might want the coziness of the dome light, reached for the switch.

She said: "Never mind that."

I reached toward the radio switch.

"Nor that, either. I just want to talk."

I got into the front seat, slid back the glass and twisted around to face her. Only the silhouette of her hooded head showed against the rear window, the glow of a cigarette in her fingers. She drew on it nervously, the glow getting bright, and then a cloud of smoke drifted toward me with a strong Turkish scent.

I THOUGHT I had her number. We cabbers get them all the time—ladies of the night. They offer their phone numbers and addresses so you'll know where to steer visiting businessmen or lodgemen, who are hundreds of miles away from their wives, on a convention.

I got my own cigarette going and waited to hear the usual line, and prepared to tell her my usual answer, which was that I didn't drive that kind of a hack.

She said: "Are you the man who got held up last night? Out in San Fernando?"

That proved I didn't know all the answers, after all.

"Yeah," I said. "Why?"

More Turkish tobacco came toward me in a rolling cloud, and along with it, almost concealed in it, a sly seductive perfume, like musk. "What would you do if you found him?"

"That guy?" I hardly knew, myself, but I felt sure she wouldn't want to hear the brutal details. I said: "I'd get my dough back. I might maybe muss his hair a bit."

Then more tobacco, more sly perfume, and her voice soft, feminine, but as practical and matter-of-fact as a jail matron's voice. "Wouldn't you be satisfied just to get your money back and turn him over to the police?"

"I might. Do I get this straight? Are you calling copper on him?"

"Yes."

"Then why not call it direct? How do I cut in?"

"You ought to guess that," she said. "I don't want to be tied up to him. Not at headquarters. That's reasonable, isn't it?"

"Yeah—if you're in the same boat yourself."

She moved impatiently, with a crisp rustle of raincoat, into the darker corner of the cab, and her hooded head was no longer framed in the bleary rear glass. The spark of the cigarette jerked up, brightened, then sank to the darkness of her lap.

"Don't be stupid," she said. "It doesn't mean that I've done anything. You don't get the idea at all. I'm not exactly calling copper on him. We talked it all over. He made a slip, that stick-up, but he wants to give himself up and serve his time. He's a decent guy at heart. When he comes out we'll get married. It's like that."

Well, I thought, maybe it was, but still there was something funny about it. Why didn't the guy just walk into a station and give himself up? Why drag *me* around to finger him—if that's what she wanted?

And as though reading my mind, she added: "Nick sent me out to find you because this is the stand where he picked up your cab last night. He's made up his mind, and there won't be any fuss. He wants you to identify him for the cops. He's waiting for you now. Here."

Her hand came toward me, cool as it touched mine, and I had a fistful of stiff folded paper. When I held it down under the dashlamp it was sixty dollars in tens and fives.

"That pays you back," she explained, "and the change is for my fare. Shall we go?"

I tried to see her through the darkness and the Turkish smoke, but even her cigarette had gone now, and there remained just the pale suggestion of a face floating in shadow, and a pair of large liquid eyes.

I said: "O.K., but I'm apt to be an awful tough customer if somebody tries to take me twice in the same week."

THE Ocean View Hotel Apartments didn't have any view of the ocean, but their transient tenants weren't the kind to be aesthetically particular. For a buck a day you got a rear room looking out into an alley where the kitchen of a chop suey joint stacked its garbage pails—and for a buck and a quarter, if you were a little more choosy, there were upstairs fronts with a view of hot dog stands, pool halls, open-fronted shooting galleries, and a

movie theater playing three lousy features for a dime.

This was the main street, the honkey-tonk, the "fun center," of Pacific Park. The grifters loitered in the bars, the panhandlers managed to look cold and pitiful on the corners and seedy blondes, smelling of Woolworth perfume, pretended to be window-shopping.

When I pulled the cab into the curb, it was going on two A. M., but lights still glowed in the fun joints, and two girls became interested in the darkened window of a pawn shop as a patrolman went by.

My fare got out into the rain with me, saying: "You can go right in. Room 306. That's the top floor. Just knock. He's expecting you. And you can phone from there."

"While you vanish?"

"Naturally. I thought you understood that."

Her hand touched my elbow and she led me toward the five wooden steps that went up to the lobby entrance of the Oceanview. It was a shabby place, three stories of ancient gloom, with a steep ugly roof. Through tall glass doors we saw a desk with pigeonholes back of it, and a sad-faced clerk talking to somebody over the counter. The other man was Oriental, and dressed like a million dollars. Hom-burg hat cocked to the right angle. Suit tailored to fit, expensive, with a fresh flower in the lapel. A smiling Japanese face, a fine camel's hair overcoat folded neatly over one arm, a long yellowish hand holding a cigarette in a long amber holder.

My fare said, "Wait a minute!"—her grip tensing on my elbow.

"What's the matter?"

She drew me away from the steps, down toward the alley. "You'd better go in the back way, cabby. You don't have to worry, there won't be any fuss. Nick's afraid of some people he got in wrong with once. But he wants to come clean now. It's just that he wants you to turn him in—nobody else."

There was something about this I hadn't liked in the first place, and now I liked it less. Down the block, almost to the next corner, the patrolman went merrily on his way, twirling his stick, and I had an urge to call him back.

My fare said: "Please don't think there'll be any trouble. Nick's ready and willing. It's just that he wants to stay in his room till you identify him and call for the police. You've got your money back. It won't take you ten minutes."

I made a gesture of sniffing the air. "The mice around here," I said, "have a very foul aroma."

But she assured me everything was all right. "Just go up this alley and there's a back entrance. Room 306."

Then she was gone, crossing the street through the rain, and entering a dive that had a neon sign in the window reading: *All drinks—25c.*

I went back to my cab and lifted up the front seat and groped among the tools. I didn't keep a gun there, but I kept a hefty steel hub-wrench, and with that wrench in my fist I could be awful hard to take—at close quarters.

THE ALLEY went straight back for the length of the Oceanview, and I passed shaded lower windows, shut tight against the rain, most of them black with sleep. I passed rows of garbage pails, broken vegetable crates, and a few parked cars, ancient, silent, hugging close to the damp walls. Then, still farther back, the rear of the chop suey joint with its smells, its clatter of dishes, its sing-song of the washers.

The Oceanview had another door back here, and a yellow globe burning dimly on a sign that said: *Use Front Entrance.* Above this, the stern of the hotel rose three dreary floors into the night, and the steel sliding ladder of the fire escape was hoisted up properly to its first platform, out of reach.

I tried the rear door. It was unlocked, of course—the more furtive tenants would see to that. I entered a musty hallway and hiked two flights of worn, carpeted steps. On the landings the management provided cuspidors instead of potted palms, and bold lettered signs advised the guests that loud radios would not be tolerated after midnight. But radios, in perverse scorn of the signs, blasted in many of the rooms, and on the third floor one of them was not quite loud enough to shake the building down. This noise came from a door numbered 306.

I rapped gently several times, got no answer, then beat the door hard with the palm of my hand.

Still no answer. I reached for the door-knob, and there wasn't any doorknob. It had been yanked loose from its screws, the broken wood freshly torn, the wood around the lock badly splintered.

I gave the door a solid kick that flung it hard back on its hinges. I dropped to a crouch, ready to slam somebody with my hub-wrench, but there was nobody to slam. The only man in the room lay flat on his back a few long paces inside the door. Most of his clothing had been ripped from his white husky body, and there was a pool of drying blood, most of it around his head, and streaked along the hard stiff line of his jaw. His eyes, deep blue, wide open, stared fixedly at the still blaring radio on the table above him—as if he hated it for desecrating his death.

On the floor beside him was a leather-covered sap. It might've been the one he'd used on my jaw—in the cab, out in San Fernando. On the floor also, a two-foot length of common plumber's pipe, sticky with blood, matted-with hair. That, then, was the gadget which had made him open his eyes for the last time.

I closed the door, tried to make it stay that way against the broken lock, and when I bent closer over him I knew the face. It was Nick, all right. And somebody else had mussed his hair.

The whole room had been worked over, just like Nick. Drawers pulled out of the bureau, contents strewn over the carpet, the bed torn apart, mattress slit, and downy pillow feathers floating thinly through the air like gentle snow in the draft from the window.

I went to the window, slid it wider open and cautiously stuck my head out into the wet night. Nobody shot at me. The alley was long floors below, and I didn't think anybody had jumped or climbed.

The only other door was closed, and when I opened it the hub-wrench was ready. Nobody stood concealed there—just a bare closet with a single suit hanging from one of the nails.

Then something made me look up, and the little square ceiling had a trap in it, probably to the attic. I saw frail broken

cobwebs, the remnants of a recent web. And dust smeared on the side wall where somebody had hoisted himself up. And the imprint of a hand against the attic trap.

I retreated into the room, shut the closet door, and my heart had moved up somewhere in the neighborhood of my tonsils. When I turned off the radio, the sudden silence had only my heartbeats in it, the distant drone of other radios on lower floors, the patter of rain on the steep shingle roof. That silence lasted a hundred years, while my heart pumped only twice in each year.

OVERHEAD, the old-fashioned bedroom chandelier had a gentle, almost imperceptible motion on its three rusty chains. Along with seeing that, I heard a soft creak of wood. Probably no louder than breaking a match stick, but to me, in my frame of mind, it was the firing of a cannon.

Backing away, my eyes fascinated by the ceiling, I knew what it would be like in the attic. No flooring up there, the joists probably sixteen inches apart, and between them, under them, the slats, the flat clinging plaster of the ceiling. You'd have to walk the joists, like narrow railroad ties, balancing yourself, ducking rafters and roof braces, with cobwebs pawing face and hands—in total darkness, unless you'd come prepared with a flash.

I backed over to the wall phone, lifted the receiver, and told the desk clerk: "Call the cops. Have them watch all around the hotel, including the alley. You've got a killer in the attic. Over 306."

I'll never know for sure whether he heard me on the phone or not—that guy walking the attic joists. It might've been that—it might have been just his hurry. A faltering step, a slipping foot, and all at once a section of ceiling exploded downward, with splintering slats, powdering plaster. A crash, a curse, and then one of his legs stabbed partly into the room—hanging as far down as the chandelier. A kicking, jerking leg, trying to draw itself back.

I let out a whoop like the Indians storming General Custer, threw my wrench away and made a grab that was

combination high-jump and tackle. I wrapped both arms around his leg, but he kicked hard, his shoe came loose, and the floor jumped up and smacked the full length of my back.

That's all that saved me—the fall. He'd gotten a gun into action, the shots beating thunder through the closed attic, spouting sharp little funnels of plaster.

I rolled rapidly out of the way, rolled against the dead man, and got one of my hands into his blood. Then I crawled out into the hall.

Up in the attic there was a thump, his shoeless leg jerked back up the hole, and after several more thumpings—quick, frantic, hurried—a window in the attic smashed to thousands of clattering bits, and he was out on the steel fire escape.

I heard him going down it with the broken rhythm of a single clumping shoe, like a man on one leg. The steel ladder rattled as it slid to the alley from the lower platform, then rang like a cracked bell as it struck the pavement.

I ran along the hall to a rear window that had a red light over it, jerked up the sash, and didn't stick my head out more than an inch.

The starter of a car whined, rasped, two stories down, and a sedan without lights made a swift moving shadow through the alley, with just a brief sparkle of rain-drops on the glass. From that distance, in the dark, you could read the license plate the same way you can read a newspaper in the next block.

I turned away from the window, and a uniformed cop was standing near the top of the stairway. His feet were still a few steps down, where he'd stopped, and his service gun was cocked in his fist, pointing along the hall to me. He had a ruddy, Irish face, tough as the district he patrolled, and a voice like a considerate undertaker.

"If I was you," he said, "I wouldn't even wiggle."

I made a gesture toward the window. "The guy you want just lammed down the fire escape, officer. Got away in a car. The alley."

He didn't say anything, and I realized how false it sounded.

"Fellow named Nick," I said. "Heister. He's in 306. Dead."

The cop had stepped up to the third floor landing now, strolling toward me, revolver still cocked, and firm as an emplaced field-gun in his big forward fist. He cast a glance into 306 as he passed the open doorway, but didn't hesitate a second as he advanced.

"Your right hand is bloody," he said quietly. "What happened? Nail-file slip while you was having a manicure?"

CHAPTER TWO

If the Shoe Fits

THE jail furnaces made the basement hot, and the only light down there was as strong as the headlamp of a Diesel locomotive. It was three feet from my face, aimed directly at my eyes. I couldn't see the two cops behind it, and after a while I couldn't see the lamp itself. It was just a great burning sun, first white, then red—then red, white, and yellow, in a succession of blinding flashes that sent hot fire deep back into my brain.

I lowered my chin, tried again to force my eyes tightly shut, but the flashes still remained hot, burning, and the rubber hose once again belted the side of my head with a blunt pain.

Chadwick said: "Open your eyes, pal!"

I opened them, and it wasn't much worse. I'd removed coat and vest, loosened collar and tie, but still sweat bathed my spine, dripped from my hair in salty beads that scorched eyeballs like the lamp.

Chadwick said: "Don't think you can out-stick us, baby. Me and Carnes got lots of stamina. We can play this in relays, from now till Christmas." /

"I didn't do it," I insisted, a little more weakly now, my voice sounding like I'd left it somewhere in the next street. "I know it looks funny as hell—but I didn't do it."

Chadwick's thick forefinger came blearily before my eyes, his fist a bunched shadow in the great white sun of the light. "What the hell you take us for, Steve? Only this afternoon you come barging into headquarters and tell us about the stick-up and what you'll do to this guy if you catch him. You still admit Nick Panetti is the guy?"

"He held me up," I said. "I didn't

know his name. I only saw him the time he rode my cab, and when I found him dead. Don't you believe about that girl with the eyes?"

"Sure. Why not? So a doll fingered him. So you followed her finger and beat the guy's brains out. Only a passing patrolman hears the shots, runs into the hotel, and there you are, with blood on your paw and guilt written all over your puss."

"The fellow in the attic—" I began.

"Nuts! Maybe some pal of Nick's that got scared out while you went pipe-swinging around the room. Maybe two guys stuck you up last night—instead of one. The score stands one down and one to go." Then his voice became cloyingly sweet. "Listen, Steve, it'll be better if you sing. This Nick probably has a record somewhere. You might as well sing, and then Carnes and me can go to bat for you—ease the rap. You don't want a death rap for killing a bum, do you, Steve?"

A phone rang somewhere behind the light. Carnes spoke into it, then spoke to Chadwick. "The captain's back in the office. He says to bring Steve up—"

UPSTAIRS, they pushed me through a door marked *Private*, and Captain Hollister said to them: "I won't need you boys for a while. Have a chair, Steve."

I had one, a straight oak chair with arms that kept me from complete collapse. I sat in it and shook with a chill.

"Better put your coat and vest on, Steve. You don't want to catch cold after that warm basement. It gets pretty hot down here, with the furnaces and all."

"Hot as hell," I admitted.

"You shouldn't mind Chadwick and Carnes. We have to put up with their methods sometimes. A couple of diamonds in the rough. Want a cigar, Steve?"

I wanted it the way starving Belgians want Nazi handouts—necessary, but not necessary to like it. The captain held a match to the cigar, reaching across the desk to me, and behind the flare of the match his face was thin, haggard, but smiling. He wasn't such a bad egg, this captain of Homicide. He'd given me a lot of breaks since we'd known each other—since my father had been his friend—and now, if ever, it was time for him to

come across with another. I needed it.

He said: "The world looks pretty black from where you're sitting, huh, Steve?"

"I'm a coal miner trapped in a cave-in."

"It's not as bad as all that, Steve. You've got a lot of circumstantial evidence piled on you, but I'm not pressing any charges till I know my case won't fall apart like a deck of cards."

"You mean I get shown out the front door?"

"Maybe. But it might not be permanent. I'll still be working, Steve, so don't be hard to find."

I put his cigar in the desk tray. "You know me better than that."

"Sure, sure. All I mean is that I might need you, off and on, for a lot of things. First, I'll trace down all the dolls Nick Panetti ever had near him. We'll need you to look them over as we pick them up. Then this guy that scrambled through the attic—we'll be on his trail. All the guys that ever knew Nick."

"I didn't get a look at him—he was in the attic."

"Sure. But you got his shoe." The captain pointed to the shoe on his desk. "Store label inside it. I woke up a clerk from the store, but he sold the shoes a long time ago and there's no charge record of the customer. But we'll round up a lot of guys and give them shoe fittings, and when we find a foot that fits, we'll let the clerk have a look-see. That's the program, Steve. To start with. We didn't get any prints in the attic, or off the door-knob, or off the piece of pipe. That handprint on the attic trap was a glove."

I stood up and straightened my tie, and combed my hair—mussed by a rubber hose—using spread fingers for a comb. "Don't bother to see me to the door, Captain," I said.

He waved a hand that seated me again. "There's one more thing." He flipped a dictograph switch on the desk, bending over the speaker. "Send Mr. Fuller in."

THE desk sergeant ushered in a man whom I knew only in a casual way—from picking up fares at the Oceanview. He was Jed Fuller, the hotel's night clerk—thin, solicitous, weary, broken down by the failure of his life.

Hollister pointed at me. "Do you recognize this man, Mr. Fuller?"

"Yes, sir. Hello, Steve."

Hollister stood up behind the desk. "How well do you know him, Mr. Fuller?"

"Well, I see him around. Cab driver for Red Owl. They call him Steve Midnight. I don't know his real name."

"Did you ever see him with Nick Panetti?"

Fuller looked blank. "Who's Nick Panetti?"

"You ought to know. Lived in your hotel. Room 306."

"Oh. He didn't register under that name. Had him under Ned Palmer. For the last month. No, I never saw him and Steve together."

"Did you see Steve tonight? At the hotel?"

"No, sir. Not till that cop barged up and pinched him. After the shots."

"Do you think Nick Panetti, or Ned Palmer, was mixed up in any kind of a racket?"

Fuller studied his fingernails with a weary grimace. "The hotel don't ask their history when they register. What hotel does? All I know is what I told those cops of yours. The guy in 306 acted kind of scared, from early evening. That's when the Jap girl came to see him."

"Jap girl?"

"Well, call it Japanese-American. She talked English all right. Swell looker, too. She came to the desk and wanted to be announced to 306. I called him on the house phone and she went up. Had a sort of package with her. Brown manila envelope like you carry papers in. She wasn't up there but a couple of minutes. Came right out."

"With the manila envelope?"

"No, sir. She didn't have it when she left. And after that the man in 306 acted funny. He didn't come out again from his room. Phoned down to say he didn't want to see anybody. To tell everybody he was out. He even had his dinner sent up to his room. Too scared to go out and eat."

"Had you ever seen this Japanese girl before?"

"No, sir."

"Know her if you saw her again?"

"I think so."

Captain Hollister picked up two framed photographs from his desk, both pictures of the same girl, and she was gorgeous, with small bowed lips, slanted Oriental eyes, and a figure good enough for Earl Carroll. The languorous poses, the stilted autograph: *Very Truly Yours, Miki Fujii*, suggested they were professional pictures.

"We found them on the wall in 306," the captain said. "Is this the girl?"

Fuller nodded briskly. "That's her, all right."

Hollister stowed both photos in a drawer of his desk. "Seems I'll have to do a little sleuthing in the Japanese Quarter. Was she alone when she came to see Nick Panetti?"

"Yes, sir, but another Jap came later. A man."

"You know him?"

"No, sir. Wealthy-looking Jap. Wanted to see Ned Palmer—you call him Nick. But, like I told you, 306 left orders at the desk that he was out. I told that to the Jap."

"When was all this?"

"Just a few minutes before the shooting."

I remembered the Jap talking to Fuller when I arrived with the girl who fingered Nick for me, so I could verify Fuller's story for the captain.

"Very interesting," Hollister said. "Looks like I'll be doing a lot of sleuthing in the Quarter. Did the Jap go upstairs?"

"No, sir. He left by the front door. Just a few minutes before the shots. Maybe five minutes. No more."

"Anything else you can tell me?" the captain went on.

"No, sir. I think that's all."

Hollister eyed him with the kind of practiced police stare that milks blood out of a turnip. He slowly raised both arms above his head, tensing them, stretching, and the movement purposely parted his coat to reveal the ominous black stock of his service gun, in tan leather. The captain liked to display it on occasions of interview. It was proof that you shouldn't monkey with the law.

"All right, Mr. Fuller," he said affably, moving to the door and holding it

open. "That'll be all for now, thanks."

And when Fuller brushed past him, going out, I clapped my cap on and went along behind him. I said to the captain: "Jolly visit. You must come up and see *me* sometime. And be sure to bring along those nice friends of yours—Mr. Chadwick and Mr. Carnes."

THE early morning, without dawn, was just a few shades grayer than the night. The same ceaseless rain dripped from store awnings, filled gutters with rushing dirty water.

I dropped into a hole-in-the-wall and had breakfast at a greasy counter and thumbed through the morning papers. There wasn't anything about the trouble. It had happened too late for the morning editions.

After breakfast I returned to the Oceanview for my cab. It was still there, parked out front, and I was just congratulating myself that the police hadn't impounded it when I noticed a soggy yellow tag on the windshield. A two-buck ticket for over-parking. The straw that broke the camel's back.

A man standing under the hotel awning gave me a friendly laugh. He said: "Nice going, fella. Haven't heard such complete, professional, well-rounded cussing since I left the A.E.F. at the close of the first World War. And we used to have some pretty good talent in the Lafayette Escadrille."

I wondered where I'd seen him before. Something about him had the hazy familiarity of a bit player you saw in a good movie a long time ago, and whose name you'd long since forgotten. It might've been his hands with their taut wrinkled skin, hands that had been in fire once. Or it might've been his jaw. Lean, strong, like the hands, with a trace of burns there, also. But not ugly on his jaw. Rather he wore the reminder of accident the way a student of Old Heidelberg wears his saber slashes. Scars of gallantry from a gentleman's past.

He said: "I suppose you wouldn't object to a fare?"

I swung open the cab's door for him as he stepped out into the rain. "Just name the destination. Red Owl does the rest."

"Federal Building," he said. "Downtown L.A."

It rained all the way downtown, but we got there ahead of the early office traffic. It was still before seven when my passenger, telling me to wait, hurried up the broad stone steps of the government building. And I hadn't dragged halfway through a Chesterfield when he came out again.

"Too early," he said. "Arthur isn't on the job yet."

"Arthur?"

"Of the F.B.I. In charge of the local branch."

"Oh," I said.

"You think it doesn't concern you?"

He settled back in the leather seat, fishing pipe and tobacco from the deep pocket of his overcoat. "It does concern you, Steve. That's why we came down here. To see Arthur. Both of us. But you don't need to get your dander up, Steve."

My stare at him probably had the intelligence of a hooked mackerel. "You know my name?"

"Steven Middleton Knight. That's a lot of handle; so they call you Steve Midnight to make it easier. You were robbed night before last out in San Fernando. Last night some woman steered you to the fellow who did it. At the Oceanview. When you got there he'd been bumped. The cards looked bad but the cops only held the joker so they had to release you." The cordial, knowing smile broadened as he tamped tobacco into his pipe with a wrinkled thumb. "You see, Steve, I get around."

