

ALL STORIES  
COMPLETE



NOVEMBER

# 10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



**A LEG ON  
MURDER**

*AN INSPECTOR  
ALLHOFF STORY*

*by* **D.L. CHAMPION**

**MR. BETTLEMAN'S  
BLISTERS**

*A NOVELETTE  
OF THE DEAN*

*by* **MERLE CONSTINER**

**JOHN LAWRENCE-DALE CLARK**



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**2 DIMES  
A DAY**

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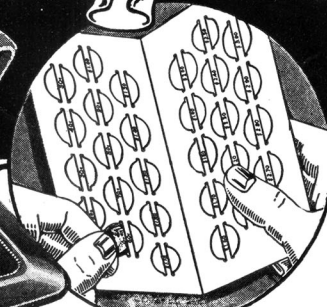
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I158 — Man's Initial Ring. Initial on Black Onyx. 10K yellow gold.

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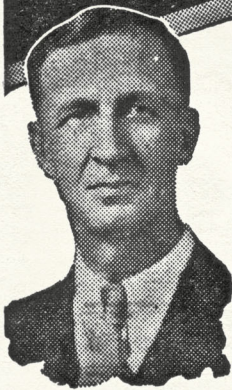
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**\$200 a Month  
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"For several years I have been in business for myself making around \$200 a month.

Business has steadily increased. I have N. R. I. to thank for my start in this field." **ARLIE J. FROEHNER**, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.

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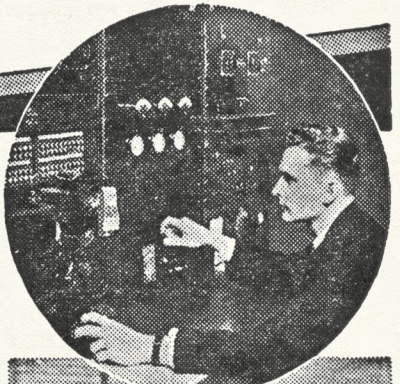
**Act Now! Many Radio Technicians  
Make \$30, \$40, \$50 a Week**  
Right now, in nearly every neighborhood, there's room for more spare and full time Radio Technicians. Many spare time Technicians are stepping into FULL time Radio jobs, or starting their own shops, and making \$30, \$40, \$50 a week!

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MAIL COUPON NOW for FREE sample Lesson and 64-page illustrated book. You'll see the many fascinating jobs Radio offers and how you can train at home. If you want to jump your pay—Mail Coupon AT ONCE! **J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 2MS9, National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

TRAINING MEN FOR VITAL RADIO JOBS



**BROADCASTING STATIONS** (top illustration) employ Radio Technicians as operators, installation, maintenance men and in other fascinating, steady, well-paying technical jobs. **FIXING RADIO SETS**, (bottom illustration) a booming field today, pays many Radio Technicians \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make \$5 to \$10 a week extra, fixing Radios in spare time.

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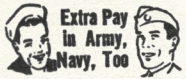
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NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE, Washington, D. C.

Mail me FREE, without obligation, your Sample Lesson and 64-page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No Salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

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**Extra Pay  
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Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the coupon now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, MUCH HIGHER PAY. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. Hundreds of service men now enrolled.

# 10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

**Vol. 40      CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER, 1942      No. 4**

## A THRILL-PACKED NOVEL-LENGTH STORY OF THE DEAN

*Unwrap the bandages that hide*

**Mr. Bettleman's Blisters**.....Merle Constiner 11  
And listen to the little man with the big Magnum unriddle the puzzle of Aunt Carmella's ashes which changed to pepper overnight in their urn on the mantelpiece.

## 4—SMASHING MIDNIGHT MURDER NOVELETTES—4

*Watch the crippled coffee-tipler of Centre Street get*

**A Leg on Murder**—An Inspector Allhoff Story.....D. L. Champion 46  
Despite the absence of his own nether limbs as the foolhardy Sergeant Simmonds wagers three months' sugar rations that Allhoff can't put his finger on the Wiltorn killer.

*Grab a guest-card for a*

**Necktie Party**.....Dale Clark 60  
Hosted by Plates O'Rion, official police photog, who'd rather be shot himself than shoot a phoney pic and kept catching murder through the lens of his speed camera.

*Be sure you've got the right key when you sing out*

**There Goes the Doctor**.....Marvin L. De Vries 74  
Or you may find you're sticking your neck out for murder as Otis did when that mysterious epidemic struck the defense plants in town and began to leave the key men blind as bats—one by one.

*Make a*

**Blood Test**.....John Lawrence 87  
Of a sullen Spaniard, a repulsive millionaire, his sultry wife and an eight-year-old cadaver—and try to determine the identity of the strangest murderer yet unhangd.

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

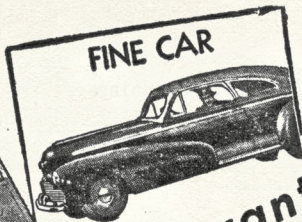
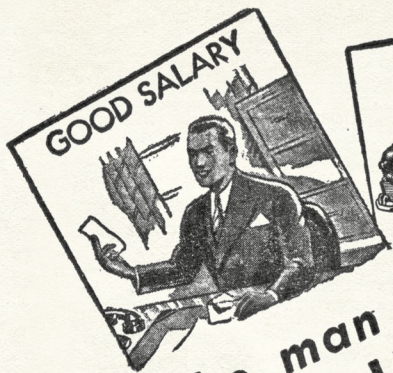
**Cover—"He Suddenly Put a Bullet Through the Film"**  
From *Necktie Party*.

*Black-and-white illustrations by John Fleming Gould*

Watch for the December Issue

On the Newsstands November 4th

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To the man who wants  
an **ACCOUNTANT'S**

to enjoy  
**CAREER**



**IF** you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

Of course, you need something more than just the desire to be an accountant. You've got to pay the price—be willing to study earnestly, thoroughly.

Still, wouldn't it be worth your while to sacrifice some of your leisure in favor of interesting home study—over a comparatively brief period in your life? Always provided that the rewards were good—a salary of \$2,000 to \$10,000?

An accountant's duties are interesting, varied and of real worth to his employers. He has *standing!*

Do you feel that such things aren't for you? Well, don't be too sure. Very possibly they *can* be!

Why not, like so many before you, investigate LaSalle's modern Problem Method of training for an accountancy position?

Just suppose you were permitted to work in a large accounting house under the personal supervision of an expert accountant. Suppose, with his aid, you studied accounting principles and solved problems day by day—easy ones at first—then the more difficult ones. If you could do this—and if you could turn to him for advice as the problems became complex—soon you'd master them all.

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As you go along, you absorb the principles of Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Statistical Control, Organization, Management and Finance.

Your progress is as speedy as you care to make it—depending on your own eagerness to learn and the time you spend in study.

Will recognition come? The only answer, as you know, is that success *does* come to the man who is really *trained*. It's possible your employers will notice your improvement in a very few weeks or months. Indeed, many LaSalle graduates have paid for their training—with increased earnings—before they have completed it! For accountants, who are trained in organization and management, are the executives of the future.

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Address..... City.....

Position..... Age.....



## THE DECEMBER THRILL DOCKET

MAX LATIN'S been in the Army—and out—since you last heard from him. It happened in a hell of a hurry—the commission, the brief spell of active service, and then—No he wasn't given the boot for kiting Uncle Sam's paychecks, or stealing the gold oak leaves from the major's uniform and hocking same. His color blindness caught up with him—that's all—and there didn't seem to be any handy way to bribe or corrupt the Medical Corps to forget about his difficulty and let him stay in the service. So he's back at the old stand—Guitierrez' restaurant—sitting in that private booth of his with a glass of brandy at his elbow and the telephone and dictograph apparatus handy—waiting for trouble and when it's a little slow coming along, stirring some up on his own. *You Can Die Any Day* is the title of this thrilling new novelette by NORBERT DAVIS, and take it from us you can do just that, or any night, too, if you follow Latin's formula for whipping up a murder *mélange*.

Bill Brent, alias Lora Lorne, has his eye on the Army, too. FREDERICK C. DAVIS, in *More Deadly Than the Male*, gets the *Recorder's* hard-boiled pundit on the perils of promiscuous petting well on the way to changing his nauseous job as the paper's heart-throb specialist to the more savory one of manipulating a machine gun against the Axis. Before he can wind up his affairs and tell his boss to go to hell, however, he's got to solve a couple of murders and put the bee on the blackmailing gossip columnist in skirts who has learned his identity and threatens to broadcast to the world the grisly news that Grandma Lorne is really the tough-as-nails Brent.

Then there's a gripping novelette by CORNELL WOOLRICH, *The Hopeless Defense of Mrs. Delford*, and another tale about Doc Pierce, the chisel-as-chisel can con artist by RICHARD DERMODY and other thrilling yarns and features.

This great DECEMBER issue will be on sale NOVEMBER 4th.

## Ready for the Rackets A Department

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

IT WAS inevitable, as we have pointed out on prior occasions in this column, that the war would bring a vast crop of petty rackets, some new, others merely variations of old ones, but all dependent in some measure for their operation on the conditions of a nation in war time. Here's a case in point—

Columbus, Ohio.

Dear Sir:

Sooner or later this old racket was bound to be revived. It was worked with a great amount of success during the first World War, and if reports of thousands of complaints are any criterion, it is again enjoying major success. Worked perhaps with variations in different localities, it nevertheless is based upon one central point—a clipping bureau.

Here in Ohio, this so-called clipping bureau, operating under a patriotic-sounding name, obtains newspapers from many cities; especially key cities with news service bureaus. From these hundreds of newspapers, every item is clipped that contains any news, no matter how insignificant, of the many men in the armed service. These items are filed away. Where a name and address of relatives are given, this information is catalogued for future use.

In one case in particular, a mother received a postcard from this clipping bureau announcing that if she would forward a half a dollar the agency would send her news about her boy in Camp S—. The postcard informed her that the bureau is operated purely out of patriotic duty and with very little profit. The half a dollar she was asked to forward just about covers the cost of gathering the information and news pertaining to her son, the card hinted.

The anxious mother lost no time in dispatching the half a dollar with a letter pleading urgently against delay in sending her the long waited news of her son. Like many more mothers, she had not heard from her son since the entry of this country into war and the consequent necessity for silence in regard to the whereabouts or movements

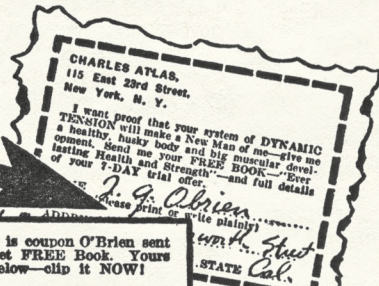
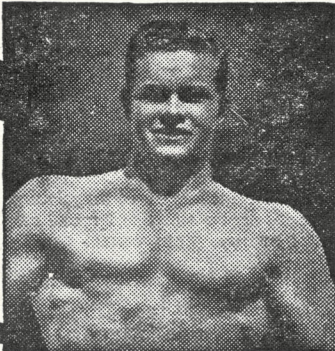
(Continued on page 8)

# HE Mailed This Coupon

**J. G. O'BRIEN**

Atlas Champion  
Cup Winner

This is an ordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' Californian pupils.



