

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE



OCTOBER

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

**THE
CORPSE THAT
WASN'T THERE**

*AN
INSPECTOR ALLHOFF
STORY*

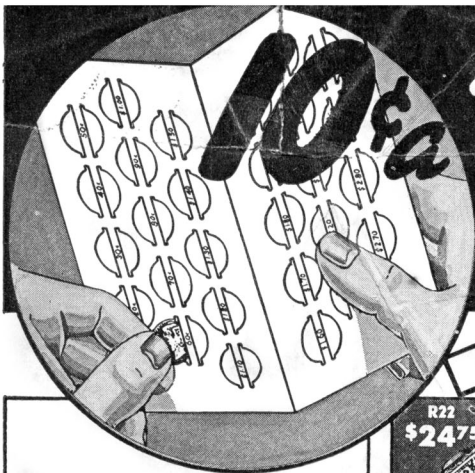
by **D. L. CHAMPION**

**COME UP AND
KILL ME
SOME TIME**

*A "BAIL-BOND" DODD
NOVELETTE*

by **NORBERT
DAVIS**

**T. T. FLYNN
CORNELL WOOLRICH
AND OTHERS**



10¢ a Day buys a Watch

on Our SAVINGS BOOK PLAN

BULOVA ELGIN GRUEN KENT BENRUS

Yes—only 10¢ a day on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN will buy your choice of these nationally known watches. It's simple—here's how you go about it...

WHAT YOU DO:

Send coupon below with a dollar bill and a brief note telling me who you are, your occupation, and a few other facts about yourself. Indicate the watch you want on coupon, giving number and price.

WHAT I'LL DO:

I'll open an account for you on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN, send the watch you want for approval and

10-DAY TRIAL

If satisfied, you pay 10 monthly payments. If you are not satisfied after wearing the watch for ten days, send it back and I'll return your dollar on our

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

A Savings Book will be sent to you to help you save your dime each day. YOU PAY MONTHLY by money order or check. Try this easy, convenient method that has helped thousands to own fine watches without burden on the pocket book or savings.

Jim Feeney

FREE TO ADULTS

A postcard brings my complete 48-page catalogue and full details on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN. No obligation.



JIM FEENEY
L. W. Sweet—Dept. 11-K, 1670 Broadway
New York, N. Y.

Enclosed find \$1 deposit. Send me Watch No. _____ Price \$ _____. I agree to wear the watch for 10 days. If not satisfied, I'll return it and you will refund my dollar. If I keep it, I'll pay balance in 10 equal monthly payments.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

R22
\$2475

M17
\$2475

R22 - Ladies' BULOVA; 17 J. 10K yel. gold plate. \$24.75
M17 - Man's BULOVA; 15 J. 10K yel. rolled gold plate case; bracelet. \$24.75
\$1 deposit \$2.38 a month

L140
\$3750

S141
\$3750

L140 - Ladies' ELGIN; 17 J. 10K yel. gold filled case. \$37.50
S141 - Man's ELGIN—sturdy 10K yellow gold filled case; 17 jewels. \$37.50
\$1 deposit \$3.65 a month

P145
\$1595

K166
\$1595

P145 - Ladies' tiny KENT. 7 jewels. Guaranteed. \$15.95
K166 - Man's KENT. Guaranteed. 10K yellow rolled gold plate case; 7 jewels. \$15.95
\$1 deposit \$1.50 a month

\$2975

T67

O68
\$2975

T67 - Ladies' GRUEN. 15 J. 10K yel. rolled gold plate. \$29.75
O68 - Man's GRUEN Verithin; 15 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate. \$29.75
\$1 deposit \$2.88 a month

K273
\$1975

T567
\$1975

K273 - Service Watch - new radium dial, easy-to-see. 7 Jewels, sturdy 10K yellow rolled gold plate case. Made especially for Army and Navy men.
\$1 deposit \$1.98 a month

\$1975

T567

O564
\$1975

T567 - BENRUS for Ladies. 7 jewels, 10K gold plate; bracelet. \$19.75
O564 - Man's BENRUS: 17 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate; leather strap. \$19.75
\$1 deposit \$1.88 a month

L.W. Sweet

MAIL ORDER DIVISION OF FINLAY STRAUS, Inc.
Dept. **11-K** 1670 BROADWAY, NEW YORK



I jumped from \$18 a week to \$50
-- a Free Book started me toward this
GOOD PAY IN RADIO

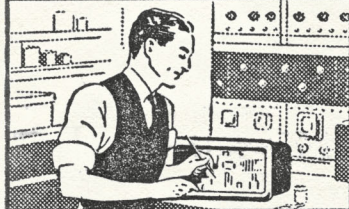
Here's how I did it
 by S. J. E.
 (NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)



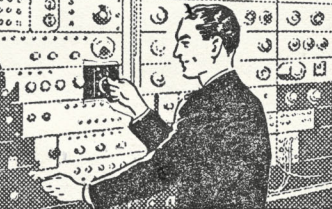
"I had an \$18 a week job in a shoe factory, but desired to make more money and continue my education. I read about Radio opportunities and enrolled with the National Radio Institute."



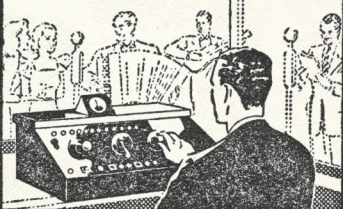
"The instruction I received was so practical I was soon able to earn \$5 to \$10 a week in spare time servicing Radios. This paid for the N.R.I. Course and led to service work paying for my college education."



"Radio servicing permitted me to attend school and work evenings and week-ends. Upon completing the N.R.I. Course I was made Service Manager at \$40 to \$50 a week, more than twice my shoe factory wage."



"Later the N.R.I. Graduate Service Department sent me to Station KWCL as a Radio Operator. Now I am Radio Engineer of Station WSUI and connected with Television Station W9XK."



"The N.R.I. Course took me out of a low-pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay; enabled me to earn funds for a college education. There's a promising future for thoroughly trained Radio men."



Find out today how I Train You at Home
to BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN

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

Here is a quick way to more pay. Radio offers the chance to make \$3, \$10 a week extra in spare time a few months from now. There is an increasing demand for full time Radio Technicians and Radio Operators, too. Many make \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. On top of record business, the Radio Industry is getting millions and millions of dollars in Defense Orders. Clip the coupon below and mail it. Find out how I train you for these opportunities.

Real Opportunities For Beginners To Learn Then Earn Up to \$50 a Week

Over 800 broadcasting stations in the U. S. employ thousands of Radio Technicians with average pay among the country's best paid industries. Repairing, servicing, selling home and auto Radio receivers (there are over 50,000,000 in use) gives good jobs to thousands. Many other Radio Technicians take advantage of the opportunities to have their own service or retail Radio business. Think

of the many good pay jobs in connection with Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Public Address Systems. N. R. I. gives you the required knowledge of Radio for those jobs. N. R. I. trains you to be ready when Television opens new jobs. Yes, Radio Technicians make good money because they use their heads as well as their hands. They must be trained. Many are getting special ratings in the Army and Navy; extra rank and pay.

I'll Show You How To Make Up To \$10 a Week Extra In Spare Time While Learning

Nearly every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments

that give you valuable practical experience. You also get a modern Professional Radio Servicing Instrument. My fifty-fifty method—half working with Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

Find Out How I Train You For Good Pay In Radio

Mail the coupon below. I'll send my 64-page book FREE. It tells about my Course; the types of jobs in the different branches of Radio; shows letters from more than 100 of the men I trained so you can see what they are doing, earning. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or paste on a penny postal.

J. E. SMITH, President
 Dept. IK59, National Radio Institute
 Washington, D. C.

THIS FREE BOOK HAS SHOWN HUNDREDS HOW TO MAKE GOOD MONEY

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. IK59.
 National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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

Age.....

Name

Address

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



Extra Pay In Army, Navy, Too



Every man likely to go into military service—every soldier, sailor, marine, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty at pay up to 6 times private's or seaman's base pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. IT'S SMART TO TRAIN FOR RADIO NOW!

10[¢] DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 37 CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER, 1941 No. 3

2—SMASHING COMPLETE SERIES NOVELETTES—2

Watch Inspector Allhoff play hide-end-peek with

The Corpse That Wasn't There.....D. L. Champion 10
As Officers Simmonds and Battersly, starting out two jumps and two clues ahead of their legless nemesis, determine to win promotion and escape from the crippled coffee-drunkard—only to find their red-hot clues turning as cold as the murder victim's corpse and Allhoff laughing last as usual.

Spend a night in the clink with "Bail Bond" Dodd and meet Sadie Wade whose

Come Up and Kill Me Some Time.....Norbert Davis 29
Attitude gave the hapless bond-broker a fifty-grand headache when she skipped her bail, and left him holding the sack not only for the dough but an explanation of the bump-off of a vice-squad copper.

2—THRILL-PACKED MIDNIGHT MURDER NOVELETTES—2

Study with little Johnny Gaines as he learns about

Murder at Mother's Knee.....Cornell Woolrich 53
Writes it up for his school lesson and draws his teacher into the middle of a one-woman manhunt when she decides his paper needs correcting in more ways than with a blue pencil.

Take a

Salt Water Slay-Ride.....T. T. Flynn 84
With half-pint Sisco Jones as he sets out with gun and camera to photograph a Florida fishing catch that turned out to be one dead man in a boat where two live anglers and a prize tuna should have been.

A GRIPPING SHORT ACME INDEMNITY OP STORY

Find the answer to the

Death With Father.....Jan Dana 70
That tore Ivers City apart from the moment the insurance dick stepped off the train onto the station platform till the curtain went down on the last act of the Quartermaine family blood-feud.

And—

We want to know if you are

Ready for the Rackets.....A Department 6
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 November Thrill Docket..... 6

Some of the sure-fire hits scheduled for production in the next DIME DETECTIVE.

Cover—"Two Figures in the Window Blasted at My Car."

From *Death With Father*.

Black-and-white illustrations by John Fleming Gould

Watch for the November Issue

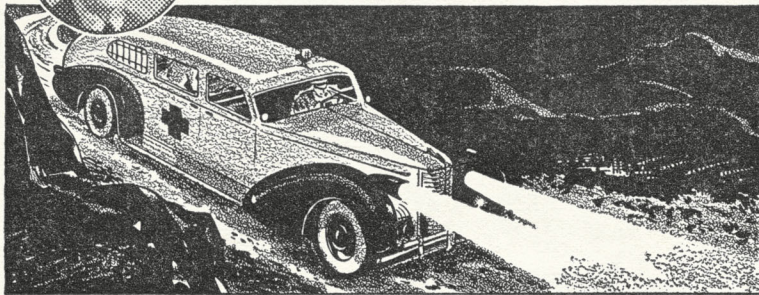
On the Newsstands October 3rd

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"WE RACED DEATH DOWN A MOUNTAIN SIDE!"

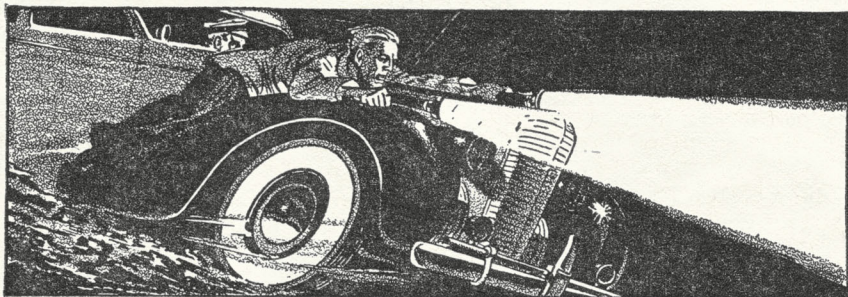
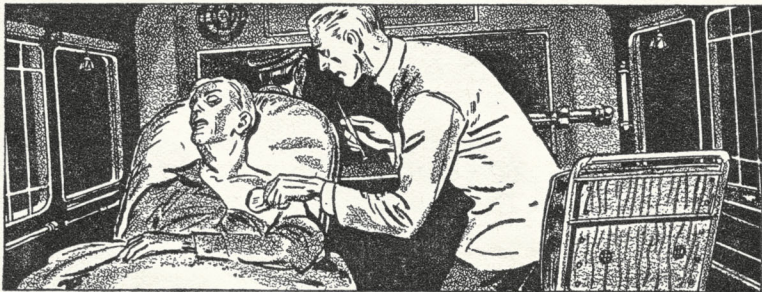


A true experience of male nurse GROVER C. BIRCHFIELD, Los Angeles, Calif.



"WE WERE RUSHING A CARDIAC CASE by ambulance to the hospital one dark night," writes Mr. Birchfield. "We were two thousand feet up on a winding mountain road and six miles from our goal, when all lights blew out.

"THE PATIENT WAS AT DEATH'S DOOR. I gave him a shot of adrenalin, but I knew with horrible certainty that unless he reached the hospital quickly he could not live. Yet we dared not move without lights.



"THEN, I REMEMBERED OUR FLASHLIGHTS! Lying on a front fender, I played their bright beams on the road while the car careened down the mountain. Thanks to dependable 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries, we won our race against death.

(Signed) *Grover C. Birchfield*

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



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

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



The November Thrill Docket

AS a private gun for prohibition fuehrers who are now mainly in blocks of cement or Alcatraz and, since then, as the Cash Wale Investigation Service, I have been hired to commit practically every shenanigan from polite blackmail to homicide. But never before had a client begged me to measure him for a coffin, put him in it and see that he stayed there.

And it was the first time a refugee from a nut factory made me play marbles with him and like it.

That's the way *Local Corpse Makes Good* gets off on its cadaverous way and believe us, it's a coffin-carload of thrills from that point right through to the burial party 15,000 words later. PETER PAIGE has crashed through once again with another gripping complete novelette about the diminutive Cash and his butterfly-brained sidekick in assorted trouble, Sailor Duffy—plus the screwiest conglomeration of wacks that were ever garnered out of a nuthouse and stored under one roof. The Stroud family, with their lives and loves and deaths will give you the most exciting crime-fiction fest in months.

They'll Kill Again brings back MERLE CONSTINER'S nonesuch duo, the Dean and his ex-safecracker cohort, Ben Matthews, to unravel the fabulous murder sequence which began with a fortune found in the sweatband of an ancient panama hat and ended with a man in a buckskin vest consulting an expert in phthiozoics (we had to look it up, too!) and learning about murder the hard way. It's the author at his best and the Dean in fine fettle with his Magnum, his brain and that storehouse of imponderables that make him the last court of appeal when the police get jammed up with an unorthodox killer.

Then C. P. DONNEL, Jr. is on deck once more with another gripping story of Colonel Kaspir of Section 5; and HUGH B. CAVE and O. B. MYERS with shorts.

This great NOVEMBER issue will be on sale OCTOBER 3rd.

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.

HERE'S another one of those nasty swindles aimed at people seeking to find honest, steady work that will bring in a decent income. It's particularly vicious for the type of individual who suffers is the one least able to stand a loss.

The Racket Editor,
Dime Detective Magazine,
New York, New York

Dear Sir:

'Wanted: Girl between twenty and thirty years of age. Must be attractive and free to travel. Salary \$40 per week and expenses. Apply after 8:00 A.M. this morning to Mr. Dash, Blank Hotel, L. A.'

The above advertisement, inserted in one of Los Angeles' leading morning papers, introduced one of the slickest rackets yet to hit the west coast.

After having made certain the ad will appear the following morning, a personable young man, smartly dressed and carrying expensive luggage, registers at the Blank Hotel; Los Angeles' most prominent one. He introduces himself as Mr. Dash, and tells the clerk he is expecting a number of women to apply to him for employment the next morning. Would the clerk see to it that they wait in the lobby, sending them up one by one as he calls? This being a common occurrence (besides Mr. Dash pays two days in advance) the clerk agrees.

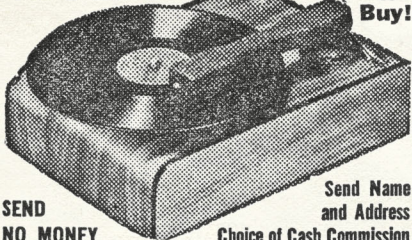
The following procedure is gone through with each girl. As she enters the room, Mr. Dash tells her he would certainly like to give her a chance, but he regrets he has half-way promised the job to another girl. Disappointed, the job-seeker starts to leave. Mr. Dash calls her back.

"You seem to be just what I want," he says, "maybe I will give you a chance." He then goes on to explain he represents a large necktie house. They want a girl free to travel with him, no strings attached, to sell neckties. She must be attractive, because their firm specializes in quality merchandise, catering to lawyers and business men. Many times a good-looking woman

(Continued on page 8)

GIVEN

Nothing to Buy!



SEND

NO MONEY

Wireless Record Player.

No Radio Connections

Send Name and Address

Choice of Cash Commission

Plays Through Radio. Just Plug In Electric Outlet . . . Thrilling!

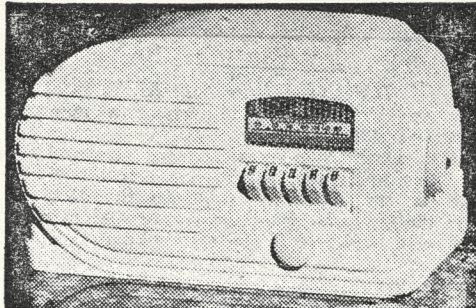
SIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE beautiful Pictures with well known **WHITE CLOVERINE** Brand SALVE used for chaps and mild burns easily sold to friends and neighbors at 25c a box (with **FREE** Picture) and remit per catalog. Our 46th yr. Be first. Mail Coupon Now! **WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. 910, TYRONE, PA.**

GIVEN

NOTHING TO BUY

SEND NO MONEY

Send Name and Address
Choice of Cash Commission



Famous Belmont 5 tube Superhet 5 station Radio. No outside aerial or ground required. Complete—**SIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE** beautiful Pictures with well known **WHITE CLOVERINE** Brand SALVE used for chaps and mild burns easily sold to friends and neighbors at 25c a box (with **FREE** Picture) and remit per catalog. Our 46th yr. Be first. We are fair and square. Mail Coupon Now! **WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. 911, TYRONE, PA.**

GIVEN

NOTHING TO BUY!



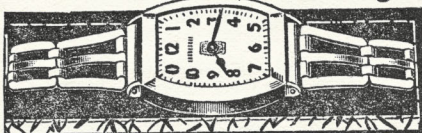
Send No Money—Send Name and Address—Choice of Cash Commission

SIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE beautiful Pictures with well known **WHITE CLOVERINE** Brand SALVE used for chaps and mild burns easily sold to friends and neighbors at 25c a box (with **FREE** picture) and remit per catalog. Our 46th yr. Be first. Mail Coupon Now! **WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. 912, TYRONE, PA.**

FAMOUS IVER JOHNSON 22 CAL. RIFLE

GIVEN

SEND NAME AND ADDRESS
CHOICE OF CASH COMMISSION
Nothing to Buy!



Send No Money

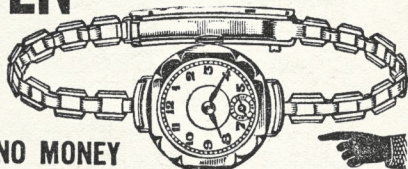
ATTRACTIVE WATCH for LADIES, BOYS, GIRLS---

SIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE beautiful Pictures with well known **WHITE CLOVERINE** Brand SALVE used for chaps and mild burns easily sold to friends and neighbors at 25c a box (with **FREE** picture) and remit per catalog. One to three boxes sold many homes. Our 46th yr. Be first. Mail Coupon Now! **WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. 913, TYRONE, PA.**

GIVEN

SEND NAME AND ADDRESS
CHOICE OF CASH COMMISSION

Nothing to Buy!



SEND NO MONEY

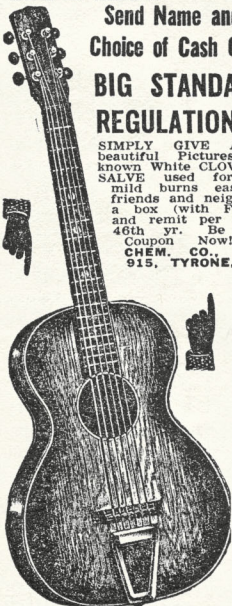
WATCH About Size of a Dime for Ladies, Girls---

SIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE beautiful Pictures with well known **WHITE CLOVERINE** Brand SALVE used for chaps and mild burns easily sold to friends and neighbors at 25c a box (with **FREE** Picture) and remit per catalog. Our 46th yr. We are fair, square and reliable. Be first. Mail Coupon Now! **WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. 914, TYRONE, PA.**

GIVEN

NOTHING TO BUY!
SEND NO MONEY

Send Name and Address
Choice of Cash Commission
**BIG STANDARD SIZE
REGULATION GUITAR**



SIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE beautiful Pictures with well known **WHITE CLOVERINE** Brand SALVE used for chaps and mild burns easily sold to friends and neighbors at 25c a box (with **FREE** picture) and remit per catalog. Our 46th yr. Be first. Mail Coupon Now! **WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. 915, TYRONE, PA.**

Special!

Choice of 25 premiums like telescopes, curtains, pocket watches, cameras, aluminumware for selling only 12 boxes of SALVE (with **FREE** Pictures) and returning only the \$3 collected. **W. C. Co., Tyrone, Pa.** Mail Coupon!

GIVEN

Nothing to Buy! Send No Money

SEND NAME AND ADDRESS - - CHOICE OF CASH COMMISSION—**Famous Rem-Rand Full Keyboard Portable Typewriter With Case and Instructions-Mail Coupon!**



SIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE beautiful Pictures with well known **WHITE CLOVERINE** Brand SALVE used for chaps and mild burns easily sold to friends and neighbors at 25c a box (with **FREE** Picture) and remit per catalog. Our 46th yr. Be first. Mail Coupon Now! **WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. 916, TYRONE, PA.**

GIVEN

Nothing to Buy!
Send No Money
Send Name and Address
Choice of Cash Commission

Bikes for boys, girls. Fully equipped. Great! **SIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE** beautiful Pictures with well known **WHITE CLOVERINE** Brand SALVE used for chaps and mild burns easily sold to friends and neighbors at 25c a box (with **FREE** Picture) and remit per catalog. Our 46th yr. Be first. Mail Coupon Now! **WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. 917, TYRONE, PA.**



MAIL COUPON

Wilson Chem. Co., Inc., Tyrone, Pa. Premium Division, Dept. PP-91, Date
Gentlemen: Please send me 12 beautiful art pictures with 12 boxes **WHITE CLOVERINE** Brand SALVE to sell at 25c a box (giving popular picture **FREE**). I will remit within 30 days, select a premium or keep cash commission as per catalog sent with order, postage paid.

NAME

RD or BOX No. ST.

TOWN STATE

Print Your Last Name Only in Spaces Below:

WRITE, or PASTE COUPON ON A POSTAL

(Continued from page 6)

can see these customers, where a man wouldn't stand a chance.

Mr. Dash then produces ten assorted neckties, and tells the girl if she wants to she can try her hand at selling these for one dollar each. See how many she can sell. He intimates if she sells all ten he'll give her the job. She is to report back before five that afternoon.

The girl jumps at the chance. As she starts to leave with the ties, Mr. Dash calls her back once more. He gives her a dollar to cover street car and lunch. Naturally, this boosts Mr. Dash in the girl's estimation. He then has her sign a slip, carefully turned half over, receipting the money, explaining he has to turn it in on his expense account. What the job-seeker does not know, is the turned over half is worded she has received payment for one day's work.

After leaving, the girl does exactly what Mr. Dash expects her to. With visions of forty dollars a week, plus all expenses, the girl unloads her ties on all relatives. In many cases, she buys them herself in order to make a good showing.

Returning with the money to the hotel, Mr. Dash is delighted with her. Still, the other two girls, he explains, haven't returned as yet. Will she please contact him at nine the following morning?

Mr. Dash, of course, is far removed the following day.

With at least fifteen girls bringing in a total of one hundred and fifty dollars, the ties not costing him over ten cents each, his hotel and newspaper expense added, Mr. Dash cleans over one hundred dollars for a day's haul.

The added tightness in his scheme being the girl's signature for one day's wages, in case she raises a howl at not being hired right after her return that afternoon.

Sincerely,
James Barr

Neckties, hosiery and gloves have all been used as items of merchandise in working the racket. Watch out for it.

AND here's another one that's been going the rounds lately, particularly in the Middle West. We've had several reports of its successful operation and can expect it to be tried elsewhere as the build-up is peculiarly suited to catch the unwitting, the times being what they are

with all of us anxious to swell the chests of worthy war charities.

The Racket Editor
Dime Detective Magazine
205 East 42nd Street
New York, New York
Dear Sir:

One day recently, local hospitals and other charitable institutions—even the "Bundles for Britain" headquarters—were the recipients of an unusual number of donations. These being in the form of bundles of merchandise. Throughout the day, trucks from various department and other stores made their deliveries.

The persons in charge of our different charities—albeit, thankful for—were beginning to wonder who could be responsible for this kindly display of generosity. With each contribution there was an identifying card, but the name thereon inscribed was not among the list of regular contributors. Their wonderment was short-lived, however.

Two days later the same trucks that had made the deliveries now returned to pick up and reclaim the packages. The explanation came from an alert merchant who had not been fooled by the charity aspect of the racket.

A tall, neatly dressed, good-looking young man came into his store and bought articles amounting to about \$8.00. He ordered the merchandise to be delivered to one of the local hospitals as a donation. He gave the merchant a card to be placed in the bundle, at the same time tendering a twenty dollar check in payment.

When the Samaritan slicker asked for change to the amount of the difference between the cost of his purchases and the check, the alert merchant became suspicious. He refused to accept the check; thereupon, the young bum-check artist, with angry protestations against an affront to his honesty, made his departure.

It is assumed this departure took in the boundaries of our fair city. The individual chairmen of local charities would like to have met this generous donor and voice their admiration for an unaccustomed display of appropriateness in his charitable donations. Many of the local merchants are anticipating a meeting with the same young man again, but with far different reasons. They would like to bounce some of those rubber checks off his head.

Yours truly,
H. C. Mershon



IS YOUR Rupture GETTING Worse?

It is terrible to feel that your rupture is constantly getting worse, taking the joy out of life, even making you feel despondent—without your seeming to be able to DO anything about it! And yet, it's so needless! We have information for you that has brought deliverance and joy to thousands of men, women and children, as PROVED by their letters of gratitude—now on file in our office.

STOP IT, STOP IT! Be Yourself Again!

As sure as you live and breathe, if you have a reducible rupture, you can stop your rupture worries—find yourself alive and energetic and rid of all the old fears that made your existence a bad dream!

THE FAMOUS BROOKS AUTOMATIC AIR-CUSHION APPLIANCE WILL SET YOU FREE

There is nothing experimental about the famous BROOKS Air-Cushion Rupture Appliance. It has been used for years and repeatedly made better and better! What is the Patented Automatic Air-Cushion? It is the part that holds back your rupture—the most important part of any truss. It is a yielding, air-filled rubber chamber that holds with complete security without gouging in. Ill-fitting trusses do gouge in! The BROOKS permits the edges of the rupture opening to remain close together. Thus nature is sometimes able to close the opening, making a truss unnecessary. While we make no promise, the fact is, thousands of former Brooks wearers have reported no further need for a truss.

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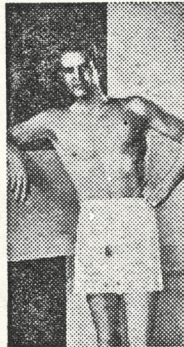
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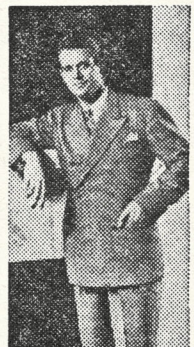
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His right hand clenched into a fist and smashed twice into Dawson's face.

CHAPTER ONE

A Corpse in My Lap

I LEFT the house a little after eight o'clock that morning. I walked toward the subway with the taste of buttered toast and my wife's farewell kiss upon my lips. Despite the bracing autumn air there was no spring in my stride. Mentally I was grappling with what was a perennial problem, almost an obsession, with me. For possibly the thousandth time in my police career, I was frowningly engaged in figuring the angles on a transfer.

For five years I had worked with Inspector Allhoff. And in those five years

I had aged ten. Fifty times I had applied for a transfer. Fifty times the commissioner had said loudly, "No!" Now, I pondered the problem again with the desperate defeatism of a convict working on an escape from Alcatraz.

As I approached the marquee of the Lafayette Hotel, I had reached the melancholy conclusion that I was licked. My only avenues of escape from Allhoff were his sudden and heartwarning demise, my own arrival at retirement age, or direct aid from heaven. Then as I passed the hotel doors heaven took a hand in the person of Ralph Bardon.

Bardon rushed suddenly out into the street. His hair was disheveled and his eyes were wide. He looked like a man who was about to begin beating his breast in public.

"There's never a copper around," he said to the ornately uniformed doorman, "when you want one. I—"

Then he swung his head around and saw me. "Simmonds," he said. "Thank God!"

I regarded him oddly. I'd known him for several years. He was part owner and manager of the hotel. He was an Elk and a solid citizen given neither to hangovers nor hysterics. But at the moment he looked very much like a man who has just seen a corpse. It developed a moment later that he had.

"Sergeant," he said to me. "Murder! And in my hotel. Not in thirty years—"

I knew that speech. I'd been hearing it from hotel men and rooming house keepers for years. I held up my hand to stop him and said: "Why don't you call Homicide? They—"

"I've called them. What am I supposed to do in the meantime? The crossword puzzle in the *Mirror*? I tell you, Sergeant, in all my thirty years, I never—"

"All right," I said wearily. "All right. Where's your corpse? I'll take a look at it."

He seized my arm and galloped me into the hotel. I accompanied him up to the twelfth floor. Bardon opened a door dramatically, flung out his hand, and said: "There! And, Sergeant, in all—"

"I know," I said. "In all your thirty years in the hotel business. Now you go down to the bar and have a drink. I'll take over here until Homicide arrives."

HE LEFT me with no reluctance whatever. I walked across the room to the bed and took a professional look at the corpse. From the point of view of a maniacal killer it was all very interesting. The face looked as if the Gestapo had handled the job on direct orders from Berchtesgaden. The skull had been smashed in as if a moderately sized building had fallen on it. The nose was neatly flattened up against the cheeks. The hair was matted with blood and the sheet on which the body lay resembled a cardinal's robe that had been dipped in cochineal.

It was a nasty mess. I sat down, my back to the corpse, and lit a cigarette. I reflected that in all my years as a copper this was the first time a dead man had just fallen in my lap. I had often wondered about these fictional detectives and journalists who were constantly being hit on the head by corpses falling from the fourth-story windows; who, through some apparently accidental inevitability, walked into murder and intrigue as an Irishman walks into a Saturday night brawl.

Well, at last it had happened to me. Not that I had any intention of performing some miracle of detecting—not that I intended to put my hand on the case at all. I would sit here quietly until Homicide arrived, then go downtown where Allhoff would continue his life work of driving Battersly and myself quietly crazy. I smoked my cigarette slowly and pondered the wide chasm existing between the detectives of fiction and myself.

Then I saw the fountain pen top. It was colored a rich green. It bore a gleaming gold clip on its side and it lay beneath the writing desk. I stood up. I maneuvered my way across the room with my back still to the corpse. I picked up the pen top and examined it. I glanced down at the desk. Scrawled upon a piece of the hotel writing paper was a telephone number in the Wickersham exchange. I folded the paper and put it in my pocket.

My heart was beating rapidly now. An idea, daring and radical, was gestating in my mind. A murder had been committed in this room. The commissioner, in common with most of his predecessors, didn't like murder. He was very partial to the men who solved them.

I thought for a moment of Muller. Mull-

ler, a detective-sergeant, had cleaned up a Brooklyn killing single-handed only a week ago. Muller had then drawn a month's vacation with pay, a citation, and a promotion. Now, here I stood, first man on the scene of a killing, with two clues in my hand. Suppose I held the fountain pen top, the scribbled telephone number out on Homicide? Suppose I turned up the murderer myself, alone and unaided? That certainly should be worth a transfer in any commissioner's book.

My right hand closed tightly over the

Then he phoned down and squawked like hell because the eggs were hard. Who the devil ever heard of six-minute eggs, soft boiled?"

I sighed deeply, lit my pipe and went away. Perhaps, Sherlock Holmes could have gone right to work on the material I had. Frankly, none of it made any sense to me. However, I wasn't discouraged. I had a phone number to work on and I was looking for a man who'd lost the top to his fountain pen. If I found him, fine. I'd win my transfer. If I didn't, it was Homicide's

Officers Simmonds and Battersly, starting out two jumps and two clues ahead of the legless, coffee-swilling Inspector Allhoff, joyfully anticipate a quick solution of the murder in room 1201—followed by promotion and escape from their bitter boss. Then Allhoff the Omniscient poses a riddle: "Why were the water faucets reversed in the murder chamber?" And, plumbing the depths of this water-pipe puzzle, the two luckless dicks find their red-hot clues turning colder than the murder victim's corpse.

pen top as the door was flung suddenly open and Lieutenant Marsden walked into the room. He looked at me in surprise not unmingled with disgust.

"Don't tell me Allhoff's on this damned case already?"

I reassured him. I told him as my pulse quickened that the case was all Homicide's. I bade him good-bye and hastened out of the room. I went downstairs and conducted the first wholly private investigation of my departmental career.

The desk informed me that the dead man was one George Green, registered from a small town in North Carolina. The switchboard told me that he had made one phone call the night before, that the number did not answer. A bellboy mentioned the fact that Green had tossed him a dollar for carrying the bags upstairs. All this was routine enough until I interviewed Room Service.

The graying clerk who handled the telephone there scratched his head.

"Green?" he said. "It's 1201, isn't it? Yeah. A bit of a nut. Eccentric, I guess. Called up late last night. Ordered two soft boiled eggs. Said they must be six minutes.

rap. I was in the enviable position of a man who has something to gain and not a red cent to lose. I eschewed the subway and took a taxicab downtown.

IT WAS twenty minutes to ten when the stairs leading to Allhoff's tenement apartment creaked beneath my foot. A moment later I entered Allhoff's combination office and living-room. As always the first impression I received, crossing the threshold, was one of superlative disorder. The floor was unswept. The wastepaper baskets were overflowing. The sink was a gray mausoleum brimming with dirty dishes.

Allhoff's laundry lay piled against the west wall, climbing dispiritedly day by day. The garbage can, beneath the sink, was again yielding up free lunch to myriad cockroaches. The bedroom door was ajar, revealing an unmade bed, twisted sheets and a blanket trailing on the floor. There was an air of mustiness in the room which filled my nostrils. I sighed heavily and sat down at my desk.

Allhoff regarded me with baleful little eyes over the rim of a chipped coffee cup.

On his desk the electric percolator gurgled spasmodically. Allhoff slammed the cup down in its greasy saucer. I felt his gaze on me but did not look up.

Across the room from me, young Battersly leaned against the wall and read the comic papers with the desperate boredom of a man who has absolutely nothing else to do. I shuffled papers on my desk and tensed myself for the sound of Allhoff's harsh voice against my eardrums. It came like the sound of a machine gun with laryngitis.

"I will not be put upon," he said. "I shall not have my authority flouted."

I looked at him. To someone who didn't have to spend eight hours of each day in his presence, the idea was funny. He was never put upon. He was never flouted. He was feared more than the mayor himself. He was an arrogant combination of Napoleon, Heinrich Himmler, and Donald Duck. I relit my pipe and said: "Who's flouted you?"

Allhoff picked up the coffee cup, drained it and set it down again.

"You," he snapped. "You're forty minutes late. You'd never dare pull that sort of stuff in any other department. You take advantage of me because I'm easy."

Easy? Allhoff was as easy as a problem in calculus to a Kallikak with a nervous breakdown. I took the pipe from my mouth and said as much.

"Damn you," said Allhoff. "You're insubordinate as well. You're thoroughly incompetent. So, for that matter, is Battersly. I don't know why I'm stuck with such a lousy pair of assistants. How would you like it if I sent you over to rot in Staten Island? Two hours' travel a day. Decaying out there in the sticks. How would you like that?"

I met his eye squarely. "I'd love it," I said. "When do I go?"

Battersly looked up from his paper, a gleam of hope in his eyes. There was none in mine. I knew rhetoric when I heard it. Allhoff was certainly going to give me no transfer—and as for Battersly, he would work in this room until the day when either he or Allhoff died.

Allhoff opened his mouth to speak again, then closed it as we heard footfalls on the creaking stairs without. A moment later, there was a staccato rap on the door. In

response to my shouted invitation, two men entered.

THE first of them was stocky, well-dressed, and over-groomed. He strode rather than walked and he exuded an air of authority. He stood before Allhoff's desk, regarding the gnome-like figure sitting huddled over in his chair, his chest pressed against the edge of the desk. He said, crisply: "My name's Winters. I have a note here from the commissioner. This gentleman is Robert Dawson."

Dawson who was well over six feet tall, bowed and smiled sadly. Allhoff uttered no word of greeting. He ripped open the envelope Winters had handed him, scowled and read it. He threw the note in the general direction of the wastepaper basket, looked up, and said antagonistically: "So the commissioner wants me to do a little job for his friends, eh? All right, where did you lose the dog?"

Winters blinked at him. "Dog?" he said. "What dog?"

Allhoff registered phoney surprise. "No dog?" he said. "Amazing. Don't tell me the case is more important than that. When the commissioner unloads his friends on me, I suspect political motives. The last time was a ward leader who'd lost his wallet. Having some influence he insisted on having the best man in the department on the job."

He drank a deep draft of coffee, and added with pleasurable reminiscence: "I had him thrown out of the office."

Winters' well-manicured finger tapped Allhoff's desk irritably. "See here, Inspector," he said. "I'm a well-known man in this town. I'm here on a rather important case. I expect at least courtesy."

Allhoff waved a grimy hand in my direction. "He wants courtesy, Simmonds. Give him some. If later, he wants some intelligence also, turn him back to me."

He buried his nose in his coffee cup and sipped noisily. Winter's face turned the color of the purple hibiscus at dawn. He opened his mouth wide and took a deep breath. I prepared to enjoy the invective he was about to hurl in Allhoff's face. Then Dawson, whose melancholy smile persisted, came into the conversation.

"Inspector," he said like a Balkan diplomat addressing Hitler, "I can well under-

stand the impatience of a man of your talents with some of the picayune matters given you. This, however, is a rather important affair. Mr. Winters here, called his friend the commissioner only to be certain that the best brains in the entire department would be available to us."

Allhoff put down his coffee cup and grinned like a ninety-year-old ingenue who is the recipient of a pass from a football player. He bowed like an actor. He indicated two rather crummy chairs.

"Gentlemen," he said. "Sit down."

I regarded him with disgust. There were times when it seemed to me that all you had to do was tell him that he was intelligent and he'd write you a check.

Dawson and Winters sat down. The latter still appeared annoyed. Dawson, his face still wreathed in ineffable sadness, did the talking.

"I'm afraid, Inspector, we are confronted with the case of a missing man and quite possibly a murder."

"Missing Persons and Homicide," said Allhoff pleasantly. "The two most incompetent bureaus in the department. I shall be happy to show them up again. Now what's it all about?"

"The missing man," said Dawson. "is named Edwards. He is an old prospector. He was due in from Cripple Creek early yesterday morning. I was to meet him. When he failed to arrive, I got in touch with Cripple Creek. He left all right. He boarded the train. Yet he never arrived."

Allhoff took it very calmly. "Probably picked up a floozy in Chicago," he said. "What about the murder?"

"A cousin of mine," said Dawson. "Killed last night in a Bronx hotel. He came up from North Carolina yesterday. I just identified the body."

I took the pipe from my mouth and blinked. My pulse picked up a beat. I said: "Bronx hotel? North Carolina? What was his name?"

"Green," said Dawson. "George Green."

Allhoff twisted his neck around and glared at me. He said through contorted lips, "Go ahead."

"Go ahead what?"

"Go ahead and tell us who killed him. Sergeant Simmonds, the great detective! Asks one single question and knows all

the answers. If you're taking the case over, go right ahead. If not, shut up."

I REALIZED I should have kept my mouth shut. I was on dangerous enough ground already, withholding evidence. Fortunately, there was a blow torch burning in Allhoff's soul at my temerity in daring to ask a question when he was handling a case. Otherwise, he would have been certain to ask my interest in the matter, to ask what the devil I cared about the corpse's name. I put my pipe back in my mouth and shut up.

Allhoff transferred his gaze from me to Dawson. "What," he asked, "is the connection, if any, between your dead cousin and this guy Edwards?"

Winters spoke impatiently as if he felt too much time was being wasted.

"Four of us were interested in a gold mine Edwards had found. Dawson here, Green, his cousin, Edwards and myself. There is no claim filed on the mine yet. Edwards is, to put it politely, not quite all there. He's a paranoiac. Delusions of persecution. Believes everyone is trying to steal his mine. He was to arrive yesterday, give us the location of the mine and collect the money for our interest. He didn't show up. In the meantime, Dawson's cousin Green, who just came in from the south to get in on the deal is killed last night in his hotel. We want you to find Edwards and Green's murderer. That's all."

"That's all!" said Allhoff. "Are you sure you don't want me to find out what became of Lord Kitchener and clean up the Elwell case for you as well?"

Winters made a gesture of annoyance and futility. "I know it's puzzling," he said, "and difficult. That's why we asked the commissioner for his top man. If there is anything either of us can do to help you, don't hesitate to call on us. During office hours you can get me at the Drovers' Bank. My home address is—"

He reached toward his vest pocket. Then he said abruptly: "I forgot. My fountain pen is broken. May I borrow a pencil?"

Allhoff handed him a pencil and my heart stood still. I had a fountain pen top in my pocket. I was looking for the murderer of a man named Green. Before me

was a banker who had had business dealings with Green and he was not carrying his fountain pen!

Allhoff took the paper with Winters' address. I half stood up and craned my neck reading it over his shoulder. It was on Madison Avenue in the fifties. I recalled the exchange of the telephone number I had taken from the Lafayette Hotel was Wickersham. That fitted, too.

Allhoff said: "All right, I'll think about this. I'll get the complete report from Homicide on Green's death. Undoubtedly, I'll want information from both of you. I'll get in touch with you. Dawson, leave me your address."

Dawson handed him a card. I fought to keep my mouth shut. I didn't want to arouse Allhoff's wrath again. Nor did I want to make him suspicious of what I was doing. But I had to ask one question. No effort of will could keep my vocal chords still.

"Mr. Winters," I said, "where did you spend last night?"

Winters raised his eyebrows and Allhoff gave me his prime, Grade A nasty look.

"Home," said Winters. "With my wife. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," I said, then to shut off Allhoff, I turned to Battersly. "Battersly, will you hand me those reports from the Alien Squad?"

Battersly obeyed blankly. Allhoff's eyes grew harder. He looked as if he were about to say something, but Winters spoke first.

"Battersly?" he said. "Is your name Battersly?"

Battersly admitted his identity.

"John Battersly?" persisted Winters.

Battersly nodded. Winters smiled cordially for the first time since he had been in the office.