"Quite a bit," I admitted, and watched him reach inside his coat for his wallet. This was pigskin, folded, and when he unhinged it there was an identification card slipped behind a square of cracked yellow isinglass. That made him William J. Durand, special investigator for Lockwood Aircraft—one of the biggest manufacturers of dive bombers and naval planes on the Pacific Coast. And it brought him clearly out of the haze of memory.

I REMEMBERED seeing whole sections about him in popular news magazines. William (Wild Bill) Durand. Test pilot, war flyer, adventurer. They said he had more medals than Goering—from

World War No. 1, from free-lance combat in Spain, from flying Chinese planes against the Jap attack of Shanghai. He'd gone anywhere in the world where a tough aviator was needed, and the recent history of the world had continual need for guys like Wild Bill Durand. I'd heard it said in the bars that he'd be flying now in the Eagle Squadron, for the Royal Air Force, if it hadn't been for his crack-up at Lockwood.

That was the crack-up that cost him his career. He'd been testing a dive bomber, with five Army officials aboard, when fire broke out all around him, flames leaping up over his hands, licking at his arms when he tried to shield his face from it. But he stuck to the controls, thinking of all those passengers aboard. He radioed the airport: "Get out the fire trucks, you lugs—this is Bill Durand on Test Flight 64, and I'm comin' in fast!"

They say the plane came down from the sky with a trail of smoke behind it a mile long, and that Wild Bill crashed it without breaking anything but the undercarriage and his own arm. Nobody else on the flight was hurt. But Wild Bill had that broken arm, and body burns which kept him in the hospital over a month, and he also had a case of broken nerves.

After that he tried a lot of drinking, and he wouldn't have anything to do with planes. A test pilot's job stood open for him, but the hectic bravado of his past had changed suddenly, finally, to a deep psychological fear. It was said, in gossip, that he'd now rather hike up a dozen flights of stairs than risk two minutes in an elevator. But of course nobody ever mentioned his fear to him. The crack-up of his nervous system was a closed subject, and Lockwood Aircraft, grateful for past services, now employed Wild Bill as a private investigator. To keep sabotage out of the plant. Because there was nothing the matter with his nervous system so long as he kept both feet on the ground.

He said to me: "What do you know about this guy, Steve?"

"Nick Panetti? Nothing. He stuck me up, and then some girl I never saw before—and never expect to see again—told me he wanted to be fingered so he could clear his rap and go straight. That's all."

"The cops know he has a prison record in Montana?"

I shrugged.

"Well, they will," Durand said. "Nick got parole from Deer Lodge two years ago. The other day he came over to the personnel department of Lockwood to apply for a job. Account of the new defense program we investigate these fellas pretty thoroughly. I checked up on him and found out about Deer Lodge. Also, he told us he used to be an automobile mechanic. That's baloney. He used to be a con man."

"You mean you suspect him of sabotage?"

Durand lit his pipe. "Let's call it suspect him of trying. This is all under your hat, Steve. And if I didn't find your past record pretty good, and if the cops hadn't released you, I might be asking a bunch of questions about how you got mixed up with Panetti."

"Hey!" I objected.

But he waved a calm hand. "Don't get your dander up, Steve."

I was sore about it. First I'd been accused of murder, and now somebody was hinting a tie-up with sabotage in an airplane plant. And along with it all, I had a two-dollar ticket for over-parking in front of the Oceanview. Now all I needed was to get fired from Red Owl—and there was still a good chance of *that*.

Durand said: "What they got on you, Steve?"

I told him how simple it was, but how bad it looked. He didn't listen with much interest because he'd already talked to Jed Fuller, the hotel clerk, and he'd learned about the Japanese girl who came to call on Nick Panetti with a manila envelope, and about the male Jap who came later.

He said thoughtfully: "Do you suppose it was a Jap's shoe?"

"They didn't smell it," I said.

Durand sucked on his pipe. "This case won't be as funny as you think it is, Steve."

I didn't think it was funny, of course, but I didn't say anything.

He said: "I'll let you go now, but you'll probably have to talk to me again, and maybe you'll have to tell your story to the F.B.I. In the meantime keep this sabotage angle under your hat. In a spy racket

we go after the big fish—not just the minnows.”

“You mean you think Nick Panetti was working for somebody?”

“I mean that he didn’t apply for a job at Lockwood just because he had a love of the airplane industry. They don’t teach flying at Deer Lodge.”

CHAPTER THREE

A Trail of Taxis

DRIVING back to Pacific Park alone, I thought about the girl in the raincoat who’d fingered Panetti. The memory of her inspired an abrupt brainstorm.

I parked the cab across the street from the Oceanview and entered a drab dive which had a neon sign in the window reading: *All drinks—25c.*

Inside, a sleepy-eyed man polished glasses behind the bar. I asked: “Were you on duty here last night? After midnight?”

He nodded sullenly.

“Do you remember a small woman, nervous, in a peekaboo raincoat? She came barging in here just before the trouble across the street.”

“You’re late to the post,” he said. “The cops already been in here to ask that.”

“Is the answer a secret?”

“Naw. I seen the dame, all right. In the front door, back to the ladies’ room, and scam. She never even stopped for a drink.”

“A customer of yours?”

“Naw. Never seen her before in my life.”

So that was that. She’d used the cocktail bar as a shake-off. In the front door, out the back. Probably had a car waiting. Or if she didn’t have a car she’d just have to walk up to the trolley station.

Then I got to thinking about the trolley schedule. After midnight they only ran every two hours. So if she happened to miss one, if she didn’t have a car waiting for her—

“You want a drink?” the bartender growled.

I tossed a quarter on the bar. “Have one yourself—to celebrate.”

“To celebrate what?”

“Being midwife to the birth of an idea.”

IT WAS after eight when I got over to the central garage of Red Owl and Pat Regan, the night dispatcher, had just turned over his desk to the day man. He said a single word to me, with sharp venom.

“Jailbird!”

I fished a wad of currency and silver from my pocket and told him I’d pay off for last night, and even the night before—including the robbery. The money made a difference. He took it greedily, checking against the meter. The only thing to make his face fall was when I held out four sixty in tips. It was a deep annoyance to him that his drivers sometimes earned a little gravy.

He said: “You’re a good driver, Steve—when you’re not in the clink. What the hell you been up to this time?”

“It’s a long story. Am I still working for Red Owl?”

He thought that over, weighing my problem against the weight of the money I’d placed in his paw. Then he said: “Any chance they’ll be dragging you back to the clink?”

“Not if I can prevent it.”

“Then report to work tonight. Nine. Same as usual.”

He started into the office with the money but I called him back.

“Last night,” I said. “Around two A. M. Did any of the boys pick up a fare in my beat?”

“Yeah. Ollie Greenberg did.”

“Anywhere near the Oceanview, or John’s Cocktail Bar?”

“Next block over,” he said. “A woman phoned from a drug store.”

“Thanks, Pat.” I tried not to make the P as in Pat, sound like R as in rodent.

When I strolled into the café next to the garage, where Ollie Greenberg always had his morning coffee, Ollie was there and he remembered the woman who’d called him from the drug store.

“Eyes,” he said. “She sure had a pair of glimmers. And the raincoat? Yeah, I remember that too. I dropped her at Fifth and Seaway, in Venice. Tipped me a dime.”

I said: “At two o’clock in the morning, Fifth and Seaway is a hell of a dark corner.”

“Yeah. Maybe she lives around there.”

"And maybe not. Doesn't Red Owl have a call box on that corner?"

"Yeah."

"Who covers it?"

"Hap O'Connor. Why?"

"Nothing," I said, and crowded myself into a phone booth at the back of the little café. I looked up O'Connor's home phone in the directory, called it, and made his wife wake him out of bed.

"This is Steve Midnight," I told him. "I'm on Red Owl's Pacific Park beat, remember? Listen, Hap, did you have a fare last night from Fifth and Seaway? About two A. M.? Girl in a peekaboo raincoat?"

"Sure," he said. "About two thirty. I picked her up at the call box."

"Where'd you take her, Hap?" I said breathlessly.

My heart stopped beating while I waited for his answer. Had the girl ducked in and out of more taxis to cover her trail, or had just two of them, and a cocktail bar, been satisfactory?

Hap said: "I took her to a bungalow over on Pico Boulevard. Don't remember the number. Think it was in the nine hundred block. A shingle bungalow next to the dog kennels—that place where they sell Scottie pups."

"Did she go in there?"

"Yeah, the bungalow, not the dog kennels. Does that help?"

"It helps like a pint of rye, Hap. You've got a fine memory. I owe you a round of drinks."

"I've got a marvelous memory," he confessed.

THE Wee Heather Dog Kennels fronted on Pico. In the show window a pair of short-legged Scottie pups with black, blocky bodies, pressed moist noses against the glass, watching me pass. They were waiting, with stoic patience, for somebody to buy them. And deep back in the store their Scottish friends and relatives set up a steady hollow barking which objected to life in general, and dog kennels in particular.

Passing the store, I found an old-fashioned shingle and clapboard bungalow set back to the side of it in a weedy growth of lawn. I'd come here in a cab, rented off-hours from Red Owl. And in my

pocket I had a woman's handbag purchased from Sears Roebuck for fifty cents. I walked through an open picket gateway, and the front steps of the house had a graded plank ramp placed over them, as though kids who lived here might use it as a take-off for their roller coasters. But the plank ramp seemed too well built to be a kid's fancy.

I went up the ramp, pushed a button, and far back in the bungalow the bell rang sharply through forlorn silence. I heard a man cough, an inside door open and close, then a rolling, squeaking sound as his cough came closer through the house. There were no footsteps, and when he opened the front door I saw the reason for that, and the reason for the little ramp across the front steps.

"Yes?" he asked.

It didn't appear to be age that had crippled him. He was not an old man, anyway not a lot over fifty. Complexion good, hair only slightly grayed, the upper part of his body rugged and vigorous. So I guessed it was just his legs that had put him in the wheel-chair. They were wrapped in a steamer robe.

I said: "I'm the driver that brought a lady to this address last night. If she's here may I speak to her a moment?"

"She's not here. I assume you mean my daughter. What was it you wanted?"

I produced the Sears Roebuck handbag and let him see it briefly in my hand. "This was left in my cab. Found it this morn'g. I thought it might be hers."

He studied the bag thoughtfully as I tucked it back into my pocket, shook his head. "Doesn't look like one of Thelma's. But of course it might be."

"Isn't there some way I can reach her?"

"Well, she's at work now."

"Where does she work?"

"Lockwood Aircraft."

I took that jolt standing, with no curiosity or surprise expressing itself outwardly. At least I hoped not.

"I can take a run over there," I suggested. "If you'll just give me her full name and what department she works in, I'll be glad to drop over. No charge. It's the standard policy of the Red Owl Cab Company in the case of lost articles."

"That's very nice of you," he said.

"However, Thelma didn't say anything about losing a bag last night, and I don't like to bother her during working hours—unless it's really necessary. Why don't we just open the bag? I'll be able to identify the contents—if it's Thelma's."

I tried to make myself blush with embarrassment, but not being the blushing type I wasn't so sure I succeeded. "Well, you see, in a case like this it's always our policy to find the fare who lost the article. I'm sure you understand no distrust is implied."

He took it all right, saying: "Step inside a moment. I have another idea."

INSIDE, a low-ceilinged parlor was cluttered with low-cost furniture—the kind that begins to look shabby before you've even made the second payment. Coals burned full red in the fireplace, and on the mantel there was a silver-framed photograph that couldn't have caught my eyes any sooner if it had been a billboard in an empty lot. There he was, face smiling and a little reckless, seasoned by wars—photographed wearing a leather helmet, the goggles pushed up carelessly crooked above dark shaggy brows.

I realized I must've given the picture more than a casual glance, so to cover it I said: "Nice-looking fella."

"Yes. That's Wild Bill Durand, the famous flyer. Thelma's—he's been courting Thelma. Fine chap." The wheelchair swung swiftly, and he rolled over to me with graceful easy maneuvers of his hands on the rubber tires. "Look, the idea I had was that I'll phone Thelma about the bag. Save you a trip over there. So just be seated a moment. And will you have a drink?"

"A drink sounds fine."

"It'll be fine with me, too. I'm alone here and it gets pretty dull sometimes, with Thelma always at work, or out."

In his eyes I detected a deep, haunting loneliness—a despairing loneliness which he didn't put on for my benefit but which came from the depths of his real being. It struck me all at once that he was the loneliest man I'd ever seen in my life.

"That's too bad," I said.

And he put up a bluff of brightening. "Well, I've got my dogs. The kennel next door belongs to me. Keeps me busy. But

I'm always darned glad to have somebody drop in to share a drink with me. I'll try not to talk your ear off about dogs."

WHEN he left me, wheeling away in his chair, I got up and studied the photograph on the mantel. I heard him out in the kitchen, the squeak of the chair, the tinkle of glassware, the slam of cupboards. And then, in the silence, I heard a sound from behind another door.

He'd told me he was alone here, but the sound I heard, like the upsetting of a glass, didn't come from the kitchen. I strolled quietly toward a closed door, then turned the knob quickly and flung it open.

This was a man's bedroom, with pictures, trophies, gun racks, everything cluttered and full of the odor of pipes and gun oils and dog medicines. On the bureau a black cat sat beside a tipped-over glass and stopped lapping its paws to give me the once-over with round yellow eyes. For a moment the cat and I stared at each other, neither of us sure who had surprised who. A radio began to blare out in the kitchen. I heard the slam of a refrigerator door, the running of a faucet as my host rattled ice cubes from the tray.

The cat yawned, showing a red tongue, small sharp teeth, then took a leap from the bureau and rubbed its sides against my legs, purring. It went around my ankles twice, thoroughly crossing me up with the omen of a black cat cutting your path, leaving me in a maze of superstition, and then it strolled on out into the parlor.

I started to shut the door, but I'd taken a fast gander around the room and some of the pictures on the walls weren't just of prize Scottie dogs with red and blue show ribbons. There were many pictures of Thelma. With full red lips and the eyes of Bette Davis in *The Letter*. The kind of woman you wouldn't trust with the Elk's tooth from your grandfather's watch chain.

On the wall near the door a page from a newspaper had been framed. It was yellowed now, a sheet from the *Kansas City Star* dated almost three years ago. The heading of a side column said: *HUSBAND SACRIFICES LEGS IN BRAVE RESCUE OF BRIDE*.

The news item told about a truck coming fast toward a red light, the failure of

its brakes. Walter Teel, aged 47, dog breeder, was crossing that intersection with his bride on his arm. He threw himself hard against her, hurled her out of the path of the screaming truck, and as he slipped down both his legs went under the big wheels. Doctors said injury to both knee joints might prevent his ever walking again.

The *Star* added information about Walter Teel's success with the breeding of Scottish terriers. Teel was a well-known, well-liked citizen of Kansas City. About the bride it only said that she had been married once before, to a Nicholas Panetti—divorced from him in 1935.

I read this again, letting the "Nicholas Panetti" sink in, and then I looked along the wall to a framed marriage certificate issued three years ago in Kansas City. The husband's name, Walter Hamilton Teel—the bride, Thelma Cecilia Orson.

Behind my back, a strong voice said: "Do you think you're playing fair? This room is private."

I hadn't heard his approach. Maybe it had been concealed in the raucous radio from the kitchen. That, or my absorption in what I'd found. Or both.

But now he sat in his chair in the doorway. The black cat purred peacefully in his lap. He had one hand on the rubber tire of the chair, in the other a Smith and Wesson revolver. A .38-.44, the kind of high velocity gun that goes through about everything but a tank.

"It was the cat," he told me with a slow scornful smile.

"The cat?"

"She came out to me. Clever cat. Can push through a swing door. I knew she'd been shut up in the bedroom."

"Oh," I said, and he gestured with the gun, mockingly polite.

"Let's go back by the fire. The drinks are ready. Of course, it won't be the same now. The social aspect has been spoiled."

IN THE PARLOR the coal grate gave off breathless heat. A pair of highballs stood tall and frosted on the coffee table. "Please take one," my host invited coldly, and when I took it I wasn't sure whether it would contain poison or a Mickey Finn. Nor was I sure just which my snooping deserved.

"Drink," he said.

I took a drink and it tasted all right.

He wheeled the chair in close to me as I sat down, operating the tire with just one hand, sparing it briefly from the caresses of the black cat. The Smith and Wesson remained a part of his other hand, as if it had grown there.

"Let me see your purse," he said.

"Purse?"

"The one you think Thelma left in your cab."

I fished it from my pocket, careful not to let him think I might be fishing for anything else, such as a gun. I placed it on the blanket in his lap, beside the cat. He opened it with his left hand. And of course all he found in it was the price tag and the crumpled tissue paper which had been used for padding.

"I'm rapidly learning things," he said acidly. "Thelma wasn't in your cab last night. She didn't lose a purse. You're probably not a cab driver at all. Am I right?"

"Right on all counts but the last one."

"Why did you come here?"

"I'm trying to keep out of jail. The cops, except for a nice guy named Captain Hollister, think I killed somebody last night. I'm trying to hunt me up an alibi—before it's too late."

"What alibi did you expect to find here?"

"Your daughter." I looked down at my shoes. "I mean your *wife*."

When I looked up I caught the wince of agony across his broad lonely features. "It's too bad you learned that. But it's not vital. Thelma likes her freedom and independence. On top of that, Lockwood Aircraft has a policy of hiring only single women. We've had to maintain this pretense, that I'm her father, so she could keep her job."

I nodded first toward the photo on the mantel, then toward the bedroom door. "Has Wild Bill ever gone snooping for cats?"

Teel's eyes narrowed and the gun tensed in his fist. "Don't talk like that! Durand's a square chap. Naturally he assumes I'm Thelma's father. And aside from protecting her job with Lockwood, I'm pleased to have her step out from time to time." He made a pitiful jerk of his

legs under the blanket, and that haunting loneliness was plain to see in his eyes. But he grinned it away. "With a pair of bum underpinnings like this, I'm not much good at the rumba. Thelma's young and full of spirit. I'd be wrong to make her stay home nights—with a cripple."

Then I knew for sure how big a guy he was—and how small was his wife. I had a complete picture of both of them. Even Rembrandt couldn't have dashed off a more vivid pair of portraits.

I said: "Did you know Thelma's been mixed up with her first husband?"

"Nick Panetti?" He spit the name. "That rat! Yes, he's been hanging around here. Lockwood Aircraft would fire her if they knew she'd been married to an ex-convict. She didn't put it on her personnel report. Now she's had to loan him money. I'll kill him if he makes trouble for her."

"You won't have to, Mr. Teel. Panetti is dead."

"Dead?"

I told him about that, how Thelma fitted, and his sigh was bitter.

"That rat! I knew he was getting her into something. Thelma's been so worried she could hardly eat, and a lot of queer people have been coming around here. Of course, Thelma never tells me anything, but I have eyes and ears. I haven't said anything—I don't like to interfere. But now I'm going to act. Thelma's in trouble. I'll get her the best damned lawyer in the state."

I STOOD up, finishing my drink. "Well, if you don't mind, I'll leave now. Have to work tonight."

The gun jumped in his hand. "Sit down! You'll talk to my lawyer before you talk to the cops. All this trouble's my own damned fault. I haven't done right by Thelma."

"If you ask me," I said, "you've been doing too much for her. Can I go now?"

"Sit down!"

He barked it so loud the black cat jumped off his lap and crossed my trail again before it scampered out of the room.

Walter Teel backed his chair around to the davenport, lifted one of the cushions and took out a square manila envelope.

He said: "I saw Thelma hide it here

this morning. A Japanese girl brought it. And now, damn it, I'm going to call a lawyer and see what's in it."

"The seal's broken," I said. "You mean you haven't peeked yet?"

"Peek? Don't be a fool. It hasn't been my business to interfere with Thelma. But if this rat Panetti got her into some kind of trouble, I'll have to act. Who's the best lawyer in Los Angeles?"

There was a desk at the end of the davenport, with a telephone on it, and he started to wheel the chair toward the phone. The gun never wavered from my chest, and I didn't feel tough enough to wrestle it from him. Arm to arm, he could probably take me, even from a chair. But as he rolled past me I had another idea.

I kicked hard at one of the wheels, hard enough to send him in a dizzy spin. I beat the gun from his fist, and it fell to the floor with a thump like a dropped anvil. I had it pointed at him before he could straighten himself up, before the rolling chair had stopped its hectic jerking. Then Teel looked at me with hate in his eyes, but a little admiration.

I said: "O. K., so I'm a heel. First I trick you with a phoney lost handbag, then I peek in your bedroom, then I pump you, then pull a lousy trick with your chair. But I've got as much at stake as your Thelma. I'm not trading in my Red Owl whipcords for a suit of jail denim. And when I talk to a lawyer, it'll have to be mine, not yours. Can you savvy?"

The loss of the gun had robbed him of his belligerent drive to aid Thelma. The loneliness returned to his eyes, and now he was just the stay-at-home cripple who raised dogs while he waited for his wayward wife to come home.

He said: "I understand you. I'm just thinking about Thelma."

"There's going to be gossip. You better think about where she is nights."

"A few wild oats," he told me. "You can't blame her for that. Not when her husband spends his life bronco-busting a chair. I'll give you a hundred dollars for that envelope."

I'd picked it up along with the gun, had it tucked under my arm. I shook my head.

"I'll give you two hundred. That's all I've got—cash. But I can sell my dogs. I

can make it worth your while if you'll just stick here while I get a lawyer."

"Sorry," I said.

I backed to the front door, opened it, while he just sat there in the chair with the robe about his legs. The black cat jumped lithely into his lap. He stroked it. The cat purred, nestling affectionately against him. It had crossed his path so many times it certainly owed him affection.

"Good-bye," I said. "I enjoyed the drink. Don't let Thelma play you for a sucker."

CHAPTER FOUR

Sing a Song of Sabotage

LOCKWOOD AIRCRAFT spread over acres and acres of ground, all of it fenced, even the testing field. The steel mesh rose twenty feet, topped with barbed wire and laced with an alarm system which would clang bells if you so much as leaned against it to watch the planes take off. As a further precaution, armed private police, under Wild Bill Durand, patrolled the fences day and night, and you stood about as much chance of talking yourself through one of the gates as you'd stand dropping into the White House for dinner.

On the main floor of the administration building, a snooty blonde was on duty at the information desk. I told her I wanted to see Mr. Durand on urgent business.

"He's not in the office today. Sorry."

"Then who's in charge of the personnel department?"

"Mr. Slattery is personnel director."

"He'll do," I said.

"Did you have an appointment?"

I told her no, and countered with a request for a large plain envelope. When she gave me this I fished into the big manila envelope I'd brought with me. Inside were fifty cards, about a foot square. I took out only one of them, folded it many times, crammed it into the plain white envelope, sealed it, and handed it back.

"Please send this to Mr. Slattery right away."

She gave me a doubtful glance, but

called for an office boy and he went away with it. In less than five minutes one of the phones rang and the blonde said into it: "Why, yes. Certainly." Then she asked my name and scribbled out a pass. "Mr. Slattery wants to see you at once. I'll call a boy to direct you."