## ...and Here's the Handsome Prize-Winning Body I Gave Him!

J. G. O'BRIEN saw my coupon. He clipped and mailed it. He got my free book and followed my instructions. He became a New Man. NOW read what he says:

"Look at me NOW! 'Dynamic Tension' WORKS! I'm proud of the natural, easy way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion'!" *J. G. O'Brien.*

### "I'll Prove that YOU, too, can be a NEW MAN"—Charles Atlas

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

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

### Only 15 Minutes a Day

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. You learn to develop your strength through "Dynamic Tension." You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

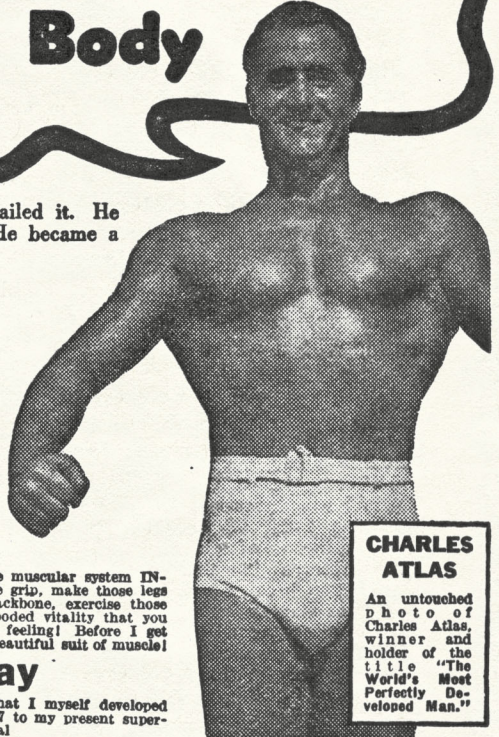
My method—"Dynamic Tension"—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "Dynamic Tension" almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to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

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In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today. AT ONCE, CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 832A, 115 E. 23rd St., New York, N. Y.



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I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" can help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." No obligation.

Name .....  
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

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

(Continued from page 6)

of soldiers. Day after day she anxiously waited for the mail man to bring the news.

Then one day, the mail man stopped and handed her a letter with the patriotic-sounding name printed in the upper left corner of the envelope. With nervous fingers, she hurriedly tore open the envelope and abstracted a small newspaper clipping. One can imagine the agitated manner with which she adjusted her nose glasses and the sad disappointment when she read the same item she herself had inserted in the hometown newspaper several weeks before when she had received a letter from her boy proudly informing her that he had been promoted to sergeant.

The thousands of complaints against this clipping bureau were substantially the same: invariably the "news" is a clipping about a son, husband or brother that the relative him- or herself had inserted in the paper.

The worst feature about this racket that thrives upon the heartaching anxiety of a mother for a soldier son is that its heartless perpetrators cannot be prosecuted. A clipping bureau is a legitimate business as long as they remain within the law. Very carefully the operators of this particular bureau avoid any misrepresentation; this is cleverly hidden beneath subtle implication.

Yours truly,  
Lacy Sherman

**A**ND the following, which is just the old fake fire-extinguishing compound, insecticide or hog remedy dressed up in 1942 costume with a war fillip—

Florence, Mass.

Dear Sir:

Always alert for an opportunity to prey on the gullible public, one group of racketeers has already started to cash in on the patriotism and war hysteria of the people. This particular form of racketeering is nothing but a means of obtaining money under false pretenses but the perpetrators escape prosecution because of the difficulty of proving the charges against them and because people are ashamed to admit to officials they have been victimized.

It works this way. All sections of the country are now practising air raids, black-outs, alert alarms and other forms of preparedness and the pickings therefore come from practically the entire United States. Canvassers make a house-to-house survey of housekeepers, offering "specially treated" compounds for extinguishing fire bombs, so that in case of an air raid by an invading enemy, their incendiary bombs will be made ineffective by this special compound being sprayed or thrown on them. Selling at a price that may vary anywhere from fifty cents to a dollar a pound, depending on the neighborhood and type of prospective purchaser, many sales are made, because the salesman is always a suave and convincing

talker who manages to convey the impression that the government expects every house to be equipped with some protection against fire bombs.

Delivery is made a few days after the order is taken, when the cash is paid for the special compound, which upon experimentation turns out to be ordinary sand and several other unnecessary ingredients to add weight and volume. Little do housekeepers who buy from these canvassers realize that the best means of extinguishing incendiary bombs is by the use of ordinary sand, dry dirt or just plain water.

Very truly yours,  
Robert Roche

**A**ND this one, which is particularly vicious, preying as it does on the anxiety of the families of service men—

Columbus, Ohio

Dear Sir:

The bait for this one often comes in the dead of night, as a telegram, but you need not be half asleep to be taken in.

The wire explains that leave, unexpectedly granted, allows a chance to get home, and comes presumably from a member of the family in the armed forces. It requests funds for fare be wired in care of a telegraph office. You have a thousand thoughts; maybe he is going to be sent overseas shortly . . . maybe you'll never see him again. So you count the bankroll and wire enough for plane fare—you'll have more time together that way, and this of all occasions is not one to economize. You plan things to be done, perhaps invite other relatives.

After waiting a couple of days without further word, patience gives way to concern and you check with the camp authorities. Your soldier boy is there and well. He has not been granted leave, and the telegram you received was sent by one of the host of gyps preying on service men's families. By now you are rightfully irked and would like very much to lay your hands on the character promoting such a contemptible scheme. Chances for that are extremely remote, and you know it, so you shrug it off and try to forget. It isn't easy.

Let's take this one apart and see what makes it tick. Your name and address; how did the sharper get that? A discarded envelope may be the answer, though not the only one. Since it would also carry the name and rank of the relative in service, nothing further would have been needed. Telegrams are at best informal things and there isn't a chance in a hundred that you would discover anything wrong with the one sent you. The gyp knows this better than you do, and takes full advantage of it.

Protection in this instance is simple and sure: instead of sending money in the first flush of excitement, investigate.

Cordially yours,  
D. J. J.



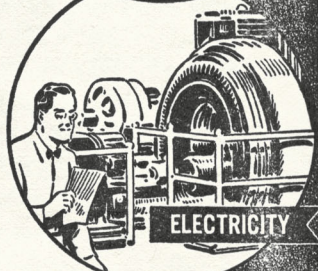
# Home Training helps YOU WIN!



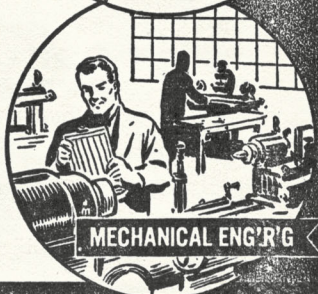
DRAFTING



HIGH SCHOOL



ELECTRICITY



MECHANICAL ENG'G

## Right Now

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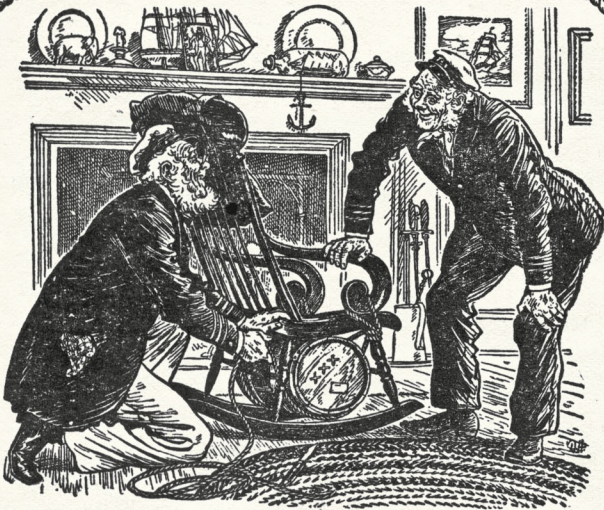
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# Mr. Bettleman's Blisters

A Novel-Length Story of the Dean

By  
**Merle Constiner**

Author of "Killer Take All," etc.

*Why did the young man with the unloaded gun hock his Aunt Carmella's ashes? Why did the urn come back filled with black pepper instead of Auntie's silt? And why should an ugly gargyle of a man insist on a no-marriage clause in the contract, every time he hired a new stenographer? Ask the Dean—who else would know?*

## CHAPTER ONE

### 14-Carat Cinerary Urn

**M**URDERERS have one weakness—they want to keep proving to themselves that they're really slick and that their crime is a deep, dark secret. They can't let well enough alone. They

make their kill and from that moment on they begin putting out feelers to be sure they're safe—like a slimy octopus hiding his prey beneath a rock. Then, one day, the law grabs hold of a tentacle and flops the creature out of its cranny into the sunlight. I've seen it happen a dozen times. And I saw it happen again in the affair of the cinerary urn filled with black pepper.

The Dean was in shirt sleeves and carpet slippers, hunched at his work-desk, when I came through the door of our office-bedroom. He'd been fuming all day, translating a tenth century Arabic manuscript on medicinal magic. He pushed the parchment away from him, fatigue showing in the creases of his cheeks. "I've broken its back," he declared. "But I don't want any more like it. Listen to this. Just a few of the mantic arts; tephramantic, coscinomantic,"—he ticked them off on his thumb—"austromantic, belomantic, pegomantic—"

"There's a female client in the reception-room," I said. "She's mantic, too. She's romantic. In fact she's neck-romantic. Zowie!"

He cringed. "Stop it! That, without doubt, is the most un-funny jest that ever wormed its way into my auditory canals." He put on a tattered smoking jacket. "Let's see what this is all about."

There were two of them, sitting side by side on the Dean's *ante bellum* love seat. A guy and a gal. The dame, a kid in her teens, had one of those bright, cheery smiles that comes from fifteen minutes a day and a looking-glass. Her pale yellow hair, waxy as new hemp, was curled and waved to the point of the grotesque. From the brim of her cocky little blue hat to the tips of her spike heeled blue suede pumps, she was designed for masculine optics. She ogled me through the crotch in the Dean's armpit as we approached—in such a way that the Dean wouldn't notice her and that her escort couldn't see her.

She wasn't trying to pass at me—it was just second-nature window shopping.

The gent was a hulking lug with a pot belly. He was the living image of what street-corner preachers call tainted money. He wore striped pants, an unconventional cutaway coat, and had pouches under his eyes from penciling racing forms in bed. He raised the flat of his hand to us and growled, "Hi'ya!"

I placed them as a typical pair—a gentleman gambler and his current subsidy. Events were to prove I was plenty wrong.

The Dean took a trigger-quick dislike to them. "You have the wrong place," he said blandly. "We don't peddle hot jewelry. Maybe you can find the little lady something on down the street—"

"I'm Lee Bettleman." The smoothy made a rickrack of his fingers and shifted his tummy comfortably under his belt. "Years ago a crack like that would have brought you visitors at night. Now I'm in a position where I can overlook it. This is Miss Constance Squires. Tell the ugly man your story, honey."

SHE twisted her pretty mouth, pretended to come to a decision. "If I must, I must!" She spoke up in a low, brassy voice. "I'm working for a man and I'm afraid. I'll begin at the beginning. I come from out in the Middle West. I was just finishing a course in business college when one day I saw on the bulletin board this notice saying that Mr. Phil Terrill wanted a stenographer. The address was a town about fifty miles away. Well, I sent in my application and got an answer from this town here. Mr. Terrill's letter said that my application had passed through his temporary address and had been forwarded to him. He said that he was retired and that he didn't want a stenographer but wanted a personal secretary. He offered a rather high salary and enclosed a ticket so I came on—"

Bettleman said tremulously: "And she just a nestling, scarcely out of high school—"

The Dean wandered to the bay window, gazed moodily down into the street. "And?"

Miss Squires pivoted a wild-eyed, guileless look about the room. "Things are funny where I work. I'm afraid. Mr. Terrill lives in a stuffy old house out at Castille Neck. He gives me the willies! I couldn't have stood him if I hadn't met Mr. Bettleman at the grocery store." She simpered. "Mr. Bettleman and I buy our vegetables at the same counter."

"Ah, Cupid!" the Dean exclaimed. "He pops up in strange corners. You began keeping close company. He advised you to consult me. Now, through a chain of circular response, we return to the point. Just what is it you wish me to do?"

She opened a blue snakeskin bag and took out a legal-looking paper. "I signed a contract," she declared. "I signed it before I had Mr. Bettleman to lean upon. I want to break it—is it binding?"

