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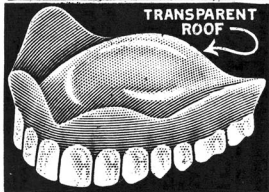
A CASH WALE NOVELETTE
by PETER PAIGE

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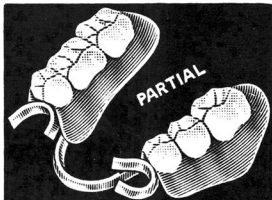
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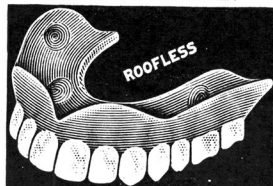
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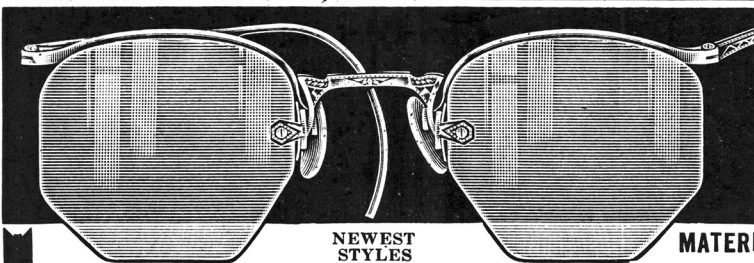
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10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



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Vol. 39

CONTENTS FOR JUNE, 1942

No. 3

3—ACTION-CRAMMED MIDNIGHT MURDER NOVELETTES—3

Help Cash Wade find

A Corpse for Cinderella.....Peter Paige 8
As a kill-bullet explodes a bubble-dancer's stock-in-trade, turning Broadway's sweetest publicity gag into as sour a slay set-up as ever boomeranged in a play producer's puss.

Watch the Dean unravel

The Riddle of the Bashful Ghost.....Merle Constiner 48
When the bats and striches fly at twilight and the restless corpse shifts in its wormy coffin, inviting its earthbound friends to make merry in a charnel house of greed and sudden death.

Ride with Bookie Barnes on the trail of

Murder Without Death.....Robert Reeves 81
While he tools his ten-ton behemoth of the highway across the noxious spoor of a fugitive from a coffin who couldn't leave dead enough alone.

2—GRIPPING SHORT DETECTIVE STORIES—2

Follow the Acme Indemnity Op as he digs into

The Case of the Meek Millionaire.....Jan Dana 38
Who had vanished seven years ago leaving a cold trail, a cool hundred and fifty grand—and a wife who was hot for the coin if nothing else.

Echo Doc Pierce's

Hello, Sucker!.....Richard Dermody 104
As he cozens the Cracker apple-knockers with his carney-pitch spiel and de-fins them one by one in a laugh-a-lap race through orange-blossom land that wound up in a crack-up for the slicker and a profit for the slickee.

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.

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

Cover—"Her Knees Wobbled and She Took a Staggering Half-Step."

From *The Case of the Meek Millionaire*.

Black-and-white illustrations by John Fleming Gould

Watch for the July Issue

On the Newsstands June 5th

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The July Thrill Docket

BILL BRENT, alias Lora Lorne, the *Recorder's* heart-throb specialist-in-spite-of-himself is back again. *You Slay Me, Baby!* is what FREDERICK C. DAVIS calls this smashing new novelette in his perennially popular series.

Still harnessed to the advice-to-the-lovelorn desk, Brent wades through the oceans of lush mushnotes that are his nightly stint and comes up with the damndest sequence of murder clues that ever befuddled a news-sleuth. Every one points straight to a new-born infant in the maternity ward of Heights Hospital as the cold-blooded killer, and not till he barges into the nursery on the most fantastic homicide hunt of his checkered career does Brent put the bee on the guilty gun-baby.

D. L. CHAMPION, in *Murder in the Mirror*, brings back Inspector Allhoff, the legless misanthrope of Centre Street, to drink his way through an ink-black sea of mocha and in the drinking solve the peculiar homicide riddle of the killer who shot himself, among other victims. Officer Battersly was responsible for bringing the case to Allhoff's attention—it was that melancholy clay-pigeon-in-uniform's bride-to-be who looked, at first, like the prime murder suspect—and Battersly should have known better than to put the gal within his boss's bitter orbit. But love walks in where even fallen angels fear to tread and the heedless copper thought Allhoff, despite his legless condition, would leap to her defense. Far from it. The upshot was *no* bride for Battersly—and a deeper murder mire than ever for him and Simmonds to struggle in.

And JOHN LAWRENCE, in *Death of a Dog*, gives us another gripping adventure of the Marquis of Broadway, novelette-length and crammed with the color and action that have made these stories famous.

Plus yarns by C. P. DONNEL, Jr., J. LANE LINKLATER and others.

This great JULY issue will be on sale JUNE 5th.

Ready for the Rackets A Department

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

THE chisel fraternity never fails to take advantage of a timely angle. As witness the unsavory case below—

Columbus, Ohio

Gentlemen:

This detestable swindle preys upon those who find themselves unemployed because of the dislocation of industry due to defense, or otherwise.

It starts, as so many of them do, with a series of ads appearing in your city's papers. Office help of all kinds are wanted: typists, stenographers, comptometer operators, posting billing clerks, file clerks, etc. . . . In some instances men have been duped with calls for machinists and mechanics of all sorts. The ads usually start appearing on Sunday and continue until Friday of the same week.

By this time the operators have their sucker-list, names, addresses and all. Each and every person who has answered one of these ads receives a telegram, delivered by a boy in uniform, sometime during the week-end. The message itself is typed upon the regulation form, is rather lengthy, in that it informs the individual he or she has been passed upon favorably and is to report to work Monday morning at such and such an hour. Pay is to be so much, with a raise at the end of six weeks probationary period. And the whole thing is signed with a non-existent firm name—the same as that on the door of the office where the applicants put in their bids for jobs. Right now the tendency seems to run to names suggesting a tie-up with U. S. Defense work. National Fabricating, National Amalgamated, etc. . . .

But you are asking how these people lose anything? Very simply, and in such a manner that not one in a hundred ever suspect anything until it is too late. The telegrams are lengthy, remember—and they are delivered "collect." Sums ranging to seventy-eight cents have been collected, and when multiplied several hundred or a thousand times, the expense of operating the swindle is negligible indeed. And the worst point of all is that if anyone at all is apprehended, it is the boys who have been hired and put into uniforms to deliver the "wires."

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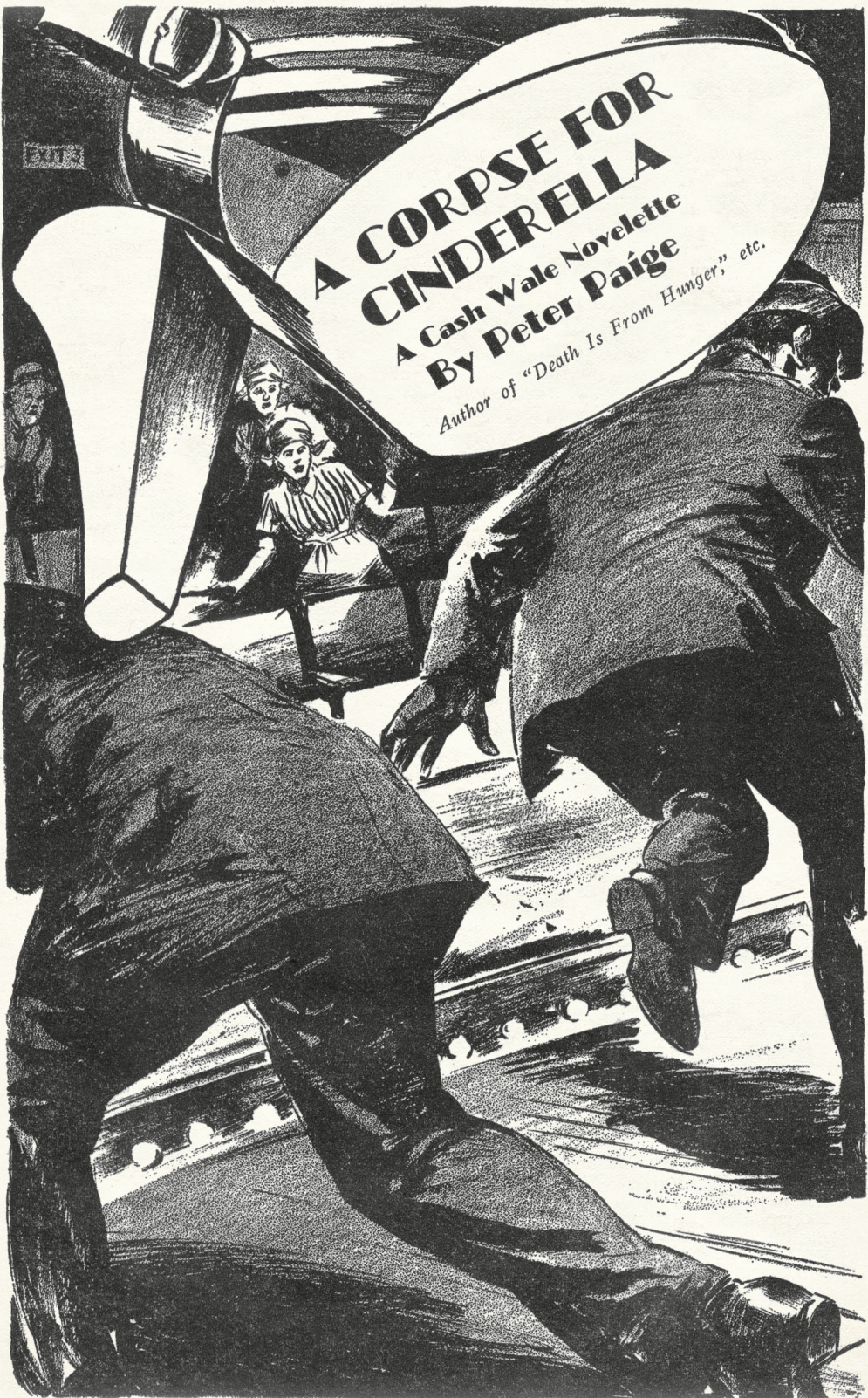
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EXIT

A CORPSE FOR CINDERELLA

A Cash Wale Novelette
By Peter Paige

Author of "Death Is From Hunger," etc.





My gray fedora flew off as a gun-blast rocked the theater with repeated echoes.

CHAPTER ONE

Is There an Undertaker in the House?

IT ALL began with the dog who liked beer. That was in the bubble-dancer's dressing-room where Benny Fox, producer-author of *A Prince for Cinderella*, which was due to titillate a resplendent first night audience in exactly fifteen minutes, raved: "What is happening to me shouldn't happen to Hitler! On opening night yet! Listen, Cash, as a personal favor and for one hundred dollars, will you bodyguard Lorelei?"

Lorelei said: "Don't ask him if he'll do it. For one hundred bucks Cash Wale will sell his soul to the Devil and throw in his right eye for a bonus. I don't see why you're in such an uproar over Strip, Benny, but if that's how you want it, I'll play. Only keep Wale far enough from me so people won't think we're together."

Strip was her dog. A Scotty. It lay on its side on the dressing-room floor with its legs stiff as rods and its eyes frozen open. The beer bottle sat on the vanity, also open. The beer tasted flat. The glass from which Lorelei had been drinking held an inch of brew that likewise tasted flat.

The Scotty's portion half filled a saucer on the floor inches from its tail. I didn't taste that—not with the peach-like odor of cyanide hovering over it in a gentle bouquet. The same bouquet clung to the dog's mouth and droplets of yellow froth clung to its long black whiskers.

The dog was still warm. But dead.

BENNY FOX said: "See how it is, Cash? A warning maybe. Or a preparation for something worse yet. In show business you can make enemies and not even know it. Maybe some *gonnif* is wanting to harm Lorelei and he poisons the dog first so it won't be in the way. Maybe—"

"Save the dream stuff," I cut in. "For a hundred bucks I'll bodyguard Lorelei from now to her door. If you want me to find answers to this"—my foot touched Strip's corpse—"it'll cost five hundred more for results."

"No," Benny said. "Like I told you, in show business you can have a million enemies and ninety-nine times out of a hundred it means just that you get dirty looks and maybe a screwball stunt like sending a threat to jinx the production. I am wanting you to guard Lorelei only because this could be the hundredth case and—"

"Why me?" I cut in again. "Why not the cops?"

Benny's teeth clamped on his unlit cigar. If he ever got around to igniting that stogie, one puff would make him an ambulance case.

He was perhaps an inch taller than a midget and almost as wide as he was tall and the pudginess of him turned a couple

of hundred dollars' worth of custom tailoring into wrinkled brown rags.

His complexion was the pasty gray you find on the undersides of damp rocks. His eyes swam in blood. His hair wasn't. His accent mutilated speech and yet the lyrics he penned made you forget Irving Berlin. The shows he cooked up made you wonder what you ever saw in Ziegfeld's extravaganzas. For the spectacular, he out-Rosed Billy and out-Barnumed P.T. And, as Mr. Secretary Morgenthau can relate, old King Midas was a piker by comparison. Nuff sed.

He told me: "You know the cops, Cash. The cast is nervous enough already without third degrees every five minutes. Anyhow, the whole show builds up to Lorelei going around happy, and how can she be happy with cops in her hair? She'll be thinking every minute it's a raid, no?"

"No," Lorelei said. "But if your heart's set on Wale, O.K. by me. Only get Strip out of here, Benny. He gives me the creeps."

Benny did it with a colored porter who looked sick at the prospect and sicker in action and then I was alone with Lorelei. She was on a stool before her vanity and toying with some open jars of makeup.

"You're not breaking your heart over Strip," I commented dryly.

Lorelei's eyes riveted to mine in the vanity's mirror and she said: "Listen, half-pint, every approach from A to Zilch has been pulled on me and, while I may have had moments, it shouldn't stir your juices because I'm telling you right now you leave me icy and the answer to all your questions is positively *no!* What are you leering at?"

What I was leering at involved a flimsy crimson something that emphasized a figure that was curvaceous, to put it mildly, a jungle of hair that would dim a flaming sunset and eyes of midnight blue that told me full well she knew the state of my glands and defied me to dispute that she was one of the most exciting descendants of Eve in circulation, period.

"Be thankful I'm just your guard, body," I said. "Or I'd have to go around finding out why someone who went to the trouble of dropping cyanide in your dog's beer couldn't have just as easily done likewise by you. For the rest, keep in mind

that until your tootsies pound your bedroom floor we're practically one. I'll be outside the door in case you want help."

Her eyes in the vanity mirror killed me half a dozen times on my way to the door and then I could imagine them stabbing through the wooden panels. I was looking up into Sailor Duffy's scrambled countenance.

"We woikin', Cash?" he fognornd.
"We gotta job, Cash?"

"A snap," I told him. "Stick around."

A SNAP, as when the head is parted from the neck, I *should* have told him, but how was I to know? Impending murders don't cast their shadows before, unless you want to call the poisoning of

stub from inside a gilt top hat a dimpled little blonde held. Lorelei read the stub and crooned:

"You're my Prince, you're Cinderella's Prince, the man in H twenty-thuree-e-e—"

Benny nudged me.

"This is it, Cash! If it clicks, the show's in. It's the greatest novelty since—"

"I read the ads," I said dryly. "What are they laughing at?"

Lorelei was repeating: ". . . *You're Cinderella's Prince, the man in H twenty-thuree-e-e-eeee—*" But her voice was buried in waves of laughter that rolled over the footlights.

Benny's teeth clamped through his cigar. "Shouldn't repeat," he muttered. He spat

"You're my Prince—you're Cinderella's Prince—the man in H twenty-thurree-eee!" crooned Lorelei, the bubble-dancer, and every male at the opening of Benny Fox's latest extravaganza envied the guy whose ticket stub she had pulled out of the top-hat. "A sweet gag, Benny," shamus Cash Wale complimented the little impresario. But it turned as sour as Lorelei's high notes when a murder bullet exploded the bubble-dancer's stock-in-trade—and the mousy little Prince found his "throne" about as safe as the hot-seat itself.

Strip's beer a shadow. But not of murder—because nobody was poisoned. Yet the dog was important—its death marked the final twist of a quadruple-cross. Strip's corpse blew one of the neatest plots in the history of crime to smithereens.

But in the next fifteen minutes I'd forgotten Strip. Backstage of any musical comedy première is a show in itself. With a Benny Fox production, it was something special. The 1942 model chorus girl is pretty terrific and Benny had done himself proud. Following Lorelei through the backstage confusion and color, watching the chorines maneuver their modern design, dodging contortionists limbering up and the comics polishing their routines, I had myself a time.

And then I was standing with Benny Fox behind a flimsy backdrop that concealed us from the audience but put the show practically in our laps. Halfway through Act One, Lorelei picked a ticket

out tobacco and mouthed a fresh stogie as Lorelei, her lovely arms extended into the glare of a magenta spot, bawled her third version, half a beat ahead of the musicians who played like mad to catch up.

Benny Fox gripped my arm.

"Cash, go see what's the matter. If it's a dame in H twenty-three, drag her escort. As a personal favor, Cash—"

"Go yourself," I scowled, shrugging his pudgy fingers off my arm. "I'm no master of ceremonies. I'm with Lorelei, remember?"

"No, Cash. It maybe needs fast talking. If this don't click, the show washes out and it's my own money in it. Please, Cash. As a personal favor and for another hundred dollars—"

So I found myself in the orchestra. I didn't have to follow the turned heads or the members of the glittering audience rising in their seats for a better view. Lorelei was grimly shouting through the

laughter: “. . . the man in H twenty-thureceeeeee!”

Her and the pianist. Lorelei was no singer. The rest of the orchestra had given up.

The man in H twenty-three was half-way to his feet and had the color a beet would have if a beet could blush. He was clutching a black cane to his sunken bosom with both hands and shaking his head frantically. I slid into row H and had his elbow before he saw me.

“Don’t be bashful, sport,” I said, touching the invisible button in his elbow. “She wants you, sport—she’s picking you for a gay whirl—this is your night, sport. Go and let her teach you the rudiments of ecstasy, you happy, lucky devil, you! What’s your name?”

The happy, lucky devil had no chin to speak of, an open, moist mouth, washed-out gray eyes and a blond fuzz to cap him—a Mr. Meek’s conception of a Mr. Meek. We were moving back along row H. He was hopping. It was that invisible button in his elbow. Ask any cop, bouncer, wrestler, lifeguard or yourself when you fall on it.

“Albert Ch—” he blurted between hops. “I mean—Charles—Albert—”

There was a sedan chair in the aisle, attended by eight darlings garbed in dimples. My fingers under Charles Albert’s ribs sent him leaping into the chair with laughter.

They bore him toward the stage as the chorus broke out into *Hail to the Prince!* I drew a handful of curious looks as applause mingled with laughter. I heard someone say: “If I didn’t see it, I wouldn’t believe it—that’s Cash Wale.” And someone else: “The name’s familiar.” And the first: “He’d shoot your mother-in-law for the right price.” And a third big mouth: “If he likes you he’ll skip the price and shoot her just for the hell of it.”

Mind it? Not Mrs. Wale’s little boy, Cash. That was the kind of advertising that gets results. That was the sort of talk that brought me business. Without it, I’d be peddling papers. I scowled at the third kibitzer for effect, then went backstage.

BENNY wailed: “Can you imagine, Cash? A house full of wolves drooling for a chance at Lorelei and a patsy she

has to pick! Thanks. That’s two hundred you’re getting.”

“Better a shy little flower like him,” I said, “than a wise guy. He’s getting sympathy and laughs. That’s the idea, isn’t it? When does Lorelei undrape?”

The cigar pointed.

“Now.”

They had Charles Albert in a booth that left him visible to the audience through glass from the waist up. Over his head was a shower nozzle and around his knees, invisible to the audience, crouched two chorus boys.

They had talked him into removing his gray jacket but he was putting up a struggle for his black cane. There was a concealed mike in the booth which the chorus boys turned on whenever the “Prince’s” comments grew comical.

He was the novelty twist to *A Prince for Cinderella*. Each performance was designed to net a new Prince. On entering, every male’s ticket stub landed in the gilt top hat and then it was up to Lorelei to do her stuff.

The Prince was due to get bathed, manicured, barbered and completely outfitted in full view of the audience, then watch the show from a throne right on the stage and, finally, the Prince was to be Lorelei’s escort to any night club of his selection—with all expenses on Benny Fox.

All a parody on Cinderella, of course, with the Prince being glamorized from obscurity instead of *la* Cinderella. And Benny Fox was just the guy to put it across.

It had me in a trance as the lights dimmed and Lorelei, in a single magenta spot, hip-swayed directly before Charles Albert’s booth—and stepped out of her skirt.

His pants flew out of the booth at the same instant and the audience had itself convulsions.

“But good!” I told Benny as Lorelei teasingly undraped to violent applause while the Prince became a goggling statue, his clothes being plucked off him like feathers off a chicken.

“Why not?” Benny chortled happily. “Watch the snapper.”

The lights were practically out. Only the floating silvery balloon stood between

Lorelei's creamy whiteness and the audience. From behind it was sensational. Someone turned on the shower over Prince Charles and laughter pounded through that house in one solid roar—

The silvery balloon popped. A hole leaped into the gauzy backdrop between Benny Fox and me. Something tugged my sleeve. A rope on the wall behind me parted with a twang.

It all happened at once.

"Some snapper," I breathed.

Benny's blood-filmed eyes squinted at me. He couldn't have gotten where he was if he wasn't fast on the uptake. His finger trembled to the hole in the backdrop and his face aged twenty years.

"No, Cash," he protested. "This I don't understand, believe me—"

I gaped over my shoulder at the upper portion of the severed rope gliding silently upward with only half its load of sandbags. My eyes swiveled to the stage where the stiff asbestos curtain was gliding silently downward over the spectacle of Lorelei racing like fury for the wings while the audience howled in sheer ecstasy.

On the stage lay the limp shred of rubber that had been her balloon. On the brick wall where the rope had parted was a flattened blob of lead. It was warm to my touch. Benny was at my elbow as I plucked it off.

"A bullet, Cash?" he whispered.

Backstage was a riot of confusion. The stage manager was yelling for the plush curtains to be dropped and for someone to connect the severed ends of rope so the asbestos curtain could be raised. Chorines raced for the dressing-rooms and scenery began moving around.

I told Benny, "Keep it quiet from her if you want to keep her happy," and started for the orchestra.

Somebody had thrown a robe over Lorelei. She swept past me without recognition, her orbs hot on little Benny. I lingered just long enough to hear her preamble: "Is that *your* idea of a comical gag, you measly, little no-good piece of—"

So I had to work for Benny's dough after all.

IT WAS a question of following an imaginary line from the lead on the wall through the hole in the backdrop and

singling out the gunman from approximately one thousand of Manhattan's theater-going elite. Which was ducky because the audience had accepted what happened as the smash climax to Act One. It was on its collective feet and jamming the aisles.

But then I noticed the imaginary line would probably miss the audience. It angled and descended and indicated a curtained alcove halfway up the side aisle.

I squeezed past bare shoulders and carelessly hung ice and fabulous hunks of fur and enough dress suits to stock an undertakers' convention and pulled aside the alcove's drapery to stare up into Sailor Duffy's fist-mangled face.

He was holding a paper cup of water. He said: "Here's the lake juice I get fer yer, pal—aw, Cash, it's you. I t'ought it wuz the guy."

"So there's a guy," I murmured as the draperies fell behind me sealing us in semi-darkness. The alcove was for fire exits and one stood open. I peered up and down the alley it faced—a narrow passage running clean through the block from Forty-third to Forty-fourth. It held nothing but darkness and the faint murmur of distant traffic.

"Nah, Cash, the guy ain't walkin' out after astin' me t'bring him a drink, is he?" Sailor breathed on my neck.

I closed the door, bringing to life a spark on the plush drape. I touched the spark and my finger went through the drape. Search disclosed two more similarly singed holes.

"So he used the curtain for a silencer," I mused. "He stood here and took his shot when everybody's attention was on the water flooding Charles Albert. Then the asbestos curtain blocked his chance for a second shot—unless he was just a wise guy out to pop the bubble in the first place."

My glare at the Sailor and his probably baffled expression were both lost in the dark.

"What guy?" I demanded.

"Aw, Cash, ya said yaself I should hang aroun'. So I hang aroun' here on account I wanna see what makes wit' Benny's show an' all the seats wuz took. So when I hear this guy monkeyin' wit' the door here, I let him in, see?"

Now that I'd closed the door there was a faint odor of cordite. I struck a match and saw that Sailor still held the paper cup of water. I plucked it from him and spilled it between us as the match flickered out.

"This is wonderful," I said. "He monkeyed with the door, so you let him in. Just a pal. Continue."

Sailor took a noisy breath.

"Aw, Cash, I figger it's allus you draggin' in the bucks wit' me never toinin' a dime. So I'm thinkin' 'at Prince stooge ain't gonna use his seat no more in the show so I peddle this guy the Prince stooge's seat fer a finif. On'y he hadda wait till the stooge gets on the stage an' when the bubble dance comes on he ast me t'get him a drink on account he's thoisty. So I—"

"So you fell for the gag and left him free to take his shot," I groaned. "Can you remember the looks of this guy?"

"A Armenian, Cash. A skinny Armenian wit' a green coat an' hat. I 'member particular, he got good teeth."

"If he was screwy enough to hang around, could you recognize him?"

"Sure, Cash. Am I a dope? If I find him, then what?"

"Is he a dope?" I muttered, drawing my Colt revolver from its leather. I pressed it into Sailor's massive paw. "Put this in your pocket," I told him. "If you see the guy, get him alone, then point this at him. Don't squeeze the trigger. The safety's on, but leave the trigger alone. Just point it at him and get his rod. Got that?"

"The guy packs a rod, Cash?"

"If he don't we'll laugh it off. But if he does, get it and put it in your pocket with my rod. Use your mitts from then on—if you have to, knock him out. Take him through the nearest exit and around to the stage door where you'll tell Pop Blassingame to get me. Is that clear?"

"Sure, Cash. I ain't dumb. I get it."

"He ain't dumb!" I breathed. "I ought to beat your fool head off. You had the guy—"

Had anyone overheard this he would have phoned an undertaker to collect my remains. I scale one-thirty and shade Benny Fox by maybe an inch—while Sailor Duffy, if you remember your sport headlines, just happens to be the guy who

dropped a close fifteen-round decision to the world's heavyweight champ some years back.

Sailor could have plucked me to pieces with four fingers. but I was the guy who led him by the hand when his sock-silly billiard ball of a head began to rattle and gave him self-respect and dignity of a job as the muscle-half of the Cash Wale Investigation Service. And the big dope took my guff humbly.

For my part, he was the only guy in the world not ashamed to be seen in public with the guy the rags periodically brand as, quote, that gun-crazy killer with a badge and pistol permit, Cash Wale, unquote. Furthermore, Sailor Duffy, in his lucid moments, is probably the world's heavyweight champion rough and tumble scrapper and one hell of an advantage to have on your side when the action is too close for gunplay.

He pleaded now: "Aw, Cash, what I do wrong now?"

"You could have held that Armenian up for twenty bucks!" I snapped back at him as I pushed out of the alcove.

CHAPTER TWO

The Terrified Prince

BACKSTAGE, the confusion was normal. Benny had not advertised the bullet. They had dried Charles Albert and wrapped him in silks and set a gilt crown on his blond fuzz and he didn't like it.

"I don't *want* to be the prince!" he was protesting. "I don't *want* to sit on the stage. What I want are my clothes and cane. I need my cane. I can't walk without it. I—"

He'd collected a motley, colorful crowd about him. Lorelei, still in her robe, crooned soothingly: "Don't you like me, honey?"

"Sure—*sure!*" The guy's chemistry was at least in order. "But I don't want—"

Pop Blassingame, the stage doorman, elbowed through the mob with his arms full of Charles Albert's gray suit and the black cane.

"'Ere now, young fella," Pop cut in, "we 'aven't eaten the bloomin' dud's

y'know. If it's the cane y'want, why keep it with you. But the rest will be in safe 'ands, y'know. No need to kick up a fuss, y'understand."

Pop was an old pale guy who bore himself like a duke and the effect of his words was immediate. Charles Albert gaped at him, took the cane lovingly and hugged it to his skinny chest. He gulped: "O.K., O.K. I'll be the prince."

Tension evaporated and I caught Pop Blassingame en route to the stage door.

"Nice going, Pop. I want to go over those clothes. See you in a few minutes?"

Pop nodded and I found Benny Fox and gestured him to the privacy of the center of the stage. He whispered: "Cash, you looked around? It's a joke some gonnif is playing on Benny, no?"

"No," I said. "Lorelei and Charles Albert were alone on the stage. The guy shot at one of them. He knew how to muffle the blast and he had the patience to wait for the right spot and he could be in Hoboken by now. A professional gunman. Benny. It's for the cops."

Benny gnawed his cigar into a spiral, looked at it, chucked it into the wings and

popped a fresh stogie between his teeth.

"I don't want to risk anybody getting hurt, Cash, but this killer would not hang around to try again, would he, Cash? Cops would stop the show and kill its chances. But if this shooter ain't coming back, it ain't no harm done to keep quiet, is it, Cash?"

Benny's pasty, fat face was screwed up into such a pathetic expression of mingled anxiety, pleading and bewilderment that I shrugged. "That's reasonable, Benny. But if anything does happen, it'll look bad for you."

"So, Cash, if you work on it?"

"I'm just bodyguarding Lorelei, remember? I should be outside her dressing-room right now."

"Cash, for a minute forget Lorelei. I want you as a personal favor and—"

"Another hundred?" I cut in. "Not for investigating, Benny. That comes higher."

"Cash, just to find out if it's Lorelei or Charles Albert who is getting shot at. If it's him, it's his headache. But if it's Lorelei I will have cops. I'll have the house surrounded by them, I promise you.

**Mow down your wiry whiskers quick!
Use Thin Gillettes — save cash — look slick!
For comfort, too, these blades are swell;
They give smooth shaves — and more as well!**



**Protect Your Skin
From Irritation
Caused By Misfit
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Save Extra Money! Get The Big New Economy Package, 12 For 27c

As a personal favor to me, Cash, and two hundred more—”

So I was on piece work.

Sailor was not in the orchestra and music heralding Act Two was rapidly filling the seats, so I went to keep my appointment with Pop Blassingame in the property-room. Charles Albert's clothes were all I had to work on for the moment.

The property-room lay adjacent to the stage door. No answer came to my knock. I walked in and absorbed the first impression of workshop confusion. There were bits of scenery, placards, piles of lettering for signs, more piles of glass lettering for the marquee and dozens of other odds and ends cluttering up shelves and corners.

I closed the door gently behind me and forced my eyes to pass over Pop Blassingame to the remains of Charles Albert's gray suit. Someone had painstakingly ripped that suit apart, torn off the jacket lining, removed the sleeves, turned every pocket and even the trouser cuffs inside out. The mutilated garments lay in a heap on the floor beside Pop Blassingame and near them lay scattered items that must have come from their pockets: wallet, papers, coins, a pipe, match booklets, a tin of tobacco, keys—the stuff a guy carries.

Pop lay sprawled on his back with his arms flung wide, his knees drawn up and a small property hatchet embedded between his eyes.

SOMEbody was going to a hell of a lot of trouble. Unless there were three somebodies—one for Lorelei's poisoned Scotty, one for the bullet and a third for this. I tried to remember what I knew of Pop Blassingame, but it was no dice. Just a quiet, elderly London accent who bobbed out of nowhere to tend a stage door.

I wrapped a handkerchief around my fingers and knelt to Charles Albert's papers. The Mexican tourist permit caught my eye. I was examining it when this low voice behind me said: “Stay just like you are, sweetheart, and read it aloud. I am curious where friend rat was headed.”

I stared over my shoulder at this tall, thin guy standing inside the door. He wore a dark brown ensemble of sharp cut. With his darkish complexion and

hawkish nose and glittering black eyes he looked more like a Turk than an Armenian, but he fitted the Sailor's description. Except the clothes. Sailor had said green but maybe the Sailor was color blind. There couldn't be two guys like that hovering around *A Prince for Cinderella* and behaving sinister.

The door was closed behind him. The revolver, pointed down at me from under the inverted V of a folded tabloid, was large enough to be a forty-five. I had the fleeting thought that not even a drape and audience laughter could drown out the detonation of a forty-five caliber revolver.

I said: “Ah, Sergeant. There's no need to hold that gun on me—I'm the man who phoned headquarters. I was simply examining these papers.”

The man in brown grinned wolfishly.

“If I didn't know different, I'd high-tail it out of here before the bulls landed, but I know different. You're quite a guy, Wale. Only don't rib me, sweetheart—it won't take. Now go ahead and read me the good word.”

I waved the Mexican tourist permit at him. “Read it yourself, sweetheart. My Spanish isn't.”

“O.K. Skip it. That ticket's English. Try that. I don't want to shove you around, Wale, I know how you don't like getting shoved around. But I have to know and what can I do?”

“We acquainted?” I puzzled.

“I hustled for Moroni when you rubbed him out in Hoboken in '28. I'm the guy who put a slug in your arm from back of the bar, only that emptied my heater and you got away. But that's ancient history now, eh, Wale? You're a legit now, a private dick, I see in the papers. Me, I didn't croak Old English on the floor, if that means anything to you. But I got to find out some things, see how I'm fixed?”

“Sure, sweetheart. Since we're confidential, how about telling me who did croak Pop?”

“I don't know, so help me, Wale.”

“You know who poisoned the dog?”

The man in brown was a picture of bewilderment.

“What dog?”

“So you didn't, you imply. How about that slug you pitched at Charles Albert?”

“Charles Albert? You mean the rat

who just got a bath up on the stage?"

"With the other rod you pack," I said.
"The automatic."

THE man in brown chuckled softly. Sailor was right, he had good teeth.

"Not me, Wale. This is the first time I'm ever in the Benny Fox Theater. I don't go for automatics, they jam too easy. And I don't like unnecessary rough-house. I like to play it smooth."

Instead of asking him how he knew Charles Albert had been picked to get the shower on the stage if this was his first time in the theater, I read the long, folded airline ticket that had lain under the Mexican tourist permit. It entitled the bearer to a ride from La Guardia Field to Tampico, Mexico—a ride scheduled to commence at four, Saturday morning.

"That's in about six hours," said the man in brown thoughtfully. "Now frisk Old English, Wale. I hate to ask you, but I'm building up from an awful let-down. A complete frisk, Wale—which means you strip him."

I said: "I'm not heeled, sweetheart. This position is beginning to cramp me. O.K. if I stand?"

The swarthy head shook, dark eyes never leaving me for an instant.

"If you was anybody else, Wale, I'd go over you to make sure. But you're such a lightning guy with a heater, I can't chance getting near you. I'd like to see you stay like you are, see what I mean?"

"Such a polite gee," I muttered, clenching my teeth and proceeding to disrobe Pop Blessingame.

Pop was growing cold. His undersides were turning purple as the blood settled. I had to force my eyes from the hatchet but as the contents of his pockets emerged into view, I forgot about the hatchet.

It was not so much Pop's airline ticket to Mexico City, a flight scheduled to start at *midnight*, four hours ahead of Charles Albert's scheduled departure. It was the fact that Pop's tourist permit was made out to: *Señor Carl McGovern*.

Every paper on Pop Blessingame bore the name of Carl McGovern.

The man in brown scowled thoughtfully down at the corpse.

"Only that twenty in his leather, Wale?"

"You watched me. How much did you expect?"

The scowl transferred to me.

"Around fifty-two grand and six yards in hundreds," he said. He brooded over the figure a moment, then asked: "When the rat got his shower bath on the stage, was he stripped clean?"

"You saw it," I fished.

"Not me, sweetheart, not me," he replied, avoiding the bait.

"He couldn't have been stripped cleaner," I said. "and I was two yards behind him the whole time. His clothes came here to be measured for the outfit he's getting in which to escort Lorelei around. During the intermission Pop lugged the clothes back for a minute to convince Charles Albert they were still there."

The man in brown grinned crookedly at me.

"And the rat was convinced. He was always a sucker for Old English. You're itching to know why these two guys should all of a sudden change their handles and book tickets to Mexico, ain't you?"

"You telling me?"

"No."

"Then just so long as it excludes Lorelei, it's no itch I can't scratch by myself," I told him.

"By me it excludes the stripper," assured the man in brown. "So we break clean, eh, Wale?"

"As a whistle, sweetheart."

"So hold your hands out like a scarecrow and go to the back of the room and stand lookin' at the wall for about five minutes, eh, Wale? I ain't gonna sap you, I don't want you on the shoot for me. I seen you fan a heater once and that was too much. Just so you keep in mind—"

"I know, I know," I said wearily as I followed his instructions. "You'll hang around outside awhile in case I get ideas. So long as Lorelei isn't concerned we break clean, sweetheart."

"For her I got nothing but dreams," chuckled the man's voice from behind me. He grew silent. Very silent. I stood with my nose against a sign that said: *WILL HE BE TALL, SHORT, DARK, BLOND, RICH, POOR or YOU! WILL YOU BE CINDERELLA'S PRINCE?*

The door snicked faintly behind me. I turned around. I was alone with Pop's denuded corpse. I lit a cigarette to kid myself my nerves weren't skipping rope and looked down at the body. What the man in brown had done was evident. The tourist permits to Mexico and the airline tickets were gone. As was the change and bills from Pop's and Charles Albert's wallets.

The guy in brown was evidently out to collect his fifty-two grand and six yards in installments.

THE curtain was ringing down on Act Two when I finally managed to slip undetected from the property-room. Benny Fox was not in evidence. Lorelei swept past me en route to her dressing-room. She wore a diaphanous something of eggshell blue and favored me with a wrinkled nose in passing. Charles Albert sat on his papier mâché throne, silked and crowned and unhappy-looking as all hell.

I made a show of assisting him as he began to descend and whispered: "Someone outside left a message for you, Prince."

The pale eyes goggled.

"Me? Here? Who?"

"Looked Turkish to me," I said. "He told me to tell you, 'I'll be seeing you in Tampico no matter what name you use, sweetheart.'"

The mousy guy almost collapsed in my arms. He sucked in his breath and thrust me away, clutching that black cane. His pale eyes jerked around as if in search of an exit.

"He's waiting outside for an answer," I said.

Charles Albert became an old man right before my eyes.

"Can't you make him go away?" he whispered hoarsely.

"I can call a cop," I said. "You'll have to swear out the complaint, of course. Want me to get a cop?"

"My God, no!" breathed Charles Albert fervently. "Did—did he say anything else?"

"He did," I lied. "He said in the future you should be more careful about his fifty-two thousand and six hundred bucks."

"Oh, my God!" wrung from Albert's

chinless mouth in agony. He tottered on the black cane and I steadied him. I felt a little sick. The guy really needed the cane. He was a clubfoot. I felt sorry as hell for him. It was beginning to look as if he was caught in a squeeze play without the experience or equipment to unsqueeze himself.

"Your best bet is to go through with it," I told him.

"Through with it?" he croaked.

"That's right. In the meantime you'd be doing the management a good turn. There's a lot of dough in *A Prince for Cinderella* and a wrong act by you could queer it. By sticking it through, right up to the night club and publicity, you'll remain in the limelight where nobody can take a crack at you.

"It means you behave as if this was the night of your life. You're bubbling over with the joy of it all and Lorelei is your dream woman come real to make you happy."

"Ye-es," hesitated Charles Albert. "But if Arab—"

"Arab?" I said. "Thought he was a Turk. Never mind him. Keep yourself public and he'll keep himself private. Meanwhile, you can tell me what it's all about so we'll know what to look out for."

The pale eyes widened.

"But you—you—why I thought you knew!"

I saw I'd slipped. I saw Charles Albert's mind clamp like a vise on that fact.

"I know something," I said hastily. "Something you don't."

He looked skeptical.

I said: "Right after Pop Blassingame brought you that cane you're holding someone chopped open his skull with an axe."

The pale eyes fogged and Charles Albert collapsed to the stage in a limp heap.

Benny Fox was suddenly at my elbow, staring down.

"Cash, what is coming off?"

"I wanted a reaction," I murmured, nodding at the inert figure on the stage floor. "I got it. Keep us alone," I added, stooping for the black cane as stagehands began converging on us. Benny waved them back.

"It's all right, boys. The Prince needs

air. The excitement's been too much."

The cane had a silver top and a rubber bottom. I played with both, twisting them in my hands, and asked Benny where he'd picked up Pop Blessingame.

"Why, Cash? Is Pop in trouble?"

"Do you expect him to be in trouble?"

"No. Just how you are asking? I know him from a long time. When I had a vaudeville troupe in the old days. He always had money then, liked the ladies. A good spender. That's all I know about him, Cash.

"He came to me a few weeks ago in rags, yet. Not asking for a handout. A job, he wanted. I was needing a doorman and it hurt me to see him like that. Such a fine man. So I gave him the job. Why are you asking, Cash?"

The cane in my hands didn't want to play. I looked down and saw Charles Albert staring up at what I was doing with an expression of undiluted horror.

"You try it, sweetheart," I said, letting the cane fall. He scrambled awkwardly to his feet with it, caressing it with his long fingers, his face two shades grayer than fog. "Smile, pal," I said gently. "It could be worse, it could be a lot worse. Just remember you're having the time of your life, pal."

He nodded dumbly.

"Smile! You're happy!" I prompted.

"O.K. I'm happy," he croaked through bloodless lips.

CHAPTER THREE

Bank Night

ACT Three wedged between Benny Fox's imminent questions and me. Then the colored porter lured him away with something about the men's room being flooded and I let the stage door take care of itself as I went in search of the Sailor.

I didn't find the big muddle-brain. Benny's dapper young treasurer, counting the première's take in the box office, paused long enough to report he had seen the Sailor yell at a man in the street who began running toward Broadway with the Sailor at his heels.

"You should keep that gorilla on a leash," cracked the treasurer.

"The same for your tongue, pal," I told him. "An Arabian-looking guy?"

"I should say more of the Egyptian type. About thirty-five minutes ago. During the second act."

"Five minutes ago," I said. "After the second act. If you count Benny's dough that way, I'm declaring myself in for a cut of the difference."

He looked annoyed.

"Come around again sometime, Wale. Always happy to bandy insults with—"

"Pick up that phone at your elbow," I said quietly. "Call police headquarters. Ask for Homicide. Tell them to come around the stage door and collect a corpse in the property-room."

"How about the fire department to douse your imagination?" cracked the dapper young treasurer. "Your wit is pedestrian, Wale. Corpse in the property-room!"

"Struth," I said mildly.