"Congratulations on your game Sunday. I enjoyed it. I'm a great fan, you know. You kicked three goals, didn't you?"

THERE was a sudden silence in the room broken only by the swift sibilant intake of Battersly's breath. I looked over at Allhoff. His little eyes were glowing like two coals imported on a fast plane from hell. He licked his lips slowly with a pointed tongue. He said, and his vocal chords were oiled with venom: "He kicked three *what?*"

"Goals," said Winters. "In soccer. He's the best forward in the east. Aren't you, Battersly?"

Battersly didn't answer. His face was a sickly gray and his eyes were empty. I stood up, alarmed. Allhoff opened his mouth revealing all his stained teeth. Somehow he reminded me of a crocodile about to pounce on a rabbit.

"A forward," he said and his voice rose maniacally crescendo. "He kicked three goals, eh? And what, my fine athletic friend, did you kick them with?"

Battersly moistened his dry lips. Winters exchanged a bewildered look with Dawson whose melancholy had turned to puzzlement.

"What did he kick them with?" repeated Winters. "His legs. His feet, of course. Soccer, understand? You know soccer, Inspector."

Allhoff put his right hand on the edge of his desk. He pushed with all his strength. His chair flew across the floor on its rollers. The movement revealed for the first time to Winters and Dawson the macabre fact that Allhoff's body ended where his torso did. At the juncture where his thighs should have begun, there was nothing.

Two black leather stumps protruded over the edge of his chair. At the moment they wriggled horribly, dancing a rigadoun in the empty air. His fists, clenched and taut, pounded madly on the arms of the chair. His mouth was open and his larynx rattled like hail on a drumskin.

"He kicked three goals!" he roared. "With his legs and his feet. With those legs and feet? Whose? Damn you! Tell the pretty gentleman whose feet you actually used! You cowardly, yellow dog! You—"

He dived into the depths of his vocabulary and came up again with buckets of assorted obscenity. He poured them over Battersly hysterically. Twice, I attempted to stem the evil tide that gushed from his twisted lips. My voice was drowned out in his.

Then, physically exhausted, he stopped. He turned his head toward the open-mouthed Winters, the shocked and startled Dawson.

"Get out," he said. "If I want you I'll get in touch with you."

With no reluctance whatever they got out. Allhoff turned back to his desk. With a trembling hand he took the coffee pot off its base and filled his cup. He buried his nose in it and drank deep. Battersly stood cowering against the wall. His face was the color of dirty snow. His hands were tremulous, and though I could not see them I knew his knees were, too.

I breathed a deep sigh and lit my pipe. Five years of this same scene played over and over again with profane variations took almost as much out of me as Battersly. Then, I thought for a moment of the Green murder, of the fountain pen top and the telephone number in my pocket. I resolved that if I broke this case personally, I'd cut Battersly in on the credit. In the matter of a transfer, God knew, his need was greater than mine.

CHAPTER TWO

Hot and Cold Clues

ALLHOFF'S outburst which had roared into my ears for the past five years had its genesis during a raid on a West End rooming house some time ago. In those days Battersly was a raw rookie facing danger for the first time. Allhoff was a seasoned, though misanthropic campaigner.

We had it from a stoolpigeon that the two thugs we were after had rigged a Tommy gun on the stairway dominating the door. Battersly's assignment had been to effect a rear entrance, attack the gun's operator from the rear at zero hour when the raiding squad came crashing through the front door.

The first part of the assignment he had carried out. Then, inside the house, he had undergone a quite understandable case of buck fever. He became suddenly panicky. Instead of attacking, he hesitated. During that vacillating moment, Allhoff, at the head of the raiding squad, came charging through the front door.

The Tommy gun went into immediate action, sending a score of bullets through Allhoff's legs before the squad disposed of the operator. A week later gangrene set in. Twelve hours after that came amputation.

Unfortunately Allhoff's legs were not

the only organs that operation cost him. Part of his brain seemed to go with them. He emerged from the hospital bitter and brooding. Within him seethed a cauldron of hate, the fires of which were never low.

The commissioner was of no mind to lose one of his best men, legs or no legs. So he had arranged that Allhoff rent this tenement slum opposite headquarters and remain a member of the department *ex officio*. Allhoff had acceded to this request but had laid down one adamant condition. Battersly was to be his assistant.

This, then, had been the setup for the past five years. Allhoff devoted his life to extracting his revenge, losing no opportunity to make young Battersly pay for that one weak moment which had cost Allhoff his legs. I had been tossed into the combination, ostensibly to take care of the paper work, actually to lend a hand when Allhoff became too violent.

All in all, the three of us led a miserable life. I was thoroughly sick of it. That was the prime reason that I deliberately had jeopardized a clean career by withholding evidence in a murder case. There was nothing I would not do to insure a transfer from this dank and miserable slum apartment where Allhoff dwelt with hate and venom in his twisted heart.

IT WAS a little after four o'clock in the afternoon when the complete report on the Green murder came in from Homicide. I glanced over the single-spaced typing on the onionskin sheets of paper and noted with marked satisfaction that Homicide was baffled.

With the two purloined clues in my own pocket, with the fact of Winters' broken fountain pen, plus the check I had done at lunch and discovered that the Wickersham telephone number was listed as Winters' residence, I figured I'd have little trouble breaking the case before Homicide had even evolved a tenable theory. Even better, before Allhoff had got his stained teeth into the case at all.

Allhoff watched me as I scanned the report. He removed his coffee cup from his mouth. "All right," he said. "Give."

I took a deep breath. I quoted and summarized. Almost everything contained in the paper I already knew. At the bottom of the final page I came across a fresh fact

which set my heart to beating wildly. "They found fingerprints," I told Allhoff, "on the bathroom faucets. They didn't belong to the dead man. They belonged to none of the hotel employees. They belonged undoubtedly to the murderer."

"So what?" said Allhoff. "If the killer has no record that means nothing. We can't go around printing every guy in town."

"There's something else," I said. "Though it's equally unimportant."

"Give me a fact," said Allhoff. "It's more valuable than your opinion."

"The bathroom faucets were reversed. The hot tap was fixed to the cold water and vice versa. Bardon, the manager, says he can't understand it."

Allhoff wrinkled up his brow and poured himself another cup of coffee. The fact that he was registering deep thought with absolutely nothing to work on, rather amused me. I was pretty sure, by now, that I had almost the entire answer to Green's death. For the first time in my life I was entering the stretch some eight lengths in front of Inspector Allhoff.

I looked across the room toward Battersly. He sat, the newspaper open to the comic page on his knees, staring broodingly out the window. There was something shocking about the expression of utter despair and futility upon so youthful a face. His eyes were blank and though he sat upright I had a distinct impression that his back was bowed.

I smiled at him and felt a warm glow inside me. Battersly didn't know it yet but he was going to get half credit in the solution of a murder case which had baffled Homicide, an ordinary enough occurrence, and defeated the great Inspector Allhoff, which wasn't.

Allhoff poured two more minims of caffeine into his system. He said abruptly: "What about those faucets? Does the report mention what kind of faucets they are?"

I picked up the onionskin again. Homicide wasn't very efficient, true. But they were damned thorough. They even mentioned the color of the dead man's shirt.

"Sure," I said. "It's all here. But I could have told you that. They use those bar-shaped modernistic faucets at the La-

fayette. Those single lever affairs. Why?"

Allhoff grunted and returned to his coffee. He was silent for a long moment.

"It's damned funny," he said at last. "There are a number of angles I can see in this damned case. On the other hand, there are at least an equal number that I can't."

He drew a deep sigh up from his intestines and shook his head. I grinned happily. There were a number of angles I could see, too. Only one that I couldn't. And I knew where to look for that.

"After all," I said pleasantly, "no one's infallible."

HE SPUN around in his chair and glared at me. He said, "I am." He reached for the telephone, picked it up and said: "Get me Cripple Creek, Colorado. Chief of police, if they have one." He hung on to the wire and stared at Battersly and myself. "You two, get out," he snapped. "Go home. The atmosphere is more conducive to clear thinking without the presence of a pair of nitwits like you guys. Lam."

Nothing loath we lammed. Downstairs, I steered Battersly into Noonan's for a drink. He sat staring moodily into his beer. I drained my rye, set down the glass, and tossed the panacea for all his troubles in his lap.

"Listen," I said, "how would you like to be a hero?"

"At what?" he said bitterly. "Soccer?"

I shook my head. "A police hero. A headline copper. With the newspapers showering praises on you. With the commissioner handing you a bow. With yourself in so solid that you could probably wangle a transfer into any precinct, any department you wanted."

He looked up, a faint glimmer of interest in his eyes.

"Are you kidding?"

"I'm not kidding. I walked into a murder today. That Green murder that they've saddled Allhoff with. I believe I've got it tied up and in the bag. I'm certain I know whose fingerprints those are. Homicide and Allhoff will never figure it. All that's lacking is a motivation and unless I'm badly mistaken we can dig that up at this guy Winters' house. I'll cut you in."

Battersly's beer was forgotten now. The

dull weariness that constantly glazed his eyes was gone. For the first time in years, he was eager and alert.

"Sergeant," he said, "God knows I'm grateful. This is the greatest break anyone ever gave me. What are the details?"

Benignly, like a scoutmaster who has bestowed another Eagle badge on a promising lad, I told him what I had.

"You see," I concluded, "everything points to Winters. There's the fountain pen angle. There's the fact of that phone number. I'm certain those are his fingerprints. We need motive. We're going to his house now to look for it."

Battersly ordered another beer. He looked suddenly thoughtful.

"But," he objected, "Winters apparently has an alibi. You asked him what he did last night. He said that he stayed home with his wife."

"Wives don't furnish very good alibis," I told him. "We can probably break that down. It's bound to fall anyway if the fingerprint angle holds up."

Battersly lifted his beer. I raised my rye. Our eyes met. We spoke no word. Yet I knew that each of us in his heart was drinking to the downfall of Inspector Allhoff.

I FELT the nervousness of a playwright on the eve of an opening as I rang the bell of Winters' Madison Avenue apartment. A rigid butler opened the door. He informed us that Mr. Winters was not in. Mrs. Winters was. Since that was the way I preferred to play it, I considered this an omen.

Janet Winters received us in the drawing-room. She was a tall, dark girl with provocative black eyes. There was, rather to my concern, a great deal of poise about her. I made my identity known. She took that calmly enough. I wracked my brains trying to remember the Allhoff technique for breaking down self-possessed young women. I achieved no good result. Battersly, I observed, wasn't going to be much help either.

He stood, hat in hand, eyes fixed on Janet Winters. He rather resembled a shy freshman calling on the campus belle. I sighed, cleared my throat and plunged in.

"Mrs. Winters," I said. "There is no reason for alarm."

She raised two delicate eyebrows. "Do I give the impression of being alarmed, Sergeant?"

She most certainly didn't.

"I called to see your husband," I went on. "With your permission, I'll wait for him. In the meantime I'd like to ask you a question or two."

She lit a cigarette with long slim fingers. "All right, go ahead."

"Your husband, I understand, spent last night at home?" I asked without much hope.

Janet Winters took the cigarette from her mouth. "As a matter of fact, Sergeant, he didn't. Why do you ask?"

In that moment I felt like a guy who has picked the daily double three days in a row. For once in my life, I felt shot with luck. Far from having the difficult task of breaking down Winters' alibi, his wife had calmly done it for me and tossed the fragments in my lap.

"Oh," I said, suppressing my excitement. "Can you tell me what time he went out? What time he returned?"

"He left a little after nine. He came in quite late. I was in bed at the time. It must have been well after midnight."

I exchanged a glance with Battersly. At that moment we both saw the same vision. An eight-hour tour of duty in a precinct as far removed from Allhoff's tenement as departmental geography would allow.

I thanked Janet Winters profusely for her help. I asked her again if she minded our waiting for her husband. She rose to her feet. She said, graciously: "Not at all, Sergeant. Perhaps you'd be more comfortable waiting in his study. If you'll follow me—"

I followed her, elation soaring in my heart. Battersly, his eyes shining, closed fast on my heels.

The first thing I saw on the study desk, after the door had closed was the cigarette holder. Exultantly, I picked it up with my handkerchief. Battersly watched me with a conspiratorial air.

"Undoubtedly," I told him, "Winters' prints are on this. We can compare them with those prints Homicide took off the faucets in the Lafayette bathroom."

Battersly nodded. He turned to a steel filing cabinet against the east wall. He

said, a touch of grimness in his tone: "We need a motive, don't we, Sergeant? Perhaps, we can find it here."

I stowed the cigarette holder away carefully in my pocket. A sudden hunch struck me.

"Look in the G file," I said. "See if there's any correspondence there."

"G?"

"For Green. George Green."

Battersly went through the files like a pirate digging for buried treasure. He extracted a sheaf of letters. He held them with trembling fingers as he ran his eyes across the page. Then he uttered an oath that was more a prayer of thanksgiving than blasphemy.

"Sergeant," he said excitedly. "It's here. He's been fighting with this guy Green about who should have control of that gold mine. Here, read some of this."

I pored over the correspondence. I gathered from the earlier letters that Green and Winters had never met—that Green had an out-of-town investor's suspicion of Winters, a baron of Wall Street. As the dates on the letters grew more recent, the context grew more acrimonious.

Green accused Winters of attempting to get control of Edwards' mine, whereas, he, Green, had been promised majority stock several months ago for lesser money. Green pointed out that since he had grubstaked the prospector, Edwards, though with no written contract, he was entitled to control.

Winters had replied to him angrily. Green retaliated by hinting there was a scandal somewhere in Winters' life, and threatening to expose him when they met in New York.

Then in a letter written less than two weeks ago, Winters angrily denied the scandal charge and threatened to thrash Green if he tried any blackmail. There was more in the same key.

I stuffed the letters in my pocket. "We're in," I announced gleefully. "We have our motive. Winters meets Green when he gets to town. They quarrel. Winters kills him. If the prints on this cigarette holder check with the ones Homicide already has, we've a case as cold as any Allhoff ever solved himself. Come on."

"Aren't we going to wait for Winters?"

"Why? We have everything we need. We're going down to headquarters now.

Fingerprint division. Tomorrow morning, unless I'm badly mistaken, we'll have Allhoff's back against the wall."

AT NINE thirty the following morning, the telephone on my desk jangled. It was Fingerprints.

"Simmonds," said Dutch Slagle, "the marks on the cigarette holder you left here check with those hotel faucets. Homicide wants to know what the hell Allhoff's got. They're scared to ask him."

I said in an unnecessarily loud voice: "Allhoff's got nothing. Battersly and I have it. We'll present the whole case wrapped up and tied with a neat pink ribbon to the D. A. before lunch."

I hung up. I looked around to see Battersly grinning at me, and Allhoff glaring over the chipped rim of his coffee cup.

"Did I understand you to say that you were solving a murder case?"

"Battersly and I. The Green case."

He looked at me as if I had announced I had just squared the circle. Then he threw back his head and laughed. The laugh nettled me.

"Go ahead," I said. "Have a jolly time. Your ego won't take it so well when we break the case before you've even got around to a theory."

"A theory," he said. "I have a theory. It's a cast-iron theory. But there's a missing piece. There's one angle I simply can't figure."

I gave him my smuggest expression.

"We have all the angles figured," I told him. "We're ready to turn the Green killer in now."

"Green?" he said. "What about this guy Edwards?"

"What about him? That's for Missing Persons. Battersly and I've been working on a murder case."

He regarded me strangely. He ran his fingers through his hair. "You have the confidence of a man who knows nothing."

"On the contrary, I have the confidence of a man who knows everything."

He filled his coffee cup. Oddly enough he remained calm. The explosion I had anticipated wasn't forthcoming. He emptied the cup and said: "What do you propose doing about it?"

"With your permission, Battersly and I will go out. We will bring Winters, his

wife and Dawson down here. Then I'll solve your murder for you."

He lit a cigarette and looked at me for a long time.

"Go ahead," he said. "I haven't been amazed in years. Perhaps it's a pleasant sensation. But if you two guys, with your limited minds can solve a case I can't figure, I'll stop being a copper and go in for crossword puzzles in the tabloids. All right, go ahead. Send out your invitations."

Battersly and I marched from the room as if each of us carried a royal flush in his hip pocket.

CHAPTER THREE

A Rude Awakening

I FELT like an actor on a first night who is certain he is starring in a hit play. I was exultantly nervous. I believed that I held in my hand the key which would release me from the handcuffs chaining me to Allhoff's side. Across the room Battersly watched me with shining eyes. I was glad I had cut him in. I had never, in five years, seen him look so alive.

Allhoff sat crouched over his desk, his face expressionless. He poured coffee incessantly and drank it with an ugly gurgling noise. Winters, smoking an expensive cigar whose fumes gave fragrant battle to the normal mustiness of Allhoff's apartment, sat upright in a battered Windsor chair. He appeared, I observed, magnificently unworried.

Dawson, gaunt and melancholy, lounged back on our decrepit sofa. His fingers intertwined themselves nervously. He watched Allhoff drinking coffee much in the manner of Emily Post regarding a shoat toying with the day's garbage.

Between them, silken knees crossed, was Winters' wife. Even in the murky atmosphere which framed her, she remained beautiful. Her face was serious enough but there was an ineffable mockery in her black eyes which seemed to laugh at us all.

Allhoff suddenly slammed down his cup. He said, rather like Pontius Pilate washing his hands of the whole business: "There was some loose talk, Simmonds, about your solving a murder case. Go ahead."

"Our solving a murder case," I said. "Battersly is in on this."

Battersly flashed me a glance of gratitude and I felt, for a moment, like Sam Rover of the Eagle Patrol who has just done his good deed for the day.

"You mean," asked Winters, "that you've discovered who killed Green? That you've found Edwards?"

I met his eyes squarely. "I know who killed Green," I said evenly. "I don't know anything about Edwards."

Allhoff clucked with phoney sympathy. "An oversight, undoubtedly," he purred. "After cleaning up a murder case, Simmonds can handle a missing person in stride. He'll probably take ten minutes off this afternoon and dig up Edwards for you."

I held my tongue. At the moment I could afford to be magnanimous. I cleared my throat and stepped into the center of the room. I had seen Allhoff play this scene a hundred times. I intended to play it along his pattern.

"Now," I said, "let's begin at the beginning."

Allhoff's eyebrows lifted themselves in the general direction of the ceiling. "It's customary," he murmured *sotto voce*.

I summoned all my dignity as I ignored him. "George Green," I began, "comes to town from North Carolina. He is interested in a mining deal. He's invested money through his cousin in this guy Edwards' mine."

Allhoff filled his cup. "By the way," he said and the mockery was thick in his tone, "whatever *became* of Edwards?"

I gave him my most freezing look which had no effect at all.

"Green," I continued, "registers at the Lafayette Hotel. While there he is visited by someone who is also interested in the mine. Someone who has quarreled with him about who owns how many shares of it."

Still playing it according to Allhoff's technique, I glanced about the room, then brought my eyes to bear upon my suspect. Winters was watching me, a frown upon his brow. The man, I decided, had nerves. He evinced neither nervousness nor guilt.

I continued: "I have in my possession letters proving motive absolutely. The fingerprints Homicide discovered on the

bathroom faucets, I have checked. Homicide couldn't find out to whom those fingerprints belonged. Battersly and I did."

I LOOKED over at Battersly, and in retrospect I must admit we bowed like two ham actors before the exit. Winters' brow was screwed up like the plans of the Italian General Staff. Dawson was regarding me intently. Janet Winters' eyes were still mocking. She possessed an odd quality of making a man feel like a fool even when he was quite sure of himself.

Allhoff registered mild boredom. He embraced Battersly and myself with his gaze and muttered: "Battersly and Simmonds, the bloodhounds of the law! The underworld trembles! Go on, Sergeant."

"All right," I said. "We have the motive. We have, in the hotel bathroom, the fingerprints of a man who denies he was ever in the room. Which is evidence enough to convict even a man of your standing, Mr. Winters."

I stood there like a lawyer who has just produced evidence which the Supreme Court is eating out of his hand. I turned my face in Allhoff's direction and gloated silently. Winters got up out of his chair and looked at me as if I were a congenital idiot.

"Do I understand that you are accusing me of killing Green?"

"Exactly," I said. "We have the motive. We have your fingerprints."

Allhoff swallowed a cup of coffee with the sound of a plugged sewer during a heavy rain.

"Hasn't Winters an alibi?" he asked. "Didn't he spend the evening of the murder at home with his wife?"

"Of course," snapped Winters. "Thank God there's someone around here with an iota of intelligence."

I cleared my throat and spoke very much like Ely Culbertson playing the thirteenth trump.

"Winters was not a home that night. Was he, Mrs. Winters?"

Janet Winters drew a deep breath. Her face was most serious, yet the odd mocking glint remained in her deep black eyes.

"No," she said softly. "He was not."

Winters stared at her as if someone had hit him on the head with an invisible club. His mouth was open and his eyes gaping.

"Janet! Are you mad? That was the night we played backgammon together. We went to bed a little after midnight."

Janet Winters met his eye. She shook her head almost imperceptibly.

"I do not consider that my conjugal duties demand I lie to the law," she said evenly. "When murder is involved my conscience insists upon the truth."

Winters expelled air from his lungs with the sound of a deflating tire. He turned to Allhoff, wide-eyed.

"Inspector," he said. "I don't understand this? Am I being framed?"

Allhoff shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't the slightest idea," he said amiably. Then to me: "Simmonds, is the gentleman being framed?"

"The Grand Jury won't think so," I said. "Battersly and I have a case as solid as any you ever solved."

"Look here," said Winters desperately. "This is insane. Now think, Janet. You remember that night. You must—"

"Yes," said Allhoff quietly. "Think, Mrs. Winters. Are you sure you're not making a mistake? Your husband's life may well be at stake."

"Are you prompting her?" I asked indignantly. "Because we've broken this case under your very nose, are you trying to get Mrs. Winters to lie?"

Janet Winters shook her head. "I won't lie," she said evenly. "This is a murder case. I have been brought up to believe that murder is a hideous crime. Not even to save my husband would I lie."

"All right," I said. "Battersly, take Winters downstairs and book him. I'll take my evidence over to the D.A."

Allhoff emptied his coffee cup. "Just a minute," he said. "There's one thing I'd like to know, Simmonds."

"What?"

"Those fingerprints which were in Green's bathroom. Homicide found them. They couldn't find out to whom they belonged. Winters has no criminal record. How did you happen to get a sample of Winters' prints and compare them?"

To answer that question truthfully was to get myself into one hell of a lot of trouble. I said: "I worked on some private clues which apparently escaped Homicide."

"Apparently," said Allhoff dryly. He lifted his head and stared for a moment at

Dawson. Dawson had sat silent throughout the entire proceedings. He smiled sadly and shook his head as if commiserating with Winters.

Allhoff spoke commandingly. "Dawson, come here!"

Dawson raised first his eyebrows, then his gaunt body. He walked across the room and stood at Allhoff's side.

"Bend down," said Allhoff.

Dawson stooped over until his face was within six inches of Allhoff's. Allhoff's voice, suddenly savage and crescendo, filled the room.

"I don't like you," he screamed. "You and your damned smug smile. Are you pitying me because I'm a cripple? Do you consider me an inferior object because I have no legs? I can't stand your damned attitude any longer. I won't. I won't!"

WITHOUT warning he lifted both his hands. His left curled around the back of Dawson's neck. His right clenched into a fist and smashed twice into Dawson's face. Blood and two teeth fell down upon the floor.

For an instant I stood stunned. God knew Allhoff's conduct was unpredictable enough. But this was utterly unheard of. I took a step across the room as Janet Winters' voice rang out.

"You dirty sadistic little beast! I'll report you for this. I—"

"Allhoff," I said, seizing his arm. "For God's sake!"

Dawson backed away. He dabbed at his face with a handkerchief. He wiped off some of the blood but none of the astonishment and rage.

"Are you crazy?" he demanded thickly. "By God, if it weren't for the fact—"

"Sure," said Allhoff with amazing calm. "If I had my legs you'd beat me up. Isn't that it?"

"My God," said Winters querulously, "is everyone insane?"

I didn't answer. I was still regarding Allhoff. There was a bland smugness about him I didn't quite like. The only explanation for his outburst that I could evolve was the fact that he was so enraged at his own case being broken under his nose that he had gone suddenly amuck.

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"Well," I said again. "Book Winters, Battersly. I'll—"

Allhoff ladled sugar into his coffee with a prodigal hand. "Just one more minute," he said with strange quietness. "I discovered this morning, Simmonds, that you were in Green's hotel room when Homicide arrived."

"Right." I gave him the details.

"So you went to work independently on this case, eh?"

"I had Battersly's help."

"You figured that if you two solved it you could gloat over me. Is that it?"

"It is not. I like you so little I don't even want to gloat. I want a transfer. So does Battersly. Perhaps, with this murder case wrapped up and in the bag the commissioner might see it our way."

"A transfer," said Allhoff slowly. "A transfer. And you were the first copper at the scene of the crime. And you solved it. Always, of course, with Battersly's aid." He was silent for a moment. Then an expression of demoniac glee distorted his features. He lifted his fist and brought it smashing down on the desk top. He opened his mouth and peals of gargantuan laughter resounded through the room. "Click!" he roared. "Click! That's the missing piece."

Bewildered I shook my head and looked around the room. Janet Winters regarded Allhoff as if he were something that had just crawled out of a swamp. Dawson holding his handkerchief to his face blinked dazedly. Winters held his hand to his temple as if he were desperately trying to understand what was going on. Battersly asked me for his cue with his eyes.

"Allhoff," I said politely, "have you gone mad?"

His laughter ceased abruptly. "Wait a minute," he said and there was an unholy glint in his eyes. "I am fighting an internal battle."

"Go ahead and fight it," I said. "In the meantime, Battersly, take Winters—"

"No!" roared Allhoff. "No one is to leave this room until I say so. I've got to make a decision."

There was something so completely dominant in his tone that no one moved. He sat, hunched over his desk, the center of a great silence. His brow was corrugated and his stubby forefinger beat a thoughtful tattoo on the desk top. Finally

he unleashed a sigh that came from the very bottom of his being.

"No," he said, "I won't do it. There's a lot of copper in me after all. A sort of a compulsion to make a criminal pay for his crime no matter how satisfactory it would be the other way."

"Allhoff," I said, "you're talking Choctaw."

"I'll put it into English. I'll tell you who killed Green. I'll tell you what became of Edwards from Cripple Creek. I have solved the case, Sergeant. Without, I may add, Battersly's help."

I shook my head. "I know what you're doing. You're putting up a desperate fight to save your face. You can't go behind my case. You can't go behind my evidence. It's sure-fire."

"I can go so far behind it," he said viciously, "that you'll find yourself facing charges, Sergeant. That odd cloud you may notice hovering over your head is the endangering of your pension rights."

I FELT a slight quiver at the pit of my stomach. Allhoff was rarely wrong. And I *had* withheld vital evidence. But how, I asked myself, could he possibly know that? How could he conceivably crack the case I'd built up against Winters?

He filled his coffee cup. He emptied it. He took a deep breath. He said: "To quote yourself, Sergeant, let's begin at the beginning."

"You mean the night Green was murdered?"

"I mean the moment Edwards stepped off the train from Colorado."

"But he didn't," said Dawson.

"The hell he didn't," said Allhoff. "He arrived on schedule."

"Then where is he?" asked Winters excitedly. "Perhaps he can throw some light on all this. Where is he?"

"In Woodlawn Cemetery," said Allhoff, "lying in a coffin with a ton of earth over him."

I gaped at him. How he'd found this out, I had no idea. "You mean," I asked, "that it was a double murder? Green and Edwards?"

"No, Dick Tracy. I don't mean any such thing. Since you were at the hotel before I got any information, I guess you

had the same clues to work on that I did. More, as a matter of fact. But, with your customary stupidity, you blew them."

"What clues?" I was frankly nervous now. "How did I blow them?"

"You found a corpse registered as George Green from North Carolina, didn't you?"

I nodded.

"You probably found out that he ordered soft boiled six-minute eggs for breakfast. Moreover, it's quite likely that a bellboy told you Green tossed him a dollar tip."

This was all true enough and I said so. Allhoff refilled his coffee cup. He sighed as if exasperated with the utter stupidity of the world.

"Well," he said, "Green wasn't Green. He was Edwards."

Winters gasped. Battersly glanced at me but I did not meet his eye. The hollow sensation at the pit of my stomach spread to the lower intestines.

"How could Green be Edwards?" said Dawson through his bleeding mouth. "That's ridiculous."

"No more ridiculous than a six-minute soft boiled egg," snapped Allhoff.

"Look," I said, "would you kindly take a moment to tell what in the name of God eggs have to do with it?"

"Sure," said Allhoff. "Edwards came from Cripple Creek. That's about ten thousand feet high. The boiling point of water is much lower than it is at sea level. It would take six minutes to cook a soft boiled egg in Cripple Creek."

I blinked and digested this information. Allhoff grinned at me happily.

"Then there's the dollar," he said. "No one apparently thought to ask that bellboy how a flimsy dollar bill could be tossed at him. Yet Homicide assures me 'tossed' was the word he used. Obviously it was a silver dollar. There are more silver dollars in use around Denver than anywhere else. I immediately arrived at the conclusion that Edwards was Green."

I thought it over and took heart. I nodded reassuringly in Battersly's direction.

"That doesn't touch our case," I said. "Edwards or Green. He was murdered, wasn't he? So my cast-iron evidence makes Winters the killer of Edwards in-

stead. In effect, it's still the same case."

"In effect," said Allhoff, "you're a blundering slow-witted lout whose screwing around has almost sent an innocent man to the chair, made a fortune for a murderer and dragged yourself and Battersly into the stinkingest departmental trial that ever gave off an odor."

I didn't know precisely what he was driving at. But somehow I wished I was a long way from here. There was a certain gloating assurance about him. I remembered his reputation for being right, my own for being wrong. I bit my lip. I said: "Will you explain all this?"

"Willingly and loudly. Since Sherlock Simmonds and Doctor Watson Battersly have stepped down, Inspector Allhoff will take over. Hold on to your hats everybody, here we go!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Prof. Allhoff's Murder Class

THERE was a breezy confidence about him that I didn't like at all. He tilted his coffee cup, spilling the last three drops upon his chin. He leaned back in his chair and began to talk with all the apodictic authority of an isolationist senator.

"This guy, Edwards, apparently finds a gold mine. He is, as Dawson has told us, as Cripple Creek has wired us, a bit of a nut. He'd been gypped out of mines before this and now he's panicky about city slickers. He doesn't even file his claim. He comes to New York to sell part of it for a lot of cash. Dawson, who knows him, is supposed to meet him at the station."

"And," I murmured, taking heart, "today is Tuesday. We know all these facts."

"Thus far you do," said Allhoff. "Now I'll give you some more facts. Facts which completely escaped you. Edwards *does* arrive on that train. Dawson *does* meet him. Dawson takes him to the Lafayette Hotel. But before doing so he pours a lot of slime in the old guy's ear. He plays on the old man's delusion of persecution. He tells him that big operators from Wall Street are out to steal his mine. That extreme caution is called for."

Dawson took the crimson handkerchief from his lips. He said: "This is ridiculous."

Allhoff ignored him. He continued.

"To this end Dawson persuades Edwards to mask his identity. This, says Dawson, will fool the crooks who are after the mine's location. Dawson, his old pal, has it all fixed. Edwards is to assume the person of one George Green, Dawson's cousin from Carolina. Edwards, who apparently trusts Dawson, agrees. Dawson loads Edwards with papers and stuff which will identify him as Green and takes away everything which might identify him as Edwards. Then he registers him as Green at the Lafayette Hotel and tells Winters that Edwards never arrived."

I considered this. It sounded all right, but for the life of me, I didn't see that it interfered with my case against Winters.

"What about the fingerprints?" I said. "What about Winters' prints on the bathroom faucets?"

"Ah," said Allhoff, "you mean those very odd faucets? The one marked hot on the cold water tap and vice versa?"

"What's so significant about that? It often happens."

"Not in first-class hotels," said Allhoff. He leaned across the desk and fixed Winters with his index finger. "Now, Winters, it is true, isn't it, that recently your wife decided to change your bathroom fixtures? She brought home samples for you to examine?"

Winters blinked. "My God," he said, glancing at his wife. "Yes, yes, Inspector. That's true. I—"

Allhoff's upheld hand silenced him. "The fact of those faucets being reversed started me thinking that perhaps the fingerprints had been planted on them *before* they were taken into the hotel. That's exactly what happened. Our killer in his haste accidentally reverses them when he screws them into the water pipe."

"You mean," I asked, "someone was trying to frame Winters?"

"With your help," said Allhoff, "yes. We have these bitter letters about the mine between Green and Winters. That makes a motive. The theory is that Winters called on Green to straighten things out, they had a fight and in a rage Winters killed him. The fingerprints in the bathroom prove it. Hell, you figured that all out yourself, Simmonds. That was exactly what the killer wanted you to do."

"I still don't get it," I said. "What's the murderer's motive?"

Allhoff cocked an eyebrow in Dawson's direction. "Do you care to tell him, Dawson, or shall I?"

Dawson took the handkerchief away from his mouth. He said again, "Ridiculous." I noted, with a sinking heart, that he didn't say it with a great deal of conviction.

"Edwards is dead," said Allhoff. "Only Dawson now knows the location of the mine. Moreover, Dawson has the dough that Winters put up. He's already claimed he'd forwarded it to Edwards in Cripple Creek. He also has something else."

Winters glared at Dawson. Then he turned his head and regarded his wife with an odd mixture of fear and wrath.

"What else has he?" he asked and he was obviously fearful of the answer.

"Mrs. Winters," said Allhoff.

THERE was a hush in the room broken only by the swift intake of Janet Winters' breath.

"It had to be," said Allhoff. "If a man is using his wife to front for him on a phoney alibi, he certainly has it fixed with her first. Winters told us at once that he spent the night of the murder at home with his wife. His wife denied it. Then when I checked on those faucets it was clear her hand was in it, too. Why?"

"Why?" I echoed weakly.

"Because she's been having an affair with Dawson. Because if Winters burns for murder she and her lover get the money. This figured obviously. A few moments ago I proved it."

"How could you prove such a charge as that?" snapped Janet Winters.

Allhoff grinned satanically. "With Dawson's teeth. You sat quiet and still while your husband was being railroaded to the electric chair. You made not the slightest protest. Yet when I smacked Dawson, you unleashed a howl. Obvious, wasn't it?"

Janet Winters bit her lip. I focused my eyes on the far wall and called every brain cell into action. If Allhoff was right and I was wrong, I was going to find myself in more trouble than a rugged individualist at Camp Dix.

"Wait a minute," I said. "What about

this Green? Where is he? And why should Dawson have gone through that business of switching Edwards' identity? Couldn't he have framed Winters for killing Edwards with the same result? Why all this business of substituting the identity of the two men?"

"A fair question," said Allhoff. "Green exists only in Dawson's mind and on the police blotter. That switch was done for reasons of motive. Dawson couldn't possibly cook up a motive for Winters' murdering Edwards. Edwards demanded a certain price for an interest in his mine. Winters was prepared to pay it. Edwards, who I gather was rather illiterate, would not engage in any angry correspondence. No, Dawson needed this Green whom he invented. Green, a supposed business man, ostensibly gets into this bitter financial controversy with Winters. Dawson, of course, is actually writing these Green letters, having them forwarded by some stooge of his in Carolina.

"I've been in touch by phone with the coppers in that Carolina town Green was supposed to come from. They found out from the post office that letters addressed to Green were being picked up from a certain box. They got the guy who was picking them. They found the original of Winters' letters in his possession. He talked at the drop of a rubber hose."

Winters sighed heavily.

"What I fail to understand," he said, "is if those fingerprints of mine were planted in the hotel, how did Dawson figure they'd be traced to me? After all, the police can't go around checking prints with every person in New York City."

I exchanged a glance with Battersly.

There was something cold and unpleasant at the pit of my stomach. Allhoff drained his cup again and looked at me like the devil about to light a particularly hot fire in Hades.

"The Sergeant wanted a transfer, didn't you, Sergeant?" he said mockingly. "The point Winters just made had me troubled for a while. If the killer left Winters' prints, it was obvious he must also leave some clues which would lead Homicide to Winters. I'm quite sure he did. What did you do with them, Sergeant?"

I SAT down, feeling as if there were water instead of blood in my knees. I saw Allhoff's unholy grin through a haze. He had me cold and completely. If I got out of this with less than a fine of two months' pay, I'd consider myself lucky.

I took a deep breath. I murmured a silent prayer to the patron saint of dumb police sergeants. I took the pipe from my mouth with a trembling hand and told him everything. As I spoke I was aware of Battersly's eyes upon me. He looked rather like a little boy who has discovered that his father has lied to him.

Allhoff heard my recital, his face twisted up, and gleaming mockery in his eyes.

"So," he said as I finished, "you withheld evidence, eh, Sergeant? And Battersly was in this, too."

"No," I said. "He really wasn't. He—"

"You said he was," said Allhoff mercilessly. "You said it three times before witnesses. Of course, the matter will be reported. It'll probably cost you both a degree of seniority and a month's pay."

I did not meet Battersly's eye. Yester-

HITS THE SPOT

PEPSI-COLA

BIGGER DRINK • BETTER FLAVOR

Pepsi-Cola is made only by Pepsi-Cola Company, Long Island City, N. Y. Bottled locally by authorized bottlers.

day I had lifted him up beautifully. Today, I had dropped him with a thud.

"You see," Allhoff went on, "Dawson figures it simply. As a relative, he identifies Green. The body is buried and no questions asked."

Across the room, Dawson cleared his throat. "Inspector," he said, "you're a master of conjecture. You'll need more than conjecture in a jury room."

"I have a witness," said Allhoff. "Haven't I, Mrs. Winters?"

For the first time since I had known her, Janet Winters revealed a measure of uncertainty. She glanced quickly toward Dawson, then back at Allhoff.

"You see," said Allhoff, "when I figured this plumbing business, I had a couple of boys from the detective bureau—not my own assistants here, of course; they were too busy working out the case for themselves—canvass the hardware shops in your neighborhood. It was simple since the faucets you bought had to be the same type as those used in the Hotel Lafayette. I discovered the store where you purchased those faucets, Mrs. Winters. I discovered further that the hardware dealer has an identifying mark on all his merchandise. That's enough, with the rest of the evidence to make a very tight case against you, Mrs. Winters. If you can explain it all without involving Dawson, you're most ingenious. If you can't, you'd better involve him now. Being a woman and a witness for the state, you'll probably save your life."

Dawson leaned forward on the couch. Janet Winters avoided her husband's eye and looked squarely at Allhoff.

"I've always been a realist," she said evenly. "So I see your point, Inspector. I do involve Dawson. And right now."

Dawson said, "Janet!" But she didn't look at him. She regarded Allhoff with her deep black eyes and it seemed to me there was some hatred in them—some hatred and a great deal of respect. "Maybe," she said, "I should have married a man like you."

"In my day—" said Allhoff, so softly, so reminiscently, that for an instant I was shocked. Then he broke off abruptly. He snapped: "Battersly, get me a copper. Take Mrs. Winters and Dawson out of here. Book them across the street."

Battersly moved dully toward the door. All the hope he had glowed with yesterday was gone. He moved like a beaten man. I felt like a louse. Allhoff drank coffee noisily like Goering toasting the fall of Paris.

THE three of us sat alone in the office. Allhoff chuckled without turning around.

"Why don't you boys get in touch with Eddie Hoover?" he said mockingly. "I understand he needs men badly."

I didn't answer him directly. I mentioned something that had been on my mind for the past few minutes.

"About that hardware store—" I said. "Isn't it odd that each dealer should carry identifying marks on every piece of material?"

"Odd?" said Allhoff. "It's impossible. But what woman would ever know that?"

I shook my head. Whenever he tried a bluff it seemed to work. When I tried one, I invariably fell on my face.

"There's one more thing," I said. "Do you recall before you began your explanation you announced you were conducting an internal struggle? After that you said that there was a lot of copper in you after all. What was it all about?"

Allhoff spun around in his chair. He balanced his coffee cup delicately on the stub of his right thigh.

"Oh, that," he said. "I was wondering if I ought to teach you guys a lesson. I was considering letting you get away with your case. Letting Winters burn. Then I would produce my own evidence. You certainly would've looked like a couple of first-rate idiots then."

"You actually considered that?"

He grinned. "Why not? I think it would have been damned funny."

"Allhoff," I said very seriously. "Why don't you see a psychiatrist? Consider, for God's sake, your mental health. You don't think it's normal, do you?"

His eyes lit up. His twisted smile spread over his face. "How's my mental health?" he said, and there was a hysterical note in his voice. "Oh, I can't kick, Simmonds." His voice rose like a siren blown by a maniac. His fist beat furiously on the desk top. "I can't kick, damn you! I can't kick!"



COME UP AND KILL ME SOME TIME

A Dodd Novelette

By

Norbert Davis

Author of "Watch Me Kill You!" etc.

Dodd has a doleful hangover but it's nothing to the headache the benighted bail-bondsman accumulates when he finds himself in the soak for 50 Gs bail. For Sadie's kootch-show has just been raided and a cop drilled in the process! The killer may be a kootch-show comic but he's no joke to Dodd.

CHAPTER ONE

Sadie Gets Socked

DODD had both arms wound around his middle. He was sure that if he didn't keep a strangle-hold on his stomach it would fall out and bounce on the floor in front of him.

He came wavering down the hall to-

Ludwig dropped
clumsily on his
knees beside
Loretta.

ward his office, bent nearly double, wincing at each step. He was a tall man with wide shoulders and a long homely face. He wore horn-rimmed glasses patched on the bridge with a piece of white adhesive tape.

Reaching his office door, he fumbled back-handed for his keys, moaning in a minor tone to himself. He got the door unlocked finally, went headlong through the anteroom and plopped himself down in the chair behind his desk.

"Oh," he said. "Oh, oh, oh."

His head felt as big and unwieldy as a barrage balloon, and the mere thought of the taste in his mouth made him shudder. It was all the fault of a character by the name of Henry Rally. Rally was a book-maker, and the night before he had celebrated his twenty-fifth arrest and acquittal on that charge. Dodd, being Rally's bondsman, had been included in the party that followed.

Rally's tastes ran to brandy with beer for a chaser and blondes with big breasts. Dodd moaned at the memory and put his head down on the desk and abandoned himself to despair and suffering.

The telephone on the desk rang shrilly. It felt exactly as though someone had slugged him on the ear with a sledge hammer. He yelled in agony and fumbled hastily to get the phone off its cradle before it could ring again.

"Dodd," he said feebly. "Bail bonds."

"Hart speaking. Take this down."

Dodd found a pencil. "Right, Lieutenant."

"*Grass Shack* on Dorado. Two for ten nineteen and one for ten twenty. Judge Mizner in Department 12. Vice squad from Central. Rolling now."

Dodd scribbled busily. "Thanks, Lieutenant." He put the telephone back on its cradle and touched his throbbing temples gingerly with his finger tips.

"Brandy," he muttered to himself. "Beer for a chaser. *Ugh!*"

He picked up the telephone again and dialed a number. After a moment a polite voice said into his ear: "Police department."