The personnel department occupied the entire second floor of the administration building—a long hallway of doors, all labeled, and at the far end of it a door reading: *Lawrence G. Slattery—Director of Personnel.*

The office boy, in a uniform so fancy it almost made him an Eagle Scout, bowed me into a trim little reception-room where a secretary glanced up brightly from her typewriter. But she didn't have to announce me. The private door behind her back stood open and a voice sang out: "If that's the man who sent up the envelope, send him right in, Della."

Slattery was a big man, pompously bald, with that brusque manner all executives seem to get after they've spent years hiring and firing the lowly workers. He stood up briefly from behind the desk but didn't offer his hand.

"What's your name, please?"

I told him.

"Please close the door."

I closed the door.

"It's a card from our files," he said. "Strictly confidential. How did you come to possess it?"

"I've got forty-nine more of them," I said, glancing toward a fine leather armchair. "Is it all right if I sit down?"

"Of course. Naturally." Then his jaw fell open. "What?"

"Forty-nine," I repeated, and pushed the big manila envelope across his desk.

HE TOOK the cards out, his hands riffling them nervously. He cleared his throat, stared at me for an owlish second, then stared at the cards again.

"Please close the door."

"It's already closed," I reminded him.

"Yes, of course. Good Lord, man, do you know what these are?"

I nodded. "Personal histories of your employees, before and after they came to work. Some of it they volunteered when they took their jobs. Some of it came from the company's private investigating.

Do they gamble or not? Ever been in jail? Do they pay the grocer on time? If they rent a residence, do they stall the landlord? Do they keep blondes, brunettes, redheads, or just wives and children? Where'd he buy that De Soto roadster? Does he hang out in bars when he gets off work? Does he brush his teeth with an up-and-down movement, or cross-ways?"

A wave of Slattery's hand stopped me. "I hope you realize what trouble it could cause if this confidential information fell into the wrong hands."

"Sure," I said. "Some of the employees might be subject to private blackmail. But worse than that, if a spy ring got hold of it they'd know who they could bribe, threaten, or blackmail—to help throw a monkey-wrench of sabotage along your production lines."

He gulped, nodding, and the diamond stick-pin in his necktie gave off bright little glimmers with the bob of the tie over his Adam's apple. "Of course. Something like that happened in our national capital last January. Thousands of records stolen from the files of the Civil Service Commission. Good Lord! You don't suppose it's anything like that?"

"I wouldn't take even money."

"But, good Lord!" Then his eyes became shrewd. "How did *you*—"

He telegraphed his next action like a punch-drunk ring fighter. On top of that he was awkward in his attempt to act quickly. The top desk drawer stuck for an instant when he tried to jerk it open. Then it bumped him in the paunch, and the weight of the gun slid inside. It knocked against the back of the drawer, spoiling his grab for it. And while he fumbled, I bent across the desk and forced the drawer closed until it trapped his wrist.

"Don't be a dunce, Mr. Slattery. I didn't steal them, and I didn't come here to sell them back. If you can reach Bill Durand he'll vouch for me. Or you might call the Red Owl Cab Company—that's where I work. You'll get a good character reference—as long as a guy named Pat Regan isn't on duty. Or you might get in touch with Captain Hollister of the police. I would've taken these cards to him direct—except Durand told me the

plant was making a private sabotage investigation, along with the F.B.I. I thought I ought to come here first."

"Sabotage?" He took away his wrist gratefully when I released my pressure on the drawer. "Does Durand know these cards were stolen?"

"I don't think so. He's just got an idea something's been going on."

Slattery flipped a switch on his dictograph. "Della!" he barked. "When Mr. Durand calls in, tell him to come right out to the plant." He glared at me as he closed the switch, placed both pudgy hands on the desk blotter, and his eyes were those of a soft man trying to be hard. "You haven't told me yet how you got these cards."

WHEN I told him, I didn't know whether he believed it or not. All that made it reasonable was that I'd come here voluntarily with the manila envelope, as soon as I'd gandered the contents.

"The quicker this thing is cleaned up," I said, "the better I like it. I can't spend my days testifying in court actions and my nights driving a hack. Red Owl won't pay me for showing public spirit. And I can't operate a cab in the corridors of the county jail. Or in the yard at San Quentin. You don't seem to get the idea. I've even got a murder charge hanging over me. And a two-dollar ticket for over-parking."

He wasn't listening. He kept fingering the cards, studying them, while outside his office windows the factory vibrated with work. I could see the roofs of the great hangars and workshops, bright and shiny in the rain—and the sound of machine-tools, pounding, ringing, buzzing, never ceased. Planes for the Army and Navy. Planes on order for the British. Hundreds of them in daily production, and dozens of their motors roaring on the test blocks.

Slattery said: "You really think Miss Teel had something to do with this?"

"She works here, doesn't she?"

"Yes, but always a good worker. Seemed reliable in every respect."

"Maybe you've only noticed below her neck. Try looking at her eyes sometime. What do you think of the kind of dame who lets her crippled husband pretend to be her father? Not just to keep her job.

But so she has a chance to play around."

"If it's true love, I don't know why Teel stands for it."

"True love," I said. "You seldom see it nowadays. The poor guy's done everything for her including giving away his legs. Lets her sow oats, while he waits at home for her. Thinks she'll come back to him some day."

"But Miss Teel seemed so nice."

I said: "Does she have a key to your file-rooms?"

"No." He touched the desk drawer again. "I keep the only key myself. Take it home with me nights. But of course I don't do the filing myself. I have to turn the key over to the girls."

"Thelma?"

"Sometimes. And also about six other girls." He said that absently, still fingering the cards. "Each one of these has a red pencil drawn across it. That's strange."

"You never cross them out?"

"No. And each has the figure five dollars penciled in the upper corner. I don't understand that."

"I do," I said. "Whoever swiped the cards is only part of a ring. That person put a five dollar price on each card. That's what was being paid by the ring—and the person, probably Thelma, didn't want anybody to double-cross her by selling them higher. I understand you have over four thousand workers in this plant now. At five bucks a card, it's a sweet racket."

Again he wasn't listening, and again he studied the cards. "Something else is very strange here, Mr. Knight. I don't recognize any of these names. As director of personnel I ought to recognize at least one of them. I'm a pretty good hand at names." He got up from behind the desk, taking a large key from the drawer. "Let's go to the file-room."

THAT turned out to be a huge vault in the basement of the administration building, a vault with a steel door and concrete walls, a part of the very foundation. It seemed a pity that a tramp like Thelma Teel could so easily get around such thoughtful precautions.

The personnel manager opened an index file and looked for the cross-check of names on the cards I'd brought him. He

didn't find them, not one of them. His bald head became flushed in the warm confinement of the vault. His face began to sweat, and the carnation in his lapel lost its charm.

"This is damned strange," he said.

"Not strange. I get it now, Mr. Slattery. Those cards are phonies. Anybody in the personnel department could probably get the blank cards and fill them out in their spare time. Put phoney names and information on them. Don't you get the idea? Some ring's been paying five bucks a card for a bunch of phonies."

He sighed hopefully. "I hope it's true. That means no real facts have leaked out. I can't afford any trouble here. Not my own position, of course, but the moral principles involved. This is a terrific blow to my department."

Checking the index files, of which there were many duplicates in the plant, including the accounting department, Slattery seemed to find everything in order. Then, using the index for a guide, he began to unlock the files containing full personnel records.

He let out an unholy yell. "Good Lord! A bunch missing. We have to keep this quiet, Mr. Knight. We can't breathe a word of this till we talk to Durand. Get a paper and pencil. Quick. I'll read off the missing cards."

Working from the index we went through the files, beginning at *A*. Before we got to *G*, a total of an even hundred cards were missing. Then Slattery pulled out the file marked *G* and all our missing cards, from *A* down, were right there at the front of the file, unassorted, in a bunch.

Slattery gasped. "Now what the devil can you make of that?"

"I can make plenty out of it. As well as selling phonies, somebody with access to the files lifts out a batch of cards, takes them home, copies them. Brings them back the next morning but can't spend enough time in the file-room to assort them all at once. Has to wait a chance to put them back in order, a few at a time. Must be a person who was sure nobody else would study the files in the meantime. Even then it was taking a chance."

"Thelma's done all the filing for the past week," Slattery said. "But it's hard

to believe it about Thelma. Let's go upstairs."

UP IN his office he got a bottle from the drawer, instead of a gun, and we both had a drink. Slattery had two more. His bald head became a sweaty tomato, and he flipped the dictograph switch hard enough to bounce the whole box.

"Della! Where's Durand?"

"He hasn't phoned in yet, Mr. Slattery. As he informed us, he's working on an outside job. He started on it early this morning. Said he might be away for several days."

"Yeah? Well, when he phones in, I want him! Send Miss Teel in here!"

I leaned over the desk, said into the speaker, "Never mind about Miss Teel for the present," closed the switch.

"What's the idea?" Slattery demanded.

"Don't tip her off till you talk to Durand. He's working on something, probably this. Don't spoil his play."

He thought it over, rubbing sweat from his head, having another drink. "I want to talk to that woman. Do you suppose

she's connected with some Jap spy ring?"

I didn't quite fall off my chair. "Why a Jap ring?"

"Well, one night I saw her down in the Japanese Quarter. I go down there with my wife for *sukiyaki* dinners. I saw Thelma coming out of the Little Tokyo Club. Of course, at the time I thought maybe Miss Teel also liked *sukiyaki*. But now—well, I'm ready to think *anything!*"

I got up from my chair. "When did you see her at the Little Tokyo?"

"Last week. Where are you going?"

"Out," I said, "temporarily. You forget I'm a night worker and I still haven't had any sleep. Also, there's a little matter of the death of a guy named Nick Pannetti."

"You'd better remain here, Mr. Knight." He reached for the desk drawer again, and not for the bottle.

"Easy!" I cautioned. "Or I might sing a song of sabotage. I might sing it so loud your whole plant will hear it. I'm on my way, Mr. Slattery. I'll be back this afternoon. Maybe Durand will be here. In the meantime, see that the lovely Miss



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Teel doesn't slip out to the ladies' room and never come back. Keep her busy taking dictation. Till Durand shows up."

He stood up, his full red face a mask of worry. "You'd better wait here, Mr. Knight! I've got my job to think of!"

"Me, too," I said.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Never the Twain . . ."

WHEN I headed for L.A.'s Japanese Quarter, and the Little Tokyo Club, it was with no certain hope that I'd learn anything. Maybe I'd get drunk on *sake*. Lean over the counter and take the bartender into my confidence.

Where could I find my old friend, Nick Panetti? What—he was killed? Holy hell, when did that happen? You don't say? That's too bad.

Well, how is Thelma Teel taking it? She been around here lately?

And how about that other friend of his—the Japanese girl? Midi Fujii.

You can pick up a lot of information that way, if you play it right, and all I planned to do was find the right person to get drunk on.

But I didn't find a living soul.

When I got there, just before noon, the slat blinds along the front of the Little Tokyo Club had been turned tight against the rain-streaked glass and a brass padlock hung on the doors. A sign stuck between the slats and the glass read: *LITTLE TOKYO OPENS AT FOUR P. M.—Daily, including Sunday.*

With the Asiatic war scare; with the United States Fleet often leaving Pearl Harbor for secret maneuvers far at sea; with a pompous little diplomat of the Orient saying: "Japan is the dove of Peace—but the snake of America tries to crawl into the dove's nest"—with all that, there existed high tension across the waters of the Pacific.

And in California, the Japanese colonies stirred with restless problems. Sons and daughters of the second generation stood steadfast by Uncle Sam, ready to fight for him if required—but the fathers of the older generation could not avoid a single unspoken demand from home, a demand of loyalty to the Land of the Rising Sun.

That tension, that unexpressed battle between the families of two generations, hung like a dark cloud of gloom over L.A.'s Japanese Quarter. I felt it in the rain. And I felt it seeping, seething behind the drawn blinds of the Little Tokyo.

A single-story building of stucco, painted red and white in gaudy stripes, the Club fronted on a street of *sukiyaki* dinners, art shops with delicate floral displays, small movie theaters offering a combination of the latest Hollywood productions and the latest importations from Japan, both on the same program.

Beside the Club, a paved alley led back to a parking lot for patrons, and when I walked along this, past painted windows, the kitchen service door was padlocked, like the front.

Still farther back, the parking lot sprawled empty and puddled in the rain. There was a two-car garage at the end of it, probably for the boss. Its door had been slid closed, and I'd just turned to go back when my ears picked up the gentle weary purr of an idling motor. It seemed to come from the closed garage.

I went over there, and the sound was a little louder, but still muffled behind wood. The doors weren't locked. I slid them back, and the deadly fumes of carbon monoxide gave me a sudden dizzy head and made me reel.

I stood away from it for awhile, to let the garage air out. Then I went inside past the stern of a pale blue Cadillac sedan, newest model, and I found the front door of it open and the body of a man who had fallen out from under the driver's wheel.

I might've seen him before. Just briefly, talking to Jed Fuller in the lobby of the Hotel Oceanview. I thought I recognized the swanky suit, the carnation in his lapel—now wilted—the camel's hair topcoat neatly folded on the rear seat.

THEY call it the yellow race but really his face was brown, with lips parted, teeth showing, as if to take a bite out of the greasy garage floor before he died. His tongue, thick, blue, swollen, filled his mouth like a gag.

I stepped over him and peered inside the Cadillac, looking at the registration on the steering post. It belonged to K. Yamashiro, 14-44 Cherry Blossom Lane,

Los Angeles. That was the address of the Little Tokyo Club. And a guy named Yamashiro was its proprietor. He'd been arrested once for running dice games in the cellar.

I went through his pockets and found a wallet. Over seven thousand dollars in it, in large currency. That was much more than even a club owner ought to carry around with him. Particularly a club owner suffering from loss of trade in the Pacific tension. I stowed wallet and money back into his pocket, feeling proud in my absence of temptation.

He had a German Luger gripped in his hand. When I got down to my knees to sniff it, I thought it had been fired. Maybe he'd changed his mind at the last minute. Suicide by carbon monoxide seemed too tough. He tried to polish himself off with the Luger. Too weak. Fell out of the car on his head.

That was very possible. A blow to his head had knocked his hat halfway across the garage, and his hair was matted with dry sticky blood.

Covering fingers with a handkerchief, I reached into the car to shut the motor off. The gasoline gauge quivered at *Empty*. Then, as I turned away, I saw the imprint of a bloody hand on the wall of the garage.

That made everything different. A hell of a lot different. It made me a picture of somebody waiting hidden in the garage for Yamashiro to come out. Some Dizzy Dean with a pitching arm that could cave in a skull, like the arm that had wielded the pipe on Nick Panetti.

The Jap, taken by surprise, still managed to get his rod out between blows. He fired once, maybe twice. That depended on how many shells he'd stocked in the Luger. And I found two ejected casings flung into the corner of the garage by the action of the recoil.

All right, so it was two. And Dizzy Dean took one of them, or maybe both. Arm, wrist, or hand. The blood came quickly, the impact staggered him back, and he planted a hand against the wall without even remembering it. The wrist, of course. That's why the blood had come quick.

Dizzy Dean couldn't have been hurt too badly, or he wouldn't have taken time to

fix this up like a suicide. He'd started the motor of the car, maybe slugging the Jap to make him stay. He was sure of everything. The fired shots would only look like a last futile attempt to end things quickly. The crushed skull would just be the Jap falling out of the car as he died of carbon monoxide. Everything was covered, nothing forgotten—except a handprint on the wall.

I **CROSSED** the paved lot again, heading back to the alley, and as I passed a rear row of office windows I saw that one of them had been broken and patched with sheets of newspaper, to keep the rain out.

I went over and looked at this. The sheets of *Examiner*, morning edition, were dated Friday. That was yesterday. That was the morning after I'd been robbed in San Fernando by a lug named Nick Panetti.

I punched away the soggy paper, released the latch, and climbed through the broken window into a small cheap office. I didn't count on finding anything, of course, because somebody'd broken in before, and if there'd been anything of value left to take, then certainly Mr. K. Yamashiro would've repaired his window more carefully.

The office had been furnished for efficiency rather than beauty. A battered desk, a swivel, a coat-tree, a water cooler. No carpet on the floor, no drapes at the windows—just tattered shades. There was a filing cabinet full of account books concerning the business of the Little Tokyo Club. And a squat, old-fashioned steel safe which didn't need a combination—you could force it with a firecracker, a nail file, or a rusty beer opener. Mr. K. Yamashiro had gone to great lengths to show that he operated his business strictly on the up-and-up. Even the telephone on the desk looked like Bell's first faltering experiment.

I rolled up the shades and let more gray daylight filter into the room. There was one door, unlocked, and when I opened it I saw only the darkness of the Club's main room. A long bar with liquor cabinets. An orchestra platform with stacked chairs and covered piano. Elsewhere, a dance floor surrounded by paper cherry

blossoms, and bare tables, each supporting four stacked chairs. There was the smell of last night's smoking, last night's drinking, last night's food—cold, cheerless, dark—with its tawdry memory of yesterday and its tawdry promise of tonight.

I closed the door, shutting out the dreary sight of it, and once again I was alone in the monastic office of the late K. Yamashiro. A man who carried seven grand in his pocket ought to have better hiding places in his office than unlocked, creaking files, and a safe you could open with a tooth-pick. With that in mind, I looked around the walls, then at the floor.

I moved one of the filing cases, and the splintered floor planks gave proof enough that somebody else had had the same idea ahead of me. There'd been a trap cleverly concealed under the filing case, but somebody who didn't know the combination had busted it open with a chisel. I pulled the broken boards aside, lit a match, and peered into a small steel box. Its cover had been forced. It was just about big enough to hold an armload of private papers, all strictly secret. And it was strictly empty except for a wire paper clip, dust, and a pair of rubber bands.

I went over to the desk, seated myself at the swivel, reached for Bell's original experiment. At the same moment a buzzer made harsh sound through the empty club. It wasn't the phone. It came from the direction of the kitchens.

I TOOK my hands away from the phone and didn't sit back in the swivel, because it might squeak. The buzzer blared three times, impatiently, while I eased Walter Teel's Smith & Wesson from under my belt.

Distantly, out in the kitchen I heard the padlock rattle, the metallic howl of rusty hinges, then light quick footsteps coming along through the club. A woman in high spiked heels. Calling out in Japanese.

I gave a simple gruff cough by way of reply. After all I couldn't speak Japanese, but a cough is the same in any language. She swung the office door open, saying, "Yamashiro—san—" and then stood still and stared at the big gun I held pointed at her across the desk.

"You—who are you, sir?"

I recognized her at once. It was "Yours

Very Truly, Midi Fujii," the girl of the photographs in Nick Panetti's hotel-room, the girl who'd come to call on him at the Oceanview, with a brown manila envelope, just a few hours before his death.

I said: "Come in, Miss Fujii."

"You know me? Where is Keeto?"

"Keeto?"

"Mr. Yamashiro. I thought he might be here. His car is not at home," she explained carefully.

"It's here, Miss Fujii. In the garage. So is Keeto. He's dead."

Her fingers worried with the clasp of her suede handbag, and I gestured for her to place it on the desk. She obeyed—but reluctantly, her dark almond eyes first slyly smiling, then full of hate.

I removed a small revolver from her handbag, had her turn toward the wall, my own heavy gun prodding the small of her back. She wore a long fur coat and I examined it carefully. She wore a long dress under that, of silk brocade, and when I ran a hand down it I found a slim knife sheathed under the dress, tucked into the garter of her stocking.

"Sorry," I said. "And I know you understand this is strictly business. Now I have to make a phone call. I'll try not to keep you waiting too long."

I called headquarters out in Pacific Park, got Captain Hollister on the line. "This is your favorite headache," I said. "Remember? You can do yourself a big favor if you check with L.A. and see if they got a report of robbery in the Little Tokyo Club, either late Thursday night or early Friday morning."

"That's about the time you got knocked over out in San Fernando by Nick Panetti. That right, Steve?"

I told him it was even righter than he imagined, and his voice left the line for several minutes. Then he said: "No robberies reported, Steve. And that's where you are now—I had your call traced. Shall I come down there?"

"No, just send some radio boys to look at a body in the garage. You'll do yourself another big favor if you go right over to Lockwood Aircraft and wait for me in Lawrence Slattery's office. He's the personnel manager. I've got a surprise for you, Captain. And I've also got a few for Mr. Slattery."

CHAPTER SIX

Flight without Wings

THEY were waiting for me in Slattery's office, the Captain, Thelma Teel, Wild Bill Durand, and the manager himself. I caused quite a sensation when I arrived there with the butt of a gun sticking from my pocket, and my left hand guiding the fur-coated elbow of an aloofly beautiful Japanese.

Hollister said: "Hell, Steve! That's the little lady Jed Fuller identified from the pictures in Nick Panetti's hotel-room!"

I bowed gallantly. "Allow me to present Miss Midi Fujii. She's safe enough as long as she doesn't carry a Mauser in her handbag and a stiletto in her garter. Please make yourself at home, Miss Fujii."

Thelma Teel's face turned scarlet, then paled as the Japanese girl passed in front of her, without a sign of recognition, and seated herself gracefully on the edge of a chair.

I said: "The death of K. Yamashiro has made a big impression on Miss Fujii. Yamashiro operated the Little Tokyo Club in the open, but behind it he operated a sabotage ring for the Land of the Rising Sun. Miss Fujii was his stooge. She's willing to talk herself into a softer rap. Because she didn't kill Nick Panetti, and neither did K. Yamashiro. And neither did I. Or do you still think so, Captain?"

Hollister frowned. "I turned you loose, didn't I? Now let's get this straight. Slattery's been talking my ear off about somebody stealing cards from his personnel files. He thinks it's Thelma Teel. But Durand says he's been running a private investigation, and that Thelma's been framed somehow."

"Baloney," I said. "Durand's just trying to cover her. Thelma wasn't framed into this swiping of personnel records—she was *blackmailed* into it. Did you know Nick Panetti had a prison record?"

Hollister nodded. "Checked his prints at the morgue. He did time at Deer Lodge and then behaved himself through parole. Came to California riding a clean slate."

"But broke," I added. "Did you know he used to be married to Thelma?"

Lawrence Slattery wiped a silk handkerchief across his damp bald head. "Married? Thelma's personnel report doesn't claim any marriage."

I said: "Why would she admit it? But Nick Panetti was her husband once, and when he came out here from Montana he was broke and touched her for money. She had to pay, because it would cost her her job with Lockwood if he turned up as the un-recorded ex-husband from Deer Lodge.

"He spent her money getting drunk in bars. And down at the Little Tokyo Club he found himself a beautiful Oriental girl. That cost money, and he had to hit Thelma harder. He told Miss Fujii about Thelma, Miss Fujii repeated it to Yamashiro, and the proprietor of the Little Tokyo saw a swell chance to punch a leak into Lockwood Aircraft. They offered Nick five bucks apiece, good or bad, for the information on the personnel cards in the Lockwood plant. And Nick Panetti fell for it, so he could buy Miss Fujii a few fur coats."