I left him mumbling over his stacks of currency, the phone untouched. Which was all to the good—at least until Benny's première had run its course.

Benny was in the men's room with the porter, a plumber and a deluge. The plumber was explaining it was probably an empty purse stuck in the bowl. He got them all the time, he said, in Broadway theaters. Pickpockets emptied the purses in the privacy of the compartments and flushed everything but the money down the bowls—but sometimes the bowls clogged.

I dragged Benny away as the round little producer began spluttering that pickpockets didn't attend *his* premières. I took him into a bar adjacent to the theater, into a corner booth where we had beer and privacy.

"You're raising my pay to five hundred for the night," I told him. "You'll find out why soon enough and then you'll realize I'm a walking bargain basement this night. To what club is the Prince due to escort Lorelei?"

Benny regarded me thoughtfully.

"All right, Cash," he finally nodded. "I am trusting you will not be talking like this if it is not serious. Five hundred. I have an understanding with the Tahiti Club."

"Switch it. Charles Albert won't know

the difference and you can stall Lorelei. Send 'em to some out-of-the-way spot. Send 'em the second the show's over. You're going to be asked questions. Forget that bullet in the first act. It's not important and mention of it will only get us in hot water. Tell the truth why I'm around, about Lorelei's poisoned Scotty and you wanting me to bodyguard her. O.K.?"

Benny said: "Cash, what—"

"Another thing," I cut in. "If the Prince asks for his own clothes, tell him he'll get 'em later. Stall him—but get him away fast."

"But why, Cash?"

"If the Prince doesn't escort Lorelei anyway it kills the effect of your whole idea, right?"

"Am I saying no?"

"So it's worth the extra hundred to you to have him take her around for at least an hour. By then your publicity would be in and nothing that happens later could spoil it."

"Anything that happens later could increase the publicity even. I'll send 'em to the Velvet Club in the Village."

"Now you're in the groove," I said.

Benny's red-mist eyes weighed me.

"Cash, if you do not mind, but five hundred is a lot of dough to be paying for things you can't see. You are telling me nothing but maybe that is good because sometimes it pays to be ignorant. But I am wanting you to remember the five hundred is to guard Lorelei and find out if it was her they were shooting at and who and why. It will be worth the five hundred to me if something that threatens my production from the outside is removed."

I let it lay at that.

I RETURNED backstage and made sure Pop's corpse was still undetected and undisturbed. I chose a secluded moment and ripped the wires of the stage-door phone from the wall.

That was personal insurance because now the only remaining phone in the theater was that in the box office.

I waited for Act Three to build up to its smash climax and wondered where the hell Sailor Duffy was with my heater and how far he got after the Armenian, Tur-

kish, Egyptian-looking Arab. I wondered how a chinless mouse like Charles Albert could have been sucked into a fifty-two grand tangle. I wondered what there was about his black cane that gave him the screaming-meemies when I toyed with it.

I wondered why I left Lorelei icy when she put me on fire. . .

Then came a sound like a million pieces of cellophane crackling. The curtains flew back and forth, like giant wings meeting and parting, as the cast of *A Prince for Cinderella* bowed and basked in the applause-evident prospect of a successful run.

There was a confused mixture of stage-hands pushing things around, chatter and feathery bustle from the forty-odd darlings in greasepaint, the sudden invasion of friends, relatives, columnists, Johns, autograph hounds and the hundreds of hectic items that make for backstage confusion at a première's break.

I had a glimpse of Benny Fox herding Lorelei and Charles Albert to the dressing-rooms, another glimpse of actors clustering about the stage-door phone and making excited comments about the ripped wires. I heard voices raised for Pop Blassingame to run the usual backstage errands assigned to doormen.

And a final glimpse of Benny rushing Lorelei and Charles Albert through a battery of photoflood flares at the stage door.

So it was time to part the curtains on the real-life show.

I burst into the cashier's cage to meet the startled glance of Benny's dapper treasurer, interrupted in the midst of answering questions through the grille.

"What in hell's wrong with you?" I demanded. "Where's the Homicide Squad?"

His lips curled over a piece of sarcasm, then gaped wide as I dialed the operator and yelled that I wanted a lot of cops in a hurry.

"Hey, you wasn't kidding?" he choked as I finally pronged the receiver. "You mean there's a real *m-m-m-murder*?"

"Blood and everything," I grinned, pinching his sallow cheek on the way out.

SO NOW the fat, as they say in books, was on the fire. My call attracted a dozen screeching prowls which, in

turn, attracted one or two million curious souls who jammed the streets and alleys about the theater. What with camera bulbs popping like mad at every dimpled knee the chorines took pains to exhibit and cops and reporters shoving each other around and female citizens in the crowds chucking faints here and there, by the time the Homicide Squad arrived in two sedans the word for it was bedlam.

The first fifteen minutes saw the homicide specialists alone in the property-room with the remains of Pop Blassingame. The second fifteen minutes had Benny Fox on the carpet.

Then a finger crooked from the property-room door and the two uniformed gorillas at my elbows marched me in and deposited me before a guy I knew by sight and reputation as Captain Mike Bacardi—a slim, smooth, pleasant-looking sort of guy in a dapper gray outfit. You would have taken him for an up-and-coming salesman.

I said: "Name, Cash Wale. Occupation, private detective. Age, this side of forty. No arrests, no convictions—but held for questioning in New York about seventy-five times. I didn't do it. I have no idea who did it—or why. And if that jerk in the box office wasn't a wise guy you'd have been here a lot sooner, Captain."

The police stenographer lifted his pencil from his shorthand pad and Captain Mike Bacardi displayed a neat set of gold teeth.

"That's showing a cooperative spirit, Wale. I appreciate full cooperation on my cases. Just a few questions and we'll be through."

Benny Fox was attempting to meet my eye but I was responding to Bacardi's dental display in kind. I knew he was pinch-hitting for my usual nemesis on the Homicide Squad, Inspector Jack Quinn, who was laid up with an ailment I prayed was nothing insignificant. I knew Bacardi was a smoothie. He'd managed to squeeze Lieutenant Marquis, of the Broadway Squad, out of the theater, which was no mean feat on Marquis' stamping grounds.

But, aside from that, all I knew was that Mike Bacardi was a cop, and ninety-nine cops out of a hundred in this man's town are only too eager to stick my name first on the list of suspects when they find me around a corpse. If Bacardi was different it was worth the few remaining hairs on my head to find out.

So I told him a plausible story about stumbling on the body, then telling the treasurer to phone in and returning to see nothing was disturbed, then phoning myself when no cops arrived.

He told me Pop Blassingame died from too much hatchet in the skull. "But the things I fail to understand, Wale," he said confidentially, "are why this Charles Albert's clothes should be frisked so painstakingly, how come he and this Lorelei woman failed to show up at the Tahiti Club and, most particularly, why should the killer take the trouble to strip the body?"

"The killer could have been looking for something," I shrugged.

Bacardi nodded as if I'd disclosed the secret of life. He pulled something from a shelf behind him.

"I was given to understand Charles

NO FINER DRINK... at sixteen—or sixty



Albert uses a cane," he said slowly.

"That looks like it," I said, indicating the black, silver-topped cane Bacardi had taken from the shelf.

"Try the knob," he said, passing it to me.

The silver knob unscrewed in my palm. I gaped at it like a dope. I was remembering not being able to unscrew it earlier that evening when Charles Albert passed out—and the look of sheer horror on his face when he came to and saw what I was trying.

"I read about these," I told Bacardi carefully. "Never saw one, though."

"Hollow," Bacardi said.

"So it is," I nodded.

"But empty."

"Clean as a whistle," I agreed, tilting the cane away from the light. "Maybe what the killer wanted was in here, Captain."

"Why didn't they show up at the Tahiti Club, Wale?"

"Put me in a cab with that dish and I won't care if I show up never," I grinned.

Bacardi matched my grin, adding a golden touch of his own. He took back the cane and said: "I have no further questions for the present, Wale. But hang around, just in case. You also, Mr. Fox." Bacardi nodded at the two uniformed gorillas. "I want the porter now."

My last glimpse of Pop Blassingame was his bulk shaping a large square of canvas. Benny whispered to me as we crossed the stage: "I got something in the office to show you, Cash."

IN HIS office, looking down at a soggy mess of water-soaked objects that filled a paper towel on his desk, I asked: "This is what?"

"Someone tried flushing them down the bowl, Cash. The plumber is fishing 'em out. Maybe it's coincidental, but you are noticing the name on the library card and bank book?"

The name was Albert Charlton. It appeared also on a lodge membership card, a phone bill and a letter from an insurance company informing him his policy had been canceled for failure to keep up the premiums.

"So this is it," I breathed. "When I asked him, he started to say his name was

Albert Ch—something, then switched to Charles Albert." I stared into Benny's blood-mist eyes. "He was on the lam, Benny. Switched identities right here in the theater and was headed for Mexico. So was Pop Blassingame—taking a new name and heading south.

"There was a guy, an Arab, after fifty-two grand and six yards your Prince was supposed to have. The guy who fired that bullet in the first act. Sailor Duffy's after him."

Perspiration gleamed on Benny's pasty brow.

"I am thinking of the hollow cane, Cash."

"It could hold that much dough in hundreds if the dough was rolled tight enough," I nodded. "But what I'm thinking is how this mousy lamster, of all the eager wolves in the theater, had to get his ticket stub in Lorelei's fingers and become Prince."

"I should be worrying my head over the whims of fate, Cash?"

I pointed out: "You was hopped up about Lorelei's poisoned Scotty, Benny."

Benny sleeved the wet off his brow, found a cigar in his desk, jabbed it between his teeth and complained: "I am failing to see it in one picture, Cash."

"Maybe it's two," I muttered. But I was doing some high class failing on my own. I leafed the drying pages of Albert Charlton's bank book and saw he had two hundred and thirty-six dollars on deposit to date. It occurred to me a guy about to hit the road would grab every piece of change he could find—which just loused up the picture a little more.

Then one of the uniformed gorillas stuck his head in the door to say Captain Bacardi wanted us. We followed him to the property-room where the whole mess blew higher than a kite.

IT WAS all in the reward poster Captain Bacardi handed me. They'd removed Pop Blassingame's corpse and only we three were in the property-room. Bacardi's gilt smile was expansive.

"This give you ideas, Wale? You're reputed to have a corner on ideas in this line, you know."

It gave me ideas, all right. Staring up at me from the poster was the picture of

Pop Blessingame, front and profile—the same grayed head, finely chiseled features, distinguished mien. But the name under the picture was: English Harry. And he was worth five thousand dollars, alive, to a Western state.

He rated that price because of his custom of entering banks with two drawn revolvers and emerging with all visible assets, which made him practically the last of a species.

The poster, among other items, mentioned he spoke with a London accent, he liked the ladies, he could talk his way through a stone wall and was considered exceptionally brainy.

He was wanted for murder.

"This makes me curious if a bank has been knocked over lately," I said dryly as Benny, peering over my arm, sucked wind through his teeth.

"The Broadway Financial," Bacardi offered. "This afternoon. Two men on the inside—one elderly, the other darkish. They got a little over fifty grand from the cashier ten minutes before the bank closed. And a third man, driving a hot Buick, got 'em away clean. It's all here."

"Here" was the next morning's tabloid he unfolded from the side pocket of his gray Chesterfield. War news crowded the item to a box on page three but all the details were there.

As Bacardi had mentioned, around fifty grand had been taken. To be exact, fifty-two thousand and six hundred dollars—all in hundreds. The money had been awaiting an armored car transfer when the gunmen entered and the cashier, a Mr. Albert Charlton, was compelled to hand it over.

I grimly refrained from breaking down into hysterics and handed Bacardi back the tabloid.

"Such a small world," I muttered.

"His name was really Blessingame, Harry Blessingame," Bacardi said. "But that just came out a few minutes ago from Scotland Yard. Over here he was English Harry. You know he broke out of stir about a month ago, *Wale*? That hand-out's six years old. Last month he engineered a riot in the prison yard that led to a mass break. Ten cons and two keepers died, but English Harry made the wall. Quite a guy.

"He'd been up for life on a manslaughter rap," Captain Bacardi elaborated as his eyes probed mine. "Happened in a Los Angeles bank where he burned down a watchman.

"They caught Harry down the street. But, between where they caught him and the bank, he'd gotten rid of his guns. That was a characteristic of all his jobs. This time everybody on the street was held. There was one skinny little dame with a school bag, looked to be fifteen."

I said: "The rods were in her bag."

Bacardi's golden canines gleamed.

"I like to explain things to a fast man, *Wale*. Turned out she was eighteen and not so skinny or little. It was how she dressed and made up. A piece of black-haired Irish. Louise Riley. English Harry had picked her up in a dance hall and they were a team.

"But she fought loose from a matron just after being mugged and printed and they never caught up with her. That was five years ago, *Wale*, and all we know about English Harry before his conviction."

"It's damn little," I said.

"I thought you might ~~and~~ something," Bacardi said. "You are reputed to have a broad list of acquaintances."

"Bank heisters are out of my line," I told him. "I'd like to help you, Captain, but I never saw the guy before this afternoon. Benny might know something."

Benny said, weakly: "I told you what I know, Captain. Just an old John who came to me a week ago for a job." Benny looked on the verge of collapsing. He'd gotten a quick glimpse of the name in the tabloid item about the bank job.

Bacardi nodded. He didn't look disappointed or irritated or suspicious.

"Well, that's how it is," he said. "I'd like to thank you both for your cooperation. And you can go now, *Wale*. Just don't leave town in case anything new turns up."

He was fast in his own light, Captain Mike Bacardi.

CHAPTER FOUR

Invisible Is the Killer

LORELEI said: "*Wale*, forget I ever despised your guts. So help me, you look good to me after an hour with Chil-

blain Charley here. I could even like you now."

Her princely escort mumbled: "Four 'clock. Gotta go fly-fly at four 'clock. Me an' good ol' Harry to good old Me-hi-co."

I said: "That's how I like to hear you talk, pal. Without inhibitions."

"Three drinks of bubbly and he's off the deep end! What a sport!" Lorelei snorted in disgust.

Albert Charlton was indeed off the deep end. His eyes resembled Benny's optic pools of blood. His black bow tie was twisted around below his right ear. He was, so help me, drooling.

I said: "Another bucket of champagne, waiter. It's still on Mr. Fox."

"Where's the publicity?" Lorelei peevied. "Where's Benny? And why *this* clip house, Wale? A load of hayseeds on the frolic who wouldn't recognize a celebrity if they crawled into bed with one."

I watched a fat perspiring man apply the tip of his cigar to a balloon and go into convulsions when it popped. The balloon had been attached to the G-string of an overstuffed blonde, along with a row of other balloons. She and five more chorines had scattered to music among the tables for the express purpose of getting their balloons popped.

"Not clip," I told her. "Corny. But cozy, and that's the idea."

"It's not *my* idea!" she snorted. Even the snort couldn't spoil her composition. The dim lighting couldn't subdue the flame in her hair; it only intensified the deep midnight blue of her eyes. Her dress—I never did get around to itemizing her dress. Just the fit. And that was perfect.

"You know as well as I do that Benny didn't feature me for my voice or acting," she was saying. "It was just that strippers became the fashion all of a sudden. Corio in legit. Gypsy Rose in legit and even writing a book. I'm just another burly stripper for the mink and silk hat crowd and it needs publicity to get across. What in hell do you think you're doing, Wale?"

What I was doing was drawing Albert Charlton's cane from between his knees to get his attention. I got both, the cane

and his fuzzy features turning to me in vague recognition.

I said: "You did a neat job at the bank today, Albert. Smooth. Who'd know you had it in you?"

He made a shaky, unsuccessful grab for the cane and shook his head dubiously.

"Sure'm a smooth job. In the cane, the good ol' cane. Harry'sh shmart. Ain't it confushing?"

I could take the cane because he sat at my right. Lorelei sat across the table from me to *his* right. That put the vacant side of the table between us and the abbreviated floor show. The tables in the Velvet Club were staggered so each table had an uninterrupted view of the dance floor.

And, for a sense of intimacy, each table was encircled on three sides by a five-foot velvet curtain. This velvety booth in which I had found them had more view and more privacy than most, being in a corner.

Benny had picked the acme of obscurity in the Velvet Club, it being one of those fly-by-night joints on a shoestring. Which put me that much ahead of the general alarm Bacardi had broadcast for Lorelei and her escort.

"Why didn't you tell me in the first place you're the cashier of the Broadway Financial Bank?" I asked Albert Charlton. "And that you had your name in the paper and everything?"

"Wale," Lorelei frowned across the table at me, "I'm not sure I'm liking this. Why the minstrel act?"

"I'm building you up for some real publicity," I grinned at her. I held it until the waiter popped the cork from the bottle in the ice bucket and poured around three sets of bubbles. When he sidled off, I said: "When you fished that ticket stub out of the gold top hat, you caught the very latest thing in bank robbers."

"Him?"

"He did it with a cane," I said. "Can you imagine? A hollow cane. He just stuffed fifty-two grand and six yards inside the cane. He did it this morning in the Broadway Financial Bank. And this afternoon robbers entered the bank with drawn guns and the papers say the robbers got away with all that dough. But one of

the robbers told me he was double-crossed out of the dough. So that leaves it up to Albert with his cane."

"M'cane!" the chinless cashier muttered, gulping his champagne and making a grab.

I let him have it.

"THIS isn't your cane," I told him. "English Harry took your hollow cane and switched this one on you. You double-crossed Arab and English Harry double-crossed you."

"English Harry?"

"Harry Blessingame. Pop Blessingame, remember? You both had airline tickets and tourist permits to Mexico—tourist permits instead of passports because they don't require fingerprints and yours are on file as a bank employee and Harry's were on file because he was a bank collector.

"He was set to double-cross you in advance because he had the duplicate cane ready to switch and his flight to Mexico was scheduled four hours ahead of yours. With fifty-two grand to buy his way around, that four-hour start on you would have been as good as four centuries. So how about breaking down and telling us about it, eh, Albert?"

"Not m'cane?" Albert Charlton queried thickly, trying to unscrew the silvery knob. He couldn't, of course. He stared blankly at me and announced: "S'not m'cane! S'a fake!"

"That's right," I said. "You made one mistake in trusting English Harry and another in trying to flush your old identity down a bowl when you decided to become Charles Albert. It didn't flush and now the cops are looking for you because English Harry is dead. That's not your cane. You've lost the fifty-two grand. You're about to be taken, my friend, and good. So why not open up and maybe we'll salvage some pieces?"

A shadow of comprehension unfuzzed his expression a little.

"Hey, y'mean Harry? He got m'cane? Alla money? Harry?"

I said, patiently: "If you spill what you know about the guy, maybe we can get on the trail of that dough."

"I c'n tell all about Harry," Albert Charlton mumbled, sagging back against the blue velvet drape. "I c'n tell 'bout the

woman—ya wanna hear 'bout the woman? She—she—thish woman, she—" He sagged lower against the drape and his blond head rolled to one shoulder and his lids fluttered shut.

Like that.

"Stinko!" Lorelei snorted, drawing away from him with an expression of disgust. The disgust gave way to curiosity. "Is that level about all that money?" she asked dreamily. "You can go a long way on fifty-two thousand."

"You can go a long way on what your mirror tells you," I said. "Dance?"

"What about Jesse James?"

"He'll keep," I said.

We danced.

They mangled the Blue Danube, but it was worth it. The atmosphere was as dark and blue as Lorelei's eyes, with an overhead spot crawling over the swaying couples. We didn't speak. I wondered what a guy had to do to melt the delectable curves in my arms.

Somewhere a balloon popped and there were snickers. Someone got sick in the middle of the floor. Someone else began arguing with the bandleader. Then the music petered out and lights came up and I led her back to the booth and went into a slow burn as she whispered: "You must be nine-tenths reputation, little man. And I always thought you'd turn out a strong guy!"

Albert Charlton slumped as we had left him. The bubbles had fizzed out of the champagne. I couldn't have pried any facts loose from Albert Charlton as he was if I used a crowbar. It was time to draw the curtain.

I slapped his back and said: "Snap out of it, Prince. The ball is over. Take your bow and let's scam."

Lorelei met my eyes and said: "You don't have to take me home, Wale."

"I'm getting paid to tag you home, remember?"

"How about the twerp?"

"Never mind him. How about it?"

"Give me five minutes to tidy up," she said and picked up her purse and headed for the door labeled: *SHE*.

Only when she was out of sight and no other head turned my way did I remove my hand from Albert Charlton's back. My palm was soggy.

I dried my hand on his napkin, dropped it to the floor, then pushed aside the blue velvet behind him and gaped up into the black-chip eyes of Arab.

OUR eyes held for seconds that seemed like centuries as the realization pounded through me that my revolver was with Sailor Duffy and the big ape was with the wind.

There was an open door behind the curtain, some sort of fire exit. I glimpsed stairs leading down beyond. Arab stood framed in the doorway, his swarthy features expressionless. Something was different about him, I couldn't figure what.

"You get around, pal," I said.

"I don't know you," he said.

"And here was me thinking you were en route to Mexico by now," I said.

He pulled an automatic from his side pocket and aimed it at me. In the time he took, I could have drawn and fired two dozen slugs into the best parts of him—but not from an empty holster.

He said: "Push the curtain back a little more and don't attract attention. I want to make sure about that rat."

I drew the blue velvet curtain from Albert Charlton's back until we could both see the heavy crimson smear between his shoulder blades. It was still running, spreading on the black cloth.

"You had your look," I said thickly, releasing the curtain.

His swart complexion split into a white grin.

"Yeah. Now hand me that cane, shorty, and forget you ever seen me because I'd take personal pleasure in batting your teeth down your throat. I don't like little guys."

I tugged the cane gently from between Albert Charlton's knees and handed it over.

"Two hours ago you took pains to handle me tenderly," I said. "Your attitude changes. Also your rod. Two hours ago it was a revolver."

"You pop off too much!" he snarled. "I don't know you and you don't know me and it'll never be different, get it?"

I nodded slowly and the door slammed on his snarl and I realized what the jarring note was. He was togged in a natty

green ensemble of sharp cut. In our first meeting, he'd worn brown. Sailor had told me he wore green.

Maybe I was color blind.

The floor show was girdled in balloons again and wiggling them into the male customers' faces to synthetic jive. A lithe redhead with a shapeless blob of scarlet for mouth was jiggling around my chair. I folded a five dollar bill lengthwise and set it on the table's edge.

"O.K., sweetheart," she whispered, snapping it up. "I get through here at four and it's a lonesome way home. I like a spender."

"Not me, Red," I objected. "That's to find a girl in the SHE room. Also a redhead, but with big time accessories. Tell her I'll meet her outside right away."

"That's a horse on you," the jiggling ballon girdle simpered. "You mean Lorelei, the skin artist. She went out the other door in the rest-room five minutes ago. I saw her." The reddish wave indicated Albert Charlton. "How about sleepy? Maybe he wants to take me home."

"He's dead," I said.

She giggled. "Gee, you're a funny guy. I like funny guys." She jiggled to the next booth, wooing me over her shoulder with a series of epileptic winks.

I turned from her to the brace of heavy-set men wearing their coats and hats who silently occupied Lorelei's and the vacant seat respectively. The headwaiter hovered behind them expectantly.

"Go away," I told him. "You should know cops don't tip."

He went away and the detective with the black mustache nodded at Charlton and said: "Wake him up, bud. He's wanted for questioning."

"That would be the neatest trick of the week," I said. "You boys had better get Captain Mike Bacardi on account his prize suspect is dead from too much knife in the back."

Mustache edged back the blue velvet curtain a little. He pursed his lips and nodded at the other dick, a grayed, red-nosed specimen, who also took a look. Mustache touched Charlton's pulse and Charlton began sliding off his chair. Mustache propped him up again. Neither dick made an effort to move.

Mustache said: "He was knifed through the coitain, c'n ya beat that?"

Red-nose said: "The knife ain't there. Maybe the midget, here, got it."

"Have your fun, boys. Search me," I said wearily, raising my arms a little.

Red-nose slapped my jacket pocket, reached in and pulled out a pen-knife dripping blood.

I SAID, "*Agh!*"

"Something like that." Mustache nodded, pointing his revolver at me over the table. "I remember you now. You was hangin' around when English Harry got bumped. Maybe this stiff's a witness, so you come here to rub him out. Only we're comin' around lookin' for him an' we're too fast for you. This oughta rate me a sergeancy."

Red-nose had wrapped the knife in a napkin very daintily. Blood soaked through the fabric and he used a second napkin over the first.

"*We* get sergeancies," Red-nose corrected. "You hold him. I'll call in."

"Tip off the rags and get us some publicity," Mustache suggested.

I couldn't talk, couldn't think. This was crowding up on me too fast and turning my stomach into a cold, wet cannonball. No jury of New Yorkers, weaned on the periodic editorials about, "That gun-crazy killer, Cash Wale," would consider leniency. If they got me before a jury, I was cooked.

Red-nose commenced to rise, then gaped incredulously at Albert Charlton. For one startled instant my own chin was lax against the knot in my tie.

Albert Charlton was rising from his chair!

His blond head rolled loosely and his arms dangled, but he came off the chair in a weird crouch, the blue velvet drape clinging to his back. Charlton's head snapped up, then down, then he was diving head-first across the table, smashing the champagne tumblers, burying Mustache's revolver under his thin chest.

I had eyes only for the blue velvet drape that still clung to Charlton's back. I barely heard the muffled detonation of Mustache's revolver under Charlton. Mustache didn't want to fire, I could tell from his expression, but his trigger finger must

have been caught.

Albert Charlton's tooth-pick form twitched convulsively under the impact of the slug and slammed head-first into the motionless, goggling Red-nose. Charlton's feet sprawled Mustache out of his chair and then the blue velvet curtain came alive, spreading out and down over all three of them.

And Sailor Duffy lay spread-eagled over the curtain!

The floor show was a medley of screaming chorines and scampering musicians. Sailor had finally released the corpse of Albert Charlton which he'd manipulated from behind the curtain. I had drawn my own sweet Colt revolver from Sailor's pocket. Mustache and Red-nose were scrambling like mad with the corpse of Albert Charlton under the blue velvet drape.

I blinked out the three overhead globes with three quick shots and shoved the Sailor through darkness to the door he must have entered. Behind us was more darkness punctuated by screams, curses and the sax player making sweet on his clarinet in an effort to restore calm.

I'd wondered about that door. It opened on stairs that led down to a Village side-street, just a back way out that must have come with the place and now served as a fire exit.

Feet pounded on the stairs behind us as we hit the pavement. A guy bumped into me and my Colt rising to clip him stopped in mid-flight. The idea had been to obscure the memory of this inevitable bystander, but colored glasses and a sign on his chest reading *I AM BLIND*, was obscurity enough.

Just a Village side-street with a cab parked on the curb and darkness spaced by occasional street lamps.

And feet pounding down the stairs after us.

I STARTED for the nearest alley but Sailor whirled me into the parked cab. The cabby must have had it in second and been juicing it because, by the time I glimpsed a pair of figures burst into the street from the Velvet Club's rear exit, we were two blocks gone and skinning a corner on two wheels.

I gaped at the Sailor and he nodded at

the back of the cabby's head and said: "Cash, meet Itzik. Itzik, meet Cash Wale, who like I tol' you, picks me off'n a soup line an' gives me a job."

Itzik's head was a foot wide and his shoulders a yard wide and he expanded as you looked down.

"Meetcha," he croaked in the voice of a frog, guiding the cab deftly in and out of Village side-streets that avoided traffic lights. "You give the Sailor a break. 'At squares you wit' me an' I don't give a damn what everybody else says about you, Wale."

"Thanks," I gulped, settling back.

"Itzik was me rubber when I usta fight, Cash," Sailor Duffy explained. "So when I see this Armenian I'm chasin' make Itzik's hack on Forty-second before I catch up wit' him, I know Itzik'll tell me when he gets back t'his stand."

"Arab, not Armenian," I said. "When did you spot Arab, Sailor? There's some confusion."

"Right after I'm leavin' ya, Cash. Right when the second act's startin'."

"And I was with Arab all through the second act," I puzzled. "You and Benny's treasurer. This Arab certainly gets around. And manages to alternate green and brown outfits while he's doing it—green when you saw him, brown for me the first time and green for me the second. And the same with his rods. A revolver with the brown outfit and an automatic with the green. Quite a guy, this Arab."

"Looked like a Hindu to me," croaked Itzik as we started up Broadway. "He picks me up, says to go to the Benny Fox Theater an' hang around. This is a tough proposition on account the bulls keep traffic movin' an' you can't park. So we go round an' round the block until this guy you call Arab sees a dame and a guy come out the stage door and get in another hack. He says follow it. A hot mama, the dame, and a guy wit' one gimpy leg and a cane."

"It's when the shows break an' there's plenty traffic but this Arab guy passes me a tenner on account. So I do it. They ride around in circles awhile, then down the Velvet Club."

"I hang around up the block after the Arab guy pays off t'see what's on this gee's mind. I like to know what's goin'

on. He stalls around, lookin' the place over from the outside, then he goes in the front. He comes out in a minute an' walks around the side, feelin' doors. I see him standin' there, thinkin'. Then he goes to the corner drugstore an' I figger it ain't my headache, so I cruise back up-town an' there's the Sailor."

Sailor grunted: "Itzik asts a kid w'en we get here, Cash, an' the kid says he sees a dark complected guy walk in the back door of the club about fifteen minutes ago. So I go up and there's you inside 'at coitain an' a mug holdin' a rod on ya. So there's a guy wit' his back t'the coitain an' I heft him and chuck him at th' mug wit' the rod. But—" Sailor called to the cabby, "I didn't find 'at Arab guy, Itzik."

Itzik's head shook.

"He lammed. I ast Peeper. Peeper tells me he sees the guy come tearin' outa the joint a couple minutes before we get there."

"Peeper? I said.

"The blind beggar ya almost slugged," Itzik said. "Where we headin' Wale?"

"Around the park with your radio on the cop broadcasts," I said, relaxing. "I want to puzzle out some coincidences. Then we'll go up the Bronx and call on the wife of a guy who isn't there."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Double-Cross Doubled

SHE was a massive blonde. Not fat, but commencing to sag around her edges. She was heavy-lidded and her lips formed a pout. She smoothed the bluish negligee over her rolling hips and said: "Say that once more, mister."

"I'm a friend of Albert's," I said quietly. "I just left him at police headquarters where he's still trying to identify the bank robbers from the rogue's gallery pictures. He told me to wait here for him and keep you from worrying."

Her eyes moved slowly under their heavy lids, from my eyes down to my shoes, then up again. She had a placid expression, except for the pout. She seemed to be listening to something deep inside her and her breath was from beer.

"All right," she finally intoned heavily. "I ain't worried. But come in."

I followed her through a foyer that opened on one of those heavily upholstered "modern" living-room suites that sell for ninety-nine dollars in installments.

There was a card table in the cone of glare from a floor lamp bearing evidence that Mrs. Charlton had been entertaining. There was no guest in view but two used glasses sat amid the empty beer bottles and a man's coat and hat lay on the divan.

Also on the card table were a pile of physical culture mags showing strong guys showing their muscles, two hand mirrors, scattered chocolates, some banana skins, and a plate of cracked nuts.

I gestured at these trivia and, keeping my eye on a closed door, said: "I don't like to disturb you, Mrs. Charlton—"

She put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed gently and said: "That's O.K." Her other hand found my other shoulder and she drew me into her with amazing strength and slid her arms around me until I couldn't move if I wanted to. Her voice called out: "He says he just seen Albert, didja hear? I can feel he's got a gun under his arm."

"I hear," grinned Arab, emerging from the closed door I'd watched. He was back to the revolver and brown toggery again. The brown even extended to his shirt and tie. But the same hawkish nose, dark complexion and glittering black eyes. He grinned: "You muffed it, Wale. Me just after telling Ruth her Albert got shivved dead. Let Wale go, Ruth. He'll behave now."

Her massive arms dropped from around me. "I need a lift," she mumbled. "God, how I need a lift!" She stooped near the divan and pulled from under it a half-empty fifth of Scotch.

"You are two people, my friend," I told Arab. "You are beginning to haunt me. Why didn't you just plug me at the Velvet Club and get it over with?"

"That wasn't me," Arab grinned, showing his perfect canines. "I never been in the Velvet Club. That was Joe."

"Twin?"

"Yeah. Only we're different."

"He sports green and an automatic," I said. "And you go for brown and revolvers."

"Not only that, sweetheart. Joe's got

no sense of humor. With him, everything is direct action. Albert Charlton leaves us holding the bag, Joe's gotta go out on the shoot."

"So it was Joe took a shot at the Prince," I said.

Arab nodded glumly.

"Yeah, the dope! He got excited over that bubble dancer and got the bubble. Anyhow, shootin' through a curtain at that distance ain't my idea of hitting accurate. But that's Joe. Me, I'm after the dough instead of revenge. That's why I ain't in Mexico. Only coming here's a bum steer. The punk ain't been home all day so he couldn't have planted the dough here."

"He never intended to come home," I shrugged.

Ruth Charlton lowered the bottle as Scotch began trickling down her chin. She used the sleeve of her negligee and mourned: "Can you beat it? Fifty grand in his hands and the gimpy mouse never gave me a tumble. Fifteen years we been married and that's what I get. God, do I need a lift!"

She up-ended the bottle again. Arab winked at me.

"He leaves her holding another bag," Arab said. "Held out the last payment on his insurance. So she collects beans. If you ever knew what a meek, quiet scared-of-his-own-shadow patsy Albert Charlton was, Wale, you wouldn't believe it possible."

"I came to find out what turned the worm," I said.

Arab winked again.

"Her. Her and Old English. Her and Old English was like that." Arab held up two adjacent fingers. "Her and *any* pair of pants was like that—but with Old English it was on and off through the years."

RUTH CHARLTON sprawled on the divan now, her negligee awry and the bottle on the floor, empty. She mumbled reminiscently: "Harry usta come around when I was in a skin show in Coney. I was the Amazon Girl—way ahead of De Fee. That was Benny Fox's first show and Harry usta come around and we'd have times. God, did we have times! Harry was a spender and he went for big girls. Only why's he so mean to me now?"

"Get that, Wale?" Arab prompted. "It's all in the papers now so there's no harm in my talkin'. Harry's here on the lam from stir and he bumps into Ruth at Macy's. He still likes big girls so they wind up here talking over old touches and who walks in but Albert, the mouse, with his cane. So Harry's the kind of guy who could talk his way through a stone wall. He tells Albert he just finished re-upholstering the couch. He's an upholsterer, Old English says. And you know what Albert says to that?"

Ruth Charlton's massive bulges quaked in merriment at the memory.

"Laugh?" she gurgled. "I thought I'd die! Albert payin' Harry ten dollars and Harry, with a straight face, makin' Albert dish out the sales tax!"

"Wonderful!" I grinned.

"Not so wonderful," Ruth Charlton mumbled, returning to her dark mood. "Every night Harry comes to supper and when I slip him the wink and talk Albert into going out to the movies, Harry goes along with Albert! God, do I need a lift!"

"All those years Ruth never knew Old English was a heister," Arab explained. "So she didn't know Old English was lining the sap up for an inside job. That's all English Harry had to find out, that Albert was a bank cashier.

"In two weeks Albert was sold, the job was lined up. Harry and me holding the rods, Albert shoving the dough at us quick and Joe in the getaway car."

"According to the papers, you and Harry Blassingame walked out with the fifty-two grand," I said.

"The papers!" Arab snorted. "All *we* got was sandwiches. All this Charlton punk shoves over the counter is wads of sliced newspapers between hundred dollar bills, four sandwiches. Until we was in the getaway we didn't know that. And then it was too late."

"So you and Joe hung around the bank," I said. "You figured Charlton had the dough and it was pretty safe returning because the cops expected you to be heading to far places. But you never had a chance at Charlton. He probably was taken to headquarters to go through the rogues' gallery and, from there, he went to the Benny Fox Theater. You couldn't follow him inside because the house was

sold out. So Joe tried to break in a fire-exit and my rattle-conk pal, Duffy, helped him in."

Arab shrugged.

"What did you expect? We'd worked for that dough, Wale. All Joe wanted was revenge. But me, when Joe comes out and tells me Charlton got stripped naked on the stage and they'd carried his duds off—"

"You came around the property-room looking for them and we met," I said. Adding: "Over English Harry's corpse."

"But the dough was gone," Arab said. "Right out of Albert's hollow cane," I said.

ARAB shook his head.

"No, Wale. Joe figured about the cane after awhile. So he tailed Charlton to the Velvet Club and got it and broke it to pieces. That cane wasn't hollow, Wale."

"The cane the cops have is," I told him. "The one Joe got had been switched on Charlton by English Harry Blassingame. Pop intended to leave Charlton holding the bag, the second bag. Pop's flight was scheduled for midnight while Albert's was for four hours later, remember?"

"Pop most likely talked Albert into meeting him in the theater to await their flights where you and Joe couldn't find them. Pop probably intended to make the switch after the show but, when Albert was selected Prince, that put the cane right in Pop's lap."

"So he got bumped," Arab scowled.

"Holding the third bag," I said wearily. "This seems to be a quadruple-cross and the quadruple-crosser has the dough. Also, that party bumped English Harry Blassingame. Likewise, that party knifed Albert Charlton—not for the dough, but to close his mouth."

"Joe?" Arab asked softly.

I gaped.

"For crying out loud, don't you trust your own brother?"

Arab's head shook slowly.

"Not fifty grand with a direct-action guy like Joe. He told me on the phone before about the cane and said I should come here in case Albert brought the dough home when he went out for lunch. It *could* have happened like that. Joe said he was going to—"

Arab grew darkly thoughtful. His glittering eyes passed from the revolver, still poised in his fist, to the sagging, mumbling hulk of Ruth Charlton on the divan, then back to me.

"You know what I'm thinking, sweetheart?" he asked me. "I'm wondering how it would have turned out if Albert's ticket didn't get picked on the stage."

"He'd be probably carrying the fifty-two grand aboard a plane—in exactly one hour," I said, glancing at my wrist watch.

Arab brightened.

"An hour, eh? I got the ticket. All I need's the dough."

"It'll burn you," I told him. "It's kill-stained now. Who answers the bell?"

Ruth Charlton was lurching off the divan to answer it—the doorbell sounding in the foyer. The middle of her bluish negligee connected with the muzzle of Arab's revolver which swung to meet it. Ruth Charlton doubled in agony.

The heavy muzzle chopped once on her blond mat of hair—then Arab jerked it to a line with my nose as Ruth Charlton sagged limply to the imitation Oriental rug. I released the comforting butt of my own revolver and withdrew my hand slowly.

The doorbell continued to stab our eardrums.

"I'm after the dough," Arab said hoarsely. "You ain't stopping me. I'm backin' out how I come in. I don't know how long I'll be around after that. And you don't know, see what I mean?"

A fine, damp sheen coated his dark features now. He had maneuvered into his coat and hat, shifting the revolver from hand to hand.

"It's becomin' an act," he laughed jerkily. "Turn around, Wale, exactly like the other time."

"I'm not going to like this, Arab," I said deliberately. "You're throwing me to the wolves. I'm cop-bait."

"And I'm wanted in five states for climbin' in windows, Wale, not counting today's job. So turn around, Wale. It's me for me and you figure out your own answers."

I turned around. I listened to the doorbell and kept listening to the doorbell and, after awhile, something inside of me exploded and I spun to my knees with my

Colt revolver jerking around at—at a pair of drapes gently swaying before the open window.

I stayed away from that window.

The damn bell kept ringing. I holstered my gun and lifted Ruth Charlton by her shoulders. She was dead weight but I managed to drag her to the divan and jack her up onto it. The mat of blond hair had saved her skull. All I could feel was a small lump. She lay on her back and snored. That was the Scotch taking hold. I switched off the light and pushed my head out of the window.

There was no fire-escape. There was a rope dangling past the window from the roof directly overhead. Arab was a top-story man. I tugged it gently, it snaked down on me. I watched it coil and writhe all the way down to the yard below where it landed with a sharp slap.

Arab and his sense of humor!

The fire-escape was outside a bedroom window, but it faced on the street and a prowling car stood at the curb below. The doorbell was sounding in angry jerks now. I returned to the living-room, flicked the light on again, palmed my revolver and went to the front door and opened it.

Captain Bacardi took his finger off the bell button and said: "You certainly are a fast man, Wale. But then you had some advantages to begin with. Mind if I come in?"

He came in.

CHAPTER SIX

Treasure Hunt

HE WAS alone and smooth-looking in his gray Chesterfield and he took pains to avoid noticing my drawn heater. He took more pains to keep his hands in plain sight. He stood in the living-room and passed his eyes over Ruth Charlton snoring on the divan.

"Drunk?" he asked.

"Partly," I said. "That and shock. Albert neglected his final life insurance payment. It hit her where she lives. By the way, I didn't shiv him, Captain."

Bacardi's gilt molars crept into view.

"I wouldn't know that, Wale. There was a print on the blade, but it wasn't developed when I left headquarters. In

any event, fifty-two G's are a lot of G's and your behavior was a little impulsive when my boys questioned you. So I'll have to hold you for investigation, Wale."

"It couldn't be my print because I never touched the chiv," I said. "Why don't you phone headquarters and make sure? Then we'll keep someone from getting hurt."

Bacardi frowned down at Ruth Charlton.

"What made him do it, Wale?"

"She was an Amazon fifteen years before Lois De Fee and can't get over it," I said, nodding at the sagging, shapeless form on the divan. "She sent him to the movies nights when she entertained and he had a club foot and maybe English Harry told him *las señoritas* of old Mexico could overlook such trifling details in the face of a cut in fifty-two grand. Although, personally, I would have had sufficient motive just being hitched to that."

"She entertained English Harry?" Bacardi queried.

"You catch on quick," I said. "How about phoning?"

He dialed headquarters, keeping both his hands visible, and asked for the laboratory. As he awaited the connection, his eyes took official notice of my Colt.

"You want to show me something about that?" he asked.

"Just that it hasn't been used tonight."

"Quite unnecessary. Nobody has been shot tonight."

"Not yet," I said.

Bacardi spent two minutes popping questions into the mouthpiece and listening to answers, then he cradled the receiver and turned to me thoughtfully. He said: "You know about that print?"

"I know," I said quietly.

"But you don't like it," Bacardi said.

I said: "No, I don't like it."

Bacardi frowned. "I'm thinking of that poisoned Scotty, Wale. That seems to tie it all up."

"I'm thinking of the load of trouble I'm getting into for a lousy five yards. You through here?"

Bacardi said: "I'm sorry as hell, Wale, but it doesn't completely exonerate you. You see, a call was made on the backstage phone during the third act of *A Prince for Cinderella*—after you claim to have stumbled on English Harry's body.