"Sergeant Henessey," Dodd requested. "Booking desk."

The line clicked, and another voice said: "Sergeant Henessey speaking."

"This is Dodd, Henessey. Is Meekins there?"

"Naw, Dodd. He went out to get a beer. Say, what about that drawing?"

"Drawing?" Dodd repeated.

"Sure. On the lottery."

"Lottery?" Dodd said vaguely.

"You know. That there Luxembourg lottery. I got three tickets. When they gonna have the drawing?"

Dodd's bloodshot eyes narrowed behind his glasses. "Any day now," he answered. "See you later."

He depressed the breaker bar on the phone, let it up and dialed another number. He waited quite awhile, and then a voice answered shortly: "Well, what?"

"This is Dodd. Is Meekins there?"

"Yeah, he's here. Hold it."

DODD waited again, and after a moment Meekins said: "Hello, boss. How you feel?"

"Lovely. Listen, you rat. Did you sell Henessey some of those Luxembourg lottery tickets you bummed off Pottsey Hanks the last time we bailed him out?"

"Well, not exactly. You see, I owed him some dough, and I give him three tickets, and he canceled—"

"You brainless louse!"

"Well, what's the matter with that?" Meekins demanded in an aggrieved tone. "Them tickets is genuine, and Henessey's got as good a chance to pull the grand prize—"

"Do you know where Luxembourg is?"

"It's in Africa, ain't it?"

"No!" Dodd said explosively. "It was between France and Germany."

"Oh!" said Meekins. "I see what . . . Say! You don't think that guy Hitler grabbed off the grand prize for himself, do you? Why hell, that's illegal! He can't do that!"

"Write him a letter," Dodd advised. "But in the meantime, you give Henessey his money. You know damned well we can't afford to get him griped at us. And there's something else for you to do. Do you know anything about a place called the *Grass Shack*?"

"Sure. That's the name of Sadie Wade's new kootch show down on Dorado Road at the beach."

"I thought that was it. The vice squad

is going to pull the joint, and I want you—”

“Oh, no,” Meekins interrupted.

“What?” Dodd said.

“They ain’t gonna pull Sadie.”

“And why not?”

“Because it ain’t her turn yet.”

“What do you mean, stupid?”

“She ain’t supposed to be knocked over any more than once a season, and they got her once already.”

“Never mind that. Lieutenant Hart just called and said the vice squad was on its way out there now.”

“Sadie’s gonna be mad,” Meekins warned.

“I don’t care whether she’s mad or not. You get over to Judge Mizner’s court and bail her out when they bring her in. She and her barker will be booked on violation of Section I019. One dancer will be booked on violation of Section 1020. You know what the bail will be, so get the papers fixed up and give her some snappy service.”

“All right. Say listen, boss. The last time I had a hangover a guy told me—”

“Shut up!”

Dodd slammed the phone back in its cradle. He put his head down on his desk again, and the smooth varnished wood felt luxuriously cool and soothing against his cheek. After a while he began to snore in muted little flutters.

The telephone went off and slammed him in the ear. Dodd jumped a foot in the air and came down so hard he cracked his neck. He sputtered profanity, grabbing for the instrument with both hands.

“Hello! Dodd speaking.”

“This is Sadie Wade, Dodd. Have you got a sawed-off little monkey with a bald knob working for you?”

“Sure,” Dodd said. “That’s Meekins. He’s my runner.”

“Did you tell him to bail me out?”

“Certainly. I hope everything—”

“Well, why don’t he do it? You think I’ve got nothing to do with my time but sit around in this damned rat-trap of a jail?”

“What?” said Dodd. “What’s this? Didn’t Meekins bail you out?”

“He did not. He won’t do it.”

“Well, why not? I told him to. Where is he?”

“Right here. Tell him again. And make it plain this time. I want bail, and I want it right now!”

Meekins’ voice said: “Listen here, boss—”

“You scum! Didn’t I tell you to bail Sadie out?”

“Sure you did. But listen—”

“I don’t want to listen! Put—up—that—bail!”

There was a crash and a crackling sound from the other end of the line. Meekins protested incoherently: “Here! You can’t— Quit shovin’!”

Sadie Wade’s harsh voice snapped in Dodd’s ear. “Did you tell him?”

“Yes,” said Dodd. “And when I get hold of him I’ll do more than tell him. I’m sorry, Sadie. He’s a dope, and I guess he probably didn’t understand. I’m always ready to give you service any time of the day or night—”

“All right, Dodd. I’m in a hurry now. See you later.”

DODD hung up and sighed in a sad, dreary way. He put his elbows on his desk and braced his head in the palms of his hands. In a few moments he dozed off again.

The sun, slanting through the half-closed shutters on the window, woke him. He straightened up cautiously. His head felt better, and he grinned with relief. He went to the cooler and took a leisurely drink of water.

He was filling the glass for the second time when the telephone buzzed commandingly. Dodd picked it up and said cheerfully: “William Dodd speaking.”

It was Meekins. “How do you feel now?” he asked.

“All right. Say listen, I want to tell you—”

“Wait a minute,” Meekins interrupted. “Go in the front room and look under the leather lounge chair in the north-east corner. The one I usually sit in.”

Dodd put the telephone down and obeyed. He felt around awkwardly under the low chair and finally brought his hand out holding a flat pint bottle half-full of bourbon. Carrying it, he went back to the telephone.

“What’s the idea of this?”

“It’s for you,” Meekins told him.

"You're gonna need that pretty quick."

Dodd felt a queer chill of apprehension. He sat down carefully behind his desk.

"What, Meekins?"

"You're in soak for fifty thousand smackers."

"Fifty thousand . . ." Dodd said numbly. "What? *What?*"

"Yeah."

"But I haven't got fifty thousand!"

"You're telling me?" Meekins asked.

"But that was the amount of Sadie Wade's bail, and you're signed up for it."

Dodd's face was gray. "Why—why—That *can't* be!"

"Yes, it can."

Dodd swallowed hard. "What—happened?"

"Sadie had a comedian named Tracy workin' for her. A little guy that wore big pants and big shoes and a clown make-up and went around slappin' the gals on the fanny between shakes. You know, anything for a laugh."

"Go on," Dodd said tensely.

"So when the boys rumbled the joint, this Tracy pulls a gun and cracks one of the detectives—Jake Holden—with a slug in the chest and scrams out the back way."

"Oh, oh!" Dodd said in a sick voice.

"Jake ain't dead—yet. But the boys are really mad. They were holding Sadie as a material witness and for aiding and abetting. That's the why of the heavy bail. We didn't do ourselves any good with the cops by puttin' it up."

Dodd exploded. "Why, you—you—What'd you do it for?"

"Ha!" said Meekins. "I tried to tell you, but you were too busy with your hangover and your snappy service. I couldn't argue while Sadie was pushin' me around. You told me to do it, and she knew you did. What was I supposed to answer to that?"

"O.K.," Dodd said slowly. "It's in my lap. I'm sorry I popped off to you."

"That's all right, boss. I know how you felt. But you bought yourself a baby. The cops are griped, and you've signed up for more bail than you can cover, and Sadie's actin' funny."

"What?" Dodd barked. "Funny how?"

"She's worth fifty thousand dollars to

us, and I been walkin' around a step-and-a-half behind her. She's steamin' mad, just like I said. I tailed her down to her joint, and I'm across the street in a dog stand now. She's got the itch. I think she's gonna blow on us, boss."

"My God!" Dodd exclaimed. "If she does, and I can't cover that bail . . ."

"Maybe you'll like it in jail," Meekins said comfortingly.

"Stay right there!" Dodd ordered. "Wait for me! Don't let her get away from that joint of hers!"

He jumped up and started for the door. Halfway there he stopped short, turned around and went back for the whiskey. He slammed out of the office, fumbling with the metal cap on the bottle.

CHAPTER TWO

Socketed by Sadie

THE bay was a great flat blue semicircle that cut into the smooth green of the hills beyond the beach. There was some wind, and the waves wore ruffled white collars of foam as they traveled up to roll themselves over in ponderous playfulness on the sand.

Automobiles shuttled back and forth in squawking lines on the speedway that was divided in the middle by a green parkway. Dodd wormed his battered coupe through the traffic lanes and parked it slantwise at the curb.

It was late Saturday afternoon now, and Dorado Road was winding up for its weekly hoopla. A ferris wheel, already lighted, traveled its endless futile way up and down again, and loudspeakers blared their hoarse invitations everywhere. The sidewalks were thronged with people with pink sunburned faces and peeling noses, and a car went by on the high lattice-work of the roller coaster with a sudden smack-bang and thin trailing whoops from its riders.

Dodd ignored it all. He elbowed his way along, hat crushed down on his head, spectacles balanced precariously on the end of his nose.

He found the *Grass Shack* without any trouble. It was a flat-roofed dingy building with colored life-size photographs of its entertainers plastered all over the front

of it. The red curtains across the doorway were closed now, and the spangled ticket box was empty. The place looked battered and rundown and sorry for itself.

Dodd made a right turn and headed across the street toward a glistening white stand with an enormous red sign over it that said: COME IN AND COOL YOUR DOGS WHILE YOU EAT OURS—ONE FOOT OF SUCCULENT SAUSAGE FOR ONE DIME. Dodd dodged around a vendor who was selling candy that looked like pink puff-balls and ducked through the door of the stand.

Aside from the white-uniformed counter-man, Meekins had the place all to himself. He was a nondescript little man with a tired, disillusioned air. He was sensitive about his baldness, and he never took his hat off unless the rules required it. He was sitting at the end of the long counter holding a raw pat of hamburg over his right eye. He turned and stared glumly at Dodd with the other.

"Where's Sadie?" Dodd demanded.

"Where's my whiskey?" Meekins countered.

Dodd produced the pint bottle. There was now only about an inch of liquor left in it.

"You must feel a lot better," Meekins said, eyeing it. He removed the cap and took care of the remaining whiskey in one big gulp.

"Where's Sadie?" Dodd demanded again. "Is she still over in her place?"

"No," said Meekins sourly.

"Well, where is she? What happened?"

Meekins removed the hamburg and showed the foundation for a beautiful black eye. The lid had already swollen shut.

"That happened," Meekins said, putting the hamburg back carefully. "Right after I phoned you, she came tearing out of her joint like the place was on fire. I was sitting here, so I hopped out and trailed along—but not far."

"Why not?"

"She turned into that alley down the road, and I put on a big spurt and turned in right after her. She was waitin' for me. She didn't even say hello. She just handed me this mouse."

"She hit you?" Dodd asked.

"And how! She tagged me with an overhand right and knocked me end-over-end. When I picked myself up she was gone, so I came back here. I don't feel so good." Meekins sighed and then added casually: "She had a bag with her."

"A what?"

"A traveling bag. One of them dressing cases."

Dodd said: "She's blowing on us! Come on!"

"Where?" Meekins groaned.

"Over to the *Grass Shack*. We'll see what we can uncover."

QUICK!

SLICK!

CLICK!

20 PROBARK JUNIOR BLADES

RECEPTACLE FOR USED BLADES INSIDE

Slick Shaves For Tough-Bearded Men . . . PROBARK Jr. Blades Twenty For Only A Quarter!

Meekins put the hamburg down on the plate in front of him and signaled to the counterman. "Put this back in the ice-box. Probably I'll need it again pretty soon."

"Hurry up!" Dodd ordered.

THEY went back across the crowded street and pushed through the faded red curtains that masked the entrance of the *Grass Shack*. There was a narrow wooden door behind the curtains, and Dodd led the way through it into the shadowed dusty dimness of the big room beyond. It was full of long rows of bare wooden benches that faced a small, low stage.

A man was sitting on the edge of the stage swinging his long thin legs dejectedly. He had a hugely swollen red-veined nose and watery-weak little eyes under fiercely bushy brows. He was wearing a checked suit and a double-breasted white vest that had an enormous gold watch chain stretched across it.

"That's Smedley," Meekins told Dodd. "He's Sadie's barker and ticket man. Smedley, this is Dodd. He's my boss."

"All right," said Smedley. "Go ahead."

"Go ahead and what?" Dodd asked.

"Curse me," Smedley said lifelessly.

"Insult me. Call me names."

"Why?" Dodd asked blankly.

"Why not?" Smedley inquired. "You might as well. Everybody else does. Nobody has a kind word for me. Everything that happens in the world is my fault personally. I'm to blame no matter what it is."

A woman's voice said shrilly: "You dirty old whiskey-bum!"

Smedley closed his eyes with a martyred air. "Sure. That's right. Go ahead."

The woman came down the aisle between the benches, brushing past Dodd and Meekins as though they didn't exist. She was a big woman with wide, high shoulders and a thickly-set strong-looking body. Her hair was a brassy red and swung loose in a long bob.

"Are you blind?" she demanded of Smedley. "Can't you spot a copper before he shoves his buzzer in your pan?"

"It's my fault," Smedley said. "Sure. Everything is my fault."

"You drooling rum-pot! Why didn't you signal us? You could at least have yelled when they put the arm on you. But, no! Not you!"

"Go ahead," Smedley invited drearily. "I'm to blame."

"You're damned right you are! So just because you didn't tip us off I have to get pinched and dragged through the streets in this outfit! Look at it! Just look!"

Smedley opened his eyes cautiously. She took off an old, stained slicker.

"Go ahead," Smedley said sadly. "Hit me. Knock me down."

"I'll do worse than that! Look at me!"

Smedley peered under one protective arm. She was wearing nothing but a very scanty gilt brassiere and an even scantier gilt G-string.

"What do you think of this for a street costume?" she demanded. "How do you like it for a court appearance? Maybe you think it's just the thing, but I don't!"

Expertly she hurled the slicker in Smedley's face.

"Now!" she said, doubling her fists on her wide hips and glaring at him. "I'm through! I'm through with this one-horse show and with this one-horse town and everybody in it!"

She opened a door at the side of the stage and slammed it violently shut behind her.

"Whee!" said Meekins, tugging at his collar.

Smedley sighed drearily. "That's the way it goes. Everybody kicks me around all the time."

"Who is she?" Dodd asked.

"That's Loretta. She's our star dancer. That is, she would be if she was working for us and we had a show for her to dance in. She's temperamental."

"Is that what you call it now?" Meekins inquired. "Say boss, I think I better take a look around backstage—"

"You stay here," Dodd ordered. "What's this about having no show to work in, Smedley?"

SMEDLEY gestured tragically at the empty benches. "We're closed. It'd be bad enough—just havin' Loretta walk out. She's something special. See, the yaps like big dolls, but most big dolls are

fat and they sort of droop when you put 'em in a rig like that. But Loretta's solid. She don't sag."

"I noticed that," Meekins said dreamily.

"She's a great artist," said Smedley. "But now she's quit, and the cops are mad at us, and Sadie's gone wacky."

"What's the matter with Sadie?" Dodd inquired.

Smedley moved his thin shoulders. "I'd think she was gonna do the old dutch, except that she don't act to me like a person who is gonna do that."

"Kill herself?" Dodd said. "What do you mean? What did she say?"

"Nothing much," Smedley explained. "Except she was swearing a little bit more than usual. But she had a mean look in her eye, and I can't figure out what she wanted that gun for."

Dodd jumped. "Gun?"

"Yeah. The .45 Colt she kept in her dresser. It's a regular elephant gun. Got a barrel a foot long. So she comes in here and swears at me for awhile and puts that gun in her dressing case and sails out again."

"Where'd she go?" Dodd demanded tensely.

"I dunno. She said she was goin' snake huntin'."

Meekins said: "Boss, if she gets in any more trouble, she'll sure jump her bail."

Dodd chewed his under-lip. "You're telling me. Hell! I certainly did manage to hide myself right behind the eight ball! Fifty thousand dollars!" He shook his head sharply. "Listen, Smedley. What happened here, anyway?"

"I don't know much about it," Smedley said, "on account of the cops had me on a leash out front at the time. They rolled in just like it was a routine pinch. Sadie was griped because it was out of her turn to get it. She's been payin' off regular, and she ain't supposed to be pinched only once a season when she does that. So she beefed with them backstage. She wanted to call Captain Boris and squawk."

"Captain Boris?" Dodd repeated.

Meekins said: "Head of the beach precinct."

Dodd nodded. "O.K. Go ahead, Smedley."

"So Sadie says these payoffs are getting too damned complicated. Too many people got their hand out, and a person can't make an honest living with a hide show any more. But the cops wouldn't let her call, and she swung on this guy Holden, and he slapped her back, which was no more than right, and then this little bum of an Edgar Tracy popped out from behind the fire barrel where he'd been hidin' and let fly at Holden and bored him through the chest. There was hell to pay around here for awhile."

"Edgar Tracy is the comedian?" Dodd asked.

"That's what he claimed. He never made me laugh."

"Was he Sadie's boy-friend?" Dodd asked.

"He had notions in that direction, but when I showed him this he changed his mind." Smedley took a razor out of his coat pocket and snapped the long blade open and shut again. "I'm a patient man, and everybody picks on me, but there's limits to what I'll take."

"Tracy got away?" Dodd said.

"Yeah. He lammed out the back. The little rat."

"Who is he? Where'd he come from?"

"I got my own ideas about that," Smedley said darkly. "Guys like him ain't born. They crawl out from under stones. I don't know who he is—aside from his name. He ain't never worked the carnny circuits or the fairs or the burleycye stands."

"What does he look like?"

"Nothin' much. Sort of fat and sort of middle-aged and sort of dopey. You can find guys who look just like him on any street corner."

"Where does Sadie live?" Dodd asked.

"At the Langley Apartments on Keener Street."

THERE was a sudden crash from backstage. Loretta screamed and then screamed again. There was another crash, and the whole small stage shook.

A man ducked out under the curtains and jumped down off the stage into the aisle. He ran three lumbering steps and then stopped, peering cautiously back over his shoulder.

Loretta batted the curtains aside and

came to the edge of the stage and pointed her finger at him warningly. She was dressed in a green street costume now.

"Scram, you bum!"

The man in the aisle wore a wrinkled blue suit and a black derby with a dent in the side. He had a beefy red face and enormously thick, heavy shoulders. He spoke protestingly to Loretta in a high, whining voice: "Now, honey-bee. Don't get mad like that . . ."

Loretta kicked Smedley hard. "And there's one thing more I'm through with around here! I'm through brushing off cow-footed fly-cops!"

Smedley winced. "Go ahead. He's my fault, too, I suppose."

"Now, honey-bee," said the beefy man.

"Shut up!" Loretta screeched. "Scram!"

She ducked back through the curtains. The beefy man cleared his throat with a belligerent cough and peered suspiciously at Dodd and Meekins.

"Who are these two guys, Smedley?"

"Who?" Smedley asked. "Oh, them. They're just a couple of would-be customers that dropped in."

"I'm Ludwig," said the beefy man to Dodd. "First class detective. Beach precinct. You got business here?"

"No," said Dodd. "We were just leaving."

"O.K.," said Ludwig. He turned importantly to Smedley. "You see anything of that guy Dodd yet?"

"Dodd?" Smedley repeated vaguely. "Oh, you mean the bail bond guy. No. Haven't seen him."

"Well, if you do, remember to tell him what I said."

"What was that?" Smedley asked, still vague.

"You dope! Can't you remember nothing? Captain Boris wants to see this bird Dodd, and he wants to see him right now."

"What for?" Smedley inquired.

"How should I know? But Captain Boris is plenty mad, and when he's mad he raises pure hell. He'll tear this guy Dodd to pieces and put him back together again wrong-side out. If he can't find Dodd he wants a guy by the name of Meekins. This Meekins is Dodd's stooge."

Meekins muttered under his breath. Dodd jabbed him warningly in the side

with his elbow and said: "Well, we'll be moving along, Mr. Smedley. We're sure sorry your show is closed. Me and my cousin left our plowing and drove thirty miles just to see it."

"Come again, boys," Smedley said kindly. "Some other time."

CHAPTER THREE

Boris Burns Up

THE Langley Apartments were housed in a thin, anemic-looking building covered in an off-shade of pink stucco that hadn't weathered the salt-sea air very successfully. Weeds grew high and rank in front of it, lapping over the curb into which Dodd cramped the wheels of the old coupe.

Here, up on the hillside, the wind had a sharper, colder tang. To the west the clouds were a rolled pile of red-gold that masked the setting sun, and shadows stretched long and thin ahead of Dodd and Meekins as they went up the chipped cement steps.

The front door was half ajar, and they went into the narrow, dark hallway that served as a lobby. Rows of mail boxes lined the left wall, and Dodd ran his finger down the name cards until he found Sadie Wade's.

"One twelve," he said. "That'll probably be in back— What was that?"

"What was what?" Meekins asked.

"Come on!" Dodd ordered.

Odors of meals long past swirled in the dim hallway, and the carpet was scuffed and ragged under Dodd's feet. Somewhere a radio and a baby squalled in off-key unison.

One twelve was the last door at the right at the end of the hall. It was closed, soiled-looking from the smears groping palms had left on it, and there was no sound from the apartment behind it.

Dodd stopped short about ten feet away, and Meekins ran into him from behind.

"Are you drunk again?" he complained. "What—"

"Shut up. I thought I heard a shot."

"I didn't hear—"

"It was muffled. Just a thud."

Dodd stepped cautiously up to the door and reached for the knob. He turned it

very carefully and slowly, holding it so the latch wouldn't click. The door wasn't locked. Carefully Dodd pushed it open an inch and then another.

From behind him Meekins said: "There ain't no light. She ain't—"

Dodd flipped his arm back and hit Meekins hard in the chest, knocking him sideways. At the same second, he pivoted himself and swung flat against the wall.

The shots weren't muffled this time. They were sharp, whip-like cracks, and three little holes like splintered, sinister periods appeared magically in the door panel just above the knob.

From inside the apartment feet scuffled hurriedly on the floor. A screen door slammed flatly.

"The back way!" Dodd shouted. "Go around—"

Meekins was huddled against the wall, his face pasty-white. "Oh, no! Not if she feels that way about it. A black eye is bad enough. I got no desire to spend the summer pickin' lead out of my plumbing."

Dodd ran for the end of the hall, but there was no door or window there—no way to get out the back of the building. He started for the front of the hall and then stopped, realizing that whoever had shot would be blocks away before he could get around the building. He approached the bullet-scarred door with wary hesitant steps, keeping against the wall.

"Boss," said Meekins, "let's just fold our tents and steal silently away. This is gettin' kind of out of hand."

Dodd ignored him. He kicked the door suddenly, knocking it wide open. The apartment was a gloomy cave, and the sharp acrid smell of powder drifted into the hallway.

Dodd waited for a long, silent minute and then put his head cautiously around the door jamb. The furniture in the box-like living-room resembled grotesque animals crouched and waiting in the shadows, and there was something else that moved and wavered and mumbled.

"Oh!" said Meekins in a choked gasp.

THE wavering thing took a sodden, slumping step toward the door and then folded down gently on itself into a lumpy pile that kept on mumbling.

Dodd reached a long arm around the door, found a light switch on the wall and flicked it. Light jumped brilliantly out of the brass chandelier that hung on a chain from the low ceiling.

"It's Sadie!" Meekins whispered.

She was a tall, heavily powerful woman of better than middle age. She was still wearing her street coat, and her flat pancake hat was tipped down drunkenly over one ear. Her face was a square-jawed stubborn mask, lined deeply with wrinkles, and the rouge stood out on her hard-muscled cheeks in raw patches.

She was sitting down on the floor, leaned back against a chair. She was holding a big .45 revolver in her lap. She had it in both hands, and she was trying to lift it. Her lips were drawn back rigidly from her square, white teeth with the effort she was making. Her eyes were wide and glassy.

"Take it easy, Sadie," Dodd said. "It's Dodd."

Sadie relaxed so suddenly her head jerked forward on the thick column of her neck. "Aw! Dodd!" She panted hoarsely, taking her breath in strangled gasps. "That—fat—smiling—little devil! I'll—kill him! You hear me, Dodd? I'll—kill—him . . ."

Dodd was kneeling beside her. "Sure, Sadie. Who?"

"Tracy. Wait 'til—I—get—my—hands . . ."

Her head slumped forward. Her hands relaxed, and the big revolver slid to the floor with a soft thump.

"Is she—dead?" Meekins asked uneasily.

"No," Dodd said. "She's hit in the left side—up high here. Call an ambulance. I'll go—"

"Nowhere," a voice finished for him. A man stepped through the door from the hall. He was short and thick-set, with a round darkly saturnine face, and he carried himself with an air of lazy confidence. He was holding a revolver casually in his right hand.

Dodd nodded. "Hello, Fesitti," he said calmly.

"Ta-da-ta-da!" Meekins said in a mock trumpet call. He had recovered himself completely. Policemen didn't frighten him a bit. "The cops arrive with a fan-

fare—late as usual. Where were you hiding, Fesitti? In the garbage can?"

"I wasn't hiding anywhere," said Fesitti. "I was staked out in front—watching the joint. I followed you two in here. Which one of you shot Sadie?"

"Pass the cocaine, Watson," Meekins commented. "The master-mind has just made a startling deduction."

"You'll talk too much one of these days," Fesitti said coldly.

Dodd said: "If you'd gone around in back you'd have nailed the guy that did this."

"That would have taken some brains," Meekins said. "Don't expect miracles, boss."

"How'd you like to fall down and hurt yourself?" Fesitti asked.

Dodd said shortly: "Stop fooling around and call an ambulance. Sadie's bleeding a lot."

"Too bad," Fesitti said. He walked leisurely over to the telephone stand and picked up the instrument. "Police department," he said into the mouthpiece. He nodded at Dodd. "Captain Boris wants to see you—but bad."

"I'll go down pretty quick."

"No," Fesitti corrected. "You'll go now. With me." He spoke into the mouthpiece. "Fesitti. Give me Captain Boris."

"Do you want Meekins too?" Dodd asked.

"I wouldn't take him as a gift."

Dodd nodded at Meekins. "You stay here with Sadie. When the ambulance comes, you go with her to the hospital. Stay there and watch her."

"O.K.," Meekins agreed.

"I got Dodd, Captain," Fesitti said into the telephone.

CAPTAIN BORIS looked exactly like the motion picture version of a Prussian army officer. He had a round, bullet-like head covered with a close-clipped blond stubble of hair and no neck at all. His eyes were sinister blood-shot slits almost hidden in pink rolls of fat.

He even had what would pass as a saber scar on his cheek. It wasn't. He had acquired it years ago when he had tried to stop a drunk from beating up his wife. The wife tagged him with a flatiron.

He looked up from the tangled mass of papers on his desk when Fesitti pushed Dodd into the cubbyhole office. He wagged one blunt finger, and Fesitti went out and shut the door carefully behind him.

"Sit," said Boris, pointing. He had a grin which was like something out of a nightmare.

Dodd lowered himself gingerly into the braced, straight-backed chair in front of the desk.

"Mr. William Dodd," said Boris. "The big shot from uptown. So you think you're going to play fun in my precinct, do you?"

"Am I pinched?" Dodd inquired. "Because if I am, I want to call—"

"Shut up. Do you know that Jake Holden died?"

Dodd's face lengthened. "No."

"Yeah. An hour ago. Jake was a friend of mine. He joined up with the cops the same year I did. He never did get past a first-class detective grade because he was honest, but I liked him in spite of that."

"So did I," Dodd said.

"Shut up. So Sadie Wade hired this guy Tracy, who popped Jake off. She didn't hire him on account he was a comedian, because he wasn't any funnier than a time-bomb. He was hidin' out, and he must have been hotter than a firecracker or he wouldn't have shot a cop just to keep from bein' dragged in on a routine vice raid. Sadie must know what he's hidin' from, but before I can question her you get her out on bail."

"That was a mistake."

Boris nodded grimly. "I'll bet you'll think so before I get through with you. But you ain't even satisfied with bailin' her out. You're afraid I'll pick her up again, so you take a bang at her to keep her quiet. Listen, sonny, let me tell you something. This precinct is a damned good thing, and I've held it for ten years. If you think you can push in with those row-de-dow tactics of yours, you're crazier than hell. And shut up!"

"Shut up yourself!" Dodd snarled. "I didn't shoot Sadie. Tracy did. She told me so. If that lunk-headed Fesitti had been a little smarter, he'd have nabbed Tracy when he was getting away. If you don't believe me, ask Sadie."

"I can't—yet," Boris said mildly. "I

just called the hospital. She's still unconscious."

"Ask her when she comes out of it, then. She knew Tracy would be hiding out at her place—or had a good idea he would. She got her gun from the *Grass Shack* and headed right for home. She bopped my man, Meekins, when he tried to tail her. She spotted Fesitti and sneaked in the back way. She and Tracy must have had an accident. He had a gun wrapped up in a towel, and he let her have it and then blasted through the door at me."

"So you say," said Boris.

"And I can prove it!"

"Probably you can," Boris admitted. "I've heard tell that you're a guy who can prove the moon's made of limburger if you set your mind to it."

"Not only that," said Dodd, "but I told you the truth a minute ago. I bailed Sadie out by mistake, and if she runs out on me I can't cover her bail."

BORIS stared at him out of slitted eyes. "You know you're sittin' there wide open for a felony charge?"

Dodd leaned forward. "Sure, I know it! That's what I'm yelling about!"

"Oh," said Boris. He rubbed the scar on his cheek with the back of his thumb contemplatively. "This sort of puts a different slant on things. Who tipped you off to the raid on the *Grass Shack*?"

"Lieutenant Hart at headquarters. He's a friend of mine, and he knew I'd been trying to get some business from this precinct."

"You sure it was Hart?"

"Call him up and ask him."

"Ummm," said Boris. "Did you know it wasn't a routine raid?"

"Meekins said it wasn't Sadie's turn, but I thought he was just blowing off as usual."

"He was right," Boris said. He sighed lengthily. "It's gettin' so I'm losing my faith in human nature. The mayor has got to make a speech before a women's club tomorrow, and he wanted something to talk about. So he wanted a vice raid. So I said they could raid down here if they were nice about it. I told 'em to take Sadie because she's a good pal of mine, and I figured I'd make it up to her later.

But I come to find out she's hiding a red-hot in her show—and without even telling me! How do you like that?"

"It's not so good," Dodd commented.

Boris nodded gloomily. "You'd think she'd at least tip me off—her being a friend and all that. She knows I'm reasonable. I wouldn't have bothered the guy as long as he behaved, if there wasn't too big a reward on him. But the main thing is, I wouldn't have run the vice squad in on her if I'd known about this Tracy."

"Have you been shaking her down heavy?"

"Sadie?" Boris asked. "Why, no. I told you she was a pal of mine. A place like hers always makes extra trouble for the cops, and I expect her to pay for it, but that's all."

"Having any trouble in your precinct?"

Boris' lips moved in a gargoyle grin. "If I found any trouble around here, I'd shoot it and mount it and hang it on the wall. Just keep that in mind, pal."

The inter-office communicator buzzed, and Boris flipped the switch. "Yeah?"

The desk sergeant's voice said: "That guy Emil Poulson is here again. Says he's got to see you right now. Very important. He says if you don't see him he's going to see Kranz and get us all fired."

"Send him in," Boris ordered. He flipped the switch and looked at Dodd. "I hate lawyers—even worse than I do bail bondsmen. Do you know this guy Poulson?"

Dodd shook his head. "No. Never heard the name."

"You're lucky. He's a pest."

CHAPTER FOUR

Respectability Rears Up

FESITTI opened the door and let in a small, plump man with a neatly pointed white goatee and a round, smiling, dough-like face. He wore thick-lensed nose-glasses attached to his coat lapel with a broad black ribbon.

"Captain Boris?" he inquired.

"That's right," Boris said.

"My name is Emil Poulson, as you are very well aware. I'm an attorney rep-

resenting the Agatha Drinkwater Estate."

"O.K.," Boris said wearily.

Poulson cleared his throat with the air of a professional lecturer and said: "The Agatha Drinkwater Estate consists of a trust of a great number of miscellaneous pieces of property. The beneficiary is, of course, Agatha Drinkwater, who is a widowed lady of advanced years."

"So what?" Boris asked.

Poulson continued in his precise informative way: "One of the pieces of property owned by the Estate and leased by its accredited agents—of which I am one—consists of Blocks 12, 14, 18, and 19 of the southeast quarter of the north section of Silvester's addition to White's quarter section of the suburb—"

"Hold it," Boris requested. "If this is a tax beef, you've got the wrong party."

"It is not a tax—ah—beef. As I say, the Estate owns Block 19—"

"Yeah, I know. Go on from there."

"The third lot of Block 19 is occupied by an amusement concession known as the *Grass Shack*."

Boris pulled his beefy body upright. "Is that a fact?"

"It is. Now the rental agreement, or lease, between the Agatha Drinkwater Estate and the—ah—*Grass Shack* contains certain provisions and covenants to be fulfilled on the part of the lessee."

"The who?"

"The *Grass Shack*. The owners of said concession agreed that they would operate a lawful business on the property."

"Well, they are," said Boris. "It's a hide show."

Poulson took off his glasses and tapped them on his forefinger. "But not a lawful one—not according to the legal definition of such outlined in *Brass Ring vs. Greeley*, 113 General Sessions 304. According to my reports, the *Grass Shack* has twice been raided already this current season by the Vice and Morality Squad of the police department."

"Oh, those were just routine raids," Boris explained.

"Routine?" Poulson repeated, raising his eyebrows.

"Sure. Those guys on the vice squad have to do something to justify their existence. If the show wasn't lawful, I wouldn't let it run in my precinct."

"The proprietor of the show—one Sadie Wade—pleaded guilty to the charges of operating an indecent show the first time she was arrested."

"Oh, sure," said Boris. "That keeps the reformers happy, gives the papers something to print, and gets Sadie some free advertising. Just a matter of business."

"Not the kind of business the Agatha Drinkwater Estate prefers to be associated with," said Poulson. "It is my intention to cancel the lease held by the *Grass Shack*."

"I wouldn't do that."

Poulson nodded his head slowly and meaningly. "Ah. I suspected you had an—ah—interest in the place. That's why you've been trying to avoid seeing me."

"Let's get this straight, chum," said Boris. "If you mean, do I own a piece of the show—I don't. If you mean is Sadie paying me protection money—sure."

"Graft," said Poulson.

"Nuts," said Boris. "What do you think I live on—my salary?"

"Graft," Poulson said solemnly. "My suspicions—as trustee—have been justified. Good day." He made a smart about-face and headed for the door.

"Wait a minute," Dodd requested. He looked at Boris. "You going to let him throw Sadie out?"

"I fail to see how he could prevent it," said Poulson, frowning at Dodd in a dignified rebuke.

Boris shrugged. "Why not?" he said to Dodd. "Sadie crossed me up—hiding that Tracy."

"You haven't talked to her. Maybe she has an explanation. Give her a chance. Besides, she owes me dough for bail bond fees."

BORIS squinted thoughtfully. "O.K., Poulson, don't cancel that lease. If you do, I'll put the joint on the black list and nobody will dare rent it."

Poulson took off his glasses and stared at Boris incredulously. "Graft," he said in a dazed voice. "And now threats."

"That's right," Boris agreed.

"Why—why, I'll have your job, sir! I'll see the mayor—the police commissioner. You haven't heard the last of this!" He went out, slamming the door.

Boris shrugged amiably. "Acts screwy," he commented. "He oughta be in with the old lady."

"Old lady?" Dodd repeated.

"Yeah. This Agatha Drinkwater. She's in the state asylum. Cuckoo as they come. She chopped her old man up with a hand-axe and was tryin' to run the pieces through a meat-grinder when they nailed her."

Dodd stared at him unbelievably.

"Fact," Boris said. "Oh, you meet all kinds of people in the police business. The guy I'd like to meet right now, though, is that Tracy."

"What do you know about him?" inquired Dodd.

"Nothing, damn it," said Boris. "We haven't got any pictures of him except in costume, and he put enough paint on his pan so he might be Hitler under it and nobody the wiser. His description fits one out of every three guys that go by the front door. Lived in a hotel. No papers or letters in his room. Had no friends. Nobody knows where he came from or why. We couldn't even get any prints that we were sure were his. Maybe he's a phantom for all I know. I guess I better call up the hospital and see if Sadie can talk yet."

He picked up the telephone from his desk. "Get me the receiving hospital," he said into the mouthpiece.

Outside in the hallway a voice said wearily: "Aw, why don't you go drown yourself, drip?"

Dodd's head jerked up, and he looked at the closed door of the office.

Captain Boris spoke into the telephone: "This is Captain Boris. About Sadie

Wade, the patient— What? *What?* . . . Escaped? What the hell do you mean, escaped? You just got through telling me she was unconscious . . . Oh, you *think* she was faking, do you? When you make up your mind about it, let me know. And in the meantime, you find her! You hear me? You find her or I'll come down there and tear you up like confetti! And shut up!"

He slammed the telephone back on its stand. "She got away! Scrammed out of the joint! I'm gonna kill somebody! I feel it comin' on!"

Dodd got up and jerked the office door open. Meekins was leaning against the wall outside, while Fesitti glowered at him dangerously, blocking the way to the office. Meekins was holding an ice cube wrapped in a paper napkin. He was running the ice tenderly back and forth along the line of his jaw.

"You!" Dodd snapped. "I thought I told you to stay at the hospital and watch Sadie!"

"You did, and I did. Until she left."

"Come in here!" Dodd ordered.

Meekins slid past Fesitti. "All right. So this is how it was. I was sitting in the corridor not ten feet from the door of her room, talking to this cop by the name of Bromski."

"That's the guy I assigned to watch her," Captain Boris put in.

"Sure. So Bromski had to go to the john. He went to look for it. Sadie must have been watchin' through the keyhole, because right away she popped out of her room. The nurse just got through tellin' me she was unconscious, so I think maybe she is delirious or something. So I



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take hold of her nice and gentle and try to lead her back inside the room. She tagged me with that same overhand right. On the jaw this time. Knocked me cold. I'm telling you, I didn't hire out for a punching-bag—"

"Shut up," said Boris gloomily, holding his head. "I'm pretty sure I'm going to kill somebody now. Any minute."

"Was Sadie dressed?" Dodd asked.

"Nope," said Meekins. "She had on one of them long hospital nightgowns. Looked like a circus tent on the prowl."

"She can't get far in that outfit," Dodd said. "She'll be picked up right away."

"You don't know them guys I got working for me," Boris told him. "There ain't any of them could find his own mouth with a spoon. Why do things like this have to happen? As if I ain't got troubles enough—"

THE inter-office communicator buzzed, and Boris snapped the switch. "What now?"

The desk sergeant's voice said: "Ludwig is here."

"So he's here. So what?"

"He's got Smedley with him. Smedley's drunker than an owl. Ludwig says he can't watch him and the *Grass Shack* both at the same time and what should he do?"

"My God," Boris said, disgusted. "Tell the gravy-brain to throw Smedley in the drunk tank and to go back to the *Grass Shack* and stay there and to keep away from that ten-ton fanny shaker of a Loretta while he's at it."

Meekins nudged Dodd. Dodd looked at him inquiringly. Meekins had discarded his ice cube and now he made motions with his fingers as though he were counting money and jerked his head in the direction of the booking-room outside.

Dodd frowned. Meekins nodded his head in a positive emphatic manner.

Dodd said slowly to Boris: "I'll go Smedley's bail on the drunk charge."

"Sure," Meekins said quickly. "Smedley's our pal, and he's a good guy. He's probably just upset about all his troubles and about Sadie."

Boris said into the communicator: "Give Smedley to Dodd and Meekins." He nodded to Dodd. "You can have him

without any bail, if you want him."

"Right!" said Meekins gratefully. "Thanks, Captain."

"Want us any more?" Dodd asked.

"I don't want anything but a long vacation," Boris answered. "Get out. Go away. Don't bother me. Wait a minute. I mean that last. Get the hell out of my precinct and stay out. I've had enough of you."

Dodd and Meekins went out into the hall. Meekins was all for heading right for the booking desk, but Dodd seized him by one thin arm and jerked him up short.

"If this is another of your crack-brained ideas—" he hissed dangerously. "What do you want to be pestered with a drunk for? Haven't we got enough trouble?"

"Smedley ain't drunk," Meekins whispered.

"How do you know?"

"He can't get drunk."

"Listen, stupid," Dodd said, "anybody can get drunk."

"Nope. Not Smedley."

"And why not, may I ask?"

Meekins said: "Look. I *know* he can't. I know a guy who runs a cartoon in the papers about strange facts and odd characters and such. He told me about Smedley on account he wanted me to persuade Smedley to let the guy run a picture and some dope about him in his cartoon. Smedley's got something wrong with him. This guy give me a lot of big words on it—but the idea is that alcohol don't absorb into Smedley's blood. Liquor don't have any effect on him. It's a fact. Smedley wouldn't let the guy run his picture in the cartoon because Smedley picks up a lot of side money bettin' guys in bars he can drink a quart of whiskey down and then walk a straight line or stand on his head or whatnot. He can do it, too. A quart of whiskey don't mean any more to him than a quart of water would to you."

"Ummm," said Dodd, staring at him skeptically.

"It's true!" Meekins said. "And if he ain't drunk and is pretendin' he is, then he must have a reason for it. Come on."

Dodd followed him into the booking-room. Smedley was parked in a corner on the floor, legs and arms trailing limply

rubber-like in all directions, head tilted forward on his chest. His eyes were closed, and he was muttering unintelligibly to himself.

Ludwig, the beefy detective with the dented derby, was standing at the booking desk.

"You can have him," he said. "You're sure welcome— Say! You're the two guys that was at the *Grass Shack*! Why didn't you tell me you was Dodd and Meekins?"

"We were incognito," Dodd answered absently.

Ludwig stared. "In what?"

"Disguise. We're so good at it we don't even recognize ourselves sometimes. Give a hand, Meekins."

They took hold of Smedley's limp arms.

"Upsy-daisy!" Meekins said, heaving.

SMEDLEY came up to his feet. He wavered back and forth loosely, eyes still tightly shut. Meekins and Dodd started him toward the door. He dragged his feet, but they hauled him along willy-nilly.

"You're gonna wish you hadn't," Ludwig warned. "He's out like a light. Don't go droppin' him in some gutter and leavin' him there, neither!"

"Oh, we wouldn't do that," Meekins answered. "Smedley's our pal."

"Sure," said Dodd. "We love Smedley dearly."

They half-carried Smedley down the cement steps and along the crowded sidewalk to the nearest corner. They turned on to a narrow residential street lined with slatternly little cottages. Scattered street lights made feeble blobs in the growing darkness, and halfway along the first block they came to a narrow alleyway that had high hedges on either side.

Dodd looked at Meekins over Smedley's drooping head. Meekins winked in answer and said conversationally: "Hold him up a minute, boss. I got to tie my shoe."

He let go of Smedley and crouched down. Dodd shoved Smedley hard. Smedley went headlong over Meekins and sprawled full length into the alley with a grunt of agonized surprise.

Meekins jumped on his chest, putting a knee on each of Smedley's arms.

"Get that razor!" he said breathlessly.

Dodd found it tucked neatly away in the cuff of Smedley's baggy trousers. He put it in his own pocket. Meekins got up, and the two of them stared thoughtfully down at Smedley. He was still playing his part. He lay sprawled out lifelessly limp.