Nobody in the room said a word, but Hollister waved a restless hand at me. "You got this as a fact, Steve? Or from a crystal ball?"

"I worked like hell for it," I assured him. "Nick Panetti had Thelma over a barrel. Not only the fact that he used to be her husband, but that she had a new husband now, a cripple named Walter Teel. And that fact, also, had been conveniently concealed from Lockwood Aircraft."

WILD BILL DURAND stood against the window with both hands dug deep in his coat pockets. He hadn't moved since I entered the office. Now he said: "You've got this bass-ackwards, Steve. Walter Teel is her father, not her husband."

"Yeah? You'd better sit down, Bill—you've got a blow coming. Hollister will check it now, and Thelma's stuck with it. Ask her."

Durand glanced across the office at Thelma, with a loyal smile. "Shall I kick his teeth in, Thelma?"

Her body shook, cheeks flushing, but she had no reply.

"She told Walter Teel," I said, "that he

had to play the father-act so she could retain her job with Lockwood. Really it was because she couldn't do the rumba with a man in a wheel-chair. Teel's the kind of patient, trusting, loving sucker who'd let her do it, hoping she'd come back to him some day. In the meantime she spent her nights kicking up heels with a handsome, battle-scarred aviator—"

Durand's face had such tenseness in it that the burn-scars of his jaw drew to wrinkled whiteness. "This is crazy!" He was watching Thelma. "I'll rip this liar apart. He says we've been two-timing a swell guy with crippled legs."

"Better sit down, Bill," I suggested.

"Thelma!" He'd caught the lack of response in her, the admission of guilt. "Thelma! You hear what he says?"

Thelma didn't say anything, still staring at her hands, and Durand's face was first incredulous, then full of agony and revulsion. His hard mouth curled, as if touched by the taste of arsenic.

"You tramp!" he said. "You lousy, dirty, two-dollar tramp!"

The office had no sound but the distant drone of the factory at work, and Slattery's irregular breathing, until Hollister said quietly: "You seem to have dropped a bomb in here, Steve. With a silencer on it."

"Get ready for some more of them," I said. "While Thelma was forced into this stealing of cards, Bill Durand got next to it. I'll give him the benefit of one doubt—I don't think he worked to cover the sabotage racket. I think he just worked to cover Thelma."

No part of Durand moved, except his eyes. They went to each person in the room, but remained principally on Thelma.

Slattery broke the silence. "You can't know what you're saying! Do you mean Bill Durand—"

"That's exactly what I mean. He got next to Thelma, but instead of exposing her he covered her. It's wonderful how she can get men to jump through hoops for her. A husband who first gives his legs, then pretends to be her father. And a lover who'll even risk the disgrace of a federal pen. Of course Bill will claim his aid to Thelma was only a shrewd angle to work information from her. He'll claim

he wanted the big fish in the sabotage ring, not just the minnows. It'll take Chadwick and Carnes, with their rubber hoses, to work the truth out of him."

Durand shook his head. "I don't think it'll be hard."

Slattery banged a fist on the desk. "What? Do you mean to say—"

"Shall I tell about Nick Panetti, Bill?"

He gave no sign at all, not even a shrug, but Captain Hollister had gotten up and blocked the door with his lean tough body. "Tell it, Steve."

I SAID: "The way it goes, Durand advised Thelma to put a stop to card stealing. She was afraid the Jap ring would kill her if she stopped—so was Nick Panetti. Durand compromised by telling Thelma to make the rest of the cards phonies. So Thelma fixed up a batch of a hundred. Then, on Thursday night, Bill Durand went down to the Little Tokyo Club and waited his chance to raid Yamashiro's office. He found where Yamashiro had hidden the last batch of cards, and he stole them back, substituting the phoney ones. Yamashiro wasn't supposed to notice the difference. Yamashiro was supposed to believe somebody had merely raided his office to find money—and didn't bother with the cards. Bill *did* have a shade of loyalty to Lockwood.

"But Yamashiro was shrewder than they figured. He knew he'd been double-crossed, and he sent Miss Fujii out with two manila envelopes containing the phoney cards. He'd drawn lines through them to show he was wise. He sent one batch to Nick Panetti, one batch to Thelma. Like a gangster giving you a penny to notify you that you either make good in a hurry or get rubbed out."

Slattery said: "What did Durand do with the cards he stole back?"

"You ought to know that. He and Thelma returned the real ones. That's the batch you found misplaced in the files. An even hundred. Remember?"

All this left Captain Hollister behind an eight ball of bewilderment. "So the Jap ring killed Panetti?"

"No, but Panetti felt damned sure they would. He hadn't busted into Yamashiro's office, like Yamashiro thought he had. At the time of the office robbery Nick Panetti

had been picking up a little extra fur-coat money by roughing up a cab driver out in San Fernando. That was his alibi. But the only way he could prove it to Yamashiro was to plead guilty to the taxi robbery. In other words, Nick decided to take a jail sentence in order to save himself from the revenge-guns of Yamashiro. He fixed it with Thelma. She looked me up and steered me to Nick. But somebody had already gotten to Nick." I nodded to Hollister. "You've got a shoe in your office. Try it on Bill."

Durand took a cigarette from his pocket, rolled it in dry lips. "Don't bother, Captain. It fits."

I'd known the blow of Thelma's "father" being really her husband would knock Bill for a loop, but I hadn't realized it would make him throw in the sponge.

Thelma glanced up sharply from her hands. "You, Bill?"

He said: "Shut up, tramp!"

"Durand killed Panetti," I went on, "because a guy like that might forever make trouble for Thelma. He searched the hotel-room, got back the phoney cards Miss Fujii had left. He made sure the police would find no tie-up between Nick and sabotage, because a sabotage investigation might go back to the plant and nail Thelma. And himself. So he cleaned the room. All he missed was a couple of pictures of Miss Fujii. He didn't have time for everything. Not with *me* knocking on the door so soon.

"He got to worrying afterwards that maybe the police had traced his shoe, or found something else in the room. So he arranged to talk to Jed Fuller, the hotel clerk, and pump him. Then he picked *me* up outside headquarters and gave me the same pumping. To cover himself, he told a yarn about Nick Panetti trying to get a job at the plant. All confidential, he claimed. He even had me drive him downtown to the Federal Building to impress me that the F.B.I. was working with him. But anybody can walk into the Federal Building and walk out again. It doesn't mean you're working for the F.B.I. But it makes a swell excuse for telling a hotel clerk and a cab driver that they should keep their mouths shut and not interfere with Uncle Sam."

"About that killing down at the Little

Tokyo Club," Hollister queried. "Who was that?"

"Yamashiro. And if you want the guy who killed him just ask Bill Durand to take his left hand from his pocket. Bill has a Luger wound in his wrist. That's why he's been playing hookey all day from Lockwood Aircraft. Digging up a quack doctor to patch it without a report.

"You see, when he learned from both me and Jed Fuller that the cops had a clue to Mide Fujii he knew he'd have to put an end to the spy ring before a real investigation picked up the Japs. Because if they squealed it would involve both Thelma and himself. He got Yamashiro, but I guess Slattery had ordered him back to the plant for this interview before he located Miss Fujii.

"You've got to hand Bill one thing. He did a nice single-handed job of breaking up the Yamashiro sabotage racket. Even if it *was* only for Thelma's sake."

OUTSIDE the window, the rain had stopped and a single white shaft of sunlight cut across the flying field. Durand gazed out at it for a time, as if trying to see up the sunlight to the sky beyond. He said quietly: "You've got a bottle in your desk, Mr. Slattery. I'd like a drink."

Slattery waited for Hollister to say something. The captain nodded, and Slattery pulled open the top drawer. In a flash, then, Wild Bill Durand came alive. He jumped over to the desk, knocked Slattery spinning in the swivel, and his right fist came from the top desk drawer with Slattery's revolver.

"Step away from that door, Captain!"

Hollister had been caught flat-footed, fumbling the lapel of his coat, where he kept his service gun. He moved obediently away from the door, but nothing about him revealed defeat.

"You won't get far," he said.

"I'll get far enough, Captain."

His revolver covered everybody in the room, and his left hand, bandaged at the wrist, held Slattery's whiskey bottle. He took two long drinks from this, but only swallowed the first one. The second mouthful showered Thelma's face as he edged past her.

"It's a lousy way to waste good liquor," he said.

As soon as the door closed, and the lock turned, Hollister jumped across the room to the desk and snatched up the phone. He hammered the prong.

"Gimme the front desk! Hello? This is Hollister. Police. Two detectives down there, Chadwick and Carnes. Tell 'em nobody leaves this plant. Close every gate!"

Then, while Slattery called the office of the plant's private police, Hollister tried to batter the door down. He was making heavy weather of it when Della unlocked it from the other side.

We ran down the inside steps and out into a lane of hangars and workshops. A mechanic came toward us. He yelled: "Hey, we had that new B-8 Bomber tuned up at the end of the field with the props turning! Bill Durand just shoved a gun at us and took off! What the hell's going on here?"

"How much fuel?" Slattery demanded.

"Practically none. A hundred miles."

"Then he won't get far. Call every airport in Southern California. Durand stole one of our B-8 Bombers. Arrest him when he lands! Get it?"

On the roof of the administration building, there was a glassed radio tower to direct the take-offs and landings of planes. Slattery raced up the stairway, Hollister and I running a tie for place-money.

But the man on duty in the tower had already received orders. He was speaking rapidly into a microphone on his desk.

"Hello—B-8 bomber! This is Lockwood calling Wild Bill Durand in plane Seven Forty-nine. You're not authorized to take that plane up, Bill."

We could hear the heavy roar of the motor, and from the windows we saw the great sleek plane clearing the hangars at the far end of the field, climbing, droning, banking to the west.

Slattery said: "He won't get far. It's not just the fuel. He cracked up a year ago and hasn't touched a plane since. Scared of them. Lost his nerve."

"But he's got it back now," I said.

THE plane circled up through bulging clouds, climbing higher and higher, until it dipped out of our sight, and even the sound of its motors no longer came to us in the tower.

The radio man kept saying: "Lockwood calling Bill Durand in B-8 Bomber. Come in, Bill."

And then we heard the voice of the flyer in the clouds.

". . . Hello, Lockwood. This is Bill Durand, plane Seven Forty-nine. So I'm even afraid to ride an elevator, huh, boys? Well, how'm I doin'?"

"You're short on fuel, Bill. Look at your gauges."

A ghostly laugh filled the tower. "Short? I got plenty for what I need. I'm just turning an altitude of five thousand, and I'm nosing her down. Got a message for the Old Man. Tell Lockwood I've advised him for weeks this damned crate would strip its wings in a power dive on open throttle. And tell all the boys in the Army, the Navy, and the R.A.F., that a guy named Durand saved them from a flight without wings . . ."

His laughter haunted us through the speaker system. "You hear me down there? Clear the north end of the field, and look out for a big splash!"

And suddenly the windows began to rattle, while the sky above was shattered to bits with the roar of open-throttled motors. We peered anxiously into the sky, while his distant voice kept coming to us from the diving plane. We heard it continuously, to the last.

"Hey, is Slattery listening? Thanks for the bottle of hooch! Nothing like a little Dutch courage at a time like this . . . Here we go . . . I'm reviving . . . The right wing has a wiggle . . . I told you, didn't I? . . . There she goes . . . In a spin . . . You tell the Old Man he's screwy . . . The other wing . . . Clear the north end of the field . . . Look out, you lugs . . . This damned fall . . . No breath . . . *And to hell with Thelma Teel!*"

The sound of the crash, ripping the earth apart, the sight of it exploding like a bomb of fire at the north end of Lockwood's testing field, would be with me for the rest of my life. I'd hear it and see it, day and night. It would wake me from vivid dreams with the shock of its reality.

But I didn't dream of crashes that night. I dreamt about a lonely tired man who lived a life in a wheel-chair and waited for his wayward wife to come home.



Follow Connor O' Melveny, the most predatory private peep who ever hired out to both sides in a divorce case. Watch him wriggle when Tony the Wop and his slippery pack of hoods put the screws on him. Then observe the cherubic and jaunty "Mephisto" emerge as a moralist on the mal de marriage of middle-aged monotony, otherwise known as



It was the man's identity that pricked O'Melveny's scalp.

FORTY PAINS

by
Cleve F. Adams

CHAPTER ONE

A Shifty Shamus

O'MELVENY watched the lady in the mink coat, and the lady in the mink coat watched the third race at Santa Anita. Elsewhere in Los Angeles or its environs Miss Desirée Dugan,

who by an unfortunate circumstance had become O'Melveny's partner instead of just his secretary, was keeping an eye on the lady's husband. Both the lady and her husband wanted a divorce, though each was unaware that the other had employed the O'Melveny agency. Even Desirée Dugan was unaware of it. O'Melveny hoped to keep her in this state, for

Dee Dugan was a victim of ethics, and regarded playing both ends against the middle as strictly outside the pale. O'Melveny himself was uninhibited.

He was looking rather well today, he thought. His fawn gray suit was a triumph of the tailor's art, though not exactly a triumph for the tailor. It wasn't paid for. Neither was the fawn gray Homburg which O'Melveny wore with the air of the true boulevardier. The cane was his own, however, and as though this fact pleased him he twirled it now and again, a rotund, rubicund gentleman about town, but recently parted from his club window for the more exhilarating atmosphere of Santa Anita. The madding throng about him acted as a disguise, like the Homburg which concealed the pink baldness of his scalp, and the pansy beds were bursting with bloom in the infield, and all in all it was a lovely day.

Arabella romped home, a winner by two lengths. The roar of the crowd was like the booming of surf in a cave, and an avalanche of torn-up tickets proved how wrong a race crowd can be. The lady in the mink coat made her unhurried way to the nearest five-dollar window where she proceeded to cash seven ducats for a truly staggering sum. O'Melveny decided he would have Desirée Dugan ask for a more substantial retainer. He followed the lady to a bar and had a quick one while she dawdled over a Collins. He was not too surprised when presently she was joined by a handsome young gent in camel's hair sport coat, flannel trousers and a rather remarkable polka-dotted scarf. According to the lady's husband she was addicted to handsome young gents.

The young man clasped the lady's hands. "Myrna!" he said happily. Her name was Myrna Bogardus. Her husband was the Bogardus of Bog-Vent, the Venetian blind which covered the world's windows.

The thing that surprised O'Melveny was that Mrs. Bogardus practically emptied her purse and gave all that money to the young man in the camel's hair sport coat. She did not seem nearly as happy about this as he did. She looked, in fact, a little pale around the gills, and

after the young man had turned away she drained her glass thirstily. O'Melveny decided that the young man might be more interesting than Myrna Bogardus. He followed the young man.

This simple device brought him presently to the rail guarding the row of boxes in the lower tier of the grandstand, and more particularly to Number 7. In this box were three men, and the entrance of the young man in the polka-dot scarf made four. O'Melveny retired to the comparative obscurity of a stair exit. For one thing he knew two of the men and they knew him.

One was Dr. Max Schlesinger, a physician who was continually in danger of losing his license, but who had so far managed to outwit the authorities. His practice was confined to the carriage trade. The second man was Tony (the Wop) Maggi. Tony was by way of being the Arnold Rothstein of his time and geographical position. When there were gambling casinos south of the border Tony had controlled them; when there were gambling boats off the California coast Tony had controlled those too. It was rumored that even though both of these sources of revenue had been closed to him, he still managed to make a more or less honest living in the fields of chance. Maggi, it was said, knew the right people. He was a large man, olive-skinned, slow of movement. Beside him the red-headed Dr. Schlesinger looked like a greyhound beside a Percheron. The third man was tall and sleek and dark and had a capacity for utter stillness that was phenomenal. None of the three paid the slightest bit of attention to the blond boy in the polka-dot scarf. They and he, were apparently engrossed in the start of the fourth race.

O'MELVENY, pondering the connection between any or all of these four men and the plump but luscious Mrs. Myrna Bogardus, descended the stairs, intending to become once more that lady's shadow. He could not find her. This did not, of course, prove that she wasn't still around. Santa Anita thinks nothing of a hundred thousand paid admissions, and a race crowd is continually in motion. After a time O'Melveny quit

looking and took up his position near the five-dollar window the lady had patronized before. The blond boy in the camel's hair coat and polka-dot scarf might have left her enough money to lay another bet or two, and it was within the realm of possibility that she might again win. She certainly had picked Arabella out of a field of much better horses. O'Melveny's agile mind worried that fact in relation to Tony the Wop Maggi. Offhand, it looked like the lady was getting her information straight from the feed box, or at least from the inner shrine. Not that it seemed to be doing her much good. Even if she won, somebody came and took the dough away from her. O'Melveny wondered if that could be construed as grounds for divorce.

He was still thinking about that when he felt a hand on his arm. He did not jump. Quite casually, and with a blue eye as naive and innocent as a babe's, he turned and regarded Detective-lieutenant Bernard Blackburn. "Oh hello, Lieutenant."

Blackburn was a hatchet-faced man in his late forties, nagged by acid indigestion and the knowledge that younger men had gone farther. He did not like Connor O'Melveny very well. "What are you doing out here?"

O'Melveny hooked his cane over his arm so that he could spread his plump pink hands in an all-inclusive gesture. "What does anyone do at Santa Anita?"

Blackburn's mouth dropped. "You never bet on a horse in your life!"

"True," O'Melveny admitted. He sighed. "It's the spirit of the race, Lieutenant. The perfectly co-ordinated animal pitted against another perfectly co-ordinated animal." He lifted his eyes piously. "Money is not everything, you know."

Blackburn looked at him. "Coming from you, shamus, that's pretty funny." Sharp eyes considered the mob coming in from the promenade to form long queues before the pay-off windows. "I see your gal friend Dugan is out here too."

O'Melveny was startled. "Where?"

Blackburn pointed. There was no doubt that Miss Desirée Dugan was among those present. She was really

quite lovely though at the moment a trifle distraught. From long experience O'Melveny concluded that she had lost her subject. She had that sort of look.

Blackburn deduced the same thing. "Who's she tailing?"

"Nobody," O'Melveny said rather too hurriedly. In the first place he was somewhat surprised to find that John Bogardus had also chosen this afternoon to attend the races. In the second place he had practically admitted just now that Dee Dugan was not with him, O'Melveny. And in the third place he didn't want Dee Dugan to discover that the reason he himself was there was to cover Mrs. Bogardus. He excused himself. "Pardon me, I see a friend."

Precisely at this moment there occurred one of those unforeseen *contretemps* which can only be labeled as unfortunate. There was a shot unmistakable in spite of the crowd noise, and then there were two more shots very close together. Over by one of the ladies' rest-rooms a woman began screaming bloody murder.

Blackburn clutched O'Melveny's arm firmly. "Come on!"

O'Melveny did not want to come on. Something told him that no matter what else happened he was bound to run into Dee Dugan. Desirée was the kind of girl to whom shots were like a three-alarm fire. On the other hand, he himself could have no possible connection with the shots, either lethal or otherwise, and consequently had nothing to fear from Lieutenant Blackburn. However, if he tried to shake himself free and make a run for it, the lieutenant was bound to get ideas. O'Melveny bowed his head. "Very well, if you insist."

They pushed through the mob now assembled about the rest-room doors. The woman was still screaming bloody murder, and some of her sisters had taken up the refrain. Blackburn had to assert his authority. O'Melveny's eyes dilated with a kind of horror as they followed the pointing fingers of a dozen bystanders. There was a man lying on the concrete pavement and there was no doubt that it was he who had been shot. Blood welled from him in at least three places. But it was not the mere sight of a dead man

that prickled O'Melveny's scalp. It was the man's identity. He was the blond young man who had so recently relieved Myrna Bogardus of all that money. The one with the camel's hair coat and polka-dot scarf.

DEE said: "You fat slob!" She did not say this lovingly either, as she sometimes did. As a matter of fact, Dee did not look at all like the kind of girl who would call anybody a fat slob. She looked, indeed, like a demure and decent sort of girl, not to mention beautiful, and O'Melveny had hired her, believing that she would lend tone to his office. It just went to show how deceitful appearances could be. In no time at all she had taken advantage of a momentary embarrassment and wormed herself into a quarter interest in the business in lieu of the salary which O'Melveny couldn't pay her. She was, in a word, an opportunist. She took this opportunity to repeat her previous unladylike phrase. "You fat slob!"

O'Melveny was deeply offended. He was cut to the quick. "After all," he said, "who is better entitled to an afternoon off than I?"

"Connor O'Melveny," Dee said sternly, "any afternoons you take off are not spent at a race track. You don't even know how many legs a horse has." She peered at him from beneath a chic little hat that seemed in danger of obscuring her eye entirely. "You are up to something. I can tell."

O'Melveny denied this vehemently. He regarded her more in sorrow than in anger. "That I should live to see the day." He shook his head. "After all I've taught you, too. You lost your subject."

Miss Dugan had the grace to flush a little at that. "Well—"

"You see?" O'Melveny said complacently. "You are like an open book to me. Merely because you yourself are in error you try to find the mote in another's eye. Mine, to be exact." He permitted himself a sad but cherubic smile. "Well, there aren't any."

At this moment Lieutenant Bernard Blackburn let out a terrific yelp. "Where's that guy O'Melveny?"

The corpse still lay where it had fallen,

and Blackburn and a doctor and a couple of county cops had been huddled over it. Half a dozen track policemen had pushed the crowd back, but unfortunately O'Melveny had been penned within the human fence. He could not get away. The same was true of Miss Desirée Dugan, though Dee probably saw no reason to get away. Neither, for a moment, did O'Melveny. "Right here, Lieutenant." He twirled his cane with affected nonchalance. "Something I can do for you?"

Blackburn stood up. The expression on his face was not pleasant. "So you don't know the guy, eh?"

"Certainly not," O'Melveny said.

Blackburn pounced. "Then how do you explain this?" Like a rabbit from a hat he produced his right hand from behind him. Between the thumb and forefinger there was a card. O'Melveny was suddenly quite ill. The card was one of his own. "I had a hunch!" Blackburn yelled. "I had a hunch when I grabbed you!"

O'Melveny assumed an air of righteous indignation. "A hunch about what? If you remember, you were actually holding my arm when the shots were fired." He appealed to all within earshot. "I think that rather absolves me of any part in the affair."

"Like hell it does," Blackburn said. "What about this card?"

"Cards!" O'Melveny said with a fine disregard of the circumstances. "I have them printed by the thousand."

Blackburn lifted the card to his nose. "Perfume, by God!" He stared resentfully down at the corpse. "He hardly looks like one of those guys."

Desirée snatched the card and sniffed at it. "Hmmm!" O'Melveny could feel her eyes on him, speculatively. He wondered uncomfortably if she recognized the scent as that worn by Myrna Bogardus. It had just come to him that Myrna, in giving the money to the young man, might accidentally have given him the card also. The perfume was from the lady's purse.

Blackburn almost yanked Dee off her feet, getting the card back. "Hey, you!" And then, with a carefully restrained manner: "Recognize the smell, baby?"

Dee shook her head. "No."