"So there was no need for you to call us on the box office phone and no need for the delay. I'm through here. I came to learn Albert Charlton's tie-up with English Harry and now I know. Why don't you come down to headquarters with me and talk this over?"

"Who likes to get shot?" I said quietly. "You don't. We'll go my way."

WE DID, of course. It was a question of leaving by the rear instead of the front where Captain Mike Bacardi's prowler car escort waited. In the back street we found the cab with its lights out.

Bacardi was surprised at the company. He looked from Sailor Duffy's jagged profile on the other side of him to Itzik's massive rear and murmured: "Friends of yours, Wale?"

It was a cosy ride downtown. Turned out Bacardi had seen the Sailor's last scrap and that made us all friendly. Particularly, since Bacardi made no effort to conceal his hands.

It was still like that, parting from Itzik and walking under the darkened marquee that spelled: *WILL YOU BE CINDERELLA'S PRINCE?*

Light sifted under the door of Benny Fox's office and we walked in without knocking. The little round producer sat behind his flat topped desk, brooding at the gilt top hat which lay on a pile of papers. That hat was empty now, but hundreds of ticket stubs littered the desk.

Benny looked old and haggard. He ignored the others and raised eyes that were twin pools of blood to me and said: "Cash, I got here your five hundred. This is finishing it, Cash. I don't want you should do no more. From now on, leave everything to the police."

"A good idea," commented Captain Bacardi dryly.

I isolated one one hundred dollar bill from the five Benny laid before me and shoved it back at him.

"That's one I'm not earning," I told him bitterly. "If you'd have hired me to look into that dog poisoning, all this killing wouldn't have come off and I'd still rate that fifth hundred."

Benny started shoving the hundred back at me, his eyes haggard on mine. I stopped him. I forced open the white-

knuckled fist his left hand formed on the desk-top and plucked the ticket stub he'd been gripping.

"H twenty-three," I told Bacardi, passing it to him without looking at it. I told Benny: "This has become personal, pal. I'd take the general shoving around I've been getting for the right price if it didn't frame me with a kill. I can't afford a jury opinion—at any price. See how it is?"

Captain Bacardi said: "You called it, Wale. H twenty-three. It's certainly a small world. Shall we proceed?"

His positive was out now, Captain Bacardi's—got it when I faced Benny. But I didn't mind that. He didn't point it at me. He didn't mean it for me. He practically knew what I knew now, and Benny Fox had a piece of the same knowledge.

We left Benny as we had found him, brooding at the gilt top hat.

Bacardi, Sailor and I moved abreast down the side aisle of the orchestra. The night crew was in action. Rows of turned-up seats were illuminated by four naked thousand-watt bulbs in skeleton frames on the stage. Porters ran wheezing vacuum cleaners up and down the aisles. Scrub-women worked rags over the seats.

We climbed the stage and marched, still three abreast, toward the spiral stairway that wound up to the dressing-rooms. We were halfway there when my gray fedora slid off my head backwards.

At the same instant a gun blasted from the vicinity of the stairway, rocking the theater with repeated echoes. They faded away and then, from the murkiness around the stairway, Arab's voice sang out: "Hold it just like that, Wale!"

I REMEMBER elbowing Sailor Duffy over the darkened footlights into the orchestra pit as scrubwomen began screaming all through the house. I remember Captain Bacardi diving past me after the Sailor as I scrambled for my fedora.

I got it. I took three quick jumps to the papier mâché throne on which Albert Charlton had been crowned earlier. The throne was handier now that the orchestra pit was becoming crowded and the target for Arab's second shot. That forty-five made a hell of a lot of noise.

I landed behind the throne cursing the twin holes in my fedora's crown and curs-

ing the throne, which couldn't stop a sneeze—let alone a forty-five slug. Arab was yelling: "Hey, Joe! Rush it! Cops!"

Then a slug furrowed splinters from the stage floor between my knees and I gaped at the brand new hole in the side of the throne.

That was ducky. That wasn't even a Mexican standoff. Arab had the stage door and the wide world at his back and Joe probably had fifty-two grand for touring expenses. And if Arab was the twin with the sense of humor, Joe would be one hell of a proposition when he started down those spiral stairs.

So I shot out the four thousand-watt bulbs and that shifted the balance of power. It left Arab dimly framed in red glow from the stage-door exit sign. It left me blotted in ink.

"Hold it, Arab!" I warned. "This is the payoff!"

His reply thrummed with panic. "No, Wale, don't! Fog the copper, Wale, and we'll split!"

I yelled: "Bacardi!"

"Have you gone mad, Wale?" rasped Bacardi's voice from the darkness. I sent a shot winging into the vaulted ceiling and heard Captain Bacardi's voice gurgle off into silence. He was a neat gurgler.

"Sailor," I called softly, "did I get him?"

Sailor's voice bellowed hoarsely: "He fall down, Cash. The copper fall down. He ain't movin'!"

"Four-way split, Arab?" I called. "You, Joe, the Sailor and me?"

Arab's form was a wavering shadow in the dim light. His voice was skipping rope. "Yeah, Wale. You fogged him? Sure, four ways. Joe's comin' down soon. Let's go, Wale—we gotta lam outa here fast. We shoulda cut you in right from the beginning."

I began walking toward Arab and the only sounds in that vast cavern of darkness were my shoes clumping hollowly on the stage and Arab's hoarse breathing. He stood near the foot of the spiral stairway. I couldn't see his hands but I could look up the stairway, right to the balcony that led past the dressing-rooms.

There was a small bulb up there, beating its rays feebly into the enveloping blackness and the balcony was empty and

every dressing-room door was closed. I remember thinking I had but one bullet left in my Colt and it had to be good.

Arab sucked in his breath, then I heard something heavy strike the wooden floor.

"My rod, Wale," Arab croaked. "See? I'm leveling."

"Wonderful," I said—and blasted my last slug at a spot halfway up the spiral stairway—just a split second before a gun on the stairway belched flaming gas and the pellet that sighed past my arm.

Then I was racing for the stairs. Somewhere behind me, Sailor and Captain Bacardi also were running. Arab stood there, yelling: "Not me, Wale, *not me!* I'm unarmed—"

He was. But the guy scrambling up the stairway wasn't. Two slugs buried themselves into the stage floor as I dived for Arab's forty-five and came up triggering it at the dim figure racing up the stairs.

Captain Bacardi's positive was also sounding off—but the light was negligible and our target was over the crest and out of sight on the balcony above.

The Sailor's boa-constrictor arms held Arab rigid. The theater echoed and re-echoed to the explosions and a cloud of cordite fumes misted our eyes and stung our nostrils.

Benny Fox was suddenly in our midst. "Cash, she is up there!" he panted. "Lorelei, she is up there, Cash. Came in half an hour before you. Said she forgot to deflate her balloons—"

Bacardi was gaping up the spiral stairway. "I never saw him, Wale. You could have walked right into it." Bacardi's eyes widened on Arab. "The man on the stairs looked exactly like this man here."

"Twins," I explained. "The difference is the guy upstairs has no sense of humor."

Arab, in Sailor's arms, seemed to have lost his sense of humor. He said, shakily: "I knew you didn't fog the copper, Wale. It was just a play to get Joe down here quiet. I knew we had no chance of makin' it. I don't go for unnecessary rough stuff, Wale. If it can't work smooth, I want no part of it. Only Joe is such a direct-action guy—"

Arab's eyes wandered up and all our eyes wandered up. I was stuffing shells into the cylinder of my own revolver. A scrubwoman's voice called out from the

blackness of the orchestra pit: "He went in the door with the star on it. I saw him! He went in an' he ain't come out! I been watchin'!"

BACARDI whirled on Benny. "Any other way out of that room?"

"Not even the window," Benny said. "Lorelei—"

"Is up there deflating her bubbles," I cut in. "Is that a habit, returning at four in the morning to undo her props?"

"Tonight it was the excitement and she forgot," Benny said. "They cost twenty-five dollars apiece, her balloons. She—" Benny wrung his pale hands in mute agony. "Cash, isn't there something you could do, maybe?"

"I returned the hundred I didn't earn for bodyguarding Lorelei—that let's me out. Anyhow, it's better this way."

Benny was eagerly shoving the hundred into my palm.

"Cash, I can't stand it," he pleaded. "Later, she'll have at least a chance. Now, up there with this *gonnif*, she'll maybe get killed—"

Bacardi spoke quietly. "My boys are on the way over, Wale. It'll take some doing to smoke him out. I think your first shot winged him, but I'm not sure. Meanwhile, the girl's safe enough. He won't make it harder for himself."

"You don't know what a direct-action guy Joe is," I said.

Arab said: "Oh, my God!" He said it like a prayer. I heard it behind my back. I was on my way up. The fifth hundred was in my pocket. I was still on piece work.

Captain Bacardi appeared silently at my side on the top of the stairs, showing half his gold molars in a crooked grin. He pointed to the trail of scarlet drops that zigzagged to the door with the gilt star. I nodded, then rapped the gilt star with the muzzle of my Colt and then hugged the wall.

For a long moment there was silence so complete I could hear a guy and a dame having an argument on the street outside. Bacardi and I flanked the door with poised heaters—and then the door opened slowly and Lorelei appeared in the doorway.

She stood close enough for me to touch. I noticed more of her dress than the fit

now. A green taffeta evening gown that was wrinkled all out of shape and featured streaks of grime. The mark of a gag was still about the lower half of her face. She appeared to be on the verge of passing out. Her voice mirrored the horror in her eyes.

"He's right behind me with a gun in my back. He says if you don't do what he wants, he'll shoot me dead. He says you should clear the stage and stage door and turn out all the lights and see to it nobody's near us when we reach the street.

"He says we'll go down and out of here together and he'll get a cab and turn me loose later if nobody tries following us." Lorelei's hands were behind her, they didn't even appear when tears formed in her eyes. "Won't you *please* do what he wants?" she whispered.

"If we don't he'll shoot you in the back?" I said.

She looked as if I'd struck her face.

"Don't you understand?"

"Perfectly," I said. "Take one more step toward me and I'll shoot you in the front!"

Her lips parted to speak, but no words came. Her eyes rolled to Bacardi, back to me, then she was trying to bring one hand from behind her—but couldn't because I was on top of her. For about ten seconds we spun on a dime and the automatic she had tried pointing at me lay pinned between us, its barrel flat against her hip, pointing down.

Then Bacardi added his weight and all three of us sprawled back through the door of Lorelei's dressing-room. We landed in a writhing heap. Her automatic spun free and skittered along the floor to the outstretched hand of Arab's twin brother, Joe.

The hand didn't move. Little red streams forked down the back of it from under the green sleeve and merged into a growing red pool around his fingers.

That was from my slug. His limp form was held in a sitting position by the vanity overturned behind him. His face was a shapeless blotch of pulpy flesh. That was from the bloodied leg of the vanity's stool which lay alongside of him. Nearby lay the remainder of the stool in pieces.

"He went in for direct-action, huh?" muttered Bacardi thickly, averting his eyes as he snapped cuffs on Lorelei, imprisoning her wrists behind her.

We dragged her to a pile of upholstery stuffing on the floor. It came from an easy chair that had been disemboweled. The entire dressing-room had been ravaged. It lay in pieces.

Linoleum flooring had been ripped up, the sink's plumbing disconnected, drawers emptied on the floor, jars of makeup smashed and tubes of makeup split open and even the soil from three rubber plants scattered about the floor.

All that remained to show it was a dressing-room was a huge silvery balloon hanging from a wall hook.

THE hunted, horrified expression on Lorelei had given way to calm resignation. "All right, what I said was a stall to get away," she admitted quietly. "Call it panic. You see him on the floor. I did it. I killed him. My only thought was to get as far away as possible. No one would believe my story—"

"I not only believe it, I can practically tell it," said Bacardi softly. His neatly polished shoe touched some wrinkled strips of cloth on the floor. "You worked yourself free while he was outside making fireworks?"

"He must have followed me in," Lorelei said with an imperceptible shudder. "He held me up with a gun—that gun. I was tied and gagged for half an hour—maybe an hour—while he did this to the room. Searching—I don't know for what." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I think he was crazy!"

"And you don't know what he searched for?" Bacardi asked gently, almost caressingly.

Lorelei's expression was blank. She settled back awkwardly in the chair stuffing and closed her eyes.

"I was working myself loose all the time," she said. "Then, when someone-outside yelled, 'Joe!' I did free myself. I heard shooting. I heard him coming back. He was wounded in the arm but I didn't know he was wounded. I had the stool's leg and when his head came through the door I—I—I killed him!"

"I believe that's how it happened," Bacardi nodded.

I said: "All except his reason for coming. Joe followed you here because he was behind the blue curtain in the Velvet Club

and he saw your hand slip around that curtain with the knife you stuck into Albert Charlton's back."

Lorelei's eyes snapped wide. She made an effort to struggle up, but Captain Bacardi put her down again with his neatly polished shoe.

"Listen to the man," Bacardi said gently. "He says you stuck a knife in Albert Charlton's back. It's a serious charge. Go on, Wale."

"He lies!" whispered Lorelei, baring her teeth.

"Who else could have dropped the bloody shiv in my pocket?" I demanded bitterly. "It had to be you. When we danced. You could have dropped the Jap navy into my pocket and I wouldn't have known the difference."

Bacardi said: "That print on the knife blade, Wale, matched the thumb of English Harry's old gun moll. We had her record out because of Harry's kill and the print on the blade was the left thumb of Louise Riley, Harry's dance-hall protégée."

"Charlton was about to yap from bubbles about English Harry," I said patiently. "She didn't know how much Charlton knew about the old guy and she couldn't take the chance. How things were developing, she couldn't afford to have it mentioned in public that Louise Riley of five years ago had become Lorelei of today."

"That's not right, that's only half the story!" Lorelei whispered, her face chalky against the scarlet daub of her lip-rouge.

"Tell us the other half," Bacardi suggested smoothly.

"I didn't stab the Prince. I saw him lurch back and seem to pass out. I put my arm behind him to steady him and the knife came into my hand.

"And then I was afraid they'd think what you're saying, Wale. I'm wanted on the Coast, I admit that. I was just struggling for pennies in the old days when Harry picked me up and it was all fun and excitement—until he shot a bank guard. I couldn't afford to be picked up now—so I dropped the knife in your pocket. I admit that also. But I didn't stab—"

"Had to be you, Joe or me," I growled. "I didn't and Joe was strictly a gunman, although he did have a motive. But your

motive was stronger. You were already on the kill-trail. The Charlton death was merely an aside. Splitting open Pop Blasingsame's skull was the main play.

"And you did that during the first intermission of *A Prince for Cinderella*. For fifty-two grand, you did it—fifty-two grand and because your dog, Strip, died from poison in its beer."

"No," Lorelei whispered, growing wrinkles on her face. "No, Wale, *no!*"

"Yes," I said. "Benny has proof you were in the play to double-cross Albert Charlton out of the fifty-two grand. A few minutes ago Benny found Charlton's ticket stub—H twenty-three—in the gold hat from which you were supposed to have picked it. You didn't pick it. You called it from memory.

"English Harry knew what seat Charlton held because seats for a Benny Fox première have to be bought well in advance. So it was no quirk of fate that found Albert Charlton selected Prince. It was planned he should get the stooge part on the stage where he'd be stripped to his skin—giving English Harry the chance to switch canes.

"English, once the canes were switched, was set to scam with the dough on the midnight plane to Mexico, four hours ahead of Charlton's scheduled flight. But maybe four hours weren't enough of a headstart. I can imagine a lot of ways English Harry might have planned to detain Charlton here but the poisoning of your Scotty, Strip, sticks in my mind."

BACARDI interrupted: "Wale, you're getting ahead of me. Fill in some details here."

"Give him the details," I told Lorelei. Her eyes were screaming at me but her mouth was a wry daub of scarlet. I told her: "A good way for Harry to increase his lead on Albert Charlton would have been to slip Charlton a mickey. That was your department. Drop a tablet in Albert's bubbles while he was escorting you around and English Harry would have had time to lose himself in Mexico before Charlton snapped out of it.

"But you couldn't afford to stand investigation for slipping Charlton a mickey, so a good idea might have been for you to slip yourself a mickey at the same time

and thus turn suspicion away from you.

"Only you happened to test the tablets English Harry gave you on your dog first and you learned it was cyanide instead of chloral-hydrate. You realized the triple-cross was now a quadruple-cross, with you slated for the business.

"On the other hand, maybe you figured he had too much on you. Or possibly you didn't want to risk having him try to eliminate you a second time with that cute brain of his. Or maybe it was that you didn't want to split the fifty-two grand.

"Whichever it was, came the first intermission of *A Prince for Cinderella*. Harry and you were alone in the property-room and a hatchet on a shelf caught your eye. So you transferred the hatchet from the shelf to Harry's cunning brain and then you were alone with the fifty-two grand."

"The fifty-two grand interests me, Wale," mused Bacardi. "Finding the dough would certainly clinch it."

"Certainly," I said, lighting a cigarette and touching the business end of it to the silvery balloon on the wall.

It popped and hundred-dollar bills sprayed that room like confetti as half a

million uniformed cops poured through the door behind drawn revolvers, with Sailor Duffy carrying Arab in bodily and foghorning: "Hey, Cash, what I do wit' this?"

I DIDN'T mind Captain Mike Bacardi's picture splashed all over the rags with detailed accounts of his "brilliant solution of the Cinderella mystery." Or Benny's show turning into a smash hit from the publicity, with another stripper in Lorelei's spot. Or the all-male jury examining Lorelei's limbs and sending her up for twenty years instead of the electric jolt—

What had me going in circles was that front page tabloid picture of Arab's twin brother, Joe, on a morgue slab—and the caption under it—

Why isn't that licensed gunman (you know who!), who spends his time doing things like this, employing his talents in the defense of his country?

As a matter of record, the Army, Navy, Marines and Coast Guard have all turned me down for being too small and underweight. So I'm doing the next best thing. I'm an air raid warden.



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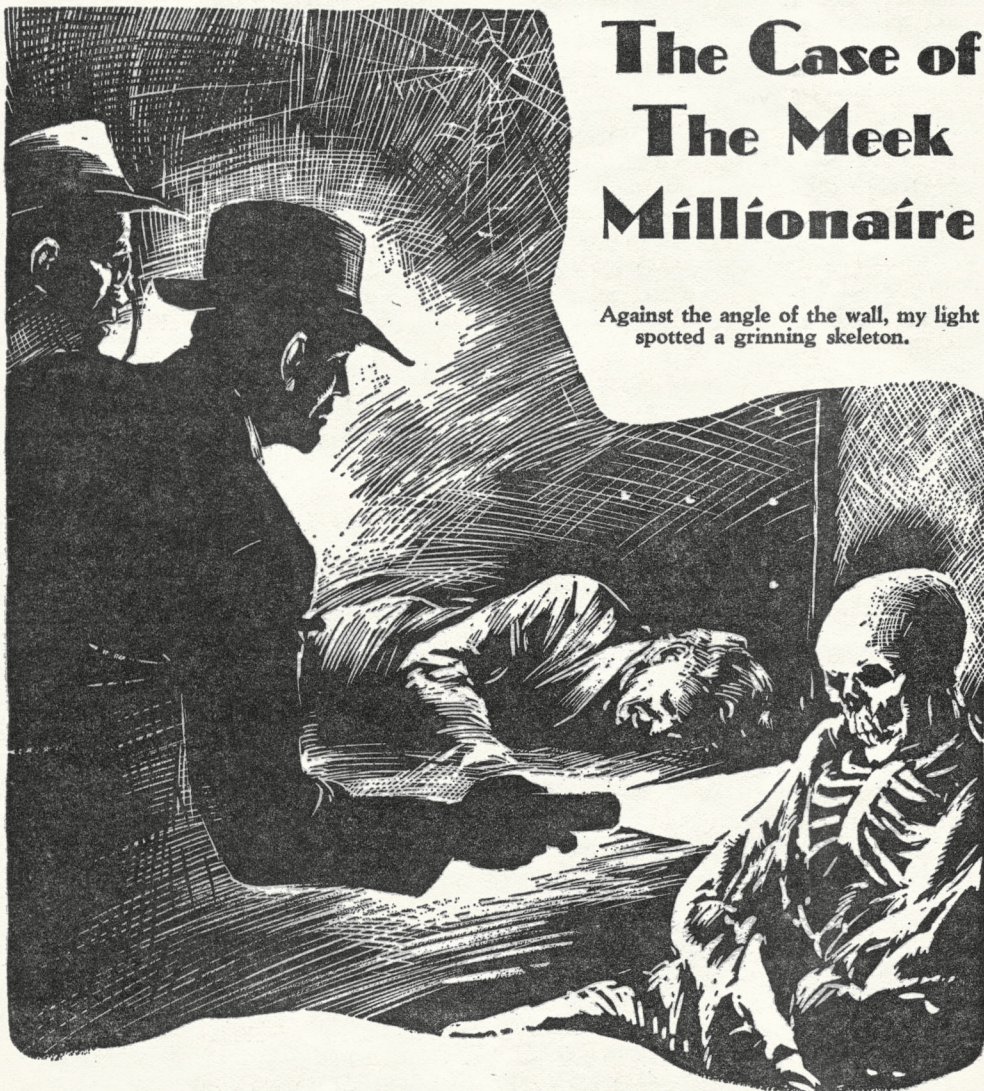
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Seven long years had passed since the mild-mannered Mr. Hayes turned up missing—and the trail was cold. But so was the cash—150 G's—that the insurance company was due to hand over to his "widow." So the Acme sleuth tackles the job, arriving in Hillvale just in time for the ghastly climax of—

The Case of The Meek Millionaire

Against the angle of the wall, my light spotted a grinning skeleton.



An Acme Indemnity
Op Story

By
Jan Dana

Author of "All Those Men Are Dead," etc.

CARLYLE drove me in from the airfield, complaining bitterly. "Investigator! Investigator! Why? I could have handled this."

"A hundred and fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money," I soothed.

"It wasn't when I wrote the policy, nine years ago! Then Acme pouted be-

cause I didn't sell him a bigger one."

"Well, sure, but you know how it is—they hate to give up on these 'legally dead' situations."

"You're telling me! It's a disgrace! They've had seven whole years to find trace of Hayes. A dozen better tips than this one have drifted in—and always before they left it to me to look into them. Now, just because it's time to pay, they get all in a fever and send an investigator!"

"Well, you know Preeker's hunches."

"Damn Preeker's hunches! How about my good-will here? Mrs. Hayes is a personal friend of mine. All my clients are—it's the only way to sell insurance in a place like Hillvale. Acme's always complaining that I don't turn them enough business. Well, if I've got to look forward to this kind of squirming and grasping at straws every time a legitimate claim for payment falls due . . . I suppose now they'll hold up settlement indefinitely?"

"No, no," I comforted him. "Once I see the girl and get her story, we'll do a quickie. Don't worry."

We turned into the town's nicely-lighted—and active—main drag, Hague Street. The pavements still gleamed from a newly-ceased rain. I judged the size of the town—twelve years' sleuthing around the mid-west for Acme had made me an expert—at twenty-five thousand. War work had re-vitalized the score of motor-parts factories around the outskirts and there was money being spent. We drove only a few blocks and then stopped in front of a street-level, converted store.

"What's this?" I asked.

"My office. I thought you might want to look over the files."

I eyed the gold-and-black *E. E. Carlyle—Real Estate and Insurance Broker* that bannered above darkened plate-glass windows. "No. I read up on the story since we got her wire this morning. Let's get to this Phyllis Graham."

"She's working now. We've two hours before the show's over. I've arranged an appointment right after."

"Oh. Well, that's all right, too," I said and reached for the door. "I want to look up a friend for a moment. You might drop my bags at the Essex House. I'll

meet you a little later at the theater."

He looked at me unhappily, fiddling with the ear-chain that anchored his pince-nez. He had a sad, spaniel-like face with mournful little dark-brown eyes. He lifted his black sugar-loaf hat and ran a harassed, bony hand over gray-streaked black hair. I thought he was going to cry. "Well—I'll be waiting just inside the main entrance for you," he fretted as I turned away from the car.

IT WAS pleasant walking in the rain-washed air. Twenty minutes asking brought me to a dingy tavern in a dingy district a few blocks west of Hague Street. I threaded the comfortably-filled tables and got the bartender's ear. "I'm a friend of Egghead's in New York," I told him. "I'd like to see Siggie if he isn't busy."

That got me into a bare, dingy back room with a bare deal table and the three-hundred pound, incredibly ugly owner of the deadfall. After we had exchanged amenities, reminiscences and drinks, I got round to: "Incidentally, what's about this Ambrose Hayes that vanished here seven years back?"

He made a wincing, amused grimace and batted at his ear. "That!"

"I got to make a report on it."

"Lord Betsy, every newspaper and magazine in the country—"

"Sure," I said knowingly. "But Egghead said if I wanted the *real* dope, you were the brain around here."

He pursed his corrugated fat face and lips into a pleased scowl. "Well—maybe so," he conceded. "Maybe so. But—" He lifted pale eyebrows and turned a fat hand palm upwards. "I wouldn't want to spoil nobody's fun, y'unnerstand."

"Don't worry. This is confidential."

He squirmed his lips around, nodded, hesitated. "Well—you know his old man owned most o' Hillvale. Ambrose was away at school till he grew up—and then Europe for a while. He married some babe in New York, but it seems they never intended coming here to live, only the old man died so they come and moved into that old house on the edge o' town.

"They was only here about a year before he vamoosed—long enough, I'd say, just to get the estate straightened out. Then, like you know, he one day sends

his secretary—this Jerry Ziegler, a guy, not a babe, y'unnerstand—to the bank around noontime for a hundred and fifty G's in cash. The secretary says Ambrose went as far as the door of the office building with him, waited there to get the cash and then they walked off in different directions—and that's the last anybody ever see of Ambrose Hayes.

"And, like you know, two weeks later the secretary one morning don't show up for work and when they look around, damned if *he* ain't blew, too, overnight. Only *he* took baggage along, after burning up half the books in the office and the records and like that."

"Well, what's the answer?"

He eyed me through pads of squinted-up flesh. "Why, the cops—"

"I know what the cops think—that Ziegler knocked him off for the cash and loose securities, hid the body and made a getaway. But you can top that."

"Yes, sir, I can. The real answer—and this is stric'ly confidential, mind—is that Ambrose had a babe on the side. So he comes here long enough to shake loose a handful of cash and then dusts out with said babe. Later on, the secretary saw some good pickings, what with everything right under his hand—he had power of attorney from Ambrose, like you know—so he just copied his head man, you might say, filled *his* pockets and lit out, messing up the records so nobody'd know what he took."

He leaned closer across the table. "How I know about Ambrose is, I got a friend goes to S. A. once in a while. My friend seen Ambrose there, in Buenos Aires, living like a king. And that's the real inside!"

I WALKED glumly back toward the center of town. Glumly, because we had investigated that crazy theory two years ago, even sending a man to South America. It had proved to be a pure pipe dream. If this were the best I could drain off the local underworld, I would get no help there.

And, moreover—this will give you a laugh—I didn't quite see Ambrose Hayes as the type to run off with a babe. No, I never knew him, but poring over the stack of reports and carbon copies of his

files that Preeker pressed on me in New York, I got a strong—and very different—impression of the guy. He was—well, meek. Not exactly humble, but excruciatingly polite, un-confident of himself, always jittery for fear he was in the wrong. The few business letters he'd written were full of such phrases as, ". . . feel sure this must arise out of some hidden error in our accounts, but . . ." and "personally believe that your offer is more than fair and shall try to convince our auditor that we should accept. . . ." There was one classic, to an obscure, two-bit charity: ". . . realize that you are perfectly correct and had I given the matter proper thought, I would have sent larger donation in the first place. I hasten to forward the enclosed additional check and hope you will accept my apologies. . . ." They had actually bullied him into doubling the size of his kick-in.

The only picture we had been able to secure—a blown-up newspaper shot of his wedding—showed him as slender, sandy-haired, of medium height, with regular, sensitive features. Our description said he had gray eyes and the photo showed him as uncertain, shrinking, miserable in the face of the photographers.

Somehow, I couldn't see him pulling such a bold stroke. All right, trying to build on the character of somebody I'd never seen sounds a little dizzy, but I wasn't entirely alone in so doing. The investigator who had handled the original disappearance had written, under "confidential comments"—*I'll bet a hat subject married present wife because she fastened on him and he couldn't think how to say no.*

I stopped and chewed a fingernail under a street lamp, debating whether to spend my hour-plus in a quick run out to see this widow—if widow she was—of the vanished man. Not knowing distances nor facilities for getting there, I decided against it and took Phyllis Graham's double-rush telegram that we'd received that morning out for another look. It was, of course, addressed to Acme in New York.

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TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND RE-
WARD INFORMATION REGARDING
AMBROSE HAYES STOP IF TRUE I
HAVE IMPORTANT DISCOVERY

ONLY STIPULATION THAT I MUST NOT BE REQUIRED SAY HOW CAME BY INFORMATION THIS VERY IMPORTANT UNDER NO CONDITIONS WILL I REVEAL INFORMANT IF YOU WISH SEND REPRESENTATIVE INTERVIEW ME AM SINGER WITH OH SISTER COMPANY PLAYING PRINCESS THEATER HILLVALE, IO. ADVISE IMMEDIATELY AS MUST INFORM POLICE TWENTY-FOUR HOURS AT LEAST

PHYLLIS GRAHAM

I WALKED slowly back to Hague Street and fumbled my way up till I stood across from the Princess Theater. It was a vast, gloomy old pile of somber dark wood and blackened brick, on a side street a block off Hague. The lobby lights burned dully, with the dead light that indicates a performance in progress inside.

Three-sheets in the bill-stalls revealed that *Oh, Sister* was the current attraction. Phyllis Graham was a minor, featured name. I wandered through the bare lobby, pushed into the untended ticket-door.

An elaborate and tuneful chorus number was filling the stage with color and song. I stood in the semi-darkness, letting my eyes accustom themselves to the gloom. Evidently the show was playing to capacity. There were dozens of standees crowded at the back of the house.

Presently I spotted Carlyle's nimble little black-clad figure and fretful spaniel face over near the side wall. He was talking to a tall, bony man with a fedora hat

shoved back carelessly on his head.

I worked my way over and Carlyle fell on me fussily, hastily introduced me to the bony man—Lieutenant Rathbone of the local police, a tall, gaunt-faced individual with sour gray eyes under ragged gray-black eyebrows. "Miss Graham insisted that Lieutenant Rathbone be present when she made her revelation," Carlyle explained fretfully. His dark-brown eyes glowed in the gloom behind his pince-nez. "The lieutenant doesn't feel—uh—very impressed."

The lieutenant made no effort to take his hands from his pockets. He made a disgusted throat sound and mumbled something I didn't catch. The kaleidoscopic chorus number on the stage was banging to a conclusion and bringing down the house. We waited for the applause to subside and I asked Carlyle: "Does Mrs. Hayes know about this?"

"No. I didn't tell . . . The poor woman's been through so many false alarms—I thought it best to—" He fingered his ear-chain worriedly. "Do—do you think she ought to be . . .?"

"No, but I'll want to see her presently."

He whipped out his watch, fidgeted. "Very well. I—I'll call her and make certain she's . . ." He turned and flitted away in the gloom.

Rathbone stared down at me broodingly. "Did they really send you all the way from New York just because *that* one said she knew something?" He jerked his

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head toward the stage—or so I interpreted it.

"More or less. My boss, Preeker, works by hunches—and don't laugh. He has a whale of a batting average." I looked uncertainly back and forth between him and the stage, where a beautifully-shaped young girl was jitterbugging a song, in a red dress. "*That one? You mean that's her now—that's the Graham girl working now?*"

"Yeah. She's a spiritualist."

"*What?*" I gasped. "Not the—the kind that gets messages from the beyond?"

"What other kind is there?"

"Good God, do you suppose . . .?"

I didn't have to finish it. Very little surprises me in this business. This did. In fact, it floored me. I went instantly aghast, defeatist, agonized. If I'd come all the way up here to hear a spook message—

God knows the girl didn't look it. She was radiantly young and blond, and she couldn't have passed her twentieth birthday by a whisper. Her arms and shoulders, above the strapless red gown, were like rich peach-bloom and the rest of her figure raised your temperature at a glance. She had a "blues" type of voice and she was hot rather than sweet in her singing. As I stared, she ended a song on a high, harsh minor, while the orchestra tried to drown her out. She was working "in one"—that is, before a black velvet drop that was almost at the front edge of the stage. She bowed off, whisking through an opening in the middle of the curtain, but the audience thundered their approval insistently.

"Why doesn't somebody tell us these things?" I groaned, as she came back to do a scat song for an encore.

"She don't parade it—for a wonder. I only found out because I spotted a couple books in her dressing-room just now. But what do you care? Don't your boss's hunches work just as well on the astral plane?"

Naturally, any faint hope of acquiring serious information in the light of this, oozed sickly out of me. I stood numbly, damning Preeker, damning the girl, damning Ambrose Hayes. I'd been through the misery of trying to fend off these screwballs before. They get mur-

derous if you don't want to fall in line.

And she was such a dish! I even wondered wearily if, after we got through with whatever nonsense she advanced, I could salvage something from the trip by dating her up.

She was selling the scat song nicely, at any rate. She knew how to use her hands—and her body—and she had, to coin a phrase, rhythm. She got the audience swaying with her, in spirit anyway, as she worked up to the smash of the second chorus. I was even feeling the urge myself as she burst up to final note and held it while the orchestra laddered its way thunderously up to join her.

Then she put on a little act.

The song ceased. She half swung away. One hand flew up to her lips.

She stood that way a full second, looking down thoughtfully at the floor. There wasn't a sound in the house.

Then her knees wobbled and she took a staggering little half step. Her other hand flew to help cup her mouth. I knotted my forehead, trying to figure what she was being. It looked like a "drunk" or "seasick" act.

Then the blood spurted out between her fingers, dripping down her arms in terrible long streamers, brighter than her bright gown and she crumpled, tripped—and crashed down on her face.

THE youthful orchestra leader, baton still raised, whirled round, his pretty-boy face like starch, his little shoe-button eyes wild and terrified and screamed hysterically to the world: "She's shot! Somebody shot her—I heard it on that last A-note—somebody in the prompter's box!"

The huge asbestos curtain was already whistling down frantically to cover the huddled small figure on the stage as Rathbone and I came out of our astonished trance and ran down the side aisle.

We burst up onto the stage. My impression was of a million bare-thighed girls, perfume, paint, powder—and staring, stricken eyes. Rathbone whirled and plunged out onto the stage, where a shirt-sleeved man, alone, was dropping down beside the shot girl stammering hoarsely, "Phyllis—Phyllis!"

I whipped at the stagehand at the cur-

tain ropes: "The prompter's box—how do I get to it?"

"D—downstairs—that door—" He pointed a shaking finger.

"Is there any other way to it?"

"On—only through the orchestra."

I jumped for the metal door, snatched the gun from my hip. I ran down stone stairs to a stone cellar, brightly-lighted. A quick hopping survey gave me the layout without my losing sight of the stairs. There was a huge, block-like room directly under the stage, with a corridor running around three sides of it. The dressing-rooms opened off this corridor in unbroken series. I had come down the only stairs there were. And there was but one door to the box-like room—on my side. I slid the safety off my gun as I snatched it open.

I looked into a shabbily furnished room used by the orchestra for lounging. The rear third of the room held looming, blackened machines of some kind—obviously disused for decades—some long-forgotten apparatus for special effects. A stepladder lay on the shabby carpet under the hole in the ceiling that was the prompt-box aperture. There was nowhere anyone could hide.

I ran out and around the corridor of dressing-rooms, looking into each. I found nothing.

I almost ran into Rathbone at the top of the stairs again. "Nobody there," I said hastily. "Better get that orchestra leader—the killer must have gone out through the pit."

He growled under his breath, turned and ran for the door that led out front—the one we had used in reaching the stage in the first place.

I elbowed through the crowd screening the girl on the stage. A professional-looking man in dinner clothes was down beside her now. I caught: ". . . small caliber bullets . . . roof of her mouth . . . throat and brain—quite dead, yes."

The spaniel-faced Carlyle had shown up. I reached through the crowd and pulled him aside, but before I could ask what I was intending, the door at the side of the stage banged and I turned to see Rathbone, gaunt and flushed, fairly pitch the white-faced, beady-eyed orchestra leader ahead of him. The youth was

pleading, gasping, almost sobbing. "But nobody *came* by me! It's impossible! They couldn't get by me—without me standing aside—I have to stand aside to let the boys crawl out to get to their places! Nobody *came* past me!"

I FELT a little giddy. I hesitated just a second as Rathbone began to bawl at the shrinking youth, then I pulled Carlyle aside again and asked: "Did you visit the Graham girl in her dressing-room? Do you know which it is? All right, duck around and let's get down there without our fatheaded friend."

We made the door presently, went down and along to the little cubicle marked L. It had the conventional bulb-surrounded mirror, racks for frilly clothes, jars of make up and furbishments. I spotted two new-looking books—*Spirit Rappings and Other Psychic Manifestations* and *The Occult World*—on a wardrobe trunk.

The only item that seemed unexplained in the room was a thin vial of pale yellow liquid on the dresser and I was in process of realizing—by smell—that it was spirit-gum, when Carlyle, at the door, exclaimed sharply.

He bent swiftly to pick something up outside in the hall. "Hey—wait!" He straightened up with a Yale key in his hand, tied to a blue, metal-rimmed tag. "By God!" he gasped. "It's—" His cola-brown eyes went wide in astonishment and he went pale. "I—I—look—" He gulped, swallowed, turned it over and over in trembling fingers. His voice went hoarse. "I—I think this is a key to Mrs. Hayes house!"

"What? How do you know?"

"I—I've seen keys with—with tags like that—hanging inside their kitchen door. Of course it may not be. . . ."

I guess I stood there for two full minutes, hot-eyed, my mind flying—and gradually shaping out an astounding question.

I said grimly: "All right. Let's go. You've got your car here?"

"Of course," he moaned, "but—but we—Lieutenant Rathbone—you mean go?" His tonsils knotted up.

"I mean go and see Mrs. Hayes—or did you tell her to come here?"

"No—no—she's afraid to drive at night.

She—she didn't want to come over."

"Well, I'm going to take a wild chance that the answer to this is nearer her than here. I've a funny bug in my head. If it flops, we can come back here and start over, but . . . Take it easy and let's slip out before Rathbone gets any bright ideas about stopping us."

When we emerged again at the top of the stairs, Rathbone had a pretty, dark-haired girl in practically no clothes backed against a wall. She was dark-eyed, scared, blurring desperately: ". . . didn't tell me any more than that, I swear! We were room-mates, but I didn't know her very well—didn't even know she believed in that—that spirit business—till two or three days ago. She—she just asked me to—help her—to wait around here in this—this graveyard till everybody went home and—and—get messages. I wouldn't listen to her."

I signaled Carlyle and we strolled casually through the frozen, whispering crowd, to the opposite side of the stage and to the stage door, and out. We could hear the sirens of the approaching police cars as we hastened toward Carlyle's coupe, half a block away, and the spaniel-faced little agent whimpered under his breath. "What—what will the lieutenant say?"

"What will the lady say, is the question," I told him grimly. "You just drive—I'll do the thinking."

WE MADE it in just under an hour. The place was on the outskirts of the suburbs. I could imagine it had once been a country estate. We drove through an opening in a low redstone fence, along a winding graveled drive between thick clumps of evergreens that dotted the vast semi-lawn. Two hundred yards in, the house sat—pleasant, old-fashioned, spacious, of frame construction. All the lights in the place seemed to be bunched around the lower right-hand corner.

We stopped in front of a wide veranda and Carlyle moaned and led me up and rang the doorbell.

Mrs. Hayes answered the door herself. She was a youngish forty, with lovely chestnut-red hair, naturally curly if I were any judge. She had a set of full features and she was a little kittenish. She

shouldn't have been—she was a shade too large for it. All this I gathered as she was backing away to let us in. Her blue eyes were worried and withdrawn and she put a hand to her full breasts and searched our faces questioningly as Carlyle introduced me.

"What—what did she say?" she asked breathlessly as soon as she had shut the door. "What did the girl say?"

Carlyle eyed me miserably. I said: "Nothing, unfortunately. She was killed before she could give out."

She went white as starch, save for two faint rouge spots in her plump cheeks. "Oh," she gasped. "Oh—how dreadful!"

I showed her the key. "Is this yours?"

Her eyes went wide. She reached for it, pulled back uncertainly. "Why—why—I think it's one of the old keys to the front door."

"Old?"

"Y-yes. We—I had all the locks changed five years ago. We had a burglary scare and—that—that was one of the ones we threw out, I'm sure."

I stood silent. There wasn't a sound in the old, shabby house.

"All right," I said finally. "I guess I've made a big mistake. We'll see you later, Mrs. Hayes."

She gasped. "But—but—"

"The police will be here, no doubt, before long and they'll tell you the whole story," I assured her. "We're trying to keep a little ahead of them."

Carlyle's face was ludicrous with agony and bewilderment as we climbed back in the coupe. "But the killer—" he blurted desperately. "If he dropped that key—maybe he's coming here."

"Could be. But I think we can forestall it. Drive back to the theater." And when he started to repeat the feverish speed that had brought us out: "No. Take it easy. I think our friend Rathbone will have blood in his eye for us by now. I want to get back in that theater—but we've got to wait till he's cleared everybody out, even if it takes all night."

It took two hours—after, that is, we got back to town.

We could have made it earlier. From all appearances, Rathbone had moved the entire proceedings over to police head-

quarters by the time we drifted past the place the first time but there were still a few figures moving around. We parked around a corner four blocks away, waited, made sorties, waited some more, tried again—while Carlyle gradually fidgeted himself up to a raging fever. "What—what in God's name are you planning to do?" he blurted finally. "I don't understand."

"You don't have to. Just sit there and pray that Rathbone doesn't go leaving guards around the place. If we get a break on that, then I'll be either a genius or the stupe of the century within an hour."

Even after the gaunt, somber old place finally seemed utterly quiet and deserted, I still sat slumped in the seat for thirty minutes. In my side pocket, my hand came in contact with my gun, which I had hastily stuck there earlier—and also the little vial of spirit gum. I must have unconsciously dropped it there in the heat of the moment of Carlyle's discovery of the key.

Carlyle was out of the car as though shot from a cannon-mouth when I finally said, "O. K."

We slipped along to the side of the theater—the stage alley. I hesitated, then sent a sliver of light from my flash skipping up the dank little slot. "Let's try the stage door."