The Dean slipped it from her tapered

fingers and read it aloud. "Contract for employment . . . by and between Phillip Terrill and Constance Squires . . . in these words the said party of the second part, Constance Squires does covenant and agree to fulfill the terms laid down, et cetera, to act as said Phillip Terrill's personal secretary for the space of one year and to conscientiously carry out such duties customary—" The Dean blinked.

Bettleman put in: "Now comes the wacky stuff."

The Dean continued: "'—and does specifically agree never, during the period of her employment, to propose marriage to her employer, said Phillip Terrill, or commit word or act that might be construed by her employer, said Phillip Terrill, as a suggestion of proposal of marriage, the penalty for the violation of the above covenant to be the instant dismissal of the said Constance Squires and removal of herself and her personal effects from the residence of the said Phillip Terrill within the arbitrary period of sixty minutes—" The Dean shook his head. "Of all the unilateral contracts, this baby wins the blue ribbon." He returned the document. "I'm no attorney." He closed his eyes. "Why don't you just quit?"

Bettleman rumbled emphatically: "What I've been telling her! Need a secretary myself. As a matter of fact,"—he went coy—"I been straining my ears ever since the lucky day I met her—trying to hear those wedding bells!"

Miss Squires announced brittlely: "I guess I'll keep a stiff upper lip and go on working—even if it leaves me a nervous wreck. I've signed my name to the paper so it wouldn't be honorable to quit. Now would it?"

The Dean didn't answer. He said with finality: "I'll see what I can do."

Bettleman purred: "Bud, you're out to make yourself a good fee. Lee Bettleman pays well. If you want me you can find me at—"

"I know where I can find you," the Dean snapped rudely. He pulled out his big silver watch. "You'd better run along now. You're holding me up."

WHEN they had departed, I asked: "Who is this Lee Bettleman? You acted like you made him."

"I know him," the Dean said slowly. "Or rather, I know about him." A foggy look came over his face and I shut up. He was thinking of something else. I could have yelled at him with a megaphone and he wouldn't have heard me.

Dean Wardlow Rock's hard to get along with. He likes to pose as a crackpot and, to tell the truth, as long as I've been with him I've never been able to figure him. He's a private investigator that runs his shop under the front of a professional fortune-telling layout. He has some sort of a *sub rosa* connection with the police commissioner. We work from our living quarters, a small three-room flat in a grimy brick boarding-house at the edge of the slums. Strangers place the chief as an amiable scholar, a bit on the screwy side. I know different. He carries a Magnum .357 that can do everything but ring for the undertaker—and he doesn't mind using it. I've not spent a dull day since we teamed up together.

The chief has an endless assortment of talents and interests. They range all the way from totem poles to fluoroscopy but his all-time obsession is the study of black magic and ancient divination. The Dean picked me up when I was down and out and gave me a job. I've been with him ever since. I'm no longhead myself—I just know two things: guns and locks.

The Dean got out the poisonous stub of a black Cuban cigar, jammed it into the corner of his mouth. "I've got those things again, Ben. You-know-what—delusions of grandeur! We've accidentally cut trail on the biggest case of the year! It's whipped the police; they've given it up. We're about to jump in—through the back door. Bettleman is right—we're headed for a fat fee." He came to a quick conclusion. "Get on that phone and call Malloy at Homicide. Tell him to assemble all important data on that Atkinson killing and to shoot the stuff over to us by messenger boy."

I lifted the receiver. "You don't mean Malloy. You mean the commissioner—don't you?"

"I mean Lieutenant Malloy at Homicide."

I gave him a hard stare. The Dean had a pipeline directly into the office of the police commissioner. Whenever he wished

to resort to police dope he overshot Headquarters. There was good reason for this and the reason was Lieutenant Bill Malloy.

The Irish lieutenant was all cop and Grade-A but he and the Dean harmonized like a couple of yearling bullocks. To be blunt about it, they were crazy-jealous of each other. I made my connection. Malloy was out—the sergeant said he'd give him our message. "The Atkinson case," I remarked. "How does the Atkinson kill tie into this? Take that Squire-Bettleman pair and turn them sixteen ways to Christmas and all you can shake out is sweet romance."

"It shakes out murder," the Dean corrected bleakly.

**I** REMEMBERED the Atkinson case from the newspapers. The thing had broken five months ago. For two days the front pages had splashed headlines and then—*whoosh!*—the story was cut down to a couple of inches and buried in the advertising section.

Monty Atkinson was a black-sheep college instructor, a professor in higher mathematics who'd been kicked off some corn-belt campus for manipulating endowment funds. He came to town on a freight car and within a week had talked himself into the underworld. He was a wizard at computing percentages, he built up a reputation as a dopester among the petty paper and dice boys. His calculations never seemed to miss. He climbed. He dropped the riffraff and set up a deluxe office, took on the gambling elite.

Then, one bright sunny morning, as he unlocked his mahogany door, he was shot-gunned out of this world.

Just another undesirable citizen departed for the happy hunting grounds—that was the line the papers took the first day.

The blow-off came the second day, things began to unfold.

A series of mysterious telephone calls and anonymous letters to the police told a strange tale. Monty Atkinson had been an ex-college professor and had been booted off the campus for embezzlement—but from there on the yarn took a new twist. He'd been brought to town by some smart promoter and pioneered for a bigtime gyp. From the first day he'd walked down Main

Street, he'd been in cahoots with this unknown, kingpin gambler. That was why his clientele had found his advice so good, it was all a buildup.

Then came the deluxe office, the exclusive tradé—and the sell-out.

Monty Atkinson and his unknown backer, playing hand in glove, had rooked the local gambling gentry of astronomical sums. So said the papers on the second day.

The third day, in a tiny four inch item back in the ads, the newspapers opined that he was killed by imported hirelings, that the man behind him had doubtless left town and that everything was being carefully cross-checked. In other words—a blank wall.

A routine mob-slaying. The Dean was finicky about the cases he worked on, I couldn't for the life of me see anything in the record that might interest him.

"How can you cog that Terrill-Squires goofy no-marriage contract into an ordinary gang wipe-out?" I objected.

"This man Terrill," the Dean answered evasively, "was Atkinson's angel. Terrill—until his recent retirement—owned a run of small-chance establishments. That was the way they worked their flimflam." I opened my mouth; he waved me silent. "It's true. And actually not too important. Please don't ask me how I know."

I didn't. The chief had his own sources of information and, believe me, when something confidential came to him it stayed that way.

I tried to argue him down. "Your specialty is fancy stuff. This is off your range. It's what you call squalid—just good old knock down and drag out elimination. A professional revenge job. I know the gambling element in this burg and I'd just as soon not bat them about. You'll have to admit that they have their side of the case."

"I admit nothing until I know more."

"It's two cases," I insisted. "I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll nose around my friends and work the Atkinson angle. You devote yourself to Miss Squires and her extraordinary employer—" He cut me off, "Let's eat!"

Three in the afternoon! All day wrestling with that Arabic chrestomathy and no time out for food. He'd put out as

much energy and fervor on a thank-you job for a museum as he would on a fire cracker manhunt. "Supper coming up," I said. "Excuse me while I fracture a dozen eggs."

I WENT to the kitchen and tied on my apron. I'm tenderloin born and raised and an apron is a gripe to my intestines but the Dean has exaggerated ideas on sanitary cooking. I beat up a dish of eggs and poured them in the frying pan; while they were browning, I mixed a little tarragon and oil in the wooden salad bowl, tore up a couple of handfuls of butterhead lettuce and quartered a few big tomatoes. The boss won't touch a salad that isn't simple. I went to the icebox, got out a half cup of cold chicken livers, diced them and folded them into the omelet. I set out a half pound of butter and a loaf of Vienna bread. The whole process took about six minutes. The meal was ready by the time the coffee water came to a boil. When the Dean says he's hungry, he means just that.

While I worked, I tossed a few things around in my mind. The case, if we had a case, was opening with a collection of mighty shady characters. The boss was a hound for juicy fees but I'd never known him to take a dishonorable penny. I brought up the subject as he was finishing his coffee. "I don't like the picture," I argued. "It's a job for the authorities, a mob feud. What can we get out of it except a smear?"

He sucked noisily at the dregs in his cup. "There's money in it," he answered vaguely. We heard our front door knob rattle, caught the light tap of indecisive footsteps wandering into our reception room. "That," the Dean said smugly, "sounds like a man in a gray suit." He pushed back his chair. "This should be fun."

It was a man in a gray suit, all right. He was standing in the center of the floor weaving a little .25 automatic around the room like he was trying to net butterflies.

A silly-looking lad with a protruding chin, he was hatless—with a crew haircut, was wearing an indescribably baggy tweed suit and shabby saddle-oxfords. He was tieless and the five inch points of his arty shirt collar stuck out from his coat

lapels like wings. One of those gypsy-tearoom specimens, a sort of combo collegiate-little theater type.

The oaf wheeled, drew a bead on the Dean and exclaimed huskily, "Hands up!"

The chief gave him a toothy grin. "Fiddle-faddle!"

The young man hunched his shoulder, squinted down the gunsight and pulled the trigger. The firing pin went *smick* on an empty chamber. The lad blushed, stammered, "I guess it wasn't loaded. Why does Charlie own a gun if he don't keep it loaded?"

The Dean raised a blunt finger, levelled it with cocked thumb and said solemnly, "Bang! You're dead." With a swift change of manner, he threw back his head, went into a routine of pompous dignity. "Explain this horse-play, sir!"

The young man blurted, "You weren't really in any danger. This pistol has such a tiny hole in the barrel that it couldn't cause much damage. I only wanted to scare you away. I was just bluffing."

"Forget it," the Dean retorted. "It's just one of those things. You say you wanted to scare us away. Why, may I ask? Are you aware that this is our home? Mr. Matthews and myself live here."

"I know it," the young man declared. "I'd hoped to find you out. I'm looking for Aunt Carmella's ashes."

"Ashes?" The Dean was genuinely astonished. He rocked on his insteps. "You confuse me, sir. Please elucidate."

The lad barged into his tale. Listening to him was like living in a fantastic wonderland. He was an orphan, he said. Poor but proud. A year or so ago a cattle-ranching aunt had died out in the Rockies, an aunt he'd never seen. Came one day, around to his humble attic, a lawyer with a box and a paper. The box contained a solid gold cinerary urn which held the cremated ashes of this mysterious aunt. The paper was her last will and testament: the urn was his, he was to treasure it until he became twenty-one—at which date the estate proper was to be turned over to him. A fortune. Not one cent until he was of age and then he got the works.

Tomorrow, he explained, he'd be twenty-one—and he didn't have the urn. It

had sort of gotten out of his possession.

The Dean puzzled. "You mean you've mislaid it?"

The young man wavered. "I hocked it."

"You hypothecated your aunt's residuum?"

"It's a disgraceful thing to admit, but it's true. I've been living hand to mouth waiting for my inheritance to fall due. I've pawned it before—it's fourteen carat, you know—and I've always managed to redeem it. But I had recently a streak of hard luck, my time expired and the thing-amabob was sold."

"But why," the Dean exclaimed, "why come here, sluicing a gun in our faces?"

The youth bit his lip. "The pawnbroker gave me your address. I was going to steal it for a day or so and then return it. I need it but I don't really care to own it."

"I don't mean to press you—goodness knows you have enough grief on your hands anyway—but just who do you think I am?"

"You're Mr. Phil Terrill. The man the pawnbroker said—"

"No," the Dean said kindly. "I'm not. I'm Wardlow Rock. But don't let it embarrass you, it's life with a capital L. Things can get pretty mixed up, can't they?"

The young man was bewildered. "You've been top-notch about this. I owe you a profound apology."

The chief laughed it off, led his guest to the door. "Not at all. It's episodes like this that spice things up. I hope you locate Aunt Carmella's silt. Good-bye and drop in anytime, sir."