"Come on, Smedley," Dodd said.

"It's a good act," Meekins added. "But we don't like it any more."

Smedley breathed in and then out again in a long, melancholy sigh. He sat up and poked at his chest experimentally, wincing.

"Why didn't you just kill me while you were at it?" he asked wearily. "Why didn't you drop me out of a ten-story window? What did I ever do to you two?"

"Nothing," said Dodd. "But you're going to. You're going to tell us what's the idea of this little song-and-dance."

"I wanted to get in jail, you dopes," said Smedley.

"Why?"

"I got an appointment with a guy that's in there."

Dodd crouched down beside him. "Who, Smedley? Come on and tell us all about it. We're your pals. We like you."

Smedley kneaded his biceps where Meekins had landed on them. "A guy by the name of Charley Blue. He's in the drunk tank. I want to see him about something."

"What, Smedley?"

"He was sellin' Sadie protection. I want to ask him why she didn't get it."

Dodd stood up and looked at Meekins. "Do you know this Charley Blue gent?"

Meekins nodded. "A drunk. A souse. He's a tout and a shill for floating crap games. Works uptown. I think maybe he pimps a little in his spare time. Strictly no good and a cheapie."

"Would he be working for Boris?"

"Hell, no. He was just shaking Sadie down a little on his own."

"Oh, no," Dodd denied. "Not Sadie. She wouldn't fall for any fake protection gag. She'd investigate. Who is he working for, Smedley?"

"I dunno," Smedley answered gloomily. "That's what I was gonna ask him. Sadie never told me. She don't pop off

much about such matters. But I know he's workin' for somebody heavy. Sadie wouldn't pay out unless he was. She's gettin' a hell of a rough shake around here, and I think it's that little punk's fault. I'm gonna slice him up like balogna. Give me my razor."

Dodd handed it back to him. "You know," he said thoughtfully, "this sort of ties in with some other stuff. I think somebody is muscling in on Captain Boris. He accused me of it at first, and he was pretty anxious to find out who tipped me off to the raid on the *Grass Shack*. Of course, he wouldn't admit he was having any trouble, but I think he is."

"Somebody is nuts, then," Meekins observed. "Captain Boris is smart and tougher than hell, and he's got this district solidly behind him because he never gouges on anybody and he keeps things in line. Somebody is going to fall right on their face with an awful jangle."

"I think Smedley's got something," Dodd said. "I think maybe we better go talk to this Charley Blue. You sure he's in the drunk tank, Smedley?"

"Sure," Smedley said sadly.

"All right," said Dodd. "Be drunk again, and we'll pack you back to the jail."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Drunk Tank

WHEN Meekins and Dodd came back into the police station dragging Smedley between them, Ludwig was gone, and the sergeant was alone behind the booking desk.

"What's the matter now?" he demanded.

"Our playmate is a little too drunk for us to handle," Dodd explained. "Can we park him in the drunk tank?"

The sergeant tossed him a ring of keys. "Sure. There's nobody in there yet but Charley Blue. Lock the door when you come out."

Dodd and Meekins steered Smedley toward the door into the cell block. "Is Charley Blue in here often?" Dodd asked the sergeant.

"Every week. It takes him about five days to wind up, and then he falls flat

on his face and stays there. The first cop that happens along totes him in to sleep it off. He's been out for about eighteen hours now. It's about time he should be waking up."

Dodd said in an undertone to Meekins: "Go get a pint of whiskey. He's going to need it."

Meekins went out the front door. Dodd half-carried the limp Smedley down the cement-floored aisle to the big cell at the back.

"All right," he said. "Stand up now. Nobody's looking."

He unlocked the cell door, and Smedley followed him inside. There were half a dozen narrow iron cots with bare mattresses placed side by side with about a foot of space between them. A man lay on his back on the one under the window. His face, pitilessly revealed by the glow of the unshaded bulb in the ceiling, was red and swollen and puffy. There was a ragged stubble of blond beard on his cheeks. His mouth was open, and he snored in a fluttering, choked way. His scanty hair stood up in a sweat-sticky clumps.

"Is this our party?" Dodd asked.

"That's Charley," said Smedley. "Don't he look pretty?"

"Like a week-old corpse," Dodd agreed.

He shook Charley Blue's slack shoulder. There was no resistance in the man at all. His head rolled a little bit. He mumbled brokenly, and a thread of saliva slid down over his chin and spread on the soiled collar of his shirt.

Meekins came in the cell with a pint bottle of whiskey in his hand. Watching Charley Blue thoughtfully, Dodd took the seal off the cap of the bottle and had a drink.

"I'm the guy that bought that whiskey, you know," Meekins hinted.

Dodd handed him the bottle. Meekins drank and offered it to Smedley.

"I never drink except for business reasons," Smedley said. "You wanta bet I can't drink all that pint and then—"

"No," said Dodd. "Give me your hat. You're not going to need it in here."

Smedley handed him the hat. Dodd punched out the crease in the crown, turned the hat upside down and held it

under the tap in the water basin. When it was full, he held it carefully over Charley Blue's head and tipped it.

The water splashed noisily, soaking into the mattress. Charley Blue spluttered. His head rolled violently, and he made mumbly protests.

Dodd and Meekins and Smedley sat down in a row on the nearest cot and watched him.

CHARLEY BLUE'S eyes opened. They were red, burned holes in the puffiness of his face. He moaned as the light hit them. Slowly and cautiously he groped around him until he found the edge of the cot. He took hold of it and pulled himself up, hand over hand, to a sitting position.

He was facing Dodd, Meekins and Smedley now. He stared at them uncomprehendingly. They stared back. Charley Blue began to shake. He shook all over in spasmodic shuddering lunges that made the cot legs rattle like castanets against the cement floor. His eyes rolled glassily.

"Wow!" Meekins said softly. "This guy is one step away from the horrors."

"Hold his head," Dodd ordered.

Meekins braced Charley Blue's head against his chest, tilting it back. Dodd tipped the whiskey bottle up to his chattering teeth and poured a little in his mouth. Charley Blue gulped and shuddered and gulped again in a raging fever of anxiety. He grabbed for the bottle, and Dodd batted his hands away.

"That's enough, now. Take it easy."

Charley Blue took deep, whistling breaths. Gradually the awful shuddering stopped and some faint shadow of intelligence came in his reddened eyes.

"More," he said hoarsely.

Dodd gave him another drink, keeping a firm hold on the whiskey bottle. He pulled it away after Charley Blue had gulped down two big slugs.

"More," Charley Blue begged.

"Nope," said Dodd.

"You'd better," Meekins warned. "He'll throw a fit."

"In a minute," Dodd answered. "Listen, Charley. We want to ask you some questions."

Charley Blue tore his fascinated gaze from the whiskey and really looked at his

three visitors for the first time. He evidently didn't care for what he saw. He moved back on the cot uneasily.

"Who're you guys?" he demanded.

"I'm Dodd—bail bonds. This is Meekins. He works for me. You know Smedley, don't you?"

Charley Blue nodded reluctantly. "Yeah, I guess so. How are you, Smedley?"

"I'm alive," said Smedley gloomily. "I think."

"I don't want no bail," Charley Blue told Dodd. "Give me another drink."

"Not just now. First you give some answers. Smedley says you've been shaking down Sadie Wade."

"That's a lie!" said Charley Blue.

Smedley took out his razor and opened it. He moved the blade so that it shimmered dangerously in the light.

Charley Blue gulped. "Here, now! Get away from me with that, or I'll yell—"

"Not more than once, you won't," Smedley told him.

Charley Blue pulled his feet up and crawled to the head of the cot and huddled against the wall shaking.

"What you guys doin' here?"

"Asking you questions," Dodd informed him. "You want us to get mad and go away with our whiskey?"

"No!" Charley Blue said frantically.

"Keep your voice down. Who're you working for?"

"Nobody!"

"You're running a shakedown racket on your own?"

"Sure. What's it to you?"

"Nothing," said Dodd. "But suppose I tell Captain Boris about it?"

Charley Blue sneered shakily. "Go ahead. He don't dare lay a finger on me."

DODD looked at Meekins inquiringly. Meekins said. "The guy is punch-drunk."

"You think so?" said Charley Blue. "I can close any joint at the beach, whether it's legitimate or what, and I don't care what Boris says about it. I can get anybody down here raided any time."

Smedley said softly. "Could you get Sadie raided?"

"Sure! And you better remember—Wh-what?"

Smedley was creeping up on him with the razor. "So you're the weasel that was responsible for her gettin' pulled today, huh? Just like I thought!"

"No!" Charley Blue said shrilly, losing all his bluster. "I am not! I never did! Get away from me!"

Dodd stood up. "Come on, Meekins. We're in the way here. Charley and Smedley want to be alone."

"Wait!" Charley Blue pleaded. "Wait, now! You guys will be sorry! I'm tellin' you! You deal in bail bonds, huh? All right, my brother-in-law will get your license—"

Dodd sat down again. "Now we're getting somewhere. Your brother-in-law, eh? Who's he?"

"Kranz," Charley Blue muttered sullenly.

Dodd looked at Meekins questioningly. Meekins was staring at Charley Blue in blank amazement.

"Kranz is the councilman for this district."

"You bet he is!" Charley Blue seconded emphatically. "And you better just watch your step how you treat me!"

"Kranz," Smedley muttered dangerously. "So he's the guy Sadie's been payin' off."

"I don't like this," Meekins said, worried. "We're getting in away over our heads."

"I know," Dodd agreed. He entended the whiskey bottle cordially. "Well, if you're Kranz's brother-in-law, Charley, why that makes everything look different. Yes, indeed. Have yourself a snort."

Charley Blue tipped up the bottle and drank greedily.

Dodd jerked his head. "Come on, Meekins. You, too, Smedley. You'll have to be sober again."

The three of them went out in the corridor, and Dodd locked the cell door.

"He'll put that whiskey down and pass himself out—I hope," Dodd told them. "I want him out of the picture until I can locate Sadie."

"I don't like this," Meekins repeated. "Something is screwy around here."

"Everything is," Dodd said.

"Yeah. But I mean with what Charley said. Kranz is honest."

"An honest councilman?"

"It's true," Meekins insisted. "He's got a good law practice—civil stuff. He don't chisel. If he did, I'd know about it. Something's wacky."

"He might skid a few corners for his brother-in-law."

"Not Kranz," Meekins said stubbornly. "I mean, the guy is really honest. He makes a point of it. He doesn't even handle legitimate graft."

Charley Blue's bubbling voice sounded behind them. "Don' believe, huh?" He was leaning forward with his head pressed against one of the bars on the door, peering at them owlshly cross-eyed around it. The pint bottle in his hand was half-empty. The liquor, on his empty stomach, had hit with the force of a ten-ton truck. He was slobberingly drunk again.

"Think I'm lyin', huh? All righ'. All righ'. Kranz my brother-in-law, see? Backs me up. Always. You wanna know? You wan' proof, huh? All righ'. All righ'. You phone. You phone yourself and see. You ask he don' back me up. Number's Ashway 6626, see? Private number, see? You phone. Go ahead. Dare you phone. All righ'."

He lost his grip on the bars and went staggering back and fell headlong on his cot.

"Come on, you two," Dodd said.

HE led the way down the corridor and out into the booking office again. The desk sergeant stared at them in amazement.

"Smedley decided he didn't like your jail," Dodd said, handing over the keys.

Captain Boris came out of the doorway of the hall that led to his office. He rolled himself to a halt, his bullet head thrust forward.

"I thought I told you two to get the hell out of this precinct and stay out," he growled.

"We're on our way," Dodd said hastily.

Emil Poulson stepped daintily through the front door. He blinked a moment through his thick-lensed spectacles, getting used to the bright lights, and then he pointed a plump, precise finger at Boris and said: "I have been in communication with Richard Kranz, the representative of this district on the city council.

He informs me that you have no right whatsoever to blacklist any property belonging to the Agatha Drinkwater Estate, and that if you do so or attempt to do so he will take steps."

"What steps?" Boris asked, mildly curious.

"He did not inform me, sir. But, as I warned you, I allow neither graft nor threats to sway me in the slightest from my sworn duties as a trustee, and if I hear any more from you on either of those subjects, I shall appeal to even higher authorities than the members of the city council. I bid you goodday."

Poulson made his abrupt, military about-face and whisked out the door.

"So long," said Boris. "Now listen, Dodd. I'm getting a little tired of talking—"

Detective Ludwig lumbered in the front door and said, "Hey, Captain," in his high complaining voice.

"What?" Boris inquired in a dangerously quiet tone.

"Well, listen, I'm gettin' tired of sittin' in that *Grass Shack*. There ain't nobody around there to talk to or look at, and I think I could do better if I—"

"So you've started to think now, have you?" Boris inquired. "What are you using for a brain?" Suddenly his voice rose to an outraged bull-like bellow. "Let me tell you something! I'm the guy who thinks in this precinct! I don't want any competition from numb-wits like you! Get the hell back there to the *Grass Shack* before I kill you right here in cold blood!"

"Yes, sir," said Ludwig, heading for the door so quickly he stumbled over his own feet.

"Wait a minute!" Boris yelled. "Take Dodd and Meekins with you and escort them out of this district—clear out! And if I see you two around here again . . ."

"We're leaving," Dodd said. "But what about this Poulson-Kranz business?"

"Nothing about it," Boris answered. "Like Poulson said, the Agatha Drinkwater Estate owns a lot of property around town—apartments, office buildings and such. Kranz can't brush off such a heavy taxpayer. He had to give Poulson some sort of a song-and-dance to quiet him."

"Kranz doesn't interfere with you?"

"Of course not," said Boris. "He realizes I know my business. He never bothers me. What's it to you?"

"Just wondering," said Dodd. "Did you know that you had Kranz's brother-in-law in the drunk tank?"

"Sure," Boris answered. "You don't think I let every drunk in town use my jail for a hotel, do you? Kranz is a good guy, and Charley Blue is a hell of a burden to him. Always in trouble. We lock him up whenever we find him crooked, and when we get tired of that we ship him off to the funny house for a cure. Now, scram."

SMEDLEY and Meekins and Dodd marched out of the station, with Ludwig lumbering along behind them like a clumsy shepherd dog. At the corner a half-block above the station, Dodd stopped short, frowning in a dramatically worried way at Meekins.

"I just thought of something," he said.

Meekins picked up his cue instantly. "What, boss?" he asked in a gravely concerned tone.

"This guy Tracy is a killer."

"That's right," Meekins agreed. "A desperate character."

Dodd said: "Do you realize, Meekins, that he shot Sadie because he thought she could identify him?"

"It must be true."

"Certainly," Dodd told him. "And there's another poor defenseless girl who is in danger while this fiend is at large."

"Who?" Meekins asked breathlessly.

"Loretta. You remember Loretta?"

"I certainly do," Meekins said emphatically.

Ludwig jerked to attention. "Huh? What's that?"

"If I was a friend of Loretta's, I'd be pretty worried about her," Dodd stated.

"I would, too," Meekins seconded.

"Say!" Ludwig exclaimed shakily. "Do you think Tracy might—might harm Loretta, huh?"

"There's a chance," Dodd said.

"A big one," Meekins added.

"Maybe he's even found her already," Dodd said. "Maybe even now she's lying in a pool of blood. . ."

Meekins put his hands over his eyes.

"Terrible, terrible! Don't even mention—"

"Here!" Ludwig said, alarmed. "Stop that! I—I never thought. I'm gonna call her and see if she's safe! You guys wait right here!"

"We won't move," Dodd promised.

Ludwig lumbered toward the drug store across the street.

Smedley stared at Dodd. "Say, what're you tryin' to pull off now? That rat of a Tracy didn't shoot Sadie because she could identify him. I could do that just as well as her. He shot her because she was going to toss him to the cops or beat his ears off or perhaps both. Sadie hates shooters."

"Smedley," Dodd said, "how'd you like to take a walk for yourself?"

"What?" Smedley asked blankly.

"Beat it," Meekins ordered. "Scram."

"All right," Smedley said in a martyred tone. "Use me and then discard me. That's the way I get treated. Nobody has any gratitude or any human feeling. . ."

He slouched away down the street, his narrow shoulders hunched over disconsolately.

"I hope he don't go too far," Meekins observed. "We're still on him for some bail. Now what?"

"I just got a hunch. Sadie needs some clothes—needs them bad and quick. She wouldn't dare go back to her own place and just anybody's clothes wouldn't half fit her. But Loretta is as big as she is, and Loretta is a pal of hers."

"Sure," Meekins said eagerly. "Let's go."

"No. Wait for Ludwig. We can tell by what Loretta tells him whether Sadie is there or not. If she is, Ludwig is the last guy Loretta would want hanging around right now."

Ludwig came back across the street, wringing his hands. "She don't answer. I rung and rung and rung. You don't think—think she might be. . ."

"No," said Dodd, chewing on his under-lip. "But I think I know where she went. And I think we'd better get there, too—and soon. This mess begins to make sense now, and I don't like the looks of it at all."

"You and me," said Meekins.

CHAPTER SIX

Tracing Tracy

MEEKINS was pleading. "Dodd," said Meekins, "why do you want to act like this? As it is now, they'll probably only put you in prison for four or five years. If you keep it up, they're gonna hang you just as sure as hell, unless somebody murders you first."

Meekins was scrounged down in the center of the coupe's seat, packed between Dodd and Ludwig's beefy hulk. Dodd ignored him. He dropped the grumbling coupe into second gear, steered it up over the rise of the hill, and parked.

"Hey," said Ludwig. "This here is Councilman Kranz's joint. What would Loretta be doin' here, hey?"

"Tell me, too," Meekins put in. "If it ain't a state secret."

Dodd said: "I'm playing a hunch. Sadie's mad. The reason she's mad is because she thinks somebody crossed her up. She's looking for that person, and I think this is the place she'd look. I'm guessing that Loretta will be with her."

"Kranz is honest," said Meekins.

"Come on," Dodd ordered shortly.

The three of them got out of the car and walked between two square cement pillars, their feet crunching on the gravel of the drive. The lawn went up ahead of them in a long, easy sweep that ended against the brightly peering squares of the windows in the house at the top.

They were halfway up the hill when brilliant light seemed to jump at them from every direction. Arc-lamps hidden in stunted ornamental shrubs and in little clumps of flowers all over the lawn blazed in their eyes. They stood frozen rigidly in surprise, like three queer bugs pinned on a bright green carpet.

"Somebody turned on the lights," said Ludwig.

"That thought occurred to me, too," Meekins agreed shakily.

Dodd was marching steadily forward.

Some of the lights were turned to reflect on the house itself, and it was like a stage setting with its walls gleaming white and the blue of a drape moving slightly in an open window.

Dodd tried the latch, and the front door

swung ponderously and silently back.

"Dodd!" Meekins wailed in protest.

Dodd walked into the hallway and looked around him. He nodded toward the wall at the right of the door.

"That must be the switch that controls the arc-lights on the lawn," he said.

Under the switch there was a long, broad smear of blood that glistened brightly against the immaculate white plaster.

"Oh, oh, oh," Meekins whispered.

Dodd walked toward the graceful sweep of the stairs. He touched the ornamental banister and then looked at his finger. There was blood on it.

Dodd climbed the stairs slowly and quietly. After a moment of uneasy hesitation, Meekins and Ludwig tiptoed after him. At the top, Dodd paused, staring at a red hand-print on the white wall.

"Somebody around here got hurt, I bet," said Ludwig.

DODD was looking down the hall toward an open door with a light showing through it. He went quietly in that direction, keeping against the wall, and Meekins and Ludwig followed after him, single-file.

From behind him, Meekins said, "Oh, my God," in an awed whisper.

It was a bedroom, furnished by and for a woman, all white and gold and blue.

Loretta lay doubled up on the floor under the windows on the far side of the room, one bloodied raw fist flung out in front of her, the other arm doubled under her twisted body.

Sadie Wade lay face down just inside the doorway, breathing in low labored groans, the muscles of her square jaw rigid and protruding, her eyes closed tightly.

A third woman was in a tumbled pile in the corner of the wall behind the bed. She had crouched there, trying to hide, and someone had beaten her until her features were a formless smear. She was dead.

Ludwig shoved Dodd and Meekins aside and dropped clumsily on his knees beside Loretta. He was breathing in little sobbing gasps, and he turned her over with infinite gentleness and cradled her head against his chest.

A siren began to wail in the distance.

"That's all we need," Meekins whispered.

Dodd swallowed against the cold, hard knot in his throat. "Sadie phoned for an ambulance. Then she went down and turned on the lawn lights to guide them. She just made it back and then fainted."

He stepped over her and leaned down toward the telephone lying on the floor. The little cardboard slip on it listed its number as Ashway 6626. It had a long cord on it, and he followed it with his eyes to the point where it disappeared into one of the spaces that had been occupied by a drawer in the bureau.

"That's it," he said to himself.

The siren was closer. Dodd picked up the telephone and dialed. "Captain Boris," he said when the sergeant at the beach precinct station answered him.

"Well?" Boris said.

"This is Dodd, Captain. I'm at Kranz's house. Kranz's wife has been murdered."

Boris didn't answer, but Dodd could hear him breathing noisily.

"Loretta's in a bad way," he went on slowly. "And Sadie Wade is here, too. She's fainted from loss of blood."

"Got anything more to report?" Boris asked thickly.

"Do you dare arrest Kranz?"

"I dare arrest anybody."

"Do it, then. And pick up Smedley. And see if you can sober up Charley Blue. I'll be down in a minute."

"You're damned right you will," said Boris. "And you're gonna grow a long gray beard before you get out again!"

Dodd depressed the breaker bar on the telephone, let it up again, and dialed long distance. When the operator answered, he said: "Give me the State Insane Asylum at Carterville."

"While you're at it, reserve a room there for me, too," Meekins requested shakily.

CAPTAIN BORIS was smiling his nightmare smile, and his eyes were narrowed down to menacing slits.

"Dodd," he said. "Don't worry about going to jail or any little thing like that. Don't let it cross your mind. Have you made any payments on your life insurance lately?"

Dodd was sitting glumly in the chair

in front of the desk. He was not happy. Perspiration kept gathering on his forehead and rolling down his cheeks.

Meekins was sitting in a chair in the corner, trying to be inconspicuous.

Ludwig came in the office, his feet clumping heavily. "You want I should go back to the *Grass Shack*, Captain?"

"No," Boris said in a kindlier tone. "Go out and sit by Duffy at the desk. I left orders for the hospital to call as soon as they learn anything."

"Yes, sir," Ludwig said in a dazed, dull voice.

Dodd wiped some more sweat from his forehead.

"Aren't you feeling well, Dodd?" Boris asked. "That is very surprising to me." He flipped the switch on the inter-office communicator. "Duffy, what about Charley Blue?"

The desk sergeant's voice said: "Nope. The doc says he can't be brung around. He is due for another cure or maybe a coffin."

"How about Smedley?" Boris asked.

"No word. The boys can't locate him."

Through the communicator they could hear the telephone on the sergeant's desk ring. His voice answered it.

"Police, beach precinct. . . Oh, yeah. . . Yeah. . . Yeah."

Ludwig's voice begged hoarsely: "What about Loretta?"

The sergeant said: "And the other—the red-head? . . . Yeah. . . Yeah. I see. Thanks." The receiver of the telephone clunked. "Cheer up, Ludwig. Hey, Captain."

"Yes?" Boris answered.

"That was the hospital. They gave Sadie a transfusion and it looks like maybe she'll come around. Loretta's got two badly busted mitts. They figure she put her hands up over her head to prevent whoever it was from beatin' out her brains. She's got an even chance."

Boris looked at Dodd. "Two murders—Jake Holden and Mrs. Kranz. Two assaults with intent to commit murder—Sadie and Loretta. That's quite a score, Dodd."

"Here's Fesitti, Captain," said the sergeant's voice through the communicator. "Send him in."

Fesitti ushered two men ahead of him

into the office. "This guy was with Kranz," he said. "Right away he started to holler about the Constitution and stuff, so I brought him along."

Emil Poulson took his nose glasses off and waved them warningly under Boris' nose. "This is the most outrageous violation of civil rights that I have ever encountered in all my years of practice! I warn you that I shall see to it that—"

"Shut up," said Boris.

"Never mind, Mr. Poulson," Kranz said wearily. He was a tall man, very thin, stoop-shouldered, and he looked unutterably tired. "Captain Boris is an old friend. He wouldn't have sent for me unless it was important."

"I'm sorry I had to, Councilman," Boris said uneasily. "This is bad—all around. I can't tell you how I sympathize. . ."

KRANZ made a wearily futile gesture. "Don't, please."

"All right," said Boris, drawing a deep breath. "The dope sitting in front of the desk is named Dodd. He's in this up to his ears, and he wants to say something now. Go right ahead, Dodd. We ain't waiting any longer—for Smedley or Napoleon. Speak your piece and make it good—awful good."

Dodd said: "I know who Tracy is. Up to about five years ago he toured through the sticks playing the leading man in tent shows. His name was mostly Shane—sometimes Shelley and sometimes Sands. He worked a racket along with his acting. Those tent shows stayed a week or so in each town they touched. He'd pick up some likely widow with a little dough and get her to invest some in him for one reason or another."

"Go ahead," Boris told him.

"He was pretty successful," Dodd said. "He had the line—being an actor and all. Very romantic. But this tent show stayed too long in one town, and the widow he picked was tougher than average. He got the dough, but she insisted that he marry her or she'd call copper on him. He wasn't having any. He shot her."

"Uh!" said Boris, startled.

Dodd went on: "He must have been a good actor, at that. He sold the jury on the idea that he was nuts. Instead of hanging him, they put him in the state

asylum at Carterville. He escaped a couple of months back."

"Well, well," Boris said slowly. "He must have thought the vice squad was the boys from the booby hatch comin' to take him back."

Dodd nodded. "Probably. He knew it wasn't a regular raid because of Sadie squawking. He thought the cops had been tipped off to him."

"By who?" Boris demanded.

"The fellow that got him the job—Charley Blue. Charley has spent quite a lot of his spare time in the asylum—taking cures for chronic alcoholism—and this Shane got to know him there. Charley is a great one for running off at the mouth. He boasts about his brother-in-law—Kranz, here—being a councilman. Shane came to Charley and got Charley to hide him by making Sadie Wade give Shane a job."

"How?" Boris asked.

Dodd sighed. "Now we come to the tough part. I figured out what I just said as soon as I talked to the asylum. Now I'll have to do a little guessing. Charley Blue is a dope. I don't think it ever occurred to him to use his brother-in-law, Kranz, for anything but to get him out of jams now and again. Shane gave him a new idea. Shane told him how to threaten Sadie. Charley did, and Sadie gave Shane the job. That was easy, and Charley began to think he'd been passing up a good thing here. I'll bet it was right about then that he went to see Kranz."

Kranz nodded wearily. "Yes. He wanted to act as my agent. He wanted to shake down people in my district—call it collecting campaign funds or something like that—and split what he got with me."

"What did you say?" Dodd asked.

"I threw him out of my office."

"All right," Dodd answered. "But Charley didn't quit. He went to Mrs. Kranz—his sister. She did what he asked. She put in a private telephone—hid it in her bureau with the bell silenced to a buzz so Kranz wouldn't hear it if it rang while he was around."

"Charley went right ahead with his scheme. He shook people down in this district—protection, campaign funds, everything. Some of them wanted proof that he was fronting for Kranz. All right,

says Charley. Call Ashway 6626. If the person did, Mrs. Kranz answered. She made an appointment to see the doubtful person. What more proof could he ask? After all, she was Kranz's wife."

Boris swore quietly. "And that souse used my drunk tank for an office!"

Dodd sighed again. "So that was the setup when this raid was pulled. Tracy-Shane got into a panic and shot Holden. Sadie was plenty mad at both him and Charley Blue. Tracy, having great confidence in his abilities as a woo-pitcher, hid in her apartment and thought he could talk her into keeping him under cover. No sale. Sadie was going to turn him up to the cops. He shot her."

"Then Sadie was really mad. She sent Smedley to get after Charley Blue in the drunk tank and started after Kranz herself. She figured Kranz was responsible for the jam she was in and it was up to him to get her out of it. She was pretty weak, and Loretta went along with her to help her."

"In the meantime, Tracy-Shane was in mighty warm water. He needed some protection—right now. He went to see Kranz on his own. There he found out that Kranz wasn't back of Charley Blue at all. It didn't take him long to pump the whole story out of Kranz's wife. He thought Mrs. Kranz must have some of the money Charley had been collecting. He tried to find it. He didn't. That enraged him and he beat her. . . ."

Kranz made a little moaning noise.

"Sorry," Dodd murmured. "Loretta and Sadie walked in right afterwards, while he was still searching. Sadie, being weak, stayed downstairs. Loretta went up to look around. She ran into Tracy-Shane, and he smacked her down and got away."

"Where to?" Boris inquired.

"Right here," said Dodd. He turned around and took the small, pointed beard of Emil Poulson in his hand and jerked. The beard came away in his hand, and Emil Poulson's round, pink face looked nude and different suddenly.

"He's got a wig, too," Dodd said. "And false eyebrows and pads in his cheeks and plugs in his nose."

"Quite," said Emil Poulson, smiling pleasantly. "Good make-up job, eh? You

didn't have to be so dramatically rude, Mr. Dodd. I would have admitted my identity, had you asked me."

THE room seemed small and tight and hot, and the breathing of the men in it was plainly audible.

Dodd said slowly: "You learned about Agatha Drinkwater in the asylum. One of her lawyers—a guy who lives in New York—is actually named Poulson. You figured you could prowl around and raise a little money for yourself by telling the people who were leasing property she owned that you were going to cancel their leases for this and that if they didn't pay off to you. It didn't work very well, because everyone hereabouts depends on Boris to see that things like that don't happen to them."

"Oh, quite," said Emil Poulson. "Very clever of you to figure it out."

"You admit—this?" Boris said. "The murders, too?"

"Surely. Why not?"

"Why not?" Boris repeated blankly.

Poulson was patient with him. "I have been adjudged insane. Legally insane. I cannot be held responsible for any of my actions. All you can do now is send me back to the asylum. I don't mind that much, really."

"Take him out," Boris said to Fesitti.

Fesitti took Poulson's arm and led him

toward the door. Poulson smiled over his shoulder at Dodd.

"You know, you're the only one who figured this out. You're solely responsible. I'll give you something to think about. If you're clever—as I am—it isn't very difficult to escape from the asylum. I will again. And I'll come and see you when I do. Remember that."

He nodded amiably and went out of the office, Fesitti fumbling along behind him.

"Oh," said Meekins in a sick voice. "Did you hear? And he means it! It don't make no difference to him, as long as he's legally goofy, if he murders everybody in the state!"

"Oh, no," said Boris. He jerked his thumb toward the inter-office communicator. "This thing was open all the time we were talking. They could hear us out at the desk—"

Ludwig's voice bellowed through the communicator: "Hey, he's tryin' to escape! Halt! Stop! I'll shoot!"

"No!" Poulson's voice screamed faintly. "I'm not! Don't—"

Shots sounded fuzzily ragged, echoing outside the walls and through the communicator at the same time.

"Ludwig is dumb," said Boris, snapping the switch on the communicator, "but he can take a hint. I'm afraid Mr. Poulson-Shane-Tracy tried to escape a little bit too soon."



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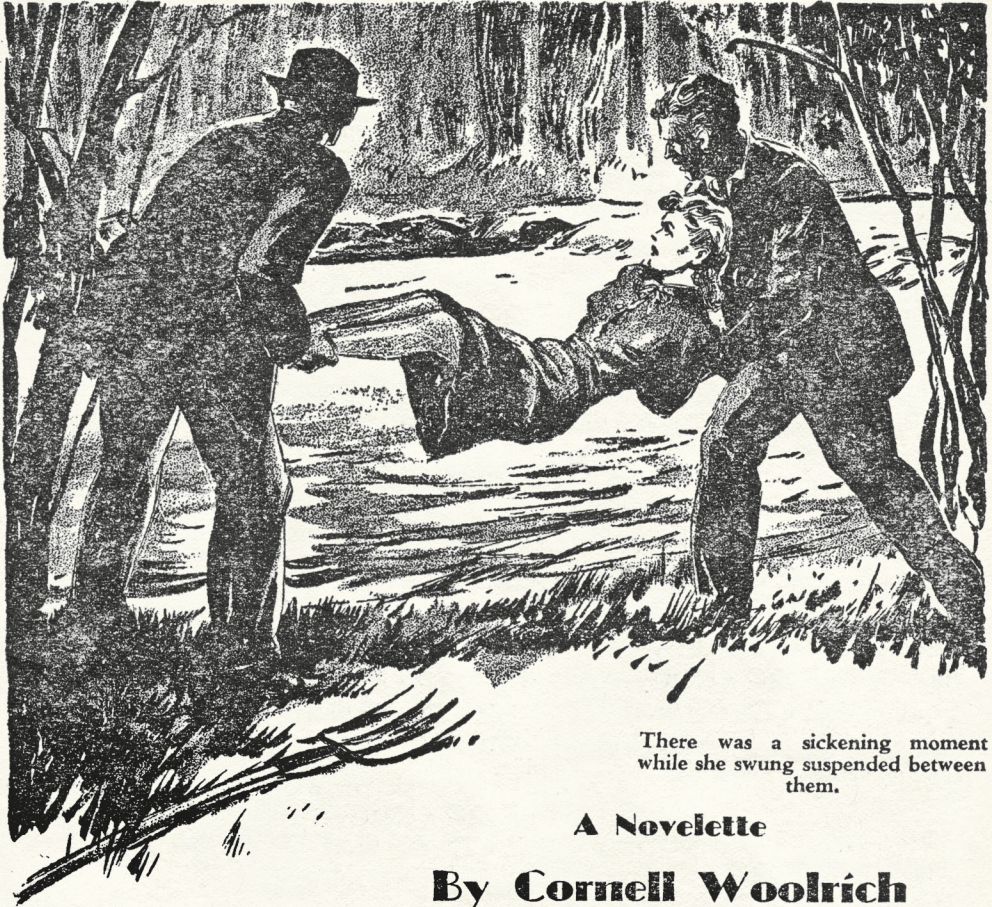
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BLACK MASK

Murder at Mother's Knee



There was a sickening moment while she swung suspended between them.

A Novelette

By **Cornell Woolrich**

Author of "Crazy House," etc.

Any hint of budding literary genius was notably absent from little Johnny's English paper. But a sinister hint of something else was there—which thrust his pretty schoolmarm into a career of amateur sleuthing and landed her on dangerous ground indeed, before she concluded her one-woman manhunt—and returned to award Johnny's opus a well-deserved A-plus.

CHAPTER ONE

Teacher Learns a Lesson

MISS PRINCE knew all the signs that meant homework hadn't been done. The hangdog look, the guiltily-lowered head. She stood there by the Gaines boy's desk, one hand extended. "Well, I'm waiting, Johnny."

The culprit squirmed uncomfortably to his feet. "I—I couldn't do it teacher."

"Why not?"

"I—I didn't know what to write about."

"That's no excuse," Miss Prince said firmly. "I gave the class the simplest kind of a theme this time. I said to write about something you know about, something that really happened, either at home or else—"

where, it doesn't matter. If the others were able to, why weren't you?"

"I couldn't think of anything that happened."

Miss Prince turned away. "Well, you'll stay in after the rest and sit there until you do. When I give out homework I expect it to be done!" She returned to her desk, stacked the collected creative efforts to one side of her, and took up the day's lesson.

Three o'clock struck and the seats before her emptied like magic in one headlong, scampering rush for the door. All but the second one back on the outside aisle.

"You can begin now, Johnny," said Miss Prince relentlessly. "Take a clean sheet of paper and quit staring out the window."

Although the victim probably wouldn't have believed it, she didn't enjoy this any more than he did. He was keeping her in just as much as she was keeping him. But discipline had to be maintained.

The would-be compositor seemed to be suffering from an acute lack of inspiration. He chewed the rubber of his pencil, fidgeted, stared at the blackboard, and nothing happened.

"You're not trying, Johnny!" she said severely, at last.

"I can't think of anything," he lamented.

"Yes, you can; too. Stop saying that. Write about your dog or cat, if you can't think of anything else."

"I haven't any."

She went back to her papers. He raised his hand finally, to gain her attention. "Is it all right to write about a dream?"

"I suppose so, if that's the best you can do," she acquiesced. It seemed to be the only way out of the dilemma. "But I wanted you to write something that really happened. This was to test your powers of observation and description, as well as your grammar and composition."

"This was part-true and only part a dream," he assured her.

HE BENT diligently to the desk, to make up for time lost. At the end of fifteen minutes he stood before her with the effort completed. "All right, you can go home now," she consented wearily. "And the next time you come to school without your homework—" But the door

had already closed obliviously behind him.

She smiled slightly to herself, with a sympathetic understanding he wouldn't have given her credit for, and placed the latest masterpiece on top of the others, to take home with her. As she did so, her eye, glancing idly along the opening sentences, was caught by something. She lingered on reading, forgetting her original intention of rising from her desk and going out to the cloakroom to get her hat.

The epistle before her, in laborious, straight up and down, childish handwriting, read:

Johnny Gaines,
English Comp. 2

Something that happened at our house.

One night I wasn't sleeping so good on account of something I eat, and I dreamed I was out in a boat and the water was rough and rocking me up and down a lot. So then I woke up and the floor in my room was really shaking kind of and so was my bed and everything. And I even heard a table and chair fall down, downstairs. So I got kind of scared and I sneaked downstairs to see what was the matter. But by that time it stopped again and everything was quiet.

My mother was in the kitchen straitening things up again, and she didn't want me to come near there when she first saw me. But I looked in anyway. Then she closed the outside door and she told me some kind of a varmint got in the house from outside, and my pa had a hard time getting it and killing it, and that was why everything fell over. It sure must have been a bad kind of one, because it scared her a lot, she was still shaking all the time. She was standing still, but she was all out of breath. I asked her where it was and she said he carried it outside with him to get rid of it far away from the house.

Then I saw where his hat got to when he was having all that trouble catching it, and he never even missed it. It fell through the stove onto the ashis. So she picked it up out of there when I showed her, and the ashis made it look even cleaner than before when he had it on. Almost like new.

Then she got some water and a brush and started to scrub the kitchen floor where she said the varmint got it dirtied up. But I couldn't see where it was because she got in the way. And she wouldn't let me stay and watch, she made me go upstairs again.

So that was all that happened.

When she had finished it, Miss Prince turned her head abruptly toward the door, as if to recall the composition's author. Needless to say, he had escaped by now into freedom, was no longer within reach.

She sat on there for awhile, tapping her pencil thoughtfully against the edge of her teeth.

MISS PRINCE settled herself uneasily on one of the straight-backed chairs against the wall that the desk-sergeant had indicated to her, and waited, fiddling with her handbag.

She felt out of place in a police-station anteroom, and wondered what had made her come like this. Back in the school-room it had seemed like a sensible impulse, and she had promptly acted upon it. Now that she was here, for some reason it seemed more impulsive than sensible. Maybe she should have just taken it up with the principal and let him decide—

A pair of thick-soled brogues came walloping out, stopped short before her, and she looked up. She'd never been face to face with a professional detective before. This one didn't look like one at all. He looked more like a business man who had dropped into the police station to report his car stolen, or something.

"Anything I can do for you?" he asked.

"It's—it's just something that I felt I ought to bring to your attention," she faltered. "I'm Emily Prince, of the English Department, over at the Benjamin Harrison Public School." She fumbled for the composition, extended it toward him. "One of my pupils handed this in to me yesterday afternoon."

He read it over, handed it back to her. "I don't get it," he grinned. "You want me to pinch the kid that wrote this, for murdering the King's English?"

She flashed him an impatient look. "I think it's obvious that this child witnessed an act of violence, a crime of some sort, without realizing its full implication," she said coldly. "You can read between the lines. I believe that a murder has taken place in that house, and gone undiscovered. I think the matter should be investigated."

She stopped short. He had begun to act in a most unaccountable manner. The lower part of his face began to twitch in various unrelated places, and a dull red flush overspread it. "Excuse me a minute," he said in a choked voice, stood up abruptly, and walked away from her. She noticed him holding his hand against the side of his face, as if to shield it from view.

He stopped a minute at the other end of the room, stood there with his shoulders shaking, then turned and came back. He coughed a couple of times on the way over.

"If there's anything funny about this, I fail to see it!"

"I'm sorry," he said contritely, sitting down again. "It hit me so sudden, I couldn't help it. A kid writes a composition, the first thing that comes into his head, just so he can get it over and go out and play, and you come here on the strength of it and ask us to investigate. Aw, now listen, lady—"

She surveyed him with eyes that were not exactly lanterns of esteem. "I cross-questioned the youngster. Today, after class. Before coming here. He insists it was *not* made up—that it's true."

"Naturally he would. The detail—I mean the assignment, was for them to write about something true, wasn't it? He was afraid he'd have to do it over if he admitted it was imaginary."

"Just a minute, Mr.—"

"Kendall," he supplied.

"May I ask what your duties are here?"

"I'm a detective attached to the Homicide Squad. That's what you asked for."

It was now her turn to get in a dirty lick. "I just wanted to make sure," she said dryly. "There's been no way of telling since I've been talking to you."

"Ouch!" he murmured.

"There are certain details given here," she went on, flourishing the composition at him, "that are not within the scope of a child's imagination. Here's one: his mother was standing still, but she was all out of breath. Here's another: a hat lying in just such and such a place. Here's the most pertinent of the lot: her scrubbing of the kitchen floor at that hour of the night. It's full of little touches like that. It wouldn't occur to a child to make up things like that. They're too realistic and undramatic to appeal to it. A child's flights of fancy would incline toward more fantastic things. Shadows and spooks and faces at the window. I *deal* in children. I took a course in that. I know how their minds work."

"Well," he let her know stubbornly, "I deal in murders. I took a course in that. And I don't run out making a fool of myself on the strength of a composition written by a kid in school!"

She stood up so suddenly her chair skittered back into the wall. "Sorry if I've wasted your time. I'll know better in the future!"

"It's not mine you've wasted," he countered. "It's your own, I'm afraid."

Her footsteps went machine-gunning out of the place. He went over and draped himself against the sergeant's desk. "Ever hear of anything like that? A kid in her class writes a composition, and she—"

It was a full ten minutes before they could quit roaring about it.

CHAPTER TWO

Quiet Rooms for Rent

A FEW minutes after her class had been dismissed the next day, a "monitor," one of the older children used to carry messages about the building, knocked on the door. "There's a man outside would like to talk to you, Miss Prince."

She stepped out into the hall. The man, none other than Detective Kendall of the Homicide Squad, was standing tossing a piece of chalk up and down in the hollow of his hand.

She surveyed him coldly.

"Thought you might like to know," he said, "that I stopped that Gaines youngster on his way to school this morning and asked him a few questions. It's just like I told you yesterday. The first words out of his mouth were that he made the whole thing up. He couldn't think of anything, and it was nearly four o'clock, so he scribbled down the first thing that came into his head."

If he thought this would force her to capitulate, he was sadly mistaken. "Of course he'd deny it—to *you*. That's about as valid as a confession extracted from an adult by third-degree methods. The mere fact that you stopped to question him about it, frightened him into thinking he'd done something wrong. He wasn't sure just what, but he played safe by saying he'd made it up. Don't you know by now that the policeman is the most feared of all things to a child?"