The lock on the stage door, like everything else in the place, was ancient and archaic. I got it open in four minutes.

The thin rays of a pilot light reached us from the stage. We stood motionless for four minutes, before I could convince myself that Rathbone really had abandoned the place entirely. I could almost feel Carlyle's teeth chattering behind me.

"Come on," I said finally. "It seems that we get our break. We'll go downstairs to the dead girl's dressing-room again."

We went down into the now pitch-black catacombs beneath, my flash guiding us till we were again in dressing-room L. Then I switched on lights.

The place was exactly as we had left it. I looked down at the stone floor.

PRESENTLY I went over and examined the wall. I tapped it with a knuckle. It was hollow brick, painted.

"Go in the next room and rap with your fist on the wall," I told the wild-eyed Carlyle and, after I had listened intently—hearing him, but finding nothing unusual about the sound, "Now the room on the other side."

I got the same results there.

"Good Lord," he squealed, "what in the world are you doing?"

"My boss Preeker plays wild hunches. I thought I might try the system—in an insipid sort of way," I told him. "You know what those detectives in books say: When you've eliminated all possibilities but one, no matter how fantastic—and so forth." I hesitated. "Well, it doesn't seem to be jelling. Let's try the alley outside again. Have you got a gun?"

"Gun?" he moaned wildly. "No. No. Of course not. Great heaven's, you don't mean—you don't think anything's going to—*to happen?*"

"It might. I don't know any reason why the killer might not decide to keep an eye on this place." I took my gun from my pocket, polished it on my sleeve and handed it to him as we crossed the stage above again. "Here—be damned careful. I'm going to be busy giving the alley a little examination. You stand flat against the wall—there—and keep anybody off my back. Stand down there—as though you were part of the wall."

This step took twenty minutes.

The alley was paved with cobblestones, but years of use had all but buried the stones under a blanket of dirt, grime and clay. It was thick and sticky now, from the recent rain. I started over it, inch by inch, digging at the muck with a stick.

Don't ask me if I really expected to hit the jack-pot here. All I knew was that it had to be somewhere—and this was the most logical place to look. Anyway, I hit it.

In the most distant corner—the inside corner, farthest from the stage door—against the wall of the adjoining building—my probing stick did *not* turn up a smooth-surfaced stone. Instead I got a flat metal surface.

I was sweating and hot-eyed, at that, when I finally scraped it clear—and had the round face of an iron manhole cover. I almost broke my fingernails—all of them—in getting the lid pried aside.

Then I had it—had the lid dragged away—and I was looking down at an interminable iron-pipe ladder, scaly with rust. Over my shoulder, I heard Carlyle gasp, and moan with excitement. I lay on my face, let my arm and flashlight down into the well—and could make out the floor far below. Even from here, however, I could see footmarks in the scaled rust that had flaked on the floor.

"Keep quiet," I grumbled at Carlyle as I slid into the hole, "and come along after me."

At the foot of the ladder, I turned to face down a narrow, long corridor that seemed to run interminably under the bowels of the theater. But the interminability wasn't what caught my eye—it was a similar iron ladder to the one down which I had just come, halfway along the passage.

I let out breath, padded quickly to it, holding my flash out behind me so the moaning Carlyle could scramble down. He scurried to catch up to me.

At the foot of the ladder I shot the light beam upwards. Carlyle whispered in an ecstasy of excitement: "What. . . ? What. . . ?"

"This clears up the mystery of where the killer went after he shot the girl, anyway," I said. "Hold the light."

I went quickly up the ladder. It extended only a few rungs above our heads. At the top I jabbed my palm against stone—and a huge block turned on its axis.

I poked my head through only far enough to realize I'd come up in the midst of the machinery that cluttered the rear of the musicians' lounging-room.

I ran down again and took the light, threw it farther down the corridor and squeezed past the ladder.

The last fogs cleared away from the picture, then—and my hair stood on end.

We were facing a solid iron door, rusted orange, of course. But there was a small, half-filled sack at one side—and the cracks of the doorway had been carefully and heavily sealed up with cement.

I CROAKED, "Good God—where can we get a crowbar—" and then answered myself in the same breath. "Wait—there must be one upstairs."

Carlyle stammered, "Yes—yes—in the tool-room. I—I'll get it," and scampered back.

"You can go up that first ladder," I snapped at him. "Get it and drop it down. The hell with the noise now—I don't care who we rouse."

It seemed to me that we made enough racket to rouse every living soul within a mile as I finally slammed the crowbar's point again and again at the thick bars of cement, chipped away enough so that there was a chance, when I finally got a purchase in the door-jamb, to pry it open.

It finally came, with a scream like a million tortured souls, slammed open.

I dropped the crowbar, snatched the light and jumped inside.

As though I'd rehearsed it, my light went instantly to a far corner of the room—and spotted the grinning skeleton. It sat against the angle of the wall, in rags. Even at a glance it was possible to see the smashed skull, now fleshless and shining.

Behind me, Carlyle whined like a dog, "Good God! It's—" and then almost strangled as I whipped my flash across to the second occupant of the room.

This one was not dead—not quite. He lay on his side, his face against an old disused tile pipe. His gaunt cheeks were stained with caked blood that had veined down from a vicious cut in his scalp. His hair was matted, pure silver, his face a horrible criss-cross of old scars. I dived to his side. He was unconscious, but still faintly breathing, his pulse still discernible.

Carlyle cried out: "Who—who is it?"

"Which do you mean," I said as I stood up, "the skeleton, or this one?"

"That one! That one! The skeleton must be Ambrose, but who is that?"

"The skeleton, unless I'm very much mistaken, is one Jerry Ziegler, my friend. *This* is Ambrose Hayes."

HE TRIED to speak. Twice, he got out only air. "But it isn't! It isn't! It doesn't—he doesn't look anything like Ambrose."

"Maybe not. He's certainly been through the wringer somewhere, poor devil—even before this."

"But—but how—who . . . Why. . . ?"

"All I can give you is a sort of rule-of-thumb guess—but I'll bet plenty of money it isn't far wrong. Seven years ago, he found out he wasn't wanted at home and, being a meek and inarticulate sap, couldn't think of anything to do but pull out and go away. Only—wherever he went—things must have gone terribly for him, and then he came back."

"And?" Carlyle whispered.

"And found out his wife had mucked up his estate—dissipated it down to where she hadn't even a servant to open the door and all that—and that her only chance of getting back on her feet was the insurance money. So he continued to play the sap—maybe started to fade out again. At any rate, I'll make a guess—it works the same whether I'm right or wrong—that he was planning to play ball with her, like the born sucker he is. Whether he was or wasn't, though—there was one party who didn't dare let him go on living. Maybe this party had temporarily convinced Ambrose that Ziegler, the secretary, had run off with loot seven years ago—but there was too much danger of that getting unstuck. And if Ambrose ever got an idea in his head that maybe Ziegler *had* been done away with—the whole rotten, stinking thing would be clear."

"But—but what . . . Why?"

"Why was the secretary killed? Well, it seems reasonable to suppose that Ambrose walked off leaving his estate under the control of Ziegler, knowing what a lousy business woman his wife was. Only, of course, this didn't suit the rat who's behind all these killings—not any."

"Who?" Carlyle's voice cracked.

"Who? Who but the slimy pup who'd been playing house with Mrs. Hayes for years—the guy on whose account this super-sucker here faded out in the first place. And the guy who got to Ziegler and destroyed the papers that would have kept the estate from falling, in toto, into the hands of his girl friend so *he* could touch it.

"Who but the guy who was so desperate when I started poking around the girl's dressing-room up above—*desperate for*

fear I'd stumble on the real cause for the mysterious rappings the girl had heard and had hypnotized herself into thinking was a spook message—that he threw down that blue-tagged key in the hall up there to steer me away?

"That was a dumb play. I knew you were my chicken the minute you pulled it—but I couldn't figure this last angle. I couldn't *guess* that you'd cracked his skull and then sealed up the room where you threw him—sealed it up so that, even when those tappings betrayed the fact that he was still alive, you found yourself blocked off—your only hope to keep investigation away till the poor devil finally did die—of the wound or of starvation. . ."

He whimpered. I saw the muzzle of my gun come up, shaking. I threw myself down, as the room rocked with the ear-splitting explosion.

I felt a hot sliver tear into my back.

I got up again and looked down at the terrible faceless thing on the floor that had been Carlyle.

Don't ever fill the barrel of a pistol with spirit-gum and let it dry. The results are too *darned* ghastly.

IT WAS the Spanish War that had given Ambrose Hayes the scars. Two days later, he could open his eyes in the hospital and whisper the story to Rathbone and myself. He had taken off seven years ago and made his way to Europe, by easy stages, keeping himself anonymous. He had, as I suspected, left papers with Jerry Ziegler which would have thrown his estate into trust, with only an income coming to the woman. He had eventually wound up in Spain and had got caught up in the Spanish war. When he could walk again, he came home.

The rest of it I had right.

We didn't attempt to tie Mrs. Hayes in. I don't think she ever had got it through the fog in her brain just what her boyfriend was doing.

Rathbone wouldn't speak to me as we left the hospital together. He growled, "Hunches," and pointedly waited till I indicated which way I was going to turn—and then turned the other.

For Victory — Buy Defense Bonds and Stamps Now!

The Riddle of the Bashful Ghost

A Novelette
of the Dean



By
Merle Constiner

Author of "The Riddle of the Phantom Mummy," etc.

"Tonight at twitterlight, when the bats and striches fly, when the restless corpse shifts in its wormy coffin, go to the woodhouse behind the stable and dance alone. . . ." So read the bewildered butler's orders in the widowed spiritist's batty home. Who but the Dean could plumb the depths of that charnel house of greed and sudden death?

CHAPTER ONE

The Crystal Gazer

BIG time crooks have their ups and downs like anyone else—but when I saw Louie Archambaut passing the hat in the bus terminal I should have wondered. Louie was strictly upper bracket. His trade was phoney paintings; he could pumice and glaze a fake masterpiece



He was swinging his gun on me when the Dean touched off his Magnum.

until it would fool a Berger loupe. I watched him panhandling through the crowd with a pad of paper and a crayon. Sketching portraits at two bits a throw. It was hard to believe.

It was a pleasant evening with the wine of early spring in the air. The Dean had gotten the urge for an after-dinner stroll so we were out for a breath of air and a package of those deadly little Cuban cigars that the terminal tobacconist stocked especially for the chief.

The commuters' rush was getting under way and the station was filling up. I pointed the moocher out to the Dean. "That's Louie the Hand. He's painted more Rembrandts than the old master himself. And good ones, too. Now he's down to a low pitch."

There's a trick that old-time circus vendors used—you know, they'd hand a kid a package of peanuts and then collect from the embarrassed parents. A squeeze play. That was the way Archambaut was peddling his pictures. He'd stand off, sketch a customer without the victim knowing it, walk up and bluster his way into a sale. "Wait until he runs into a hostile customer," I said.

It wasn't long before he did. A fat lady sat in the corner behind a pile of baskets and bundles; four kids were crawling over her, there was a bird-cage in her lap and a kitten in a shoebox between her ankles. Louie approached her, held out a drawing. She waved him off. He haggled, became abusive.

The fat lady began to shout, the kids squalled. Louie went into an angry tantrum. A station attendant came running up, grabbed the beggar by the collar, swiveled him to the street. There was a dead silence. The crowd gawked.

The Dean then did a shocking thing. He sauntered over to an empty bench, picked up a lady's overnight bag, examined it carefully—and tucked it under his arm.

I was stunned. "Put that back," I whispered hoarsely. "And pray that the owner isn't watching you."

"Don't worry about that." His eyes were cloudy, bleak. "The owner is dead. Murdered. Let's get out of here. Quickly. My guess is that we're about three minutes ahead of the police. This thing has

been very carefully planned indeed."

Wardlow Rock is my boss. He's a private detective who practices as a professional fortune teller—under a *sub rosa* agreement with the Police Commissioner. We operate from a small apartment in a grimy brick rooming house down on the edge of the slums. The chief has a reputation for quick results and we really take in the wash.

He's rather trying on the nerves. He likes to pose as an amiable crackpot; as well as I know him I can't figure him. The Dean is at home in a dozen Eastern languages, everything from Burmese to Tamil, and carries a Magnum shoulder-gun that puts out plenty of cease and desist. His accomplishments range from wig-making to Braille—but his obsession is the study of the art of divination.

Me, I'm his helper. I owe him a lot. He picked me up when I was walking the streets with paper in my shoes and gave me a job. I've been eating ever since. I'm no savant; I just speak two languages—guns and locks.

ALL the way back to the apartment the Dean replied to my questions with evasive answers. I put the pressure on him. "Listen," I declared. "I'm a loyal cupbearer. Your slightest wish is my fondest et cetera but this is too much. You lift a travelling bag and throw out dark hints—"

Before I could stop him, he was off on a lecture on business enterprise. "There are three sorts of cases," he announced pontifically. "The kind that seeks out the detective, the kind that the detective digs up—and the kind that blossoms, suddenly and unexpectedly, like a gorgeous orchid, full in his face. A good detective, like a good scientist, must be an opportunist, must be constantly on the alert—"

I smiled bitterly. "Let's just clam up and brood. We're not getting anywhere."

In the seclusion of our bedroom-office we examined the Dean's filch. The sensation began to grow on me that maybe he was half-right.

The travelling bag was not an ordinary piece of luggage. It was an expensive, custom-made job. Zebra hide, saddle-stitched, with a gold plate monogram in running script: *S. McH*. It contained a

batch of feminine underthings and night-gowns bearing the same initials. Tucked in a corner, in a wad of chiffon hose, was a ball of gauze bandage—a half-dozen strips knotted into a rope perhaps thirty feet long.

"Pretty foul!" I grimaced. "They tied her up with this, eh?"

"Twaddle!" The Dean dropped the lid, snapped the lock. "It's horrible enough. Don't try to embellish it."

"For the last time," I demanded. "If I'm cut into this I want to know what it's all about. Who is this S. McH.?"

The Dean lashed out angrily. "How do I know who she is? Give me time. I know she's been disposed of—and that's enough to start on. I know that there's a big stake involved. Louie Archambaut doesn't play for cabbage leaves—"

"Louie the Hand!" As soon as he put it into words, I got the whole dodge. "You mean Louie put on an act?"

"Exactly. He staged a diversion, baited the fat lady and caused a scene—"

"And a confederate planted the zebra bag!"

He shook his head. "No, Ben. Not a confederate. A street urchin. I saw the entire procedure while you were watching the sideshow. The gamin carried the bag in a canvas news-sack. When Louie went into his tantrum the child placed the bag on the bench. I don't like criminals that utilize children. . . . You get the framework, don't you? This girl, S. McH., has been done away with. Her slayers are afraid that her absence will be noted. They leave her luggage at the bus station. Ten to one they called the police with some silly story—to point the plant. When the

bag was found the implication would of course be that the girl had left town. A subtle scheme and a good indication of the caliber brain we're up against. Hundreds of girls vanish just as casually every year." He paused and cocked his chin. "Ha, we have a client."

The doorknob rattled in the reception room, there was the sound of uncertain footsteps.

When you combine an investigative agency with a fortune telling layout you catch a grotesque class of customers. Maybe a high school boy'll drop in to have you diagnose a pair of dice he suspects of being loaded and ten minutes after he's gone it'll be a hot-shot buyer from the Midwest who wants the stars to advise him about picking up a carload of capeskin gloves. It's a trade in which you learn to be wary. You can't tell just by looking at a client what's steeping in his brainpan. A stupid looking lug with a pendent underlip and a microcephalic forehead might turn out to be sharper than a mouthful of Mexican peppers.

The Dean was cagy when he approached our visitor.

THE lad standing in the center of our carpet gave me the creeps. I can't say why—that's just the way he struck me. He had limp bladder-like cheeks and miniature, crescent eyes. He wore a somber dark-gray banker's suit and had a little boutonniere of glass flowers on his lapel. His stubby shoes looked mighty like they had lifts in them and the way his stomach shelved in suggested a girdle.

He rushed across the floor, collided with me, brushed me off, and began pump-



NO FINER DRINK ON ANY JOB



ing the Dean's hand with great vigor.

The Dean wrenched himself loose, glared balefully. "I abhor physical demonstrations, my friend," he said frigidly. "Explain yourself."

Our caller stretched out an enthusiastic index finger. "You can't deceive me, sir. You are the dragon man."

"Fah!"

"I've read every one of your books and pamphlets. I refer in particular to that learned brochure, *Fire Drakes, Wiverns and Dragonettes*—" He gave the Dean's antique love-seat a thorough dusting with a diaphanous oversize handkerchief, sat down. "Permit me to present myself. I'm Evan Crandon, known to a few friends and intimates as the Prophet."

The Dean was curt. "Why do you come here?"

Crandon assumed a sagacious expression. He fumbled through his pockets and produced a strange object: a small plate of highly polished steel about the size and shape of a playing card framed in a filigree of gold. "This," Crandon announced, "is a divining mirror. An exceptionally fine one. I happen to possess it illegally. I wish you to approach its owner and purchase it for me. It's essential in my racket."

The Dean winced. "Racket?"

"That's right, brother. I'm talking straight from the shoulder. As one operator to another."

"There are operators and operators," the Dean said mildly. "If the mirror is stolen, return it. It's a poor crystal gazer that can't make out with a substitute. A pool of ink, a drop of quicksilver will do as well. Medieval sryers are said to have obtained satisfactory results from studying their highly polished fingernails. Anything with a glinting surface that throws up reflected light, *points de repere*, is claimed to be conducive to hypnagogic illusion—"

"Sure, sure." Crandon smirked. "I know all about that." He rubbed the plate affectionately on his cuff. "I have to have this very glass. It's a money maker. You know about crystal gazing—three quarters of your trade is female. You either click or you don't. There's something about this particular gadget that gets them in a swivet. Will you handle it for me?"

The Dean's face was as blank as the inside of an eggshell. "Indeed I will!"

The crystal gazer got to his feet. "Fine. That's settled then. The owner is Mrs. Griffeth Fell." He paused, pretended to remember something. "Oh, yes. I guess I'd better tell you. Mrs. Fell is my aunt. You mustn't mention my name. I found it in an old book in her library, a musty tome on occult science. It was bound beneath the leather cover—you know how the old timers used to make a secret pocket in the binding for valuables. So it's quite possible that Aunt Martha doesn't even know she owns it. Here's the way I want you to handle it. Tell her you are a detective. Ask her if anything has been stolen lately. If she says yes, quiz her, find out all about it. Then report to me. I'm at Gorham Towers. You understand? You're not to negotiate at first. You're just to enquire and then report to me."

When he had gone, I said, "A weasel."

"He's a crystal gazer, Ben," the Dean remarked. "Or so he says. Every man has a right to his own opinion and my opinion is that crystal gazing is downright skulduggery. The object is to paralyze the optic nerve so that visions can arise. Why, say I, won't a good belt behind the ear serve the same purpose?"

THE Dean retired to the bedroom, unlaced his shoes and put on his house slippers. He pulled his broken-down Morris up to his work table, snapped on his student lamp and got out rice paper, brushes and a red-ink stick. "Mrs. Duffy is having a good luck tea for some of her spinster friends," he explained. "She wants me to dash off a few Chinese mottoes to bake in her muffins. If you have anything of your own to do, don't let me keep you."

I bristled. "Don't nag me. You mean I should be in the kitchen washing the supper dishes. O.K. But to use a favorite expression of yours—first things first. Shouldn't we be out chasing down Louie Archambaut?"

The Dean grinned wolfishly. "We'll let Louie take care of himself. I imagine he has his hands full. He's a liability to his accomplices now. And liabilities have a way of getting written off the books. . . . Now leave me. I've some thinking to do."

I'd just finished the pots and pans and was sluicing the sink when he called me into him with a happy bellow. "I've placed that name," he exclaimed. "It's the lunatic."

"One moment please," I said. I stuck my dishcloth in my apron pocket, went to the icebox and returned with a glass of ale and plate of potato chips. "Shoot. Which lunatic?"

"Griffeth Fell, Benton, was that millionaire that died a couple of months ago. The one who worked out that fiendish hoax directed at his wife. Gad! How could the human mind conceive anything so grisly. His wife, that is, Cousin Crandon's Aunt Martha, was an ardent amateur spiritist. Her husband pretended to scoff and, to prove her in error, he left an evil will. He was to be buried in a specially built coffin, one which contained a dictograph or some such recording device. Six months after his death, according to his will, his body was to be exhumed and the dictograph record was to be played. His contention was that it would be blank."

I wet my lips. "Of all the ghoulish—"

"You've heard nothing yet. When the testament was made public, just before his burial, the authorities stepped in and forbade exhumation in advance. The will was declared against public good. There was a big scene at the funeral. Someone got suspicious and played the supposedly blank cylinder. *Out came Griffeth Fell's voice.*"

"What did it say?"

"I've forgotten the details. The gist of it was an attack on his wife's relatives. A diatribe saying that they couldn't be trusted. That they were planning to murder her. If the scheme had gone through as he intended, if he'd been exhumed and the record played, it would have sounded like a voice from the other world."

"Let me get this clear," I protested. "This Griffeth Fell is the late husband of the dame that owns that mirror that Crandon wants us to buy?"

The Dean snorted. "Nonsense. That's Crandon's feeble attempt to cover something much more important. He simply wants us to go to the Fell home, pry around and make a report to him. What his game is, I don't know." He flattened

his lips against his teeth. "But we'll find out."

WE WERE just on the point of leaving for the Fell home when the police force swooshed in on us. Captain Kunkle and Bill Malloy. Icy with restraint. I had the hunch that before the session was over there would be tricky words spoken.

The Dean and the lieutenant just couldn't get along. The Dean grugged Malloy the elaborate police system he had at his service and the lieutenant could never forget that the boss had a pipeline over his head directly into the Commissioner's office. They had a healthy respect for each other's ability, too. They were as jealous as a couple of rival brush salesmen working the same block.

Captain Kunkle was genial enough—as long as he could look into your eyes and see a three-inch banner carrying his name. But it was Bill Malloy that solved the cases.

The Dean, to my amazement, appeared delighted at seeing them. "Come in, gentlemen." He greeted them cordially. "Sit down. This is a most propitious visit. You've saved me a trip to headquarters. I've something I want to ask you. Have you located the girl yet?"

Malloy blinked. "So you're in on that, too. No we haven't located her yet. But we will. It's a routine case."

"There are some ominous angles," the Dean declared mysteriously.

"Maybe so, maybe so." Malloy passed it off. "It's not for me. It's missing persons, not Homicide. A guy calls up and asks us to send a cop to the bus terminal to intercept this Sylvia McHenry. She's a lady's maid. She got mad and quit her job. They were afraid from the way she acted that she had a touch of amnesia, didn't want her roaming around in that condition. The boys will find her. We've a man at each of the stations. She's carrying a zebra travelling bag—she won't get out of town. Are you retained by her employer?"

"No," the Dean said carefully. "I'm working in the interests of the girl herself."

Captain Kunkle left his corner and took over the discussion. He tucked his chin into his collar and waved a pudgy hand.

"Girls will be girls," he declaimed a little vaguely. "And so on. Let's get down to brass tacks, to the object of this call. About twenty minutes ago the body of a man named Archambaut was discovered in a Front Street junk yard—"

The Dean furrowed his brows. "Why pour it in my lap? Whenever you—"

"The nature of the crime, Mr. Rock. It's down your alley, as the riffraff say." The captain made a new start. "Archambaut was known to us as a prosperous crook. When we discovered his body he was dressed like a bum. Obviously he was disguised. That, in itself is an enigma—"

The Dean showed signs of restlessness. "Great men sometimes travel incognito."

Malloy cleared his throat. "Show him the garrote, Captain."

Louie the Hand had been strangled with a strip of new rawhide, a thong about a half-inch wide. "It has some special purpose," Kunkle observed. "But we can't seem to place it. Notice those pencil marks—that row of dots along the edge. It looks like some sort of code. It's not Morse or Continental. Now, Mr. Rock, you have a bit of a name as a cryptographer. Can you explain it?"

The Dean hardly heard him. "A scytale!" he murmured. "Gad. I never thought I'd actually see one."

"Well now you have." Malloy glowered. "What in blazes is it?"

"The captain is correct," the Dean confirmed. "It's cipher. If you hadn't brought it to me you would have never been able to read it. Scytale is an ancient form of secret writing. You are familiar with it in a modernized version. You know, the stunt of taking a deck of cards arranged in an established sequence, writing a message on the edges, and then shuffling. A very difficult device to break down, by the way. Well, this is the great granddaddy of the card cipher. The Spartans used it centuries ago—"

Kunkle wedged in. "Now, that's very educational. But we're a little pressed for time. Would you, would you—"

The Dean picked up the thong, started coiling it. Center out—in a tight, flat spiral. Gradually, as the disc became larger and the pencil marks matched on the adjoining edges; letters began to build up. We crowded at his shoulder.

"There you are," he said. The letter formed three ragged words: TAKE BALLARD NEXT.

Captain Kunkle was nonplussed. "Ballard? Who's Ballard? Take him where?"

The Dean shrugged. "Who Ballard is, I haven't the slightest idea. But where they want to take him is pretty evident. Now, gentlemen, I'll have to ask you to excuse me. I must ask a widow if she's been hearing anything lately from her husband."

"I TRULY believe," the Dean said enigmatically when the law had departed, "I truly believe that we could sit right here and have this ghastly business brought to us piecemeal and solved beneath our noses. Without our turning a hand. Already we know—"

"Which case are you talking about?" I demanded. "Louie Archambaut, Sylvia McHenry—or the prophet and his crystal-gazing mirror?"

"They're all the same case," the boss said smugly. "Or to be more exact, they're all part of another and bigger case."

I sighed. "That old feeling is coming over me again. I can't quite grasp—"

"I don't see how you can miss it." The Dean was nettled. "What did that message say?"

"It said take Ballard next."

"Precisely. The crux, of course, is not who comes next but *who came first*."

"Right back to you," I said. "Who did come first? Sylvia?"

"No," he said quietly. "Not Sylvia. I should guess that it was Griffeth Fell, the man that ordered the strange coffin. Ben, this is worse than we thought. It's a murder chain. And no one knows that it has been going on!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Garnet Bracelet

THERE'S no crime as bad as secret murder. It breeds a virus in the killer's veins; slaughter gets to be fun. The way he looks at it, the rest of the world is simple and he's as smart as a new pair of shoes. He wonders how anyone ever gets caught; all you got to do is be careful. It gets to be a little joke he

enjoys immensely, and all to himself.

The secret killer is a repeater. He's insatiable.

"This an extraordinary case," the Dean announced sternly. "It's going to take a bit of manipulating. What do you know about arborvitae?"

"That's those little evergreen trees, isn't it?"

"Of course it is." The Dean was impatient. "What I mean is, what do you know about the species, how much they sell for?"

"I've never bought any. I've seen them in parks and on estates—"

"You've seen them some place else—and that's to be the wedge of our attack." He got to his feet. "We've got our teeth into this thing. Just follow my lead."

We took a taxi out to the Triangle, where, to my surprise, the chief paid off the cabbie and got out. The Triangle is out in the university neighborhood. We crossed the street and entered the college grounds. Dusk was darkening into night; the great stone buildings were smoky in the purpling twilight. As sepulchral as a circle of Druid dolmens. We passed the library and the observatory, branched off on a path toward a small brick building half hidden in shifting shadows.

"Don't tell me," I objected, "that old lady Fell bunks here in the girls' dormitory—"

The Dean reproved me. "We're not at the present moment in quest of Mrs. Fell. And this is not the girls' dormitory. It's the Hall of Natural Science."

We swung open the great oak panels and stepped into the entrails of the old building. And I mean entrails; there was the smell of formaldehyde and chloroform and pickled viscera. We found ourselves in a dimly lighted corridor. The Dean turned to the right, descended an iron staircase to the basement. He prowled about for a minute, located a door bearing the nameplate: *Dr. Bruce Kendall*.

A cheery feminine voice responded to our knock, called us in.

The office was small, cubic, and as anti-septic as a maternity ward. The gal that sat behind the enamel topped desk, her eye to a microscope, almost knocked me off my feet. She was an ash blonde with dove-gray eyes and a general assembly

that belonged behind footlights. She frowned. "This confounded black widow is too much for me. I'm not making a bit of headway."

The Dean beamed. "Lactrodectus Mactans, like the common cold, is proving quite a problem for science, isn't it? The old empirical treatment of magnesium sulphate should be replaced with something a bit more specific. The venom, as I understand it, is vaso-constrictor and affects the periphral nerves and nerve endings. What do you think of atropine?"

"Good," she said. "But there must be something better." Suddenly she realized that we were strangers. "Can I help you in any way?"

The Dean seemed fussed. "You, I believe, are Dr. Bruce Kendall—the daughter of the late Griffeth Fell?"

"A step-daughter," she said frankly. "And a typical one, I'm afraid. We couldn't get along. I left his home many years ago. Why?"

The chief coughed politely. "It pains me to do this—but after all, we have an outlay, you understand. I'm with the Hamptonville nurseries. Two months ago, when your father was buried, Mrs. Martha Fell ordered from us thirty-six of our best arborvitae and instructed us to set them out on her husband's cemetery plot. That we did. Now it appears that she has changed her mind. She refuses to pay us for them. There is nothing left for us to do but to reclaim them. The amount is not large—only a hundred and eighty dollars. I thought you might like to be consulted before we dig them up—"

BRUCE KENDALL'S eyes became diamond hard. "I appreciate your coming," she said. "Thank you. Just leave them where they are. I'll send you a check."

"You know," the Dean added conversationally. "We weren't too happy in taking the order in the first place. Mrs. Fell has the reputation of being—well—unbalanced."

Dr. Kendall seemed puzzled. "Unbalanced? Oh, I see what you mean. You're thinking of that macabre coffin and the dictograph record. She is a spiritist but all that's perfectly harmless."

"A generous and noble attitude." The

Dean was bland. "About those trees. Perhaps Mr. Evan Crandon will share the expense with you—?"

"Evan?" She scoffed. "Not Evan. He's money crazy. I wouldn't appeal to Evan if I was starving. I don't make much, colleges don't pay enormous salaries, but I'm not that hard up." She hesitated. "There's something unholy about Evan. You can't lay your finger on it—but it's there. It was Evan that got Martha excited about spirits and demons."

"Is that so?" The Dean pretended a half-interest. "Let's see—what about Sylvia McHenry?"

Bruce Kendall flushed. "Oh, I couldn't ask Sylvia. You can't ask your friends to share your father's funeral expenses. She's in no way obligated. Ballard would have a spasm. Ballard is Sylvia's husband."

"The name is reminiscent," the Dean said. "I believe he bought honeysuckle vines from us—"

Dr. Kendall smiled. "That's hardly likely. You must be thinking of someone else. Ballard McHenry is not what I'd call the honeysuckle type. He's a pure-bred misanthrope. He's bed-ridden, too; hasn't been out of that little room he lives in for goodness knows how long. He owns a small bar on Beckett Avenue."

The Dean paused at the door. "I'm sorry to have come on such an unpleasant errand—"

"That's all right," she assured him soberly. "Only you didn't need to bring a detective with you." She pointed at me. "That man's carrying a pistol."

"Whew!" I said as we left the college grounds. "That place is worse than a morgue. I'll smell like a dissecting room for weeks . . . How such a doll could work there and enjoy it, is beyond me. And speaking of the gal, she's my idea of third rail. How does she strike you?"

"She's got a quick mind," the Dean replied. "Which makes me speculate. Was she laughing at us all the time? She packed a load of family scandal into a three minute conversation. I can't help wondering how much of it was weighted. She couldn't be trying to twist us, could she?"

"I don't go much for a job like this," I complained. "The Crandons and the Kendalls and the Fells—family stuff. In

homemade homicide you're handicapped from the start. The two standard approaches, motive and opportunity, are water under the bridge. Everyone has opportunity and as for motive, it might be anything from spite to delusions. These tribal cases are my idea of something really morbid."

The Dean chuckled. "What you say is certainly true. However, your diagnosis doesn't quite adjust itself to facts in hand. This business is our old acquaintance: murder for profit. It's just swiggled around a bit so you won't spot the element of greed."

"I hope you're right," I said. "That I can understand. Where to now? Mrs. Fell's?"

"Quit harping on Mrs. Fell," the Dean snapped out. "She can wait. We'll take Ballard next—ha!"

THE Bon Ton Saloon was a deadfall in the heart of the Tenderloin. I was born and raised in the neighborhood, thought I knew the ins and the outs, but the joint was a new one on me. It was a cellar dive; the upper half of the window, the part that hit the sidewalk level, was painted black. We groped down a gas-pipe banister to a dank, moldy area-way.

"What's the tie-in?" I asked. "So far this has been carriage trade. How does this mole-trap fit the picture?"

"We'll soon see."

The bar was doing a brisk business. A juke box was hammering out beer music. Two girls were fluttering about, serving the tables, and a brawny, tattooed barman was sweating keeping them filled up. The air was stifling. The place was bare, undecorated except for a huge mirror set flush into the rear wall.

We'd hardly stepped through the door when a buzzer rang by the cash register. The barman put down a half-mixed drink, lifted a flap in the counter and came over to us. "Step this way," he ordered. "The boss wants to see you."

He took us behind the bar, opened a door to a narrow passage. "Straight ahead," he directed. "Mr. McHenry is expecting you."

The passageway made a dogleg into the bowels of the building and brought us up

to one of the strangest layouts I've ever seen.

The room was paneled in rosewood. McHenry lay propped in a pile of pillows on a massive four poster bed; his lanky body, beneath the bedsheet, was shrivelled, emaciated. He was a queer looking specimen; his scalp was shaved to a blotched, brownish skull and his dwarfed, pinched face was contorted to an expression of perpetual suspicion.

The sick man's blue veined hands were clasped on his chest. They held a pair of powerful achromatic binoculars. He sat facing a window in the wall. A clear glass window which looked directly into the barroom. You could see the customers, the sweating bartender, the hustling waitresses.

"Diaphanous glass, eh?" the Dean remarked. "To them it's a mirror—from this side it's transparent. That's how you knew it and buzzed the barman when we entered. You sit back there with your field glasses and spy. I know exactly what kind of a man you are."

McHenry leered. "A sick man has to take precautions. How I run my establishment is my own affair. You're Wardlow Rock. Explain why you have come here."

"Gladly." The Dean smiled. "I want to talk to you about your murdered wife."

McHenry took it with nerves of steel. "You're as batty as they say you are." He sniffed scornfully. "Sylvia isn't dead—she's out of town. Who sent you here? What's this all about?"

"I'm being retained by Dr. Bruce Kendall."

"That trouble maker!" He scrambled towards us to the side of the bed. "You go back," he grated, "and tell that brat—"

"I'm giving you the wrong impression," the Dean said hastily. "We're trying to protect you. The message said to take Ballard next."

"I don't catch." McHenry looked baffled. "What message?"

The Dean sidestepped. "I had quite a nice talk with Dr. Bruce. She informs me that you're a bit of a scholar. Ancient history, I believe, is your particular field."

The sick man sank back on the pillows. "I don't see what you're getting at. I'm no scholar. I can barely write my name.

I wouldn't read a book if there was a ten-dollar bill tucked into every page."

"I was wondering about the scytale," the Dean said thoughtfully. "But we'll let that pass. Will you tell me this—what exactly is your relationship with the Fell family?"

"None whatever." McHenry closed his eyes, appeared to be lapsing into sleep. "Sylvia, my wife, was the late Griffeth Fell's secretary. When he died he left her five hundred hooks. He should have left ten grand."

"And what is Mrs. McHenry doing now?"

"I couldn't tell you. I haven't seen her for years. She calls me once a day on the phone but that's all the contact she has with me. She never talks about her personal business. She called me this morning saying she had a quarrel with her employers and was going to be out of town for a short time. That's all I can tell you."

"What, sir," the Dean said, "is your personal opinion of the recently deceased Griffeth Fell—"

"Didn't know him." Ballard McHenry's voice was drowsy. He started to snore—a gurgling, wheezing whine. A fake job if I ever heard one. Suddenly he began to mumble. "They can't pin this on me. Find the ladder and you'll find the one-dollar corpse. . ."

The Dean grinned, tapped me on the elbow. "Come, Ben. We'll leave our host to his slumber. He's exhausted."

WE HIT the street with the chief in an elated mood. He could hardly contain himself. "We'll crack it in three hours! I've never seen anything like it. It's falling apart!"

He'd just about convinced me—when the blow came.

We made it a practice when we were away from the apartment to put through routine check calls to Mrs. Duffy, our capable landlady. They rarely amounted to little more than hello and good-bye. We dropped into a drugstore, made our connection—and this time she handed us a kick in the pants.

She relayed a message from Lieutenant Malloy. Sylvia McHenry had been picked up. Safe and sound. It seemed she had

gone to the bus station with the intention of taking a trip. She absentmindedly left her bag in the cab. The driver had sent it into her by a newsboy who couldn't identify her; the lad had left the luggage on the bench hoping she'd recognize it. Mrs. McHenry was at that moment buying her ticket. She realized her error, dashed out to the taxi just before it pulled out. The newsboy and the driver and Mrs. McHenry all came in and looked around for the zebra bag. They couldn't find it. So Mrs. McHenry called off her trip.

"That's that," I said. "Let's go home and play a game of cribbage."

The Dean was dazed. "If it wasn't official I wouldn't believe it. It's almost impossible."

"Wrap up that zebra bag," I advised. "Address it with your left hand in printed letters and mail it to the gal care of the police station. And hope Malloy doesn't take it into his mind to try to trace it. Ah, me."

The Dean clamped his jaw. "Louie Archambaut wasn't strangled by the long arm of coincidence. There's a cog slipping somewhere. Here's what we do: we go right ahead. We'll make that interview with Mrs. Fell, the one that's got you so anxious, and then we'll report the result to Evan Crandon. Maybe, in the meantime, we can pick up that lost thread."

The Fell home was out in River Park—a restricted community of rambling estates. The mossy mansion sat back in a grove of maples, a pall and an irritation to the human eye. The structure looked as though the architect had started out to build a sedate country home, and then—suddenly popping his valve—he'd begun slapping on domes and turrets. It had wrought-iron balconies, wings, porte cochères; everything but grace and charm.

The Dean boggled. "What people do when they have too much money! Let's take a look at the inmates."

The guy that answered the door was about my age and height. He was wearing two dirty shirts, hobo style; his face was bleary, stubbled. He socked a pair of mean, slaty eyes on us, ushered us into an elaborate parlor, gestured with an apish thumb toward a couple of chairs.

The entire operation was entirely wordless. He left us with a slow shuffling gait, whistling between his broken teeth. It was about the most casual reception I have ever experienced.

The best way to describe that barnlike living-room was to say that it looked exactly like an ill kept antique shop. A dozen chandeliers hung from the ceiling—everything from prismatic pendants to Oriental hammered brass. The floor space was cluttered with mismatched tables and cabinets, all displaying arrangements of tiny china animals, dogs and horses and cats. Above the mantel, in a place of reverence, was a huge enlarged photograph. We walked over and inspected it.

"A so-called spirit photograph," the Dean explained. "And a nice job of montage, it is. We must be gazing on the countenance of the late Griffeth Fell."

The picture was of a grand dame in her early sixties. She was seated serenely on a chair, her hands folded tranquilly in her lap. To her right, partly superimposed across her shoulder, was a hazy, masculine face. The face was a bitter, resentful one. I didn't like to look at it.

"Devilish, isn't it?" I remarked. "There's something hypnotic about it."

THE Dean leaned over, took out his Coddington magnifier and gave it a hasty once over. "Hypnotic is what it's intended to be. The pupils of the man's eyes have been retouched until they stare straight ahead. You've seen pictures in art galleries like that. Wherever you stand they seem to be glaring at you." A startled expression came over his face. "Gad! That's it! That settles it."

"What settles what?"

"That fake was made for Mrs. Fell by Louie Archambaut. It's the work of an artist. It's a ghoulish, spooky thing and it's hung on this wall for a special purpose. Ha! Lieutenant Malloy simply must be in error. Sylvia McHenry is dead. She simply can't be alive."

There was a gentle murmur behind us. We turned around to face our hostess.

Martha Fell's photograph had deceived us. As a matter of fact, the gal couldn't have been a day over thirty. She had a tapered, voluptuous body and the calmest poise I've ever seen on any woman. In

my considered opinion the girl was nuttier than a scoopful of filberts. That sort of serenity just doesn't exist in a normal brain. She was dressed in a classic black velvet gown caught just below the breast with a silver chain; her small bare feet were thrust into monastic rope sandals.

The Dean picked up a tiny china dog, held it carefully between the ball of his thumb and his index finger. "An absorbing hobby—miniaturia!"

"It's not a hobby," she corrected him austerely. "It is ceremonial. Each of those pieces represents a dead animal."

"Now think of that!" The Dean seemed highly interested. "Animals you have owned?"

"Oh, no," she said vaguely. "Just dead animals. They're dying right along, you know. Everywhere, every day." She gave us a slow, preoccupied smile. "Now that you've seen my sanctum I must ask you to depart. You've been misadvised. My home isn't open to the public."

"We're not the public," the Dean explained. "We're here on a special mission. I'm Wardlow Rock, sometimes known as the Prophet. And this is my intermediary, Mr. Matthews—"

It almost stirred her out of her coma. "The Prophet? I thought Evan was the Prophet. Are there two?"

"There are many," the Dean retorted. "And I'm a much better one than the gentleman whom you just mentioned. To prove it, I'll say this. He comes to me when he wants his personal prophesying done. But that's neither here nor there. I've come here in answer to a dream. My familiar exhorts me to deliver this message: *Discharge your butler.*"

"Jackman?" She was bewildered. "I can't discharge him. It's not I who employ him. It's my husband. I have no authority to release him. He works for Griffeth—all I do is pay him."

Sweat beaded itself on the Dean's forehead. "How did he happen to come here in the first place?"

"Evan and I were holding a seance the night that Griffeth was buried. Griffeth ordered me to hire the first man that came to my door. The next morning Jackman appeared and said he'd been sent to me by an omen. He's been here ever since."

"Speaking of Evan Crandon," the Dean

said casually, "he tells me that something has been stolen from you."

She reproved him gently. "Never use the word *steal*. People don't steal, they may borrow but they don't steal. Human beings are essentially pure in heart. Someone has borrowed Jackman's ladder—he's chauffeur and gardener, too, you know. Maybe that was what Evan was referring to."

"It doubtless was," the Dean agreed. He bowed. "You've been very gracious to give us a moment of your time. At the risk of being presumptuous, I would like to compliment you on the effectiveness of your robe. I feel that I am in the presence of a high priestess. Garnets, I presume, are your birthstones?"