She's lying, O'Melveny thought. She does too recognize it. He wondered if she were fooling Blackburn. He also wondered what had happened to the money the young man had been carrying. Blackburn hadn't turned it up. Beside the body there was a little heap of personal property, taken from the young man's pockets, but aside from some loose change there was no money.

Blackburn thrust out his chin. "I'm not accusing you of killing the guy. Not yet, anyway. I want to know who he is."

O'Melveny shrugged. "Sorry, Lieutenant."

AT THIS moment a quiet voice spoke from the crowd. "I know who the man is, Blackburn." Everybody turned. The voice belonged to Tony the Wop Maggi. They cleared a little path for him and he came and stood beside the dead man. His olive-skinned face was impassive. "His name is Raoul Dixon. One of my boys."

Blackburn was startled. "The hell you say!"

"Yes," Maggi said. For just an instant his inscrutable eyes encompassed O'Melveny and Dee. O'Melveny shivered. He didn't want any part of the Wop. Pretending an unconcern he did not feel he looked around for the other men who had been in Maggi's box. Neither Dr. Max Schlesinger nor the dark and quiet man were in evidence. He wished Dee would quit staring at him like that.

Blackburn had partially recovered from his astonishment. He looked at Maggi. "Any ideas?"

"No," Maggi said. He was not exactly a talkative man.

O'Melveny cleared his throat. "Well, if you have no further use for me—" He settled his hat, preparatory to departure, and took Dee's arm.

A sort of low cunning was reflected in Blackburn's narrowed eyes. "All right, shamus, you can go" He pretended to go into conference with the county cops.

O'Melveny and Dee thrust their way through the crowd. The fifth race was just being announced. No matter who won it, Myrna Bogardus was not going

to pay off to the young man in the camel's hair coat and the polka-dot scarf. Not any more, she wasn't. O'Melveny wondered idly why she hadn't killed the young man *before* she gave him the money. It would have been so much simpler.

Dee's voice was deceptively sweet. "Buy me a drink, Connor?"

"Well—" Sighing, he permitted himself to be led to the nearest bar. It was the long one under the grandstand, and there was quite a crowd. Dee waited till she actually had her martini before broaching the subject nearest her mind.

"That was her perfume, Connor. I smelled it in the office this morning."

"No!"

She eyed him. "That isn't all that smells about this case, either. You haven't yet told me what you are doing out here."

He drank thirstily. "Can't a man go to the races without signing his life away?"

"Raoul Dixon couldn't," she pointed out. She clicked the edge of her glass against her teeth, meditating. "I don't suppose you were—say—following the luscious Myrna?"

"Certainly not," O'Melveny said stiffly. "Why should I?"

"Because it would be just like you, you fat slob." She wrinkled her forehead. "The only thing is, I can't see—" And then she did see, or thought she did. "Connor O'Melveny, is it possible that—" She caught her breath. "No, it couldn't be. Even you wouldn't do a thing like that!"

He looked at her. "Like what?"

She regarded him without love. "Who was the other client you had this morning—the one before I got down to the office? The one who smoked Turkish cigarettes?"

Involuntarily O'Melveny closed his eyes. "That wasn't a client. That was a—a collector."

"How odd," Dee said. "Odd that Mr. John Bogardus smokes Turkish cigarettes too."

O'Melveny was amazed. "He does?" He waved this aside as being irrelevant and immaterial. "Well, I hardly see the point in—" He was rudely interrupted

by a gentleman who was apparently in a very great hurry to get to the bar. "Scotch!" this man ordered. "Make it a double!" Obviously he was laboring under some great emotional strain. He was Mr. John Bogardus.

O'Melveny tried to remove himself from the immediate scene but the crowd was too deep. Not only that, Miss Desirée Dugan jammed a vicious elbow in the Bogardus ribs. He turned then and saw O'Melveny. "O'Melveny!"

O'Melveny affected the surprise of one being accosted by a total stranger. "Pardon me, I'm afraid I—"

Bogardus had a single track mind. "Am I to understand that you followed my wife out here?" He gulped his drink. "She is here now?"

"My dear fellow," O'Melveny said weakly, "pray control yourself!"

"Well, did you or didn't you?"

Dee's voice was positively saccharine. "Certainly he did, Mr. Bogardus." She arched her eyebrows. "It's just that he never likes to let his left hand know what his right is up to." Under her breath she added, "The dirty two-timing double-crosser!"

CHAPTER TWO

"Keep Your Nose Clean"

THE interior of the cab was quiet with that palpable silence peculiar to the interim between two claps of thunder. O'Melveny glanced nervously out the rear window. "I think we're being followed."

"Don't try to change the subject," Dee said. Her usually lovely mouth made a firm, uncompromising line. "Did you or didn't you hire out to both sides in a divorce case?"

When caught, O'Melveny could be as honest as anybody. "Well, in a way, yes." He avoided her eyes. "The ultimate good, you know."

"Ultimate good!"

"Well," he protested, "they both want a divorce, don't they?"

Dee regarded him coldly. "Let's not quibble."

He became very angry indeed. "Who's quibbling? Mrs. Bogardus has been

playing around, and if I can believe you, he has too. You say he had a woman with him this afternoon."

"I see," Dee said. "And just which side did you propose to testify for in court?"

O'Melveny nibbled the head of his cane. "It depends." He quoted: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." He savored the sound of that with extreme unction. "That's what I was trying to find out—which was the guiltiest."

"Like hell you were," Dee said. "You were playing both ends against the middle, collecting two fees, and deliberately crossing up not only your clients but me." She caught her breath. "Well, there's only one thing to do. We'll return their money."

O'Melveny considered her. "Aren't you forgetting something, my pet? This is no longer a mere divorce proceeding. It's murder." His blue eyes mirrored compassion. "At all cost we must—ah—protect our client."

"Protect!" Dee said tartly. "You mean blackmail her!"

"That," O'Melveny stated, "is rank calumny. I never blackmailed anybody in my life—much." A new angle occurred to him. "Besides, maybe it wasn't Myrna. Maybe it was her husband."

Dee was startled. "Connor, you don't really think—"

"How can I?" he demanded aggrievedly. "With people—yes, even my own partner—going around accusing me of things." Again he looked out the rear window. "My God!"

Dee craned her neck. "Who is it—Blackburn?"

"I wish it were," O'Melveny said. The car behind had pulled out into the center lane now and was coming up very fast. It was much too nice a car for any police job O'Melveny had ever seen. His suspicions regarding it were immediately justified as it drew alongside. The chauffeur was a gorilla, and the guy beside him was a gorilla. In the tonneau was Tony the Wop Maggi. O'Melveny's hacker let out a yell as the big car deliberately cut in, forcing him to the curb. "Hey, what the hell is this?" There was the screech of brakes.

Dee was outraged. "Right in broad

daylight!" She opened the left-hand door. "I'm going to tell them a thing or two."

O'Melveny hooked his cane around her neck. "You're going to keep your pretty mouth shut, darling." He yanked her back in as the gorilla-chauffeur and the gorilla-footman got out and asked the hacker if he wanted to make anything out of it. He said he didn't. He said this very emphatically.

Maggi rolled his window down. "Come on, O'Melveny, I want to talk to you."

O'Melveny shuddered. "No, thanks."

Dee began screaming her head off. A couple of cars slowed up at this, but the occupants, not seeing any dead bodies lying around, apparently considered the business not worth their while and went on. One of the loogans reached in the cab and slapped Dee across the mouth. "Shut up, you!" He looked at O'Melveny. "Coming?"

O'Melveny licked his lips. "Well—" He saw the gun in the second man's hand then. O'Melveny was deathly afraid of guns. "Well, if you insist." Somewhat hastily he bridged the gap between cab and the open door of the sedan. The door closed. They went away from there. Beads of cold sweat dotted the O'Melveny brow. He was afraid to reach for a handkerchief to wipe them away, because his gesture might be misconstrued. Furtively he examined the Wop's profile. "You're making a big mistake, you know."

"I make lots of 'em," Maggi said. And that was all he said for quite a while. They were well within the Pasadena city limits before he spoke again. "Who killed my boy, O'Melveny?"

"I don't know."

"Meaning you won't tell?"

SOME of O'Melveny's courage had returned by this time. It seemed obvious that if Maggi intended anything really drastic he wouldn't have left Dee behind. Nor the hacker, for that matter, though hackers were notably forgetful about certain things. "Now, really, Tony—"

"Don't give me that," Maggi said irritably. His heavy brows drew down. "Dixon ever come to see you about anything?"

"Certainly not."

"Then how did your card get in his

pocket?" Maggi asked in a menacing tone.

O'Melveny sucked in his breath. At times life was very complicated. "Blackburn asked that one too. I wouldn't know."

Maggi's eyes closed till it seemed he had almost gone to sleep. He hadn't though. "What did the Bogardus dame want of you?"

If he had hoped to surprise O'Melveny he was a great success. O'Melveny felt his small world crumbling about his ears. "The—the Bogardus dame!"

"You needn't bother to deny knowing her too," Maggi said. "I've been having her tailed."

O'Melveny's curiosity overcame his better judgment. "Why?"

"Because she owes me dough."

"My God," O'Melveny said in a stifled voice. This thing was getting worse by the minute. He sat up very straight indeed. "Look, Tony, I don't want any part of what concerns you. The lady hired me to tail her husband. She wants a divorce. So help me, that's all I know."

Maggi looked at him then. "And you were tailing him this afternoon?"

O'Melveny was attacked by a sudden fit of coughing. "Well, no, as a matter of fact it was my—my partner who was on him."

"She on him all the time?"

"No, she—" For the first time O'Melveny saw where all this was leading. No matter what the reason, this guy Maggi suspected Mr. John Bogardus of knocking off Raoul Dixon. He also suspected O'Melveny and Dee Dugan of trying to conceal that fact and use it to their own advantage.

"Well?" Maggi demanded.

O'Melveny was faced with the necessity for either tossing Bogardus to the wolves or Miss Desirée Dugan. He tossed Bogardus. "She lost him," he confessed.

"Thanks," Maggi said. He spoke to the chauffeur. "This is all right, Clem." The car halted. Maggi looked at O'Melveny. "Out."

"Now look," O'Melveny said desperately, "I don't think Bogardus would have done it. He—he wouldn't have had any reason." He wished he could tell Maggi that Bogardus wanted a divorce just as much as his wife did, that he, Connor

O'Melveny, knew this to be a fact, because he had been hired by both parties. "All right," he said heavily. "But just the same you'd better think it over, Tony."

"Did I say I was going to do anything?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Then—out," Maggi said. He put the flat of his hand on O'Melveny's chest and pushed. O'Melveny landed on his bottom in front of Super Market 116. The Wop's car went away.

A kind old lady and a little boy helped O'Melveny to his feet. "These new cars," the little boy explained, "they got no running boards."

The old lady must have seen more of what had actually happened than the little boy. "It's the younger generation," she said acidly. "They have no manners."

O'Melveny resented being mistaken for an older man than the Wop. He lifted his hat stiffly. "Thank you very much, madam." He went hurriedly into the market and found a phone booth. Three dimes failed to locate Mr. John Bogardus. The best he could do was to leave a warning at each place. "Tell him not to go out, understand? He is not to go out—any place—until he contacts me." Feeling like the finger man in a murder syndicate he went out and hailed a passing cab.

DEE was sitting in her accustomed chair, apparently without a care in the world, when O'Melveny came in. Indeed she scarcely lifted her eyes from the vanity mirror before returning to the business of smoothing lipstick with a little finger.

"A fine thing!" O'Melveny said. His pinkly cherubic face wore an injured expression. "For all you knew I might be lying in a ditch with my throat cut."

Miss Dugan was nothing if not practical. "But you aren't," she pointed out. She powdered her nose. "What did that lug Maggi want?"

"A lot you care," O'Melveny said. He went into his own office and had a drink from the bottle in the lower drawer of his desk. He was as nearly shaken as he had ever been.

Dee came to the communicating door. "I don't see any cuts or abrasions."

O'Melveny glared at her. "It's my soul that is scarred."

"So you admit it." She was very beautiful for such an unfeeling wench. "Myrna Bogardus called up. I told her you weren't in."

O'Melveny regarded her. "That, if I may say so, is the most remarkable piece of understatement I've ever heard." He paled at a sudden thought. "What did she want?"

"I didn't ask her," Dee said. "I told her we were returning her retainer."

O'Melveny was outraged. "Damn it all, Dee—" The phone rang. He snatched it up. "Yes?" His voice became butter mellow. "Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Bogardus?"

The lady was undeniably agitated. "See here, Mr. O'Melveny, if it's more money you want—" She caught her breath. "How much is it going to cost me?"

O'Melveny's eyes blinked, just once. "For what?"

"For keeping your mouth shut!"

"Well," O'Melveny said, "ordinarily we don't charge much for just that. But in a murder case—"

"Then you *were* there this afternoon!"

"Oh, yes," O'Melveny sighed, "I was there." He looked at Dee, who was biting her nails in a perfect frenzy. "About the money, Mrs. Bogardus, I understand you are already pretty heavily obligated to— to others."

There was quite a noticeable pause before she said sharply, "Who told you that?"

O'Melveny had a brief moment of intuition. Was it possible that Maggi was not the only one who had a hold on her? "A little birdie," he said.

She persisted. "Was it Maggi?"

"Perhaps." He thought of something. "And speaking of Maggi, Mrs. Bogardus, he's pretty sore about Dixon. Right now he thinks it was your husband who did it, but he may eventually get around to you. Better stay indoors for a while." With this sage advice he disconnected. Almost instantly the phone rang again. This time it was the lady's husband. "My God, O'Melveny, what's happened?"

O'Melveny pushed Dee away with one hand. Into the phone he said, "Where are you calling from?"

"My club!"

"Then you'd better stay there," O'Melveny advised him. "A guy named Maggi is looking for you."

Mr. Bogardus cursed. "In God's name, why?"

"Because he thinks you shot his boy friend Raoul Dixon."

"Don't be silly," Bogardus said. And then, as though struck by a sudden thought: "Say, that's an idea, isn't it? I mean, Myrna chasing around with the guy and all. The jealous husband—unwritten law angle." He drew a deep breath. "Would it help if I came right out and admitted it?"

O'Melveny's face wore a Lord-what-next expression. "No," he said carefully, "no, I hardly think that would help." He sighed. "You just stay put and let me handle everything."

"All right," Bogardus said in a tired voice. He hung up.

Dee was furious. "So you're going to handle everything, are you?" She stamped her foot. "You're going to return both those retainers and forget it, that's what you're going to do!"

The telephone rang. O'Melveny looked at it as though it might be a coiled rattler. "This seems to be our busy day, doesn't it?" He put out a tentative hand.

DEE was made of sterner stuff. She snatched up the instrument. "Connor O'Melveny's office. Miss Dugan speaking." Quite suddenly she paled. "What? What's that?" She stared wide-eyed at O'Melveny. "No, he isn't here right now. Yes, I'll give him the message." She had to try three times before she could finally locate the phone base. "Now I wonder who that could be?"

O'Melveny was heavily sarcastic. "One of the twelve prophets, perhaps? President Roosevelt?" He stood up violently. "Let's play a game. You tell me the message and I'll guess who it was."

Dee moistened her lips. "He—he said to tell you to keep your nose clean."

O'Melveny shuddered. "The Wop?" He answered his own question. "No, it wouldn't be Maggi." He thought a moment. "Blackburn, perhaps?"

"It wasn't Lieutenant Blackburn," Dee said.

Lieutenant Blackburn himself opened the hall door. "Somebody taking my name in vain?" He came in swiftly, closed the door behind him and shoved his hat far back on his head. His hatchet face was not pleasant. "Now then, you two, I want to know who bumped Dixon."

"So does Tony Maggi," O'Melveny said.

Dee stared at him with a kind of horror. You could see she was thinking of what Maggi's kind was reputed to do to squealers.

Blackburn licked his lips. "That's a thought, shamus. I guess I'd better have the Wop picked up—for questioning."

He went to the phone and buzzed headquarters. O'Melveny winked at Dee. Not that he didn't realize his own danger if Maggi found out; it was just a temporary expedient. With Maggi in jail, everybody concerned, including himself, would be much safer. At least for a little while. He offered Blackburn a cigar, a nickel one from the impressive humidior on the desk. The good ones he kept in his pocket for his own use. "You don't have to tell this, Lieutenant, but Maggi and a couple of his boys gave me the arm this afternoon. That card, you know. The one that you found on Dixon."

Blackburn was obviously surprised. "And he let you go?"

"Certainly," O'Melveny said. "He's smarter than you are. He had an idea, but he gave it up after he'd talked to me."

Blackburn was not exactly dumb. "You wouldn't, by chance, have fingered someone for him, would you?"

"How could I?" O'Melveny protested. He became indignant. "Are you insinuating that I would protect a murderer?"

"If you could make a dime," Blackburn said. He narrowed his eyes. "I could see you tagging somebody else to save your own neck, and then tagging Maggi to save the other guy's." He exhaled noisily. "By God, I wouldn't put it past you to use the whole police department to pull your chestnuts out of the fire." He strode to the phone as though intending to countermand his own order.

"Better not," O'Melveny cautioned him. "If anything happened and Maggi did it—"

Blackburn let go of the phone as though

it were red hot. "Yeah." He looked at Dee. "Who were you tailing this afternoon?"

"Nobody," she said promptly.

Blackburn obviously knew this for a lie but decided to let it pass for the moment. "Who was the guy you and O'Melveny talked to at the bar?"

O'Melveny's skin crawled. So Blackburn had seen that too! He affected complete candor. "Well, if you must know, he was from a collection agency. Wanted to know how I could afford the races when I couldn't pay my tailor."

"I see," Blackburn said. He went to the door, paused with his hand on the knob. "I think I'll drop over and have a talk with this collector." His smile was positively wolfish. "For a collector he seems to be doing all right for himself. He's stopping at the Union League Club." He went out.

O'Melveny sighed. "Well, I guess that's that."

Dee regarded him with the loathing one reserves for something that has just crawled out from under a rock. "You mean you're not going to call Bogardus and warn him?"

O'Melveny pretended to find a speck of dust on the sleeve of his coat. "Mr. Bogardus will be much safer in jail, my child."

Dee was furious. "He's a client and you deliberately threw him to the cops. Sometimes, Connor O'Melveny, I think you're all the things Blackburn says you are."

O'MELVENY received this horrible indictment quite amiably. "Mr. Bogardus may suffer a bit of inconvenience, but just think how grateful he'll be when we get him out. Lieutenant Blackburn is quite happy, thinking he has outsmarted me, and when Bogardus admits he killed Dixon the lieutenant will be even happier." He spread pudgy pink hands. "You see, darling? The ultimate good."

Dee made an unlovely sound with her lips. "I don't know what I ever saw in you. You're as shifty, as unstable as quicksand."

"And free," O'Melveny pointed out. His smile was that of the prophet who is without honor in his own home town.

"You had better go see Myrna Bogardus now, darling."

Dee stared. "Why?"

"Because the police may not be as efficient as I think they are. Tony Maggi may still be on the loose."

Dee paled. "You mean she did it?"

"I don't know," O'Melveny said honestly enough. He sighed. "At any rate, I think it would be nice if you were with the lady when she finds out that her husband has been arrested." He picked up his hat and stick.

A voice behind him said, "Going some place, chum?"

Dee screamed. O'Melveny turned with elaborate carelessness. The man in the doorway had a gun. He was the tall, dark and quiet man O'Melveny had last seen in Tony Maggi's box at Santa Anita. "I beg your pardon?" O'Melveny said. His voice sounded a little stifled, even to his own ears. He was acutely aware of the gun.

The man scarcely moved, yet somehow he was inside and the door closed, very gently, very quietly. His quiet was more terrifying than the belligerence of most men. "I passed a dick in the corridor," he said easily. "What did he want?"

O'Melveny affected a calm he did not feel. "Before I tell you that I ought to know your interest in the matter, hadn't I?"

The dark man smiled. "Tony Maggi is a friend of mine."

Involuntarily O'Melveny closed his eyes. This was an unlooked for development. He opened his eyes very wide indeed. "I've already told Tony all I know."

Dee sank tiredly into a chair. After that first surprised scream she hadn't made a sound.

The dark man considered O'Melveny. "About your card," he said. "How did Raoul Dixon get it?"

"I don't know," O'Melveny said. And then, as the gun lifted ever so slightly: "Now wait a minute, maybe I can guess." He pretended to think. "A—a client of mine was seen to give Dixon a wad of money after the third race. The card may have been mixed in with the bills."

"I see," the quiet man said. "And this client?"

O'Melveny looked at Dee who was making frantic signals. He ignored the signals. "Mrs. Myrna Bogardus," he said. "A divorce proceeding. Her address is the Westmere Towers."

Dee said a naughty word. "You dirty double-crosser!"

"Thank you," the quiet man said. He backed out as quietly and unobtrusively as he had come.

O'Melveny counted up to ten, audibly, before he went to the phone and gave a number. Presently he said, "Mrs. Bogardus? This is O'Melveny. You had better leave your apartment at once. Yes, at once. Miss Dugan will meet you at—say, the Ambassador in ten minutes?" He coughed gently. "In the cocktail lounge."

Dee clutched his arm. "Why don't you have her call the police?"

O'Melveny replaced the phone and smoothed the thinning sandy hair over his bald spot. "The police," he said kindly, "are the last people in the world Mrs. Bogardus ought to see."

CHAPTER THREE

In Deeper

THE Westmere Towers was one of those newer apartment hotels which climbed skyward from Sunset Boulevard in the County Strip. It was slightly after five o'clock and darkness had fallen, and the myriad multi-colored signs of *Ciro's* and the *Trocadero* and other such places where the stars congregated, or are supposed to congregate, gave the Boulevard a festive air. Below, dropping sharply away from Sunset and extending to the sea, stretched the vast panorama of Los Angeles at night. Traffic was pretty heavy.

O'Melveny descended from his cab some little distance down from the Westmere's main portal, paid off and sauntered leisurely along the sidewalk. His appearance was quite in keeping with the best traditions of The Strip. He looked like a producer, or maybe a two-thousand-a-week writer, or even, perhaps, like one of the better-class agents who batted on both. He swung his cane jauntily.

So far as his bland blue eye could tell, there had been no murders in the vicinity

recently. Neither was there any sign of the tall, dark and quiet man. Everything, indeed, appeared as it should be, including the uniformed doorman. O'Melveny lifted his cane in careless salute, waited for the door to be opened for him and strolled inside. The lobby was not a large one, so there was no escaping the clerk's eye. O'Melveny didn't even try to escape it. He met it with a stare more supercilious than the clerk's own, nodded distantly and proceeded to the elevators. His manner said that he knew exactly where he was going, which was a fact. Myrna Bogardus lived on the top floor. O'Melveny hoped that by this time she was at the Ambassador.

He got out and approached the door of an apartment other than hers and pretended to ring the buzzer. The elevator descended. O'Melveny moved rather swiftly then. From his pocket he withdrew what looked like an ordinary pen knife, but what was in reality an instrument known as a gimmick, and for the possession of which he could have been arrested. He was breathing somewhat hurriedly before he finally gained admittance to the Bogardus domicile. He stood there in the darkness of the little foyer, listening while the elevator came up and again descended. There was no sound inside but his own labored breathing. Presently he reached out and found the wall switch and snapped on the lights.