"I'm not in uniform," he protested.

"It doesn't matter, he sensed you for someone in authority. They're smart that way. I saw the frightened look on his face

even after he got here. I can imagine how tactful you were about it, too!"

He thrust his jaw forward. "You know what I think is the matter with you?" he told her bluntly. "I think you're *looking* for trouble! I think you're just trying to find something wrong, no matter how you do it, to give yourself some excitement!"

It was a case of perfect mutual hostility, although she may have had a slight edge on him in this regard.

"Thank you for your co-operation, it's been overwhelming!" she said arctically. She snatched something from him as she turned away. "And will you kindly refrain from marking the walls with that piece of chalk! Pupils are punished when they do it!"

She returned stormily to the classroom. Her victim sat hunched forlornly, looking very small in the sea of empty seats. "I've found out it wasn't your fault for being late, Johnny," she relented. "You can go now, and I'll make it up to you by letting you out earlier than the others tomorrow."

He scuttled for the door.

"Johnny, just a minute, I'd like to ask you something."

His face clouded and he came back slowly toward her desk.

"Was that composition of yours true or made up?"

"Made up, Miss Prince," he mumbled, scuffing his feet.

Which only proved to her he was more afraid of the anonymous man with a badge outside than he was of his own teacher, nothing else. She didn't press the point.

"Johnny, do you live in a fairly large house?"

"Yes'm, pretty big," he admitted.

"Well, er—do you think your mother would care to rent out a room to me? I have to leave where I am living now, and I'm trying to find another place."

He swallowed. "You mean move into our house and *live* with us?" Obviously his child's mind didn't regard having a teacher at such close quarters as an un-mixed blessing.

She smiled reassuringly. "I won't interfere with you in your spare time, Johnny. I think I'll walk home with you now, I'd like to know as soon as possible."

"We'll have to take the bus, Miss Prince, it's pretty far out," he told her

when they had emerged from the building.

IT WAS even farther than she had expected it to be, a weather-beaten, rather depressing-looking farm-type of building, well beyond the last straggling suburbs, in full open country. It was set back a sizable distance from the road, and the whole plottage around it had an air of desolation and neglect. Its unpainted shutters hung down askew, and the porch-shed was warped and threatened to topple over at one end.

Something *could* have happened out here quite easily, and gone unrevealed, she thought, judging by the looks of the place alone.

A toilworn, timid-looking woman came forward to meet them as they neared the door, wiping worried hands upon her apron. "Mom, this is my teacher, Miss Prince," Johnny introduced.

At once the woman's expression became even more harassed and intimidated. "You been doing something you shouldn't again? Johnny, why can't you be a good boy?"

"No, this has nothing to do with Johnny's conduct," Emily Prince hastened to explain. She repeated the request for lodging she had already made to the boy.

It was obvious, at a glance, that the suggestion frightened the woman. "I dunno," she kept saying. "I dunno what Mr. Mason will say about it. He ain't in right now."

Johnny was registered at school under the name of Gaines. This must be the boy's step-father then. It was easy to see that the poor, harassed woman before her was completely dominated by him, whoever he was. That, in itself, from Miss Prince's angle, was a very suggestive factor. She made up her mind to get inside this house if she had to coax, bribe or browbeat her way in.

She opened her purse, took out a large-size bill, and allowed it to be seen in her hand, in readiness to seal the bargain.

The boy's mother was obviously swayed by the sight of it, but still being held back by fear of something. "We could use the money, of course," she wavered. "But—but wouldn't it be too far out for you, here?"

Miss Prince faked a slight cough. "Not at all. The country air would be good for

me. Couldn't I at least see one of the rooms?" she coaxed. "There wouldn't be any harm in that, would there?"

"N-no, I suppose not," Mrs. Mason faltered.

She led the way up a badly-creaking inner staircase. "There's really only one room fit for anybody," she apologized.

"I'd only want it temporarily," Miss Prince assured her. "Maybe a week or two at the most."

She looked around. It really wasn't as bad as she had been led to expect by the appearance of the house from the outside. In other words, it was the masculine share of the work, the painting and external repairing, that was remiss. The feminine share, the interior cleaning and keeping in order, was being kept up to the best of Mrs. Mason's ability. There was another little suggestive sidelight to the situation in that, to Miss Prince.

She struck while the iron was hot. "I'll take it," she said firmly, and thrust the money she had been holding into the other's undecided hand before she had time to put forward any further objections.

That did the trick.

"I—I guess it's all right," Mrs. Mason breathed, guiltily wringing her hands in her apron some more. "I'll tell Mr. Mason it's just for the time being." She tried to smile to make amends for her own trepidation. "He's not partial to having strangers in with us—"

"Why?" Miss Prince asked in her own mind, with a flinty question-mark.

"But you being Johnny's teacher—When will you be wanting to move in with us?"

Miss Prince had no intention of relinquishing the tactical advantage to be gained by taking them by surprise like this. "I may as well stay, now that I'm out here," she said. "I can have my things sent out after me."

She closed the door of her new quarters and sat down to think.

Until and unless she unearthed definite, specific evidence that what Johnny had seen that night was what she thought it was, she must keep an open mind and an unwarped sense of proportion, she warned herself, and not be swayed by appearances alone, no matter how incriminating they seemed. Positive evidence, not appearances.

The sun was already starting to go down when she heard the thud of an approaching tread coming up the neglected dirt track that led to the door. She edged over to the window and peered cautiously down. Mason, if that was he, was singularly unprepossessing, even villainous-looking at first glance, much more so than she had expected him to be. He was thick-set, strong as a steer in body, with lowering, bushy black brows and small, treacherously alert eyes. He had removed a disreputable, shapeless hat just as he passed below her window on his way in, and was wiping the completely bald crown of his head with a soiled bandanna. The skin of his scalp was sunburned, and ridged like dried leather. The adverse impression was so overwhelming that she felt it was too good to be true, not to be relied on. Again, appearances.

She left the window, hastened across the unreliable flooring of her room on arched feet to try and gain the doorway and overhear his first reaction, if possible.

She strained her ears. This first moment or two was going to offer an insight that was never likely to repeat itself quite as favorably again, no matter how long she stayed here.

"Where's Ed?" she heard him grunt unsociably. This was the first inkling she had had that there was still another member of the household. Who he was and what relationship he bore, she could only conjecture.

"Still over in town, I guess," she heard Mrs. Mason answer timidly. She was obviously in mortal terror as she nerved herself to make the unwelcome announcement she had to. The listener above could tell that by the very ring of her voice. "Johnny's teacher's come to stay with us—a little while."

There was suppressed savagery in his low-voiced rejoinder. "What'd you do that for?" And then a sound followed that Emily Prince couldn't identify for a second. A sort of quick, staggering foot-fall. A moment later she realized what it must have been. He had given the woman a violent push to express his disapproval.

She heard her whimper: "She's up there right now, Dirk."

"Get rid of her!" was the snarling answer.

"I can't, Dirk, she already give me the money, and—and she ain't going to be here but a short spell anyway."

She heard him come out stealthily below her, trying to listen up just as she was trying to listen down. An unnatural silence fell, prolonged itself unnaturally. It was like a grotesque cat-and-mouse play, one of them directly above the other, both reconnoitering at once.

He turned and went back again at last, when she was about ready to reel over from the long strain of holding herself motionless. She crept back inside her room and drew a long breath.

If that hadn't been a guilty reaction, what was? But it still wasn't evidence, by any means. It could have been just nosiness, too.

The porch-structure throbbed again, and someone else had come in. This must be the Ed she had heard them mention. She didn't try to listen this time. There would never be a second opportunity quite like the first. Whatever was said to him would be in a careful undertone. Mrs. Mason came out shortly after, called up: "Miss Prince, like to come down to supper?"

The teacher steeled herself, opened the door and stepped out. This was going to be a battle of wits. On their side they had an animal-like craftiness. On hers she had intellect, a trained mind, and self-control.

She felt she was really better equipped than they for warfare of this sort. She went down to enter the first skirmish.

THEY were at the table eating already—such a thing as waiting for her had never entered their heads. They ate crouched over low—like the animals they were—and that gave them the opportunity of watching her surreptitiously from their overhanging brows. Mrs. Mason said: "You can sit here next to Johnny. This is my husband. And this is my step-son, Ed."

The brutality on the son's face was less deeply ingrained than on Mason's. It was only a matter of degree, however. Like father, like son.

"Evenin'," Mason grunted.

The son only nodded, peering upward at her in a half-baleful, half-suspicious way, plainly taking her measure.

They ate in silence for awhile, though she could tell both their minds were busy on the same thing: her presence here, thinking about that, trying to decide what it betokened.

Finally Mason spoke. "Reckon you'll be staying some time?"

"No," she said quietly, "just a short while."

The son spoke next, after a considerable lapse of time. She could tell he'd premeditated the question for a full ten minutes past. "How'd you happen to pick our place?"

"I knew Johnny, from my class. And it's quieter out here than farther in."

She caught the flicker of a look that passed between them. She couldn't read its exact meaning, whether acceptance of her explanation or skepticism.

They shoved back their chairs, one after the other, got up and turned away, without a word of apology. Mason sauntered out into the dark beyond the porch. Ed Mason stopped to strike a match to a cigarette he had just rolled. Even in the act of doing that, however, she caught his head turned slightly sideways toward her, watching her veiledly when he thought she wasn't looking.

The older man's voice sounded from outside: "Ed, come out here a minute, I want to talk to you."

She knew what about—they were going to compare impressions, possibly plot a course of action.

The first battle was a draw. No hits, no steals, no errors.

She got up and went after Mrs. Mason. "I'll help you with the dishes." She wanted to get into that kitchen.

She couldn't see it at first. She kept using her eyes, scanning the floor surreptitiously while she wiped Mrs. Mason's thick, chipped crockery. Finally she thought she detected something. A shadowy bald patch, so to speak. It was both cleaner than the surrounding area, as though it had been scrubbed vigorously, and yet at the same time it was overcast. There were the outlines of a stain still faintly discernible. But it wasn't very conspicuous, just the shadow of a shadow.

She said to herself: "She'll tell me. I'll find out from her what I want to know."

She moved aimlessly around, pretending to dry off something, until she was

standing right over it. Then she pretended to fumble her cloth, let it drop. She bent down for it, and planted the flat of her hand squarely on the shadowy place, as if trying to retain her balance. She let it stay that way for a moment.

She didn't have to look at the other woman. A heavy mug slipped through her hands and shattered resoundingly at her feet. Emily Prince straightened up again, and only then glanced over her way. Mrs. Mason's face had whitened a little. She averted her eyes.

"She's told me," Miss Prince said to herself with slow, inward satisfaction.

There hadn't been a word exchanged between the two of them.

She went upstairs to her room a short while after. If somebody had been murdered in that room she had just been in, what disposal had been made of the remains? Something must have been done with them, they must be lying concealed someplace around—a thing like that couldn't just be made to disappear.

She sat there shuddering on the edge of the cot, wondering: "Am I going to have nerve enough to sleep here tonight, under the same roof with a couple of possible murderers?" She drew the necessary courage, finally, from an unexpected quarter. The image of Detective Kendall flashed before her mind, laughing uproariously at her. "I certainly am!" she seethed. "I'll show him whether I'm right or not!" And she proceeded to blow out the lamp and lie down.

CHAPTER THREE

Nobody Missing

IN THE morning sunlight the atmosphere of the house was less macabre, more bearable. She rode in to school with Johnny on the bus, and for the next six hours put all thoughts of the grisly matter she was engaged upon out of her mind, while she devoted herself to parsing, syntax and participles.

After she had dismissed class that afternoon she went around to her former quarters to pick up a few belongings. This was simply to allay suspicion out at the Masons'. She left the greater part of her things undisturbed where they were, to be held for her.

She was waiting for the bus, collected parcels beside her, when Kendall hove into sight on the opposite side of the street. He was the last person she was anxious to meet under the circumstances. She pretended not to recognize him, but it didn't work. He crossed over to her, stopped, touched his hat-brim, and grinned. "You seem to be moving. Give you a hand with those?"

"I can manage," she said distantly.

He eyed the bus right-of-way speculatively, then followed it with his gaze out toward its eventual destination. "It wouldn't be out to the Mason place?" Which was a smarter piece of deduction than she had thought him capable of.

"It happens to be."

To her surprise, his face sobered. "I wouldn't fool around with people of that type," he said earnestly. "It's not the safest thing to try on anyone."

Instantly she whirled on him, to take advantage of the flaw she thought she detected in his line of reasoning. "You're being inconsistent, aren't you? If something happened out there which they want to keep hidden, I agree it's not safe. Which isn't going to stop me. But *you* say nothing happened out there. Then why shouldn't it be safe?"

"Look," he said patiently, "you're going at this from an entirely wrong angle. There's a logical sequence to things like this." He told off his fingers at her, as though she were one of her own pupils, which was to her only an added insult. "First, somebody has to be missing or unaccounted for. Second, the body itself, or evidence sufficiently strong to take the place of an actual body, has to be brought to light. The two of them are interchangeable, but one or the other of them always has to precede an assumption of murder. That's the way we work. *Your* first step is an imaginary composition written by an eight-year-old child. Even in the composition itself, which is your whole groundwork, there's no direct evidence given. No assault was seen by the kid, no body of any victim was seen either before or after death. In other words, you're reading an imaginary crime between the lines of an account that's already imaginary in itself. You can't get any further away from facts than that."

She loosed a blast of sarcasm at him

sufficient to have withered the entire first three rows of any of her classes. "You're wasting your breath, my textbook expert. The trouble with hard-and-fast rules is that they always let a big chunky exception slip by, and then try to ignore it because it doesn't get inside the frame."

He shoved a helpless palm at her. "But there's nobody missing, man woman or child, within our entire jurisdiction, and that goes out well beyond the Mason place. Word would have come in to us by now if there were! How're you going to get around that?"

"Then why don't you go out after it, to places from which it wouldn't be likely to come in to you of its own accord?" she flared. "Why don't you take this main road, this interstate highway that runs through here, and zone it off, and then work your way back along it, zone by zone, and find out if anyone's missing from other people's jurisdictions? Believe me," she added crushingly, "the only reason I suggest *you* do it, is that you have the facilities and I haven't!"

He nodded with tempered consideration. "That could be done," he admitted. "I'll send out routine inquiries to the main townships along the line. I'd hate to have to give my reasons for checking up, though, in case I was ever pinned down to it: 'A kid in school here wrote a composition in which he mentioned he saw his mother scrubbing the kitchen floor at two in the morning.'" He grinned ruefully. "Now why don't you just let it go at that, leave it in our hands? In case I get a bite on any of my inquiries, I could drop out there myself and look things over—"

She answered this with such vehemence that he actually retreated a step away from her on the sidewalk. "I'll do my own looking over, thank you! I mayn't know all the rules in the textbook, but at least I'm able to think for myself. My mind isn't in handcuffs! Here comes my bus. Good day, Mr. Kendall!"

He thrust his hat back and scratched under it. "Whew!" she heard him whistle softly to himself, as she clambered aboard with her baggage.

IT WAS still too early in the day for the two men to be on hand when she reached the Mason place. She found Mrs. Mason alone in the kitchen. A stolen

glance at the sector of flooring that had been the focus of her attention the previous night, while she stood chatting with the woman, revealed a flagrant change. Something had been done to it since then, and whatever it was, the substance used must have been powerfully corrosive. The whole surface of the wood was now bleached and shredded, as though it had been eaten away by something. Its changed aspect was far more incriminating now than if it had been allowed to remain as it was, to her way of thinking. They had simply succeeded in proving that the stain was *not* innocent, by taking such pains to efface it. Be that as it might, it was no longer evidence now, even if it had been to start with. It was only a place where evidence had been.

She opened the back door and looked out at the peaceful sunlit fields that surrounded the place, with a wall of woodland bringing up in the distance on one side. She pretended to gulp enjoyable quantities of air. It was enjoyable, but she wasn't thinking of that. In one direction, up from the house, they had corn growing. The stalks were head-high, could have concealed anything. A number of black specks—birds, but whether crows or just what species she wasn't rustic enough to be able to tell—were hovering above one particular spot, darting busily in and out. They'd rise above it and circle and then go down in again, but they didn't stray very far from it. Only that one place held any attraction for them.

Down the other way, again far off, so far off as to be almost indistinguishable, she could make out a low quadrangular object that seemed to be composed of cobblestones or large rocks. It had a dilapidated shed over it on four uprights. A faint, wavering footpath led to it. "What's that?" she asked.

Mrs. Mason didn't answer for a moment. Then she said, somewhat unwillingly, the questioner thought: "Used to be our well. Can't use it now, needs shoring up. Water's all sediment."

"Then where do you get water from?" Miss Prince asked.

"We've been going down the road and borrowing it from the people at the next place down, carrying it back in a bucket. It's a long ways to go, and they don't like it much neither."

Miss Prince waited a moment, to keep the question from sounding too leading. Then she asked casually: "Has your well been—unfit to use for very long?"

She didn't really need the answer. New grass was sprouting everywhere, but it had barely begun to overgrow the footpath yet. She thought the woman's eyes avoided her, but that might have been simply the chronic hangdog look that was a result of her browbeaten attitude. "'Bout two or three weeks," she mumbled reluctantly.

Birds agitated in a cornfield. A well suddenly unfit for use for the last two or three weeks. And then, in a third direction, straight over and across, the woods, secretive and brooding as always. Three possibilities. Three choices in direction. But only one of them the right one.

She said to herself: "She told me something I wanted to know once before. Maybe I can get her to tell me what I want to know now too." Those who live in the shadow of fear have poor defenses. The teacher said briskly: "I think I'll go for a nice long stroll in the open."

She put her to a test, probably one of the most peculiar ever devised. Instead of turning and striking out at once, as a man would have in parting from someone, she began to retreat slowly, half-turned backwards toward her as she drew away, chattering as she went, as though unable to tear herself away, to cover up the close scrutiny she was subjecting her to.

She retreated first in the general direction of the cornfield, as though intending to ramble among the stalks. The woman just stood there immobile in the doorway, looking after her.

The teacher closed in again, as though inadvertently, under necessity of something she had just remembered she wanted to tell her. "Oh, by the way, could you spare me an extra chair for my room, I—"

Then when she again made to part company with her, it was in a diametrically opposite direction, along the footpath that coursed toward the well, as if without noticing where her steps were taking her. "Any kind of a chair will do," she called back talkatively. "Just so long as it has a seat and four—"

The woman just stood there, eyeing her without a flicker.

She changed her mind, came back again the few yards she had already traveled. "The sun's still hot, even this late," she prattled. She pretended to touch the top of her head. "I don't think I care to walk in the open. I think I'll go over that way instead, those woods look nice and cool from here. I always did like to roam around in woods—"

THE woman's eyes seemed to be a little larger now, as she shifted directions in accordance with this restless boarder of hers. She swallowed hard. Miss Prince could distinctly see the lump go down the scrawny lines of her throat. She started to say something, then she didn't after all. It was flagrantly obvious, the way her whole body had seemed to lean forward for a moment, then subside again against the door-frame. Her hands, inert until now, had begun to mangle her apron. It was almost like a pinwheel, the way it swirled one way, then the other, in their hidden clutch.

Not a sound came from her. Yet, though the test seemed to have failed, it had succeeded. Miss Prince went on, this time without any further backward parleying.

"I know the right direction now," she was saying to herself grimly, as she trudged along, head bent. "It's in the woods. It's somewhere in the woods."

She went slow. Idly. Putting little detours and curleycues into her line of progress, to seem aimless, haphazard. She knew, without turning, long after the house was a tiny thing behind her, that the woman was still there in the doorway, straining her eyes after her, watching her all the way to the edge of the woods. She knew, too, that that had been a give-and-take back there just now. The woman had told her what she wanted to know, but she had told the woman a little something too. She must have, she couldn't possibly have failed to, in the course of the mental fencing-match they had just had. If nothing else, that she wasn't quite as scatterbrained, as frivolous, as she had seemed to be about which direction to take for her stroll. Nothing definite maybe, but just a suspicion that she wasn't hanging around out here altogether for her health.

She'd have to watch her step with them,

just as much as they'd have to watch theirs with her. A good deal depended on whether the woman was an active ally of the two men, or just a passive thrall involved against her will.

She was up to the outermost trees now, and soon they had closed around her, the house and its watcher was gone from sight, and a pall of cool blue twilight had dimmed everything. She beat her way slowly forward. It was not a dense copse, the trees were not set thickly together by any means, but it was extensive, it covered a lot of ground. There were avenues, alleys running through it in various directions, natural ones, not man-made, but none of them was continuous, it just happened to be the way the trunks were ranged around.

She had not expected anything so miraculous as to stumble on something the moment she stepped in here. It was quite likely that she would come out again none the wiser this time. And many more times to come. But she intended returning here again and again if necessary, until—

If there had been a murder, then there was a body somewhere. Johnny had turned his composition in three days ago. Even if his "dream" had taken place two or three weeks before that, there must still be a body somewhere. There would still be a body a year from now.

She was getting tired now, and she was already none too sure of her own whereabouts. She spotted a half-submerged stump protruding from the damp, moldy turf and sat down on it, fighting down a suspicion that was trying to form in the back of her mind that she had lost herself. A thing like that, if it ever got to that Kendall's ears, would be all that was needed to complete his hilarity at her expense. The stump was green all over with some sort of fungus, but she was too tired to care. The ground in here remained in a continual state of moldy dampness, she noticed. The sun never had a chance to reach through the leafy ceiling of the trees and dry it out.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nightmare

SHE had been sitting there perhaps two minutes at the most, when a faint scream of acute fright reached her from

a distance. It was thin and piping, and must have been thin even at its source. She jarred to her feet. That had sounded like the voice of a child, not a grown-up. It repeated itself, and two others joined in with it, as frightened as the first, if less shrilly acute. She started to run, as fast as the trackless nature of the ground would allow, toward the direction from which she believed the commotion was coming.

She could hear water splashing, and then without any further warning she came crashing out onto the margin of a sizable and completely screened-off woodland pool. It was shaped like a figure eight.

At the waist, where it narrowed, there was an irregular bridge of flat-surfaced stones, although the distances between them were unmanageable except by sprinting. There was a considerable difference in height between the two sections, and the water coursed into the lower one in a placid, silken waterfall stretching the entire width of the basin. This lower oval was one of the most remarkable things she had ever seen. It was shallow, the water was only about knee-high in it, and it was surfaced with dazzling creamy-white sand. There was something clean and delightful-looking about it.

Two small boys in swimming-trunks, one of them Johnny Gaines, were arched over two of the stepping-stones, frantically tugging at a third who hung suspended between them, legs scissoring wildly across the surface of the sleek sand below. "Keep moving them!" she heard Johnny shriek just as she got there. "Don't let 'em stay still!"

She couldn't understand the reason for their obvious terror. The water below him certainly wasn't deep enough to drown anybody—

"Help us, lady!" the other youngster sobbed. "Help us get him back up over the edge here!"

She kicked off the impediment of her high-arched shoes, picked her way out to them along the stones, displaced the nearest one's grip with her own on the floundering object of rescue. He wouldn't come up for a minute, even under the added pull of her adult strength, and she couldn't make out what was holding him, there was

nothing visible but a broil of sand-smoking water around his legs. She hauled backwards from him with every ounce of strength she had in her body, and suddenly he floundered free over the lip of the low spillway.

The three of them immediately retreated to the safety of the bank, and she followed. "What got you so frightened?" she asked.

"Don't you know what that is?" Johnny said, still whimpering. "A quicksand! Once that gets you—"

There could be no mistaking the genuineness of their fright. His two companions had scuttled off for home without further ado, finishing their dressing on the hoof as they went.

"Look, I'll show you." He picked up a fist-sized rock, shied it in. What happened sent a slight chill down her spine. The stone lay there for a moment, motionless and perfectly visible through the crystalline film of water. Then there was a slight concentric swirl of the sand immediately around it, a dimple appeared on its surface, evened out again, and suddenly the stone wasn't there any more. The sand lay as smooth and satiny as ever, clean and delightful-looking. The delayed timing was what was so horrible about it.

"We'd better go," she said, taking a step backward from it.

"The upper pool's all right, it's only got gravel at the bottom," Johnny was explaining, wiping off his hair with a handful of leaves.

She didn't hear him. She was examining the branch of a bush growing beside the bank that had swung back into place again in her wake. It formed an acute angle such as is never found in nature. It was badly fractured halfway out along its length. She reached for a second frond, a third, fingered them. Their spines were all broken in that same way.

Her face paled a little. She moved around the entire perimeter of the bush, handling its shoots, careful to overstep the treacherous cup under her. Then she examined the neighboring bushes in the same way. The fractures were all on the landward side, away from the pool. The tendrils that overhung the water itself, that anyone in difficulties in the sand

could have been expected to grasp at and cling to, were all perfectly undamaged, arching gracefully just the way they had grown.

She came away with a puzzled look on her face. But only that, no increased pallor.

At the edge of the woods, just before they came out into the open again, the youngster beside her coaxed plaintively: "Miss Prince, don't gimme 'way about going swimming in there, will you?"

"Won't they notice your hair's damp?"

"Sure, but I can say I went swimming in the mill-pond, down by the O'Brien place. I'm allowed to go there."

"Oh, it's just that—that place we just came from they don't want you to go near?"

He nodded.

That could have been because of the quicksand—possibly. Then again it could have been for other reasons as well. "Have they always told you to keep away from there?" she hazarded.

It paid off. "No'm, only lately," he said guilelessly.

Only lately. She decided she was going to pay another visit to that cannibal sand-bed. With a long pole, perhaps.

THE evening meal began in deceptive calmness. Although the two Masons continued to watch her in sullen silence, there already seemed to be less of overt suspicion and more of just casual curiosity in their underbrow glances. A casual remark from Johnny suddenly brought on a crisis when she was least expecting it. The youngster didn't realize the dynamite in his remark. "Did I pass, in that composition I handed in?" he asked all at once. And then, before she could stop him in time, he blurted out: "You know, the one about the dream I had, where I came down and—"

Without raising eyes from the table she could sense the tightening-up of tension around her. It was as noticeable as though an electric current was streaking around the room. Ed Mason forgot to go ahead eating, he just sat looking down at his plate. Then his father stopped too, and looked at his own plate. There was a soft slur of shoe-leather inching along the floor from somewhere under the table.

Mrs. Mason said in a stifled voice, "Sh-h, Johnny."

There was only one answer she could make. "I haven't got around to reading it yet." Something made her add: "It's up there on the table in my room right now."

Mason resumed eating. Then his son followed suit.

She had given them all the rope they needed. Let them go ahead and hang themselves now. If the composition disappeared, as she was almost certain it was going to, that would be as good as an admission in itself that—

She purposely lingered below, helping Mrs. Mason as she had the night before. Then when she came out of the kitchen again and made ready to go up to her room, they were both sprawled out sluggishly in the adjoining room. Whether one of them had made a quick trip up the stairs and down again, she had no way of knowing—until she got up there herself.

Mason's eyes followed her in a strangely steadfast way as she started up the stairs. Just what the look signified she couldn't quite make out. It made her uneasy, although it wasn't directly threatening in itself. It had some other quality that she couldn't figure, a sort of shrewd complacency. Just before she reached the turn and passed from sight he called out: "Have a good night's sleep, Miss." She saw a mocking flicker of the eyes pass between him and Ed.

She didn't answer. The hand with which she was steadying the lamp-chimney she was taking up with her, shook a little as she let herself into her room and closed the door. She moved a chair before it as a sort of frail barricade. Then she hurried to the table and sifted through the homework papers stacked on it.

It was there. It hadn't been touched. It was out of the alphabetical order she was always careful to keep her papers in, it had gotten in between the M's and N's in some way, but it had been left there undisturbed for her to read at will.

That puzzled, almost crestfallen look that she'd had at the pool that afternoon, came back to her face again. She'd been positive she'd find it missing.

She retired and blew out the lamp finally.

HOW long she'd been asleep she could not tell, but it must have been well after midnight that something roused her. She didn't know exactly what it was at first, then as she sat up and put her foot questioningly to the floor, she identified it as some sort of a strong vibration coming from someplace below. As though two heavy bodies were threshing about in a struggle down there. She quickly put something on and went out to listen in the hall. A chair went over with a vicious crack. A table jarred. She could hear an accompaniment of stentorian breathing, an occasional wordless grunt. But she was already on her way down by that time, all further thought of concealment thrown to the winds.

Mason and his son were locked in a grim, heaving struggle that floundered from one end of the kitchen to the other and back again, dislodging everything in its path. Mrs. Mason was a helpless onlooker, holding a lighted lamp back beyond danger of upsetting, and ineffectually whimpering: "Don't! Dirk! Ed! Let each other be now!"

"Hold the door open, quick, Ma! I've got him!" Mason gasped just as Miss Prince arrived on the scene.

The woman edged over sidewise along the wall, flung it back. Mason catapulted his adversary bodily out into the night. Then he snatched up a chicken lying in a pool of blood over in a corner, sent that after him, streaking a line of red drops across the floor. "Thievin' drunkard!" he shouted, shaking a fist at the sprawling figure outside. "Now you come back when you sober up, and I'll let you in!" He slammed the door, shot the bolt home. "Clean up that mess, Ma," he ordered gruffly. "That's ore think I won't 'low, is no chicken-stealing drunkards in my house!" He strode past the open-mouthed teacher without seeming to see her, still heaving with righteous indignation, stamped up the stairs.

"He's very strict about that," Mrs. Mason whispered confidentially. "Ed don't mean no harm, but he helps himself to things that don't belong to him when he gets likkered up." She sloshed water into a bucket, reached for a scrubbing-brush, sank wearily to her knees, and began to scour ruddy circles of chicken-

blood on the floor. "I just got through doin' this floor with lye after the last time," she mumbled.

Miss Prince found her voice at last. It was still a very small, shaky one. "Has—has this happened before?"

"Every so often," she admitted. "Last time he run off with the O'Brien's Ford, drove it all the way out here just like it belonged to him. Mr. Mason had to sneak it back where he took it from, at that hour of the night."

An odor of singeing felt assailed the teacher's nostrils. She looked, discovered a felt hat, evidently the unmanageable Ed's, fallen through the open scuttle-hole of the wood-burning stove onto the still-warm ashes below. She drew it up, beat it odorless against the back of a chair.

There was a slight rustle from the doorway and Johnny was standing there in his night-shirt, sleepily rubbing one eye. "I had another of those dreams, Ma," he complained. "I dreamed the whole house was shaking and—"

"You go back to bed, hear?" his mother said sharply. "And don't go writing no more compositions about it in school, neither!" She fanned out her skirt, trying to screen the crimson vestiges on the floor from him. "Another of them wood-varmints got into the house, and your Pa and your Uncle Ed had to kill it, that's all!"

Miss Prince turned and slunk up the stairs presently, with a very peculiar look on her face. The look of someone who has made a complete, unmitigated fool out of herself. She slammed the door of her room behind her with—for her—unusual asperity. She went over to the window and stood looking out. Far down the highway she could make out the dwindling figure of Ed Mason in the moonlight, steering a lurching, drunken course back toward town and singing, or rather hooting, at the top of his voice as he went.

"Appearances!" she scowled bitterly. "Appearances!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Dangerous Ground

SHE always seemed to meet Kendall just when she didn't want to. He appeared at her elbow next morning just as

she alighted from the bus in town. "How're things going? Get onto anything yet?"

She made a move to brush by him, first, without answering.

"I haven't received anything definite yet on any of those inquiries I sent out," he went on.

She turned and faced him. "You won't, either. You can forget the whole thing! All right, laugh, you're entitled to it! You were right and I was wrong. Now go ahead, make the most of it!"

"You mean you don't think—"

"I mean I practically saw the same thing the boy did, with my own eyes, last night and it wasn't anything of the sort. It was just a family row! I've made a fool out of myself and gone to a lot of trouble, for nothing!"

"What're you going to do?"

"I'm going to pack my things and come away from there, right today, you can be sure of that!"

"Don't take it too hard—" he tried to console her.

She stalked away. At least, she had to admit to herself, he'd been decent enough not to say, "I told you so," and laugh right out in her face. Oh well, he was probably saving it up to enjoy it more fully back at the station-house with his cronies.

Mrs. Mason was alone in the kitchen again when she returned that afternoon to get her things together. There hadn't been time before school in the morning. The woman looked at her questioningly, but the teacher didn't say anything about her imminent departure. Time enough to announce it when she came down again.

In her room she picked up the dress she'd had on the afternoon before and started to fold it over. Something caught her eye. There was a viscous stain, a blotch, on the rear of it that she hadn't noticed until now. She looked at it more closely, as though unable to account for it. Then she remembered sitting down on a half-submerged stump for a moment, just before hearing the boys' cries of distress. "No more appearances!" she warned herself half under her breath, and tossed the garment into the open bag.

She picked up the batch of school papers lying on the table to follow suit with them. There was that composition of Johnny's

that had started all the trouble, staring her in the face again. She started to re-read it. She was standing up at first. Before she had finished she was seated once more. She turned and looked over at the dress she had just put away. Then she got up and took it out again. That and the other things that had preceded it.

There was a timid knock on the door and Mrs. Mason looked in at her. "I thought maybe you'd like me to help you get your things together," she faltered.

Miss Prince eyed her with cool imperturbability. "I didn't say anything about leaving. What gave you that idea? I'm staying—at least for awhile longer."

The woman's hand started out toward her, in a palsied gesture of supplication and warning. She seemed about to say something. Then she quickly closed the door again with stealthy terror.

HER main worry was to get down the venerable stairs without causing them to creak and betray her. The house lay steeped in midnight silence. She had felt certain Mason and his son were inveterate snorers when asleep, she had heard them at other times, even downstairs when they dozed after meals. Tonight for some reason she couldn't hear them.

She didn't use the pocket-light she had provided herself with, for fear of attracting attention while still within the house. The real need for that would be later, over there in the woods. The stairs accomplished without mishap, it was a fairly easy matter to slip the bolt on the back door and get out without too much noise. There was a full moon up, but whether it would be much help where she was going, she doubted.

She stole around to the back of the rickety tool-house and retrieved the long-poled pitchfork she had concealed there in readiness earlier in the evening. Its tines were bent, and with a little manipulation, it might serve as a sort of grappling hook if—if there was anything for it to hook onto where she was taking it. A button was all she needed, a rotting piece of suiting an inch square. Evidence. Until she had that, she couldn't go to Kendall about this, she had to keep on working alone. Not after what she had admitted to him that morning.

She struck out across the silver-dappled fields. The trees closed around her finally, a maw of impenetrable blackness after the moonlight, and she brought her pocket-light into play, following its wan direction-finder in and out between the looming, ghostly trunks.

The bed of the quicksand loomed white-ly even in the dark. There was something sinister about it, like a vast evil eye lying there in wait. The thin coating of water over it refracted the shine of her light to a big phosphorescent balloon when she cast it downward on it. She discovered her teeth chattering and clamped them shut. She looked around for something to balance her light, finally nested it within a bush so that the interlaced twigs supported it. She shifted a little farther over along the bank and poised the pitchfork like someone about to spear fish.

She lunged out and downward with it. The soft feel of the treacherous sand as the tines clove into it was transferred repugnantly along the pole to her hands. That was all she had time to notice. She didn't even see it sink in.

A leathery hand was pressed smotheringly to the lower half of her face, a thick anaconda-like arm twined about her waist from behind, and the light winked out. Her wrists were caught together as they flew up from the pitchfork-pole, held helpless.

"Got her, Ed?" a quiet voice said in the dark.

"Got her," a second voice answered.

There hadn't been a warning sound around her. They must have been lurking there concealed ahead of her, to be able to spring the trap so unexpectedly.

HER pinioned hands were swung around behind her, brought together again. The hand had left her mouth. "You int'rested in what's down in there?" the man behind her asked threateningly.

"I don't know what you mean. Take your hands off me!"

"You know what we mean. And we know what you mean. Don't you suppose we're onto why you're hanging around our place? Now you'll get what you looked for." He addressed his father. "Take off her shoes and stockings and lie 'em on the bank. Careful, don't tear 'em now."

"What's that for?"

"She came out here alone, see, early tomorrow morning, and it looked so pretty she went wading in the thing without knowing what it was, and it got her."

She kicked frantically, trying to impede them. She was helpless in their hands. Her ankles were caught, one at a time, and stripped.

"They'll dredge for her, won't they?" Dirk Mason mentioned with sinister meaning.

"She'll be on top, won't she?" was the grisly reassurance. "Once they get her out, they'll be no call for them to go ahead dredging any further down."

She ripped out a scream of harrowing intensity. What if it had been twice as shrill as it was, it couldn't have reached past the confines of these woods. And who was there in these woods to hear her? "Think we ought to stuff something in her mouth?" the older man asked.

"No, because we gotta figure on her being found later. Don't let it disturb you, no one'll hear her."

She was fighting like something possessed, as any animal fights for its life, but she was no match for the two of them combined. Not even a man would have been.

They were ready for the incredible thing they were about to do now. "Grab her legs and swing her, so she goes out far enough." There was a moment of sickening indecision, while she swung suspended between them, clear of the ground. Then her spinning body shot from them.

Water sprayed over her and she had struck. The fall was nothing. It was like landing on a satin quilt, the sand was so soft. She rolled over, tore her arms free, and threshed to a kneeling position. There was that awful preliminary moment in which nothing happened, as with that stone she had seen Johnny throw in yesterday. Then a sudden pull, a *drawing*, started in—light at first, barely noticeable, giving the impression of being easy to counteract. And each move the wrong one, fastening it tighter around her bared feet, ankles, calves.

MEANWHILE, something was happening on the bank, or at least, farther back in the woods, but she was

only dimly aware of it, too taken up in her own floundering doom. It reached her vaguely, like something through a black mist. An intermittent winking as of fire-flies here and there, each one followed by a loud crack like the breaking of a heavy bough. And heavy forms were crashing through the thickets in several directions at once, two of them fleeing along the edge of the pool, others fanning out farther back, as if to intercept them. There was one final crack, a floundering fall, and then a breathless voice nearby said: "Don't shoot—I give up!"

A light, stronger than the one she had brought, suddenly flashed out, caught her, steadied, lighting up the whole pool. Her screams had dwindled to weak wails now, simply because she hadn't enough breath left. She was writhing there like a crazed rumba-dancer, still upright, but her legs already gone past the knees.

"Hurry up, help me with this girl!" a voice shouted somewhere behind the blinding light. "Don't you see what they've done to her?" The pole of the same pitchfork she had used was thrust out toward her. "Hang onto this a minute." She clutched it with both hands. A moment later a noosed rope had splashed into the water around her. "Pass your arms through that and tighten it around you under them. Grab hold now! Now kick out behind you!"

For minutes nothing happened, she didn't seem to move at all, though there must have been at least three of them behind the rope, judging by the amount of pull it was exerting. "Are we hurting you?" Then suddenly there was a crumbling feeling of the sand all around her trapped legs and she came out flounderingly, like a dead fish.

Kendall was one of them, of course, and even the brief glimpse she had of his face by torchlight made her wonder how she could have ever felt averse to running into him at any time. She certainly didn't feel that way now.

They carried her out of the woods in a "chair" made of their hands and put her into a police-car waiting at the edge of the fields, although she was already beginning to insist that her feet were all right, just "pins and needles" with numbness.

"You'd better get back there and go to work. Even before you got the rope around me, the downward pull had stopped, I noticed. I seemed to be standing on something.

"We got them both," Kendall said. "And of course the mere fact that they would try anything like that on you is the give-away, evidence or no evidence."

"How did you get out here on time?"

"One of those inquiries I sent out finally paid off. A commercial traveler named Kenneth Johnson was reported missing, from way over in Jordanstown. He was supposed to show up at Indian River, out beyond here in the other direction, and he never got there, dropped from sight somewhere along the way, car and all. He was carrying quite a gob of money with him. He left three weeks ago, but it wasn't reported until now, because he was only expected back around this time. I only got word around eleven tonight, a little over an hour ago. I thought of the Masons right away, but mainly thanks to you. I started right out here with a couple of my partners to have a little talk with them, look around, but never dreaming that you were still here yourself. Then a little past the next house down, the O'Brien place, we met the kid, Johnny, running along the road lickety-split, on his way to phone in to us from there and get help. His mother had finally gotten pangs of conscience and thrown off her fear of her husband and step-son long enough to try to save you from what she guessed was going to happen."

SHE came out again the first thing next morning. Kendall came forward to meet her as she neared the pool. He told her they'd finally gotten the car out a little after daybreak, with the help of a farm-tractor run in under the trees, plenty of stout ropes, and some grappling hooks. She could see the weird-looking sand-encrusted shape standing there on the bank, scarcely recognizable for what it was.

"Kenneth Johnson all right," Kendall said quietly, "and still inside it when we got it up. But murdered before he was ever swallowed up in the sand. I have a confession from the two Masons. He gave Ed a hitch back along the road that night, like a fool. Mason got him to step in for

a minute on some excuse or other, when they'd reached his place, so he'd have a chance to rifle his wallet. Johnson caught him in the act, and Mason and his accomplice of a father murdered him between them with a flatiron. Then they put him back in the car, drove him over here, and sent it in. No need to go any closer, it's not a very pretty sight."

On the way out he asked: "But what made you change your mind so suddenly? Only yesterday morning when I met you you were ready to—"

"I sat down on a stump not far from the pool, and afterwards I discovered axle-grease on my dress. It was so damp and moldy in there that the clot that had fallen from the car hadn't dried out yet, the way it would have in the open. Why should a car be driven in there where there was no road?"

"But the main thing was still that famous composition of Johnny's. I happened to reread that, immediately after the re-enactment they had staged for my particular benefit. Ed Mason's hat, the second time, was lying in the exact same

place and manner that Johnny had seen the other hat, Johnson's, lying the first time. Both fell through the open scuttle-hole in the stove onto the ashes below. Is it probable that a hat, flung off somebody's head in the course of a struggle, would land in the identical place twice? Hardly. Things like that just don't happen. It had been deliberately placed there for me to see, to point up the similarity with what had happened before."

That night, safely ensconced back in her old quarters in town, she was going over back-schoolwork when her landlady knocked on the door. "There's a gentleman downstairs to see you. He says it's not business, but social."

Miss Prince smiled a little. "I think I know who it is. Tell him I'll be right down as soon as I've finished grading these papers."

She picked up Johnny Gaines'. She marked it A-plus, the highest possible mark she could give, without bothering for once about grammar, punctuation or spelling. Then she put on her hat, turned down the light, and went out.



JOHNNY MAY HAVE GOT HIS GUN . . .



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DEATH WITH FATHER



He fell down on his face and began sliding out.

An Acme Indemnity Op Story

By **JAN DANA**

Author of "Death in the Center," etc.

He only wanted to do the D.A. a favor when he stepped off the train in Ivers City—innocent as the sweet old lady who got off with him. So he scarcely expected to see the D. A. blasted to Kingdom Come before his eyes—or tangle with the old lady in the last act of a foul family feud.