I hadn't noticed it before but his quick eye had sorted out the flaw in her ensemble. She was wearing an ornate garnet bracelet.

A TOUCH of color flushed her cheeks. "It does clash, doesn't it? I'm wearing it out of friendship. It's a long story and you wouldn't be interested in it. A girl, Sylvia McHenry, was Griffeth's secretary before he left us for over there. She and I got to be good friends. Last night she dropped in for a few minutes and this morning I happened to notice this bracelet which she had worn the night before—on my vanity in my bedroom. She must have slipped up during the evening and left it there for a gift. She's just that sweet."

"Sylvia McHenry!" the Dean exclaimed. "I know her husband, Ballard, very well indeed. He has one of those essentially sweet natures that you were speaking of. Where is Mrs. McHenry living, may I ask?"

"No one appears to know. Sylvia can be close mouthed when she wishes to be. She hasn't much money. She's probably rooming in some hovel."

"Perhaps she's dwelling with Dr. Kendall?"

Martha Fell shook her head. "That's hardly likely. Bruce is studious, earnest. Sylvia is flippant, full of the joy of life. The two girls are absolutely unable to understand each other. They get on each other's nerves."

A humble, hushed note crept into the

chief's voice. He indicated the pseudo-spirit-photograph. "That's truly a remarkable piece of work. Did Mr. Crandon take it?"

Her answer staggered us. "No. I took it myself."

"It's quite expert. Are you a photographer?"

"Not a photographer—a medium," she explained patiently. "I set up a camera, tied a string onto the shutter and snapped it. Evan just developed the plate for me."

"I see," the Dean said gravely. "And now, with your permission, we must leave you."

We flagged a cab for Gorham Towers. "From now on," I declared, "you can write out your own ticket. The skeptic in me has completely evaporated. This case is seeping with rot. Every person involved—with the exception of the ash blond college professor—is scummy with dementia. Ballard McHenry and his indoor field glasses! Martha Fell with her sensuous body and her collection of little china death figures. Crandon with his roundabout attempt to get the lowdown on—What does Crandon want to learn, anyway?"

The Dean screwed a black Cuban snipe into the corner of his cheek, got it going. "Crandon wants to learn about the borrowed ladder."

"The ladder? Which brings to mind Ballard McHenry and his one-dollar corpse. A red herring, eh?"

"The one-dollar corpse, Ben, isn't a red herring. It's a horrible fact. The one-dollar corpse is the key-piece to this charnel puzzle. . . You've made a careful summary of the affair—but you have omitted one factor. Doesn't Jackman, the thuggish butler, provoke you?"

"Of course he provokes me," I retorted. "But I know his type. He doesn't have a brain in his head. He's working for someone else. We'll cauterize him when we burn his master."

The Gorham Towers was one of those apartment hotels that had a fireplace in every suite, air conditioning, gold leaf corridors—and a clientele so crooked that you had to wrassle your next door neighbor every morning for your newspaper and milk bottle. It had a striped marquee over the sidewalk and a dopey-looking doorman

smoking a cigarette from a furtive cupped hand. Buildings have personalities and this one reminded me of a clip-joint pick-pocket in a stolen tuxedo.

Evan Crandon's living-room was just about what I expected: neat, new, and smelling of stale whiskey and feminine sachet. If my nose was any judge, the Prophet took time off from his crystal-gazing for a bit of recreation now and then.

HE WAS thrilled at seeing us. As a matter of fact, he acted like he was going to smear us with mustard and swallow us. The man literally trembled with anticipation.

"Sit down, sit down," he ordered. "Did you see her? What did she say? She's hard to pump. Did you learn anything?"

The Dean studied our host with ill-concealed disgust. He wasn't a pretty picture; his flabby bladder cheeks wobbled. He got out a fat billfold, laid it on his knee.

"Put that thing away," the Dean said coldly. "I like money but I don't grovel for it. You'll pay me when I say—and as much as I say. I don't work on a dosage basis like an invalid and his insulin. Mrs. Fell doesn't know anything about your scryer's mirror. There has been something stolen from the place but I hardly think you'd be interested in it. A ladder."

"A ladder?" He punched a little loop in the side of his lip, nibbled on it thoughtfully. "So they're searching for Griffeth's secret room again. Hooey! I knew Griffeth like a book. He didn't build any secret room. It's just another one of his hoaxes."

"What's this about a secret room?"

Crandon's beady eyes drew back into their sockets. "The story is that several years ago, when Griffeth had a wing added to the home, he had the carpenters put in a hidden room. It is supposed to be a small attic cubbyhole that has no *inside entrance*. The eaves of the old building are just studded with dormers and gables. The idea is that behind one of those windows is Griffeth's secret room. The design of the building is so erratic that you can't figure it out. The only way to do would be to take a ladder and investigate them all, one by one. From the outside. It would be a laborious task. It's just a hoax, I tell you."

He didn't seem too sure of his words. "I'm going to give you a little information," the Dean said blandly, "which earns my fee. It's this: Sylvia McHenry has been slain—"

Crandon came out with a trigger-quick laugh. "Now that's a good one! You're quite a character, sir. It couldn't be, could it, that you're setting yourself to bludgeon me for a swell in prices? If so, disabuse yourself of the idea. I've been around a bit; let's don't get fantastic. Mrs. McHenry is out of town. She phoned me just before she left—"

"You too? Gracious." The Dean bared his teeth. "I say it again, and I mean it: Sylvia McHenry has been murdered. That ladder was used in concealing her body. That, sir, will be worth five hundred dollars. I'll take it now and in cash."

Crandon stormed to his feet. "Get out, you quack! Leave this apartment! By your insolent manner you have forfeited any slight fee you may have earned." He quivered in pretended frenzy. "Not one penny do you get. Be gone, before I ring for the house detective."

"That I will," the Dean said pleasantly. "I have a feeling that I'll be seeing you again—but that you won't be seeing me. You're booked for a slab in the morgue. Good day, sir. And give Griffith my best. You'll be floating with him, arm in arm, before so very long—I hope."

I caught a section of his face through the closing door. And it was a terrible thing to see. Fear, doubt and anger suffused it. I had the momentary impression that he was about to spring after us, to fall on his knees and fawn.

I mentioned it to the Dean on the pavement. "He's completely shattered. You really know how to wreck them."

The Dean was grim. "He isn't worried one whit. He was just acting. He was trying to hog the final curtain."

"So he didn't fall for your climax about the corpse. You laid it on a bit too thick. Even I could see that it was impossible. Imagine lugging the body of a dead girl up a painter's ladder, two stories, maybe three stories, opening a little window with your arms full—and cramming the thing inside. It's preposterous!"

"It's not preposterous," the Dean remarked. "When you realize how it was

done. You have forgotten that ball of gauze bandage we found in the zebra bag. I'll give you a good hint. If the thing was done as you describe it, what became of the ladder?"

I worked on it for a minute and I didn't like what I got. "It's too gruesome to believe. I get the chills when I think about it. The killer must have carried the corpse up, shoved it into the hidden room, *then climbed in after it and dragged in the ladder*. That means that there's a murderer secreted in the old Fell house with his prey! Maybe he comes out at night to prowl for food."

"Bosh!" the Dean exclaimed. "Nonsense! If the hidden room is a small one how will it hold a twenty-five foot ladder?"

CHAPTER THREE

Murder in Trust

WE'D been on the case for maybe a little better than two hours and already I felt like an octogenarian. You can't traffic with goofy people and not have it bear down on you. That is, I can't. The Dean was as blithe as a mating nightingale. "It marches," he purred. "Go to our apartment and hold down the office until I return. And be watchful. We may be having energetic company."

"Where you bound for?" I enquired. He clucked a disapproving tongue, shook a finger at me and, before I could comment, disappeared into the night.

I really didn't expect an answer. It was a custom of his, whenever a case began to hit the grade, to go off by himself on a solitary scouting expedition. It was his established habit, day in and day out, to pass out obscure monetary favors—a fin to a busboy or maybe a sawbuck to a hard pressed janitor; he ran sort of a one-man charity organization. When he needed information he'd make the rounds. It was surprising the nature and the scope of the tips he'd pick up. He used to say to me, "Ben, it's the little people that serve mankind, the people who hand you things, and take away things—the people whose faces you never remember. It's the people that serve you who really rule you. They know you like the palm of their calloused hands.

Do you know them or remember them?"

He'd come back from these voyages bright eyed and tight lipped. Dynamite couldn't blast a giveaway from him. When a thing was told to him in confidence he kept it in confidence. That was the way he had built up a cross index file of human minds that covered every phase of the city's multiplex life.

Everything would have been all right, I guess, if I hadn't gotten the sudden urge to show off. There was something about working with the Dean; he was so chaotic in his methods and yet so flawless in his results, that it made you want to prove to him that you had something on the ball yourself. He had one hard and fast rule: free lancing on my part was strictly taboo.

I had a hunch and the way I figured it—if nothing came of it, O. K. He'd never hear about it.

That's what I thought.

My idea was to cut the trail of Jackman, the Fell handyman. He looked mighty like an habitual to me—and I had a few contacts of my own. He shouldn't be so tough to trace. I decided to drop in on the Pin-Setter.

The Pin-Setter kept shop in a gloomy, mus Drury. He was a disbarred attorney and his moniker came as a tribute from the underworld. The word was that if the law knocked you over, go to the Pin-Setter and he'd put you on your feet again. His specialty was legal papers—cracking partnerships and contracts, voiding wills and finagling bonds. He was a rat from his shoe laces to his hat brim. We'd gone to public school together; his old man and mine had had many a happy barroom brawl. He looked upon me with contempt—and for my part the feeling was mutual and with a bonus. The interview wasn't going to be pleasant.

The Pin-Setter kept shop in a gloomy, semi-vacant building that housed a handful of struggling small businesses. He had a little dusty room at the top of three flights of creaking wooden steps. The place had the air of frugal respectability. The disbarred attorney was tilted back in his swivel chair in his stocking feet. He was polishing the toe of a patent leather shoe by blowing on it and buffing it gently with a scrap of chamois.

He didn't look up when I entered. He

said: "We put out no small loans. So save your breath. And stay away from that safe—you cracksman."

I sank into a chair and got myself under control. "I'm not here to put the tap on you," I answered. "Art, I'm here to do you a favor out of respect for old times, just because I liked that drunken old man of yours." It was a trick of the Dean's; when anyone jumped on him he pretended he had something to push across the counter.

THE Pin-Setter paused in his polishing. His swarthy, sleek face screwed itself into humorless derision.

He said: "Matthews, you're jealous of me because I'm prosperous, and got a noodle on my shoulders. You had the same start as I did and you're a failure, a bum. I don't know what you're sucking around here for—but it's not to do me a favor. I gripe you. You see in me your frustrated dreams."

"You're correct," I agreed. "I can't sleep nights moping over it. Do you want to hear what I have to say or shall I leave?"

He didn't get where he was being reckless. "Shoot. I got an idea it's going to cost me." It did. It cost him his life.

I groped around, trying to give it a cautious build-up. "There was a guy named Griffeth Fell," I began. "He was a millionaire. He died a couple of months ago—"

The Pin-Setter sneered. "So that's your chisel! You're working for one of the heirs, maybe the Kendall gal, eh? The Griffeth Fell will is ironclad. You couldn't break it with an eight pound sledge. It was drawn up by the best experts the old man could hire. I know, I was approached myself, read it once through and handed it back. The old man was a crank—but his will is the sanest thing I ever laid on my desk. He simply split his fortune three ways and left it in trust. At the death of any of the heirs, that heir's principal is to revert to the common fund and there is to be a new distribution. It's an ordinary type of testament, there are dozens of precedents upholding it—no court in the country would smash it."

That called for some quick thinking. "I'm perfectly aware of all that," I said

casually. "Suppose I could produce evidence that Fell was influenced when he drew it up."

The Pin-Setter was skeptical. "That would do it, of course. But it's a mean thing to prove. Let me see." He closed his eyes. "No good. Not logical. If influence was exerted, it was exerted obviously by an heir. Say heir A drafts the testament. Why would he or she split it three ways? Why doesn't heir Aglom onto the whole boodle? What is this proof of undue influence?"

I ran wild. "It's like this," I whispered. "The true facts are not generally known. It's not Martha Fell that's the spiritist. *It was her husband*. He was insane on occult stuff. He was in the toils of an unscrupulous medium. The family just put out that other yarn to save his reputation. I can get a dozen witnesses to swear it. How does *that* sound?"

Art Drury came out with a nasty laugh. "It sounds like what it is—a bunch of horsefeathers. You should have kept your mouth shut. You've gone and undercut yourself. It so happens I know better. It's the Fell dame that goes in for table rapping and bell ringing, not the late deceased Griffeth. Get this: a certain party, a client of mine, contacts me to place an order for a bogus psychic photo of the babe and her dead husband. Louie Archambaut does the job. Now that picture was faked for the dame herself—not her husband. It's hanging right this minute in her parlor. And furthermore—"

The room shook and roared with five reverberating blasts. The shots came from directly behind me—it was as if someone had laid onto my ear drums with a baseball bat.

My eyes were on the Pin-Setter and it was a brutal thing to witness. The first shot got him in the chest and he came up out of his chair like he had been shocked. From then on, two, three, four and five, the slugs pounded him back into the wall.

A good humored voice said: "All right, Matthews. Fold your hands behind your neck and be a little gentleman."

There were two of them. They were standing in the doorway. A little ragged fellow with a receding chin and spectacles as thick as beer bottle bottoms and his team mate, a natty lad with a wedge of

flesh missing from his upper lip. A pair of professional killers that loved their trade. They each carried a big bore short-gun balanced in a way that suggested unfinished business.

"YOU'VE gone and knocked off your boss," I said severely. "I hope you both starve." The way it looked to me, I was a goner. A wisecrack more or less couldn't make things any worse.

The little guy with the nearsighted specs was in the mood to banter. "We'll get by, pal. Don't fret about that. Eh, Reggie?"

Reggie nodded, slipped his rod into a hip holster.

"Listen, Matthews," the little fellow said conversationally. "We saved your life. We got him before he popped off to you. Now scam out of here like a good chum and forget all about it. You were inviting yourself into a mighty big fiesta. Take my advice. You don't want any part of it. Now run along."

"You mean," I asked, "that I don't get a little of the same medicine?"

The ragged man laughed boisterously. "Ha-ha! You're joking. Of course not. We like you. You're a friend. Besides you're not on our list. Now lam."

Which I did. I had no choice.

I thought about it all the way back to our apartment. At first it seemed just like another warped scene in a screwy case. Crazy and without meaning. Halfway home the fog cleared from my mind and I got the picture behind the picture.

Reggie and his myopic pal were afraid of the Dean. The Dean's absence had been my reprieve. If he'd been there with the Pin-Setter and myself the killers would have probably gone to town with a three-man massacre. They had the advantage of surprise, the tools to do the job—and they knew how to use them.

But the Dean wasn't present—and that was another story. They didn't have the guts to knock me off and set the Dean on their trail.

As well as I knew the Dean, I realized they showed good judgment. He wouldn't be particularly nice in a vengeful rage.

They figured so far he didn't know too much and it was healthier to steer clear of him.

Jackman, Martha Fell's man-of-all-

work, was waiting for me in the reception room. Just as unkempt as ever. He still had on his two dirty shirts; he was so unwashed he was rancid. He greeted me with a hardening of his slate blue eyes—I thought for a second I was in for more trouble.

"Where's Rock?" he demanded. The lug had one of those hoarse, battered voices that sounded like someone was ripping burlap.

"Mr. Rock is out raffling off a turkey," I said. "I could ask you how you located us—but I won't. I'll merely assert that I am Mr. Rock's assistant, and quite capable. In other words, when Mr. Rock is not present I am Mr. Rock. May I sell you something or are you just browsing?"

"You talk like an educated man," he rasped. "Maybe you can handle it. I wanna hire me a highbrow bodyguard."

"Highbrow?"

"You heard me, bud." The bimbo was uneasy. "Strongarm stuff I can take care of myself. But this here's different. It's fancy. They got me crated and labeled and ready to ship and the address on the label reads prison."

"You mean someone's framed you? How and for what?"

"Help me, I don't know." He rubbed his bleary jaw. "It's a rap, though. I feel it in my bones."

I began to miss the Dean. "Let's try it this way," I coaxed. "Who's doing this framing?"

Jackman flared. "How should I know! I tell you it's fancy. It's highbrow. They're selling me down the river. The job pays well but it scares me. Take the way I was hired. I'm two days out of stir flopping at the Barlow. A guy calls me and sends me around to the Fell house. Next morning I drop in, the nutty dame hires me. She says her dead husband sent me. That's the way it started, from then on it gets worse."

The handyman flexed his chest muscles. "The shivers it gives me. This afternoon I get a letter in the mail. In the envelope there's a note and a new ten dollar bill. I done what it said in the note and then I got scared and come here for advice. I know Rock from hearsay—I made him when I let you two in out at the Fell joint a couple of hours ago. What's cooking? Am I in a jam?"

"Do you have that letter with you?" I asked.

HE HANDED it over. It was written on a flyleaf torn from an old book—a mighty tough thing to pigeonhole. I've seen a mess of anonymous notes but I have never seen any as ingenious as that one. The message had been written in a round hand *first on another piece of paper and then traced on the flyleaf*. The best graphologist in the world could do nothing with it.

Jackman:

Ten dollars enclosed. Earn it in this simple manner.

Tonight at twitterlight, when the bats and striches fly, at the hour of nine, when the restless corpse shifts in its wormy coffin, go to the woodhouse behind the stable and dance alone.

These are your instructions: waltz from the southwest corner of the woodhouse to the weeping willow; jig around the grindstone; curtsy to the hawthorn by the pump.

The ten dollars is now yours. Try no tricks.

"Striches and twitterlight!" Jackman growled. "What kind of double talk—"

I got out an Old English dictionary of the chief's. "Striches are screech owls and twitterlight is the oldtime word for twilight," I explained. "More, I can't tell you at the present. I must—ahem—consult my senior partner. We'll no doubt get in touch with you in the near future."

He didn't seem exhilarated over my pronouncement. "They better let me alone," he mumbled.

I dreaded the point when I'd have to confess to the Dean about my bungling at Pin-Setter's. The chief liked to manage a case himself; he was pretty frigid about my attempts at free-lancing. I sprung my report the minute he blew in, to get it over with. To my bewilderment, he ate it up.

"You're a clever boy, Benton," he remarked paternally. "I muff a crucial fact and you smell it out. It had to be something like that."

"Like what?" I asked. "Like the murder of Art Drury?"

"No. I wasn't speaking of Drury." He shrugged his shoulders. "Men like Drury come and go. They're dying right along, everywhere, every day—like Martha Fell's ritualistic animals. I was thinking of Grif-

feth Fell's will—murder in trust. Another nice point you turned up was the Pin-Setter's place in this. You see it, don't you? There had to be a man like the Pin-Setter, a go-between, a middle man between the underworld and our slayer. Someone who knew where and how to get illegal jobs done."

I was just getting to go over my strange interlude with dirty-shirt Jackman when we had visitors.

And what visitors! Dr. Bruce Kendall and Bill Malloy. And the lieutenant was loaded for a pinch. In the period that the Dean and I have run together I've seen Malloy angry at the chief a hundred times or so—but until now I had never seen him actually on the verge of making an arrest. He was quiet and low voiced and a little depressed—but he was cocked for business, there was no doubt about that.

It was a new Malloy to me. He said, "Wardlow,"—the first time I ever heard him call the boss by his first name—"this does it. I guess you'll have to come along with me." The officer turned reluctantly to Dr. Kendall. "You make the identification?"

The little blonde was as steady and as impersonal as if she was peeling pickled snake. "That's he. The man that owns the Hamptonville nurseries. The nurseries which I'm unable to identify in the college directories. The man who is trying to collect a hundred and eighty dollars for evergreens on my father's grave. I've just come from my father's grave—there are no evergreens on the plot." She started to leave, hesitated, addressed Malloy. "Do you want me to sign anything?"

Malloy stalled. "Not just now. Drop around to headquarters when we notify you."

"Just a minute, Dr. Kendall," the Dean said hurriedly. "When I last talked with you, you gave me the impression that you were in a rather tight corner financially. I've since learned that you are direct heir to a third share of your stepfather's fortune. It appears to be a contradiction, doesn't it?"

I didn't expect her to answer it but she did. "My inheritance is in trust. I've turned my income from the principal over to a research project at the university. I'm living on my salary. Why do you ask?"

The Dean held silent.

"I guess that's all." She faltered. "I'll be going." We listened to her footsteps down the hall. They were slow, thoughtful footsteps.

"BEFORE you say a word," the Dean cut in, "I want to make a few statements myself. Don't commit yourself to anything rash until you hear just what you're tangled in. You know me well enough to realize I wouldn't pick up a few dollars by a paltry flimflam. This is a slaughter sequence. It started with Grif-feth Fell, has gone through Sylvia Mc-Henry and Louie Archambaut. It's just getting started. Three more individuals are on the blood list."

He narrowed his eyes at the lieutenant. "I see through the whole thing. I know exactly why you are here. You're Homicide, you don't go around making petty arrests. You want to put me under pressure. The girl turned in a complaint, and you use this as a lever. You're Homicide and you're here on a homicide case. Confess now, aren't you?"

Malloy said innocently: "Now what in the world are you talking about—"

"I'll make a guess," the Dean said. "The cipher on the rawhide thong has been fulfilled. They've taken Ballard Mc-Henry. Am I right?"

"Not according to the coroner." Malloy watched the chief like a hawk. "According to the coroner, McHenry took himself. An overdose of digitalis."

"What's your personal reaction to the man's demise?" the Dean asked. "I mean, does it make you feel as though a leading citizen has been foully—"

Malloy said: "No matter what the coroner claims I know the guy has been bumped. My personal reaction is that he was a swine—you should see the contraption he had rigged up in his bedroom, a mirror to spy on—"

"Then we're of one opinion," the Dean said bluffly. "Let's shake hands and call it quits."

Malloy wouldn't release his advantage. "Now I can't do that, Wardlow. The Kendall gal has complained and the law is the law—"

"Malarkey!" The Dean argued. "The complaint's not formal. There's been no

warrant. You're here to persecute me. I'll make you a swap. Here's a tip to hold you: the next man on their books is Art Drury, the Pin-Setter. He's doomed sure as fate."

Malloy was dubious. "I don't believe it. And what else?"

"This," the Dean said firmly. "Meet me in an hour and a half at the Fell place. Not at the house but at the chauffeur's quarters in the garage. We'll sew this business up together."

"That," said the Dean after the lieutenant had departed, "was about as close to a cell as we have ever been. That man Malloy has more bulldog in him than I imagined. Whew! I thought for a minute I was going to have to pop over his head and appeal to the Commissioner. An hour in jail would upset the apple cart. We have to work, and work fast—"

"Speaking of meeting Malloy at Fell's," I remarked, "reminds me we had a client. Jackman. He wants to hire a highbrow bodyguard." I told him about the visit, got out the letter. "All this dancing in the moonlight," I observed. "I've been into your books, I know what it means. It's a witches' sabbath. This is Friday—it's the Sabbath of the Black Ass!"

The Dean was annoyed. "Leave the demonology to me. Please! There's no black magic involved in that note. All that twilight and owls and bats is a blind. The note, however, shows us definitely and specifically where Sylvia's corpse is hidden. It tells us, too, what became of the ladder—"

"Does it tell us who the killer is?"

He looked at me like I was only half bright. "Don't you know? Do you mean to tell me you have been running around on your own, risking your life at every turn *and you don't know whom we are up against?*"

"Sometimes," I declared, "you're hard to take. You're just throwing your weight around. I don't think you know any more about it than I do. Prove it. Why was Jackman sent out in the twilight to do all that dancing?"

"A shrewd question would be: did Jackman send himself that letter? He wasn't sent to dance. He was sent to obliterate someone's footprints. His instructions were extraordinarily definite. The ground behind the Fell stable slopes to the

river, it's clayey. Where we find Mrs. McHenry's corpse we'll find Jackman's jumbled footprints."

"I'll believe it when I see it." I was still mad. I don't like to be called half bright. "And while we're on the subject, what about this girl, Sylvia? You keep yelling she's dead—Malloy, who should know—claims she alive."

THE Dean looked complacent. "He didn't correct me a few minutes ago, did he? I've been out checking on a few details. A woman called in and gave the police that story. Up to this second they haven't glimpsed her. The number the woman left turns out to be a public phone. Even Captain Kunkle admits it was a trick. . . . Someone, possibly one of the team that shot up Art Drury, was posted lookout in the station. When I took the zebra bag I was spotted. They switched tactics, waited an hour or so, and called off the cops."

He grimaced, wavered. "It galls me to do this but I can't see any way out. Let's step across the hall and have a word with the Duffy. We're at a place where we can use a little common sense."

The Dean rapped on our landlady's door. She had retired. No response. He rapped again. "I hate to waken her. We have no choice. Lives are involved in this." Bed springs squeaked, there was a clatter of wooden heels as she ran across the room. "She's after her lilac perfume!" The Dean grinned fondly. "If the house was burning she'd slosh herself with perfume before she turned in the alarm. There's a lady that appreciates the niceties of life. Oh, good evening, Seraphina. I'm afraid we disturbed you—"

She not only had her perfume, she had her feather boa. She was one person that you never caught unprepared. There was a sweet, dazed look in her eyes as the fog of sleep evaporated and she recognized us. "Come in," she insisted. "I'm just about to put on a pot of tea. It's a lovely evening isn't it?"

"No," the Dean said. "We certainly won't come in. You were in the arms of Morpheus and you well know it. It was beastly of us to break you out but we need your counsel. Here's the proposition: A gardener on a country estate has lost his

ladder. This ladder is twenty feet or so long. I have reason to believe the person that took it did not take it off the premises. As a matter of fact I believe it was used and then left standing where it was used. There is no such thing as an invisible ladder—why can't it be found?"

Mrs. Duffy said thoughtfully: "It must be in a hole."

The Dean almost reeled. "Go back to bed," he commanded. "You've just snared a master criminal. Sleep well."

"That's the human mind," the Dean observed when we were alone. "It's a servile and a helpless thing. You can cudgel it and lash it and it reacts according to habit. A ladder to me was something that one climbed up with. A ladder to a well digger would be something that one climbed down with. A ladder to Mrs. Duffy's well balanced brain is something that you climb up and down with."

"So?"

"So now we understand everything. Remember Jackman's letter, how he was told to jig and waltz and prance *around the pump*? Let's reconstruct the crime. Sylvia McHenry is slain on the grounds—just after she leaves Martha Fell's house. The body is taken out behind the stable to an empty cistern—"

"Cistern, I'll grant you. But why empty?"

"The ladder. Sylvia McHenry's body is dropped in this cistern. Suddenly the killer remembers something—he has tossed in the overnight bag. He goes away and returns with a rope of gauze. He lowers Jackman's ladder into the well, descends, fastens the bag to the gauze, climbs to the surface and pulls up the bag. He then replaces the cover to the cistern and departs."

"Nuts," I said. "Why didn't he carry the bag up the ladder with him? If he was strong enough to carry a corpse and that ladder he was hefty enough to carry that little bag!"

"That's faulty reasoning," the Dean argued. "But we haven't time to debate it now."

THE little brown shingle cottage was in a half-developed allotment. On one side of it was a glistening white Cape Cod with a *For Sale* sign in the yard, and on

the other was a pile of lumber and a concrete mixer. Yesterday the place was a field; tomorrow it would be a street of cozy homes.

"Who lives here?" I asked.

"You're going to be surprised," the Dean answered. "We're about to have an interesting ten minutes. This is a little detail I uncovered when I was out on my roundup."

Surprised was right.

The tattooed bartender of the Bon Ton Saloon opened the door to our ring.

"You are Mr. Turk McHenry," the Dean remarked solemnly. "Brother of Ballard. Accept my sympathy. Do you recognize us? We were among the last to see your brother alive. May we come inside?"

The barman nodded, stepped back. We entered a snug, bookshelved study. It was the sanctuary of a man of cultivated tastes; delicate mezzotints hung on the walls, the floor was covered by a soft rose-colored hooked rug. Turk McHenry bent over a flat topped desk, lifted the lid of a humidifier. "You gentlemen smoke?" Before we could answer he dropped the cover on the jar and faced us.

"I'm glad you people came," he exclaimed. "I'm jumpier tonight than a wet drumhead. Are you detectives?"

"Yes," the Dean said gravely. "And good ones. Already I've detected something." He indicated the door to the kitchen. "As we came into this room there was a crack of light by that doorjamb. Suddenly it flicked off. You are hiding someone. When you answered our ring you had something palmed in your hand, something you wanted to get rid of. On the pretense of offering us a smoke—loose pipe tobacco, by the way, not cigars—you dropped the object in the humidifier. Call in your guest and let's get this business straightened out."

Turk McHenry grinned. "You'll do. I favor a highhanded man, myself." He turned his shovel-jaw to the kitchen, called, "O.K. They know you're here."

Martha Fell came through the door. I don't think I fully realized until then what a beautiful woman she was. Dr. Kendall Bruce was flashy, attractive, but Martha Fell was profoundly moving. She approached us with the poised stride of a

tranquil goddess, barely lifting the soles of her sandals from the floor, her breast arched and her eyes level and calm. She dropped into a deep red leather chair, crossed her knees. She gave no sign that she recognized us.

"I am Wardlow Rock," the Dean introduced himself. "I'm attempting to solve a series of deaths, the most recent of which appears to be the demise of Ballard McHenry. Mrs. Fell, these tragedies concern you greatly. Actually, I am an agent without a client. Twice I have adopted Bruce Kendall and each time she has rejected me. I must have authority and the assurance of a fee before I proffer my assistance."

"A moment, please." Martha Fell shut her eyes. We stood around like fools; at last she raised her eyelids. "Griffeth says yes. Griffeth says there's been an injustice done."

"Splendid," the Dean exclaimed. "Griffeth is correct. First I want to ask how long you two have known each other?"

"We don't," Turk McHenry put in. "Never saw each other until a few seconds ago." He opened the humidior, took out a little china dog about the size of your thumbnail. "Tell him about it, Mrs. Fell."

"IT WAS delivered to my house an hour ago," she said. "In a small cardboard box. There was a typewritten card with it. The card said: 'Here's another dog for your collection. Its name is Ballard McHenry. He's dead.'" She frowned. "It frightened me. The dogs in my collection are for dead dogs—not dead people. I phoned Mr. McHenry here and told him about it. He asked me to come around—"

"I only hope," the Dean said quietly, "that you haven't retained me too late. This is a vicious and subtle plot that surrounds you. Some corrupt master of mental aberrations stands like a phantom behind his curtain, nicking at your sanity with the sure, deft strokes of a surgeon in his laboratory." He spoke to Turk McHenry. "I think you agree with me that your brother was murdered. One of two men did the killing. A ragged man with myopic glasses—or a natty gunman with a scarred lip, a man named Reggie. Can you tell me anything about them?"

McHenry shook his head. "It was done through the back door. Ballard's room had a rear entrance from the alley."

"That's hardly likely." The Dean corrected him. "I maintain it was done from the front. However and however. One thing more, and then we must leave—why the diaphanous mirror and the field glasses? Was your brother in deadly fear of his life?"

Turk McHenry cursed. "It wasn't fear, it was greed and suspicion. He owned the joint outright. I only slaved for him. All the time he lay back there and spied on us. He liked to see the cash register punched."

McHenry led us to the door. As we were about to leave, he shielded his mouth with a hairy hand. "Did I do right?" he whispered. "You're too deep for me but I tried to follow your lead."

The Dean blinked. "My lead?"

"About the guy with the scarred lip. He works for you, doesn't he? That's what he said. He came in about ten minutes after you gentlemen left, said he had a special message—so I showed him back to Ballard. Don't tell me—"

"Later!" The Dean waved him off. "Take Mrs. Fell home. Stay with her. I'll see you out there in a couple of hours or so."

All the way back into town the boss gave me an oration on avarice. "The lust for money," he observed, "is an interesting phenomenon. It's so relative. To a professional gambler fifty thousand dollars is a decent stake. The waterfront thug will kill for a glass of ten cent whiskey. A crime involving money is difficult to solve. It's not how much money but who wants it most. This type of crime falls into a special category and should have a special name—"

"How about calling it The Golden Fleece?"

He winced. "No puns, please. And don't go literary. Why do I try to teach you the trade! You must learn as I did, by experience. Consider the subject closed."

He couldn't restrain himself. "Let me put it this way. In murder for profit, corpses are a commodity. They have price. Ballard McHenry and Louie the Hand may be disregarded in this hypothesis—"

they were killed because they were dangerous to the plan. They knew things. I am convinced that there was a witness not to Sylvia's murder, but to the aftermath. Someone saw the murderer throw her body in the well, saw him retrace and return with the ladder. This witness telephoned McHenry. Ballard contacted the killer, stupidly, to check on the story. So Ballard was taken next."

He went on: "Look upon the people involved in this case as merchandisable corpses and you begin to see the pattern. Griffith Fell, of course, is at the top of the scale. Alive he was worth nothing to anyone but himself. Dead, it's a different story. Heirs rush in where angels fear to tread. Now the valuable bodies are those of Martha Fell, Crandon, and Bruce Kendall." He took from his wallet a memorandum. "I obtained this from the First National Trust—where Mrs. McHenry did her banking. Sylvia at the time of her death, and for some time prior to that, maintained a balance of one dollar and one dollar only. She was in dire straits."

"And Ballard knew it?"

"Certainly he knew it. He cared little about her death but was irritated that she left no estate. I knew it too, or rather, I suspected it."

"On what evidence?"

"Her body was hidden. A merchandisable corpse must be in the open for exhibition!"

WE WERE in a cab, heading for Gorham Towers and Evan Crandon when, abruptly, the Dean tapped on the glass, directed the cabbie to our office. "That's where we'll find him," the chief said. "Back at our apartment. We want to see him—but he *has* to see us!"

The Dean had him doped. Evan Crandon, the Prophet, was back in our office-bedroom. He was ensconced in the Dean's pet armchair, at the Dean's work table. He had a deck of the chief's fortune telling cards spread out before him and was studying them absorbedly. The Dean paled.

"This is my bedroom, sir. Visitors, even of the welcome variety, have the decency to remain out front in the reception room." He noticed the cards; his lips

whitened. "Is that my taroc deck there?"

Crandon smirked. "I was just killing time, running through the major and minor arcanæ—"

The Dean exploded. "I'm not interested in what you are doing. I am interested in how you found those leaves. I keep them in the bottom drawer of the dresser with my private papers—"

"And that's where I found them," Crandon said casually. "I presumed you'd have a deck." He scooped the cards up, gave them an offhand toss onto the bed. "I've been pondering our little tiff. I've come to apologize. I'm too big a man to let your petty disposition come between our mutual profit."

"That," said the Dean blandly, "is one of the most generous apologies I ever listened to. Unfortunately, I have a client in this affair and don't see how I can take on another. Nevertheless, I'm always open to the proper sort of persuasion. Just what is it you expect of me?"

Crandon's brittle eyes tightened, his flabby bladder cheeks snapped back in a scavenger smile. "I don't expect much. Only this. Everyone thinks Aunt Martha is off her trolley. She's not. She's perfectly normal. I want you to realize that, to think about it—and, if the time ever comes, *to stand up in court and swear it.*"

"It's a strange commission," the Dean answered. "I'm not a psychiatrist."

"Don't worry about the doctors. I'll have a squad of them on hand—"

"Let's indulge in a bit of fantasy," the Dean said pleasantly. "Say Mr. Jones frames Mrs. Smith for murder. Mrs. Smith is a widow and Jones will inherit from her. The law, however, decides Widow Smith is unbalanced and, instead of executing her, confines her. Mr. Jones is in a hole—because Widow Smith's fortune is in trust. As long as she lives, he's foiled!"

Crandon listened stolidly. "I don't know anything about the Joneses and the Smiths. I'm interested in Aunt Martha's welfare. She's too sweet a soul to be committed to an institution. She acts a bit whimsical and I'm afraid she's being misunderstood—"

"Interested in your aunt's welfare!" the Dean exclaimed. "An aspect of your nature that I never suspected. You're a scaly

specimen, sir. I want no association with you. Good evening!"

Crandon was unruffled. "About the problem of the stolen ladder. I've been meditating." He picked up his hat and gloves, prepared to depart. "I wonder if Jackman, himself, could have mislaid his ladder? There's an old dry cistern back of Martha's stables. He could have dropped it down there and forgotten about it. Just a point. Maybe you can work it around and do something with it."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Tomb

A COLLEGE directory gave us the address of Dr. Bruce Kendall.

She lived in University Circle, across the street from the campus, in a professorial sort of boarding-house—a remodeled gingerbread duplex. A scattering of diseased barberries ornamented a grassless yard, a frustrated wisteria drooped from the lattice on the warped and sagging front porch. The place had about it the dignified air of a poverty stricken schoolmaster with patches under his coat-tail and a Greek lexicon under his arm.

"Denizens of these academic hostleries are a strange breed," the Dean remarked. "Most everything they know comes in bound volumes. If you'd ask them about the Spanish Prisoner racket they'd look it up in an index. You mustn't underrate them, though. They have a strange and powerful gift—the gift of constructive abstract logic. They can find a complex answer even if they don't understand it."

The house mother, a pudgy dame in gold-rim glasses and a chatelaine breast watch, let us in to a small antechamber. She had a horsy jaw and a merry twinkle in her eyes. It's been my experience that when you find a merry twinkle, you find a character that's hard as nails. No one can be that happy all the time; it's a mask. The Dean inquired for the ash blonde.

The house mother shook her head. "Dr. Kendall is not home."

The Dean bowed. "Did she tell you where she was going?"

"She did."

"To Mrs. Griffeth Fell's, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"Or possibly she's out with Mr. Evan Crandon?"

"Possibly."

The Dean altered his manner. He delved in a baggy pocket, came out with his old-fashioned clip purse. It was the chief's habit to keep each and every calling and professional card that came into his possession. He selected one at random, handed it to the pudgy housekeeper. She read it aloud.

BARNEY'S LOFT

If they were good enough for Someone
Else they are good enough for You!
Try Us!

Barney Malone, Manager

The housekeeper wavered. "I don't believe I understand—"

"Of course, you don't," the Dean said jocularly. "And you don't want to. My assistant and I are going to have to inspect Dr. Kendall's wardrobe. Just to be sure she's playing square with us. She's delinquent in her installments and we want to make certain she hasn't negotiated any of our chattels—"

The housekeeper was amazed. "Bruce has been buying secondhand clothes? And on credit!"

The Dean soothed her. "There's nothing wrong with secondhand clothes. We handle only the best. When anyone dies, we hustle around and purchase the deceased's wardrobe from the family. Like book dealers do with libraries and furniture men with household goods. We get some pretty nice garments that way. We have feelers out with doctors and undertakers and get the tipoff just as soon—"

It was a marvel to watch the house mother's face. The twinkle, probably for the first time in twenty years, left her eyes. "How nauseating!" she gasped.

"Not at all," the Dean asserted. "Merely practical. Now will you show us upstairs so that we can make a quick invoice."

She left us at the door of Bruce Kendall's bedroom, turned and hopped down the steps in her effort to get away from us.

"We sicken her," I said.

"Yes, we do," the Dean observed proudly. "She'll never forget us!"

IT WAS impossible to tell from Miss Kendall's room that a doctor of science inhabited it. The flashy blonde, like most people, had an alter ego—and here she gave it full sway. A half-dozen photos of male movie stars were stuck in the mirror of her vanity; a little shelf held three different perfumes and five different shades of powder. There was a battery of nail files and tweezers and orange sticks. There were satin bows on the bedposts, frills on the bedspread—and lace wherever there was space for it. The Dean gave it a quick casual survey and started on the clothes closet.

She had ten pairs of spike heeled pumps, and all of them expensive. "Shoes," the Dean commented, "are an indication of character. Miss Kendall, despite her *savoir faire*, is infected with that bacillus that disturbs so many unmarried women. She's boy-crazy. Notice!" He pointed to an avalanche of frothy lingerie. "That doesn't look like a destitute school teacher." He took down a hat box, opened it and tensed. "Gad. This is a strange case. One can never tell what one will find—or where!"

He lifted out a wide-mouthed glass jar. In the jar, grinning at me from a packing of cotton batting, was a set of false teeth. And to make the effect a bit more horrible, the upper plate had a gold tooth squarely in the center of its porcelain brethren. "Whose are they?" I asked.

"Griffeth Fell's." The Dean rubbed his jaw. "Let's go now." He replaced the jar in its box, the box on the closet rack. "We've had better luck than I expected. With these teeth as collateral, we're due for a whopping fee."

"Blackmail?" I asked.

"No," the chief answered gravely, "not blackmail. Just a little Lidford law."

I didn't like to hear him say it. I'd seen him put out Lidford law before. Lidford law was punishment without trial.

When we had left the boarding-house, I said: "What—in words of one syllable—do Griffeth Fell's dentures clear up?"

"They wipe the steam off the window and show us the clear details to the murder picture we have been reconstructing. They are definite proof that the old man was

murdered for his money, they show us how it was done. They explain the most grotesque detail in the entire scheme—the dictograph in the coffin." He gave me a sparrowlike wink. "Did I take the words right out of your mouth?"

We tackled the Fell estate from the Dean's favorite angle—from the rear. We turned off the old turnpike at the river road, left our rented car in an abandoned gravel pit and ascended a clayey path.

The spring night was soft and mild; from the river below us came the spicy pungent odor of rotting wharves and watersoaked driftwood. The trees were in their early leaf and made shifting filigree beneath the high white moon. We came out of the hooding shadows onto a level meadowlike greensward. "Be cautious," the Dean warned. "From now on death is trump."

Griffeth Fell had built his out-buildings in a quadrangle, or, more properly, in the form of a U. There was a crushed gravel court in the center, facing the mansion, and around it was a hodge-podge of chicken houses, vacant dog kennels, work shops. On one wing of the U was a big red eighteen-ninety stable and opposite it, across the court, was a comparatively new three-car garage. The garage, itself, was larger than an ordinary home; an outside staircase ran to the second floor and lights came from cretonne curtained windows—Jackman's quarters.

At the corner of the stable was a dilapidated woodhouse and a stone's throw away was a hawthorn tree. About halfway between the hawthorn and the woodhouse was a wooden platform about six inches above the ground—in the center of the platform was an old rusty, long handled pump. "You see," the Dean said. "If Jackman jiggered and curtsied and waltzed as directed he'd leave his prints all around that cistern. Let's take a look inside."