**I**T WAS after our caller had left that I caught the play of sunlight on the boss's forehead, he was sweating like a mule!

"What," he asked quietly, "was your impression of that little adventure?"

"He told a fabulous yarn," I observed. "But weird as it was, I believe it was true. It had convincing overtones—"

"Overtones, me eye!" He snorted. "Don't be going highbrow on me. You said it was fabulous and it was. A fable is essentially a downright lie. Our friend came in and dumped more nonsense on us than I've listened to in a fortnight. He

knows we are launched on our case and wishes to call our attention to Phil Terrill—the employer of the fluffy Miss Squires. For what reason, I haven't the slightest idea."

"If he knows we're launched on this case, he's a quick worker. I didn't know it myself twenty minutes ago."

"He is a quick worker," the Dean agreed. "And a careful one. These careful workers lay plans and stick to their blue-prints, that's the reason I took a chance when he waved his little .25 at me. That baggy tweed coat and those long collar points were a clever rig—but the coat was a mite too baggy, when he wheeled on us, it bunched. When you glimpse tan leather under a man's arm you can safely decide it isn't a riding boot. It was a shoulder holster and midget automatics are not QED: the little automatic was a display—not for shooting purposes—"

I was tongue-tied. "Are you telling me that sap was gun-heavy?"

"No sap, he, Benton, my boy." The Dean was grave. "We've just interviewed a profession triggerman. I'd like here and now to make a prophetic guess. Even money that lad is involved in the death of Professor Atkinson."

"And you let him walk out on us?"

"We'll pick him up on our way back."

I knuckled my temples, I knew he was goading me but I couldn't help rising to it. "You're pushing this occult stuff too far." I demanded loudly: "While we're on the subject, let's get this settled. How could you, sitting in the kitchen, tell by the sound of his footsteps that he was wearing a gray suit? Sometimes you drive me nuts."

He guffawed. "When Miss Squires and her amorous escort were here I strolled to the window, looked down into the street. There I observed him. He was standing across the alley—peeling an orange! The epitome of suspicion. It was pretty obvious that he'd tailed our clients to us. That's why I asked for an early supper—in anticipation of his visit, and a busy evening, I decided that we'd better fortify ourselves."

My reaction was one of relief. "Gunmen, I can play checkers with. It's this fancy stuff that throws me, stuff like solid gold urns full of old ladies' ashes. I'm



glad it turned out to be just a spiel—"Ah-ah!" The Dean reproved me. "We mustn't get hasty. The story was essentially false but I imagine that we shall find a cinerary urn to exist. And doubtless Mr. Terrill possesses it."

SO MUCH had piled up in such a short time that it seemed to me long ago in the dim past when I had phoned Homicide at the chief's request and left our message for Lieutenant Malloy. Actually, the time-interval between my hanging up the receiver and Malloy and Captain Kunkle scrambling out of their beetle-like police car at our curb couldn't have been over a half hour. Which same was smooth policework, the boys at Headquarters have a way of showing up like harvesters when there's something cooking.

The Dean welcomed them with a splurge of pseudo-anger. "Come in, gentlemen. There was absolutely no need for this personal visit. I was just a bit curious about the dossier on that Atkinson case. A messenger boy could have brought me the folio."

Malloy bridled. "Messenger boys," he said with difficulty, "messenger boys haven't as yet access to our confidential files. That was as batty a demand as ever came over a police wire. Have you really got something or are you just stirring up a mare's-nest?"

The Dean ignored him, turned to his superior. Captain Kunkle was the rift in the Irishman's armor. Malloy, who'd come up the hard way, wouldn't give a non-cop a transcript of a dog license. Kunkle, on the other hand, would horsetrade with you anytime—as long as you threw in the corner crib and barn. Yes suh, Captain Kunkle would co-operate—as long as advantages obtained there-unto.

The Captain did a dragging sort of ballet step, placed his comfort-ease shoes at a jaunty angle on the floral carpet. "We admit we need your assistance. I understand you have reason to believe the Atkinson case is about to be re-opened. That bump-off, as you well know, has been a very painful thorn under our corselet, so to speak. I don't quite get your interest in the affair but I'm sure that we can be

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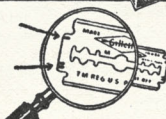
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2. APPLY LATHER OR BRUSHLESS SHAVING CREAM WHILE FACE IS WET. IF LATHER IS USED, WORK IT IN WELL WITH BRUSH OR FINGERS



3. TWO EDGES DOUBLE BLADE LIFE. MARKS INDICATED ABOVE IDENTIFY EDGES, ENABLING YOU TO GIVE BOTH EQUAL USE AND GET EXTRA SHAVES



4. CLEAN BLADE IN RAZOR BY LOOSENING HANDLE, THEN RINSING IN HOT WATER AND SHAKING. WIPING THE BLADE IS LIKELY TO DAMAGE THE EDGES

of mutual benefit to each other, as you might say."

Malloy rumbled in warning, the Captain ignored him. He continued: "As a token of our good faith, we've brought along a bit of evidence that we've so far withheld from the public and the press." He burrowed into his coat and held out a small, spiral-bound notebook. "We found this on Professor Atkinson. He was carrying it when he was slain."

The Dean took the book, its pages were completely blank but for a single annotation. A few brief sentences in the Professor's neat copperplate read:

Numbers have power. There be benevolent numbers, good omens; such numbers are capable, dexterous. There be also numbers which are evil, sinister. The dexterous numbers are 3 and 8. The sinister numbers are 5, 6, and 2. This was brought to my attention in the good year of 1361.

The Dean closed the covers, returned the book. He asked shortly, "Well?"

Kunkle queried crossly: "What does it mean? Such malarky! The man was just plain screwball. In the good year 1361! It must be numerology. Now, we hear that you're one of these so-called fortune-tellers, we're banking on you to explain it to us."

The Dean said curtly: "You should have brought it to me sooner. You've let the trail get cold." He shook his massive head. "No, it's not numerology. There's nothing cryptic about it except the 'good year 1361'. He doesn't say what calendar system, it's obviously the Mohammedan system. He's trying to be foxy. The Mohammedan year 1361 is this year, of course—nineteen forty-two. Hah! So that was when it was brought to his attention."

Malloy exploded: "But what does it mean? We can't solve the code—"

The Dean smiled. "It's not code. It's simple straightforward English. It means exactly what it says. It appears confusing, it isn't. It's extremely lucid. Get a dictionary, sit down, check on every word—"

Malloy purpled. "Don't kid us. It's not the *words* that ball us up. We don't get the gist behind them."

Kunkle said stiffly: "We'd best be on

our way, Lieutenant. We're on a merry-go-round. Frankly, I think someone is four-flushing. I've heard patients ramble that way in observation wards." He dipped in portly farewell. "Thank you for your efforts. We can't be intelligent all the time, can we?"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Milady's Blackjack

"**S**PEAKING of sinister numbers," I reflected. "My mind's eye insists on scampering back to the coquettish Miss Squires. Yowp! Now there's a sinister number with a powerful figure! Let's drop in on her with a case of ale. You can wheedle out some wonderful lowdown by cajolerie, you know."

"Please remember," the Dean rebuked severely, "please remember that Miss Squires is a nestling scarcely out of high school. Don't go bucket-headed on me." He considered. "However and however, now that I think of it, a little courtesy call may be in order. A bit of badinage, a few quips, a little tomfoolery! You're presenting a good brief."

"I'm presenting no brief at all," I said. "I just suggested—"

He nodded enthusiastically. "Gad! You've got a golden tongue! I realize your suggestion is a good one. This should be a splendid time to visit her—she won't be home."

Bucket-headed, he called me! "Swell," I agreed. "The fresh air will do us good."

We were halfway there before his real intent dawned upon me. Abruptly, I recalled that the voluptuous blonde was personal secretary to the ubiquitous Phil Terrill, and we were headed for a pow-wow with the ex-gambler himself. I confess, as they say in travelogues, that the prospect needled me. I've met my share of Svengalis—I can take them or leave them alone—but I've never met a glamor-man with such an attraction for women that he had to write a no-proposal clause into his secretary's contract. I tried to visualize the physical countenance of this demigod and had to give it up because my imagination seared the insides of my eyelids.

Castille Neck was a small community in a loop of the river just north of town,

it was highly restricted and the only thing that could finagle you a deed to building-ground was the fragrance of a super-charged bankbook. The cluster of estates with its nucleus of tiny modernistic stores was just a stone's skip from the corporation line, the city fathers couldn't entice it in—it was sitting back there, with its nose up, waiting for a better city to come along.

Terrill's residence was a diminutive Florentine castle with more red rock and lancet windows than you'd find in a country courthouse. An enormous, garish edifice, it perched on a hillside embellished with lavish evergreens. "And Miss Squires referred to this joint as 'stuffy,'" I exclaimed.

"It may well have seemed cramped to her," the Dean remarked. "Miss Squires is a daughter of the prairies and spent her childhood on a thousand acres of tableland surrounded by a single-strand, six-volt electric fence. When you take it in its broader aspect Mr. Terrill's opera-house seems almost a dove-cote."

"Baloney," I said. "What are we waiting for—let's take a look at the warden."

We swung through a gate constructed of two mammoth wagon wheels and ascended a narrow, asphalt footpath to the galleried porch. The Dean thumped the massive diamond panels of the brass-studded door. It popped open as though it were controlled by an electric eye. The guy that confronted us must have been standing with his hand on the latch, watching us approach through the plate glass window-slot.

"O.K.," the guy rasped. "Sing out."

The Dean said impassively, "I am an astrologer, sir. A message has just come through." He made a hideous mask of his face. "Tell Mr. Terrill that the sign is in the kidneys!"

The fellow blinked. "I'm Terrill." His jaw dropped. "Howzzat? Did which?"

It was only then that I really noticed him. I could hardly believe it, his appearance certainly didn't dovetail with the picture I'd sketched of him. In my opinion, the ex-gambler just missed being repulsive. He had a wedge-shape ferret-face, I saw a big, battered nose and little icy gray eyes with the skin tight around them like buttonholes. He had bright carrot

red hair, a microscopic waxed mustache and a pair of hands the size of welder's gloves. What made him so offensive was that queer aura of orange, the limp halo around his pate, the sandy bristles beneath his nostrils and the soft golden fuzz on his wrists and fingers. He said: "What's that about my kidneys?"

The Dean eeled past him into the hall. "Come in, Ben," he ordered. "You're keeping the gentleman's front door ajar."

That's the way we did it, and the next I knew, we were seated in Terrill's den.

THE Dean settled himself luxuriously in an enormous, pneumatic leather chair. "What say we shelve your kidneys, sir, for a few moments. They are an interesting subject—but first things first." He lay back in the cool cushions. "I am, as I said, an astrologer, but I am also a private investigator. This is Ben Matthews, my stockroom manager. We are here in behalf of a client. We understand that you have drawn up an extremely unusual contract with your personal secretary and we are approaching you with the suggestion that you dissolve it. Miss Squires wishes to quit her position but feels honor bound to remain in your employ her stipulated year."

"She can quit anytime she wants to," Terrill was icy. "All she has to do is make a pass at me and it's the brushoff, she's canned."

"That's just it. She doesn't want to be fired—she wants an honorable resignation." The Dean looked disgusted. "What on earth is that no-proposal clause in the contract for, anyway?"

The ferret-faced man got to his feet and started to pace. He walked straight to the Dean, thrust his nose within three inches of the chief's. "I gotta put them clauses in my contracts," he said hoarsely. "There's some peculiar fascination about me." He jerked around, circled the taboret, zipped his thumbnail along the bookshelf like a stick on a picket fence—and back again he came, shoving his battered nose almost between the Dean's eyes. The Dean was as rigid as a crowbar. "They go nuts over me," Terrill panted. "It's not my kale, it's me—my hotshot personality. I'm putting out these charm waves all the time, I can't help it

and the gals just can't resist them."