He knew perfectly well what he was doing. He was risking not only his license, but his neck, in an attempt to find out definitely whether Myrna Bogardus had or had not killed the man Raoul Dixon. He felt that he had to know this before proceeding much farther. He was practically sure that she hadn't—almost as sure as he was that her husband hadn't—but he had to know. There was little or no doubt in his mind that the lady had an excellent motive for the deed. Being a man of low morals himself, O'Melveny was able to recognize blackmail when he saw it, and he was positive he had seen it in the way Myrna Bogardus had paid off that afternoon. The odd part was that she had gotten nothing in exchange.

Also, there was the little matter of Tony Maggi. The Wop had admitted Dixon was one of his boys. He had also

admitted, to O'Melveny at least, that Myrna Bogardus owed him, Maggi, a sum of money. Obviously, if this sum of money were for blackmail, Maggi would not have admitted it. Thus it was almost certain that the money owed was a gambling debt. What, then, had become of the money the lady had paid over to Raoul Dixon? If Dixon had passed it on to Maggi, the Wop wouldn't have been squawking, would he? Ergo, Dixon hadn't passed it over, which seemed to indicate that he was either working a racket of his own, or was holding out on his boss. This last made a very neat motive for Maggi himself to have knocked off his henchman. Provided, of course, he had discovered the hold-out. Against this theory you had the undeniable fact that Tony Maggi had seemed very eager indeed to find Dixon's killer.

Sighing, because all this had gotten him practically nowhere, O'Melveny began the ticklish business of searching the apartment thoroughly but quickly. His task was made doubly difficult because he had no idea what he was looking for. The gun, perhaps? It hardly seemed likely that Mrs. Bogardus would still have clung to it. Indeed the gun was just one of the reasons O'Melveny didn't think the lady had done the job. He had seen her practically empty her purse out at the track and there had been no gun in evidence then. She didn't look like the kind of gal who would wear it strapped to her thigh, either.

But speaking of thighs and such, O'Melveny ran across an interesting array of scanties in one of the two bedrooms, and underneath them a hypodermic needle outfit. It was quite a beautiful little engine, all silverplated and neatly cased in genuine snakeskin. There was also an unlabeled green bottle with traces of a whitish powder still clinging to the inside. O'Melveny didn't think the bottle had contained aspirin, but just to be sure he thumped the upended bottle on his palm until he got enough of the powder to taste. It wasn't aspirin. He began to be very sorry indeed for Myrna Bogardus.

HE DID not find a gun, nor did he find anything of value among the lady's correspondence. In a pigeonhole of her

desk, however, he did discover a receipted bill under the imprint of Dr. Max Schlesinger. All it said was: "For professional services, \$25.00." Deciding that he would have to try elsewhere O'Melveny looked up the address of Raoul Dixon in the phone book. And then, because the phone was right there in front of him, he picked it up and called the cocktail lounge of the Ambassador and asked to have Miss Dugan paged. Dee, when he finally got her, was agitated. "Connor, she didn't come!"

O'Melveny was not a profane man, but this information evoked a curse even from him. "All right," he said presently. He thought a moment. "Tell you what you might do. Go out and see Doc Schlesinger. Pretend you're a hophead."

Dee sniffed. "And what will that get me?"

"That's what I'd like to find out," O'Melveny said. He put out the lights and descended to the lobby via the elevator. He was quite relieved that nobody was waiting to arrest him for breaking and entering. His relief lasted all the way out to the sidewalk, where he was attempting to flag a cab when Tony Maggi's limousine rolled up to the curb. The limousine was complete with chauffeur-gorilla, footman-gorilla and Tony Maggi himself. O'Melveny controlled his natural impulse to run. "Oh, hello there, Tony!"

Maggi opened the car door. "Been reporting to Mrs. Bogardus?"

O'Melveny shook his head. "She isn't in."

Maggi poked the gorilla-footman in the back. "Go ask the clerk, Joe." Joe got out and went in past the goggling doorman. Maggi beckoned. "In, shamus."

O'Melveny hesitated. "Now look, Tony—"

"In."

"Well, if you insist," O'Melveny said. He got in the car. He wished Lieutenant Blackburn and the rest of the cops were more efficient, or Tony Maggi less so.

Maggi lit a cigarette. The flame of the lighter illumined his heavy, brooding profile. "The cops pinched Bogardus, chum, and they tried to pinch me. You have anything to do with that?"

O'Melveny licked his lips. "Don't be silly."

Joe came out of the lobby. "She ain't in, boss."

"You see?" O'Melveny demanded. He became indignant. "It isn't bad enough to have you hounding me, I've got to have your friends too."

Maggi straightened. "Who, for instance?"

O'Melveny described the tall, dark and quiet man. "At least he said he was a friend of yours. He pulled a gun on me in my own office."

"Kralne?"

"How do I know what his name is?"

Maggi's brows drew together. "Now what would the Duke be wanting?"

"The same as you and everybody else." O'Melveny laughed hollowly. "Who killed Dixon, he wanted to know. My God, as if I knew!" He took a sudden vindictive thrust at the big man beside him. "Did you know that Dixon was blackmailing the woman?"

"You're a liar!"

"Hah!" O'Melveny said scathingly. "Did you get any part of the money he took off of her this afternoon?"

Maggi sat perfectly still for a moment. "You're making it pretty tough for your own client, shamus. That's a hell of a good motive."

"I know it," O'Melveny said. His face was utterly without guile. "That's just to prove to you that I'm leveling." He shrugged. "But don't ask me what he had on her. I don't know."

"All right," Maggi said, "we'll skip that for a minute. Who else has been bothering you?"

"Some monkey on the phone," O'Melveny said tiredly. "Though come to think of it, he didn't want to know who killed Dixon. Maybe he knew. All he insisted on was that I keep my nose clean."

Maggi put his face down very close to O'Melveny's. "And are you keeping it clean, chum?"

"You bet," O'Melveny said fervently. He thought of a neat motive for his call at the Westmere Towers. "I just dropped around to return the lady's retainer. I'm through, all fed up."

"That's nice," Maggi said. "That's a hell of a swell notion, pal." He jerked

his thumb toward the sidewalk. "Out."

O'MELVENY got out. The limousine rolled away. O'Melveny discovered that he was sweating copiously, though the night had grown quite cool. He presently hailed a cab and was driven across town to the address given in the phone book as that of Raoul Dixon. This turned out to be the upper half of a modernistic stucco-and-tile duplex on South Rimpau.

Traffic was rather heavy and there were a lot of parked cars at the curbs, but so far as O'Melveny could tell there was nobody particularly interested in the Dixon place. There were no lights, nor were there any in the flat below. Presumably the police had been there and gone, not even leaving a stake-out. Just to be sure, though, O'Melveny strolled past twice before attempting the outside stairs which led to the upper floor. He was not accosted. Indeed, for the moment, he seemed to be the only pedestrian. He went up the stairs, making no effort to be secretive about it, and rang the bell. Under cover of ringing it again he tried the doorknob. The door was not locked. With a quick glance he took in the street below, believed he was unobserved and went inside. Not until then did he discover that the lights were on in two of the rooms. Heavy drapes over the windows had given the effect of a complete blackout.

Half blinded by the unexpected light, O'Melveny just stood there for a moment. Then, as though a shutter had been removed from before his eyes, he saw the tall, dark and quiet man. The quiet man did not see O'Melveny, though his eyes were wide open. Duke Kralne was more utterly quiet than he had ever been. There was a bullet hole in his right temple. He was sitting, almost erect, in a corner of the divan, and on the floor, as though fallen from his lax hand, there was a gun.

O'Melveny sucked in a deep breath. For a long moment he seemed incapable of anything else. There was a tightness about his throat, a kind of paralysis in his legs, and his hand refused to do his bidding and wipe the cold sweat from his brow. He was, in a word, scared stiff.

Presently, on leaden feet, he forced himself nearer the corpse. He did not know why he did this. He didn't know

why Duke Kralne should have committed suicide. He was quite sure that the best place for a dick named O'Melveny was miles away from this particular spot, yet he was drawn by a sort of intangible magnetism. And then, mixed with the faint odor of burned cordite he smelled the perfume. It was quite distinctive—so distinctive that he could almost see Myrna Bogardus herself. His eyes dropped to the gun on the floor. It was not Duke Kralne's gun, at least not the one the Duke had displayed in O'Melveny's office. That had been an automatic. This was a revolver.

Like a sleepwalker O'Melveny got out a handkerchief and picked up the weapon. There were four exploded shells. His lips moved silently, counting. Three for Raoul Dixon, out at the track, one for Duke Kralne. He put the gun back exactly as he had found it. The intent was quite obvious. It was meant to be believed that Kralne had killed Dixon, and then, in a fit of despondency over his act, had done the Dutch. Had the gun been Kralne's own, O'Melveny himself might have believed it. He began to be very angry indeed with Myrna Bogardus. He was not too angry, however, to remember that she was still his client. The gun might somehow be traced to her. He picked it up again, and this time wiped it carefully and thrust it into his pocket.

Quite suddenly, startlingly loud, the telephone rang. O'Melveny stared at it resentfully. He would not, he told himself, answer it. Nobody in his right mind would. It was certainly odd, though, that anybody should be calling a guy after he was dead, and the papers had made it clear to one and all that Raoul Dixon was that way. The phone kept ringing. O'Melveny put out his hand for it, withdrew, finally could not resist its imperative summons. He lifted the instrument and spoke from the corner of his mouth. "Yeah?"

"Connor!" Dee screeched. "Connor, I'm—" There was a terrific bang and the phone went dead.

Behind O'Melveny a hard voice rasped, "Don't move, O'Melveny!"

O'Melveny had no trouble recognizing the voice. It belonged to Lieutenant Blackburn. The phone dropped from suddenly numb fingers. "Who, me?"

Blackburn slid into sight. His gun was out and his lips were drawn back over yellowed teeth. "Who's the corpse this time, shamus?" He jerked his head at Kralne's body.

"I—I really don't know," O'Melveny said.

Blackburn spat. "So you just go around killing them without an introduction, eh?"

O'Melveny lips were parched. He wondered if the fact that he couldn't possibly have killed Dixon would influence Blackburn's judgment regarding Duke Kralne. He hardly thought so. He wished the gun in his pocket were at the bottom of the ocean instead. A dead guy on the divan, the murder weapon in O'Melveny's pocket—no, it was asking too much of anybody to believe it wasn't so. He became very brisk. "I was just calling headquarters."

"Oh, you were!" Blackburn took two quick steps, scooped up the phone with his left hand. "Police business, Beautiful. Get me a supervisor."

O'Melveny smacked his cane down on Blackburn's gun wrist. As the gun dropped and Blackburn involuntarily stooped for it O'Melveny hooked the cane in Blackburn's vest and yanked. Blackburn fell on his face. O'Melveny removed himself hurriedly from the premises.

CHAPTER FOUR

O'Melveny, Moralist

THE house was a Colonial, with tall white pillars and a broad red-bricked terrace fronting a deep lawn studded with shrubs and rather formal flower beds. On one side of the main house the drive led under a porte-cochere and disappeared around a turn at the back. On the other side, connected with the house in the form of a one-story wing, was Dr. Schlesinger's office and reception room. There were scarcely any lights showing in the main house, but the office was bright behind drawn shades. A car stood in the drive just short of the porte-cochere, and O'Melveny, descending from a cab, saw by the license plates that it was a physician's, probably Schlesinger's own. The scent of night-blooming jasmine was heavy on the air.

O'Melveny went along the brick terrace, not swiftly enough to account for his hurried breathing, and with his cane hooked over an arm lifted the antique brass knocker on the doctor's office door. He had only to bang it once before the door opened and a broad path of yellow light illumined him, a portly though rather jaunty gentleman whose pink face suggested that he lived rather too well and might have high blood pressure.

Silhouetted against the light, Dr. Max Schlesinger regarded his caller. "I'm sorry," he said, "office hours are over at four. After that I insist on appointments." There was no sign that he recognized O'Melveny. He started to close the door.

O'Melveny thrust a foot in the opening. "I have an appointment. I was to meet a lady here."

"Sorry," the doctor said, rather more stiffly this time, "I know of no such lady. If you will excuse me?"

"Oh, but I won't," O'Melveny said. He poked his cane at Schlesinger's stomach. He winked. "I understand you're a sort of silent partner of Tony Maggi. You wouldn't want Tony to know what you've been doing on the side, would you?"

Schlesinger's mouth made a thin straight line under the red, carefully groomed mustache. "You'd better come in, O'Melveny."

"That's what I thought too," O'Melveny said. He went in past the doctor, apparently without a care in the world. The luxurious reception-room was quite empty. So too was the more austere office beyond it. His eye quickened, however, as he saw the lady's purse in the waste-basket beside the broad desk. The purse was Dee's. "I see the lady has been here, anyway," he observed.

Behind him, Dr. Schlesinger began to laugh. It was not a nice laugh. "You're such a fool, O'Melveny." Something that was certainly not a fountain pen poked O'Melveny in the small of the back. "Stand perfectly still, my friend." A hand as light and deft as a woman's patted O'Melveny's pockets, found the gun, removed it. "There, that's better." The hard object was withdrawn from O'Melveny's kidneys. "That's much better." There was the click of a door lock.

O'Melveny turned just in time to see

the doctor drop the extra gun into a steel filing cabinet. Not that the doctor was unarmed. He still had the weapon which, as O'Melveny had suspected, was not a fountain pen. It was a black and shiny automatic and there was not much doubt that it had once belonged to Duke Kralne. Also, Dr. Schlesinger was smarter than Lieutenant Blackburn. He knew enough to keep his distance. Schlesinger's pointed mustache made a V over a smile which resembled nothing so much as a wolf's. "Were you hoping to blackmail a man of my caliber, O'Melveny?"

O'Melveny forced a feeble grin. "Well, you know how us private dicks are. A dollar here, a dollar there." He wondered if it hurt much to be shot. He never had been.

Schlesinger said: "You mentioned my partnership with Maggi, my friend. How did you find that out?"

O'Melveny pretended great surprise. "Why, from Tony himself." He held up two fingers pressed tightly together. "Tony and I are just like that." He smiled. "Well, perhaps not as close as that, but when I called him up to tell him what had happened to his very dear pal Duke Kralne he was so—ah—startled that he actually answered a couple of questions!"

SCHLESINGER himself looked a little startled. "You tell him—" He shook his head. "No, you wouldn't. You wouldn't kill the goose you expected to lay the golden egg."

"Not if the goose laid," O'Melveny admitted. He looked at the gun in the doctor's fist. "It seems the goose isn't going to, though, doesn't it?"

"You were warned," Schlesinger said coldly.

"That was my secretary you spoke to," O'Melveny said. He sighed. "I was afraid you might be a bit difficult." He looked at the ceiling. "So I asked Maggi to meet me here."

The clock on the desk ticked loudly. For the space of thirty seconds it was the only sound. O'Melveny leered. "You've got about a minute to make up your mind, Doctor. If I'm not mistaken that's Tony's car turning into the drive now."

Schlesinger stiffened, listening. There

really was the sound of a car. He lifted the gun, decided against shooting. You could almost see him decide against it. O'Melveny was relieved. "All right," the doctor said between suddenly bared teeth, "I'll make a deal with you." He moved in closer, gun hanging at his side. "You'll have to wait in the surgery."

And then, without warning, or what he thought was without warning, he lifted the gun and attempted to bash O'Melveny's head in. Only O'Melveny's head had moved. For such a portly gentleman he acted rather swiftly. He permitted the gun to hit his left shoulder, thwacked his cane across the doctor's shins, and then, dropping the cane, used a pink and meaty fist to hop the doctor's chin. He was quite surprised when the doctor fell down and lay still. He went over and unlocked the surgery door. "Desirée?"

From the darkness there were sounds like "Mmph, mmph, glmmph!"

"Oh?" O'Melveny said. He reached in and snapped on the lights. There was not only one woman, there were two. Both were neatly taped, hand and foot and mouth. It was a workmanlike job, as you would expect of a medico of Dr. Schlesinger's standing. Clucking sympathetically, O'Melveny ripped the tape from Dee's mouth. "Shame on you," he said.

Dee cursed him. "I tried everywhere when I heard him coming. Calling Dixon's place was a long shot, but I had to take it." She spat. "He caught me just as you finally answered."

"Very sloppy work," O'Melveny said critically. "This whole business is sloppy." He used a scalpel from a glass case to slash Dee's bonds. "Take care of Mrs. Bogardus, darling. I've got company."

Dee wiped stickum from her mouth. "Who?"

O'Melveny sighed. "Tony Maggi, I think. Blackburn ought to be along presently too. It's taken him long enough to trace your phone call back." He went out to answer a thunderous knocking on the door. Dr. Schlesinger was beginning to stir. O'Melveny bent and thoughtfully removed the slugs from the automatic before replacing it by the doctor's outflung hand. "Just a moment," he called for the knocker's benefit.

Dee wobbled to the surgery door. "Con-

nor, in the filing cabinet there are pictures of Mrs. Bogardus." She colored. "Not nice pictures."

"Get them," O'Melveny said.

He unlocked the door. Tony Maggi and his two inseparables came in. The two inseparables ranged themselves on either side of O'Melveny. Maggi looked at him, looked down at Dr. Schlesinger. "Now, what's this you were telling me?"

O'Melveny shuddered. "It's not nice," he said. "Not nice at all. People just won't tell me things. Mrs. Bogardus wouldn't, her husband wouldn't, even you wouldn't." He opened his blue eyes very wide. "Now if I had known in the first place that Doc Schlesinger was your partner—"

Maggi crossed the room swiftly and caught Dee by the shoulder. "Hey, what do you think you're doing?"

Dee waved a flat packet of photographic prints. "Art studies," she said. "You wouldn't be interested."

At this instant Dr. Schlesinger came to life. Unaware that the automatic was empty he snatched it up and menaced the room with it. "We can square this yet, Tony, if you want to be nice." He jerked his chin. "Have the boys get rid of O'Melveny and the girl."

Maggi just looked at him. "You killed Kralne. Dixon I wouldn't care about, but Kralne—well, the Duke was a friend of mine." He shook his big head. "Besides, I'm not in the smut business." He moved forward with an utter disregard for the gun in Schlesinger's hand. Schlesinger squeezed the trigger. Naturally nothing happened. With a bleat of terror he turned to run then, and Maggi caught him and slammed him violently into a chair. "You going to talk, Doc?"

Schlesinger began talking very fast indeed. "You wouldn't play," he said. "I knew damned well you wouldn't." He moistened suddenly dry lips. "But the setup offered such sweet possibilities for extra gravy. Through the gambling end you could get a line on people who had money, and if you were a doctor—"

"Not me," Maggi said. "You."

O'MELVENY moved casually away from the two gorillas and went into the surgery. Mrs. Bogardus was just re-

moving the last of the adhesive from her ankles.

She regarded Connor O'Melveny with frightened eyes. "What—what are you going to do?"

"Nothing," O'Melveny said. He sighed. "It's out of my hands now." Prowling, he discovered a portrait camera disguised as part of the X-ray equipment. "How convenient." He looked at the lady. "Hadn't you better tell me things?"

She stood up. "Dixon was bleeding me," she confessed. "He had a picture of me—with a man."

O'Melveny nodded at the camera. "Faked."

"I didn't know that." She shivered. "I've been such a fool, O'Melveny. I—I thought that I had gotten drunk, or been on a cocaine party—"

"Bad," O'Melveny said piously. He went back into the office.

Dr. Schlesinger was just finishing what must have been a very painful recital. "So I caught Dixon holding out on me. That was out at Santa Anita. In the argument

he threatened to expose me and I had to let him have it." His voice broke. "Later, I got to thinking he might have left something in his apartment, something that would have incriminated me—"

O'Melveny was aghast at his own stupidity. "That's where you ran into Mrs. Bogardus! She went there hoping to find the stuff Dixon was holding over her. And you grabbed her and brought her here."

"Well—yes," Schlesinger said. He looked at Dee without affection. "And I ran into this baby prowling in my office."

O'Melveny was complacent. "I sent her." He frowned at Miss Dugan. "Not to prowl, but to pretend she was a dope addict in need of assistance."

"How could I?" Dee protested. "He wasn't in."

O'Melveny looked at Maggi. "So when she called me and was so rudely interrupted I had an idea where she was. I got to thinking what a swell setup a doctor would have for blackmail—you know, physical examinations, that sort of thing. And I remembered seeing the doctor in

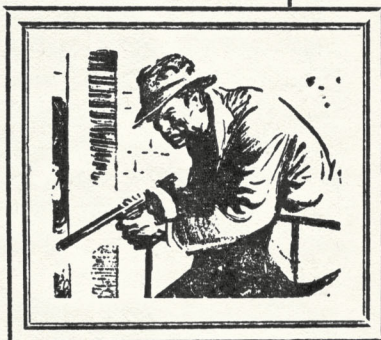
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your box out at the track." He spread his hands. "It all kind of—well, just fitted. All but Duke Kralne." He sighed. "I still don't understand Kralne."

"The Duke wanted to buy in with me," Maggi said heavily. "I told him I already had a partner." He looked at Schlesinger. "The Duke was a funny guy. When he had something on his mind he kind of worried it. I guess you and Dixon must have tipped your hand to him, eh, Doc?"

Schlesinger stood up suddenly. "You've got me all wrong on that, Tony. I didn't kill Kralne. Mrs. Bogardus did."

Everybody was so surprised at this that for a moment they did absolutely nothing. Probably Schlesinger didn't hope to be believed. All he wanted was the time necessary for him to reach the filing cabinet, get the drawer open and snatch the gun he had taken from O'Melveny. He had actually done all these things and was backing toward the surgery when the door from the ante-room banged open. Lieutenant Blackburn did just what any other cop would have done under the circumstances. He let Schlesinger have two slugs right in the belly. After that it seemed only an instant before the place was full of cops.

Blackburn looked somewhat stupidly at the assemblage. "Well, for crying out loud!"

"Yes," O'Melveny said placidly. He twirled his cane. "It will all come to you presently, Lieutenant. You will find that the gun in Dr. Schlesinger's poor dead hand is the one that killed Raoul Dixon and Duke Kralne." He sighed. "The

blackmailer being chiseled, you know." He winked at Maggi and the two gorillas, who looked as though they would like very much to be somewhere else. "Mr. Maggi has been of inestimable assistance to me in uncovering the foul plot. We all owe him a debt of gratitude."

Dee and Mrs. Bogardus came to the surgery door. Blackburn scowled. "Who's that?"

"That," O'Melveny said, "is a victim of what the psychologists call 'Forty pains.'" He gestured with the cane. "They occur to a lot of married people who have reached—umm—middle age." He sighed. "These pains make you begin to look for greener pastures, for excitement, anything to escape the dull monotony of being wealthy and married. The lady has suffered them and I am quite sure her husband has also. But in the pinch, each was willing to confess a murder in order to save the other. Do we need to say any more?"