HE GRASPED the corner of the platform, heaved. The entire cover came up—on well oiled hinges. The pump was a phoney; it had been so arranged that it acted as a counterbalance, throwing the lid back as neat and easily as a safe door.

"Another bouquet on our criminal's grave," the Dean murmured. "This is premeditation if I ever saw it." He flashed his light down into the murky pit. "Here's the ladder all right. Follow me. I want a close-up of this."

The cistern was about three times the size of any I'd ever seen—deeper and roomier. It was like a great underground vault. We stood on the earthy floor and played our torches about us. The brick walls had long since crumbled—shattered by the slow thrusts of tree roots which hung about us like festoons of witches' hair. "Old-time estates had these big reservoirs," the Dean explained. "They used them as tanks for their formal gardens and fountains."

"I don't see any body," I put in. "For which I'm grateful. Are we in the right place—or are you wrong, after all—"

"I'm rarely wrong," the Dean said grimly. "And we're in the right place." He bent down, lifted a tangle of matted roots. There on the cool earth, not three inches from my ankle, lay the stiffened corpse of Sylvia McHenry.

She'd been a pretty little thing, tiny but buxom. Her plaid blouse was torn at the shoulder and there was a bloody gash across her forehead. An eight-pound pipe wrench was tucked beneath the folds of her skirt. The Dean examined the wound.

"She was dead when this was done," he observed. "The killer brought the wrench down, swung it, and left it. It appears to be an attempt to incriminate Jackman."

"If you ask me, Jackman doesn't need anyone to do his incriminating for him." I swiveled my gaze away from the tragic thing on the floor. "Why did they pick on her? What did it get them?"

The Dean said bleakly: "It got them security. She was the chink in their armor. Sylvia McHenry was Griffeth's confidential secretary. She knew he was slain—and had a good idea who did it. At the time, she let it slide. She supposed she, like the family, would come in for a big slice of dough. But the will said no. It left her a few hundred dollars. She spent the inheritance, lived hand-to-mouth, and got the urge to cut herself back in. By attempting to do so she

signed her death warrant. She was the one who hooked Griffeth Fell's false teeth. Ten to one, she sneaked them right out of the coffin!"

"I hear you, suh," I said. "But not with the inner ear. Let's get out of this catacomb."

We ascended the ladder to the surface, replaced the cistern cover with its bogus pump. "I wonder if I've found the right profession," I threw out. "Episodes like this make me melancholy. Let's sell out and raise squabs."

He gave me one of the few honest answers I ever heard from him. "I can't stop. I've tried it. When I'm inactive, I brood about criminal wrongs inflicted upon innocent victims, and simmer. I'd work for nothing, Ben, I honestly would. But for Gad's sake never quote me."

THE light in Jackman's quarters was out. But the windows of a small building between the dog kennels and the stable were ablaze. I hadn't noticed the shed before; now I gave it a closer examination. At first I thought I was seeing things. It was a diminutive dwelling; a midget house maybe ten or twelve feet tall. It had a little chimney, little window boxes, a sloping, shingled roof. "Martha Fell and her miniatures!" I exclaimed. "She's even—"

"Not Martha Fell," the Dean corrected me. "That's a playhouse and an extravagant one. From its peeled paint and rundown condition I should say it was built many years ago. Built by Griffeth Fell for his step-child, Bruce Kendall. Look!" As he spoke, the ash blonde passed before the window. She was carrying something in her hand; her face was strained, intent.

The Dean raised a toy knocker. "We may as well observe formalities." He gave it a clatter, twisted the knob and entered.

Inside, it was one fairly large room; at one end there was a child's stove and china cabinet, there was an undersized table, small chairs, tiny pictures on the wall. Dr. Bruce Kendall, leaning over the baby table, looked like a huge, ravishing giantess. She frowned with displeasure as we approached. "You two again!"

"That's right," the Dean taunted. "You

should have locked us up when you had the chance. Are we interrupting an academic experiment?"

Then I got an eyefull of what she had laid out on the table before her: three oranges, a bottle labeled *Digitalis*—and a hypodermic needle.

She seemed perfectly relaxed. "Yes, I've just finished a bit of work. A problem of search and seizure." She gestured toward the layout. "I found these lethal things back in that cabinet. I supposed they were around somewhere. Now I've got them. I've saved someone's life—perhaps my own."

The Dean said gently: "The oranges look quite fresh, don't they?"

She started to weep. She had a funny way of crying; she didn't wrinkle her eyes and cheeks—she just sobbed. It was like a mask trying to moan. "I don't know why you're persecuting me! I do the best I can and everyone kicks me around. I haven't had a fair chance since I was a little girl and my mother died. I come back here to be alone and live over those happy hours and you break in on me and threaten me—"

That's just how quick she changed her story.

It jolted us.

We didn't know that a couple of my old friends had entered behind us and that she was talking to a new audience.

The pair that had knocked off Art Drury, the Pin-Setter, barged in on us. They were on another job and this time we were the focus of their attention—that was pretty obvious. The ragged man with the myopic glasses waved Bruce Kendall to a neutral corner. "Stand back, sister," he said genially. "These things splatter." He raised his .44 short-gun, set his wrist against his pelvic bone and sighed.

"Who's paying for this?" I asked. "You've canceled your old boss—"

"Business at the same old stand," the ragged man grinned. "Redecorated and under new management."

"May I quibble?" the Dean inquired.

"If you can make it in ten words or less." The nearsighted man was having himself a merry time.

"Stop me," the Dean insisted, "if I begin to bore you. First, I take issue

about your being under new management. I say you're working for the same person you've been working for since this flood of blood began."

Reggie, the lad with the scarred lip, snarled. "Watch yourself! You want us to have to chill the dame too?"

"I certainly don't," the Dean said calmly. "And neither would Lieutenant Malloy—he's got the dragnet out for you two cretins right this minute. He wants you for a number of things—all homicide. The murder of Griffeth Fell, of course, you're not responsible for; you came on the scene a few days afterwards. A junkman down on Front Street has identified you two as the pair who strangled Louie the Hand with a rawhide thong. The thong was a cipher sent to you by your employer. It said to take Ballard McHenry next. You did." He fastened a baleful glare on Reggie. "Which reminds me, I understand that you put yourself off as an assistant of mine in the commission of your slaving at the Bon Ton. I don't like that!"

THE ragged man was uneasy. "Is that all?"

"No," the Dean said, "that's not all. I'm saving the best for dessert. It's about Jackman. Did you know he was an amateur photographer?"

The ragged gunman wet his lips with his tongue. "Who is Jackman and why do you say *was*?"

The Dean ignored his questions. "Jackman appealed to the police this afternoon. He feared that his life was in danger. The police suggested that he set up three concealed camera traps in his bedroom. One pointed at the door and two aimed at the bed and released by pressure on the springs—"

That was the spark that blew things up. Then came the shambles.

The ragged man snapped a slug through the cuff of my sleeve and I went down behind my belt buckle and got out the old bulldog. Why they picked me first, I didn't know at the time; later I realized that the Dean had them scared silly, they didn't much know what they were doing. Reggie let loose three times—once at the Dean and twice at the girl. He was just swinging his gun on me when

the Dean got out his Magnum and touched it off. Reggie's head was twisted back on his shoulder in his excitement and the chief's soft-nose caught him in the V of skin which lies just under the chin. His arms fanned out in a spasm of reflex and he went over chairs and little tables like a drunken man in a pile of milk bottles.

The ragged man's face was red-veined and bloated in the surge of slaughter. He brought his gun out from his hip with a crook of the arm—and laid the rear sight against the bridge of his nose about an inch away from his thick lensed spectacles. It was a frosty picture. He'd missed me once and he wasn't going to do it again. The ghoulsh abnormality of the operation almost hypnotized me into my grave.

I had my rod out and lined but I couldn't seem to get the strength to pull the trigger. Bruce Kendall's scream doused me out of it—and I nailed him.

"I was correct again," the Dean said complacently. He slipped his big gun back into its shoulder clip. "That was thinking on the feet. It came to me like an inspiration."

"What?" I asked. "This stuff's too fast for me—"

"That darkened window in Jackman's quarters. They'd just come from a rendezvous with Martha Fell's chauffeur. He'll never jig again. He's lying lifeless on his bed."

That was more than I wanted to take. "Why bed? Why not in a welter of blood on the well known broadloom?"

"Because," he explained impatiently, "it must look natural. It must be heart failure or suicide. The body's on the bed. I'll wager you!"

Bruce Kendall said: "Mr. Rock, permit me to retract any harsh remark I may have directed at you. That was the most spectacular demonstration of dexterity it's ever been my honor to witness. Your hands! You should have been a scientist."

"I have been a scientist," the Dean said amiably, "in my time. I gave it up. No future in it." He cocked an eyebrow at her. "We're about to go up and see what's been going on in Jackman's quarters. Would you care to join us?"

She shook her blond head. "I've had enough for one evening. I'm going in

with Martha and mix up a bromide." "Stick around," the Dean said carelessly. "We'll be seeing you."

JACKMAN'S apartment above the garage was a doggy suite of three rooms. The landing on the outside staircase led directly into his living-room. The Dean glanced hastily about, went back to the kitchen, retraced and joined me by the dummy fireplace. "All clear," he announced. "Now we'll take the boudoir."

The Fells did right well by their servitors. The furniture was sturdy rough-shaped maple, a motif which was carried on in to the bedroom. There was a fine mannish chest of drawers, a couple of Windsor chairs, a wagon-seat bench by the window—and a luxurious double-bed holding Jackman's contorted corpse.

The chauffeur was as unclean in death as he had been in life. Still unshaven, still in his grimy shirts. His little slaty eyes were just as hard and his loose mouth was just as sneering. "The end of the trail," I said. "The Hobo's Farewell."

"Don't jest," the Dean reproved. "He's a tragic figure. Believe it or not, he was an honest man. He was just out-managed. An ex-convict, he was picked by the Pin-Setter as a fall-guy and placed here in Martha Fell's home to be used as a scapegoat if the occasion should ever arise. He was a natural for the part. Too natural, as a matter of fact. Everything about him was too suspicious. How he came to be hired through a spirit voice, his slovenly and unkempt person, the insane letters he got in the mail. A web of suspicion was laid about him with great skill but he tore loose and came to consult us this afternoon. His manipulators became alarmed."

"You mean they knew he came and talked with me?"

"Of course they knew! Reggie and his ragged pal were sent around to polish him off." The boss examined Jackman's parted lips. "Suffocated. He's been throttled." He meditated. "There was something he could have told us that he didn't. What could it have been?"

"If it was a paper or anything like that," I offered, "you'll find it in his shoe. That's the bum's old faithful safety deposit box."

It was not only in his shoe, it was in his sock. A new ten dollar bill and a hypodermic needle wrapped in heavy lead-foil.

"How many sets of these things are there?" I exclaimed.

"Just one set," the Dean said quietly. "It seems to have gotten scattered. If he had showed you that needle this afternoon we could have saved his life. These clients that withhold vital information—"

Lieutenant Bill Malloy sauntered through the door. He wandered to the bedside, gazed moodily at the twisted figure. "So you've dug up another one."

Before the chief could answer, the officer bridled. "You and your hot stove-lid tips! Every time I trade with you I get caught with a handful of horsefeathers. Art Drury is knocked off, all right. He was already dead when you swapped him to me.

"It's a long story," the Dean said evasively. "And one with a happy ending. Try to be patient—"

"What's going on inside the big house?" Malloy pointed out the dormer. The great mansion had its yardlights on. "I just saw Evan Crandon, the nephew, come flying out of a cab, rush up to the front door, and almost beat the lintel in. Maybe we'd better drop in on 'em."

"As you say," the Dean murmured modestly. "Ours but to obey."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Bashful Ghost

TURK MCHENRY let us in. The bartender was subdued, docile. There was an aroma of Irish whiskey as he said: "They're upstairs preparing for a seance. Crandon's fixing to call up a few supernatural relatives. It's strictly a family affair—they put me on the door to say no admittance." He recognized Malloy. "Oh, hello, Lieutenant. So this is a police visit." He showed us to an ornate, carved stairway. "They're in a sort of den at the back of the hall. You gentlemen will have to excuse me. I have to go out to the kitchen and finish something I'd just started."

"Stay sober," Malloy cautioned. "Because it's from someone else's stock, don't

overdo it. I may want to talk to you."

There was just the faint suggestion of a weave to his ankles as he left us.

"Disgusting!" Malloy growled. "His brother killed this evening and now he's busy getting tighter than a—"

"He may know what he's doing," the Dean answered. "Let's not underrate him. . . . How would you like to spend your life in these surroundings?"

The upstairs corridor was like an embalmer's showroom. It had everything but the caskets. The gilt ceiling was in plaster floral relief, the walls were hung with dusty red velvet drapes. There were gigantic terra cotta urns and bowls of faded artificial flowers. Malloy took it in glumly.

A door opened, Crandon's head popped out. The next second the Prophet was scurrying down the hall to meet us. He was in a high state of agitation. "Go back," he ordered. "Downstairs. This is intimate. Aunt Martha is preparing to talk with Griffeth!"

"Dandy," the Dean grinned. "I'd like to say a few words to him myself." He pursed his lips. "Did you say Mrs. Fell was going to act as operator? I understood it was *you* that had the veil. Be frank with me. You know, as you yourself said, we're in the same racket."

The Prophet flinched. "That was different. This is on the level. Aunt Martha is an extremely sensitive medium. We've had some uncanny results from her trances."

I thought of the spirit photograph that she took—the one that Crandon turned over to Louie Archambaut to develop for her. I thought too of Crandon's vision and how the next day Jackman the chauffeur appeared as if by magic. When he said they'd had some uncanny results from her clairvoyance he was putting it mildly.

"What do you expect?" the Dean asked. "Voices or lights or maybe even a materialization?"

"We've had voices in the past," Crandon said. "Maybe we can get them again."

The Dean perked up. "Voices?"

Crandon cleared his throat. "Well, not exactly voices. We've had slate messages in Griffeth's script. It's about the same."

The Dean was silent. Malloy said brusquely: "Well—what are we waiting for?"

I DON'T think any of them were pleased at seeing us.

Dr. Bruce Kendall, her hands clasped around her shapely knees, was seated on an ottoman in a corner of the little den, her dove-gray eyes fastened intently on the regal figure stretched full length on an armless divan. Martha Fell had changed her black robe for one of white satin; she lay there rigidly, almost cataleptic, on a white bearskin. She spoke to us as we entered—in a strained, hurt voice. "I'm confused."

Like a tortured patient in a hospital. Plaintive.

Malloy said: "I don't like this. I gotta good mind to break it up."

Crandon wheedled. "Not now. Please! Isn't she wonderful? It's mind over matter."

Bruce Kendall gave a low, harsh laugh. "It looks like scopolamine to me. Pupils as big as pie plates!" She gave Crandon a laconic smile. "Ring up the curtain, Evan."

"This should be informative," the Dean said pointedly. "I've never seen a medium negotiate from a supine position."

The Prophet picked up his slate and exhibited it to us. He did it with the fast talking air of an old professional. The Dean listened to him with an expression of infantile gullibility.

It was not one slate, but two, hinged at the back like the covers of a book. The Prophet opened it out, displayed both sides. They were, of course empty. "This is a special slate," he explained. "Designed by Aunt Martha." He closed the two leaves, thrust a padlock through a hole in their wooden frames and clicked it shut. "They're now locked. Aunt Martha and I work together under rather unusual conditions. She is purely the medium. I take care of the mechanical end. She doesn't trust me too much. These locked slates are satisfactory to each of us."

Then he pulled a new one on us. He punched a switch; the lights went deep bloody red. Just as our eyes were getting accustomed to the color, snap went

the switch again—this time the room was bathed in stinging indigo.

When he snapped out the blue, I mean to tell you, the room was really dark. Queer blurred images floated inside my eyelids. You felt dizzy, helpless. I heard him say to Martha Fell in a deep commanding whisper: "There is someone who loves you. He is trying to reach you. Meet him in shadows of the half-world."

There were quick catlike steps past me, those stubby little shoes with the lifts in them.

Next he was speaking at my side. "Bruce, you are the skeptic." Crandon's voice was good-humored, natural. "I'm going to ask you to hold the slates right here on your knees. You're neutral. If we can get a message through, Martha will believe."

The girl said: "All right. I'll play."

There was a moment of silence.

Crandon said in a sirupy voice. "Uncle Griffeth! Aunt Martha needs you. Speak to her!"

More silence. And then, out of the swathing blackness there came a scratching, scribbling sound. The sound ceased.

The Prophet flicked on the lights.

Malloy, registering bellicose distaste, sat with his hand suspiciously near his hip. The Dean with his eyes closed, seemed to be taking a short nap. Martha Fell writhed restlessly on her bearskin rug. Bruce Kendall, of all of us, seemed perfectly collected; she held the slates on her knees in a firm grip.

With a flourish, Crandon took them from her, unlocked them, opened them—displayed them.

They were as clean and bare as they had been at the beginning.

The Dean guffawed. "The best laid plans of rats and men, eh?"

The Prophet was flabbergasted. "It can't be," he muttered. "It's impossible. There had to be a message. *I know.*"

"Perhaps Griffeth is bashful this evening," the Dean remarked. "You pulled the old switched slate gag, didn't you? Well, let's check on the other. Maybe you got them mixed up."

Crandon didn't even bother to excuse his swindle. He seemed lethargic, in a stunned stupor. He went to a table

drawer and produced the duplicate, the original slate. It, too, was blank—bare of any writing.

"That exposes you," Bruce said coldly. "From now on I—"

"It exposes me," Crandon agreed in a strained voice. "But it converts me, too. Griffeth Fell is here with us, in this very house. I wrote a message. Who wiped it off? Griffeth. I've always felt his presence—even through all this sham."

A blank, glazed look came into his eyes. "I'll be right back. I want to go downstairs and take another look at that photograph above the mantel."

Before we could move, he was gone.

We heard the bolt turn in the door. He'd locked us in!

MALLOY flushed. "He outsmarted us!" He started to his feet.

"Sit back," the Dean advised. "And relax. He's a quick thinker but I wouldn't worry too much about his getting away. Turk McHenry's loose in the place. And Turk is vengeance minded. Would you like to hear the entire set-up, how it was worked from the very beginning? It's a pretty frightful tale."

Bruce Kendall said: "I would, for one."

The Dean said gently: "Mrs. Fell, you are my client. I am about to make my report to you. As you lie there listening you must pretend you are hearing a strange nightmare. As soon as I have finished speaking, you must forget. Do you understand? Answer me!" He pressed her, urged her. She gave him a faint, hypnotic nod.

"Sometime ago, many months ago, as a matter of fact, one of Griffeth Fell's heirs decided to murder him for his bank account. The plans were laid carefully. It was to be done here on the premises in a casual, natural way. The original plan was to slay him by force, perhaps in his sleep, and dispose of his body. There is a dry cistern behind the stable, it was rigged into a handy tomb. However, at the last moment, the killer consulted a disbarred attorney who altered that plan. Griffeth missing was no immediate proof that Griffeth was dead. The new plan, the one finally put through, was simply to poison him. The killer and the attor-

ney hatched up a subtle plot to throw suspicion of murder on an innocent person. It was a deliberate scheme, a frame and doubtless at a propitious time they would bring it out to light. Thus the law would work with them—and the courts of justice would bear the actual onus of a second murder."

Bill Malloy asked: "What was this frame?"

"It might be called a frame of gadgets. Gadgets are the giveaway. It started with a dictograph in the coffin—done through a forged codicil to Griffeth's will. Then came the bogus spirit-photo, the phoney dream which brought Jackman asking for a job. And so on. They were preying on the character of their victim. It's been a cold blooded job and utilizes what is known as the scientific method." He paused. "Do you concur, Dr. Kendall?"

The blonde was deadpan. "I wouldn't like to express an opinion until I have a bit more data. Would you proceed?"

"Wild horses couldn't stop me." The Dean made a steeple of his forefingers. "The criminal blundered over and over. Every time you use a gadget you leave a trail—"

He was interrupted by a distant, treble scream. It seemed to come from the living-room downstairs. It was repeated again and again. Each time it became louder, more frantic. There was a hammering of footsteps down the corridor; a crazed fist pounded and thumped the door panel.

"Get that open," the Dean commanded. "Quickly!"

There's a slew of things I'd rather do than practice lock-picking before an officer of the law. I took out a pair of gooseneck tweezers, inserted them in the keyhole, grabbed the key bit, twisted it and dropped it outside on the floor. A skeleton from my key-ring finished it. There was never a peep from Bill Malloy; he went stone blind.

Evan Crandon was bunched in a knot on the threshold. Dead as an iced oyster.

Turk McHenry appeared on the top step, meandered up to us. The bartender carried a brimming tumbler of whiskey, sloshed it along on the floor as he walked. "What gives?" he asked.

"That's what I want to know," Malloy demanded. "What happened down there?"

McHenry took a swig, gagged. "This guy comes busting into the kitchen. He pours himself a drink and sits down on a stool. I try to talk to him but he won't loosen. He looks sick. All of a sudden he notices a mark on his wrist and hollers, 'I've been hyped!' That starts the bedlam. From room to room he goes yelping and yowling—"

"Hyped?" The Dean inspected the wound. It was a tiny mark an inch or so long. "Dr. Kendall, see what you think."

The girl picked up the dead man's wrist, studied it, dropped it. "Nonsense," she said. "That's just a scratch. That didn't kill him!"

"True indeed," the Dean approved. "He was poisoned but he got his poison sometime ago, over an hour, I should say. He himself took it—orally."

The ash blondé was aghast. "You mean Evan committed suicide?"

"Come now," the Dean said pleasantly. "Do facts bear that out? Of course not. He was murdered."

WE WENT back into the den and sat down. Everyone but the Dean seemed completely flabbergasted. He beamed about him at the circle of inquiring faces. Martha Fell, aroused from her coma by the excitement, sat erect on her bearskin rug. "Evan's dead?" she asked.

The Dean said kindly, "That's right. Now it can be told. You were afraid of him, weren't you?"

Her tranquillity wavered. "He was satanic." The Dean reached out, touched her forearm, felt her pulse. "A little rapid," he said to Dr. Kendall.

Bruce Kendall didn't answer.

"Not interested?" the Dean asked.

"Of course, I'm interested."

"I should think you would be."

The Dean paused, stared at the rug. "It was you who planned and executed the whole fiendish plot. You connived with Art Drury, the Pin-Setter, to slay Griffeth Fell. The two of you worked out an elaborate scheme to plaster the crime on Evan Crandon. You wanted money and more money and were all set to continue until

there was but one heir left—you and only you.

"Sylvia McHenry had been Griffeth's confidential secretary and had her suspicions. She had to go, too—in the cistern you had prepared for Griffeth. You had even anticipated the use of the ladder and had put out a silly story about a secret room in the attic. After Sylvia had been done away with, you phoned around impersonating her, saying that you were leaving town. This cheap murder, this one-dollar corpse, was your undoing. It set me on your trail. Moreover it had a witness. This witness called Sylvia's husband and told him your identity. Ballard, like a simpleton, called you to check. You took a thong of rawhide, wrote on its edges, as prearranged, and sent it to Drury. It said to take Ballard next. In the meantime, Louie Archambaut fumbled in an assignment at the bus terminal. For that and other reasons—he'd probably been getting upstage—he was eliminated. It was you who poisoned Evan Crandon by giving him a sandwich or drink when he entered this house a little while ago."

Bruce Kendall fluffed her hair over her shoulder, appraised her sleek ankles. "Such foolishness! It's true I've been on the grounds here the last two or three nights, doing a little precautionary prowling, but to say I actually killed—"

The Dean looked up from the rug. "Excuse me. I guess I've been ambiguous. I wasn't speaking to you, Dr. Kendall. I was accusing Mrs. Fell. She's the lady with the blood lust."

Malloy said, "That crank?"

"She's no crank," the Dean answered. "She's as sane as any of us. Aren't you, Mrs. Fell?"

"She's stark crazy," Turk McHenry insisted. "I know. I'm a good judge of human nature. I see 'em across the bar, drunk and sober, all kinds—"

"You've never seen one like this witch," the Dean said lightly. "She figures out a problem in murder like you balance your monthly accounts."

Martha Fell made an eerie, cooing sound. She looked serenely through us, into space. She began pronouncing strange names. "Pythius, Asmodeus, Thenth, Meresin, Abaddon—"

"It'll do you little good to call on de-

mons," the Dean remarked. "You hold as little belief in them as I do. You'd better call a good lawyer. We've got you dead to rights. You've gone about with infinite care painting yourself with pretensions of insanity but you've made some blatant errors. You had the spirit picture made for yourself, you surrounded yourself with a macabre graveyard of little china animals. You had Drury hire Jackman. The dictograph record was your idea—"

SHE straightened the folds of her satin robe. "Don't talk that way. Griffeth doesn't like it."

"Griffeth, bah!" the Dean exclaimed. "You loathed him when he was alive and you despise him dead. You're not deceiving anyone. You gave yourself away when Crandon worked his switched slates. The locked slate—that Crandon said you designed—is a familiar trick to me. Gyp mediums have used it for years. The pin slides out of the hinge in the back, the slate opens on the shackle of the padlock in front. You slipped one over on your nephew. He brought in a prepared slate, tucked it there under the bearskin. You were afraid of the message he had written, afraid he would tip Lieutenant Malloy, here, off to something you wished to keep covered. A good message, for instance, would have been: *Mar-*

tha has checkstubs made out to Art Drury. Something along that line. You unhinged the planted slate in the dark, wiped off the message. That's why you're wearing a white dress tonight; your black velvet gown would show chalk marks. When Crandon bent over you with his exhortation you scratched him—you hoped he'd see it later and fear he'd been hyped."

Martha Fell said to Malloy: "You people go home. This has been a strenuous day for me."

"Hasn't it?" the Dean agreed. "What with a sore wrist."

"Sore wrist? I don't know what—"

"I'll tell you. When you lowered the ladder into the well to get Sylvia McHenry's zebra bag, you sprained your wrist. You went back to the house to get a rope of gauze to lift it from the cistern. You could climb up and down with one hand but you couldn't carry the overnight bag. Just now, when I grasped your wrist to feel your pulse, you winced."

"You just imagined it," she said calmly. "Try it again."

"That was a beautiful bluff, flaunting your victim's garnet bracelet. It was clever, too, the ruse you worked on Turk McHenry to see how much the police were doing, how much Ballard had told before his death. Did you know that Bruce found your needle and poison in

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the playhouse. And that Jackman had the wind up? Where did he find his needle? Here in the house, I should say."

He took a deep breath, added smugly: "We've got the teeth."

She came across the room at him like a whirlwind—straight at his face. A cursing cyclone of insensate fury. Almost too late we saw the knife in her hand; she threw back her muscular arm to strike. Malloy fired.

We gathered round her. As she died. "She's with Griffeth," the Dean said brutally. "And I, for one, am thankful."

"WHAT did you mean," Malloy asked, "when you said we've got the teeth?"

"Sylvia had reasons to believe that Griffeth had been poisoned. In her naive way she imagined that his false teeth would prove it. She removed them from the corpse, kept them for a long time—and at last turned them over to Dr. Kendall for analysis."

"Yes," Bruce said. "I made a solution from their washings and tested with no result. The quantity was too minute or possibly he wasn't wearing them when he took it—"

"The best card," the Dean said, "I didn't play. We had a witness. Dr. Kendall, what did you see?"

"We all knew she was dangerous—Syl-

via, Evan and I. I was in the stable looking for evidence the night Sylvia was put in the well. I called Ballard. I was afraid to go to the police until I had more to show them. It was my word against hers as to her guilt."

"That can all be cleared up," the Dean said with a sudden exudation of charm. "It looks like you are now heir to the Fell fortune. Mrs. Fell was my client, she retained me in the presence of Mr. McHenry, here. As her money was at that time in trust I might have been said to be employed not by her as a person but by the estate. I feel that you—"

Bruce Kendall tossed her head. "I get it. Don't be so longwinded. Send me your bill."

The Dean bowed. A sudden thought struck him. He called her to one side. "This is gratis," he whispered in a stage whisper. "A little final advice. You have on your mirror in your bedroom photographs of five movie stars I recognize—and one I don't seem to be able to identify. This stranger is bald-headed, has a big Adam's apple and buck teeth—"

Bruce Kendall hardened. "That's no movie star. That's Dr. Chadwick P. Halsey." She blushed. "A bachelor, of course. He's head of my department at the university—"

"Marry him," the Dean ordered. "At once. He's too fascinating to be at large."



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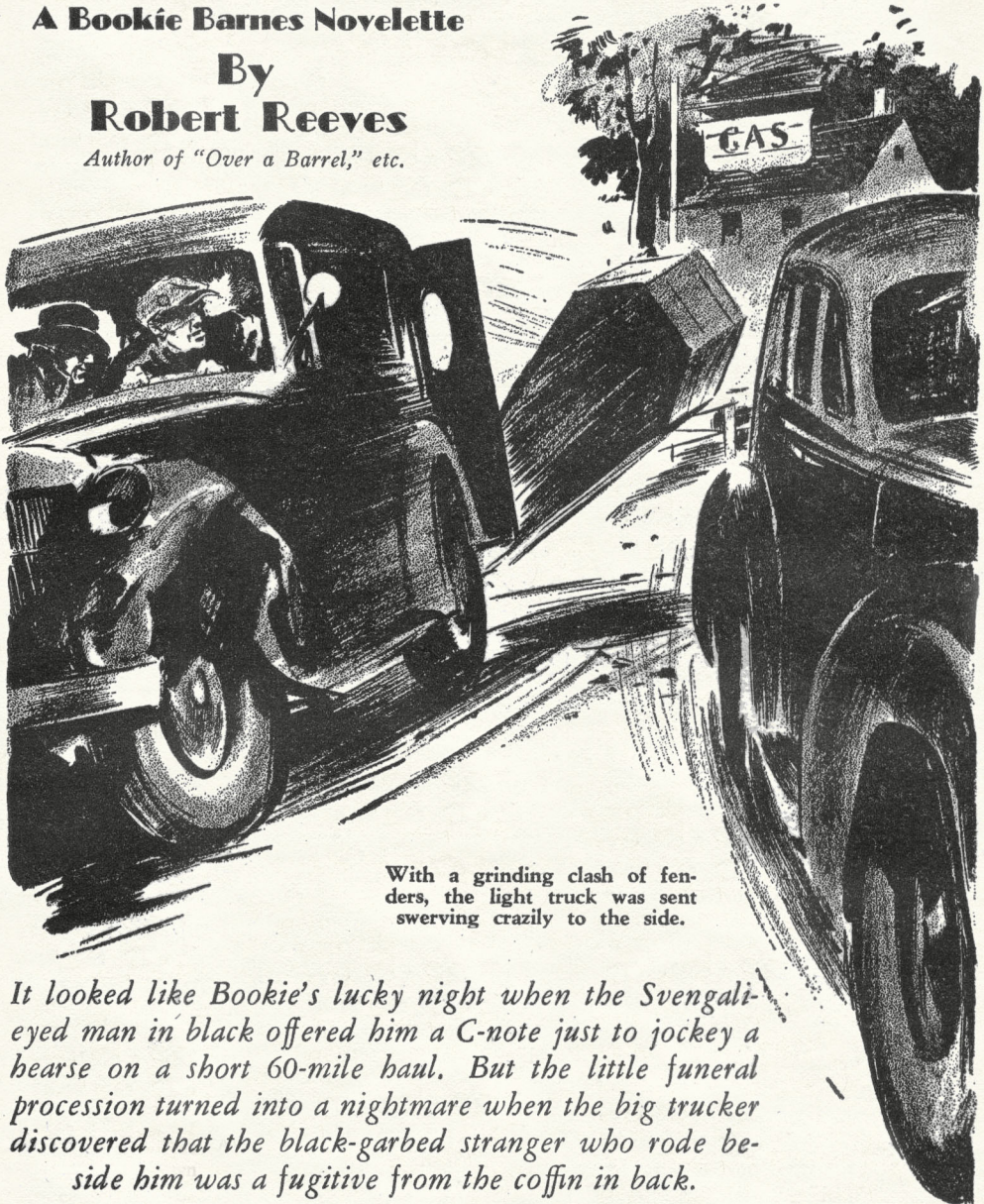
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Murder Without Death

A Bookie Barnes Novelette

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With a grinding clash of fenders, the light truck was sent swerving crazily to the side.

It looked like Bookie's lucky night when the Svengali-eyed man in black offered him a C-note just to jockey a hearse on a short 60-mile haul. But the little funeral procession turned into a nightmare when the big trucker discovered that the black-garbed stranger who rode beside him was a fugitive from the coffin in back.

CHAPTER ONE

Stabbing Eyes

"THE damned Svengali," muttered Bookie Barnes.

Bookie disliked being stared at as much as anyone and the piercing

eyes of the man in the black coat, following his every movement, were particularly annoying. They seemed to have a hypnotic, X-ray quality and, as Bookie leaned over to chain up the tailboard of his trailer, he could feel those small, beady orbs drilling into the layers of clothing right through to his appendix.

Bookie did not have the appearance of a sensitive plant. He was big and chesty and looked like the "after" part of one of those before-and-after ads. Bookie might have been thinking something of the same for he told himself that it was silly to let the Svengali get him. In, of all places, the New York terminal of Murdock Motor Freight, Inc!

The terminal was a bedlam of noise and seeming confusion as the huge semi-trailers were backed up against the platform and loaded for the nightly runs which ranged from Maine to Pennsylvania. It was not the kind of place to promote worry. The air was thick with the fumes of exhausts, the yells and oaths of drivers, the squeals of chains, pulleys, and obstinate crates, the rumble of tractors' motors and heavy-duty tires.

Deliberately, Bookie Barnes straightened up and turned to face the Svengali. There he was, standing by the gas pump, next to the night foreman. Despite the mild weather, the offending stranger wore gloves and his coat was buttoned to the neck with the collar turned up. A hat, also black, was tilted low and what could be seen of the face was white and fleshless. Bookie stared back, unwaveringly, into the black, pinpoint irises, telling himself that if it weren't for the foreman he'd go over and close those eyes to his own satisfaction.

It was Bookie Barnes who surrendered and first dropped his eyes. Angrily, feeling he was being a fool, he turned back to the semi-trailer to check the twenty-seven variously colored lights and six reflectors. In a few minutes he'd be shoving the tractor-trailer combination up to Bridgeport, Connecticut.

But he was unable to rid himself of the uncomfortable feeling and called to Latch, another of Murdock's drivers, who was trying not to notice a flat tire on his truck unit.

"That beanbag in the blackout clothing by the pump," said Bookie. "What do you make of him?"

Latch looked and shrugged. "A guard or something."

But Svengali, Bookie knew, could not be one of the guards recently hired by Murdock Motor Freight to keep an eye on the transportation of war orders. They

were easy to spot—competent and solid with tomato-red faces. This Svengali staring at him would keel over from a strong whiff of onions.

With a relief that shamed him, Bookie swung up into the cab of the tractor and began to pull away from the platform. Another ten seconds and he'd be in the clean night air, away from those eyes. He heard a shout and saw the foreman flagging him back. He pulled the emergency and dismounted from the cab knowing, without question, that the delay had something to do with the stranger of the piercing eyes.

The foreman came up. "You'll have to drop that, Barnes," he said. "I've got another job for you."

"What's wrong now?"

"Nothing. You're taking a half-ton Chevy up to Bridgeport."

"Me?" Bookie bridled. He had been with Murdock for three years. The inexperienced drivers were given the odd jobs with the smaller trucks.

"Only this once," said the foreman placatingly. He nodded toward the Svengali. "I wouldn't pick you except that he insists."

"I don't get it. Why does he insist on me?"

"He's been sizing up my boys and he figures that you look the toughest, that you can take care of yourself in a pinch."

So that was why Svengali had been looking him over. "What will I carry in that half-tonner?" asked Bookie suspiciously.

"Oh, nothing heavy. You'll have no trouble at all. It's just a coffin. And what's inside it."

BOOKIE BARNES shook his head decisively. "Not on your tintype. I'm a truck driver—not an undertaker's stooge. Get yourself a couple of Valkyries."

"He wants you to drive it," responded the foreman, "and if you don't want to you can turn in your time card."

Bookie hesitated. He liked his job. "Since when do we go in for this kind of hauling?" he asked.

"We're in business and when we're offered five hundred bucks to drive from here to Bridgeport that's a profit. Be-

sides, he says he'll give you a hundred dollar bonus. He says."

That, decided Bookie, made a difference. With Svengali dishing out a century for driving a coffin up to Bridgeport it would be worth it—especially when the alternative was losing his job. Bookie nodded. "It's a deal."

"I thought you'd see it the hundred-dollar way. Get going, Barnes. The box is loaded outside. I'll send him out to you."

"You mean that Svengali's coming along?"

"Stop arguing." The foreman was becoming irritated. "There's a law about someone having to travel along with a coffin and if there isn't he's paying for the privilege."

"How about Latch or Steve Czerno?" asked Bookie with an uneasiness he couldn't explain. They'd be glad to drive the coffin for a hundred buck tip.

"I told you the guy wants you! If—" The foreman suddenly grinned. "Say, I'll bet you're scared."

"Grow up," muttered Bookie. Without further word, he strode out and found the small truck by the curb. He looked inside and saw the plain, oblong box. A tag attached to one end gave the occupant's name, *Marcus Lunding*, and an address on a street off the Boston Post Road in Bridgeport.

He went around to the front, got into the driver's seat, and turned over the motor. A few moments later, the Svengali came out and sat next to Bookie, saying: "How do you do."

Bookie didn't reply. A Murdock driver named Lou Selinski rumbled by and gave two mocking blows on the horn when he saw Bookie in the small truck. Viciously, Bookie jammed into gear and the vehicle jerked forward. He decided that the trip to Bridgeport would be made in record time.

They raced through upper Manhattan and the Bronx as silent as the coffin-enclosed corpse of Marcus Lunding in the back. Occasionally, as they passed street lamps, Bookie would glance at his companion. The Svengali looked straight ahead. Without being able to see the eyes, the face was expressionless and the flesh, on closer inspection, seemed more yellow than white.

They had reached the Boston Post Road when Bookie heard a slight rustle and saw a gloved hand extending something. He could make it out by the dashboard light. A hundred dollar bill.

"That's for you." The Svengali's voice was soft and he still didn't bother to turn his head.

Bookie pocketed the bill. "That's a lot of money to give away for a trip like this," he said.

"It is. I hope you will spend it wisely and not on gambling or liquor. Please stop at the next gas station as I would like to make a phone call."

Bookie did so. He watched the Svengali as he went with slow, measured steps into the station. His feelings had been baseless and unreasonable, Bookie told himself. The Svengali sounded like a reformer—a harmless crackpot whose hobby was staring at people.

Svengali completed his call and they moved ahead. Bookie was feeling a little friendlier but there was still something he couldn't understand. He said: "Why did you ask to get a driver who could take care of himself in a pinch?"

"For good reason, but I hope you won't have to find out."

Bookie frowned. "Has it something to do with Marcus Lunding—the body we're carrying?" he asked bluntly.

"A great deal."

"Was this Marcus Lunding a friend of yours?"

"Yes."

Bookie felt he was getting no place rapidly. "What did he die from?" he fished.

"He didn't just die," was the reply. "He was murdered."

BOOKIE BARNES' foot pushed down for more speed. He looked at his companion. The Svengali still did not face him but continued gazing ahead, down the dark road.

"He was murdered," the soft voice repeated, "and he shall be avenged."

"I don't get it."

"Wouldn't you go after the murderer of someone dear to you?"

"Sure, but didn't the police get the killer?"

"No. That will be my job. The police

don't even know of the murder of Marcus Lunding."

It wasn't making sense. Bookie lit a cigarette to be able to examine his companion by the light of the match. The patch of face between upturned collar and hat seemed to be set in cement. The Svengali was not jesting.

Bookie asked: "Do you know who killed Marcus Lunding?"

"Yes. Three are responsible. Three rotten members that comprised his family."

"I'm beginning to think you're a crackpot," said Bookie Barnes with a bluntness that surprised himself. "You ought to be lassoed before you start making trouble."

Though he was watching the road as they passed by Larchmont, Bookie could feel the unoffended shrug.

"I don't blame you for thinking so," was the reply, "but I'm saner than I ever was. Marcus Lunding's murder opened my eyes to a lot of things."

"I still can't understand why the police don't know about the murder," said Bookie.

"They simply weren't informed."

"Where did it happen?"

"In New Jersey. The Palisades."

"There are cops even in Jersey."

"They didn't witness the murder and no one told them it had taken place."

Bookie wondered if he should stop at the next police station and have his passenger measured for a padded cell. But maybe there was something to it. Bookie decided to wait a while and let him talk. He asked: "How was the guy murdered?"

"Marcus Lunding went for his customary walk to watch the sunset. He had a summer home on the Palisades. The murderers stole up behind him and pushed him off a cliff. It was just a twenty-five or thirty foot drop—just enough to break his neck."

"What do you mean by the murderers?" asked Bookie. "Just one killer was enough to shove him off the cliff."

"It makes little difference which of the three did it. They were all part of the scheme."

"Did you actually see the murderer?"

"No, but I know who was responsible."

Bookie Barnes flicked his lights in recognition to a passing truck and sighed. "I don't get the picture. If you didn't make all this up out of reclaimed rubber then you have a reason for telling it to me. I want to know that reason."

"I see I chose my driver well," the Svengali said. "I wanted one with both muscles and intelligence."

Bookie's fingers whitened as they tightened on the steering wheel in an effort to control the pointless anger rising in him. "Stop talking in circles," he snapped.

"I'll try," was the mild response. "What do you want to know?"

"You didn't give me a hundred bucks just to drive this scooter sixty miles. And how come you paid all that dough to Murdock on a short-haul for a coffin?"

"I'm wealthy. Money means little to me."

"If you're wealthy that's because you don't throw your dough away for no reason. Besides, it's nine o'clock in the evening and it's the wrong time to pick for taking Marcus Lunding's body back to his family and—"

"The time is well calculated and perfect," interrupted the smooth voice.

"—and the custom is to send coffins by hearse on short distances and by train on longer runs." Bookie's voice became harsher as he warmed to his argument. "There's something phoney going on and a hundred bucks doesn't make me like it. How could you get a burial certificate on Lunding without the cops knowing? A thing like a broken neck is reported automatically. And—"

"And what?"

"What's your angle? You say you were Marcus Lunding's friend but that means nothing."

IF THE Svengali intended replying, Bookie never heard it. They were passing over a dark stretch of the Post Road and, automatically, Bookie glanced at his rear view mirror as a beam of light crossed it. A car had just pulled out of a side intersection and was bearing down on them at a fast clip.