I THOUGHT the little old lady looked vaguely familiar, when I spotted her over the heads of the crowd. She was standing just inside the almost deserted waiting-room, looking helplessly at a timetable, as I swung down from the Pullman.

Billy Wilkes' crop of electric black hair burst through the crowd on the platform. It was an old-fashioned gray frame station with the platform under the sky—no steel-and-concrete modernities for Ivers City. Wilkes grabbed my unburdened hand. His face was flushed and he, too, lugged a bag in his other hand. He pressed keys and a square of cardboard on me and rattled breathlessly: "Car's in parking lot—across road. If you don't mind, I'm going to hop a train right back to Trenton—leaving in couple of minutes on Track Two. Congratulations on Conover busi-

ness. 'Bye," and he took himself out of my life.

Ivers City didn't pamper itself with red-caps, so I shouldered my way into the almost empty, dingy, varnished waiting-room, lugging my own grip, heading for the phone booths.

The white-haired old lady had withdrawn further away from the swarming platform, was still forlornly examining the time-table, holding pince-nez on nose with a white-gloved hand. She was elegant in a white dress with small black figures, a black-and-white bonnet. Apart from her obvious confusion with the schedule, she had a sturdy, almost a cheerful, independence about her and her finely wrinkled face was pink-cheeked.

I had to walk straight at her—she was just beyond the booths—and her bright blue eyes jumped up to mine in bewildered appeal. She made a helpless little wave of the folder with one hand, a little gesture with the other—that gesture was somehow familiar too—opened her mouth—and then her eyes went wide. Looking over my shoulder, she looked awed and alarmed, open-mouthed.

An easy, booming voice that had the trace of a chuckle in it said behind me: "Acme Insurance, ain't it? I thought I recognized you."

I turned and looked at a big, genial Irish face, with snapping, laughing brown eyes. That is, they would have been laughing except that the left one had a slight cast in it. The resultant effect was inexpressibly sly and greedy. The face was under a uniformed cap and above a heavy-set body in a police lieutenant's uniform. A second uniform—a sergeant's—moved away from behind him and I recognized that one's scarred and battered blond face and dull gray eyes—Sergeant Boyle.

The lieutenant chuckled. "Now, don't tell me you've forgot me—Murtagh, headquarters? We had doings four years back when you were here chasing that embezzling department store cashier your company bonded."

My memory must have been having an off day to forget this one. I'll always swear the bank cashier I was chasing got away only because I was fool enough to go to headquarters and confide in this same Murtagh. That was before I learned that

he owned the finest home in Ivers City and two Packards.

"Didn't we, though?" I said sourly.

"What brings you to our fair village this time? Maybe we can make up for the tough luck you had before."

"I won't be here long enough. I've got a little item to pass to your D. A. It's probably not even of interest but I was on the Coast and had to pass through here on my way back to N. Y. So I thought I'd just drop it off in passing."

His shining, crooked eyes gave me a careful scrutiny. "You wouldn't fool an old pal, would you?"

"Not over this. I'll be gone in an hour. Excuse me. I have to make a phone call. It's after five thirty and I don't want the party to go home on me."

I SLID into a booth, stared out at them stolidly, till they moved out of ear-shot. Then I closed the door and flipped through the hanging phone book and called the D. A.

"Mr. Glisselin?" I said, when I finally got him. I recalled myself to him. "You were just an assistant then, but I understand you're the big noise now. Well, listen and then tell me not to bother you."

"I was just chasing a couple of jewel-thief brothers out on the Coast. One of them misjudged and fell off a train trying to get away. I wouldn't bother you with it, except that these lugs are pretty deadly—and pretty big-time. I took sixty thousand in ice off the dead one, as well as a Mauser pistol and a letter. The letter was in an envelope but he hadn't addressed it yet, so I don't know who it was to. I have it here and I'll read it to you."

"Dear Ab:

You had it right about this lip being formerly in Ivers City. He came here some years back. I have given the twist in his office a play, but she is tough going. All I can say is that he guards the stuff like it was diamonds, in his private safe, and that he has a reminder on his desk pad to send it on to Ivers City on the 21st. I'd like to try and get more on this for you, but unfortunately I have to powder out of here, on account of some heat that has cropped up. Hope this much makes sense anyway, to whatever you're cooking. Yours, Harry."

I tucked it away. "Does it make any sense? Do you want it or. . . ?"

"My God," he burst suddenly out of a long silence. "Of course! Of course! I get it now! How—yes, of course I want it! Can you—would you bring it down here? I can't tell you how much I'd appreciate. . . How long before you could get it here?"

"You're still in the old Criminal Courts Building on the Square? Well, half an hour. I'm driving and I'll have to park—"

"No, no—I'll be waiting on the steps for you. I—I'd like to talk to you. Maybe we can have dinner. . . ."

"All right. I'll be there in half an hour."

WHEN I came out, I was vaguely surprised to find the waiting-room completely deserted. I assumed this was Murtagh's idea of strategy, and fully expected him to pop up on my tail presently.

I really can't say that, as I pushed the old convertible downtown, I was very seriously interested in the cryptic note. It meant nothing to me. If Glisselin saw anything valuable in it that was fine with me, but it was not my worry. The only item in the whole affair that midged me was a vague, gnawing grudge against the tricky-eyed Murtagh and a solid mistrust of him.

Just to be on the safe side, I took the note from my pocket, opened my suitcase and shoved aside the Mauser that lay on top, to get at the false side-flap pocket. Then I decided that if I were going to hide the thing I might as well hide it thoroughly. I took out the note in its envelope and rolled it into a cylinder, made sure I was unobserved and flipped open the tube that housed the ignition wiring on my steering-shaft, popped it in and snapped it closed. I had conceived and constructed this hiding-place with my own hands and it had not been discovered by anyone in a year and a half.

Nor was it now.

I was in no great hurry so I tried to spot Murtagh and his sergeant taking my dust. I put on a real thorough act for them. I tried every trick of twisting and doubling—even of stopping and slipping into a doorway—but by the time I entered the downtown section I was feeling a little

foolish. Either they were too clever at the trailing dodge for me, or else they were not taking the interest in me that I had brashly assumed. I saw no sign of them. By the time I was at Tompkins Square, I gave up mucking about and drove straight over towards the Criminal Courts Building.

Here, Ivers City had not stinted itself. The building was of glistening white marble, ten stories high, as trim and sweet a structure as you'd care to see. It sat at the north end of the square—a sort of cement park covering an area of approximately six square blocks, with a few fountains and statues in its middle, and the heart of the city's financial district scattered around in tall office buildings on the other three sides.

The broad marble steps of the law building were fairly busy—even though most of its offices had closed at five. It seemed to me that this department of Ivers City life had always been extremely busy—and maybe a hundred people, all told, were passing up to or coming down from, the building. But I saw Glisselin immediately.

He was standing on the bottom step, a little narrow-faced ferret of a man, the very last rays of the setting sun glinting on his pomaded, thin black hair and on his thick spectacles as he peered this way and that. I skirted the fountain and sent the old convertible idling up to the curb in front of him, gave the horn a little touch.

He jerked his eyes down to me—and then came hurrying across the sidewalk and around to climb in the passengers' side. I leaned over and undid the catch, let the door swing open.

He put one foot on the running board. "This is awfully good of you. Maybe. . . ."

A gout of blood lobbed out of his eye-socket and slapped warmly on my hand on the seat before I heard the distant crack of the rifle. He fell down on his face moaning, his glasses flying to splinters.

Angry hornets hummed around my head. One slug plowed into the seat under me, burned my pants like a red-hot iron. My hair stood on end. I snatched the Mauser from the still-open bag, wrenched myself frantically backwards out my door and dived for the shelter of the rear tire of the convertible.

Instinct, I guess, jerked my astounded eyes in the right direction—far across the square, to the top floor of a nine or ten-story red brick office building. A window in the middle was open and I saw a lick of flame crack at me, even as I laid the Mauser across the rear slope of the convertible. Good eyes are a requisite in my business but I can't honestly say I saw more than that there were two figures in the distant window, one of them a woman with black hair against a red hat, the other a shadowy tall form. It seemed that light glinted from steel and glass in the things they held. Slugs whanged and hummed from the body of my car, following me. It was reasonable to suppose such accuracy was only possible with telescopic sights. I held the powerful, long-barrelled Mauser steady and pumped four slugs at the distant window.

Unfamiliar with the punch of the gun, I was aiming high. I kicked stone from the coping of the roof, then shattered the upper half of the opened window above them—and then poured the last two bullets into the space, I hoped, in which the killers stood. At any rate, they were suddenly no longer visible and no more flashes came from the window.

I ran around the car and dropped down beside Glisselin. He was dead.

The square was in bedlam, people screaming, running. A police siren whined alive. Bluecoats sprang out of the pavement, roaring, bearing down on me in a huge wave as I rose from one knee. A stupid red face roared into mine, "Drop it," as a fat cop flung himself on my gun arm and several others made flying tackles for me.

Somewhere, Lieutenant Murtagh had sprung up. I didn't see him but I heard him crackle orders. "Take him into headquarters—downstairs—hurry." And they rushed me through the crowd.

THEN I was in a bare-walled dim stone room, with the usual light in my eyes and figures yelling at me.

I let the questions fall and said unexcitedly: "I represent Acme Insurance. Acme represents one hundred and twenty million dollars. It's their policy to back their investigators to the limit. You guys want to play?"

I knew my wide-open motor cities. It tamed them down instantly.

Then the door flew open and Murtagh strode in. He did not hesitate a minute, but jumped for me and backhanded me furiously across the mouth. He had a heavy gold-onyx-and-diamond lodge ring on and it cut my lip.

"So! You——" he roared, "you were going to be out of town in an hour! Just a little personal matter between you and the district attorney. Start yapping or I'll take you to pieces. Who was your triggerman? What did you finger Glisselin for?" He had his tunic half off as he raged the questions at me.

"Uh—Lieutenant," a voice said out of the darkness.

Murtagh's head whipped round and he swallowed. "Oh—Inspector. Didn't see you there."

"Let's see what this man has to say for himself before we lose our tempers."

"Inspector, he's guilty as hell. Boyle and I saw him at the depot half an hour ago and he said he had something to settle with Mr. Glisselin—something personal—of no account. Said it'd take him under an hour—"

"I still say so, slob." There is something about a slap in the mouth that stings me silly. The instant before the big bruiser had appeared, I was ready to pass everything along. Now I had an unshakable determination to louse things up for him. I was suddenly mad all over again at what he had done to me before—four years back—as well as this. I thought up the first cock-and-bull story that came to hand. "Now I'll tell you all I know and then walk out of here. If anyone so much as lays a hand on me, Acme's last dollar says he'll get the grease. You can take it or leave it!"

"I was out on the Coast chasing a heister named Harry Conover. He fell off a train and conked himself. I got to him before he died. Besides the things I wanted out of him, he spilled something about a bond robbery here in Ivers City."

"What?" asked the inspector.

"Just that the haul—the loot—was in some trust company here. I suppose he meant a safe-deposit box. Anyway, I'd left my car over in Trenton when I took after this Conover, so I had to pick it up.

I thought I might as well have one of the boys from our Trenton office drive it over here, pass what I had along to Glisselin and be on my way.

"If you ask me, Glisselin's getting shot at this time was just happenstance—didn't arise out of this thing at all."

"I was watching from my office window," the inspector said. "I saw the whole thing. It looked to me as though they were shooting at *you*, not Glisselin."

"Well, I've been sleuthing for Acme for twelve years. I've made life difficult for various folks. That's all I can say. I don't know of any who are laying for me in Ivers City."

Murtagh, purple-faced, burst out: "I think this is a lot of crap!"

"Then arrest me for something," I snarled. "Never mind the material witness gag, because I'll be bailed out in an hour. Your judges at least have some respect for Acme." I stood up.

"Now, wait a minute," Murtagh rasped. "You ain't going nowhere—"

"How about it, Inspector?" I asked the darkness. "Do I go or is there a stink?"

"He'll powder out of town the minute he's out of here," Murtagh flung. "He—"

"Don't kid yourself," I said grimly. "I don't turn my back on gags like this. I'm sticking around till I find out who did pot at me—if it *was* me the bullets were for."

"You'll give me your word not to leave town without seeing us again?"

"I sure will."

"Well, Lieutenant, have you any more immediate questions to ask?"

"Plenty," Murtagh blurted, "but—"

The door behind him opened quickly again. A uniformed cop came in, looked hastily around and saluted the darkness.

The inspector asked: "Any trace of them?"

"None at all, sir. They got away clean. The building superintendent said that office wasn't even rented. They must have used a skeleton key to get in. We found a pair of field glasses on the floor. They're on your desk, sir."

I SUCKED a cigarette glumly in my room in the St. George hotel half an hour later. I watched through the window as the street lights bloomed on in the darkness, reflecting on what Preeker, my

sharp-nosed, penny-pinching little boss back in New York would say to my getting held up here on non-company business. He would be tearing his hair.

Well, let him. I was burned up, and, entirely apart from my stinging irritation with Murtagh, I wanted to clean this thing up. For one thing, I had worked up quite a touch of affection for the thin-faced, earnest little Glisselin. As far as I knew, he was one island of honesty in the sieve-like law-enforcement agencies of this town. I would like to put the arm on whoever killed him. And—the damned bug had got into me that maybe it *was* me for whom those slugs were set aside.

I had not dared look in my hiding-place in the convertible when I saw it in the police garage, where they had towed it, but I was confident the letter hadn't been discovered—or I'd have heard of it.

I conjured up its wording—and for the first time I became really alive to the date mentioned in the thing—the twenty-first. I looked over at the newspaper on my bureau. This was the twenty-third. It was over a week since I had chased Harry Conover off that train. Hell! Was it possible that the date referred to was *this* month—that I had stumbled into the very crux of whatever was going on?

I ran the letter hastily through my mind again. "—lip from Ivers City—came here years back—" Here, I presumed, meant Spokane, where I had flushed Harry. "—given the twist in his office a play—guards the stuff like diamonds—will send it to Ivers City on the 21st."

Was it actually possible that *this*—to prevent the possibility of my having achieved this information and being about to pass it on to the little prosecutor—was what had touched off the fireworks? Hell, if that was how it lay, it fairly shouted that I had stepped into a play that was big. Big and deadly. Without thinking it out, I could visualize the backtrail of the situation. Roy Conover knew that I downed his brother. Maybe he also knew of the letter in Harry's pocket, and was privy to the whole investigation Harry was making for this "Ab." If he had been disposed to phone Ab and acquaint him with that knowledge—and if Ab had taken the pains to inquire about my movements from the nearest Acme office—

Sharp, intense interest took the place of vagueness in my mind as the pieces began to fall into place. If something were shipped from Spokane on the 21st, it would be about due to arrive here now—any time. Or—perhaps it had already arrived. Was that what lay behind the feverish, almost mad, urgency to keep me away from Glisselin? Was the situation at the very culminating point?

I turned on the light, grabbed out the phone directory and turned to the F's. I ran down Froehlich, the lawyer who had handled my troubles last time I had been in Ivers City. He wasn't at his office, naturally, but I caught him at his home.

"Well, well," he said when he heard my voice. "I was wondering when I'd hear from you. What you mixed up in now? I just heard on the radio—"

"I'll write you a letter about it. Meanwhile, I've got to get the name of a lawyer, formerly of this town, who moved to Spokane some years ago."

"Hey?" And when I repeated impatiently, "Hell, man, I don't know. We got three hundred thousand people in Ivers City—one-third cops, one-third lawyers and one-third other kinds of crooks. How can I keep track. . . ?"

"I'm not expecting you to know. I'm expecting you to find out—in a hurry."

"Well, the Lawyers' Club might possibly know. Meet me at the Lawyers' Club in an hour—though I'm not guaranteeing they'll know anything."

IVERS CITY was like most motor towns—everybody in the place drove a car and the rest of the transportation system was difficult. The burg was built in sort of a wide spot in a valley between two modest mountains, the motor-parts factories that supported it at one end, the Nob's Hill or Gold Coast spreading out up the sides of the mountains at the other. The business section was almost mathematically in the middle, the workers' homes down near the factories, the white-collar folks sandwiched in physically as they were economically, between the two strata. Their modest houses also splayed up the gentle slope of the mountains on both sides.

My hotel was on the west side of town. The Lawyers' Club, they informed me in

the lobby, was directly across—practically straight through the square where Glisselin had been shot down—and a mile or so further. I made an attempt—from a phone in the bright little lobby—to retrieve my car from the hands of the police, but got exactly nowhere with that. The desk clerk recommended a U-Drive-It place two blocks away, booned me with a street map of the city and I left the hotel.

It was on a park-like little square and there were other hotels around the square, as well as the blazing marquees of the town's leading theaters. The section was swarming with samplers of Ivers City's night life and all very gay as I took a quick look around, more than half expecting to find Murtagh or his equivalent lurking somewhere nearby.

If he was, I couldn't spot him in the crowd.

I had covered almost the whole of the two blocks, was less than twenty yards from the corner, when a leaping Lena of a taxi—I didn't see this, it was just behind me, but I gathered it presently—tried to cut out and pass the car ahead, just as a sedan coming in the other lane of traffic had the same idea. The road would not support all this, being a narrow ribbon around the park. The taxi driver was caught out on a limb and made a wild stab to cut back in between two cars on the inner lane—two cars that were only six feet apart.

All I heard was the wild stab of the taxi's horn, then the teeth-chilling scream of rubber—and then the slamming crash of metal, ten yards behind me.

As fast as I turned to see what had happened, it seemed a crowd was already half-formed, rushing to get an eye-full. I stepped to the curb, turtled my neck to see the taxi-driver stumble out, sway back against his accordion-pleated jalopy with one hand to his head. Then others crowded in front of me and my tiptoe-standing didn't avail.

Then I settled on my heels—and the little hard thing was tight against my back for just an instant. A husky, tense voice took the joy out of life by grinding in my ear: "Walk to the next corner and turn right and I'll give you a chance to live. Hands out from your body."

The gun went away from my back be-

iore I could even contemplate a quick snatch. The whole thing was neatly enough done so that I didn't know which of the men behind me was the gunman. There wasn't much to do but turn and filter slowly through the mob obediently.

He said, "Turn here," when we got to the corner and we rounded into an almost deserted, slummy-looking narrow side street. Wide-spaced bluish street lamps guttered. Under the second one, midway on the block, a black Victoria coupe stood parked, its California license plate too mud-caked to read.

"Walk slowly down and put both hands on the handle of that car's door," the voice behind me said tightly. I complied with the order and stood sideways and got a good look at my captor.

"Well, well," I said. "Ab Hartmann."

I SUPPOSE that when I had first heard the name "Ab" I might have thought of this one. But the last time I had heard of him, years before, he had been holding forth with a one-man private agency in Brentwood. He specialized in the kind of work that was drained off the bottom of the other agencies around who handled troubles for the nearby movie studios. Since nine-tenths of *those* agencies were creeps you wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole, Ab Hartmann was something not mentioned among polite people. He was a tall, well set-up man of forty-five and looking younger, with a gaunt, deaconish face and manner and little hollow-set eyes.

He stood a few feet from me, a hard hat on his long head, one hand in his jacket pocket. He wore the same clothes as when I had seen him seven years ago—black suit, a gates-ajar collar with a somber gray-and-black tie, starched cuffs protruding from his sleeves, black gloves on his hands. "Open it slowly," he croaked.

I couldn't quite understand his tautness. To ascribe it to fear of me was flattering—but it didn't seem quite right. I groped hastily for the answer as I opened the door.

"Reach slowly in and put your hands on the wheel. Then climb in. You'll drive."

Not till I was sitting meekly under the wheel, did he slide in behind me. The car was a Victoria—two bucket seats in front, with a little foreshortened space and a nar-

row seat across the back of the car. He half-kneeled, half sat on the rear seat and the blued steel gun was out of his pocket now, glittering in his gloved hand.

"Get going," he said, and when I had toed the motor into life, "Turn north at the first corner. And forget the tricks. This gun is cocked. You're got a chance to live if you play cozy."

I eased the car away from the curb, trundled it toward the corner. A stop-light halted us. I looked in the rear-view mirror—and saw a Packard coupe creep round the corner behind us.

I swore dispiritedly at myself. It seemed that I must be slipping. Everybody was tailing me and I seemed unable to spot anyone. Not that Murtagh—I was almost sure that was he who was behind us—didn't look like a life-saver here. If I could use Murtagh's presence. . . .

Behind me, Hartmann cursed sharply under his breath and said, "Murtagh." Then to me, "Step on it, chum—shake that Packard, fast. I wouldn't hesitate to drop you both so don't get ideas. *Step on it!*"

I sent the car roaring up the boulevard like a scared rabbit. It had four times the power I'd expected. I could see the Packard coast round behind us—a good block and a half behind.

"Turn," Ab snapped as we neared the third corner.

I took a chance, gave the wheel a vicious, right-angled twist and we squealed round. I was half up from the seat, alert for the chance to grab him if he was thrown off balance—but he wasn't.

"Go on—move!" he choked, and I goosed the accelerator. And then he fell.

Without the slightest sound of violence, he simply jack-knifed over the seat. There was no shot. I didn't jerk the car. Nothing happened. He simply piled over the seat, the gun dropped from his hand, his face came down and was squeezed sideways on the seat beside me. He made a queer hiccough—and blood poured from his open mouth. Then, startled, I did touch the brake—and the rest of him flopped over, his feet flying up at the wind shield, his tall body windmilling in the confines of the car. He slammed down, half on my lap, half in the bottom of the car—and my hair was on end. Behind me, Murtagh cut loose with his siren.

HOW I got away from him, God knows. I didn't know the city. But the Providence that watches over fools and drunks took me in hand. At least, fifteen wild minutes later when I flung to a halt beside a block of apartment houses a square from Sequoia—the town's main drag—I thought I'd lost Murtagh. I wasn't sure, because after that first whine, the siren had not sounded again.

I yanked open my door, flung out, then ran around and opened the other one. I was on fire—but I couldn't resist the temptation to find out what had happened to Hartmann.

He lay in a cramped, crumpled heap and there was blood everywhere. I yanked and tugged him over onto his back. He had no pulse. His little dark eyes were wide open, glittering like a snake's in the glow of the dashlight. I saw no wound anywhere on him—and then I saw the bulge under his vest! I put a quick hand on it—and then hastily ripped the vest open and the shirt beneath. He had no undershirt. A wad of bandage, plastered on with adhesive was soaked in blood and as I move it aside, the dark, jagged lips of a bullet-hole showed gruesomely under his ribs.

Even then it was a second before it dawned on me that this was my own work. That some of my Mauser lead must have miraculously found him in the eight-story building a few hours ago when he rifled Glisselin to death—and that he must have underestimated the seriousness of the wound. The bullet must be still inside him somewhere.

I wiped sweat from my face, turned to get away—and my eyes jerked back.

One of his starched cuffs was fully out of his sleeve now and the green glow of the dash showed up faint pencil markings on it. I hastily bent closer, and read: *Jefferson 4673*.

It was an instant before I realized that it was a telephone number—but no instant at all thereafter before I snatched at the cuff, ripped it from his shirt and stuffed it in my pocket. I turned and scuttled for the tree-shaded corner ahead, afraid to run—and almost afraid to breathe, till I reached the lights of Sequoia Street and was lucky enough to find a parked taxicab.

I rode almost back to my own hotel,

before I found a side street dark enough to tell the hacker to pull into. I was taking as little chance as possible of his seeing and remembering my face. I threw him a bill, piled out and walked quickly away from him, until I heard him clank away from the curb. Then I turned back and as he disappeared around the corner I went as near at a run as I dared, back to a lighted drug store on the corner.

I sweated in a booth, debated, hesitated—and finally called the number on the shirt-cuff.

After long ringing, a girl's hesitant, faint voice answered.

"This is Ab," I said huskily. "I'm all in."

There was silence, then the voice stammered hesitantly. "What—what did you say? What number did you want?"

"You know what number I want. This is Ab—that slug's getting to me. You got to come and get me."

The voice said bewilderedly: "I—I think you must have the wrong number. I—I really don't know any Mr. Ab."

There was so damn much sincerity in it that there was nothing to do but hang up. Yet—what in God's name was the number doing on Ab Hartmann's cuff? It couldn't possibly be innocent. I sweated, fretted.

Then my eye fell on the clock—and I slid quickly out of the booth, looked up the number of the Lawyers' Club, slid back in and called it.

"Hullo," Froehlich's weary voice said. "Well, no one around here knows any local lawyer that went to—"

"All right. This is more urgent. Can you get me the address that goes with this phone number?" I read it off to him.

He groaned. "That's one thing that's hard to get in this town. I'll get Red Harvey—he's a newspaper friend of mine. He can probably dig it out. Where are you?"

"I'm no place. I'll call you back there in twenty minutes. All right?"

"Make it half an hour. I—you see, we don't have that who-called-me-up-service in Ivers City and the only way—"

"All right, all right."

But he didn't have it in half an hour and when I called fifteen minutes after that, I got the real kick in the teeth.

He got the number all right. "It's a

Miss Joan Quartermaine, 168 Isabella Street, but listen—what in God's name are you doing? Did you kill that guy in your room?"

"In my room? What the hell are you talking—?"

"They just found the body of some private detective named Hartmann, in your hotel room. You're wanted for questioning. Red heard it on his police radio just now."

I said: "You stay right where you are. Keep that reporter there too. Some so-and-so is going to lose his badge—or you can write *me* off. It's a frame."

"Who? By the cops?"

"By a cop—Lieutenant Murtagh. Stay there."

I slammed down the receiver and my forehead was burning as I strode out. I had seen some frames in my time, but nothing quite so casual and callous as this one.

Murtagh must have found the corpse in the car almost within minutes of my leaving it and coolly lugged it downtown. Certainly, he must have friends in the hotel staff—or even have the run of the back end of the hotel. Getting the corpse upstairs and into my room would be child's play for him. But—certainly he wasn't going to do this and just let it lie. There could be no possible doubt that he had grimly set out to do for me—or else get me in such a squeeze that he could give me any order he chose. I thought of it that way, automatically. A criminal in that rat's hands did not automatically go to jail—not if he could pay off thickly enough. And that all but silent pursuit of me through the city read plainly that Murtagh had private plans.

I glanced down, tight-jawed, at the scribbled slip of paper in my hand—the address Froehlich had just given me. I tried not to think of the fact, as I rode north in another cab, that this represented the last chance I had. The whole wild situation had bloomed up so fast that I was left hanging by my teeth out of a clear sky, you might say. If this solitary lead turned out to be a frost. . . .

I disposed of my cab still on Sequoia. The street map in my pocket had shown me that Isabella was two blocks west, and parallel. I walked swiftly over, and into a

section of trim, modest little bungalows, each in a generous little square of lawn, and, in most cases, separated from the sidewalk by a picket fence.

Two minutes from the corner brought me exactly opposite number 168—the residence, presumably of Miss Joan Quartermaine. There was orange light in all the windows, as there was in a good proportion of the lighted houses along the block. There were one or two trees in the side yard.

I started across—and faint footsteps turning in from the corner sent me back to hiding in the shadow of a tree. Light, quick footsteps came down the street—and turned in through the gate of 168.

I noticed that it was a white-haired old lady, of course, but not till she had mounted the bungalow's two flanged, wide cement steps and touched the bell, then turned a little so the square of light from the door fell on her head and the shawl around her shoulders, did I realize it was the old lady I had seen that afternoon in the station.

I don't know why it gave me a monstrously queer feeling, but it did.

And then the door opened and a thin, mouse-like girl of twenty or so appeared hesitantly. The old lady spoke something to her, bobbing her head, and her spectacles flashed. She made that same maddeningly familiar little graceful and yet helpless gesture of her hand and wrist—and then the two of them vanished inside.

DON'T ask me why, when I was halfway up the wide cement terrace, I suddenly checked myself, took a quick look behind me, and eased into the shadows at the side of the house. I guess it was the queer, unaccountable memory-stirring that the old lady touched off in me. Or maybe, as some say, I'm just a born snooper.

Anyway, I trod softly around to the side of the house—and voices came out a partly opened window promptly.

The old lady was saying: ". . . great opportunity for you, my dear. Mustn't neglect it, whatever you do. I'll be only *too* glad to lend you any money you need."

"But—but—" the girl's faint voice said bewilderedly, "I—he hasn't heard me play

the piano or—or anything. I—really I'm not good enough for such a teacher."

"Well, we'll let him decide that, shall we? All that matters is that he wants you to come to Detroit so he can hear you. If he thinks you're not ready—why, you've had a little trip at his expense and that's all there is to it. But on the other hand, you *might* be better than you think, and to have a great teacher like Stanowski take your career in hand—my, what an opportunity."

"But I don't understand it! I don't know how he could have heard of me—"

"Some friend of his, no doubt, heard you practicing in the evenings, just as I have, many times. Now come, my dear—you must get packed and not miss that midnight train. Remember, he insists on seeing you at ten in the morning. Have you everything you need?"

"No," the girl said miserably. "I've never been on a trip before. I—I have no luggage—nothing."

By then I was cautiously straightening outside the window, letting my head and eyes come above the level of the sill. I saw the pink-cheeked old lady, beaming and nodding at the side of the room. "That is no problem, my dear—none at all. I shall be only too glad to lend you some bags. I have some very nice ones. . . ."

I had to shift sideways a little to see the frightened, thin girl wringing her hands at the side of the room. She wasn't un-pretty, at that. She had neat, delicate, rounded little features and nice brown eyes. But she was drab, colorless and her brown hair was frizzed, as though by bad care. And she was a little thin. She had the makings of a typical old maid.

The old lady shook a finger at her. "Now—you get what things you need all laid out, and I'll go and have those bags fetched right over. And I'll ask a friend of mine to come and drive you to the train, too."

"No," the girl cried desperately. "I—I'm afraid. I've—I've never been on a train. I don't want to go—"

The old lady's kindly, wrinkled face mirrored astonishment—and again she made the little lax-wristed gesture of helplessness. "My dear child. . . ."

I didn't catch the rest of what she was saying, because I was suddenly astounded

with realization—at last—of where I had seen the old lady before.

Maybe I shouldn't have been astounded, but somehow it always seems sensational to me to see moving-picture actors or actresses in the flesh. I guess I've still a good deal of yokel in me. I must have, for that matter, or I wouldn't sneak off to double-feature movies when the occasion presents—such movies as the *Murray Family* series.

Perhaps you do too. Perhaps you sit through them with the same silly delight that I do—and get vast entertainment out of their homely, everyday doings—old man Murray, with his grocery store, Tommy, the fifteen-year-old, and Mary, just growing up behind him, and tired old Mrs. Murray. And Grandma Murray—the sweet, lovable old autocrat who slyly rules them all, and who gets her way in spite of hell or high water. How many times had I seen that look of helplessness come over her wrinkled old face when they opposed her—and that gentle, helpless lax-wristed gesture which breaks them all down. I get a tremendous belt out of it—always.

It doesn't seem to matter that I know that Sheila Byron, who plays the grandmother, has been in more—or worse—trouble in every studio in Hollywood and only gets to play in these 'B' productions because she is married to Abe Berg, the producer, whose 'A' pictures are Metri-versal's bread-and-butter. Nor that I happen to know what it is she holds over Abe Berg that makes him continue to live in the same house with her and keep her working.

There was a second when I scoffed at myself, when I tried to assure myself that Sheila Byron wouldn't be here—out in the middle of Michigan, miles from Hollywood—that this old lady was probably one of millions resembling the screen grandmother who promptly adopt and imitate the mannerisms of the actress. . . .

Then I thought of Ab Hartmann—and the doubt collapsed. This was Sheila Byron all right.

I CAME out of my daze, just as she hurried from the room, the girl trailing her hastily and saying in a distressed voice: "No—please, Mrs. Mustard. Wait—"

"I won't hear of it," the old lady said.

"I'll be back within the hour—with all arrangements made. I won't let you be a foolish child."

The door opened and closed, and I heard her pattering footsteps go down the cement steps. Then the gate clanked, and I could see her trudging away down the dark street.

I don't know how long I stood there—measured in seconds, of course—before I blew the haze out of my brain and went round and up to the front door.

I hesitated again on the front steps, trying wildly to grope out some connection here. I couldn't, so I rang.

"Miss Quartermaine," I said hastily when she opened, "I'm a friend of your father."

One look at the place was enough to tell an experienced sleuth that she lived alone, or, at most, with another girl.

She gasped—and her brown eyes seemed to come alight. "Oh." She backed away, holding the door wide. "Were you? Won't you come in?"

I won't say that I didn't have luck in pumping her fast—but neither will I say I didn't put everything I had into it, too. The "were" of course, was the tipoff. I edged in, taking off my hat.

"I've been wondering, so often, how you were getting on," I groped. "I remember how fond he was of you. Let's see, it's quite a few years now since I saw him."

Her throat bobbed and her eyes darkened a little. "He—he's been dead five years," she said.

"And your mother?"

Well, you could hardly blame me for taking the obvious opening, could you?

Her eyes suddenly changed. I'd say they got green, if such a thing were possible. Her pale, soft lips got firm and tight. She said stiffly: "If you don't mind, I'd rather not talk about my mother."

"But—I know it must distress you," I said quickly, "but that's one special reason why I've come to see you. A certain bit of information has reached me—" My eye, going through the open door at the back of the hall, saw a kitchen. In the kitchen, a table. On the table, a white cake with a quarter gone and on the cake, a lot of little red candles. "Now, let's see—this is your birthday, isn't it? Or—"

"Yesterday," she said puzzledly. "Why?"

"And you're—twenty-one?" I guessed.

It was just that—a guess! I didn't put any significance to it, till she answered: "That's right. I'm all grown up."

It was still obscure. I pounded away. "Now—about your mother. Please—just for two or three minutes—let's talk about her. Your—your father would have wanted you to, believe me."

Cheap stuff, sure. But don't forget there was a corpse lying in my hotel room, and that the police were combing the town for me—with a good solid chance of a murder rap staring me in the face.

HER lips came together, trembled. Her eyes seemed to retreat, as *she* half did, toward the living-room. "I—I can't think he would," she said huskily. "He—since the first time the neighbors told me she'd deserted me when I was a year old—he forbade me to talk about her. To him or anyone."

I bowed my head. "Yes, yes. I can understand that," I said. "It—it was most unfortunate. When—may I ask—did you hear from her last?"

Her eyes shone. "I've *never* heard from her. I don't want to hear from her. She broke his heart. Running away with a card-sharp. No, I don't know if she's alive or dead, and I don't care. Nothing about her could possibly interest me."

A dozen more questions were trembling on my lips—but suddenly a little shaft of light lanced into my brain—and I knew I musn't be found here.

I suddenly looked at my watch. "Well—you've told me what I wanted to hear. I know I'm a little mysterious, but—well, in about a week you'll hear from me, and I think you'll be pleased. Now, I have just one favor to ask you—for your father's sake."

Her eyes were muddy with uncomprehension. "But—but you've just come—"

"Yes, I know. And when I come back we'll have a real visit. But believe me, it's important that I get this information to a certain party at once. And now this favor: Will you please not mention to anyone—not to a living soul—that I've been here? Yes, I'm sure you will. And good-bye. Remember, it must be a secret!" I shook

her limp hand, left her standing there open-mouthed, opened the door and let myself out, closed it and hurried down the steps. Nobody was in sight on the dark little avenue, as I hastened back to Sequoia and a drug-store phone.

I hastily called Froehlich at the Lawyers' Club, held my breath till I got him and asked: "Is that newspaper guy with you? Is he straight—can I trust him?"

"Eh? Yes—why, yes. Look here, old man—" he said anxiously.

"Put him on," I snapped, and when I had him: "Listen, Red—I don't know you and you don't know me. But I have lots of newspaper pals. I'll give you the biggest story of the year, if you'll play with me the way I say."

"Proceed."

"Can you get to Lieutenant Murtagh—slip him a tip?"

"I certainly can."

"Well, make your own mind up about whether to show your own hand—but he has to get this tip in the next ten minutes: Sheila Byron, the Hollywood movie actress, knows the truth about that shooting this afternoon. Get that?"

"Hey—wait a minute! How could that old lady—oh, I get it! It's a phoney."

"It isn't any part of a phoney. She's at that address you got for me just now—that Joan Quartermaine. And for some reason, she's trying to get the Quartermaine girl out of the city in a hurry. Put it to Murtagh this way: that if he threatens to investigate some music-teacher offer that the Quartermaine girl got, he can probably get his hands into Sheila Byron's money. You know what I mean."

"Yeah, sure," he drawled. "Listen—do you smoke opium or—"

"Don't make any mistake about it," I assured him grimly. "This is real—and it's all true. Get that tip to him, then join me here at this store yourself, as fast as you like. I'll let you in at the finish."

I hung up, before he could refuse.

HE joined me in the store in twenty minutes, a big, amiable red-headed slob, with green eyes that were those of nobody's fool.

"Well," he sighed. "I've certainly heard some goofy tales but I never stuck my neck out on one like this before."

"Reserve your opinion," I told him. "Come along with me."

We got back outside the living-room window three minutes later.

I took one look—and heard a few words from inside. Then I put my mouth close to his ear and said: "Take a look. There she is."

He caught his breath.

And in that minute, the soft purring of a car turned into the street we were on—and stopped.

Our heads jerked round and neither of us breathed. Inside the house, the voices of the two women had faded to a murmur as they moved about inside a bedroom across the hall.

"Will Murtagh swallow the tip?" I felt safe in whispering. "Did you get it to him in such a way—"

"Listen," he shot back.

We could just vaguely make it out—the oncoming, rubber-soled tread of a man walking with the minimum of noise.

Then Lieutenant Murtagh came abreast and stopped—squinting up at the house beside which he crouched. He put a thumb up, shoved his fedora hat—he was in plainclothes now—back on his sandy, head, put his hands in his pockets.

Then he eased open the gate and came softly up the walk. I didn't know exactly what was going to happen. Maybe I would have acted the same way if I had—but I doubt it. All I was sure of was that if Murtagh tangled in this dynamite, he was going to get trouble. No matter what anyone says, I didn't expect things to work out quite as they did. I'm not that cold-blooded.

He must have waited at the door, peering in or something, for two or three minutes before we heard the ring of the bell. Then the girl came out of the bedroom—and the old lady behind her. But—the old lady let her guard down for just a second, when the girl's back was turned—and fierce, quick concern showed in her blue eyes. She had a reticule in her hand.

Then the girl was backing into our line of vision again, and the big, jovial face of Murtagh was beaming down at her. "Just a little friendly visit," he said. "I understand—"

And then he saw Sheila Byron in the bedroom door.

Whatever the red-headed newshawk had told him, he had had doubts up until this minute obviously, because he, too, gasped on seeing her. "Well, well," he said. "How do you do?"

"This—this is Mrs. Mustard," the girl hastily explained.

"And I—I am Lieutenant Murtagh—from headquarters," he told them expansively.

I could not see the slightest variation from kindly, beaming approval in Sheila Byron's face or attitude—except that maybe she got a little more rigid.

"I understand that Miss—uh—Quartermaine—has received a peculiar offer about some music teacher," he said. "I would like to talk that over a bit." His eyes were turned away from the girl, directly on Sheila Byron. "I understand that you know something about it?"

"Why—why, yes, officer. That is—I know it's a wonderful opportunity—simply wonderful," she bobbed and beamed. "Suppose, while the child finishes her packing, I tell you all about it. There—the telegram is there. Simply because she doesn't understand why she should receive it out of a blue sky, she is hesitant about going. Surely now, with an important police officer to assure her it's perfectly all right—"

And that was the end.

I suppose it would have worked out the same eventually, even if we had waited there all night, drawn it out for hours. But Fate or something got impatient—and sent the uniformed postman turning in through the gate at that moment.

He was out of his truck and out of our line of sight so fast that, even if I could have thought of anything to do, I wouldn't have been able to do it.

His double ring came a moment later.

I think that Murtagh recognized it as a postman's ring—and certainly Sheila Byron did. Her eyes were wide, white-ringed. Only Joan Quartermaine looked distressed and puzzled.

"Oh, dear," she said faintly. "I wonder—" She started for the door.

Sheila Byron made a surprisingly quick movement and got in front of her. "No, my child, I'll see who it is."

"I'll get it," Murtagh said and put his back in front of Sheila Byron.

He opened the door and I heard the postman's cheery: "Registered special delivery—Miss Joan Quartermaine. Oh, hello, Lieutenant."

"I'll take it, Charley," Murtagh said.

"Well, uh—it's personal delivery, too," the postman said hesitantly.

"Sure—so I'll just sign her name, per me. That'll be all right," Murtagh assured him loftily.

The postman said hesitantly, "Well, good-night," and the door closed.

MURTAGH stepped back into our line of sight, holding aloft a much-stamped and ink-decorated long manila envelope. "Well, well," he said "What have we here?"

Joan Quartermaine stepped forward hesitantly, a hand outstretched.

Sheila Byron pulled a short black automatic pistol from her reticule and shot Murtagh in the stomach.

He cried out and the letter fluttered from his hand as he doubled over, his face twisted in agony. Joan Quartermaine screamed, tried to run and crashed into the door jamb.

Sheila Byron ripped off her white wig and her black hair cascaded about her shoulders as she deliberately tried to get a bead on Murtagh's head as he crashed rolling to the floor.

I swear I had no possible expectation of *that*. I had my gun out myself—not the Mauser, but my own—and I laid it across the windowsill.

Before Murtagh stopped rolling, I pumped two slugs at Sheila Byron's wrist and the gun flew up out of her hand. She slammed back against the wall, flung a wild, frantic face towards me, nursing her blood-spurting wrist.

I said: "All right, Sheila—the game's all over and you *don't* win. Miss Quartermaine—get to the phone and—" but she was down on her knees, having a fit of hysterics, so the redhead and I had to pile in and do all the phoning.

He was stunned—the newshawk I mean. He kept saying. "Oh, God, oh God! What a yarn!"

I had the letter ripped open, ignoring the handcuffed Sheila and the sobbing Joan Quartermaine on the floor—as well as the now still Murtagh.

"Look at this for your topper," I said. I read it aloud.

"My dear daughter:

As you know, I have always forbidden you to talk about your mother. But now you are twenty-one years old and the emotionalism of childhood is behind you. You should be able to take a clear view of things and I think you are entitled to know exactly what the truth is. This letter will be forwarded you by my lawyer, Harry Falk, on your birthday, whether I am alive or not, and you must make up your mind what to do.

Your mother, as you know, preferred a professional gambler to me, and eloped with him—if eloped is the word. That would have been bad enough, God knows, abandoning you at the infant age, but there were worse things about it. If you will examine the police files for the day on which she left me, you will find that a boy was killed by a hit-and-run motorist. You will also find that a Marmon sedan was stolen on that day and abandoned some miles out of town. On the Marmon were evidences that it was the car involved in the hit-and-run incident, and—on the steering wheel were a woman's fingerprints. Those fingerprints, I have ascertained, are your mother's.

Now—I have taken great pains—much greater than your mother realizes—to follow her career since then. She has managed, by one liaison after another, to reach Hollywood and has been employed in motion pictures, under the name of Sheila Byron. If, after perusing this letter, you feel that anything should be done about this

knowledge that I have concealed all these years for your sake—then you have the weapon to act.