He was off again to the races. This time to the ash tray, he picked out a handful of cigarettes, lined them up like a freight train on the desktop. Before I could dodge, he was over me, his foul breath in my face, his slatey eyes probing mine. "Squires is doing nicely. But she'll slip. They all do. First they're modest and businesslike and then, one day, they begin throwing sheep's eyes at me and hinting about did I ever think about getting married when the right girl comes along. I've canned them before and I'll have to can Squires. It's a curse that's on me."

"Curses are down my alley," the Dean said genially. "Perhaps we can remove it. Would you mind giving me the case histories on Miss Squires' predecessors?"

"Until a few months ago I was in what you might call the entertainment business. I owned a small string of amusement joints. I was getting along pretty well in the velvet so I decided to sell out my holdings and retire." Talking about himself seemed to have a sedative effect on his jumpy nerves. "I bought this dump here in Castille Neck because my neighbors are ritzy and leave me alone. It'll take me about a year to settle up my affairs so I phone the employment bureau and have them send out a secretary. They send out a gal named Dennison, a fancy little brunette, she stays about three days and comes right and asks me to marry her. I fire her. I gripe to the employment office and the next prospect is a homely wench called Sperry. Specs and freckles. She holds out a week and then breaks down. She gets the bum's rush too. Then I write to a business college out in the sticks and get this Squires—"

The Dean urged him on. "Just how did these girls, Dennison and Sperry, just how did they pop the question to you? Stick mash notes under your breakfast toast, or what?"

That wild look flared up in his eyes. "They came right out and asked me. It happened the same way—down to the last detail—with each of 'em. It's ten o'clock at night. I'm sitting where that bimbo is—" he pointed at me. "She's over in that leather chair where you are, taking notes. The clock strikes the half hour, it's

time for her to go to bed, she closes her shorthand book and asks me to marry her."

"What were their exact remarks? Can you remember?"

"Can I remember? Haw! The little brunette said: 'Let's you and me get hog-tied.' The gawky one, the Sperry wench, said: 'I have found thee. Thou art my Prince Charming.'"

"And you discharged them?"

"Did I? Brother, they were out of the house, bag and baggage on the curb waiting for a taxi, by midnight."

"Many employers marry their secretaries and are very happy," the Dean commented blandly.

"I know," he said miserably. "But Carmella won't release me."

"Carmella?" The Dean put a politely questioning note in his voice. "And who is Carmella?"

"My poor, sweet, dead sister." He strode to the black marble fireplace. Then I saw it, the cinerary urn. It sat in the center of the mantel-shelf on a black satin scarf. The object was about five inches tall and had the general shape of a pot-bellied marmalade jar, the gold of its highly polished surface caught the lamplight in its shadowed niche. The ex-gambler addressed it—he spoke calmly and intimately, as though he were speaking to a pet dog. "Carmella, this man there is Mr. Matthews. The other gentleman's name I didn't catch—"

"Wardlow Rock."

"—May I present Mr. Matthews and Mr. Wardlow Rock. They're detectives. What their real purpose here is, I don't know. But believe me, Carmella, the bond between us is just as strong as ever. I shall stick by my promise."

The Dean cleared his throat. "Now this, I don't think you're going to like. Nevertheless it's a request I must make. Do you have a picture of Miss Squires? There's a good chance that the lady I have in mind is a fraud."

Terrill said bluntly: "She means nothing to me. I think she has a photo in her bedroom." He ambled out into the corridor.

And the Dean was across the room and on the urn in a single pounce.

The next twenty seconds were a nau-

seating experience for me. The boss carried the jar to the tablelight, turned it carefully about in his fingers. He examined the bottom, scrutinized the single word—CARMELLA—inscribed across its bulging side. He grasped the base in one hand, the decorative top in the other, and gave it a twist. The threaded cover unscrewed. He dumped a little heap of grayish substance into the palm of his hand, sniffed it *and tasted it!*

I turned away. "Stop it!" I whispered. "I can't stand it!"

"Now this," he said, munching ravenously, "—eats mighty good." He tossed a pinch into his mouth and watched me flinch.

"Human ashes!" I gasped dryly. "How can you do it?"

He grinned. "Not human ashes, Ben." He screwed on the top, replaced the urn on the mantel. "That jar is full of black pepper. Just ordinary, household pepper."

Terrill came prancing in with a photograph of Constance Squires in an abbreviated bathing suit. The Dean clipped on his nose-glasses. "That's the girl. Now I can give my client the go-ahead. So you won't dissolve the contract, eh?"

"Of course I'll dissolve the contract," Terrill answered good-humoredly. "The dame can pull out anytime she wants. Secretaries are a drug on the market, I can pick up a dozen by reaching for the phone." He frowned. "Who is this client that's stirring up all this fuss?"

"A very distinguished gentleman. I think he must be a senator or a financier. His name is Bettleman."

"Lee Bettleman?" Terrill began to yell. "That rat sent you here? I retract my offer. The girl stays!" He dropped his voice woodenly. "Get out of my house, both of you. You've climbed over the wrong fence."

As we stepped out on the front veranda, Terrill made a final dart at the Dean. He took a fistful of the chief's sleeve in his big hand, gave it a vicious, terrier-like shake. "You're kidding me about Bettleman, aren't you? He's not your real client. I smell Hard Labor behind this—am I right?"

The Dean wiped off his clutch. "Your guess is as good as mine. *Vale et salve, sir!*"

ON THE way back to town, the Dean showed signs of suspicion. "That last, enigmatic remark of Terrill's," he fretted. "I can't seem to do anything with it. It's so inane. 'I smell hard labor behind this.' Of course there's hard labor behind this—and there's devilish ingenuity, too."

I said: "When the guy said Hard Labor, he didn't mean hard labor. He was referring specifically and personally to Hard Labor."

The boss gave me a sympathetic glance. "Your pyramidal tract appears a little fluid this afternoon. We're just getting started on this business—don't let it grind you down."

I blew up. "I'm talking sense, I'm saying what I mean. Hard Labor's a bawd, a trollop."

"Now that's pure poetry, if I ever heard it," the Dean murmured. "But it doesn't seem to advance us."

It was the way he said it, with a solicitous quirk to the corners of his lips, that got me. I turned frying mad and clammed up. O.K., I thought, I know what I'm talking about—if you're so smart dig it out yourself. It was a childish way to act—and before the case was broken, I paid for it.

I gave the conversation a twist. "Black pepper in a funeral urn! Of all outlandish stunts! And me sitting there and listening with a saline solution in my mouth while he spoke to it and called it dear Carmella and introduced me to a spirit. Why the hocus-pocus?"

"There was no hocus-pocus to that," the Dean announced. "Terrill was dead-ly serious, there're more factors in this case than you've considered. You're ignoring the triggerman in the arty garb, the boy that threw down on me with the unloaded automatic."

I pushed the idea around for a minute. "You mean that Terrill really believes the urn to contain the ashes of his dead sister? You mean that the gunman in the baggy tweeds has stolen the real ashes and substituted pepper? It doesn't seem logical. Why would he come to us then and call our attention to it, in fact point us directly to it?"

"When you start to roll," the Dean retorted, "you really pull out the choke. If

you wish to ask me any questions, put them to me one at a time. I refuse to make any blanket statement." He shrugged, added absently, "We're bound for Lee Bettelman. He surrounds himself with nervous characters. I'd be just as pleased if this comes off without a show of cordite. Our principal mustn't lose his power of speech. I suppose we could get along without him—but I'd hate to."

**I**F THE Dean had asked me to pick up Bettelman's trail, I'd have started a systematic tour of the backroom bookie joints—taverns, greasy-spoons, smoke-shops. Bettelman was a bigshot—no doubt about that—but the bigger they are the more they like to parade among the small fry. I was plenty perplexed when the chief drew up before the *Jewel Theater*.

The *Jewel* was a neighborhood picture house featuring third-run westerns at ten cents a throw, a red lettered sheet on the board said, *CONTINUOUS SHOWING—5 P.M. To 5 A.M.* The theater was smack in the center of a bustling stucco business block, out in a quiet, highly respectable residential suburb. The Dean hesitated on the curb, made a concealed gesture with his forefinger. "There we are," he said. "By that big tooth."

I followed the direction of his pointing, cut my eye casually across the facade of the building. On the second floor, above the theater and a couple of suites to the right, a huge gilded, wooden tooth hung out from the cornice. Gold leaf on a black painted window read,

Drs. Knight  
Lyman  
Haskins  
& Fogg  
DENTISTS

"What about it?" I asked.

"Dentists don't paint the upper half of their windows black. Here, especially, in the suburbs, they need all the good north light they can get. I've heard about this place for a long time. It was built by an alky baron in the twenties who owned the entire block. It's a hangover from prohibition—if you'll excuse the paradox! This'll be highly gratifying to me—I've always wanted to look the set-up over."

Then, to my astonishment, he walked

straight up to the ticket booth, laid down a quarter, took his two tickets and nickel change and strode into the theater lobby. I caught up with him at the chopper. The place was dingy, rancid with the stench of box lunches and human sweat. We walked past the curtained aisles, the picture sound-track spewed forth thundering hooves, banging six-guns and singing cowboys. The chief's goal was the gents washroom—and a foul den it was.

The *Jewel's* gentlemen's lavatory was a damp, cement-floored cubby hole caustic to the nostrils with the fetid odor of stale antiseptic. "Here we are," I said. "What's next? Do we take a bath?"

The Dean ignored me. He went to a broom closet, opened the door and gazed in curiously. The closet was empty but for a scrub bucket in the corner and a denim jumper hanging from a nail on the black wall. The chief put his hand against the closet wall and pushed. The whole back panel swung inward.

We stepped through the aperture and closed the two doors behind us.

We were in a narrow hall, a dim bulb hung from the cracked plaster of the ceiling. The Dean lowered his voice. "This corridor is a blind alley. It's the only ingress and egress to Bettelman's offices. It's a smart idea, worked out, as I said before, under gang rule. Now, it's more or less of a relic. Bettelman must find it useful, though, it gives him privacy." He began his prow into the building's entrails. "Watch yourself. From now on anything might happen—we're among savages, Dr. Livingston."

The narrow hallway took a dogleg turn, we ascended a precipitous flight of steps to the second story and encountered a third door. "We've certainly tripped a warning buzzer by now," the Dean grinned. "The least we can do is be courteous and knock. It'll save buckshot." He gave a staccato rap on the door jamb.

As usual, he knew what he was doing. The ape that let us in, covered us with a shotgun the size of a sewer tile. "It's all right," the Dean said cheerfully. "You can go back to your pinochle game. Bettelman sent for us. We have an appointment."

We entered what looked like a sort of a clubroom. There were a couple of brass

cuspidors on the frayed burgundy carpet, three or four broken-down easy chairs and an old plush couch. A bug-eyed dope in a sharp robin's egg blue suit sat at a big round diningroom table with a double solitaire layout in front of him. The upper panes of the windows were painted black and just beyond the window ledge was that enormous gilded wooden tooth.

The bimbo with the shotgun said to the lad in the electric-blue suit: "You hold 'em here, Gutherie. I'll see what Lee has to say." The dapper man lifted his hat from the table and flicked an army automatic across the surface into his palm—like a bartender spinning change down the counter. Our host disappeared behind a seven foot Chinese screen.

I said to the Dean: "We've come during business hours. This guy here must be Bettleman's collector—he's just in from his round of the boss's joints. Bettleman's in the back room totting up his daily receipts. They're afraid of a stick-up."

The guy in the blue suit laughed.

The strongarm boy came out from behind the screen and nodded. "He'll see you."

**B**ETTLEMAN'S office was but a shadow of its former glory, you could pretty well imagine its magnificence under its former owner in its heyday. It was windowless, its walls were peach-colored and the cigarette-scarred rug was a genuine Oriental. The gambler, still in his formal jacket and striped pants, sat at a huge carved desk.