"You're damned right we need to say more!" Blackburn snarled. "I haven't forgotten what you did to me, you pot-bellied——!"

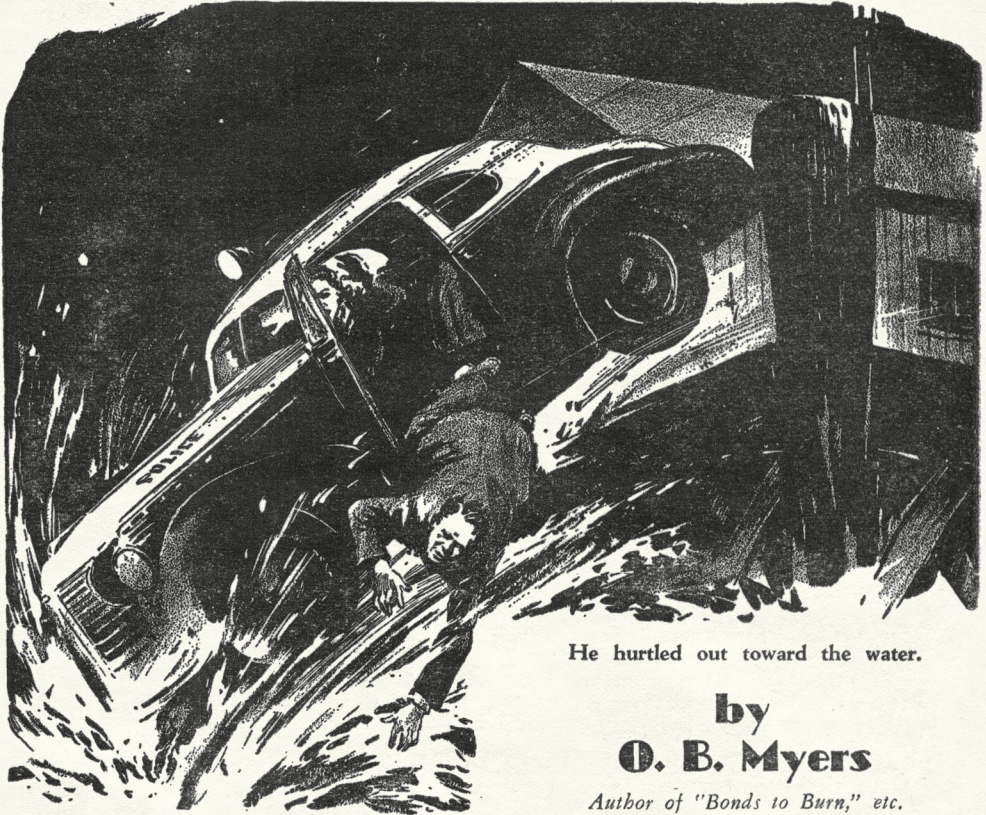
"But you will forget, won't you?" O'Melveny said. He was the epitome of the milk of human kindness. "Just as Mr. Bogardus will forget. He will not sue you for false arrest."

"But he confessed!" Blackburn yelled.

"Mr. Bogardus," O'Melveny said, "is a greater man than I." His blue eyes opened very wide. "I will not confess, Lieutenant." He smiled. "And if I remember rightly, you have no witnesses."



THE WILD MAN OF WALL STREET



He hurtled out toward the water.

by
O. B. Myers

Author of "Bonds to Burn," etc.

"Women are all the same, they're always getting you in a mess!" said Roy Hight, the over-cautious cop mechanic. But he made the mistake of distrusting the right gal—which nearly landed him in a watery grave at the bottom of the East River.

THE clatter of the wrench on the concrete floor rang metallicly through the empty reaches of the steel and concrete cavern. In an undertone blurred by weary patience Roy Hight said, "Nuts!", bent to pick it up, and again draped himself over the fender. When he had tightened the last stud he straightened up slowly, easing the twinges that ran up and down the muscles of his back. Without lowering the hood he walked around and opened the

door of the coupe on the driver's side. He started the motor without getting in, using his grimy fingers on the starter button and then the accelerator. It purred smoothly, up and down the scale, and then died in a whisper when he turned the key.

He was standing by the side of the open hood, wiping his hands on a shred of waste, when he heard rubber-soled footsteps behind him.

"Morning, Sergeant! She's all set."

Sergeant Volk teetered on the balls of his square-toed feet. The dim daylight that filtered down through the grimy panes set in the slope of the roof gave a gloomy cast to his heavy features. Through half-closed eyes he gazed at the car rather than at Roy.

"How's tricks, Hight? You pretty busy?"

"No!" Roy expelled the word forcibly, with satisfaction. "As a matter of fact, I'm not busy at all. That's not saying I've not been busy. Just finished up this tomato, here."

He jerked his head toward the open hood with a certain pride. "You can still see the bullet scrapes, along the side of the crankcase. But they don't hurt a thing—she's shaped up fit as a fiddle. Want to hear the motor turn over?"

Sergeant Volk shook his head. He asked, without interest: "That Scanlon's coupe?"

"Yeah. Been working on it all night. Just finished."

The sergeant's chin lifted abruptly. For the first time he looked at Roy, straight. "What's that? All night?"

Roy made an apologetic movement with his shoulders. "Since it came in at four, yesterday afternoon. You can ask Mac."

The sergeant half turned toward the door of the storeroom, where the superintendent of the departmental repair shop stood, turning a dead cigar between his lips. "Don't ask me why he does it, Sarge. He knows damned well the office won't O. K. no overtime. Just Scanlon makes a crack about he always liked this buggy better than any of the others, so this goof throws away a night's sleep."

The sergeant's voice now held a keen edge of interest. "You're sure that Hight didn't leave here last night?"

The super nodded. "It wouldn't be done now, if he had."

The sergeant turned back to Roy, and his expression had loosened up as if he were relieved. "That's swell, Hight," he said quietly.

"Aw!" Roy shrugged, chucking the waste into the corner. "I'll get no thanks for it . . . I gotta wash up."

"Wait a minute, Hight." The sergeant touched his arm, but then hesi-

tated, as if he didn't know quite how to say what was on his mind. "You got an uncle? Caleb Hight, up in Hastings?"

"That's right," said Roy. He glanced curiously at the sergeant, then faced him squarely, arms akimbo. "He's dead," said Roy flatly, as if he had read the fact in the other's hesitation.

Sergeant Volk's glance was quick, sharp. "How did you know? When did you see him?"

"I haven't seen him in a month. But he was pretty old, and he had heart trouble. I've been kind of expecting it, any time."

The sergeant didn't take his eyes from Roy's face. "Were you expecting him to be murdered, Hight?"

ROY didn't even move for several moments. The blare of a horn and the shouts of children at play came in through the big doors that opened on the street. Then abruptly, as if the meaning of the words had just reached him, he blurted, "Murdered!"

"I see you didn't," said Sergeant Volk. He explained the circumstances briefly. "The milkman found the back door standing open this morning, and the old gentleman lying on his back on the kitchen floor, in a puddle of blood. He'd been knocked down, pushed—there was a slight contusion on his chest. The blood was from a gash in his neck, where he hit it on the gas heater. The cause of death was actually dilation of the heart, brought on by the blow and the fall. The bungalow had been combed from top to bottom, every corner turned out. Must have taken hours."

Roy had gotten over the first shock of surprise. "Murdered! Well, I'm damned!" he muttered. "I can't say I'm heartbroken to hear he's dead. The old skinflint never did anything for me. I hardly saw him three times a year. He was a crusty old devil. Never got along with the rest of the family, or anyone else either. But—murdered!"

The sergeant, still watching Roy closely, said quietly: "He had plenty of money once, didn't he?"

Roy grimaced. "He was supposed to have made a fortune in the Street, several times, and lost it. I guess he was

pretty well cleaned out when he retired. He's lived like a hermit for the last ten years." He looked at his grease-caked hands. "Well, I suppose I'll have to go up there. I'm the only relative he's got."

As he moved off toward the locker-room to clean up, the super called after him. "Maybe you won't have to work nights any more, hey?"

Roy gave a short laugh. But then he came to a sudden halt, and the mirth evaporated from his features. It had just dawned on him what the sergeant had been driving at with his first questions, why his attitude had changed so abruptly. He turned on his heel.

"That's why you wanted to know where I was last night!"

Sergeant Volk spread his hands. "I have to ask, don't I? After all, if there's any dough, you're the one who benefits. But don't let it bother you, son. A guy could hardly have a better alibi than a night spent in the police department garage. And I'm glad that's the way it is, Hight. Makes it easier all around."

Roy nodded and went on, but for several minutes his scalp prickled at the thought of how close he had come to serious trouble. If instead of working, for example, he had taken Sylvie to a movie and had met no one on his way home afterward, look at the jam he'd be in now! That was the way with women, he thought. They were always getting you in a mess one way or another.

Nevertheless, when he strode rapidly down the street a short time later, he did not go direct to the subway. Turning the corner, he pushed open the door of the 20th Century Luncheonette and Coffee Shop and walked to a stool at the rear end of the long, shining counter. It was too early for the mid-day rush. The small tables along the walls were empty and the short-order cook was polishing bright work.

"Hello, Joe. Coffee and cakes. . . . Where's Sylvie?"

Joe picked up a porcelain cup half an inch thick and made it describe a spinning arc higher than his head before slipping it under the spigot of the big urn. "Not in today," he said. "She phoned."

"What's the matter?"

Joe slid the cup along the counter be-

fore he replied. "Said she was sick."

Roy's heart rose pounding into his throat in a way it had not done at the news of his uncle's murder. While Joe turned toward the griddle Roy stared after him stupidly and absently dumped twice the usual amount of sugar into his cup. Then he slid off the stool and went to the coin-box on the wall. At the next corner, on his way to the subway, there was a booth, but he didn't feel like waiting.

HE COULD hear the ringer repeat its monotonous buzz for a long time before it was answered by a feminine voice heavy with weary impatience. Roy asked for Miss Sylvia Britten.

"Apartment 1-B, you mean? I think she's here, but I don't know if she can come to the phone or not. Is it important?"

"Tell her it's Roy Hight."

"Oh!" The voice lapsed into silence, which after a long time was broken by a fainter one that sounded weak and far away.

"Roy? Hello, Roy? Why are you calling me at this hour?"

"I'm in the luncheonette. Joe said you were sick."

He heard an odd sound, between a laugh and a snuffle. "Oh, sick! It isn't anything, only a cold. I got it last night, I guess. Only I felt awfully low this morning. Fran can take care of me."

"A cold?" repeated Roy blankly, aware that Joe was listening. Suddenly he felt very foolish. He had hastened to call up before even touching his coffee—and she had a cold. That was the way they trapped your sympathies—got you all worried over them when it was nothing. His voice turned almost harsh.

"Listen. I won't be seeing you for a few days. I won't be around. My uncle was—he's dead."

"Your uncle? Oh, yes, I remember. What about him?" Her voice was slender and girlish and sounded a long way off.

"He died," said Roy bluntly. "He was killed." He was again aware that he was not in a booth. "You'll probably see something about it in the papers. But I'll be busy with things—you know."

Something came over the wire that might have been a sneeze, or an exclamation choked back. "All right, Roy. I'll be back to work in a couple of days, probably. Maybe I'll see you then. . . . It was nice of you to call up."

He mumbled a denial of his niceness and hung up. When he went back to the counter his cakes were waiting, and he ate them without lifting his head, aware that Joe was watching him curiously. But Joe did not speak until he was nearly finished.

"She say what time Fran was comin'?" he asked, then.

"She didn't say, no," Roy told him.

"If she leaves us short at noon—" growled Joe. The telephone started ringing. He came around the end of the counter to answer it.

"Yeah? . . . Who? Fran? No, she ain't here. I'm lookin' for her any time, though. . . . Just say it's Jack, huh? O. K., I'll tell her."

Roy wondered mildly again, as he had wondered before, about the mysterious "Jack" who frequently called up Sylvie's cousin, but who never seemed to appear in person. Fran never seemed particularly crazy about him—less so, in fact, than Roy would have liked. Though Fran, with her sophistication and carefully cultivated stagey look, was the type to make a play for any man she encountered.

They're all the same, thought Roy, paying his check.

For the next week he was even busier than he had expected. Being the only living relative of a corpse involved, he discovered, an endless array of inescapable duties. And when the corpse had come to its end by violent means the number was doubled. Lawyers, detectives, reporters, and cranks were crowded by salesmen and "investment counselors" of every description.

The newspapers made a sensation of the case, for old Caleb Hight had once been known as the Wild Man of Wall Street. From their files they dug out items hoary with age, and retold the tales of how he had cleaned up millions overnight. Of how he had lost those millions, quite as swiftly, very little was said. It was obvious that at the time of his death

he had been living like a poor man in the isolated bungalow on the outskirts of Hastings, but every reader was free to exercise his imagination on the supposition of concealed treasure.

If anything had been hidden in the closets or cellar of that dingy shack, it was no longer there. The thieves had ransacked every crevice from cistern to chimney, and then the police had ransacked them all over again. They found neither money nor clues to the killers. The crime had been so simple that it offered them not a handhold with which to get started. All they could learn was that a car with two passengers had been seen on that road late in the evening. The rest was swathed in mystery. There was no instrument of death to look for. A shove of a hand had been enough to kill the tottering old man, who had made neither friends nor enemies among his neighbors.

ALTHOUGH Roy spent his afternoons, as usual, in the shop—he had no intention of parting with his job—he saw little of Sylvie that week. When he did drop into the luncheonette for a quick bite, she seemed different. The cold had touched her chest, she said. Her voice was lower and huskier than ever. But it was more than that. Unlike everyone else, she asked him nothing about his uncle at all, acted as if it were all something unpleasant but temporary that had come between them, and the sooner forgotten the better. She seemed farther away from him, more reserved—doubtless only a play to recapture his attention, he thought.

Fran, however, evinced an alert but nervous interest in his affairs. Ever since Sylvie had gotten her the job in the luncheonette, several months before, Fran had made no attempt to conceal her feelings toward Roy, in fact. She was tall and lithe, with full, sensuous lips and heavy lidded eyes which knew no inhibitions, and she knew how to use her charms. She had once told Roy frankly that she couldn't understand why he preferred that mouse of a Sylvie. After that he sometimes wondered himself.

Roy's tour of duty began at noon. Between five and six he generally dropped

into the little restaurant for a bite. Fran gave him a sloe-eyed smile and indicated a place already set for him.

"Where's Sylvie?" he asked, looking around before he sat down.

"She went home early. I think she had a headache."

Roy frowned and scowled at the sandwich list. It was a slack hour and there were but few customers. When she had served him, Fran leaned on the counter with her head close to his.

"I was wondering if Sylvie was disappointed," she murmured.

Roy grunted. "Disappointed? What about?"

Roy, looking at his plate, did not observe the guile in her eyes. "About your uncle. Not leaving you any money, I mean."

Roy shrugged. "What of it? It's nothing to me. I wouldn't be quitting the department anyway. You don't suppose I'm always going to be a mechanic in the shop, do you? I'm moving up, some day."

Fran touched his sleeve intimately. "Sure you are, honey. I know the regu-

lar sort when I see one. You'll make good. That's what a girl is interested in, if she's the right sort herself. Not just a few filthy dollars the fellow might inherit—like Sylvie."

Roy winced, but her words agreed so exactly with his own sentiments that he could not dispute them. "You think she's disappointed?"

Fran's eyes narrowed. "Don't she look it? What do you suppose she's moping so much for, lately? She probably expected you were going to be a millionaire, or something. She's probably not so crazy about a copper mechanic."

She saw him stiffen, and hastened to soften the blow. "But what do you care, honey? She's not the only girl in New York. There's even some with a little dough of their own who would toss it into the pot for a fellow they were really fond of." She stroked his sleeve, and lowered her tone. "Let's take in a late movie, tonight, and talk it over."

Roy shifted on his stool in embarrassment. The shy, retiring kind who played the come-on game had never appealed to him. This was a different sort of attack,

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and he didn't know quite how to handle it.

"What's the matter with Jack?" he mumbled uneasily.

"Jack!" There was scorn in her voice, and something else, too, that he could not define. "Jack's got nothing to do with us. I can forget Jack in two seconds." She straightened up and gazed at him with a curious mixture of affection and dislike. "If you ask me, I think you're stuck on Sylvie," she declared scornfully.

Before he could reply the cook called her behind the partition, and he paid his check and left before she reappeared.

AT THE shop he was working on a radio patrol car that had smashed into a hydrant. An hour before quitting time he had finished lining up the steering and the brakes but had not yet tackled the warped door on the driver's side. He was moving it over to the street door, to give it a test run, when the super called to him.

"On the phone, Hight! . . . Your social secretary, I guess."

Roy went in the office and picked up the instrument. The voice that reached him from the other end was pitched low, spoke in nervous, jerky phrases.

"This is Fran. Roy, you've got to come over here. Right away."

"What for? I'm not through yet. Where are you?"

"At the apartment. Sylvie's apartment, in Brooklyn. Listen, she's in trouble, Roy. You've got to help her out."

Roy's throat constricted suddenly, so that he could hardly find his voice. "Sylvie? What's the matter?"

"I can't tell you over the phone. Come right over. It's very important. I'll meet you in the foyer. Hurry!"

Before he could ask any more questions the line went dead.

He racked the receiver and stepped out into the shop. The superintendent had disappeared for the moment. Roy climbed into the coupe and started the motor. By the time he was rolling through the door he knew what he was going to do. It was strictly against the rules to use the department cars for personal business, but rules meant little when Sylvie was in

trouble, and anyway he had to test the steering, didn't he? Before he reached the bridge he had forgotten the steering.

The residential street in Flatbush was quiet, only a few lights showing in the windows of the old-style, walk-up apartments. Signs behind the curtains showed that many of these housed casual roomers. The neighborhood was slightly down at heel, though still respectable. Roy knew the building without looking for the number, and slid the coupe deftly up to the curb. From force of habit he tried to climb out on the left. When the door refused to open he remembered that it was still jammed; he had not yet fixed that bent hinge. Sliding over to the other side, he stepped out and mounted a few steps to a glass-paneled door.

There was no bulb in the fixture in the outer foyer, but before he could reach for the push-button a figure was at his side.

"Roy? I'm awfully glad you came." It was Fran's voice.

"Sylvie?" he said quickly. "Where's Sylvie?"

"She's not here—she's out," was the reply.

"Then why did you bring me—" he began.

"Sh-h," she cautioned. "I've got to show you something."

She led the way into the hall, where a dim light illuminated the narrow, carpeted corridor on which a number of doors opened. The apartment where Sylvie and Fran each had their rooms was at the rear, as Roy knew well, but Fran did not go in that direction. Instead she carefully opened a door in an angle of the wall and indicated a flight of stairs that led downward. Puzzled and curious, Roy groped his way down into warm darkness that smelled of coal gas and stale garbage. Fran's steps followed him down. She hissed in his ear: "Stand still a minute! I know where the light is."

When she switched it on, it was only a single grimy bulb over near the furnace, but he could see her plainly enough. For a moment he thought that she had been drinking. Her eyes were abnormally bright, her color high, her movements quick. Then he recognized it for intense nervous excitement. When she came close to his side her fingers fluttered on

his sleeve, her skin shone along the line of her jaw.

"What's the idea?" he demanded uncertainly.

"I went in Sylvie's room to get something," she explained in a tense whisper. "Look what I found in the back of the closet!"

She was dragging something out from under the steps. A girl's clothing—dress, stockings, slippers, underwear. He recognized the dress immediately; Sylvie had worn it several times when they had gone out together. He lifted the hem between his thumb and forefinger.

"Well? Needs cleaning, doesn't it?"

Fran's lips came close to his ear. "Do you see what that is?"

SUDDENLY he let go of the fabric, his hand recoiling in horror. His eyes, bulging in their sockets, saw that all of the garments were streaked and blotched with the same kind of gruesome stain. On the soles of the flimsy slippers, especially, it was thick, like tar, as if the wearer had waded through crimson mud.

"My God!" he gasped. "It's blood . . ."

Fran nodded. "When they asked me where she was, last Thursday, I told them she was in her room. But she wasn't there at midnight, because I happened to look. Where do you suppose she was?"

Roy clapped his hand to his head. The walls seemed to reel. *Sylvie*, he thought, *Sylvie* . . . He stared in horrible fascination at the smeared slippers, and remembered the scene in his uncle's kitchen, still unchanged when he had arrived except for a sheet over the body. A slight push would have been enough to topple the feeble old man, the sergeant had said—such a push as a woman might easily deliver. Neither the sergeant nor anyone else would have any trouble discerning the motive, either. The young girl who wanted to get married, the fellow who hardly made enough at his job to support her as she hoped to be supported, the rich uncle who clung to life—It was wretchedly plain, and wretchedly sordid. He groaned between clenched teeth.

"What . . . what can we do?" he mumbled stupidly.

"We must get rid of them," hissed Fran. "Sooner or later they will be found, if she leaves them around. She must have been crazy—"

"Get rid of them?" repeated Roy, trying to think.

"Burn them," said Fran sharply. "In the furnace. There'll be nothing left. Then no one will know—but us."

He moved like a man in a stupor, his limbs stiffly reluctant. His soul cried out against this horrible thing, but Fran was jogging his arm, and something else drove him with greater urgency. He swung open the furnace door and peered in.

"It's banked," he muttered. "We'll have to wait. Open the drafts. They won't burn. . . . Leave me alone."

He was torn between a stifling sense of guilt and disaster, and a caustic anger at himself. He should have known better, he told himself bitterly. This was what happened when a man let his emotions go too far off the deep end over some wistful, helpless woman. She got herself into some abysmal trouble, and then you had to get her out. If you didn't love her, you wouldn't bother, of course. You'd simply turn the things over to the sergeant and let justice take its course. But if you loved her—

A crimson glow appeared in the open door as the drafts took effect. Roy crouched on a knee, and tossed in a silken garment. It caught instantly, vanishing in a curl of flame, and for a brief moment he smelled a smell that made his stomach turn over inside of him.

"Give me the rest," he croaked. "One at a time . . ."

The stockings vanished in a puff, leaving nothing but a wisp of ash that writhed on top of the glowing coals. The heavier pieces burned more slowly. He had to wait, lest he choke the fire and leave half charred fragments to tell the awful tale. Kneeling rigid as a statue, he stared with an indescribable expression at a delicately molded slipper.

Fran started, "Can't you—" and then stopped. Raising his head, Roy saw that she had whirled to face the stairs, and to his astonishment saw that she held an automatic in her hand.

"Who's that?" she hissed.

THE man must have taken great care to be quiet, because he was already at the bottom of the steps. He was not tall, but was exceptionally thick through the chest, so that he gave an impression of immense virility. His dark features were handsome in a brutal, aggressive sort of way, though they were scored by the lines of dissipation and marred by a furtive expression around the narrow lips.

"Easy, baby, easy," he murmured, his almond-shaped eyes darting from side to side. "You wouldn't get rough with papa, would you?"