Believe me, always your

Loving Father."

"Oh, God," the red-headed newshawk fairly sobbed. "She found out that this thing was lying in wait for her, hired Hartmann and came here to intercept it. Then Joan Quartermaine got that wire to pull her away. And they were desperate—with not only Sheila's life, but all that money of her husband's that she had to work on, at stake. They were willing to do anything—were afraid the D. A. would start nosing. I remember Harry Falk—he was a close friend of Glisselin—they figured you might turn it up that way."

"Not only that, but Sheila here was waiting for me at the station when I got off the train. The funny part is that Murtagh and Boyle came along and she figured she couldn't cope with all three of us—hence that hastily prepared rifle setup. Well, maybe Murtagh saved my life at that, so I'm willing to hope he doesn't die."

He didn't. But he was in the hospital for several months. Fortunately, we didn't need his testimony at Sheila Byron's trial and she got a life sentence without it. But I still insist I never thought she'd shoot him.



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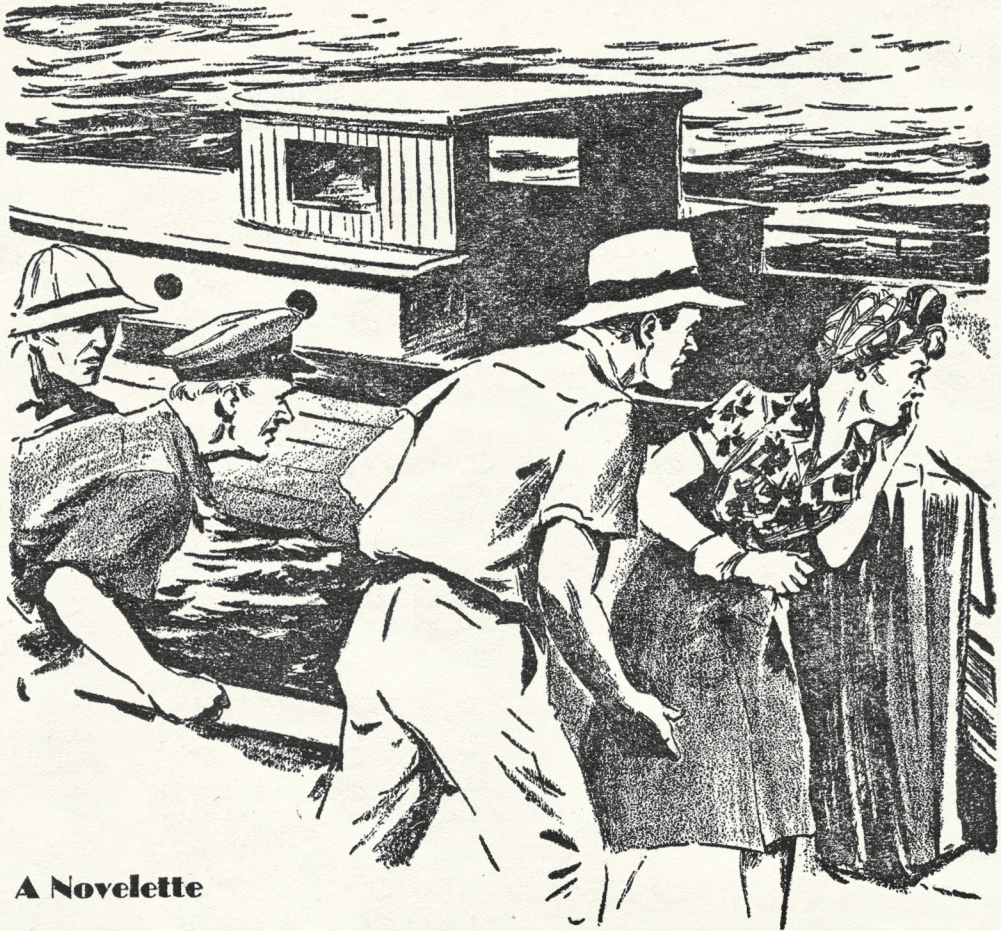
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SALT WATER



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"Hold that revolver up,
Slim!" Sisco called.

CHAPTER ONE

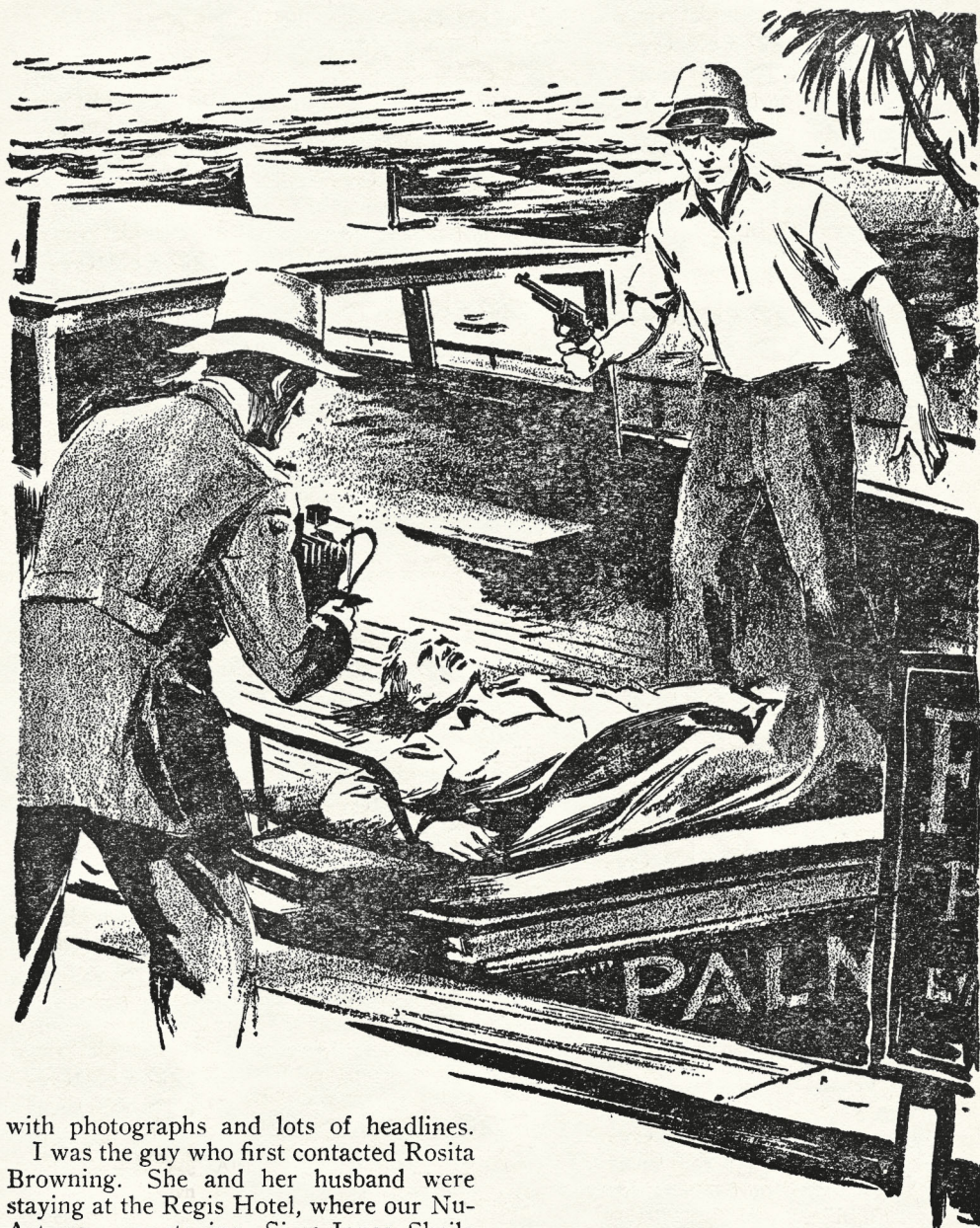
Murder Goes Fishing

Half-pint Sisco Jones sets out with sun and camera to photograph a Florida fishing catch, only to find a fishy catch indeed—a lone dead man in a boat where two live ones had started out. Trust the little camera-fiend to risk his own scrawny neck catching another corpse in a photo-finish—and harpoon the homicide-fisherman singlehanded.

SURE, I know this Sisco Jones—horn-rim glasses, scrawny neck and awkward-looking hands. Working for Nu-Art Studios, Sisco handling the portrait camera, we live together, you might say, all over the country. And don't get Sisco wrong like some strangers do. Try shoving that meek, scrawny little guy around and things start happening.

I was there in Ft. Bemis, Florida, when the Chamber of Commerce tried shoving Sisco around on the Browning murder case. And Sisco put it back in their eyes

SLAY-RIDE



with photographs and lots of headlines.

I was the guy who first contacted Rosita Browning. She and her husband were staying at the Regis Hotel, where our Nu-Art crew was staying. Sisco Jones, Sheila Mason and I, Art Stanfield and Sid Newman and his wife were the crew. We had an extra room for reception and the adjoining room for our temporary photography studio.

Sisco made the photographs and Sheila wrestled with appointments and helped Sisco with fond mothers, kids and local

glamor girls that the rest of us contacted around town.

I was in from a hot afternoon knocking doors and selling photographs. And the Browning woman turned from the desk and caught me as I crossed the lobby.

"The desk clerk tells me," she says, "you represent a good photographer."

"You can't do better at any price," I said, taking note that she was a slender brunette, in her middle twenties, and easy on the eyes. You know, dark, striking, and full of that slow burn you can guess even if you never find it.

"Our prices are low," I said, giving her the spiel. "We're glad to have our work compared with studios in the larger cities who charge three times the price. Our service for small towns like this is more for advertising than—"

She took it away from me. "Your prices won't matter. Is your photographer good with fish?"

"He's good with anything," I boasted. "Uh—did you say 'fish'?"

She explained with an edge of impatience. "My husband and a friend are out fishing. I think it would be nice to have them photographed with their catch."

"Any kind of picture anywhere," I agreed. "There'll be a dollar deposit and the rest will be due when the proofs are O.K.'d."

She gave me the dollar and said her name was Mrs. Browning, and she would be at the wharf waiting for her husband and his friend. If she wasn't there when the photographer arrived, Captain Snell, at the wharf, would give directions.

The dollar was mine. I was whistling under my breath as I entered the reception room where Sheila Mason sat behind a small table. And if the Browning woman was an eyeful, Sheila Mason was good for both eyes and a heart flutter.

Sheila was blond and slender, with a freckle or two and features and legs that were a lensful for any camera or any males who cared to look. The local males usually looked and got nowhere.

"Sisco busy?" I asked. "I've got him a rush appointment outside."

"Sisco's fit to be tied," Sheila said with amusement. "Listen."

The door into the next room was slightly ajar. We could see Sisco speaking with strained patience.

"Watch the little birdie sing, Roscoe." And the little metal birdie went *treep-treep* as I stepped to the door and looked in.

Roscoe, age about nine, was posed on the velvet covered bench eyeing Sisco and the camera sullenly.

"That ain't funny," Roscoe said scornfully.

Roscoe's fat, perspiring mother snapped: "Don't say 'ain't'! And smile for the man. A dollar I paid on these pictures and you're trying to waste it! Smile at the camera, sugar, or I'll take the strap to you when we get home!"

Sisco put the little metal bird back in his bulging coat pocket. He must already have tried the Jew's harp, the yellow silk handkerchief, the trick half-dollar and the paper snake that unrolled with a shrill whistle when Sisco blew into the end.

Sisco mopped his forehead. I could see he was suppressing violent thoughts about Roscoe and the job with Nu-Art.

Traveling with a portrait crew had seemed a good idea in New York. Get away from the camera grind on a big city daily. No more silk-sheathed gams and mugging celebrities. No more living on a hair-trigger with flashgun and press pass to catch the latest in violence and murder, love-theft and doublecross, sorrow, vanity and exhibitionism.

No sir! T'ell with it all for Sisco Jones. Back to the people. Back to the soil where all good things start. Plenty of traveling. South in the late fall and winter, under that good old summer sun. Plenty of time for outside camera practice in new locales. Just the thing to sharpen the serious side of a man's technique. All expenses paid and the life of Riley!

I knew why Sisco drew a long slow breath in there beside the portrait camera, why he stared queerly through the horn-rimmed glasses at Roscoe. This little Florida west-coast town was hot today. I mean hot. The shabby hotel was stuffy with heat. Appointments had been coming in all day. Roscoe was not the first scrubbed and prettied youngster who had rebelled against smirking at the camera.

BUT that scrawny owlish-looking little Sisco Jones had a strange reverence and respect for his work with a camera. He'd do anything to get his picture and get it right. I guess that was why he was aces in New York, why they thought he was a fool for taking a whirl around the country as a tramp photographer.

Now Sisco spoke quietly to the fat, irritable mother.

"If you'll step in the next room for a few minutes, Mrs. Bromski, I'll get this picture."

"Why should I do that?" she demanded belligerently.

She would have made two of Sisco. And a comic could make cracks about Sisco's scrawny neck, big ears and owlish look through the horn-rimmed glasses. But sometimes Sisco suddenly looked hardboiled and hands off. Like now.

"Just wait in the next room," Sisco said without lifting his voice. "And tell the young lady to bring in Exhibit A."

Sheila groaned. "I was afraid of this. Am I going to be a sucker again?"

Roscoe's mother lumbered heavily in with us, dabbing a handkerchief at perspiration on the dark hairs of her upper lip, and complaining.

"This is the last order I'll give you people. As if I'm not the one to be with my own son when he's having his picture took. That man wants something called Exhibit A."

Sheila was gathering up an armload of magazines.

"Do be comfortable, Mrs. Bromski. I'm sure Roscoe will be through in a minute."

In the next room Roscoe sullenly asked: "What's Exhibit A?"

Sisco had lighted a cigarette and was toying with the camera bulbs. His voice was patient.

"You'd be surprised. Sit there and take it easy for a minute."

Sheila stepped through the doorway with her armload of magazines, caught her heel on the edge of the worn rug and sat down heavily, scattering the magazines over the floor.

"Ouch!" Sheila exclaimed.

Roscoe straightened in surprise—then snickered and laughed out loud!

And Sisco pressed the camera bulb.

"O. K.," Sisco said. "That got it. Come around and see us again."

Roscoe came sidling out and his mother grabbed his hand and challenged through the doorway: "Did you get his picture smiling?"

"He was laughing," Sisco assured her solemnly. "And so was I. You'll like the pose. Thanks for coming in."

Roscoe was dragged out. Sisco inhaled from the cigarette and comforted Sheila.

"It's good for the hips, Toots. You bounced on that one."

Sheila indicated the scattered magazines.

"I drop them and you pick them up, smart guy. And that's the last pratt-fall I do for dear old Nu-Art. I don't know why I fell for your gag in the first place."

"It's the artist in you, Toots," Sisco said. "We always get our man. Didn't Roscoe break down and mug?"

"You didn't hear it, but I broke down too," Sheila snapped. "I've flopped for you in every tank down south of Richmond—and enough is enough. I'm not a rubber doll. If there's a splinter or a nail around I land on it. And I can't be vulcanized. The next little dear who won't come through is your grief, sonny."

Sisco grinned as he started to pick up the magazines. "A bustle of goose feathers or crepe rubber would help. You'd really bounce. Was Roscoe the last one?"

"For me but not for you," Sheila said with satisfaction. "Johnny just brought in an outside appointment. Where is it, Johnny? Far, far away?"

"It's a fish," I said.

"I can't swim," Sisco said, dropping the magazines on a chair. "Not even for a mugging mermaid. Scram, Johnny. It's too hot for wise cracks."

"I've got her dollar," I said. "The rest is up to you and Nu-Art. The lady's name is Browning. She wants a camera on the wharf when her husband and a friend come in with their fish. If she's not there, ask for Captain Snell at the wharf and he'll tell you the rest."

Sisco shrugged. "How about helping me with the camera and tripod?"

"I shouldn't do it," I said. "But maybe it'll be cooler down there on the wharf. How about you, Sheila?"

"I laugh," Sheila said. "I know where it's cool—and I'll be under that shower in three minutes."

So Sisco and I went to the wharf.

CAPTAIN SNELL turned out to be an old timer, lean and weatherbeaten, in soiled white ducks and a perspiration-damp shirt. He shifted a chew to the other seamed cheek and shrugged.

"The Browning boat ain't in yet. Ye'll have to wait. The lady went away. She'll

be back. At least she said she would."

This part of the Florida west Coast was not exactly fashionable. Most of the tourist traffic went by fast to more lively spots. Which griped the Ft. Bemis citizens plenty. The Chamber of Commerce this year had tapped all the merchants and citizens who could spare donations, and had made an early drive for the fishing trade. Advertisements in sporting magazines and newspapers up north, road signs, literature and all the usual whoop-de-do they could afford. More than they could afford, I'd gathered in talking around the town.

They did have something to sell. The small boat fishing off Ft. Bemis and other nearby points was good if you cared more for fishing than for style and exciting background.

They had painted the weathered wharf and the corrugated iron shed at the shore end. The few charter boats would have rated sneers from the sleek, costly fishing fleet at Miami.

But a modest purse could rent row boats, outboard boats and sturdy open boats with inboard motors. Low palm-studded islands offshore broke the Gulf rollers and let the small boats get out to the fishing in comparative safety.

Some of the boats were already coming in. Two men were weighing a string of fish on scales slung from a wooden tripod before the dockshed. Ten or fifteen spectators loitered about and more were arriving.

Sisco went back to the roadster for the small Graflex he carried everywhere.

"Might get some nice angle shots down on the boats," he said when he returned.

"Don't you ever get tired of it?"

Sisco looked surprised. "Why should I? There's always something new."

"You've got me, pal," I said. "Some guys take booze or reefers. I guess it's all in what you try first."

Sisco grinned and walked out on the wharf, where a charter boat had just brought in a couple of tarpon. I drifted there too, listening to questions and answers between the spectators and the trio of fishermen.

Sisco shot a couple of pictures and presently Captain Snell passed him and said: "That looks like Browning's boat comin'

in now. One of them two just rounding Bird Island."

I could see the boats running side by side as they skirted the tip of the island and headed toward shore. It looked like they were making a race of it to see which boat would tie up first.

"I'll get the other camera set up by the scales," Sisco said.

He passed the Browning woman just arriving and didn't know her. She saw me, came to me and asked: "Is everything all right?"

"We're ready. Captain Snell says your husband's out there now."

"Where?"

"In one of those two boats—see them?"

She looked and shook her head.

"I don't see my husband. Charley Emsdorff was with him. I can't see but one man in either of those boats."

She was right. Both boats were open and not very large. Anyone sitting or standing would be visible at this distance. And each boat carried a single man.

"Old Snell's eyes must be bad," I said. "If your husband isn't back before long, Mrs. Browning, the light won't be much for a picture."

"I don't know what's keeping them," she said with annoyance.

I noticed her crimson fingernails digging nervously into her right palm. She was biting her lip as she stared out over the water.

"Worried," I thought. "Getting steamed up about it. Friend husband will get his ears pinned back if he's much later."

The two boats were still neck and neck as they approached the wharf. Captain Snell shouted between cupped hands.

"Slim, where's the two men who took that boat out?"

Slim was the tanned young man in the left hand boat. His reply whipped back across the water.

"Got one of 'em here! The other'n must be on the bottom somewhere."

For an instant it didn't register with me. Or with Captain Snell either. Snell called: "What's that? On the bottom?"

"Yeah! This guy's dead!"

The salty-fishy smell of the sea was heavy on the sultry afternoon. Little wavelets were lapping against the wharf piling. I remember those wavelets—and the

spectators all standing motionless in a moment of stunned silence.

But most of all I remember the wild, unearthly scream from the Browning woman as she started toward the wharf edge . . .

CHAPTER TWO

A Restless Camera

I JUMPED fast and caught her arm. And then almost lost her as she tried to break away, still screaming.

The nearest men came to life and caught her too. I let them have her and stepped over to watch Slim bring the boat in.

The body was there in the boat's bow, half-hidden under a square of old canvas. Fishing tackle and a green metal tackle box lay in the bottom near the feet. And the gray paint inside the boat was spotted with fresh crimson patches.

Then I saw Sisco, elbowing along the wharf edge with his camera. Sisco was intent, purposeful, as if the spectators had ceased to exist and all his world had narrowed to that boat on which he focused the camera.

Slim tossed the bow rope to waiting hands on the wharf. Lanky, sun-bronzed, Slim had the look of a year-round resident. And he craned his head and spoke with a rush to Captain Snell, standing above him like a grim questioning old judge.

"Pete an' I were out beyond Palmetto Island when we see this boat heading across our bow, out to sea," Slim said. "Hit wasn't runnin' fast. We didn't pay no attention to it for a couple of minutes. Then Pete says its kinda late to be headin' offshore and the guy in the boat must be asleep or sick, for where is he?"

"We took a good look and didn't see no one, so we chased this boat. And the dead 'un was there in the bow like that, only the canvas wasn't over him. The revolver hit was there by his hand. He'd shot himself. But there'd been two of them in the boat. You c'n see they had a fight over something. Look at the inside of the boat. Pete and I figured this one must have killed the other fellow—an' then got scared and shot hisself."

Sisco called past his camera. "Pull that canvas off him, buddy, and look up here!

This picture is for the newspapers!"

Slim hesitated only an instant and then pulled the canvas away and looked up with a foolish grin that didn't mean anything. Just mugging for the camera.

Sisco got him full-face as young Mrs. Browning saw the body and screamed: "Dan! Dan! Oh, let me go down to him!"

"Hold that revolver up, Slim!" Sisco called.

Slim was straightening up with the revolver when Captain Snell bawled: "Put that down, Slim! Cover up that body!"

And as Slim hastily dropped the gun, the captain turned his anger on Sisco.

"This ain't any time to be makin' pictures! Get outa the way! We got serious business here!"

"O. K., Cap," Sisco said, and Captain Snell undoubtedly wasn't aware that the camera held carelessly against Sisco's hip had caught him in full-faced anger, shaking his fist. I'd barely seen Sisco's finger work the shutter and I'd known what to expect.

The captain swung around, calling: "Somebody telephone Chief Shute at the police station! Pete, get two-three boats ready to go out and look fer that other feller! He's out there somewhere if the sharks or barracuda ain't got at him!"

Young Mrs. Browning was still hysterical, still struggling with the two men and a woman spectator who were trying to soothe her. Sisco's awkward-looking hands had swiftly set the Graflex again. His head cocked intently as he shifted position. He photographed the Browning woman in three-quarter profile, with one of the men trying to calm her.

Strangers would judge Sisco callous about the woman's grief. I knew different. Sisco wasn't callous. He was absorbed in picture values, light and shadow and the technical side of his camera work.

Scenes as bad or worse than this had for years been routine to that meek, owl-like little camera fiend. Now Sisco was getting this down on negative with swift sure judgment. And beyond that he wasn't thinking.

But Captain Snell's indignation had communicated itself to others. I didn't like several scowls that were cast at Sisco. He hadn't been sent here by a newspaper. He didn't have to be doing this. Why stir

up trouble without reason? But then I wasn't Sisco Jones.

If Sisco noticed any displeasure around him, it made no difference. He stepped back to the wharf edge and took a picture of the death boat from a new angle just as Slim put the canvas back over the body.

I heard a burly man speak angrily to another beside him.

"We oughta run that fool with the camera outa here! Don't he think that woman's got feelings?"

I went over and took Sisco's arm.

"Amscray," I said under my breath. "Get that damn camera out of sight. They're getting ready to hand you the bum's rush."

Sisco said: "Yeah?"

Mrs. Browning had fainted. The fattish man who had been holding her arm knelt beside her and violently chafed her wrist.

"Get a doctor!" he called excitedly.

"Throw some water on her face," Sisco advised calmly.

"What do you know about it?" the fat man hollered angrily. "Maybe she's dying! Maybe her heart's gone back on her! And you say throw water on her! What do you know about it? You running around here making pictures of everything!"

"Somebody's got to make 'em, brother."

I SAW what Sisco was about to do and I dragged him toward the shore end of the wharf.

"Leggo," Sisco snapped. "She'll make a swell shot, laid out like that!"

"If you haven't got any sense, I have!" I told him. "These gillies will be yelling for a lynch rope if you keep on!"

Sisco shrugged.

"O. K. I need some fresh film anyway. This is good stuff, Johnny. That one of the wife trying to throw herself down in the boat would make any edition."

"Not with Nu-Art," I said. "Listen, sucker, you're working for Nu-Art now. Not a newspaper. We get a buck advance on anything you're supposed to photograph. Get wise. There's no percentage for you in this."

Sisco slapped the Graflex and looked through the horn-rimmed spectacles almost pityingly.

"I can sell good stuff like this. And

who wants a percentage anyway? This is the real thing. It'll rate space anywhere. Two men—two friends—go out fishing like pals and get into a murderous fight. And the survivor commits suicide. It's great, even to that gun they had along."

Sisco stopped. We had reached the dockshed and were alone for the moment. But Sisco's voice dropped, even as it sharpened.

"I knew there was something queer about this! Couldn't put my finger on it. How many of these visiting fishermen take a revolver out in their boat?"

"Don't ask me. I'm not a visiting fisherman. Plenty, probably."

"Plenty don't, you mean. Why should a tourist be bringing a revolver to Florida?"

"Why not? Maybe Browning thought he'd meet a shark or a whale. Maybe he likes to lug a gun around. Maybe—hell, what difference does it make?"

Sisco's eyes had narrowed.

"It's an angle," he said. "Jake Bemis, on the Graphic, would blow it up and wring it dry."

"That tabloid!"

"You'd almost swear Browning had been prepared for trouble," Sisco muttered.

"Nuts!" I said.

"I've got to get some fresh film," Sisco said, and started for the roadster.

I got there as he was reaching in the dash compartment for his film.

"The lady's out her dollar. She won't want her husband photographed now. Let's get on back to the hotel and eat."

"And leave this?" said Sisco.

"No newspaper presses are waiting for you," I reminded. "Nu-Art isn't interested. Come on, you're asking for trouble."

Sisco set his camera on the running board and lighted a cigarette. He was thinking hard.

"Who is this Browning?" he asked. "What does he do? Where's he from? And the other man too?"

"How should I know? I got her dollar and that was enough. The Brownings are evidently staying at the Regis. I don't know about the friend. His name is Emsdorff. Charley Emsdorff."

"Browning didn't look like a man who'd be carrying a revolver," Sisco said. "Did

you notice that business-man's-club look about him? Good solid respectability?"

As a matter of fact I had. The dead man looked to be in his middle forties. Quite a bit older than his wife. The khaki trousers and shirt he'd worn out fishing were new. Probably purchased here in Ft. Bemis.

The bruises on his face from the fight, and the bullet wound in the temple, with powder marks around it, had not destroyed a well-groomed, substantial look.

"Men like that don't carry guns," Sisco said, and he sounded as if he were arguing with himself. "So why does Browning take a gun out fishing—unless he had something to fear from the other man?"

"Nuts," I said.

Sisco picked up the camera. "We'll see," he said coolly.

Before I could think of a crack to that, the local chief of police arrived behind a siren, with half the Ft. Bemis police force. All four of them.

"I wonder what cops would do if you took away their sirens," Sisco said.

He watched thoughtfully as the big, red-faced chief-of-police hurried out on the wharf with his men. Abruptly he reached some kind of decision and got into the roadster.

"Let's get back to the hotel, Johnny. I'm hungry."

I wasn't sap enough to swallow that.

"What's on your mind?" I asked as he started.

"Why should anything be on my mind?" Sisco said, and that was all I could get out of him.

NEWs travels fast in a small town. The hotel already knew what had happened at the wharf. People in the lobby were discussing the tragedy as we entered.

Sisco stopped at the desk with his cameras. Scrimmons, the slightly pop-eyed desk clerk said: "I guess you didn't get your pictures after all. What happened to Mr. Browning's boat?"

"No one knows yet," Sisco said. "Did you know that Browning carried a gun today?"

Scrimmons shook his head.

"None of us knew he had a gun. Neither he nor Mr. Emsdorff looked like they'd

be in the habit of carrying a gun."

"So they were both staying here?"

Scrimmons nodded gloomily.

"Good friends?"

"I guess so," Scrimmons said. "They're all from Chicago. Emsdorff asked for the Brownings as soon as he registered."

Sisco was acting casual enough. Scrimmons didn't guess he was being skillfully squeezed for information as Sisco fed him another question.

"How long were the Brownings here before Emsdorff arrived?"

"Three days. Emsdorff didn't get here until this morning, just before Browning went fishing."

"Right in and right out on a fishing trip for Emsdorff, eh?" Sisco said. "Was Browning glad to see Emsdorff?"

"I guess he acted more surprised than anything," Scrimmons said. "Emsdorff was right there by the corner of the desk when Browning and his wife stepped out of the elevator. It was about ten thirty. I heard Mrs. Browning say: 'Why, Charley Emsdorff!' And Browning looked like he didn't believe it for a second, then he came over with his hand out and a kind of a puzzled smile on his face. 'What the devil are you doing down here, Charley?' he asked. And then quick he asked, 'Anything wrong back home?'"

"And what did Emsdorff say? Was anything wrong back home?" Sisco asked.

"I don't know," Scrimmons confessed. "Emsdorff said, 'I'm just here for a day, Dan. I thought I'd get in a few hours fishing while I'm here.' And Browning laughed and said, 'I've had pretty good luck the last two days. I wasn't sure whether I'd go today or not. Got your bag unpacked? . . . No? Well, do that and I'll arrange for a boat.'"

"Old friends from the same town, eh?" Sisco said. "Nothing to indicate they'd try to kill each other?"

"Not a thing," Scrimmons said with a touch of querulousness. "They both looked like guests you'd be glad to have in the hotel. How was I to know they'd cause all this trouble and bad publicity? Leo Crane, Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, acted like I should have seen there'd be trouble and notified some of them to prevent it.

"We spend thousands of dollars to get

people here,' Leo said. 'and this sort of thing gets out to kill our publicity and keep people away.'"

"Tch, tch," Sisco said. "How could you know?"

"The Brownings were here for a week last year and there wasn't anything about them to suggest this would happen," Scrimmons complained.

"Emsdorff ever been here before?"

"No," said Scrimmons as he turned to answer the buzzer on the switchboard.

SISCO headed for the elevator with his cameras and I followed with the portrait camera tripod.

"So now you know all," I said. "Satisfied?"

"Sure," said Sisco. "Why not?"

But he looked preoccupied, and as soon as he was in the room we shared together, he put the cameras on the bed and went to the telephone and asked for long distance.

"Hey," I said. "What gives?"

"Chicago," Sisco said—and I had one of those hunches of trouble coming.

Sisco called a newspaper. *The Morning Herald*. He asked for Tom Hendricks. He knew Tom Hendricks, for the call went through quickly, and Sisco said:

"This is Sisco Jones, Tom. I'm at Ft. Bemis, Florida. Will you get the charges O.K.'d on a couple of dead Chicago guys we've got down here? I've some swell camera shots and an angle you'll thank me for."

I don't know what Tom said—but Sisco said: "Maybe I've got a million bucks and don't want to work any more. Anyway I'm down here and I want dope on these guys. Here's what happened—"

Sisco was talking fast when someone knocked on the door. I opened it. Sheila Mason had knocked, and she said: "I heard Sisco's voice. What's this about a murder at the wharf, Johnny? I thought you two were there."

"We were," I said as Sheila stepped in.

Her eyes widened as she heard Sisco putting his terse description into the telephone.

"What's Sisco doing?"

"Tell me and I'll make you Queen of the May," I said. "He's reverted to type. Almost got us in trouble taking pictures of the dead man and his wife."

Sisco said to Chicago: "I want all the dope you can dig up quick. Who are they? How are they connected? Why should they be killing one another? Phone me at the Hotel Regis. And double-cross me on the charges, wise guy, and I'll pour it on you."

Sisco hung up and Sheila said: "Having fun, sonny?"

Sisco peered at her through the horn-rimmed glasses. He had that preoccupied look as he muttered: "Browning wasn't expecting trouble out in that boat. He didn't even suggest going out in the boat. Emsdorff's arrival astonished him. Emsdorff was the one who suggested they go out fishing. As far as Browning was concerned, it was all done on the spur of the moment. So why should Browning take a revolver?"

"Has he been like this long?" Sheila asked me.

"Finding a corpse to photograph seemed to make him feverish," I said.

"The poor dear," Sheila commiserated. "Sisco, dear, come down and have some milk toast. Sheila will hold your hand. Tomorrow everything will be all right."

"Go to the devil," Sisco said sulkily. Sheila laughed.

They were like that. Good friends. More than once I'd had an idea Sheila Mason was the reason Sisco stayed with us. He had a way of looking at Sheila when he thought no one else was noticing. A sort of hopeless and hungry look.

Even Sisco could see it was hopeless. Sheila had what it takes to get a he-man, heeled and handsome enough for any girl to wear. Sisco just didn't rate for a girl like Sheila.

But they got along in their way. Had to, I guess, working in adjoining rooms every day.

"I'm going to eat," I decided. "This guy will be running around in circles all evening. Coming, Sheila?"

Sisco had walked to the window and was staring outside, apparently oblivious of us. Sheila gave him a peculiar look, hesitated and agreed: "I suppose we might as well eat."

WE WALKED down the street to the Elite Cafe. Dusk was falling. People were still straggling toward the wharf.

Small groups along the street were talking about the trouble.

Customers and help in the Elite Cafe were talking about it. A small town like Ft. Bemis is stirred up by anything like murder. And this was worse than murder. This had a macabre angle in the blood-stained boat and the solitary body that had been cruising out to sea.

Two tables from us a pallid little tourist with nose glasses and a blond mustache was declaiming with assurance to two plump women at his table.

"How does anyone know what happened? Those men might not have had a fight. They might have been held up. I've seen some rough-looking men around here. Strangers in another boat might have held them up and robbed them, and tried to make it look like the two men killed one another."

"I wouldn't be surprised," the younger of the two plump women said. "I think we'd better go on to Tampa. I wouldn't let you go out fishing here now, Harold. Suppose you were attacked?"

"I'd give them a run for their money," Harold boasted.

"You'll not risk it, Harold Gruber! Not while Mother and I are here to stop you! We'll get out of this town in the morning!"

Sheila chuckled as she buttered a piece of roll.

"If I were Harold, I'd be more afraid of wifey and mother-in-law," Sheila said under her breath.

I grinned and nodded. But that was the way things were going. The remarks had been heard at other tables and at the counter. No telling how fast such ideas would spread or how many winter visitors here in Ft. Bemis were already thinking them.

As I paid the check, an ambulance rolled by, evidently taking Browning's body to the undertaker. And outside the cafe, Sheila and I met the Newmans, Sid and Dora, two young hustlers on our Nu-Art crew.

Sid and Dora had just come from the wharf. They said Browning's body was in the ambulance and several boats out searching for Emsdorff's body had not returned.

The local police had cleared the wharf

of spectators and examined the death boat, searched the body, talked with the widow. The Chief of Police had departed with the fishing tackle, the tackle box, the contents of Browning's pockets and the revolver. And that was all anyone at the wharf had seemed to know when the Newmans left.

"Has Sisco been back to the wharf?" Sheila asked.

Sisco hadn't.

"He'd better stay away from the wharf and forget it," I said as Sheila and I walked on.

"You're as bad as that mouse Harold," Sheila said with sudden spirit. "Why shouldn't Sisco think about it if he wants to? Sisco's smart. Too smart to be wasting his time with Nu-Art crew. I'll bet he knows more about what to do than anyone in this hick town. Who else would have thought to photograph the body of that man when it was brought in to the wharf?"

"Whew!" I said. "Don't jump me about it. Up in the room you acted like you thought Sisco was nuts!"

"What if I did?" Sheila said tartly. "Can't I do what I want to?"

She was getting too deep for me. And just then we met Leo Crane, the stocky, breezy Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce.

Crane made a point of trying to personally greet as many visitors as possible who stayed more than a day in Ft. Bemis. He was the greeter type. A booster, with a hearty handshake, a fast line of talk and a smile for all.

"Glad to have you in Ft. Bemis! Glad to have you with us, friend! The greatest little town in Florida! Make the Chamber of Commerce your headquarters while you're with us . . ."

Crane seemed to believe it. He was a native of Ft. Bemis—the greatest little town in Florida. And now Crane wasn't smiling as he came out of the Chamber of Commerce office and met us.

"I was just coming over to the hotel to talk to you people," he said. The words came out as if they tasted bad. Crane was scowling.

"Fine," I said. "What's on your mind?" But I already had an idea, and I was just about right.

CHAPTER THREE

Picture of Murder

CRANE planted his feet on the sidewalk and eyed us belligerently. "It's that other fellow—the one named Jones. I understand he's butting into this matter of the suicide."

"Is he?" I said.

"Jones telephoned a Chicago newspaper to spread his version of the matter," Crane snapped.

"My goodness," Sheila said. "If you don't approve of it, why didn't you stop him?"

"I would have if I'd been there!" Crane promised her.

"Oh, I thought you must have been close to the telephone," Sheila said sweetly. "You seem to know all about the conversation. I suppose Mr. Jones told you."

"Never mind who told me. I know who he called and what he said. He offered a lurid story and pictures of Mr. Browning's body and of Mrs. Browning to that Chicago newspaper. Ft. Bemis doesn't want publicity like that. We're trying to bring people here, not frighten them away."

"I see," Sheila said brightly. "The dead men are from Chicago and you're going to let Chicago know everything's all right and it probably didn't happen."

Crane got redder.

"I didn't say that. We have a newspaper, a police department and a Chamber of Commerce to give out information. You picture people are here taking money out of the town instead of bringing money in. We certainly aren't going to stand for anything like this from you people. Tell that man Jones I'm warning him."

"This afternoon Ft. Bemis was in the United States," I said sourly. "Tomorrow it'll probably still be. Who put a swastika on your arm and started you snooping on telephone conversations and laying down rules? If the men are dead, they're dead. And if you don't like what the Chicago papers print, sue 'em. That'll show the world where Ft. Bemis stands. Jones can call his friends all over the country if he thinks they're interested."

I took Sheila's arm and we left Leo Crane standing there, red-faced and angry.

"Good for you, Johnny," Sheila said. "The nerve of him. It's pretty bad when someone can't make a long-distance call without the hotel clerk or the local operator listening in and repeating what was said. They could get into trouble for that."

"Who's going to get 'em into trouble?" I asked. "I had a hunch Sisco was stirring up something. I ought to have agreed with Crane. It's none of our business or Sisco's business."

"Losing your nerve?" Sheila asked sarcastically.

"My nerve hasn't got anything to do with it! I'm here for Nu-Art. That Chamber of Commerce guy just got in my hair for a minute. But Sisco better lay off or we'll all be in the soup. Crane was serious. He and others like him around town can make real trouble for us. How would you like to get run out of town?"

"I've never been run out of a town," Sheila said lightly.

Which wasn't any help. I couldn't figure Sheila. She was level-headed. She didn't care who murdered whom or what newspaper printed what.

By tacit agreement we returned to the hotel room together. A haze of tobacco smoke hung inside. Sisco was pacing around the room, fingering a cigarette.

"I just saw the local Chamber of Commerce," I said as we entered.

Sisco ignored the remark.

"Tom Hendricks just telephoned back from Chicago. Browning was the president of the Lake Trust Company, a north side bank. Emsdorff was the cashier. One of the *Herald* rewrite men lives in that neighborhood, a few doors from the vice-president. He has an account at the bank. So he rushed out to the vice-president's house and saw him personally."

"And the bank," I said, "had been expecting trouble between the two men for years. The vice-president said to return the bodies collect and thanks for notifying him."

"You're not funny," Sheila told me coldly.

SISCO rubbed the cigarette in an ash tray. He seemed more scrawny and awkward than ever as he took off his glasses and polished them. But he was coolly matter-of-fact as he peered at us.

"It stunned the vice-president," Sisco said. "He'd been expecting trouble—but not murder. After Browning left on this trip, Emsdorff stumbled on a clue that led to facts they'd never suspected. Emsdorff and this vice-president found that the bank had been pretty well looted in the past couple of years. It had been insolvent for some time."

I whistled. "Browning?"

Sisco nodded.

"The trail seemed to lead to Browning—but they weren't quite sure. They didn't know what to do. If they notified Browning and he was guilty, he'd have a chance to escape. If they reported it to the board of directors or the bank examiners, the bank would immediately be closed. Browning was the key to everything."

"The two men decided that Emsdorff had better get down here without Browning knowing he was coming or that anything was wrong at the bank. After a talk with Browning, Emsdorff would know what to do. Call the police or return to Chicago with Browning."

"So that's it," I said. "Emsdorff got Browning out in a boat and told Browning he was caught cold. That's why Browning had a gun. Why he took the gun along. He was guilty. When Emsdorff showed up without warning, Browning knew the dirty work had been discovered."

"It looks that way," Sisco said.

"Emsdorff may have told Browning that no one else knew about the shortage. So Browning decided to kill him and rush back to the bank before anyone else discovered the facts. Simple, isn't it?"

"Simple," Sisco said coolly.

"Or if it didn't happen that way," I argued, "Browning may have lost his head and decided he could put Emsdorff out of the way temporarily and make a run for it. The money is probably where he could have gotten it easily."

I snapped my fingers as everything fell into a neat pattern.

"Browning may have brought the money here. Why not? It's probably here in the hotel!"

Sheila caught some of my conviction.

"Sisco, the money might be here. And there might be a reward for it. The first

one who finds it, would get the reward. And you could use it. You could set yourself up in business. You could buy a home and get married—"

"Married?" Sisco said. He laughed shortly. "Who'd marry *me*?"

"You're no bargain," I grinned. "But the babes would be standing in line if you had big reward money. How about it, Sheila? You'd take a chance, wouldn't you?"

"I'll marry for love when I do," Sheila snapped. "Thanks for your opinion of me."

For a moment Sisco had looked oddly excited. Now he was abruptly cynical. "You find the money in Browning's room, Johnny and take the babes. I'll take a camera."

"You don't think the money's there?"

"How do I know where it is?" Sisco said. "I'm going out and eat."

"That's all you'd better do," I warned, and told him of Leo Crane's warning. "The guy wasn't fooling. Northern visitors are their cash crop. Let 'em get an idea you're hurting the crop and they'll go after you faster than cotton farmers after the boll weevil."

"Facts are facts."

"Let some other guy print the facts then. Crane has put the mark on you. I'll bet a dime to a doughnut he's already been tipped off to the dope your man in Chicago telephoned you."

Sisco grinned as he started to the door.

"He's good if he knows what Tom Hendricks told me. Tom and I worked seven months together in Shanghai and took Chinese lessons. When Tom called me back, we did part of our talking in Chinese."

"Chinese!" I said as Sisco closed the door. "Play that on your chop suey!"

"I didn't know he'd been in China," Sheila said weakly.

"He'll be on his way back if he keeps this up," I prophesied. "He's up to something. I know the signs."

Sheila nodded—but there didn't seem to be anything we could do about it. We didn't know what Sisco had on his mind.