He was tying little piles of banknotes into neat stacks. Tying them with ribbons. Each bundle had a different colored ribbon around it, emerald green, raspberry red, purple, baby pink. The Dean stared. "Gad, sir! That, in my opinion, is gilding the lily. A banknote in itself and of itself is a beautiful thing and needs no embellishment."

"How," Bettleman asked hollowly, "how did you locate me here?"

The Dean assumed an offhand air. "Oh, I just asked a newsboy. The whole town seems to know about this place. By the way, there's some sort of rumor about its having a second secret entrance. Have you spotted it yet?" He cocked his head

and then observed the effect of his lie.

Bettleman was mute with dismay. "Holy Smoke!"

"I wouldn't worry about it," the Dean pretended to soothe him. "Now, I have your report. We've just come from Phil Terrill's, he refuses to release Miss Squires from her agreement. It's stalemate."

The fat gambler dismissed it with a sneer. "Him and his nutty contracts can jump in the lake. I've persuaded Miss Squires to quit him. I've sent a truck around to get her things. She has a nice suite at the Elmyra Hotel and tomorrow she starts to work for me. She's consented to be my spouse."

"Your spouse?" The Dean's eyes twinkled. "Now think of that! Blessings on you. My fee is, to date, one hundred dollars."

Bettleman pawed in a trouser pocket and came out with a fold of bills in a gold money clip. He laid two fifties on the desk. "It's robbery," he said genially. "You ain't did nothing. But I'm a good fellow and there's lots more where this come from."

We paused in the doorway. The Dean appeared to remember something. "Usually," he declaimed, "for the fee of one hundred dollars, I give, gratis, a demonstration of what a remarkable detective I am. It comes free. Would you like a sample?"

Bettleman was amused. "Suit yourself."

"All right. This is called constructive reasoning. We start with those big, painful pink blisters in the palms of your hands. They look suspiciously like rowing blisters. Mr. Terrill lives out at Castille Neck and his estate no doubt has a dock on the river. Now my deduction is this: you've been pursuing your ardent courtship of Miss Squires, not in the grocery store—as you represented—but on the river in the moonlight. Ah, the romance of a rowboat! . . . Here's what those moist blisters tell me: Miss Squires pretends to go to bed. Instead she circles the lawn and waits for you on Terrill's dock. She peers into the darkness. She hears a lapping sound and you come feathering out of the night with the lovelight in your eyes. Am I right?"

Bettleman boggled. His tongue overflowed his open mouth like a ripe plum.

"So I'm correct. Lovers have their ways and means, don't they? Good afternoon, sir."

GENERALLY, when a case begins to unfold, the boss goes on a hunger strike until it's all wrapped up. This time, however, as we left the *Jewel Theater* he headed for a restaurant. He carefully selected a table back by the kitchen—the hottest and most unpleasant spot in the dive—and ordered a platter of four steaks. It had only been a couple of hours since he'd knocked off my chicken liver omelet yet he devoured his brace of sirloins with a few magic passes of his cutlery. "I hate to admit it," I declared grudgingly, "but you're almost eerie. How on earth did you reconstruct all that stuff about Squires not going to bed and meeting Bettleman on the dock at night—just from a couple of blisters?"

"Blisters?" He looked puzzled.

"Yes," I repeated. "Blisters. I'm talking about the blisters Bettleman got rowing. Don't you remember?"

"Bettleman didn't get those blisters rowing. The idea is fantastic. That slob pushing a boat upstream! Absurd. The sores were so conspicuous I had to say something about them so I made up as crazy a tale as I could invent—"

"Then how," I asked bitterly, "did he get them?"

"Who knows? Perhaps by digging." He whipped out his clumsy silver watch. "Go back to the apartment and wait for me. I just have time to get to the employment office—if I hurry. I'd like to check on two girls named Sperry and Dennison. I may be an hour or so. I have a few other odds and ends to clear up here there and yonder." He got to his feet. "Take good care of yourself—there's killing in the wind!"

I STOOD on the curb and let him walk away from me. Ever since our visit with Terrill, I'd been thinking how I could make my own contribution to the affair.

When I said that Hard Labor was a bawd and trollop, I'd meant just that. I'd known her all my life—though it had been some time since I'd seen her. Her real

name was Florence Conlin. She got her start, believe it or not, racking balls in her uncle's pool parlor, that's the story as I heard it. When I first met her, she was middle-aged. Somehow, in those poolroom days, she got a little capital together and staked a petty crooked enterprise. It came through and paid off. That started her on her career. She was sort of a banker, a Hetty Green of the underworld, she'd been up before more judges than Man-of-War. She always got off with a light penalty, it was some judge along the line who'd said: "Five dollars. It should be life at hard labor!" that gave her the nickname. Only a few intimates called her Hard Labor, most everyone else called her Flo.

There was one thing the Dean objected to—and that was my free-lancing on my own. The temptation was so great I couldn't resist it. I decided to pay my old friend a brief call.

Flo Conlin held forth in the lawless, rough-and-tumble strip of tenderloin that edged the warehouse district—between the wharves and Chinatown. A district that I'd known pretty well at one time. Every second window-front was a hock-shop or a beer joint. It was the old economical law of supply and demand—the habitues of South Canal Street spent the majority of their waking hours alternating between pawnbrokers and bartenders. Flo lived in a sooty brownstone domicile wedged flush to the sidewalk.

There was a fluffy curtain on the front door and a card in the window. The card was embossed in the picture of a peaceful country church in the winter with some kind of sparkley stuff glued on the roof to represent snow, in fancy letters it said: *My people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation . . . and in quiet resting places—Isaiah 32-18.* Underneath was printed in black crayon: *FURNISHED ROOMS—One Dollar, One Night—IN ADVANCE.* I grasped the big brass knob and shoved open the squeaky door. Peaceful habitation! At least two knifings and one clubbing had taken place within those old walls just in the span of my short memory.

Flo Conlin welcomed me with a big lopsided smile and practically towed me into her apartment. I flipped a curious glance



about me, the furnishings were quiet, expensive—and in excellent taste. There was but one single eccentric detail: on the satiny rosewood game table was a two-quart canister. That alone would have told me I was in the right place. It was a man-sized beer bucket fashioned from copper—the only metal to set off the true tang of beer—tailormade for her, under her special instruction, by the town's best tinsmith. That half-gallon can was as famous as Flo Conlin herself and part and parcel of her. "What's new, Ben?" she asked in that warm, velvety voice that curdled so many a jurymen. "They tell me you've gone over to law and order?"

I nodded—and took a quick invoice of her. She hadn't changed much. Despite her age, she had a trim, attractive figure, she knew how to dress, too—she was wearing a smart, box-pleat skirt and a perky polka-dot blouse. And her face concealed the secret of her years. A long time ago, back in the roaring twenties, she'd had her face lifted. Maybe plastic surgery was in its infancy then—or maybe she got hold of a novice—anyway, she's come out of the hospital with a queer mask. It don't mean she was ugly—she wasn't. It was just that frozen, lifeless expression and those glowing, amber cat-eyes of hers. She asked: "What brings you back to us, Benny boy?"

SHE dropped on a delicate Chippendale, pulled the copper bucket to her and downed a long, silent swig. "Pardon me. I'm trying to see if this thing has a bottom."

She didn't offer me anything. I didn't expect her to. I began: "Flo, I'm working, as you know, for a man named Wardlow Rock. But this call is personal, off the record. About three hours ago a guy rushes into our office and throws down on the chief with an unloaded .25. All the time he's toting a big caliber shouldergun. It was a screwy act and must have some meaning but we can't make it. You know this town from park bench to the social register. I want you to place this man for me."

"You used to get around pretty well yourself, kiddo."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. But this lad's a new one on me. He wears a baggy

gray tweed suit, an open collar with long points. He looks like an out-of-work amateur actor trying to make the legit. He carries his chin up in the air—"

A golden veil folded itself deep in her yellow eyes. "That's Little Clyde. So he's in town?"

"He certainly is. Who is he?"

There was a long turgid silence. At last she said: "Clyde's a hot skillet. I'll lay him in your lap, I hope you can handle him. He's the country's ace heist-guy and he touches nothing but ice. In Dallas a diamond salesman gets out of a taxi before a jewelry store, Little Clyde's waiting for him on the curb. In Atlanta, a diamond salesman is stuck up in an elevator. In Springfield, a diamond salesman is robbed on a down-town corner. In Seattle—"

"And all this gives Little Clyde, eh? He labors, doesn't he."

"I mean to tell you. It's his trade and he goes at it hammer and tongs. And there's more to this kind of a hold-up than meets the eye. It's not like filling stations, it takes tedious planning and split second execution. Little Clyde's quite a go-getter. My advice would be to let him alone." She was sitting pretty stiff. "I wonder what brings him to town?"

This was the showdown. I had to do now or never. And I wasn't too hepped on it now the crisis was at hand. I said solicitously: "Flo, you're tangled in this. It's the Atkinson kill popping up again. Phil Terrill's trying to turn the law on you."

She said calmly: "Bennie, the Atkinson kill, as you call it, has never been dead. The police have dropped it, the newspapers have dropped it—but I haven't dropped it. When that case is really finished, I'll let you know—I'll send you a black-edged announcement card."

A chill ran down my back. I asked: "What's your interest in that swindler, Flo?"

She got to her feet and strolled to the grand piano. On the piano was a bowl of yellow roses and a neatly folded Mexican shawl. She picked the shawl up, carefully, tenderly, and brought it over to me. "I don't show this to everyone," she whispered. "Take a look."

I leaned forward, something like hot jelly exploded beneath my ear. The next

thing I knew, I was on my knees shaking the fog out of my head, staring at Flo Conlin's swanky little red doeskin mocasins. I stood up, brushed back my hair.

She was standing there, smiling at me. In her hand was a nine-inch, braided leather blackjack. She tossed the shawl and blackjack on the couch. "Watch your tongue," she said. "Monty Atkinson was my husband.

"We were married three days before he died." The sly smile went into a broad, feline grin. "I'm gutter-born and bred—by accident and choice. I've never been around anyone that knew and loved really beautiful things. Monty had the same streak in him that I have—a black one—but he had more than that. He had a knowledge of real culture and a love for life. He was just beginning to teach me when they murdered him."

She smirked. "Tell your boss he has a client in me. If he catches Monty's slayer—the sky's the limit."

That silly smile was beginning to get me down. And then I got it. She wasn't laughing—she was crying. She was doing the best job of sobbing that her stiff face would allow.

I apologized. "Flo," I said, "this has been a painful visit for both of us but something might come of it. I'll give the Dean your message. And hold on at the curves—he's a man that goes places."

**L**IEUTENANT BILL MALLOY was ensconced in the reception room when I returned to our quarters. The Dean had not yet arrived. The police officer beamed on me, greeted me in a voice sweeter than a tropical fruitstand. "Howdy, detective,—I wouldst a word with you." Careful to keep any trace of sarcasm out of his tone, he made a valiant attempt at being breezily intimate—and didn't quite click.

I hung my hat on a chair-arm and rubbed my throbbing jaw. "O.K.," I agreed. "Shoot." When a certified police officer refers to me as a detective the millennium is at hand.

"Lissen, son," Malloy remarked. "You had an old man once, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"You thought a lot of him, didn't you?"

"We got along so-so. Why?"

He rolled his eyes to the ceiling and

made out he was doing a little mental calculating. "The way I figure, I'm just about old enough to be your father. Look at me hard and try to imagine I'm your old man." He gave me a pitiful smile. "I'm maybe not so good-looking—"

"You're better looking. My old man had a nose like a frosted maple-leaf."