The approaching car was heavy—in those split seconds, it looked like a sedan to Bookie's experienced eyes—and it gained speed rapidly. Bookie pulled to

the safety of the outside lane but the sedan had different ideas. As it came abreast, it swerved to the right, there was the grind of clashing fenders, and the light, half-ton truck was sent swerving crazily toward the side.

Even without the time to think, Bookie knew he couldn't pull the truck out of its stampeding skid. The sedan was already clear, disappearing down the road. Without hesitation, Bookie yanked the wheel to the right, doing perhaps the only thing to avoid crashing over immediately.

With the added, centrifugal momentum, supplied by the wheel turning in the direction of the skid, the light truck went into a spin. Six or seven times the car spun around in widening circles, each time slower, till finally it jumped the shoulder by the edge of the road and settled on its side in a shallow ditch.

For a full minute, Bookie Barnes lay stunned in a state of semi-consciousness. As he came to, he breathed deeply and moved his limbs. Nothing seemed broken. Fortunately, the car had slowed down considerably before turning over into the ditch. Then Bookie realized that his companion was missing.

He climbed out of the side-turned truck. The Svengali, who had either jumped or been thrown clear in the crash, was struggling to his feet. Bookie noticed that the coffin had also been knocked out of the truck and its lid broken off. He looked inside for the corpse of Marcus Lunding. It was empty.

Bookie went toward the Sengali who was silhouetted by the light of the headlamps which had somehow stayed on. The bottom half of his coat was ripped but he seemed to have suffered little other damage. As Bookie neared him, he noticed a small object on the ground and picked it up. It was the Svengali's wallet which had dropped from the torn clothing. He opened it. The identification card read: *Marcus Lunding*.

CHAPTER TWO

Sharp Nails

SO Marcus Lunding was murdered!" said Bookie Barnes with all the sarcasm he could inject into his voice.

The other still breathed deeply but managed to reply: "Yes, he was."

"You liar!" yelled Bookie. "There's no corpse in that coffin. This is your wallet. You're Marcus Lunding and you're going to tell me what it's all about!"

The other didn't reply.

The accident to his truck—which Bookie knew had been no accident—the lies he had listened to, the corpse which didn't exist, all caused a welling fury in him. He reached out with one big paw, grabbed the black coat and yanked Lunding forward. The buttons tore and the coat parted—to reveal that Marcus Lunding's neck was set in a steel brace.

"Do you understand now?" asked the soft voice. "Those three did murder me, they did break Marcus Lunding's neck."

Bookie released his hold. "I'm sorry. I couldn't guess what it was about."

The soft voice became bitter. "If medical science was able to perform miraculous patchwork and I still breathe, that does not make the crime lesser. I'm as good as murdered. Worse! I'm useless. I'm hardly past forty but I look all of sixty."

It was true. "Then what's the idea of the vaudeville act with the coffin?" demanded Bookie.

"It's no act. I want Amos and Susan and Frank to see where they have put me. I want them to pay for their crime."

"Why didn't you tell the cops about getting shoved off a cliff?"

"That would make it too easy—for those three."

Bookie moved away. He returned the empty coffin to the back of the truck, then took stock of the damage. The side on which the car rested had not caved in and the motor seemed all right. However, a fire was blown and the wheels were probably out of line.

Bookie lit a cigarette and waited. Marcus Lunding would hold, he thought. There was nothing to do now. Even if he wished to, there was nothing he could tell the police. It was no crime to hire a truck to carry an empty coffin.

They were near Greenwich and those few automobiles that stopped to offer assistance were waved on by Bookie. It was not long before his ears, sensitive to

the throb of motors, picked up the sound for which he was waiting. It was, Bookie knew, one of Murdock's semi-trailers rumbling toward them. He stepped out into the road and blinked a flashlight in his hand, bringing the tractor-trailer unit to a halt.

It was Lou Selinski who looked out at Bookie from the cab of the tractor. He took in the situation and began to roar. A safety driver—one with a silver button in his cap to prove it—had finally met disaster by somersaulting a half-ton truck! Lou Selinski thought it was riotous. Slowly, Selinski grew aware of the cloud over Bookie's face and decided to stop laughing.

The two drivers hauled rope out of the semi-trailer's tool chest. One end was looped over the top edge of the side-turned truck and the other was knotted to the tractor's axle. Barely seeming to strain itself, the tractor pulled forward and toppled the truck right side up.

The drivers removed the rope and Bookie said: "I'll do the rest. Thanks."

"Do you want me to put in a report for you?"

"No." Far from it, in fact. Turning this truck over meant, to Bookie, the loss of his safety record and the bonuses that went with it. He knew not how but he intended to prove that it was not the result of his own negligence.

Lou Selinski nodded and left.

Bookie forced fenders back into position, switched the spare for the blown tire, and then tried the motor. A few sputters and it worked. He beckoned to Marcus Lunding, who had silently watched the proceedings from the background, and they resumed their journey toward Bridgeport—much more slowly this time for one of the front wheels shimmed violently.

In all, barely more than a half-hour had elapsed since the sedan had appeared from the side road, trying to kill Marcus Lunding and Bookie Barnes.

BOOKIE, who never carried a gun on his routine hauls voiced aloud his wish to have one now.

"I have a revolver," said Marcus Lunding. His coat collar again concealed the brace around his neck and he sat side-

ways so as to be able to face Bookie. "I'm beginning to see why you wanted a tough driver. You foresaw something like this."

"I did," Lunding admitted, "only they struck sooner than I had expected."

Bookie guided the wounded truck through Stamford traffic and headed for Darien. He said: "I'd like to know why you expected that crackup. I'd like to know how those three relatives of yours knew you'd be in this truck and where you'd be passing."

"It was that phone call I made before. I telephoned them to let them know I was coming. I even described this truck."

"What did you do that for?"

"I want them to sweat and suffer before they pay for their crime of killing me. I want them to know I'm coming after them."

Bookie Barnes kept his eyes on the dark road and tried increasing his speed by a couple of miles. The sooner the coffin was delivered and his job finished, the better he would feel.

"Do you still think I'm crazy?" asked Marcus Lunding.

"I've met saner guys directing the battle of Waterloo. Why do they want to kill you?"

"My money. I told you I was wealthy and they expect to inherit it. I own a lot of property, bonds, stock, and have nearly a quarter million in cash. But it's not going to them."

"Who gets it?"

"Some of it goes for a church to be erected on a piece of property I own on the Post Road. The rest will be left to create a Marcus Lunding Foundation to combat evil and sin."

And anyone having a little fun, thought Bookie. He asked: "If your playful friends are cut out of your will, what do they gain by trying to kill you?"

"They didn't know they were cut off till I told them so before, over the phone. I told them that I left my money to—" Suddenly, Lunding began to laugh. It was soft, restrained laughter that issued from Marcus Lunding's mouth without causing even the lips to tremble. It was laughter that had no connection with pleasure.

For a long while they drove in silence,

Bookie Barnes brooding and wondering how he might save his record as a safety driver and Marcus Lunding lost in his welter of vengeance against the people who had murdered him.

Finally, as they were passing through Fairfield and nearing Bridgeport, Bookie said: "I'd like to get a line on the driver of that sedan that cracked us up."

"That's unimportant," replied Marcus Lunding.

"Maybe it is to you, since you're supposed to be so wealthy, but I've ruined my record. Unless I can get the guy and prove he did it on purpose I lose my bonuses for the next two years. I want to find that sedan."

"You'll probably find it at my home and its driver was probably Amos."

"Where is he?"

"We all live together. Amos is my brother-in-law. His full name is Amos Cook and he's stayed with me since my sister died, hoping to get my money."

"Who are the rest?"

"Frank Cook, my nephew, and Susan Cook, my niece. There are too many of them but that will be remedied."

"What do they do?"

"Amos is an architect. There's a sample."

They had reached the outskirts of Bridgeport and Lunding pointed to a tall building situated on the Post Road. It was intended as a miniature Radio City, the ground floor occupied by a night club and motion picture theatre with offices above.

"Amos planned that," Marcus Lunding continued. "I own all that land next to it and I've willed it for a church."

"What about the other two?"

"There's Amos's son, Frank Cook, a wastrel, and Amos's daughter, Susan Cook. She speaks with honeyed words but covets my money as much as the others. That next block, please."

Bookie turned to the left and, following Lunding's directions, wound down side streets till he was told to stop. They were in front of a large, three-story house. Its lines were severe and solid with no ornamentation. Bookie wondered if that too was an example of Amos Cook's architecture.

Marcus Lunding put something on the

seat and stepped out of the truck. "Here's an additional hundred dollars for you," he said. "You will carry the coffin up to the porch and ring the front doorbell. When it's opened, you will set the coffin down in the living-room which will be on your left. Then your job will be done."

"Wait a second," said Bookie. "Won't you come in with me?"

"I'll be around—as long as those three are alive. And in case you don't intend to follow my instructions, remember that I carry a revolver."

Marcus Lunding walked away. Bookie called to him and leaned out. The street was dark, and quiet, and empty. Lunding had probably disappeared into a grove of trees adjoining the house where the Cooks lived. Bookie shrugged. He took the hundred dollar bill on the seat, went around to the back of the truck, opened the doors, and hoisted the light coffin to his shoulders.

WITH one hand, Bookie Barnes steadied the coffin over his back and pushed the doorbell with the other. It was a full minute before he heard movement from inside the house.

As the door finally opened and Bookie stepped over the threshold into the lit hallway, there was a scream and a fist hit him on the chin. The blow was light and he whirled to find that his attacker was a young girl.

Normally, she was pretty. But at the moment, she wore a faded wrapper, her face was twisted with rage, and the long, reddish hair dropped over head and shoulders in twisted tangles. She descended on Bookie furiously, kicking and pummeling him with her small fists. Protecting himself as best he could, he dropped the coffin and stumbled over it, falling to the floor.

She leaped after him and the pointed shoes kicked as she screamed: "Leave us alone! It won't work! Do you understand that? We're not scared!"

Bookie felt a long slit of blood, probably from a fingernail, and decided to stop being chivalrous with the redheaded vixen. The next time one of the pointed shoes came within range he grabbed and twisted. She fell in a heap and he pinioned her shoulders against the coffin.

"Now cut it out," he snapped. "I stopped having fun after the first pint of blood."

"We're not scared!" She struggled to get at him and the words came out explosively, as if from a broken exhaust. "We're not. Go back and tell that to your boss."

He kept her away, thankful for his longer reach. "We've got our wires crossed. My boss wouldn't know you from a Panzer division."

"You get out of here and go back to the Twittering Bird and tell him!"

"The Twittering Bird?" Then Bookie remembered. It was the name of the night club occupying the ground floor of the building Marcus Lunding had pointed out—the one planned by Amos Cook. "You're still off your course, girlie."

"Don't tell—" For the first time she seemed to notice his windbreaker and peaked cap. "Oh. I'm sorry. I thought you were one of Colombo's gunmen but you don't look like that."

"If this is a sample of how you greet Colombo's gunmen I'm glad I'm not one of them."

He thought it safe to take his hands away from her shoulders. She pulled together her wrapper and brushed back her hair and a tinge, as red as the hair, spread over her face. They stood up.

"It was a mistake," she said. "When you walked in with that coffin I thought it was another one of their attempts to intimidate us. They've been sending us threatening notes and obituary notices and it seemed—" She caught her breath. "If you're not one of Colombo's men what is this coffin?"

He pointed to the tag and she bent over and read the name. Her body stiffened perceptibly but there was no outcry. At least one thing was correct, Bookie thought. There was little love between Marcus Lunding and his niece.

He said: "It's empty. I'm just delivering it for your uncle. Marcus Lunding is your uncle, isn't he?"

Susan Cook nodded. "This must be more of his browbeating."

"He sent it because you're supposed to have helped shove him off a cliff and murder him—after a fashion."

"I don't understand." Susan Cook con-

sidered the coffin speculatively, with no fright.

The phone rang and Bookie followed her into a bleak living-room. Without much hope, he looked around for a whiskey bottle, then sat down and listened as she spoke into the phone.

"He hasn't shown up yet, Mr. Jason, but he must be around . . . He sent a sample of his macabre humor by some truck driver . . . A coffin with his name on it . . . I'll tell him, Mr. Jason." She replaced the receiver.

Bookie asked: "Who's this Jason looking for your uncle?"

"Henry Jason. He owns the building where the Twittering Bird is. If you don't mind, I'm expecting a visitor."

Bookie didn't move. "I'm looking for a sedan with smashed fenders on the right hand side."

"My father owns a sedan but I don't know about the fenders. I'm afraid you'll have to leave now."

"Take it easy," said Bookie. "You're more than a match for me but I'm sticking around till I find that sedan. It turned over my truck and it'll cost me bonuses or even my job if I can't prove it wasn't my fault."

"I see. You're just another victim of my dear uncle."

"I don't get it."

"It's simple. After my mother died, Marcus Lunding made it a hell for us. He's taken advantage of our dependence on him and he thinks we want to kill him. It's gotten to the point where I'd grab the first man who'd flash a wedding license."

AND God help that man, thought Bookie. "It has nothing to do with me, Miss Cook, but Marcus Lunding seems to think that your father and brother and you are responsible for breaking his neck. He's hanging around some place with a gun. You ought to tell the police."

"He's only trying to scare us. I haven't heard about any broken neck and he's probably lying. Have you a cigarette?"

He gave her one. "Did your uncle phone here a couple of hours ago?"

"Thanks. We're not even allowed to smoke in the house though he does. There was a phone call that might have been

from him. My father took it and left right after."

In time to intercept the truck, thought Bookie. "And where's your brother, Frank?"

"Probably chasing Margit," Susan Cook said with a venom that made him wonder.

"If you're not after Marcus Lunding's dough why don't the three of you move out?" asked Bookie. "Your father's an architect. He makes dough. He made that building for Jason on the Post Road."

"That was the first job he had in a long time and Henry Jason hasn't even paid him for it." There was the sound of a car in the driveway. "That must be father now," she said.

"Why wasn't your father paid for it?"

"He and Mr. Jason had some sort of fight and he quit before the job was completed."

They heard the front door open and a moment later Amos Cook entered. His hair was of a darker red than his daughter's and, when he spoke, his voice had a rasping, belligerent quality. "Is that coffin more of Colombo's dirty—" He stopped as he saw Bookie.

"That's one of Uncle's tricks," Susan Cook explained. "This man delivered it."

Amos Cook barked: "Get out of my house, Barnes."

"So Marcus Lunding told you my name when he phoned. He also told you enough to send you chasing after my truck."

Amos Cook advanced then stopped when he realized Bookie's impressive size. "My brother-in-law told me enough to know you're a crook. Don't think you'll get away with it because we'll contest the will every inch of the way!"

Bookie frowned. It sounded like double talk but he remembered Marcus Lunding's queer laughter when reminded of his will. He asked: "What has Lunding's will got to do with me?"

"You know very well," Amos Cook shouted. "We've suffered here for years and now he's leaving his money to you. But we'll break that will on insanity grounds!"

There was the answer to Marcus Lunding's laughter. He had phoned his bro-

ther and informed him he was changing his will in favor of a truck driver—a stranger! It was delicate torture—the most effective for the Cook family.

Bookie said: "I doubt if that goon left me the steel brace around his neck but you're a little premature. He thinks himself as good as murdered but you'll have to finish the job before you start contesting his will."

"Do you accuse me of breaking his neck?"

"No, but he does." What had Marcus Lunding wanted? A driver who could take care of himself? He would start right now, Bookie decided, to do just that.

Without further word, Bookie stood up and walked out. He wanted to know if the right hand fenders of Amos Cook's car were damaged. He went down the stoop and around to the driveway where he could make out a sedan. Behind him, Amos Cook had followed him out.

Bookie walked around the sedan, feeling the fenders. They were all smooth. But it proved nothing. Amos Cook, or his son, Frank, might have used some other car. There was the crunching of feet on gravel and Bookie froze.

He looked about but in the half-moon light he could see little. The sound had not come from the direction of the house, where Amos Cook was probably skulking, but from the other side, behind some trees.

Almost as if he had expected it, Bookie heard the explosion of a gun from the other side of the car and immediately a sharp gasp. Then again silence.

He moved over a few feet and kicked something. He picked it up. It was a revolver. He reached inside the car and threw on the headlamps. Not far away he could see a form on the ground. As Marcus Lunding had promised, there was one less Cook.

Amos lay dead in the dirt.

CHAPTER THREE

Lying Tongues

PATIENCE is the hallmark of an intelligent man."

This item of bombast was addressed to

For Victory — Buy Defense Bonds and Stamps Now!

Bookie Barnes and issued from the lips of a motorcycle cop named Felton—the first to arrive at the scene. Susan Cook was also present, huddled in the corner of a sofa, apparently more shocked than grieved by the sudden death of her father.

"I tell you Marcus Lunding is running around loose," snapped Bookie. "You'd better get him before he kills any more Cooks."

"So he's loose," soothed Felton, "and I can only be in one place. The boys will be along in a little while and he'll be attended to. I'd still like to know how you let your prints get on this gun, Bookie."

"I didn't know what it was when I picked it up," Bookie repeated for the tenth time.

"That's not being a smart truck driver. Aside from this guy with the broken neck, who else might have done it?"

"I don't know but someone called Colombo from the Twittering Bird seems to have been pressuring this house. She can tell you about it."

The cop turned to Susan Cook and she said: "He means Luigi Colombo who owns that night club in the Henry Jason building but I don't think he had anything to do with it."

"What has this Colombo against you?"

"It's my uncle. He owns that big piece of land next to the Twittering Bird and he's against night clubs and bars."

"What about it?" prompted Felton.

"My uncle's ruining their business, Colombo claims. He's put up a sort of mission right next door with a lot of psalm-singing and free handouts to anyone that wants it."

The cop nodded. "I've seen it."

"Naturally, the patrons of the club don't like it and it's hurt business. It's the kind of thing that Colombo couldn't prevent legally so he's been sending his gunmen around in an attempt to frighten uncle."

"Uh-huh." Felton rubbed his chin.

"You say you don't think Luigi Colombo killed your father. Who did, in your opinion—your uncle?"

"No. My uncle has too much fun tormenting us to want us dead."

"Then who did?"

Susan Cook pointed to Bookie. "Him."

Bookie said: "You mean he."

"The grammar of it will be discussed in due time," announced Felton. "Now, Miss Cook, I've known Barnes for some years and I doubt if you know what you're talking about."

"Is that so?" She straightened up. "I suppose you believe that story of the gun being dropped near his feet and that he just happened to pick it up."

"Why not?"

"It's a very convenient explanation. Then what about my uncle, Marcus Lunding, leaving him all his money?"

She seemed ready to go into action again and Bookie backed away. He said, in answer to Felton's questioning brows: "Lunding's a crackpot. He only phoned in that yarn to Amos Cook to annoy this outfit. Lunding told me he's leaving his dough for a church next to the Henry Jason building."

"Besides," Felton added, "being beneficiary would give you cause to kill Marcus Lunding, not Amos Cook. Lunding isn't dead."

"Not yet," said Susan Cook significantly. "My father threatened to fight that will so this man killed him."

Her voice became shriller as her father's death drove deeper into her consciousness and her hysteria rose. Her voice sounded like police sirens and Bookie was reminded that the Homicide squad would arrive any moment. It would delay him for hours, even longer, he thought glumly, if the Homicide officer gave any credence to her accusations. He had an idea where he might find the sedan that had cracked him up, but a few more hours of delay and it would be a useless hunt.

Bookie cut into the redhead's tirade and said smoothly: "I have to report to my terminal but I'll be back soon."

The cop looked dubious. "I don't think I can allow that, Bookie. Maybe when the department gets here—"

"I'll be back before they arrive. You know me, Felton, and you know where to put your hands on me." Bookie kept talking till he was out and the front door shut behind him.

TWO police cars rounded the corner and came down the block. Bookie Barnes slid behind the wheel of his dam-

aged truck and let out the clutch. He had left the Cook household just in time.

He wasn't too worried about Susan Cook's accusation that he had murdered her father. That could be disproven by Marcus Lunding's will, for Bookie was certain that he was not the beneficiary. Besides, it was an absurdity. He had known these ghouls for only two hours of his life. It was all part of Lunding's scheme, part of his Monte Cristo complex for revenge. That was only the first step in the scheme. The murders of Susan Cook and her brother Frank were yet to follow unless the police corralled Lunding.

Bookie reached his destination and pulled to the curb. He was again on the Boston Post Road, not far from the combination office building and entertainment center Amos Cook had planned for Henry Jason—and for which he had not been paid.

Lots of neon embellished the front of the Twittering Bird and Bookie could see lights from a first floor office window. He could also hear an organ grinding out some psalm. The sound came from Marcus Lunding's mission, a small shack not twenty feet from the Henry Jason building. Lunding had calculated well. It was just the kind of thing to ruin a night club's business—and the projected church right next door would finish the job.

To the right of the Jason building was a parking lot on which were hardly more than two dozen cars. Not very good business for a night club on a Friday night. Deeper in the lot was a lean-to with a few cars parked under its protection. Here, guessed Bookie, were probably the automobiles owned by tenants of the Jason building, by Henry Jason and Luigi Colombo. These were the cars he wanted to examine.

Bookie left the truck, walked past the Twittering Bird, and turned into the parking lot. There were no attendants. The club's business was probably very bad. He could hear a saxophone wailing in contrast to the muted tones of the mission's organ.

He reached the lean-to and found three cars there. Only one of them was a sedan. He walked around it and felt the front right fender. It was creased. He touched

the radiator grille and found it warm. He knew that this was the car that had forced his truck to the side, turning it over.

Bookie considered the sedan, wondering what he should do next. He had heard no sound but gradually grew aware of a bulky figure standing in front of him. The white front of the figure's dinner jacket stood out brightly. It was no doubt a bouncer from the Twittering Bird.

"Having trouble?" asked the bouncer.

"Not unless you start it," replied Bookie whose temper was worn to a razor edge.

The bouncer chuckled confidently. "Feeling sharp, bub?"

"Whose car is this?"

"Can't you cop the tires without knowing whose it is? Live and let live is my motto, bub, but I don't like tire snatchers these days. It ain't patriotic."

"I'm not interested in the tires. I want to know whose car this is."

The bouncer reached out and grabbed Bookie's left wrist. "You better come along and talk to the boss."

"Take your hand off."

"Bub," said the bouncer, "you underwhelm me."

Bookie's right hand moved out and grabbed hold of a lot of face. It was a huge hand and the thumb was under the bouncer's right ear while the small finger reached around in a firm grip under the lobe of the left ear. The hand started to squeeze.

There was an agonized gasp and the bouncer's fingers scrambled ineffectually to pry the closing vise off his face. Bookie pushed back and jolted the bouncer down on to the sedan's running board. His other hand reached inside the white shirt front and removed a gun. Then Bookie released his hold.

He said, "Tell Luigi Colombo that Bookie Barnes will be around in a little while for explanations," and then walked away.

BOOKIE BARNES entered the lobby of the Henry Jason building and ascended the stairs. That light from the first floor, he was sure, came from Henry Jason's offices—where he was waiting to hear of the return of Marcus Lunding.

Bookie reached the landing, turned left

down the corridor, and stopped by a door under which showed a slit of light. He had been right, for the paneling on the door gave Jason's name. He knocked and entered on the response.

Henry Jason turned around in his swivel chair. He was middle-aged and what want ads like to call the executive type. An olive-skinned girl in her twenties sat on the edge of the desk. She was pretty and in a few years she would be plump. At present, the form inside the high-bodiced, Magyar gypsy costume was perfect.

Henry Jason's shrewd eyes took in his visitor. "Are you the truckman Susan Cook mentioned when I phoned her before?" He was no fool.

"Yes. I'm called Bookie Barnes."

"Glad you came up, Barnes. This is Miss Margit Otvos."

"So charmed," exaggerated the girl with a Hungarian accent.

Margit! So this was the girl Susan's brother, Frank Cook, was chasing. At least it showed taste, Bookie thought. He said: "I'd like to see you privately, Jason."

"Speak out, Barnes. I never keep anything from Margit."

"Only your pocketbook," commented the Hungarian.

"There's a sedan downstairs in back of the parking lot," said Bookie. "Do you own it?"

"Is it dark blue with fog lights?" asked Henry Jason.

"That's the one."

"It belongs to Luigi Colombo. I own a roadster."

Bookie frowned. If the night club owner had been behind the wheel of that sedan then it didn't make much sense for Colombo could not have known where the truck would be and when. Marcus Lunding had phoned his home and given that information to his brother-in-law. He wondered if Amos Cook might have borrowed the night club owner's sedan.

"Amos Cook was murdered a half-hour ago," said Bookie.

Henry Jason didn't comment and Margit Otvos said: "How threeling!"

"It doesn't threel me," stated Bookie angrily. "And how about you? What's your angle? What do you want with Frank Cook?"

Henry Jason started to protest but Margit Otvos waved him back. "No, no, let him speak. I like it. You are too gallant, Henry. It becomes boring. Sometimes I even feel you respect me."

"I'm still waiting," said Bookie.

"My name is Margit Otvos and I sing for Luigi. I want little but peace from Frank Cook because he is damp behind his ear and he has no money. Now if Marcus Lunding was interested in me—"

"Margit's morals are unimportant," interrupted Henry Jason hastily. "I'd like to know about Amos's murder."

Finding no reason why he shouldn't, Bookie Barnes outlined the events of the night.

When he was finished, Henry Jason announced with finality: "Amos Cook turned over your truck and later Marcus Lunding, that phoney philanthropist, killed him."

"Maybe," said Bookie, "but some things don't fit. Amos Cook planned this building for you but you didn't pay him. Why?"

"Because he quit the job before it was finished," Jason replied. "We had a fight."

"If you had a fight how come you were friendly enough to phone his home an hour ago?"

"That wasn't a matter of friendship but business. I've been trying to buy two feet of land from Marcus Lunding on the north side of this building. I have to have that extra ground because I want to build a high fence."

"On account of Lunding's mission?" asked Bookie.

"Exactly. I want to shut out the sight of it. Luigi Colombo is my tenant and it's ruining his night club. It's ruining my whole building."

"And you're sure," said Bookie, "that that sedan downstairs doesn't belong to you?"

"I'm sure."

"It's wonderful to be so positive," cooed the Hungarian thrush sardonically.

BOOKIE BARNES entered the Twitting Bird. He managed to get only a faint glimpse of the night club's interior before being whisked away but it was sufficient to reveal the scarcity of patrons

and the desperate efforts of the band to inject some gayety into the proceedings.

The whisking away was done by a half-dozen dinner-jacketed bouncers who converged on Bookie. He was eased past a gaping hat-check girl, down the carpeted corridor, and through a door into the office. It was large and comfortable, the windows facing the Boston Post Road, and behind the white mahogany desk sat Luigi Colombo.

The night club owner's fleshy face creased into a pleasant smile. "I expected a big man, Bookie Barnes, and I was right." He indicated the bouncer who had showed fight on the parking lot. "Anyone who can make Freddy do capers has to be big."

Freddy's feet shuffled with embarrassment and the five other bouncers eyed Bookie respectfully.

"And to take his gun, Bookie! Freddy is hurt."

"I didn't feel like being shot in the back as I walked away," said Bookie.

Luigi Colombo chuckled. "My boys are getting soft. In the old days when I was bootlegging whiskey down the Road they could take on twice their number in truck drivers."

The phone jangled and the night club owner reached over and took it. He listened without saying a word, then replaced the receiver.

"What did Henry Jason have to say?" asked Bookie.

Luigi Colombo grinned delightedly to his circle of henchmen. "He guessed it! Should we ask him the ten dollar question?"

"What was it?" persisted Bookie. "Did he warn you to tell me nothing?"

"Don't rush me, Bookie. I'm legitimate now but I still remember how to be tough. Sure that was Henry Jason. He told me that Amos Cook was gunned."

"That's right."

"Too bad it wasn't Marcus Lunding who got it."

"I hear you're having trouble with Lunding."

"Trouble! He doesn't approve of liquor and night clubs and just because he's got an empty lot next door I suffer."

"You'll probably be rid of Lunding. It looks like he killed his brother-in-law."

Luigi Colombo had thick brows and they formed inverted V's as he regarded Bookie with suspicion. "What you meant was that maybe I killed Amos Cook to rig this Lunding for the job. Just forget it, Bookie. Maybe I've been trying to scare Lunding into laying off me but I'm legitimate now and I got my boys here to convince you."

Bookie shrugged. "I'm not interested. There's a dark blue sedan in the back of your parking lot. Do you own it?"

"Yes. Why?"

"That sedan crashed my truck a few hours ago trying to kill Marcus Lunding."

Luigi Colombo yawned. "This time I'm not interested, Bookie. Suppose you go home and take some more nose candy. Give Freddy his gun on the way out."

Bookie decided that the night club owner's counsel was wise. It would be better to get at Luigi some other time—without six bouncers lined up in back. He took the gun from his windbreaker pocket and slid it along the desk.

"Now," said Luigi Colombo as if he were instructing a public school class, "you can grab him and tie him to that chair. Don't make too much noise or you'll wake up the customers."

Bookie's every muscle stiffened, then instantly relaxed. With the gun in Colombo's hand and the half-dozen bouncers on all sides it was senseless to struggle. His teeth clenched and the skin of his face whitened but that was the sole reaction to the rough hands that grabbed at him and shoved him into a chair.

Freddy appeared with a length of clothes-line rope. With the air of an artist, he tied each of Bookie's ankles to a front leg of the chair, knotted his hands in the back, and gagged him securely with a long silk scarf.

His job finished, Freddy spread a hand over Bookie's face. Then he shook his head. "My paws ain't big enough for that trick, bub, but I'll show you—"

"Nothing," completed Luigi Colombo. "First we find out who's using my car to stick me for a bum rap. After that you can make tricks."

The night club owner snapped out the lights and walked out, trailed by his henchmen.

CHAPTER FOUR

Red Lips

BOOKIE BARNES sat in Luigi Colombo's darkened office, bound to the chair, watching headlamps bear past the windows along the Boston Post Road. From beyond the door, the Twittering Bird's band, hacking away at music, set him on edge.

Freddy was indeed an artist. Bookie's straining and twisting and pressing against the ropes had been unable to make them give a hair. His arms and legs seemed dead and paralyzed and he had stopped trying. The ropes were just tight enough to dam the course of blood to the limbs without stopping it completely.

Bookie's ears picked up the sound of a semi-trailer and he watched its broadside of lights pass by the window. It looked like a job from National Transportation. It was a visible reminder to Bookie that he was getting what he asked for by not minding his own business. When someone like Luigi Colombo smiles pleasantly it's time to forget about bonuses and sedans and get out of—

The door had opened.

The lights came on and Bookie saw Margit Otvos standing there in her abbreviated gypsy costume. How threeling! That's what she would say, thought Bookie bitterly.

Margit did say exactly that and added: "I was hoping we would again meet." She shut the door.

Bookie could make no sound through the gag around his mouth but his eyes followed venomously as she came forward and chucked him under the chin. "How interesting! A helpless man in my power. I would so like to talk with you but you would shout for help if I removed that scarf, would you not?"

Bookie's head shook negatively.

"I hope you will keep your word for your sake," she continued. "I always do. But just in case you don't, do you see this?" She picked up a heavy inkstand from the desk.

Bookie nodded.

"I will drop this right on your head, Bookie dear, the very first time you shout."

He had no doubt but that she would and nodded again. Humming a tune, she undid the scarf.

He wet his lips and swallowed a few times. "Now take off the rope."

"I mustn't do that. Luigi would be furious. I always watch out for my skin and purse. Luigi did put you here, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Then you will have to stay like that. Where is Luigi?"

Bookie shrugged as well as he could. "I suppose he and Henry Jason are deciding what to do with me. Take off the rope."

"No, my precious. And you mustn't shout because this inkstand is harder than your head. We will have a nice talk and you will tell me all about yourself."

"You haven't finished telling me about yourself," said Bookie. "Finish what you were going to tell me upstairs about Marcus Lunding being interested in you."

"It would be wonderful if he was interested. He has money and he is too old a ——— for any other woman to want to take him away. He is not like his nephew. Frank Cook uses vaseline on his hair. I hate men who use vaseline and sing *None But The Lonely Heart*, don't you, my love?"

"I'm not your love," scowled Bookie. "The way I see it, Henry Jason sent you chasing after Marcus Lunding. What did you want from that Svengali?"

"To talk him into selling the two feet of land Henry needs to build that fence. But Marcus Lunding doesn't like liquor and dancing and not even women. Can you imagine somebody not liking me, sugar?"

"Untie this rope."

She laughed and picked up the scarf. "Luigi wouldn't like that. I will have to close your mouth again, my helpless cherub."

Bookie's mind raced. Here was his only chance to get away from that ex-bootlegger and there had to be some way to do it. Slowly, an idea began to filter through his brain. It was a long shot and its chances of working were unlikely as hell but . . .

He asked: "What time is it?"

"About half past twelve, sugar, but you

are not going any place unless Luigi takes you."

He tried the ropes again but could not even feel any sensation in his arms as he twisted them. The long shot was the only chance.

I WANT you to do me a favor," said Bookie Barnes. "I want you to take my cap off my head, open the window, and fling it out into the middle of the Road. It can't get you in wrong with Luigi Colombo because he'll never know about it. After, you can go inside and sing and—"

Margit's laughter broke in. "You take me for a fool, pet."

"Luigi will never know."

"That is not the point. Margit watches out for her own skin and she doesn't do things like that without reason."

Bookie understood. "I can give you money but how do I know you won't doublecross me?"

She was all smiles. "Margit is as honest as the days are long."

"The days are getting shorter now. There's a wallet in my windbreaker pocket. Inside it you'll find two one hundred dollar bills I got from Lunding. You can have them."

Slim, eager fingers probed into his pocket, removing the wallet. "You lied, sugar! There are two hundred four dollars here."

"Those four bucks are mine."

"I will keep them too and in exchange you can watch while I hide them in my garter."

Bookie restrained himself. "All right. Now take off my cap. Hold it by the brim, top side up, and toss it through the window. Try to throw it around twenty feet but be sure it doesn't land on the sidewalk or go past the center line in the road."

With relief, he watched his peaked cap sail out. She shut the window and came back.

"Now I must put back the scarf and leave before Luigi catches me. But first"—she bent over and kissed him full on the lips—"a little gift for my generous pet."

"Wipe off that lipstick," he said ungraciously.

She laughed again and rewound the scarf around the face as securely as it was before. "One can't see the lipstick now, my gallant pet."

The lights snapped off, the door shut behind Margit Otvos, and again he was alone in the dark office—the poorer by \$204.

His eyes looked out the window eagerly as he again calculated what chance there was of his cap being noticed. It was after 12:30 now and he had left the New York terminal of Murdock Motor Freight around 8:30. At that time, Latch had had a flat tire on his tractor. Figure fifteen or twenty minutes to change that tire and Latch would be passing the Henry Jason building with the cumbersome semi-trailer shortly after twelve. Too soon.

But Latch would probably make a coffee-and-sinkers stop at some lunch wagon. Irritated by the flat, he was *sure* to stop by the Waldorf in Westport for his chocolate bar. That would make the timing just right. He'd be due to pass by in a little while.

And when Latch went by he would notice the typical truck driver's cap in the middle of the road. Maybe not the other drivers, but he would. He was one of the wild-cat drivers from the old days and nothing missed him. He *had to* notice that cap. Suddenly, still far away, Bookie heard the pounding noise of a semi-trailer. One of Murdock's!

Slowly, the sound grew louder and then the broad beams of the headlamps cut by the window. With those lights went Bookie's hopes. But no! The semi-trailer had stopped. Now it was in reverse. That sweet, whining reverse gear! Bookie stopped straining and relaxed.

It was exactly thirty-eight seconds, by Bookie's count, before the door to the office opened and the light snapped on. There stood Latch, the cap in one hand and the inevitable nickel bar of candy in the other. That ugly, leathery face was as beautiful to Bookie as any Miss Atlantic City.

Latch sauntered into the room and his eyebrows raised. "Ah, a stag at bay." He indicated the silver badge bearing Bookie's license number which was pinned to the cap. "At last I know why you've

been wearing this doo-dad. Just so my lights should pick it up. And my! Look at that lipstick. Beautiful, red lips must have put it there. Who kissed you? Old man Murdock?"

Bookie kicked out at Latch, forgetting his legs were tied, and the unbalanced chair tumbled backward to the floor. Latch pulled out a pocket knife, severed the ropes, and pulled off the scarf. Bookie lay on the floor, stretched out luxuriously as the blood pounded freely through his limbs.

FINALLY, Bookie stood up. "Have any trouble?"

"It was a clear road," responded Latch. "A guy outside that looks like a gungsel saw me but he didn't try anything. What's up?"

"I'll tell you later. Let's get out of here."

They stepped out into the corridor. The bouncer named Freddy was standing there but none of the others were around.

"Don't start anything," said Bookie, "or I'll perform a gungselectomy."

"Why should I start anything?" Freddy sounded surprised. "I'm doing fine. I'm prouda my station in life, bub."

Bookie and Latch walked out. Nobody tried to stop them. The small, half-ton truck was still where Bookie had left it. Something was wrong and Bookie was worried. The whole thing was too easy. Why had Luigi Colombo let him get away from the Twittering Bird without a fight?"

"Give out, Bookie," said Latch. "What happened?"

"I'll tell you some other time because we've got to get away from here quick. Something stinks. That outfit saw me leave but they did nothing to stop me. It's not like them."

"But—"

"Go on. Get back to the terminal. I'll see you there later." Bookie sprinted for his small truck and drove away. He turned off the Post Road and made the short trip back to the Cook house. He had found the sedan but he still had to find the man who had driven it when it hit his truck. He had an idea where to look for that man, but there was no profit

in talking up to Luigi Colombo on the subject—not alone. The next time he would be backed up when he visited Luigi.

As he approached his destination he could see several cars parked in front of the Cook house. The police from Homicide were still there, for he recognized one of the cars as theirs by the cop behind the wheel. He wondered, as he parked the truck and walked toward the house, if the Homicide cops had found Marcus Lunding.

On the front stoop sat Felton, looking worried. He drew a deep breath of relief at sight of Bookie and said: "I thought you were going to Murdock's Bridgeport terminal to report."

"I didn't have the chance," Bookie lied. "I had to stop off some place."

Felton wiped his forehead. "It's fortunate for me that you decided to come back." He looked sore. "And for you, too," he added. "I don't like to have a fast one put over on me."

"What's eating you, Felton?" Bookie asked. "Do you believe that redhead's crazy claim that I killed Amos Cook?"

Felton shook his head. "No. But she told the Homicide dick and he gave me hell for letting you go. Come on in and get me off this spot, Bookie."

Bookie said: "Lunding's the man they want. That business about me being beneficiary to his will is screwy. Lunding never saw me before tonight so he couldn't have named me in his will. A phone call to Lunding's lawyer will prove that, if necessary."

Felton said: "Come on inside and tell it to the Homicide dick."

Bookie followed the state cop into the living-room. The Homicide man was there with Susan Cook and a sleek young man that Bookie figured was Susan's brother, Frank.

There was a corpse there too. Another corpse. It lay on the floor and it was covered by a sheet but through the cloth Bookie could make out the sharp edges of the steel brace around the neck. This time no one would dispute Marcus Lunding's claim that he was dead. Marcus Lunding had been murdered at last.

Susan Cook saw Bookie and went to work. "Do you believe me now?" she screamed. "Does this man have to mur-

der all of us before you police arrest him? He killed my father and my uncle because he wants the money that belongs to Frank and me. But he'll never get it! I'm going to fight him all the way!"

Bookie backed behind Felton and Frank Cook said: "Shut up, sis."

The Homicide detective seconded the suggestion and turned to Bookie. "Let's have it," he said.

"I didn't kill Marcus Lunding," Bookie said. "When I left here I went down to the Twittering Bird to find the sedan that crashed me and I found it. Colombo and his toughies tied me up. Latch, another truck driver, came along and got me out of it. Then I came here. If you don't believe me, Latch will back me up."

Felton said: "I know Latch. His truck passes here every night about this time."

"When did this Latch come along?" the Homicide cop said.

"About twenty minutes ago."

"Then Latch won't be good enough, Bookie." The cop looked at his watch. "Just about forty-seven minutes ago I heard a shot and ran outside to find Marcus Lunding dead, lying exactly as Amos Cook had been lying. Where were you then?"

"I was tied up at the Twittering Bird. And I can prove it. Latch found me there. And Colombo's singer, Margit, saw me. I got her to throw my cap with my license number out into the highway so that Latch, who was due along, would see it. This girl Margit probably can be made to talk even if Colombo and his toughies refuse to admit they tied me up. I had no reason to kill either Lunding or Cook. That business about me being named in Lunding's will is crazy. The guy never saw me before tonight. You can check on the will through Lunding's lawyer tomorrow."

"We're doing that now," the Homicide cop said. "But I've got to consider all angles. You might have been willing to gamble on the chance that Lunding had you in his will."

BOOKIE laughed. "All I'm interested in is proving that the driver of that sedan was at fault when he hit my truck tonight, so I won't get docked my bonus

for the next two years. And it looks as if I'll have to help find Cook's and Lunding's killer to find the driver of that sedan."

The Homicide man said: "Well, you stick with me until I tell you otherwise. Come along. Let's go see Colombo."

The Homicide car stopped in front of the Henry Jason building and Bookie stepped from the back, followed by the watchful Homicide man. Luigi Colombo and the bouncer, Freddy, were lolling outside the door of the Twittering Bird and observed their approach with vast disinterest.

The cop said to Colombo: "I understand you're alibi-ing him, Luigi."

"Who's him?" asked Colombo.

"Bookie Barnes here. He claims he was inside your joint the last hour. Tied to a chair in your office. How about it?"

Luigi Colombo took his pleasantest smile off the shelf and used it. "It's not bad."

"What isn't?" asked the cop.

"The rib."

"This is no rib. We're serious," Felton put in.

"Sure, Felton, sure. But you should have tried it with some guy I knew," Colombo said. "I never saw this Bookie Barnes in my life."

Bookie felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. He was beginning, too, to understand why Colombo had let him escape. Colombo knew that Marcus Lunding had been killed. He had let Bookie escape so as to rig him for the job. A frame, pure and not so simple.

A door to the night club opened and one of the customers came out. Behind the threshold, for the moment the door was open, Bookie saw Margit Otvos. She glanced at him without recognition. So she was in on it too!

"Wait a second." Bookie tried to keep calm as he leveled a finger at the bouncer. "You. You saw me come out. You know when I came in and when I left here. You helped tie me up."