THE town still seethed with talk of the murders. The local cops had talked freely with friends and neighbors, who

talked in turn. Mrs. Browning had identified the revolver as her husband's. She hadn't known he'd brought the gun along. She couldn't explain why he'd taken it out fishing. Her husband and Emsdorff had been friendly business associates for years. She couldn't account for the sudden trouble.

A search of Browning's luggage had not helped. So evidently the missing money wasn't in the hotel. Ft. Bemis had a body at the undertaker's, a body missing, and scandalous publicity it didn't want.

And out over town by local grapevine went the details of an ultra-respectable banker who had betrayed trusting friends, business associates and his devoted young wife.

Browning had been a wolf in sheep's clothing. The smiling, genial banker had in reality been a middle-aged crook who had finally stolen everything in sight and then gone berserk and murderous when caught.

Several torrid letters from women Mrs. Browning had never heard of were found by the police in Browning's suitcase. Spicy details were already circulating in Harry's poolroom. And even in the poolroom they were agreeing that Browning was a skunk who had given his young wife a raw deal.

I met Leo Crane again on Main Street. He gave me a dirty look. So I stopped him and asked: "Do you understand Chinese?"

"I don't!" he snapped. "But I understand Jones drove off this evening with his camera equipment and two flashlights. He's still meddling."

"Are you still playing cops and robbers?" I said. "You'll be ringing curfew next. See Sisco Jones if you don't like what he does."

I should have soft-soaped him. Strangers in strange little towns don't get the breaks. Sheila was sitting in the hotel lobby when I walked in, and she didn't know what Sisco was doing.

"It's Sisco's business," Sheila said. "He has a right to take pictures." But Sheila was worried. "What could Sisco be doing this late in the evening?" she wanted to know.

"Anything can happen when that guy's

loose with a camera," I said. "If you hear a woman scream, he'll probably be taking a picture through the widow's window."

"Two flashlights!" Sheila said, wrinkling her forehead. "What would he be doing with two flashlights, Johnny?"

"I wouldn't even guess."

The small boats returned without finding Emsdorff's body. Ft. Bemis was restless, staying up later than usual, natives and tourists alike. Twice Chief Shute, of the local police, went through the hotel lobby and up to the widow's room. The second time he was accompanied by Leo Crane, looking more bustling, more officious than ever.

It was about eleven thirty when Sheila found me in the Elite Cafe again, drinking more coffee.

"Johnny—they've arrested Sisco for taking pictures of Browning's automobile! Sisco telephoned from the jail! He wants to see you!"

I gulped my coffee, suddenly angry.

"That's that guy Crane from the Chamber of Commerce! He's a lousy busybody! I warned him he was getting into trouble!"

Sheila was worried but using her head. "Hadn't we better get a lawyer?" she asked as we left the cafe.

"Wait until I see Sisco. This may put some sense into his hard head. All they want is for him to lay off with that damn camera. If he promises, they'll probably let him out."

THE jail was a bull pen in the back of the two story brick city hall. The police department was on the same floor, with a side entrance.

Chief Shute, an officer and two townsmen were in the outer office when I entered. Shute kept his feet on his desk and a cigar in the corner of his mouth as he answered my inquiry.

"We got him all right. I brought him in myself when I heard he was in the Highway Garage messing around with the Browning car."

"What was he doing?" Sheila asked.

"Climbin' in and out of it, lady. Taking flashlight pictures an' God only knows what."

"There's no law against taking pictures," Sheila said spiritedly.

Shute was a big man, angular, red-

faced, with a mean quality to the smile he gave Sheila.

"I'm sayin' what the law is tonight. This fellow was told to mind his business and he wouldn't take the hint. So he gets locked up."

I asked to see Sisco. Shute shrugged and spoke to the officer. "Let him in for a few minutes, Ed."

Sisco was alone in the bull pen, sitting on a wooden bench. He jumped up when the sheet steel door clanged behind me.

"Hello, Johnny. I wondered if they'd let you in."

"Why didn't you get smart and lay off this foolishness?" I asked. "Say—did they rough you up?"

Sisco's cheek and both hands showed raw fresh scratches. His left trouser leg was torn below the knee. And I saw that his shoes were muddy and mud smears had been only partially brushed off his clothes.

And there was something different about Sisco. He looked keyed-up, taut. Worried. And yet bursting with some inner satisfaction as he peered through the horn-rimmed glasses.

"I didn't argue much," he said. "I was afraid something would happen to the camera. Look, Johnny, I've got to get out of here. They can't toss me in here for taking a few pictures."

"Maybe not—but you're here."

"I want a lawyer."

"Lawyers in the middle of the night come high," I pointed out. "You'll be in all night anyway."

Sisco swore under his breath as he nodded.

"Look," he said, "get Tom Hendricks on long-distance. Get him at his home if he's not at the paper. Tell him they've pinched me for trying to get a news story. Tell him they're trying to gag the press on this story. That'll give him an angle. Tell Tom to get me out of here fast and I'll give him a story that'll make his eyes pop. And pictures. Tell him I've really got something. Tell him I've got a story here that's better than Li Hung's second death—and I've got to get out of here quick to prove it. And if he don't get me out, I know who will."

"You sound like an opium dream," I said. "And you look like you've been out

on a nightmare. Where'd you get that mud on your shoes and clothes, and those scratches, and that tear in your pants leg?"

"I went driving," Sisco said.

"You look like you went crawling. And with two flashlights, Sheila says. And now you talk gibberish about a Chinaman's second death. What's it all about?"

"Never mind all that," Sisco said impatiently. "What you don't know won't hurt you. I had an idea of helping these local cops. Now I'll burn them and they'll know they've been burned. Tom Hendricks will do something if he has to dig down in his own pocket. And get my camera as you go out. They haven't any use for it. Tell 'em you'll hold it for me."

"I don't know why I even listen," I said grudgingly. "I hoped you'd learn some sense—and now you're getting me mixed up in it. Need some more cigarettes?"

Chief Shute turned me down flat on the camera.

"It'll stay here until he gets out. And listen, young fellow, we don't hold with peddlers coming in town and trying to run things. You'll get along all right if you remember it. If you don't—"

Shute jerked his head at the door leading to the bull pen. His voice had a mean warning edge. I was hot as I walked out with Sheila.

"I don't know what Sisco's got up his sleeve—but if it'll put mud in that dumb cop's eye, I'm for it! Peddlers he called us! You'd think it was a privilege to work this jerkwater town!"

"I'm worried about Sisco," Sheila confessed. "Why—why they might put him on a road gang or beat him up. Some of these small town police will do anything. Does Sisco want a lawyer?"

"He wants Chicago notified," I said. "And Chicago gets notified as fast as I get back to that hotel. It may get us tossed in the clink with Sisco. Nu-Art will go crazy when they hear what this crew is doing."

"I'm tired of making kid photos anyway," Sheila said.

LONG-DISTANCE got Tom Hendricks on the phone at the *Morning Herald* office in Chicago.

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His voice had an edge of humorous annoyance when I said I was calling for Sisco. "Sisco's in a jam," he guessed.

"He's in the local bull pen," I said.

"For socking a cop?"

"Not yet. He was taking pictures on this case he telephoned you about. The local folks don't want any headlines on it. Sisco got his warning and wouldn't stop. So they grabbed his camera and locked him up."

"Got his camera without a fight?" Hendricks chuckled. "The guy is slipping. What does he want—a lawyer and some headlines about interfering with the freedom of the press?"

"Plenty of that," I said. "He wants out quick. He said to tell you that he's got a story that's better than Li Hung's second death."

"What's that?" Hendricks said, and in a sharp voice he repeated the statement.

"Whatever that means," I agreed. "He said to say he's really got something. Pictures and everything. A story that'll make your eyes pop. But he says he'll have to get out quick to prove it."

"Put that sawed-off rooster on a desert island and he'd come up with a story and plenty of pictures! Tell him I'll go to bat as far as the paper will let me. Tell him to sit tight on what he's got. Tell him to put films in the air mail or wire-photo from Tampa—and shoot me the dope fast."

"No use telling him anything until he gets out," I said. "They're holding his camera."

"I'll do what I can," Hendricks promised.

Sheila Mason sat on the bed while I telephoned. We talked it over for a few minutes and decided to turn in and let the morning show what kind of magic Hendricks could work.

We didn't realize what a metropolitan newspaper could do when it meant business. Most people in Ft. Bemis read the morning *Tampa Ledger*. And Sisco was in the *Ledger* when I bought one on the way to breakfast.

CHICAGO HERALD PHOTOGRAPHER JAILED

Ft. Bemis Objects to Pictures

The *Chicago Herald* must have wired the facts. And the facts as printed were not complimentary to the Ft. Bemis police and city officials. Out of them Sisco Jones emerged a martyr to the newspaper profession.

Nu-Art Studios were not mentioned. In one sweep Sisco had been gathered back to the profession, a newspaperman assigned to the Browning-Emsdorff story.

The *Ledger* covered the Browning case also, as summarized by the Ft. Bemis police.

But the story drew only a column spread. Newspapers at a greater distance undoubtedly cut it down more. It was a rather shoddy crime, without mystery or much interest outside the locality in which it had happened. Except, perhaps, in Chicago, where the two dead men had lived.

All that came out of Tampa in the morning

(Continued on page 100)

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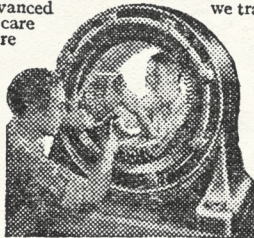
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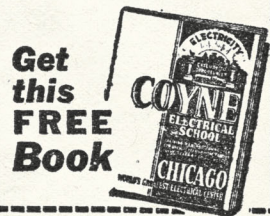
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Dime Detective Magazine

(Continued from page 98)

newspaper. And two high-powered lawyers also came out of Tampa, earlier, probably, than they liked.

They were lawyers for the Tampa *Ledger*, retained by the Chicago *Herald*. They had Sisco out of jail by eight o'clock.

I FOUND it out from Sheila Mason who met me on her way to breakfast.

"Sisco dashed in to shave and change clothes before he left town," Sheila told me. "He said if anyone asked for him to say he had gone to Jacksonville and didn't know when he'd be back."

"What's the matter with that guy?" I said. "Last night he didn't say anything about Jacksonville. He don't need to run that far to keep out of trouble."

Sheila laughed. "It's all right, anyway. He's out of jail. Art Stanfield can take over the portrait camera today."

"It sounds screwy," I said. Sheila looked so innocent that I guessed: "He told you what he's up to."

"I don't know anything," Sheila denied. "Well, if he went to Jacksonville," I said, "we may get a little peace. I hear at the cafe there'll be an inquest this morning and Mrs. Browning is leaving for Chicago with her husband's body on the afternoon train." And then I remembered: "Where's this big story Sisco promised his buddy in Chicago?"

"Sisco must be working on it."
"Not in Jacksonville," I guessed. "Well, I wash my hands of it—and if Sisco lands in jail again, my hands stay washed."

You talk like that—and sometimes have to eat your words. My time came sooner than I expected. Our Nu-Art crew, minus Sisco, was gathered in the reception room before starting the day's work when Chief Shute broke up the meeting. He burst in without knocking, with two of his uniformed officers at his heels and the hotel manager hovering behind them.

"Where is he?" Shute demanded loudly. "Where is who?" I asked. "That fellow Jones! You know damn well who I mean!" he barked at me. "Where is he?" "Oh, Jones," I said. "He went to Jacksonville—Sheila, wasn't that where Sisco said he was going?"

"Yes," said Sheila. "They didn't seem to want him here in town so he got out." And Sheila asked the Chief sweetly: "Are you celebrating because he's gone?"

Shute swore. "We'll celebrate when we get him! How did he go to Jacksonville?"

"I didn't ask him," Sheila replied. "And if no one ever taught you not to swear around ladies, I'm telling you now! We're not used to rough-necks breaking in and pretending this is a bar-room!"

"He's making a run for it!" Shute rasped to his men. "It's like I thought! He's guilty as hell and trying to get out of the state! But we'll get him. And with a murder charge we'll keep him this time!"

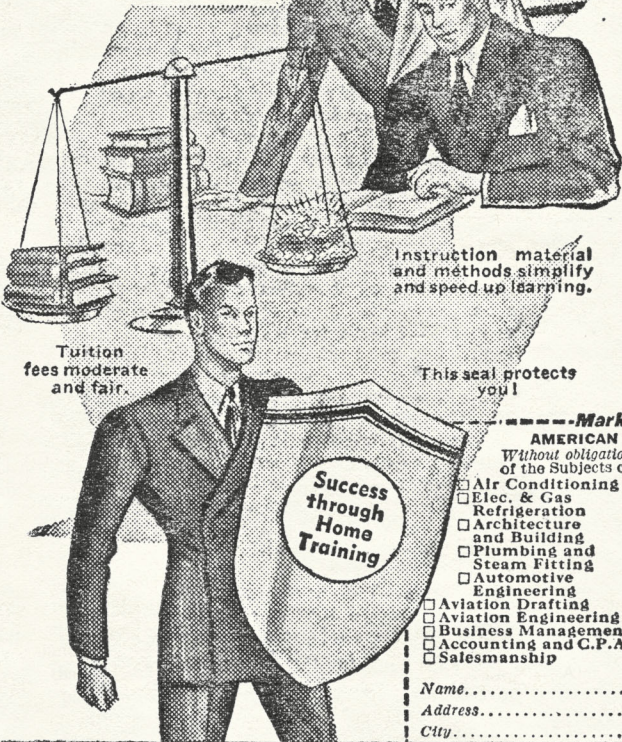
(Continued on page 102)

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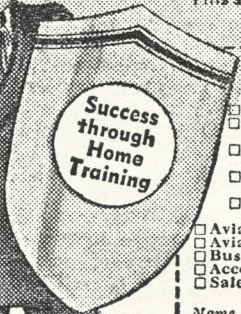
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Dime Detective Magazine

(Continued from page 100)

"Now it's a murder," I said. "Taking pictures around this town is really a crime!"

Shute reached inside his coat, like he might have another gun. But he brought out a photograph. A fresh photograph, still damp.

"Look at this!" he snarled. "Do you know anything about it? Do you know how-come Jones to kill him?"

I heard Sheila gasp behind me. And I almost gasped. For the man in the photograph was dead. Mighty dead. And he hadn't been killed in a boat either. And he couldn't be the missing Emsdorff.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the Killer's Boots

IT WAS a flashlight photograph, gruesomely clear in detail by a man who knew his camera technique. It seemed to have been taken in a tropical swamp. The matted vegetation showed clearly. So did water and mud. And the mud-smearred body on that swampy ground was a dead man. An old man, with ragged whiskers and patched overalls, who looked as if he had been dragged through the mud and water. The picture fairly cried violent death at you.

"How would I know anything about this?" I said from a throat suddenly dry.

"You knew everything else! Tried to get his camera last night, didn't you? Put a hurry call through for help to get him out, didn't you? Helped him get away before someone found out what was in his camera, didn't you?"

"Was this in Sisco's camera?" I asked.

But I knew the answer. I could see again the mud on Sisco's shoes, the torn trouser leg, the scratches on his cheek and hands, the mud smears not entirely brushed off his clothes.

"I got a nephew who takes pictures and develops them at home," Shute told me roughly. "I left the camera at his house last night and he got up early this morning and developed the film in it. He knew the body right off. It's old Hermit Joe, who hangs out around the salt swamp, six-seven miles down the coast. All the folks in town know him. He's been beat on the head. The picture shows it clear. And by God, there ain't any doubt who done it. This Jones had swamp mud on his shoes and pants—only we didn't think nothing of it last night. Gone to Jacksonville, has he? I got a good mind to run you all in for helpin' him!"

Shute glowered at us, and then took the picture.

"Let's have a look at his room," he said to his men, and slammed the door as they went out. "Murder!" Stanfield said in an awed voice.

Sheila whirled on Art. She was pale. Her voice was shaking. "Don't even say it again! You know Sisco didn't kill anyone!"

"That guy was certainly dead!" Art muttered. "And in Sisco's camera! Johnny, you saw Sisco last night. Did—did he have mud on his clothes?"

(Continued on page 104)

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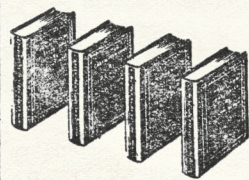
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(Continued from page 102)

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"Sure he did," I said. "So what? You don't murder a man with mud. And if you do murder anyone, you don't hang around making flashlight photos of him!"

Sid Newman swallowed and moistened his lips. "Sisco was crazy enough about a camera to take pictures of anything."

And Sid was right. We all knew Sisco by now. We all knew that Sisco might do just that if he ever killed a man and had his camera and wasn't bothered. Take a picture of the body. The best picture he could. And if the picture sent him to the gallows or the chair, Sisco would still be proud of his work.

"Johnny," Sheila said huskily, "did Sisco say anything about a swamp? Did he say anything about mud and—trouble last night?"

"Not a word." I looked at Sheila. She looked at me.

"It looks bad," I said. "That negative out of Sisco's camera looks like murder and nothing else. Sisco was with that body last night. These cops will get him for it if they can. Sisco hasn't helped it any by leaving town."

"But his story," Sheila said. "The story he had you telephone Chicago about."

"The story that was better than Li Hung's second death," I said. "A real murder story. And wouldn't it be like Sisco to head for the chair in a blaze of headlines and photographs, even if the story was about himself?"

They knew Sisco as well as I did. They could believe it. The sound from Sid Newman's wife was very close to a whimper.

"It's terrible to think of Sisco being sentenced for murder!"

"He hasn't been. We're not holding his wake yet!" I said. "Come on, let's get out of here. I want to see if they found anything in his room."

WHEN I got up there they had already found Sisco's mud-marked shoes and suit. Following orders, I pointed out Sisco's two suitcases and other personal effects.

They took everything.

When they left I was nervously smoking a cigarette and trying to reconcile Sisco's picture-taking on the Browning case with a salt swamp miles down the coast. And a murdered swamp hermit. And all the other facts, including Sisco's quick exit from Ft. Bemis.

I hadn't told the others, not even Sheila, but I'd wondered—and I wondered again if Sisco had used this Tom Hendricks to get out of a tight spot? Had Sisco guessed that his films might be developed, and used Tom Hendricks to escape?

When the lawyers got him out and his films weren't returned, had Sisco run fast before the cops came after him again?

Things like that go through your mind, even when a man has been your buddy. Murder isn't always deliberate—and most men will try to save their necks.

Sheila came into the room without knocking. "Are we alone, Johnny?"

Salt Water Slay-Ride

I nodded.

"Johnny—Sisco didn't go to Jacksonville!"

"Maybe you know where he is," I said.

"I do," Sheila nodded. "He told me, in case anything happened. But he didn't want anyone else to know."

"Plenty's happened," I said. "Where is he?"

"He didn't expect anything like an accusation of murder," Sheila said. "He didn't seem worried. He went to Laguna Springs, Johnny."

"That's only about twenty miles from here!"

"I know," Sheila said miserably. "And if they suspect he's so near they'll arrest him before he knows what has happened. For murder, Johnny! And maybe he won't be able to get out this time."

"Fast talk won't spring him on a murder charge," I agreed. "Are you sure it's Laguna Springs? Does he have any intention of coming back here?"

"He said he'd be back by dinner time," Sheila said. "And if they don't find him by then, and he isn't warned, he'll walk right into their hands. You'll have to stay in and catch the appointments today, Johnny. I'm going to Laguna Springs. Sid Newman will lend me his car."

I sighed. "Once a sucker, always a sucker. I'll go. You stay here and talk for me, too. Make it Jacksonville also, if Shute asks for me."

Laguna Springs, about the size of Ft. Bemis, was another small coastal town, offering fishing, boating, cheap living for tourists.

I drove out of Ft. Bemis without trouble. And as Sid Newman's light sedan streaked south on the blacktop highway, I wondered why Sisco would be in Laguna Springs anyway. If he was dodging arrest for murder, he wouldn't stop so near Ft. Bemis. And if it wasn't the murder charge, what was his business in Laguna Springs?

I couldn't guess—and half an hour's searching of Laguna Springs didn't tell me any more. Main Street, side streets, trailer parks—I tried them all—and no Sisco.

It was after eleven. The sun was getting hot and I was hotter. Sisco had evidently handed Sheila a line. Probably hadn't even started toward Laguna Springs.

I drove by the waterfront before starting back to Ft. Bemis. And suddenly jammed on the brakes. The old roadster parked in a line of other cars was Sisco's. Windows were up, doors locked. This was the parking space for the fishing wharf. I was asking questions around the wharf a few minutes later. Sisco's horn-rimmed glasses made him easily described.

Small boats, tackle and bait were rented here to visiting fishermen the same as in Ft. Bemis. And Sisco had rented a boat and tackle and gone fishing alone. No doubt about its being Sisco. The boy in charge of the boats even remembered the camera Sisco had been carrying.

"Said he was aimin' more at taking some pictures than ketchin' fish," the boy said. "Uh-huh—he didn't say when he'd be back. He got him a box lunch from Pete's across the street. Most likely it'll be afternoon sometime before

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he's back. He ain't been gone hardly an hour." More photographs! With a murder charge hanging over him, cops hunting him not twenty miles away. I looked at the sun, thought of the hours ahead and said: "Got another boat?"

I HAD to say I was familiar with a boat and be shown how to stop and start the little inboard motor. Sid Newman's car keys and my driving license stayed behind with a signed receipt for the boat and the fishing tackle I accepted to shut off curious questions.

Laguna Springs was on the south bank of a small tidal river. Half a mile down-stream the river widened into the bay. And as at Ft. Bemis, several long low islands off the coast broke the Gulf rollers and gave sheltered water for small boat fishing.

Boats dotted the open water beyond the river mouth. They held big men, small men, fat men, thin men. Usually more than one in a boat. And as I went weaving through the fishing fleet they must have thought I was crazy with my monotonous question: "Seen a little guy with horn-rimmed glasses around here anywhere?" No one, it seemed, paid any attention to who was in another boat. The sun began to feel like a fire ball hung directly overhead.

Only that gruesome photo of the old man's body out of Sisco's camera kept me going. Murder was murder and Sisco had to know what was waiting for him in Ft. Bemis. At that I think I might have turned back finally if a fat man out near one of the islands hadn't put me on the right track when I yelled my question. "Horn glasses, friend?" he called back. "Little fellow with a camera?"

"That's him!"
"Keep on the way you're going!" he called. "He was by here and took my picture!"

I swore as I started the motor and wiped perspiration from my face. Pictures again! I was heading north and I kept going, with only four boats in sight ahead. And the fourth boat, the last boat that I could see up this way, held two men who said that Sisco had passed not half an hour back. They thought he'd gone around the north end of the island.

The north end of the island was about a mile away. A couple of miles of open water stretched to the next island. What Sisco could be doing up this way, alone with his camera, was more than I could see.

These low sandy islands held windblown palm trees, thick brush and nothing else. Lonely, deserted islands and a desolate stretch of mainland behind a narrow sand beach. No reason for a man to bring his boat this far from Laguna Springs either for fishing, taking pictures, or a boat ride.

And I rounded the end of the island and saw Sisco's boat drawn up on the sandy beach. Two boats as a matter of fact. And as I ran nearer I saw two men sitting in the shade of a palm tree apparently eating lunch.

They stood up as I steered toward them. One was Sisco. I hadn't stopped to get a box lunch or water. I was hungry, sunburned,

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thirsty, and suddenly mad as I came in to shore and heard Sisco's shout of greeting.

"You're a long way from the fishing, stranger!"

"You're telling me!" I said, and bit back the reply I wanted to make.

Sisco could see well enough who I was—and he had called me "stranger." It was a clear warning not to show I knew him, and not to call his name. And I think, actually, that was the first moment I really believed Sisco might have killed a man and might be hiding out.

The other man must have sighted Sisco and come ashore to have company and conversation while eating lunch. He was a typical tourist fisherman, getting on toward forty, comfortable in an old khaki suit and the luxury of skipping his morning shave.

I ran the boat up in the sand and jumped out, asking, "Got a drink here? I ran out of water." "Couple of jugs," Sisco said, pointing to where they had been eating. "Any luck this morning, stranger?"

There it was again. Stranger! And Sisco had a taut, nervous look even as he smiled. I looked him in the eye, not smiling.

"Lousy!" I said. "If a man wanted any luck, he'd get out of these parts, quick!"

The other man was watching us. I couldn't make a warning sign of any kind. And the stranger innocently took my cue.

"I caught a few this morning," he remarked. "But they're not biting up this way. I was telling this man it's a waste of time."

ALL three of us were walking to the glass water jugs as we talked. I drank half of Sisco's water in great gulps, sighed with relief, and looked enviously at a sandwich and an orange in his lunch box.

Sisco's camera had evidently been returned to him minus the film inside. It was resting on the sand beside the lunch box.

"Taking pictures?" I asked.

"Thought I'd get some fish worth photographing," Sisco said. "No luck there so I've been taking a few pictures." Sisco grinned non-committally. "It's a habit of mine."

"Sometimes it's a bad habit," I said. "I read in the morning paper that the Ft. Bemis police put a man in jail last night for taking pictures."

The stranger lighted a cigarette and flipped the match away. "I saw that," he nodded. "Had something to do with that murder case over there, didn't it?"

"Yes."

"Pretty bad, wasn't it? Have they found the missing body yet?"

"They hadn't when I left this morning."

He gave me a quick look. "Are you from Ft. Bemis?"

"Just stopping there for a few days."

"Something wrong with the fishing there?"

"I was afraid I might put a hook in that body they're trying to find," I told him.

And he smiled.

"I doubt if there's much danger. If they haven't found the body by now, they probably never will. Sharks or barracuda or the currents

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will take care of that. What do the Ft. Bemis police think about it?"

"I haven't heard," I said. "They've got something else to think about now." And I looked at Sisco as I talked. "They've got another murder on their hands. An old man who was killed in the swamps south of town."

Sisco's face was a study. "Do they know who the killer is?" he asked.

"I understand they're certain who it is and they're looking for him," I said. "By now they've notified police as far as Jacksonville and are going to try to stop him from getting out of the state."

"It's a hard state to get out of when they're looking for you," Sisco said. And I wouldn't have believed his voice could be so steady as he spoke to the other man. "Now if it was California, where you live, a getaway would be easy. Plenty of roads and mountains."

"That's right," the stranger nodded.

"A smart man wouldn't try to break out of this state," Sisco said. "If I killed a man in this state and knew they might be after me, I'd try to pass myself off as a tourist and stay somewhere in the neighborhood, where no one would think of looking for me."

And the stranger said maybe it would work but he doubted it.

I'd given Sisco all the warning I could—and he was grinning about it. I was sour as I said: "All the police don't seem to be sure of it why the old fellow was killed. He didn't seem to have any enemies. Most of the people who live in Ft. Bemis seemed to know him and like him. They can't figure why a poor ragged old devil like that would be murdered."

And Sisco grinned again and said: "That ought to be easy to guess."

"You guess it," I told him. "No one else seems to be able to."

"Well, look," Sisco took me up. "How about this double killing out in the boat? Why wouldn't the old man's murder have something to do with it?"

"Emsdorff and Browning died in a boat, not the swamp," I said sarcastically. "And they died—so how the devil could they have anything to do with the murder in the swamp?"

"That's easy," Sisco retorted airily. "You say they haven't found this man Emsdorff's body. Maybe he's not dead. Maybe Emsdorff killed the old man."

"Why should Emsdorff kill that old man?" I demanded. "And anyway, if Emsdorff was alive, it would mean that Browning didn't kill Emsdorff. So there wouldn't have been any reason for Browning to commit suicide. Why, you're as good as saying that Emsdorff must have killed Browning—and left the revolver in the boat to make it look like suicide."

"Well," Sisco said, "there you are. Emsdorff certainly couldn't have killed Browning accidentally, in defending himself from Browning's attack. For then Emsdorff could have gone to the police as soon as he got ashore and claimed self-defense. He didn't. So if he killed Brown-

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ing, it was deliberate murder—and why wouldn't he kill some other stranger who got in his way when he came ashore?"

THE stranger chuckled. "You two men are doing some tall supposing. It's too hot to think so seriously."

"I call it dumb," I said. "The way this fellow is reasoning. For if this man Emsdorff killed Browning—and is alive now—it means that Emsdorff came to Ft. Bemis with murder on his mind. It means that Emsdorff must have left Chicago with murder on his mind."

"Go on," Sisco invited. "You're proving my point. Emsdorff must have embezzled the bank's money—and knew that Browning could prove it. But with Browning dead, the guilt would stay on Browning. Emsdorff seems to have put the guilt on Browning in the first place, when he reported the shortage. It would be one of the smoothest frame-ups on an innocent man that I've ever heard."

"Smooth," I agreed. "It would be perfect—if it happened that way. Browning dead and Emsdorff aparently dead, so nobody would look for him. He could take another identity and have nothing to worry about. That is—if it happened that way."

"The whole thing looks screwy to me," Sisco said. "Think it over. Two men meet like pals in the morning and fish all day without trouble. Then suddenly decide to kill each other."

"They evidently did," I said dryly.

"Maybe," Sisco said, and he wasn't smiling now. "The boat," he told me, "was heading out to sea when it was found. Several days might have passed before it was discovered. Whoever set it on the course must have hoped so. Which was probably one reason why the trouble happened so late in the day, when most of the Ft. Bemis fishing boats had started back and there wasn't much chance of discovery."

"I don't think anyone's thought of that," I admitted.

"There seems to be plenty they haven't thought of," Sisco said. "The paper says that Emsdorff took a plane out of Chicago. He was in such a hurry to see Browning that he flew to the nearest point to Ft. Bemis. And if he was so hurried, would he have waited all day in the boat before bringing up his business and setting off the fireworks?"

"Browning could have listened to him—and then waited until late in the day before trying to kill him."

"Maybe," Sisco said again. "But a suicide is a suicide. I doubt if Browning would have headed that boat out to sea before shooting himself. He wouldn't give a damn how soon he was found. He'd probably have cut the motor off first."

"Speculation."

"Suppose Browning was guilty of the embezzlement, that he planned it all cold-bloodedly and carefully. He had to kill Emsdorff and he did kill him."

"That's what the paper says."

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"O. K.," Sisco said. "We'll suppose it all happened like Browning planned. He knew he'd get a few years in the pen for embezzlement. But killing Emsdorff would give him a chance to escape. He was willing to commit murder for that chance to escape. Right?"

"That seems to be what happened," I agreed. "Then after Browning killed his man and was all set to escape as he planned—why in hell did he commit suicide?" Sisco demanded.

"You win," I said. "Maybe Emsdorff is alive." And as the possibilities struck me I grew excited. "If he's alive, he got ashore safely some way! Maybe he had another boat come out and get him! Had it arranged before he showed up in Ft. Bemis!"

"Would a man planning to disappear for good, feel safe with someone else knowing about him?" Sisco asked.

"That dead man in the swamp! Maybe Emsdorff hired him to bring a boat out—and then killed him!"

"Too much risk," Sisco said promptly, as if he knew what he was talking about. "The man might have talked before he started out with the boat. No, Emsdorff would go through with it alone. The boat with Browning's body was discovered well out beyond the islands, in open water. No one was steering. So if Emsdorff landed from the boat, or swam in from near the shore, he had to start the boat back out to sea beyond the last island, six or seven miles south of Ft. Bemis, where the salt water swamps lie just back of the beach."

I looked at Sisco speechlessly. For a great light had dawned on me. I had realized that I was hearing from Sisco the startling news story which he had promised Tom Hendricks.

I was getting the truth of that photograph of the old man's body lying in the swamp. I was understanding the mud on Sisco's shoes and clothes, the scratches still showing on his hands and cheek.

SISCO said: "The highway runs a couple of miles back from the beach through there. And the swampy ground is between the highway and the beach. It's lonely through there. Suppose Emsdorff swam ashore with his shoes suspended around his neck, walked up on the sand and sat down and put on the shoes. Then looked up to see another man approaching, and obviously curious as to what had happened. Wouldn't Emsdorff realize instantly that this man would have to die too?"

"He'd be a fool if he didn't," I agreed. "And if the old man got an inkling of it, and started to run, Emsdorff would chase him. Chase him back into the swamp and kill him and leave him there."

"I suppose someone came along the beach and found the tracks, then followed them into the swamp growth and found the body." Sisco mused. "And now all they have to do is follow the tracks to the highway, where Emsdorff would have to go—and decide which way he went from there and how he traveled. He shouldn't be hard to find. Why, if I was as smart as Emsdorff," Sisco said owlishly, "I'd

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only go to Laguna Springs—and I'd take another name and lie low until the excitement blew over."

"You know a lot," the stranger said. "A damn sight more than you got out of the morning newspaper!"

After hearing all that, I was still slow on the uptake. I saw the stranger's hand whip a gun from under the khaki coat—and it still didn't occur to me for an instant that he meant murder.

But Sisco knew it. Sisco must have been watching for it. Sisco jumped at him and grabbed at the arm as the shot crashed out. And they were suddenly tangled together and reeling across the soft sand, with Sisco in close and holding to the stranger's gun hand.

Two more shots blasted out over the beach before I got an arm around the stranger's neck from behind.

Sisco had the gun a moment later. The stranger was gasping, choking as I threw him in a heavy fall and stood panting over him.

"Why the devil didn't you jump quicker?" Sisco panted. "I'll bet he ruined my camera!"

Sisco already had grabbed the camera off the ground where the stranger's foot had kicked it. A quick look at the camera and Sisco eyed the sun, made an adjustment, and focused on the stranger, who, by this time, was coughing and feeling his neck as he sat up there on the sand. "Damn that camera!" I exploded. "You'd

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take pictures if your grandmother fell off a house! Who is this guy?"

"Emsdorff!" Sisco sang out—and the stranger looked at him and Sisco got his picture.

The man was Emsdorff all right, and he went crazy again when we tied him with a rope from one of the boats. And when he was tied he lapsed into a sullen silence as we loaded him into Sisco's boat and drew the other two boats safely up on the beach and started for Ft. Bemis.

Sisco's explanation of the dead man in the swamp was simple as we put-putted up the coast. He'd reasoned everything out, and gone along with two flashlights to that lonely stretch of beach south of Ft. Bemis.

He'd searched the beach where Emsdorff might have come ashore—and found footprints where Emsdorff had come ashore. And photographed them. Emsdorff had sat down and put on shoes, and got up, walked a few yards and met another man's footprints. And both men had turned back into the swamp.

"It was plain enough what had happened," Sisco told me. "The old man got about a quarter of a mile back from the beach through undergrowth he almost had to burrow and claw through. But Emsdorff got him anyway. There he was with his head bashed in and dragged a few yards and pushed down half out of sight in some mud and water. He probably never would have been found. I had to drag him out and push some of the undergrowth back before I could get pictures."

AND it was almost as grisly to think of Sisco pushing in alone on that trail at night and finding the body. You wouldn't think Sisco had the nerve. And dragging the body out of the mud and water to make flashlight pictures! Photographing the footprints on the beach! Documenting step by step the whole gruesome business!

"What did this guy do aiter he killed the old man?" I asked.

"He went back to the beach," Sisco said. "And walked about half a mile south to an old overgrown path that cut through to the highway. On his way from Tampa to Ft. Bemis he had stopped off in Laguna Springs and rented a camp cabin under the name of Arnold Downing, of Los Angeles. Said he was going to

Classified Advertising

(Continued)

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fish for a week or so. All he had to do after killing Browning was to show up at his cabin and go fishing this morning. Which he did. Clear out to the end of that island, where he could loaf all day, I guess, and not be noticed."

Sisco grinned at me. "You saved the bacon, Johnny. When I did find him, I was alone with him and couldn't do anything but talk and try to figure some way of taking him without a gun."

"Very nice," I said. "But after you followed his footsteps out of the swamp, how did you know he was at Laguna Springs?"

"Easy. I'll tell you after we get to Ft. Bemis." And that was all he would tell me. Our prisoner wouldn't talk either. Wouldn't tell what he'd done with the money he'd looted from the Chicago bank and blamed on Browning. Wouldn't say anything. He looked like a sullen sick man with the chair already before his eyes.

Ft. Bemis looked peaceful as we came in. The fishing boats scattered over the calm water. A few loafers were around the wharf. Captain Snell was there, lean and weatherbeaten in his soiled white ducks. Only today Captain Snell hailed us genially as we came in.

"Got lost, didn't you? Ain't that one of Sam Preston's Laguna Springs boats?" And then the captain stared and called out as I cut the motor off. "It's you, is it? What you got in the bottom of that boat? Is it the body we been huntin'?"



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Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

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

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"It's him!" Sisco replied, and picked up his camera and spoke to me as I steered the drifting boat to the wharf. "I'm going to the hotel, Johnny. Turn this guy over to the cops."

Captain Snell stared in amazement when the body stirred and sat up. And Sisco jumped out of the boat and hurried off with his camera. On his way to the telephone, and to the airmail with his films!

Captain Snell shouted after him: "They're lookin' for you! You won't get away, young feller!"

But the missing body that had come back to life held Captain Snell there, swearing and demanding to know what it meant.

By the time I told him we had a growing audience. Enough to take care of Emsdorff. I said I was going to report to the police and started for the hotel to find Sisco.

The desk clerk told me Sisco had been in, asked for Mrs. Browning, and hurried out again. Mrs. Browning had already checked out and left for the railroad station to start back to Chicago with her husband's body.

More pictures! I was sure of it as I looked in the Nu-Art reception room, told Sheila we were back with Emsdorff, and started for the station myself. Sisco would wring the last possible negative from this case. Even pictures of the widow when she heard her husband had been the victim of a murderous frame-up.

The train came in just as I arrived. The crowd at the small Ft. Bemis station surprised me. Then I remembered that Mrs. Browning had everyone's sympathy. They were here to see her off on her sad trip.

It was easy enough to find Sisco after I pushed and shoved through the crowd. He was near the widow, with his camera, unnoticed, and getting set for a picture.

Chief Shute, Leo Crane and the mayor were with Mrs. Browning. And several prominent ladies of the town. All solicitous as they escorted the black-clad widow to the Pullman steps.

I was pushing, shoving closer to Sisco as the widow reached the train steps. I saw Sisco lift the camera. The smile on his face was almost diabolic, and I wondered again if Sisco didn't have an inhuman streak where his camera work was concerned. For he might have been speaking to some young chippy on the streets as he suddenly called out.

"Give us a smile for the newspapers, Babe! We're going to put you on the front pages!"

I saw Mrs. Browning gasp with surprise as she turned. And even then I noticed what a stunner she was in black clothes. Chief Shute and Leo Crane and the others turned too—just as Sisco got his picture.

Shute's voice sounded strangled as he started toward Sisco. "Give me that camera! You're under arrest!"

THE diabolic grin stayed on Sisco's face as he made the camera ready for another picture and answered Shute.

"You don't want me, sucker. You want Mrs. Browning there, as an accessory to the murder of her husband and that old man in the swamp! She planned her husband's murder with Ems-

dorff! She helped Emsdorff escape to Laguna Springs!"

Chief Shute stopped as if he had been clubbed. His red face grew redder in the sudden deathly silence that had fallen.

"What the devil are you saying?" Shute roared.

Still grinning, Sisco lifted the camera.

"Emsdorff is on his way to your office to sign a confession. Put her under arrest before all of you make bigger fools of yourselves!"

The wail that came from Mrs. Browning was part cat-anger and part sheer terror that rose to a scream at the last.

"He said he wouldn't tell anything no matter what happened! Oh! I hate him! I hate him now, the weak fool! Oh, oh, oh—"

Leo Crane caught her as she fainted—and Sisco got a picture of it and was smiling with satisfaction when I shoved to his side in the quick confusion.

"So you had her spotted all the time! This is the story you promised Chicago! The story that's better than the Chinaman's second death!"

"Sure," Sisco said. "Li Hung was a Shanghai merchant who stole all the firm's money, killed his partner, swapped clothes with the dead man, set fire to the building where it happened, and vanished with the partner's wife. She had been in on it. Everybody thought Li Hung was the victim and the partner had fled with his wife. A few months later the wife was recognized in Canton. The police went around to arrest her husband for murdering Li Hung, and shot him as he tried to escape through a window. So Li Hung got killed for murdering Li Hung and the woman drew a death sentence out of it. It was a good way to tip Tom Hendricks off that I had something here."

"And who tipped you off about Mrs. Browning?" I asked.

"Somebody picked Emsdorff up after he cut through the swamp to the highway. I'd thought it was queer that Mrs. Browning wanted fishing photographs when she didn't seem to care about fishing herself. So when I got back from the swamp I went to the garage and looked at the Browning automobile. It had swamp mud in the back off someone's shoes, and there was a damp spot on the seat. That was enough for me. Emsdorff had evidently sat in the back seat and changed to dry clothes while the car was being driven along the highway.

"A colored man at the garage told me the car had been washed and greased only the night before. Browning hadn't had time to drive it anywhere before he went fishing with Emsdorff. But when I looked at the mileage penciled on the grease sticker and compared it with the speedometer, I saw that the car had been driven seventy-eight miles since it was greased. That meant about twenty-five or thirty-five miles down the highway and back. Laguna Springs was the only town that fitted. I went there as quick as I could this morning and started asking questions at every place where a stranger might be staying. Simple, eh? And Ft. Bemis lands smack on all the front pages with one of the sweetest sex crimes I've ever seen! Pictures and everything."

"Simple," I said. "And terrific."

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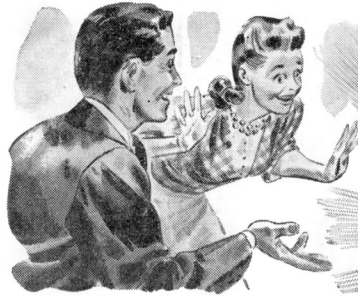
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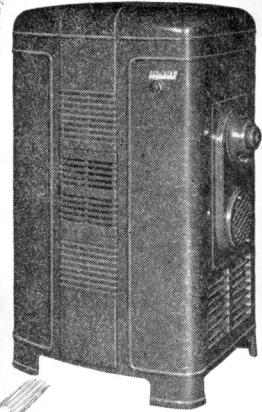
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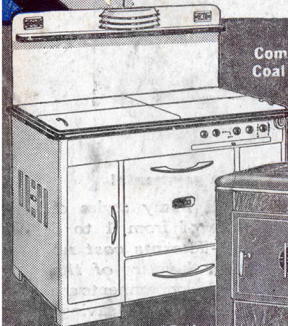
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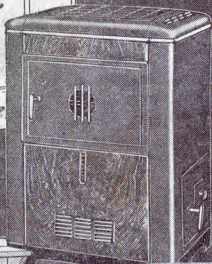
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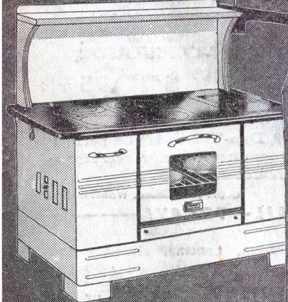
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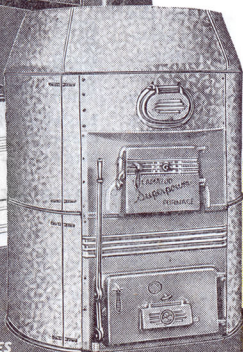
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