He took up where he left off. "—I'm not so good-looking but I have your interests at heart. Ben, I need your help. Old age comes to youth for assistance. For the sake of auld lang syne, if you love the memory of your fine old father, tell me this: *What has the sum of five hundred and sixty-two dollars and thirty-eight cents got to do with the Monty Atkinson bump-off?*"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

He colored and a little emery showed itself in his voice. "Don't push me around, Matthews. You're holding out on me. There's a penalty for obstructing justice, you know."

"So I've heard. I'm telling you the gospel truth—I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"Wardlow Rock himself said with his own mouth—"

"Oh," I said. "That's something else again. The boss tells me very little. Whatever he told you in confidence—"

"Whatever he tells me in confidence you could tuck under your upper plate! I'm speaking about what he said this afternoon, publicly—before you and me and Captain Kunkle. He told me to take that note we found on Atkinson's corpse, that 'numbers are powerful' inscription, home and check it with a dictionary. I did. I found out something I never knew before: the very first meaning the dictionary gave for *sinister* was *left-hand*. The first meaning for *dexterous* was *right-hand*. The rest of the note was just folde-rol." He took an old envelope out of his pocket, unscrewed his fountain pen and placed a dot in the center of the paper. "That's the dividing point," he explained. "Now the left-hand numbers—" he wrote them down, "—are five-six-two, the right-hand numbers go over on this side. They're three-eight."

He displayed the paper :

I must have showed my amazement. "I guess you're clean," he grumbled. "I'll be mooching along. Have Rock get in touch with me."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Diamonds!

THE Dean came through the door in a jubilant mood. Past experience had taught me that when the boss went rhapsodic someone was in for a lot of hard luck. While he was still in a frisky frame of mind I told him about Hard Labor and her blackjack. I'd been guilty of deliberately deceiving him and extending myself—against his known opinions on the subject—and hoped if I talked fast I could get my dereliction over before he realized what I was saying.

I'd hardly swung into my episode when he became instantly sober and focused a terrific stare on me. It was hard going—but I plowed through. "Bravo!" he applauded when I had finished.

"Bravo because I got pancaked with a slung-shot?"

"I was cheering the diamonds," the Dean said stiffly.

"That what?"

"The diamonds." He lowered his eyelid in a patronizing wink. "There had to be some sort of loot somewhere."

"Atkinson's murder was a mob-kill. A revenge job growing out of a swindle," I objected. "How do you get the idea of boodle?"

"It wasn't a profitless mob-slaying," the Dean explained. "That's perfectly obvious. The death took place many months ago and count the jackals still tearing at each other's flanks: Flo Conlin, Bettleman, Terrill and the coy Miss Squires. Not to mention Little Clyde, of course, the busy gunman. Name the participants over to yourself and you'll find that there's not one of them—with the possible exception of Flo Conlin—who was tied to the crooked college professor in a sentimental way. Burial urns and banknotes bound with colored ribbons, no-marriage contracts and a fat gambler with blisters on his hands—try and look beyond these strange phenomena, Matthews, and you'll see the ghost of Monty Atkinson

acting as the master of ceremonies."

"That," I persisted, "is just a supposition. I maintain the professor's death was a routine knock-off. He'd double-crossed the underworld and had it coming to him. Remember that flood of telephone calls and tip-off letters the police received?"

"I investigated that angle this afternoon. As a matter of fact, there was but one telephone call and two unsigned letters, the letters were typed and without doubt written on the same faulty typewriter. In other words, the whole show was a hoax, a blind. The police, I might add, weren't taken in for a minute. They've just been holding back on the public."

"But you, yourself," I exclaimed, "stated that Atkinson was pulling a gambling gyp and that Terrill was his backer."

"Indeed, yes. But it was definitely small-time. Not the kind of thing to kill over. Bread-and-butter stuff. I took the trouble to send a wire to the professor's college. It now appears that he held twin chairs—mathematics and *mineralogy*. In the light of Flo Conlin's report on Little Clyde, the picture begins to piece together. It clears up that gentleman's firebrand visit to us a few hours ago." He bared his teeth, said flatly: "I can't be wrong. Atkinson was dealing in hot diamonds. That was why he was killed and that is why the scavengers continue to scamper over his grave. He must have left a treasure trove somewhere." He half-hooded his eyes. "And I think I can locate it."

Such a rosy, dreamy look came over his face that I couldn't resist the temptation to irritate him. "Malloy has just wafted in and out, chief. Like a zephyr from Precinct Three. He had a tape-measure, he came to fit you for handcuffs. He wants to know all about that five hundred and sixty-two dollars and thirty-eight cents."

The boss looked blank. I explained the Lieutenant's reasoning.

"He's way off—but he's on the right track." The boss was highly annoyed. "That's what I get for throwing hints around. Malloy's shrewd. We'll have to work fast or he'll beat us to it."

"He can take over anytime he cares to," I grumbled. "I'm absolutely all-set to throw up the whole damn mess. Every-

thing! Solid gold cinerary urns and all!"

"But the urn isn't gold. It looked strangely like brass to me." He paused to get my reaction.

"Brass or gold—it makes no difference—"

"It makes a great deal of difference. It helps explain that no-marriage clause in Terrill's contracts. Furthermore, it gives us a good guess why Bettelman bundles up his banknotes with ribbon."

"Does it say what became of Carmella's ashes—and how pepper got into it?"

"No," the Dean answered. My remark nettled him. "No. The pepper baffles me!"

I HAD the distinct impression that he was on the verge of breaking down and clarifying the unholy mess for me. His general policy was to keep me informed of essential facts but to volunteer little or no interpretation of them until the spirit was on him. He'd had a hard day with his Arabic manuscript and his eyes were tired, bloodshot. For a split second fatigue caught up with him, he dropped his perpetual guard. "Ben," he exclaimed, "this is horrible. One murder is bad enough—but three or four!"

It stunned me. Then I got it, I could see Little Clyde, the busy gunman, scampering from city to city knocking off diamond merchants. "It's bad," I agreed. "But it's happened before—"

From the expression on his face I realized that we were speaking of different things. He exclaimed: "It's never happened before! Such brutal, grisly slaying—"

He'd got just so far—and Mrs. Duffy came bursting in to tell us about her catastrophe. She erupted through the doorway like an equinoctial squall.

Our landlady is a widow, she'd readily choose death rather than appear in the presence of a male—any male at all—in anything less prepossessing than her second best finery. For the Dean, whom she held in swooning esteem, she invariably reserved her feathered house-robe augmented by about six ounces of lilac perfume. Today, the picture was radically different. Her hair was rumped, her starched wrap-around apron reached barely to her chubby knees, her shoes were

slit at the sides for foot-ease. We saw her for the first time as she actually spent her domestic life behind her locked doors. "Why, Seraphina," the Dean exclaimed anxiously. "You're upset!"

"Upset? Haw!" She made frantic, futile efforts at straightening the saggy seams of her stockings which spiraled her plump legs. "I've been plundered!" Her lowered lip trembled. "Wardlow—" It was the first time she ever called him *that*. "You'll get it back for me, won't you?"

He gave her a calming pat on the shoulder. "Of course I will. What's gone?"

"My pincushion. The red satin one, shaped like a tomato, that my demised husband gave me on our first wedding anniversary." Her eyelids beaded. "That man took it." We listened while she amplified.

The gag had been just whimsical enough to trick her. She'd been cleaning the wallpaper on the kitchen ceiling when she heard a knock on the door. A man with a mechanic's cap and a kit of tools was standing on the back porch. He had a dirty handkerchief balled around his thumb. He apologized for disturbing her and said he was a plumber who had hurt his hand, and he wanted to borrow a little iodine. Mrs. Duffy, alarmed, scurried to the cabinet and came back with the iodine bottle. The man was very pleased. He was just about to administer the medicine when he happened to read the label. "This won't do," he said. "Thanks a lot." He handed the bottle back to her. "This contains alcohol. Eighty-eight percent! I have to stay away from the stuff—doctor's orders. That's almost pure alcohol. Whiskey's about forty percent and beer only four or five—so you can see, can't you?"

He explained that there were two sorts of iodine, one type made with purified mineral water. "I don't need a stimulant," he said, politely, "I only want to cure my thumb."

Mrs. Duffy had asked him to wait. She'd gone to three neighbors to borrow iodine but everywhere she went the bottles said eighty-eight percent alcohol. When she came back the man was gone and so was her red pincushion.

The Dean shook his head in admiration.

"Genius. Sheer genius. Almost any woman would fall for it. And the pincushion was all that he stole, eh?"

"Oh, no. He took my amethyst bracelet and the chest of my sterling silver flatware, but money can buy more. The pincushion—"

"The pincushion," the Dean interrupted, "was where he overdid it." He paused thoughtfully. "Go back to your apartment," he advised. "And search it carefully. Unless I'm badly mistaken, he didn't come to steal. He simply grabbed up things and hid them—to give the appearance of theft. No one would steal a pincushion."

Mrs. Duffy looked childishly relieved. She turned at the door. "You're a great detective, Mr. Rock."

The Dean bowed gracefully.

"It's going to be a cruel blow," I said harshly, "if you're kidding her—"

The Dean said coolly, "I'm scared. That tool kit scares me. What if it wasn't a plumber's kit—what if it was an electrician's kit?"

"Plumber's—electrician's, who cares? But if the Duffy said plumber you can bet your life that's what it was. You can't fool a landlady about a plumber."

"If that's true," he murmured, "perhaps we're in time. Come with me to the bathroom. Don't touch anything, just watch."

It took him three minutes to locate it. In the gooseneck pipe, the waste trap, under the washbowl. A metal cylinder about three inches long and an inch and a half in diameter, it looked like a fat flashlight battery. He slid it cautiously out onto a Turkish towel. "What on earth is it?" I asked.

"A pineapple." He gazed at it in fascination. "A capsule of high explosive detonated, doubtless, by some hydro-fulminating agency. Should either of us have had an impulse to wash our hands—and run a little water down the drain—we would have written the final chapter to this old building." His jaw went granite-hard. "They're worried about us. They've come out in the open! That's good." He added casually: "When we were in Bettleman's office this afternoon, up above the *Jewel Theater*, didn't he say Miss Constance Squires was bedding at the Elmyra?"

"I couldn't swear to it," I answered. "I was too busy drooling over that nice desk piled with lovely money."

He snapped down the brim of his hat. "Let's go."

Mrs. Duffy came trotting out to meet us as we passed down the corridor. She was again the old Mrs. Duffy that I had known—feathered kimono, lilac perfume and all. She gave the boss a mysterious moue. "I found it."

"Found what?"

"What the man hid."

The chief said courteously, "I'd almost forgotten." He tacked on an afterthought: "So did we."

THE Elmyra Hotel was not exactly the place you'd select to throw a Sunday-school convention. Its chambermaids were lightfingered, its bellboys passed out runner's cards to clip joints and its manager could laugh off any crime on the book—any crime, of course except one: defrauding an innkeeper. It was a rollicking outfit, staying at the Elmyra was like living in a den of adolescent ogres. A five dollar bill got us past the roomclerk and informed us that the highly attractive Miss Constance Squires was in suite 17-D, alone, and just finishing a lamb chop dinner with new potatoes.

We took the stairs to avoid being pumped by an elevator boy.

The dame started out by putting on an act of pretending not to remember us. The Dean barged rudely into the room, I followed leisurely in the wake of his broad shoulders. "Snap out of it," the Dean ordered crisply. "Drop the dramatics. You know very well who we are."

Miss Squires straightened her slim back. "I place you now," she declared archly. "You're those ugly men we came to see. Go away from me, please, we don't require you anymore."

"But I," the Dean said, "require you. This isn't going to be too pleasant for you but I'll make it as painless as I can. You understand that I'm—er—an appendage of the law? Fine! Now I put this to you bluntly and frankly: are you not still on the secret payroll of Phillip Terrill? Are you not, for good hard cash, stringing the amatory Mr. Bettleman along at Terrill's behest?"