Freddy grew thoughtful, then snapped his fingers. "Say," he exclaimed, "I think I did lamp a couple of guys in wind-breakers walk out of the office. I thought they were delivering something. But that was more than an hour ago."

The Homicide man shook his head. "It's not good enough, Bookie. I'm sorry about it. I guess the thought of all that dough just drove you berserker."

"What are you talking about? Can't you see this is a frame? You—" Bookie suddenly remembered Henry Jason. "Come on. I've got somebody else to alibi me. And he's good."

He grabbed the Homicide man's arm and dragged him around to the main entrance of the building, Felton trailing them. As they climbed the steps to the first floor, Bookie could hear a phone ring from where Jason's office was located. He swore. Luigi Colombo was undoubtedly letting Henry Jason in on the frame, if he hadn't already.

They pushed open the door to Jason's office. Jason looked up from behind his desk, pencil in hand, and said: "Yes?"

"Who phoned you just now?" Bookie said.

"I beg your pardon?" Jason looked blank.

"We heard the phone ring as we came up the stairs. Colombo was tipping you off not to recognize me. I suppose you'll claim I wasn't up here an hour ago."

"A half truth," murmured Henry Jason. "The phone did ring, but in the next office. However, it's true that I've never before seen you."

The Homicide man pushed Bookie towards the door. "It's no use, Bookie. We'll check on the stories you think up later. You're wasting my time. You can't stall us forever. I'm running you in."

Bookie decided he didn't like the way things were going. Desperately he grasped at straws. "Has that kid, Frank Cook, got an alibi?" he said.

"We'll find that out too. Meanwhile, you aren't impressing me with this kind of stuff, Bookie."

Bookie said: "All right. But will you remember to check with Marcus Lunding's lawyer on that will?"

"Sure. Anything to make you happy."

Felton had gone on ahead of them and Bookie could hear him going through the door to the street down the one flight of stairs. Bookie and the Homicide man were alone in the corridor.

Bookie said, "Don't forget," and brought up his right fist. It was an im-

posing fist, square with heavy knuckles. The Homicide cop's head snapped back and he slumped to the ground.

Bookie paused long enough to feel the cop's jaw. There seemed to be no fracture and he hurried downstairs, peered out into the street. Colombo and his bouncer had, apparently, gone inside the night club. The cop chauffeuring the department car was facing the other way, and Felton was not in sight.

Bookie stole a few hundred feet beyond the Jason building, then crossed the Post Road. He saw a semi-trailer approaching, recognized it as one of Murdock's jobs. When it came abreast of him, he jumped on the running board.

Mike Projak was at the wheel and Bookie said to him: "Keep going. I'm a dangerous guy, Mike. I've killed two men already tonight."

CHAPTER FIVE

And Heavy Fists

BOOKIE BARNES sat on a crate in the trailer. The semi-trailer was parked just outside Bridgeport by a lunch wagon the boys called the Stink House. He had told Mike Projak enough to prevail on him to park by the wagon while he tried to think himself out of his jam.

He knew that his story was making the rounds of the drivers and that by morning it would be known from Boston to Philly but he wasn't worried. He knew also that no one would turn him in, that if such a thought occurred to anyone he would be deterred by sheer fear of the other drivers. A little while before, sirens had sounded on the Post Road and he had changed over to a National trailer also parked outside the Stink House. But the cops had just looked into the lunch wagon without bothering to search the trucks.

However, he was not thinking himself out of his jam too successfully. He was sure of only one thing—that he had no intention of being booked on a murder charge. He knew he could probably beat the charge in the long run but that would mean time and lawyers and money. And now the cops wouldn't be bearing him any good will.

A driver reached in and handed Bookie a cup of steaming coffee. He took it without bothering to see who it was and again searched over the slender threads of reason he could see in the case. The sedan and the wrecked truck seemed unimportant now. The paramount thing was to find someone upon whom to hang the killings. There were too many candidates.

The Svengali had been wrong on one count. It was not Amos Cook who had shoved Marcus Lunding off a cliff, breaking his neck. That was as certain as that it was *not* Lunding who had murdered his brother-in-law. Either Frank or Susan Cook might have killed Lunding to get his money. Luigi Colombo might have killed Lunding because his business was being ruined by Lunding's reformist activities. The same reason held for Henry Jason.

But those were motives to kill the Svengali, not Amos Cook.

The trailer door swung open and Latch jumped in. "I heard you were loused up, Bookie."

"Uh-huh," said Bookie absently. He sipped the coffee and wondered what single motive could have impelled the murders of both Amos Cook and Marcus Lunding.

"If it's real bad," persisted Latch, "we can figure out a route and get you out to the West coast or the Mex border by slow stages."

"Go away."

"All right, but you shouldn't hit cops. By the way, there's some punk in the Stink House asking after you. What'll we tell him?"

"What punk?" asked Bookie.

"He says his name is Frank Cook and he's trying to find you. Do we kick him out or what?"

"Bring him here," said Bookie after some hesitation. It could be a trap but he was in no position to be choosy.

Latch left and reappeared a few moments later with Frank Cook. Bookie trained his flashlight on Marcus Lunding's nephew. He had a petulant, spoiled face, one that could show no determination unless it was faced with some honest labor. Margit Otvos had been right about one thing. There was too much vaseline on the hair.

"How did you know where to find me?" asked Bookie.

"I heard how you got away from the cops," Frank Cook replied, "and I started hunting for you along the Road in the places where truck drivers hang out."

"Why?"

"I didn't want there to be any hard feelings, Mr. Barnes. Susan was just excited before. She didn't really mean what she was saying."

"You're very kind," murmured Bookie and waited to hear the real reason for the visit.

"To tell you the truth," Frank Cook finally blurted, "I was afraid my sister might have queered everything by yelling about that will."

"Don't tell me you also believe that business about your uncle leaving me all his dough."

"Of course not, Mr. Barnes. I just didn't want that to queer it because if we stick together there'll be plenty for both of us."

Bookie's frown slowly melted into a grin. Everything had clicked into place. He knew the answer now.

He turned the flash on his watch dial as Frank Cook talked. Two thirty. Luigi Colombo would still be there, counting up the night's receipts without having to take off his shoes. "Let's begin," he said to Latch. "Go in the Stink House and tell the boys to come along."

"I DON'T want to get into any trouble, Mr. Barnes."

Frank Cook said it and Bookie Barnes did not reply immediately. He looked out through the moving trailer's rear doors and could count five trucks following them down the Boston Post Road. There were some nine of them, excluding the vaselined punk, and that was just sufficient to welcome the night club owner.

"Just keep quiet and come along with us," Bookie finally said, "or you'll be in for plenty of trouble."

A few minutes later, the six mammoth trucks stopped in front of the Henry Jason building and the drivers piled out. Pulling the reluctant Frank Cook with him, Bookie jumped down.

The Twittering Bird's signs were dark and the front door locked. The lock on the

door was not quite good enough to withstand the heavy shoulders ramming against it and soon the catch snapped and they broke into the night club's corridor.

Luigi Colombo must have heard the trucks approaching for a reception committee was waiting. Colombo and his men—bouncers, waiters, cooks, musicians—were lined up in a heavy mass. Over twenty of them, armed with cleavers and bats, against the nine drivers equipped mostly with jack handles or crowbars.

Freddy's hand dug into a pocket and came up with his gun. Bookie hurled the flashlight he carried, catching the bouncer over the bridge of the nose. The drivers took it as their signal and surged forward.

The truckmen fought with gusto. Big or small, clumsy or agile, they were trained on heavy work—wrestling crates or lifting loads often beyond their strength. Few of them fought with any pretense to science, accepting a dozen blows before delivering one. But that one was executed with ponderous, heavy efficiency and rarely required a follow-up.

Bats and cleavers were disposed of with the jack handles and, in one case, with a jack itself. Then weapons were dropped in favor of heavy, block fists. Rapidly, Colombo's men fell back and it was not long before the help dived for the shelter of tables or booths to lick wounds, leaving the bouncers to face the drivers.

Bookie found himself dodging Luigi Colombo. The ex-bootlegger knew how to fight and Bookie could already feel the swelling mouse over his left eye. He moved in to get a stinging blow on his jaw before Colombo danced out of his reach. Enraged, Bookie stopped boxing and threw himself forward like a halfback, bearing the night club owner to the ground. He sat on top of Colombo and his fist chopped down once. Colombo stopped struggling.

Feet raced by and Bookie could see one of the truck drivers chasing after a waiter. "Let him go," he yelled.

"He'll phone the cops if he gets out!"

"That's what I want."

Everything was suddenly quiet. Those of the Twittering Bird had had enough

of truckmen. There was a peal of delighted laughter. Margit Otvos sat on the bar, legs swinging. "Admirably done, sugar."

The drivers corralled Colombo and his bouncers and herded them into the office. The rest were ignored.

Bookie called to Mike Projak. "Go up to the first floor and bring down Henry Jason. He'll be sitting at his desk, figuring numbers and looking very important."

THE bouncers lay on the floor, their noses buried in the carpet. If they moved, a kick in the ribs from one of the drivers was sufficient to still them. Luigi Colombo and Henry Jason sat very quietly in chairs and Frank Cook, looking very unhappy, had his back pressed in a corner as if he were trying to disappear through it. Only Margit Otvos, sitting on the desk top with legs curled under her, appeared gay and unworried.

"The cops will be around soon," Bookie said to her. "Are you willing to tell them I was tied up in here when Marcus Lunding was murdered?"

"I'm sorree." She nodded to Colombo. "He pays my salary and you are only still a truck driver."

Bookie turned to the night club owner. "Then will you admit you had me here during that time?"

"Go strip your gear, brother."

"You'll change your mind. Where's that jack?" Bookie's eyes fell on the radiator. An end was two feet away from one of the walls. "That'll be perfect."

Luigi Colombo said: "If you're thinking of squeezing my arm or leg with that jack you're—"

"I'm what," asked Bookie, "because I'm thinking of it?"

The night club owner shrugged. "Then you're on the right track, Bookie, because it ain't worth it to me. Sure you were here when Marcus Lunding was killed."

"You could have saved yourself a lot of trouble," Bookie said, "by not trying to frame me."

For the first time, Henry Jason spoke. "I'll admit it too, Barnes," Jason said. "We were just trying to teach you a lesson, so don't start figuring it proves any of us did the murders."

"My figuring is doing fine," replied Bookie, "ever since Frank Cook offered to split with me. And he wasn't talking about his uncle's will either."

They could hear the squeal of police car brakes, traveling without sirens, as they pulled up in front of the Jason building and a moment later the Homicide man, heading a contingent of cops, burst into the room. The Homicide cop's jaw was taped.

Bookie spoke hurriedly.

"I'll make a deal with you—"

The Homicide man yelled: "You crazy killer! The only deal you're making with me is in the back room."

"You're making a fool of yourself, pal," said Bookie. "This bunch has already admitted I was here, the way I claimed, when Marcus Lunding was murdered."

The cop hesitated. "Is that so?" he asked Colombo as if he hoped it wasn't.

"The hell with that kind of cheesy lying," said the night club owner. "Sure he was here."

"I too saw him here," added Margit brightly.

The Homicide man glowered around the room. He glanced suspiciously at the recumbent hoods and the drivers and put away the revolver. "Then why the hell did you deny it in the first place?"

Colombo was silent and Bookie said:

"They wanted to pin the killings on me."

"I know why I'd want you to burn but why should they?" the cop growled.

"Because they knew that if they didn't deliver a first-class suspect then they themselves would be on the carpet."

"It still doesn't give you any call to hit a policeman."

"That's the deal I want to make with you," Bookie said. "Forget that sock and I'll give you your murderer."

The cop stood uncertainly for a moment, then grunted acquiescence. "I'm not promising anything but let's hear."

"Well, it begins some time ago with Marcus Lunding. He was one of those pillars of society who fight sin and use soap for a toothpaste. He also had dough and he had the idea that Amos Cook, his brother-in-law, and Frank and Susan were willing to murder him for it. His idea was probably correct but that wasn't why someone finally did kill him."

"Leave me out of this," interrupted Colombo. "I was here all night and my boys can back it up."

"You were here with me," said Margit Otvos with the hint of a threat.

"And I was in my office upstairs," Henry Jason thought it necessary to say.

Frank Cook tried to speak but only a frightened whine resulted.

"None of which proves anything," said the Homicide man. "Go on, Barnes."



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BOOKIE continued: "Marcus Lunding so feared for his life that he went to his summer home to hide out. But the killer followed him and shoved him off a cliff. The fall broke his neck but Lunding didn't die. Tonight Lunding came back here with every intention of murdering the Cooks who he believed tried to kill him to get his money. On the way, Lunding had me stop the truck while he made a phone call. He told me he phoned Amos Cook that he was on the way to kill him.

"As a result of that phone call, the murderer tried to beat Lunding to the punch by wrecking my truck. At first I figured it was Amos Cook that crashed my truck. But I know now that Cook was not the killer. I know too that it was not Lunding who killed Amos Cook. Lunding never got a chance to kill Cook."

"What are you getting at?" Henry Jason broke in impatiently.

"Me," said Luigi Colombo. "He thinks I had a motive to kill both Cook and Lunding on account of that lousy mission Lunding built next door to ruin my business. But he's wrong. All I ever did was try to scare Lunding out of ruining my business by sending my boys over."

"That's right," Bookie agreed. "You had reason to kill Marcus Lunding, but not Amos Cook." He turned to Frank Cook. "How far is it, kid?"

"Twenty-four inches," Frank said.

"Cut the doubletalk," snapped the Homicide cop. "What's this business about twenty-four inches?"

"It has to do with this building," Bookie said. "And it's the reason why both Amos Cook and Lunding were murdered. Henry Jason owns this lot on which the Jason Building stands—all except two feet of it. Marcus Lunding owned that two feet, plus the land next door on which he erected the mission. Jason hired Amos Cook to design and build this building. Before the building was completed Amos quit the job. Why? He said it was because Jason wasn't paying him for his work.

"About this time Margit Otvos began trying to get into Lunding's good graces."

"Why?" Margit said.

"You were trying to talk Lunding into selling Jason two feet of land from that property next door. Jason told you that

he wanted to build a fence on that land, a fence high enough to hide that mission. But that isn't so because Henry Jason didn't really care if he was forced to put Colombo's night club out of the building—he can always rent this space to some other business and make the same money out of it. The truth is that Jason tried to get Lunding to make a deal—Jason told Lunding that he would cancel Colombo's contract, get rid of the night club, provided Marcus Lunding would sell Henry Jason two feet of land next door."

"What the hell good would two feet of land do him?" the Homicide cop asked.

Bookie said: "That two feet of land—just twenty-four inches—is underneath the Jason Building. Amos Cook deliberately ran the Jason Building over onto two feet of Marcus Lunding's land. Amos knew that when Lunding found out about it there would be a fight between Jason and Lunding. Amos knew that Marcus Lunding had cut the Cook family out of his will. Amos decided to kill Lunding, and at the same time fix up a blackmailing setup that would get him some money—some of Henry Jason's money.

"Amos Cook deliberately extended the Jason building over two feet of Lunding's property to start a feud between Jason and Marcus Lunding. When Lunding was murdered, Cook would threaten to tell the police that Lunding and Jason had fought about that two feet of Lunding's land, which Jason had tried to buy and Lunding had refused to sell. Lunding's lawyer would know about that, would be a witness. And Jason would have trouble proving that he *didn't* kill Marcus Lunding. Amos Cook meant to see to that.

"Amos Cook quit his job with Jason before the building was finished so that later he could say that he had quit when he found out the building was partly on his uncle Lunding's land."

Bookie looked at Henry Jason who sat in his chair, tense and motionless.

"It was a good blackmail scheme. Amos Cook could collect money indefinitely from Jason to keep quiet about that two feet of Lunding's land. To move a building the size of the Jason Building would cost a fortune, if possible at all."

"We checked with Lunding's lawyer,"

the Homicide man said. "I got word by phone just before we came here that the land next door is being willed to a church and Lunding's dough goes to charities."

Bookie nodded. "And Amos Cook knew it. Amos was smart. But he didn't figure that Henry Jason would fight his blackmail scheme the way he did—by killing both Amos and Lunding."

HENRY JASON stood up abruptly, like an automaton. His face was white, lifeless. He stared at Bookie Barnes with expressionless eyes, but he did not speak. Felton reached for Jason's arm, held him fast.

The Homicide cop said: "How do you know all this, Bookie?"

"Some of it I figured. But I got the blackmail setup from Frank Cook. When Frank heard that story about Lunding leaving *me* his money, Frank believed it. So he propositioned me. Said he wouldn't contest the will if I would make it possible for him to continue blackmailing Jason. Frank had been in on his father's scheme, of course."

Henry Jason's eyes turned to Frank Cook's cringing weak face, and expression came to them for the first time. "Yes," Jason said through his colorless lips. "Yes, he was in on it. He and his father meant to ruin me, to bleed me dry. They knew I was at Marcus Lunding's summer home when they tried to kill him. They told me to go there, to talk with Lunding about selling me that two feet of land. They framed me. But they failed to kill old Lunding that time. I knew they'd try again—and succeed eventually. And I was helpless to stop them because they could show that I had been fighting with old Lunding about that land. And the fact that they were not to inherit Lunding's property would clear them. . ."

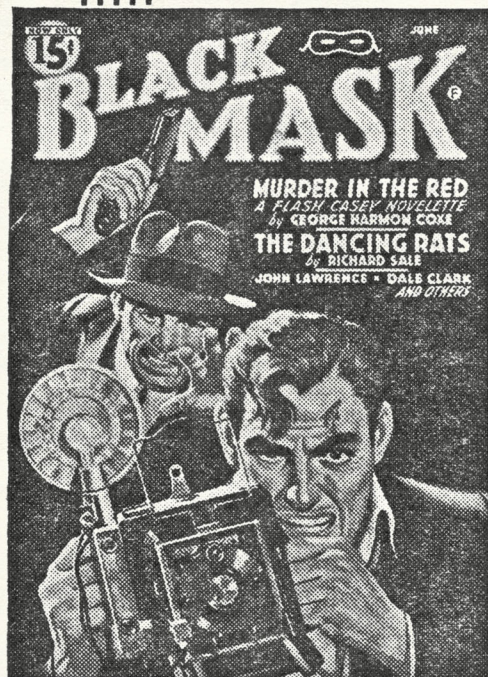
Bookie sighed, started for the door. Margit Otvos reached out and rumbled his hair as he passed the desk.

"Threeling work, sugar."

He looked her over. "Maybe we'll have a date tomorrow night."

"On a truck driver's salary, pet?"

Bookie grinned at her. "Lucky me," he said.



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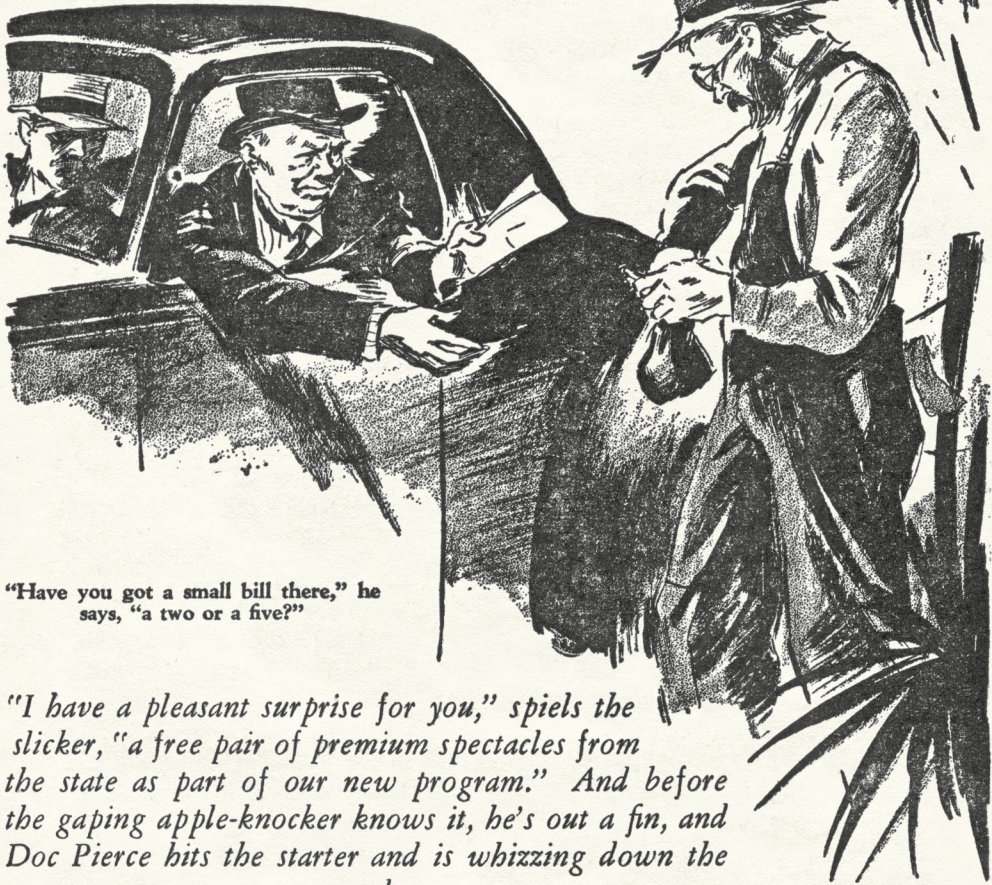
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Hello, Sucker!

By
Richard Dermody



"Have you got a small bill there," he says, "a two or a five?"

"I have a pleasant surprise for you," spiels the slicker, "a free pair of premium spectacles from the state as part of our new program." And before the gaping apple-knocker knows it, he's out a fin, and Doc Pierce hits the starter and is whizzing down the road.

IT IS a cool morning and the woods and fields in northern Florida are a pleasant change from the sand and scrub pines around Miami. The doc's Chevy is purring along and staying on the pace and the ham and eggs are taking hold so I feel pretty comfortable.

The doc stops cackling at a little story I tell him and begins to run his fingers around the edge of this high collar he is wearing. I figure a play is coming up as I notice him doing the same thing the

night before whenever the dice go sideways on him. I do not have long to wait.

"I have a little confession to make to you, my young friend," he starts out. "I am afraid I will have to impose on you for a small financial accommodation until I can contact my banker. My glasses got fogged up last night after you left and I did not do so well in that game of chance or whatever it was."

I have been thinking this doc over and I am not surprised at this touch. When I

met him in a gin-parlor in Jacksonville the night before I put him away as a solid citizen and the kind of people I like to associate with.

He is a big red-faced party with a sway-back coat that splits over the quarters and a pair of these striped pants with no cuffs. He is also wearing a wide black hat and a pair of cheaters with a black tie-rope on them so when he tells me that he is Doctor Pierce and is connected with the government of this state of Florida I am ready to believe him.

When I let on that I am a well-known figure around the turf and am even now on my way to New Orleans to take a bite out of the bookies, he tells me he is driving to Mobile and I am welcome to ride with him that far free of charge; so of course I am waiting for him in front of the hotel that morning.

As I said, though, I have been thinking him over and he does not add up quite so well in the daylight, although I cannot quite put a tag on him.

Anyhow, when I get dressed that morning I slip my roll into my shoe. I have twenty sawbucks and it makes quite a lump under my foot but I feel better with my dough where this state official or whatever he is can't make a play for it.

I try to stall him.

"I thought you said last night that you were a big somebody around Tallahassee."

"Well," he says, "I was in the employ of the taxpayers for several years but I am now in business for myself." He chuckles and pats me on the knee. "Surely a little harmless prevarication will not interfere with our budding friendship?"

I don't get it, but I tell him he is welcome to what few checkers I am holding, about three dollars and a half, all told.

The doc's face gets purple and for a minute I think he is going to bust right out of his collar.

"Look here, pony boy," he says. "Do you expect me to believe that you intended to make New Orleans on that kind of small change?"

I tell him I plan to wire to some pals when we get to Mobile. I can see he doesn't swallow it but he stays pleasant.

"Well," he says. "This is an awkward situation but we will have to make the best

of it. Maybe we can scrape up a few shekels from our country cousins as we go along."

He stops the car and opens up a suitcase and takes out a handful of dime-store spectacles and some long sheets of green paper that are printed up like insurance policies or court orders, with red and gold seals stuck all over them. He lays this stuff on the shelf back of the seat and we take off again. I can't make any sense out of this equipment but I don't ask any questions.

He drives along slowly for a couple of miles and then turns off the highway onto a gravel road leading back into the woods. It is a Sunday morning and there is not much traffic. The sun is shining and I am sitting back taking in the scenery when all of a sudden the doc steps on the brakes.

I LOOK around and find out we have stopped in front of a shabby old farmhouse. An appleknocker with a gray beard is leaning up against a rickety fence along the road.

The doc calls him over to the car.

"I am Doctor Pierce of the state department at Tallahassee," he says. "Who am I speaking to?"

The beaver says his name is Clayton.

"That's fine," says the doc, "you're just the man I want to see." He reaches back of the seat and holds out a pair of Woolworth binoculars. "Did you receive a pair of the premium spectacles, Mr. Clayton?"

Clayton takes the cheaters and mumbles he didn't hear tell about no spectacles.

"I have a pleasant surprise for you then," the doc tells him. "You have a free pair coming from the state as a part of our new program. I understand you are one of the largest landowners in these parts."

Clayton allows he's got a lease on three hun'erd acres.

"Splendid!" says the doc. "Of course you are familiar with the wonderful work we are doing over at Tallahassee. We are out to get the farmer the value of the high dollar. We're cutting out the middleman, the speculator, the profiteer and the gambler." He rattles it off like the auctioneer

reading a yearling's pedigree at Saratoga.

He hauls out one of the long sheets of green paper. "This document will appoint you as our agent in your community. We'll send you literature every week right from the state capital and we want you to read it and speak for our program among your neighbors. Twice a year there will be a big meeting at Tallahassee with all your expenses paid. You'll be a guest of the state."

The doc stops to get his breath.

Clayton has hooked the spectacles over his ears and is standing there with his mouth open, drinking it in.

The doc turns and tips me a wink. "This is Doctor Allen," he says. "One of the brilliant younger members of my staff. I suppose you heard him lecture over at the court-house a few weeks ago?"

Clayton admits he heard tell of some doin's over yonder.

The doc holds the paper out the window. "Are the premium spectacles perfectly comfortable? Can you read the document?" He reaches out and settles the cheaters on Clayton's nose. "If the premium spectacles are not entirely comfortable I am sure Doctor Allen will be only too willing to make sure that you are properly fitted."

I still don't get the play but I know that I'm not having any. I tell the doc I can't help him.

He gives me a dirty look and snaps, "You're still pretty green, Doctor Allen. Maybe you'll wise up quick one of these days." He turns back to Clayton and chuckles. "We older people are apt to expect too much from the young folks, I sometimes think."

Clayton just goggles at him so the doc moves in for the payoff. He holds the green paper against the side of the car and produces a fountain pen.

"Just sign right here at the bottom of the document."

Clayton scratches some hen tracks on the paper and the doc snatches it away before he has a chance to read it.

"Now that you've signed the document and received the premium spectacles," he says, "I shall have to collect a few pennies for postage. As Doctor Allen often says, 'A two-cent stamp never hurt anybody.'"

CLAYTON goes down into his clothes and comes up with a pouch about a foot long. He gets it unbuckled and plows up a couple of pennies.

The doc is jingling some silver in his hand.

"Have you got a small bill there, Mr. Clayton?" he says. "A two or a five? I have so much small change now that I am getting lopsided."

Clayton disappears into the poke again and comes to the surface with a fin. The doc grabs it and hands him a nickel.

"Thank you, my friend," he says very rapidly. "One hundred and ninety-seven stamps is exactly four dollars and ninety-five cents." He hits the starter and we are fifty yards down the road before Clayton gets his whiskers parted to start the beef.

The doc steps on the gas for a mile or two without doing any talking. I am thinking hard. I am beginning to get worried about those ten-spots in my shoe. From what I have seen of this doc he is apt to charm them right out into the open if I stay around him long enough. I am afraid to start a play myself because I realize this doc is two jumps ahead of me in any kind of going.

Finally he slows down and turns to me with a little smile on his face. "So you won't cooperate, pony boy?" He shakes his head. "Poor Mr. Clayton would be so much happier with his new premium spectacles if you had given him a little personal attention."

I tell him I don't want any part of this petty larceny he is carrying on and that he can unload me in the next town.

He just grins at me. "We don't get to any towns for quite a while," he says. "Maybe you'd like to get out here and wait for Mr. Clayton?"

I can't answer that one.

"Perhaps if you search yourself carefully you might find an odd twenty or so that you overlooked," he says. "Then we could get right back on the highway and head for Mobile."

I am willing to give a couple of twenties to make the pavement again but I know that if I admit I am holding anything at all I might as well hand him the whole roll so I dummy up.

We continue along these back roads

nearly all the rest of the day. I have to hand it to this doc. He is the smoothest operator I ever saw. He hooks at least a dozen of these hayshakers for everything from aces to sawbucks. One victim even goes into his house and brings out a five-spot. Then he makes a second trip for a shotgun and gets one blast at us before we get out of range.

While we ride along between customers the doc tells me how this deal operates. He claims the law can't touch him because this document the suckers sign is a receipt for a pair of spectacles. The doc fills in the price according to the take.

He tells me that he gets his training around the carnival pitches back in the middle-west and he claims that John Harrison, the circus man, is the finest character that ever lived. "He was my boyhood hero," the doc says. "How he loved to hear a sucker squeal! The cry of the denuded Hoosier was music in his ears!"

THE only foul ball the doc clips all day is a young stove-lid on his way home with one solitary checker in his poke. The doc coaxes the dollar out into the air and even gets a grip on one end of it but the smoke won't let go.

"Nossuh," he says. "I got to buy rations wid dis heah dolluh. If I go home widout it, my ole woman skin me."

The doc points out that this is state business and that he has signed the document. If he doesn't turn loose the doc will have to blow the whistle, he tells him.

"When de sheriff come aroun', I have de dolluh," the smoke claims.

"Nonsense," the doc says. "If we have to set the machinery of the law in motion to collect this paltry sum it will cost you twenty dollars and three months on the chain gang!"

The smoke is scared blue but he hangs on and finally the doc gives up.

It is late in the afternoon and we are

still a long way from Pensacola and the ferry to Mobile when the doc decides to call it a day.

We come to a crossing and turn south past a group of buildings that the doc tells me is a turpentine camp. I notice a signboard that says the highway is ten miles ahead and I begin to relax.

About a mile down this road we come to a shack with a couple of gasoline pumps out in front. The doc pulls up and gets out a handful of currency. He arranges four ones in his hand with just the edges showing and says we will stop here for fuel.

A chunky filly about sixteen is in charge of the pumps and while she is loading the tank the doc climbs out and wanders into the shack. I follow along as I figure some kind of a play is coming up.

The doc gives the filly the exact change in silver for the gas and then peeks over her shoulder into the cash drawer. He still has the four ones in his left hand and suddenly I realize what he has in mind. I have heard of this caper but I have never seen it operate so naturally I am very much interested.

The doc is very smooth. "I see you have some ten-dollar bills in there, little girl," he says. "I wonder if you could spare me one of them in exchange for ten of these ones? I wish to send it to my dear old mother through the mail."

The filly hands the doc a sawbuck and he riffles the aces into the till, counting them aloud as they fall. I am watching closely because I know he has only four in his hand but I will swear that I see ten different pieces of lettuce drop into that drawer, one at a time.

The filly seems satisfied and we get back into the car. The doc tries the starter and nothing happens. He kicks it again and it groans but the motor is dead. I am getting nervous by this time and when a big husky walks out of the woods with



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a shotgun under his arm and comes up to the car I don't feel any better.

This party is about fifty years old with a square chin and the brightest blue eyes I ever look at. He is very polite and asks are we having trouble with the car.

THE doc gets out and pulls up the hood and the big guy helps him take a gander at the insides. Finally they come up for air and the doc shakes his head. "I fear we will have to call in another opinion," he admits.

The big guy smiles and holds out his hand.

"My name is Turner," he says. "My eldest son is very handy around a car. He has gone down to the highway with the evening milk but he will be back soon."

The doc smiles. "I am Doctor Pierce," he says, "and this young man is Mr. Allen." He gives Turner a funny look and says, "Pardon me, Mr. Turner, but do you happen to come from Indiana?"

Turner nods. "Yes," he says. "I am a Hoosier. I was a minister of the gospel back in the corn belt but now I am a farmer and a very good one, too. I came down here for my health some years ago and I have never regretted it."

He turns to the filly, who has sidled up during the conversation. "This is my only daughter and the best business head in the family. She runs the filling station here while my six boys handle the farm work." He nods at the shotgun he is packing. "That gives me plenty of leisure for my favorite amusement, the hunting of small game."

I do not like being so close to this sixteen-year-old jail-bait and this artillery at the same time. It gives me the creeps. Also I am wondering about how long it will be before this career woman finds out the till is short six dollars.

The doc acts as though Turner has just paid off at thirty-to-one. He grabs his hand again and puts on a big smile. "This is indeed a pleasure," he says. "I spent the happiest years of my life in Fort Wayne."

Turner gets excited. "You must come over to the house and meet my wife and the rest of my little brood," he says. "My

Hello, Sucker!

wife lived near Fort Wayne as a girl. She will be very happy to meet you."

I can think of plenty of things I had rather be doing but I follow the doc and Turner down a path through the woods. We come out on a clear space before the biggest log cabin I ever saw. It must be half a block long and has chimneys sticking up all over it. Turner says he has been building on it for ten years and I can believe it.

I notice an old mule going round and round on the end of a big log at one side of the house and I ask him if that is the way he works out his stock.

He tells me that it is a sugar mill and the mule is grinding cane. "We are a self-sufficient little unit here," he says. "We raise our vegetables and fruit and make our own butter and cheese. The woods abound with game and all my sons are fine shots."

I am liking this less and less as we go along and the idea of all these sharpshooters around the place does not make me feel any better.

WE MEET Turner's squaw and a few more of the tribe and after the doc and Mrs. Turner have finished putting in the boosts for good old Fort Wayne we go back to the gas pumps and stand around waiting for this mechanical wizard.

Finally an old flivver bounces up and a kid about twenty climbs out. The rest of the tribe are all huskies like the old man but this punk is about two axe-handles across the shoulders and has mitts on him like Tony Galento. He tinkers with the doc's Chevy for a while and tells us that the distributor has thrown a splint or something and we will have to put in a new one.

I give myself up when he says the earliest we can get one of these gadgets is the next morning as today is the Sabbath and the nearest garage, which is twenty miles away, is not operating.

The doc doesn't seem worried and inquires where we can get accommodations for the night. Of course Turner insists we bed down with him and after a little backing and filling the doc accepts.

Turner is so pleased I think he will

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bust a surcingle. He starts gabbing away to the doc about how profitable the filling station is right then. He says there is a boom in the turpentine business and all the boys at this camp up the road have jalopies and buy their gas from him. He says the take this weekend will run into a tidy sum.

I don't like this line of chatter as I figure the doc might get ideas in the middle of all this rural prosperity. The first chance I have I get him in a corner.

"Do you figure that gal isn't going to know who shorted her books for that six checkers?" I ask him.

He admits that the filly will probably start a beef if she finds out somebody made her for that score but he says he will think of some way to handle it. He looks at me with a kind of twinkle in his eye.

"You aren't thinking of ducking out on me, are you, pony boy?"

I tell him of course I will stick around.

"Well," he says, "I would not advise you to leave right at this time. I have a little plan that might work out unfavorably for you if you take a powder on me. I might suggest to Turner that I saw you lifting a few bills from the cash drawer just before you departed. I am certain the boys would have a lot of fun tracking you down."

I figure he probably has a little plan for me anyhow but I can't think of anything I can do about it.

We go back to the house with Turner and put on the chicken and black-eyed peas. The sharpshooters are all handy guys with a fork and the doc stows it away like a two-year-old but I am definitely off my feed.

After we pull out of the trough I mope over to the gas pumps and stand around talking to the filly. I am trying to think of some way of balancing the cash drawer before she finds out it's short.

SHE goes out to wait on a customer and I get a brain wave. I slip off my shoe and get out my roll. I have the cash drawer open and am trying to sort out four ones from the pile, thinking I will replace them with one of my tens, when I hear a step on the gravel. Old Man

Hello, Sucker!

Turner is coming through the doorway.

I don't have time to get my roll in my pocket so I drop it in the till and close the drawer. Even then I am not sure Turner has not seen the open till but he doesn't say anything.

I have my head down tying my shoelace when I hear the drawer slide open again. I nearly check out when I look up and see Turner standing there with my stack of tens in his mitt. He says something about how good business is but I am too punchy to understand it.

When I finally recover a little I hear him call out to the filly that he is taking all the large bills up to the house for safe-keeping and that they will not balance the books until Monday when the rush is over.

I walk back to the house with Turner as I want to keep as close to my dough as possible and also I do not want him to think I am making a play for his daughter. I have enough troubles as it is.

For a minute I think of putting the slug on him while we are walking through the woods but I take a look at him and realize I am not built for the job.

I don't let the doc in on this news about the books not being checked until Monday. Let him worry. I am doing plenty of it. My roll is gone and I can't think of any way of getting it back without a lot of awkward explanations. And I figure the doc can out-explain me in any company.

Turner parks us in a big bedroom with a fireplace in the corner. The bunks are comfortable although these corn-shuck mattresses wake you up every time you turn over. I wake up once and see the doc rustling around in my keister in the moonlight. I figure he is making sure I have not got a few bucks stashed away in it. I only wish I have. I would gladly split with him.

In the morning Turner's wife comes in with a pitcher of hot water and lights up the fireplace. I am standing around watching the doc scrape his face with an old-style razor like the smokes up in Harlem use for social gatherings and I notice this collar of his laying on the bureau.

I pick it up and look it over. It is made out of some thick material and I ask him

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Dime Detective Magazine

what it is. He says it is cloth with rubber in it and very handy as you do not have to send it to the Chinaman. You just mop the dust off it with a damp rag yourself. He claims one of them will last for years and is very economical. I notice the doc has got quite a neck on him as this choker is size seventeen.

Turner walks in and wishes us a good morning. He takes the doc's collar away from me and chuckles. "I never see one of these collars in this country," he says. "I always wear them myself and brought a supply with me when I came to this state. I have several of them left and will probably be buried in one of them as I do not have much occasion to dress up nowadays."

THE doc mumbles something through the lather and Turner stands there bending this collar back and forth. All of a sudden it flips out of his hand and lands plop in the fireplace which is putting out a lot of heat by this time. Before any of us can get to it, the collar is long gone.

The doc jumps about two feet into the air and nearly guzzles himself with the razor. Turner is very much upset and rushes out of the room saying he will replace it immediately with one of his.

The doc is in a state of mind. He lets out a stream of the worst language I ever hear and for a minute I think he is going to pop a blood vessel. This red face of his gets as green as the infield at Belmont and he has trouble getting the breath for all he wants to say.

I have trouble figuring why a cool hand like the doc should get in such a heat about a collar, even a rubber one, but I realize that most guys have a kink in them somewhere and maybe this haberdashery is the doc's private angle.

Turner comes in with another collar and the doc cools out and thanks him very politely for the loan. He promises to send it back by parcel post but Turner insists he keep it as a little memento of his visit.

The mechanical red-hot shows up at breakfast and says the doc's Chevy is ready to roll. The doc wants to pay off but Turner slips the kid the nod and he refuses to tell the doc how much he paid

Hello, Sucker!

for the gadget. Turner says the doc must allow him to show some real southern hospitality to an old neighbor from Indiana.

After a lot of bowing and scraping on both sides we take off in the Chevvy again. Although I am still sweating over losing my two C's I am pleased to be getting out of this area and back onto pavement. I can't help wondering how Turner and the jail-bait are going to get the books balanced with all that extra sugar in the kick.

The doc is silent and keeps running his finger around his collar the way he does when the pressure is on. I am curious about this uproar he raised when his collar goes up in smoke and I poke him a little to see how he will react. I can afford to jig him now that I have no bankroll to protect.

"It was very handy," I tell him, "that this Turner has a collar like the kind you are so attached to. 'Collar-attached Pierce,' that's you, doc," I tell him.

He grunts and gives me a sour look.

I grin back at him. "I don't suppose you could slicker these spectacle customers of yours in a regular collar," I tell him.

The doc stays dummied up so I take another fly at him. "Anyhow, you have lots room to move in. This Turner is a couple of sizes bigger than you are around the tonsils."

"Of course," the doc says, very snappy. "This Turner has a neck like one of his mules. This thing is at least size seventeen. I wear a sixteen," he says.

"Your zipper is loose, doc," I tell him.

"That collar on the bureau this morning was a size seventeen. I noticed it special because very few people are that big around the neck."

THE doc stops the car and takes me by the arm. His hand is shaking. "Are you absolutely sure that collar was a size seventeen?" He speaks very low and he is dead serious.

I tell him of course I am sure.

He slumps for a minute and then sits up and begins to produce the bad language from the beginning again. I listen respectfully for a while and then I ask him what is the score.

He just looks at me for a minute. "This

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Dime Detective Magazine

Turner is no preacher," he says, very deliberate. "In fact he is a very sinister character. He filched my collar last night while I was a guest in his home and tore it open and extracted the eight hundred dollars I had sewn up in it and substituted one of those he had brought from Indiana."

I ask if it is a habit for him to keep his dough in his collar and he tells me it is a favorite hiding place among the pitchmen around the carnivals in the middle west.

He grabs me again. "That's it!" he hollers. "That's what made me think I had seen him before. That's why I asked him if he was from Indiana. I thought it was his speech at first but now I am sure. That one-thing-and-the-other was no preacher. He was a con man and a hypo artist. That's how he knew where to look for my roll. He pegged me the minute he saw me!"

I feel pretty sick. "That old joker must have seen me put that dough in the till," I blurt out.

The doc stares at me. "Don't tell me he made you for a score, too, pony boy?"

I need sympathy so I tell him about my idea of slipping a ten in the drawer and taking four out so the books will square up and how Turner walked in and I have to drop the whole two C's in the till.

The doc feels better already. He cackles and hollers until I think he will fall out of the car.

"Maybe that will teach you not to hold out on your superiors," he tells me.

Finally he quiets down. "Well," he says, "I doubt if we will obtain justice by going back and arguing with Turner or whoever he is. I have a feeling we would wind up full of buckshot. I guess we will just have to absorb our losses."

He starts up the car again and we move on down the road. We get a couple of miles along and we meet a haywagon with an old party in white whiskers in charge.

The doc slaps on the brakes and leans out the window.

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