He came toward them slowly, evenly, disregarding the gun in her hand as if it had not been there. Keeping his own hands out of sight in his pockets, he jerked his head toward Roy. "Who is this, the boy friend?" he inquired, in a tone of heavy sarcasm. But before an answer came he saw the slipper in Roy's hand, and the other garments over her arm, and his eyes widened in amazement. "What's that stuff?"

"None of your damned business, Jack," snarled Fran in a whisper as taut as a steel wire. "What the hell do you have to nose around here for?"

Paying no attention, he stretched out a heavily knuckled hand and lifted the edge of a silken slip. His tone was barely audible, when he spoke. "Blood. . . . For God's sake, Fran, what is this?"

She was quivering from head to foot, so that the automatic jerked up and down in her hand. "Get out of here," she grated. "Leave me alone. I know what I'm doing."

He was staring at the slipper. "You weren't wearing those," he murmured, with a calmness that was terrifying. "You had on brown galoshes. I threw them in the river myself." He gave her a sudden, sharp glance, full of curiosity. "Another one, Fran? Two in one week?"

"Shut up, you fool!" she spat at him. "I wasn't the one who pushed him, and you damned well know it! If you try to say I was, I'll let you have it right here!"

He peered at her through narrowed lids. "Damned if I don't think you would! You always had plenty of nerve, Fran. I'd like to know why you're in

such a dither over this thing just now."

She turned her head to glance at Roy; who had risen slowly to his feet. That remark about another one had chilled the blood in his veins. He fixed her with an icy gaze. "Sylvie!" he said, choking on the horror that rose in his throat. "Where is Sylvie?"

"Don't listen to him," said Fran quickly. "He don't know what he's talking about—he's crazy. He's just jealous, that's all."

The man called Jack gave a curt and mirthless snicker. "Jealous?" he wheezed. "Of this punk? So this is who baby has been playing with, eh?" Roy could hear him breathing through his teeth. "Maybe baby has forgotten a few things that Jack remembers."

Roy could see her tense all over like a coiled spring. The gun no longer bobbed in her grip. It was steady, pointing straight for the middle button on Jack's coat. She made no sound, but the heavily rouged lips were drawing back from her teeth in a snarl that was revolting to see on a face that had the right to be called beautiful. Jack suddenly spun on the balls of his feet.

From above their heads came the steady thump of footsteps in the corridor. While they stood, frozen, there were more footsteps, and the muffled sound of knocking. Staring at each other in tense curiosity, they heard the click of a door opening. Then a voice came to them plainly.

"There's a light down here, Sergeant," it said.

That last word, with its obvious connotation, was what sent the blood draining out of Jack's face. He glanced once at the telltale slipper, lying on the concrete floor where Roy had dropped it, and then peered furtively into the corners.

"Let's get out of here," he murmured.

Fran was abruptly cool as ice. "The front, by the alley," she whispered, turning past the furnace.

Roy felt something blunt and hard pressed into his ribs through the pocket of Jack's coat. "You're coming along, punk. You know too much to stay here and blab. Follow her—fast!"

Fran seemed to know as much about

that cellar as she did about the first floor, where she lived. Maybe she had made use of it for clandestine purposes before. She jerked open a door in the side wall and led the way into an alley running from front to back. It was pitch black here. They felt their way with finger tips against the bricks, but Jack's gun was never far from the small of Roy's back.

At the front end, steps led up to the sidewalk. There was enough illumination in the street for them to see two cars, exactly alike, standing at the curb, both empty.

"You came in one of those," said Jack bluntly. "Give me the key."

Roy took as long as he dared fishing it from his pocket.

"Now all together," said Jack. "Like pals. . . . Just bleat once, fella—just once. Keep your rod on him, baby."

They crossed the pavement at a trot, without a sound. Jack slid under the wheel. Fran backed in, holding her automatic out in front of her body. Roy crowded in gingerly. He pulled the door to behind him, but merely held it against his leg without trying to latch it.

The instant the motor started a cry came from inside the foyer. Roy's head jerked back on his neck as Jack threw the gears into mesh. The coupe had supercharged power under the hood, as Roy well knew. It shot down the street as if about to take off and fly. The roar of the motor in first drowned any shouts from behind, but was penetrated by the flat crack of a shot. Roy also knew well

that the first shot, in such a situation, would be one of warning, fired into the air. Before he heard a second they took a corner on squealing tires and Jack shifted gears without losing an ounce of momentum.

AT FIRST Roy thought that they had gotten away clean, but after a few moments he heard the wail of a siren, somewhere behind them. The man at the wheel heard it too; he leaned far forward and tramped the accelerator to the floor. He whirled two corners, then gathered speed on a straight stretch. When he caught a glint of light in the mirror, he locked the brakes and reeled into the first side street with all four wheels sliding. Roy heard him mutter a curse.

He lost track of their location and their direction almost at once. The driver himself apparently was paying no heed to where he was going, just so long as he went there rapidly enough to outdistance the pursuit. After he had lost them would be time enough to choose a route.

The coupe swooped out onto another broad avenue, and nearly collided with a taxi which was pulling out of a group of cabs at the curb. Jack cursed again, viciously. Those drivers would tip off the cops to his direction. In quick succession he snaked around three corners, once going up over the curb and behind a lamp post. The street he was on now was narrow and dark, lined with the blank facades of warehouses. He had not switched on the lights of the coupe. Roy's sensation was that of being borne



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Ward Dental Lab., 936 W. 63rd St., Dept. 50-G, Chicago, Ill.

Dime Detective Magazine

through a canyon on a rushing torrent. The car gained speed again. Squinting, Roy tried to make out what was ahead.

Suddenly he let out a wild yell of warning, and his toes involuntarily dug into the floor boards. The savage application of the brakes threw his body forward, and the car careened as the driver twisted the wheel. Centrifugal force threw Roy's door open, and he was half out on the running board, clutching desperately for a hold on something, anything. But a terrific jolt broke his frantic grip, and he hurtled through the air. Out and down he flew, making one complete turn, and hitting the surface of the water on his shoulder, so that he did not sink deep. His head came up while the tremendous splash thrown by the car was still spattering down. Gasping for breath, he saw the coupe floating for a moment or two on its side, and even had a glimpse of hands struggling madly with the inside handle of a door. The left-hand door, on the driver's side—the one he had not had time to fix before responding to Fran's urgent plea. . . .

Pulled down by its own weight, the coupe disappeared beneath the oily surface of the East River. By the time he had swum to the end of the pier and dragged himself up the rungs there, the bubbles had stopped rising from the black depths. . . .

SERGEANT VOLK asked: "Did you think that was blood?" He shifted his bulk in Sylvie's one and only armchair and sniffed in derision. "What kind of a detective will you make? Strawberry syrup, if you ask me. But the laboratory will be able to tell us. There's enough on this one slipper for forty tests."

"Strawberry syrup?" growled Roy, pulling Sylvie's bathrobe closer about his damp shins. "Why strawberry syrup?"

"She wanted to hang it on the little one," said the sergeant, with a knowing grin. "I guess the tall one was sort of stuck on you, eh?"

Roy flushed uncomfortably. "She was crazy!" he declared.

"She was a bad number, that Fran,"

(Continued on page 108)

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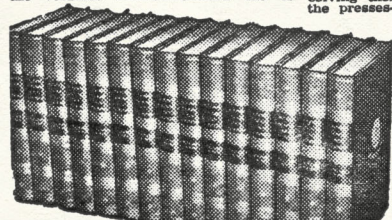
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(Continued from page 106)

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28x5.25-18	2.45	1.15
28x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
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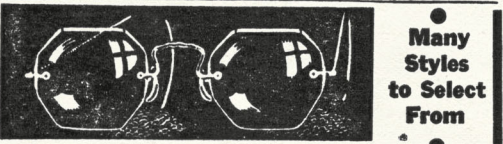
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the sergeant told him. "We found she had done a term in Bedford Hills, for shoplifting. This Jackman, whose real name was Schachman, was the fence who backed her. When she was discharged a few months ago, she came to town and planted herself on her cousin, bringing trouble in the door with her from the first. Jackman looked her up, of course, and wanted her to case some bigger jobs for him. This uncle of yours was a natural. Without meaning any harm, the little one here spilled all the dope, as she'd heard it from you. I don't suppose they intended murder. When the old fellow passed out, it must have been quite a shock. Not enough to stop them from giving the bungalow a thorough going over, though."

"I don't think they got much for their pains," said Roy.

"We'll find out, when that coupe is dredged up, tomorrow."

Roy shook his head. "I'll bet there won't be enough to pay the cost of the dredging," he said with conviction. "Why, Uncle Caleb had even borrowed to the hilt on that last little insurance policy. He wouldn't have done that if he'd had a lot of cash hidden in the house, would he?" Roy was looking at Sylvie, perched on the end of a day-bed, still looking scared and bewildered and helpless. "No, there's no fortune coming to me from Uncle Caleb."

She smiled a little, for the first time. "I'm glad, Roy," she said, so softly that he barely heard her. "It only makes trouble—money. And I guess I've brought you trouble enough, haven't I?"

He stared at her as if he saw her for the first time. "Yes," he said slowly. "You've brought enough trouble, all right. It seems to be part of you, doesn't it? You certainly need someone to help take care of your troubles for you, Sylvie. You'll never be able to handle them alone. I was just thinking . . ."

He paused uncertainly. The sergeant jumped to his feet. "I've got to go see how they're making out, down on the pier," he announced. "See you two later."

Roy didn't see him go.

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 chiselers 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.

IT WAS inevitable, of course, that the war in its innumerable ramifications should beget a vast variety of rackets—petty and some not so petty—directed at harassed refugees, their friends and people who have no direct personal contact with anyone involved in Europe but whose hearts and sympathies are just more developed than their cynicism or skepticism. Here's a nasty swindle that's been going the rounds—particularly vicious in that it might conceivably sour on all causes—counterfeit as well as genuine—potential contributors to worthy and legitimate causes.

Columbus, Ohio.

Dear Sir:

American hearts are big and American heads are often ruled by emotion. Because this is so, this clever and timely racket is proving effective in various parts of the country. If you are a business man or a person of substance you may be approached at any time.

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All Greek business men, importers and others, whatever their line, have pledged themselves to co-operate. This way: For your interest and help you'll receive a nicely engraved card proclaiming you a Friend of Greece. The air of the thing is carried to a fine point by Greek letters that appear thereon. The sample he shows you carries the likeness of a prominent person—perhaps the Mayor—and inferentially you are led to believe that worthy has lent his support to the drive. These cards, it is explained, entitle you to trade at cost with any Greek business in this country, for this

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Dime Detective Magazine

has been pledged through co-operation with the Greek Embassy in Washington.

You may be so situated that the only thing that comes to mind is hat-cleaning and blocking or an occasional ice cream, then again you may do business with importers. Be that as it may, your "contribution" is governed accordingly, whether it be \$25.00 or several hundred.

The psychology of this is almost perfect—for are not the valiant Greek people themselves footing the bill ultimately? Are they not fighting for things you believe in, putting up a heart-warming battle? Thus persuaded, it takes little salesmanship on the part of the racketeer to separate you from money that might well go to some truly worthy cause.

In one case a business man called the Mayor's office while the racketeer sat entirely at ease beside him. The Mayor was out of town, and not until later did the man realize—to one hundred dollars worth of his sorrow—that the racketeer had known and counted upon this fact. Thinking back, it became evident he had been "steered" into making the call!

Pat Mershon.

AND here's one equally unpleasant, in that it trades on the friendliness people instinctively have for children. The rats who are perverting juvenile innocence to stuff their own pockets are still operating in the Middle West. Watch out for them!

Detroit, Mich.

Gentlemen:

"Mister, where do I pay this bill for my Aunt? She asked me—"

The floorwalker looked down at the youngster. He was about fourteen, maybe a little less, with laughing brown eyes and a crinkly smile. "Come along, sonny. I'll fix you right up."

At the cashier's office on the mezzanine floor the kid put down a monthly statement and an endorsed check for considerably more than the amount of the bill. They asked him a few routine questions which he answered without difficulty. He was such a nice mannerly little fellow that the store employees were much taken. Just how much taken they did not know until days later when the check came back from the Clearing House—through their Bank—prominently marked in red ink: "Fraudulent." It came to them as somewhat of a shock that their mannerly little boy was in reality a cleverly coached tool in the hands of a gang of forgers.

A routine police report revealed that almost every store of consequence in the city had thus been victimized! A detective of the forgery detail sighed wearily: "People will never learn. Just because the bill presented was genuine and the kid seemed be-

Ready for the Rackets

yond any double-dealing, they pay out good money for a piece of worthless paper. Crooks have nothing to do but cook up angles. This one is simple. They make the rounds of better apartment houses, rifle mailboxes to get monthly statements, execute a batch of very pretty but utterly worthless checks and start the lad out on his rounds."

Naturally, there was a belated warning. It came too late to be effective here. Can't you imagine these racketeers laughing, as one says to the other: "A little child shall lead them—to a clipping."

Ingenious indeed, this one may pop up in your town next time. Forewarned is forearmed!

Cordially,
Mrs. F. G. Stills.

"VANITY, vanity," said the preacher, "all is vanity!" That was a good many centuries ago but his dictum holds just as true today as it did then. The two chisel set-ups revealed below both stem from the same inherent weakness in mankind—and will continue to flourish no doubt as long as the race.

Los Angeles, Calif.

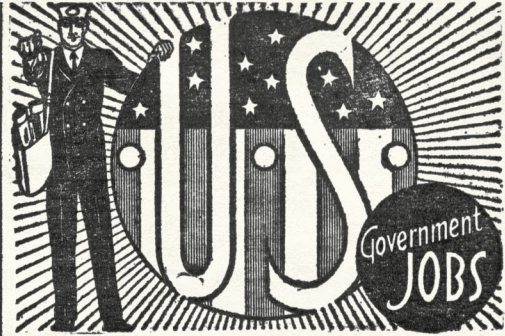
Dear Sir:

I am told by itinerant newspapermen that this racket is an ancient one and rarely attempted these days. It concerns my Uncle George of Marysville, California. For obvious reasons, I have falsified his name and address.

Like most Americans, Uncle George couldn't help envying movie stars, lecturers, politicians and brass hats in general who are so famous they must needs subscribe to news clipping bureaus to keep abreast of what is being said about them in the public print. And, since Uncle George is by way of being something of a celebrity himself in certain community and civic affairs, he was naturally flattered, instead of suspicious, when the letter arrived from the "Stellar Clipping Service" of Chicago.

"We have available," it stated pompously on an aristocratic letterhead, "certain clippings covering your recent activities. Should you wish to receive them, please forward our service fee of \$2.97 . . ."

It didn't occur to Uncle George that legitimate bonafide clipping bureaus contract with the client *before* they do their clipping, rather than afterward. He only reflected that he *was* pretty darned active in a lot of local affairs and modestly decided that some of his best speeches must have been reprinted in the eastern papers—Chicago and New York, perhaps. He bunged a money order into the mails and rushed out to notify his closest pals that sweet fame at last was on the way. Appreciation was around the corner!



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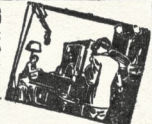
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 Frontier Asthma Co.
 462 Niagara St.,

142-H Frontier Bldg.
Buffalo, N. Y.

112

Dime Detective Magazine

Finally, with Uncle George nigh to bursting with suspense, the clippings arrived. Three of them. Beautifully mounted on yellow paper, with the date of publication and the newspaper noted neatly at the top of each page.

But there was no joy in the heart of Uncle George.

For all three clippings were exactly alike. Each one reported a speech he had made a few weeks before at a luncheon club meeting. And each yellow page bore at the top the notification that each clipping had been taken from his hometown paper, and not from the Chicago Tribune or New York American, as Uncle George had so fondly hoped and quite naturally expected!

Human nature being what it is, Uncle George endeavored to forget the incident. He couldn't admit the truth to any of his friends. And he was afraid to protest for fear the unpleasant facts would get around town. So he was just out a little self-respect and \$2.97, as were thousands of other gullible and overly-confident persons throughout the nation, doubtless. And probably, though Uncle George never investigated, his "clipping" bureau was clever enough to change its name and location after each "killing" made with excerpts from thousands of smalltown newspapers every month or so.

Very sincerely yours,
 Vern Partlow.

AND this one from the West also. They follow a definite pattern, after the fleeing, in that neither fleecy mentioned much about how he'd been taken. Don't think the chisel-artists don't know their human psychology and count on such silence—at least for long enough to permit them to get well away and into untilled fields for further activity.

Butte, Montana.

Gentlemen:

Here's a fast one put over by a smooth article who made Butte the seat of his operations last summer. Almost a tenth of the baldheaded residents of the town proved easy victims. Many of them haven't yet woke up and are still diligently rubbing an oily, smelly concoction onto their shiny pates hoping against hope.

The slicker, 45, personable, affable and the possessor of an unusually luxuriant growth of chestnut hair sans the slightest trace of gray, obtained work at a prominent garage as a machinist.

The soul of conviviality, his spare time was spent around the bars of the town's many taverns. Invariably he could be found standing at the bar alongside some bald-headed individual with whom he usually managed to engage in conversation.

Ready for the Rackets

Always the trend of their talk was cleverly turned to the subject of hair, the intended victim gently being led on to tell the sad story as to the premature loss of his locks. Hereupon the con man was sympathy personified, and after a few more drinks was ready to play his trump card, the trump being a faded postcard snapshot of himself evidently taken several years previous, and picturing the slicker as bald as the proverbial billiard ball. Of course the photo was a plant and had been made with the aid of a theatrical wig. But the victim was blissfully unaware of this.

The slicker then went on to state that the snapshot showed the condition of his scalp ten years before, when he had made the acquaintance of an eccentric German chemist in Milwaukee, who through friendliness had given him a preparation of his own making, that in six months' time had restored his hair to its present luxurious condition.

No, for some eccentric reason, the German had never marketed the preparation. Yes, the slicker had his address and upon persuasion allowed he might possibly obtain a supply of the restorer for his new-found friend. Of course, the German was in none too good circumstances and most likely would appreciate some slight remuneration—ten dollars—twenty—or whatever amount he surmised the victim's bank-roll would stand. As a gesture of friendship, the con man would mail the German his own personal check, and when the preparation arrived he would be only too glad to deliver it to the victim's address, at which time his bald friend could reimburse him.

In a week or so, he was at the victim's address with a plain, unlabeled, half-pint bottle containing an oily mixture that at least had the odor of hair-restorer. It would take six months, and in some cases longer, he explained, before any appreciable results might be expected. If, in the meantime, the small bottle was used up, the victim had the con man's address and he would be only too glad to send for more. Of course, he intimated, his friend would keep the matter a secret as he did not wish to be annoyed by all the bald-headed men of Butte.

Day after day—victim after victim—each paid out varying amounts for bottle after bottle of the mixture, the ingredients which later were found to have been purchased from an eastern wholesale barber supply company at a cost of about sixty cents a gallon. In six months' time the slicker had disappeared and was operating in a new locality.

I was one of his victims to the tune of \$35, as were several of my friends for equal amounts. It was but recently, that in comparing notes, and checking up with his ex-landlady, that we discovered that upon departing he had left behind several dozen gallon jugs, all empty, that had once con-

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Dime Detective Magazine

tained a cheap, but popular brand of hair tonic. His take during his sojourn in Butte must have been in the thousands. I don't think any of his victims as much as ever peeped to the police.

William A. Burke.

WE'RE all fair game for the con man and his crew—high and low alike—and here's one that put the bee on some of our politicians. They probably had just as bad heads the morning after as they would have if they'd got delivery of the bubbly.

Columbus, Ohio.

Dear Sir:

Proof that those in high places are not immune, is the following, for it has caused a number of red faces in Washington among Congressmen and Senators!

He was a hail fellow well-met, with graying hair and the grand manner. A shipping man, he said, in the nation's capital on official business. Residing at one of the better hotels he naturally encountered numerous law-makers.

Once his easy flow of conversation about the shipping problem had established his position rather firmly—along with his patriotism, of course—the rest was a comparatively simple matter.

"Say, that reminds me. I was down to Martinique recently, and while in Fort-de-France the Governor made it possible for me to get a hundred cases of French champagne of the finest brands. I'd consider it an honor to present you with several cases: where could I send it?"

If the victim was agreeable to receiving this obvious token of appreciation for his effort in helping steer the ship of state in these times, the subject was dropped—for then. Always it came up later. Like this.

The sharper would seem suddenly to think of something—something that was hard to say. Ultimately he would get it out. "I just remembered; the duty on that champagne hasn't been paid, you wouldn't mind . . ."

Since they were presumably getting something for nothing, of course they wouldn't. A number of them—both Congressmen and Senators reached for checkbooks while the convincing stranger glibly stated the amount to cover the import duty. One or two others did not allow themselves to be roped in, but admitted they came perilously close to it.

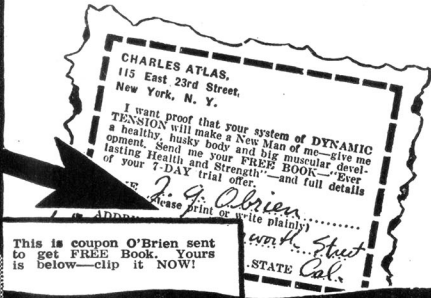
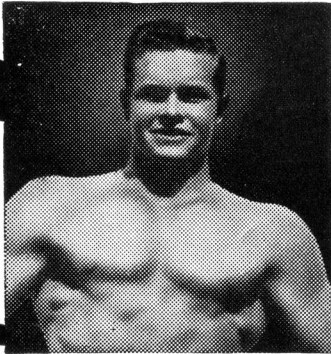
It sounded so authentic. The wine was on the man's yacht down on the bay at Baltimore; he was offering them what amounted to a gift and it would be almost rude to refuse to pay the few dollars per case duty. Oh, it was neat all right. And of course it was phoney.

D. J. Johnston.

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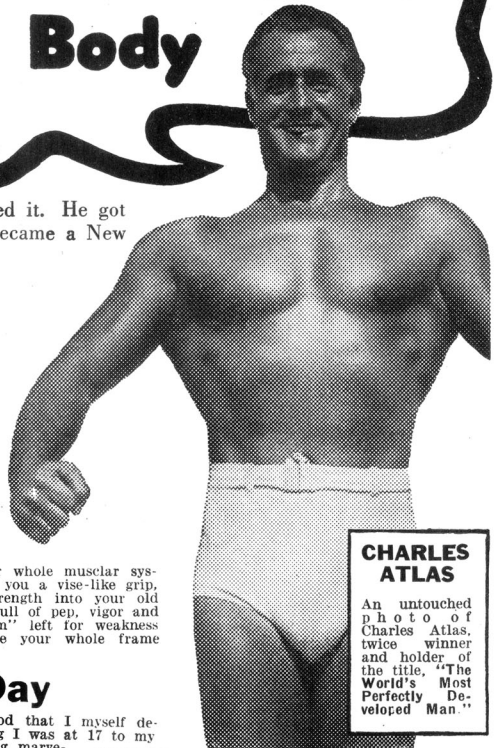
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