She seemed stupefied. "Gracious, no. I never want to see that Terrill person again. Gah! He and his sister Carmella." She hitched the shoulder-strap of her slip, added matter-of-factly: "When that red stone dump burns down I'll be somewhere else, thank goodness."

The Dean asked innocently: "Burns down?"

"Why certainly. There's something wrong with the wiring. The lights go on and off." The Dean gave a scoffing laugh. She got hard, angry. "You don't need to sneer. I mean what I say. It happened twice. It always happens about ten-thirty in the evening, just before I go up to retire. Mr. Terrill was dictating, I was sitting there in the study with him, taking notes. All at once the light begins to fade. The first time, Mr. Terrill said it must be a fuse, he left the room, was gone a few minutes and came back without finding what the trouble was. We just sat there in the murky dimness while he cursed. After a while the light came on again. The second time it was the same only this time just as soon as the fading began, he rushed out of the room. I could hear him tearing around through the house—I think he had a pistol. When he came back, I suggested that maybe it was his sister Carmella, I was just trying to console him but the remark threw him into a rage."

While she was rattling on, I was taking in the room. That was how I came to notice the beer bucket. On the floor in the corner of the room, by the waste basket. Copper, about a half-gallon measure, it appeared to be an exact duplicate of Hard Labor's famous tankard. The Dean said: "One thing more, Miss Squires, and then we'll leave you. Can Mr. Bettleman read and write?"

I exclaimed: "Hey, babe! Where did you get that beer can?"

She followed my pointing finger. "Is that what it is? Good lord! I thought it was some kind of rare, early American vase. A messenger boy brought it up to my room all wrapped in tissue paper." She turned to the Dean, caught the tail-end of his question. "Certainly Mr. Bettleman can read and write. He reads the racing form and writes me the sweetest sentiments—"

"Such as 'Please accept these thousand dollar ear-clips'—eh?" He bit his lip in preoccupation. "Well, we'll be ambling along. This has been very enlightening." He paused, indicated the dinner-tray with its empty dishes. "What kind of a man is this Bettleman? He engages such a nice suite for you, pays you ardent suit—and yet you are forced to sup alone?"

She said defensively: "Sometimes we have a midnight snack together. Supper with Lee is sort of a business spot. He eats at Brodey's Horseshoe with his collectors and finishes up his day's affairs. I could join him if I wanted to but I'd just be a bother. A woman's place is in the home."

"A woman's place," the Dean said gallantly, "is wherever he hangs her hat—or am I getting my metaphors mixed?"

"I MUST confess," the Dean said as we exited from the Elmyra's lobby, "I must confess to a desire for another look at Brother Bettleman's blistered paws. Can you find Brodey's Horseshoe?"

"Yes, I can. But first I want to put this to you: why didn't you ask Mrs. Duffy what her phony plumber looked like?"

"Why should I?" The Dean was petulant. "I know what he looks like. And so should you—"

"O.K., O.K. Pass it up, skip it." When the Dean fluffed you off he did a good job of it, further questioning of him would be a waste of time. The sun had set during our interview with Miss Squires, as we hit the curb we stepped into a queer, greenish afterlight. A shelf-like cast of clouds in the eastern sky caught the last light rays in a lip of livid silver. North of the city hall, toward the river, the air was hazy, opalescent—like powdered glass. The Dean's nostrils twitched. "There's going to be a bad fog tonight," he declared. "And we could well do without it. A good, blind fog urges an unbalanced killer to run amok—"

"This is a funny case," I observed. "Here are two men with just the opposite characteristics. Terrill is ridden by the fear that women will fall in love with him, Bettleman goes all out trying to make himself magnetic. I've got the feeling

that this isn't any coincidence. And that isn't all—you've completely muffed that big wooden tooth that hangs outside the window of Bettleman's office." He'd been pulling this sort of stuff on me too long, I decided to dish out a little myself.

The Dean looked astonished. "The tooth? What about the tooth?"

"Lay me a background, tell me all the facts, and I'll show you how that tooth is the answer to everything."

"Very well," the Dean agreed skeptically. "Here's what happened. Monty Atkinson was dealing in illicit diamonds. Buying them probably, from Little Clyde, the go-getter. Now diamonds, even hot diamonds, are expensive, you don't buy them with bottle tops. That leaves us to believe that he was acting as agent for someone. Someone was laying in a stock of negotiable diamonds and the Professor was acting as go-between. They must have assembled quite a saucerful of gems, they've got the riffraff all running high temperatures. What about the tooth?"

I said haughtily: "Now give me your undivided attention, sir. Monty, while working his little gambling racket with Terrill, was playing around with Bettleman in this hot ice deal. The Professor doesn't own these diamonds, you see. He just buys them and forks them over to Bettleman. Well, he gets to thinking and works out a plan. He already has an in with Terrill, he goes to him and they hatch a scheme to pilfer Bettleman's diamonds. Bettleman suspects Monty and kills him. How does it listen?"

"It listens about one percent accidentally true and about ninety-nine percent hogswill."

"Here's where I've got you," I said calmly. "Here's where that tooth comes in. My guess is that the tooth is hollow. It's Bettleman's safety deposit box. He reaches out of his window late at night and puts things in and takes things out. That's where the diamonds are."

"What a letdown," the Dean said sadly. "From now on, you leave the reasoning to me. That tooth is where it is for one purpose only, to obscure vision from the street into the lower window pane. If you ever turn crook, you'll drive the police force batty. I know how to get the diamonds. Monty left us the instructions

in that nifty little note that he wrote."

"You know where they are!"

"No. I haven't the slightest idea where they are. I simply said that I knew how to get them. I haven't found them yet but when I do find them, I'll have them. Getting them and finding them are two different things, I practically have them now but I have to find them first. You see when I find them—"

"Stop it!" I cried. "Here's where we came in!"

**B**RODEY'S HORSESHOE was a cellar grill patronized by the sporting brotherhood in periods of affluence. It was in the waterfront district, you got to it by going down a blind alley off of a backstreet. Its ceilings were low and dank, it was windowless and stuffy—but its steaks were aromatic, juicy, and as thick as a drunkard's tongue.

There was a lull in trade when we pulled in. Still early for the evening rush, the lads that patronized Brodey's, in the main, were just getting out of bed. We skirted the big U-bar and went down the string of wall-booths.

They were in an alcove at the back, Bettleman, the apish bodyguard and the collector in the robin's-egg blue suit. They were sprawled at a squat tavern table, toothpicks in their mouths, cleaned T-bones on pewter platters before them, fat cigars notched in their greasy fingers. The bodyguard squirmed to attention at our appearance.

The Dean said silkily: "No need for anything harum-scarum. I'd just like to see Mr. Bettleman alone for a few minutes."

They all grinned. Bettleman grunted amiably. "You and about a hundred other guys. I'm sorry, doc, but no one has seen me alone since I caught a hipful of mixed lead back in nineteen thirty-four. Not during business hours anyway. Anything you have to say you'll have to spill just as she lays. These lads are bosom pals. What's this? Another mooch? I've paid you off."

"It's about Monty Atkinson's diamonds," the Dean began brightly. "The police seem to think—"

Bettleman began making gastronomical noises. "Br-r-rp! Harrumph! Br-r-r-p!"

The Dean subsided. The bloated gambler hooked his finger into a vest pocket and came out with banker's roll of paper-wrapped quarters. He handed them to the man in the blue suit. "Gutherie," he said coldly, "you and Danny ankle back to the slot machines and have yourselves a good time on me."

When they left, he rasped. "What's this about what the police think?"

"Who's talking about the police," the Dean said angrily. "I come all the way down here to throw something your way and now you're threatening me with the police! I do declare! You're the hardest man to get along with! If you weren't my client I'd take my wares where they'd be appreciated."

Bettleman's mouth popped open in bewilderment, out came that plum-red tongue again. "I'm not threatening you," he said docilely. "I'm just attempting to understand what's on your mind."

"That's better," the Dean answered smugly. "I accept your apology—but don't grovel, I can't stand a servile man. Where was I? Oh, yes. The diamonds—either you have them or Terrill has them—or Miss Squires has them. Little Clyde doesn't, of course, that's why he's ranting around. Say, Miss Squires has them—or knows about them, that would partially explain your intense interest in her. We were out at Terrill's red rock castle this afternoon and while we only gave the place a cursory examination I have the definite hunch the gems aren't there. Ben, here, keeps saying that you have them. What about it?"

The stare he gave me was as cold and blank as a brand new tombstone. He said in a dead voice: "Let's drop the Squires angle, the young lady is going to become my wife. So you know about the diamonds, eh? Monty Atkinson was a purchasing agent with money behind him. Some say he was working for Terrill—some say that he was working for a gal named Flo Conlin. Wherever the stones were when he died, that's where they still are. Where that is I don't know and don't care. Gambling's my trade, I've got a bigger intake than I can handle—I've got no time to branch out."

"That's a slant that never occurred to me," the Dean admitted. "Well, we'll be

strolling along. By the way, I'm due to give a brief but poignant lecture in Phillip Terrill's study tonight—at twelve sharp. We'd like you to be present. Bring Miss Squires. I'm going to reveal the secrets of the past—"

He shook his head. "Can't make it." He touched the tender blisters in the palms of his hands. "You want to know, he asked, "how I really got these babies?"

"Digging for mislaid corpses, perhaps?"

Bettleman looked shocked. "It grays my hair just to talk to you! You're like a ride on a ferris-wheel." He lowered his voice. "I got these blisters on my Body-Buildo."

"Your what?"

"My Body-Buildo. It's a mechanical exerciser. I'm trying to reduce. Honey-Child likes men to be slim and supple." He gave out with a horse laugh. "Me, at my age! I must be haywire."

**I**T WAS dark by the time we left the Horseshoe. Mist was already spreading from the river, tenuous, misamic vapors, knee-high, rolled down the rat-warren maze of waterfront alleys. The Dean held his coat sleeve to a street-light, it was beaded with glistening moisture. "It's starting bad," he said. "And it's due to get worse. In an hour, everything will be blotto."

Deep in thought, I paced along the dingy streets beside him. At last I spoke. "I guess Bettleman's right. Flo Conlin has a piece of this somewhere. I hate to admit it—but she hooked me. It was a good act and it fooled me—"

The Dean remarked: "I wouldn't base an opinion on anything Lee Bettleman might have said."

"I'm not. I'm basing an opinion on the evidence of my own eyes. The Squires dame and Flo Conlin must be mighty close friends or Flo would never have sent her that copper beer bucket."

He stopped dead still on the pavement. "Beer bucket? What are you talking about?"

I told him all about Flo Conlin's beer bucket, how it was made to order for her by a tinsmith and how where most women kept a box of chocolates or a chow dog handy Flo always hung onto her half gallon can. "So when I saw it there in



the hotel room at the Elmyra, I couldn't help being surprised."

The Dean was horror-stricken. "Gad! I missed all this entirely. What did Miss Squires say when you alluded to it?"

"She thought it was some kind of fancy metalwork, she said a messenger boy had delivered it to her."

"That does it," he said quietly.

"Does what?"

"Takes Miss Constance Squires, lady adventurer from the prairies, out of the picture. There's nothing we can do about it. *By now they have slain her.* Our killer moves quick and surely and, as I have said before, according to careful plan." He appeared more angry at his error than at the girl's death. "It's a gory mess and there'll be more blood before it's ended!"

**T**HE man's name was Orville Johnston and he was general manager of the Criterion Employment Agency. The Dean had contacted him that afternoon and had made an appointment for us at nine thirty. It had taken a little persuading but the Dean had prevailed upon him to bring certain memoranda home with him from the office files.

He lived in a modest frame house, one of a long row built precisely and to the last detail from the same roll of contractor's plans—out beyond the ball park. He was neither elated nor disgruntled at our intrusion into his domestic life, he received us in a fluttering sort of dignity and led us into a drawing-room cluttered with birds' nests—I bet there were fifty of them—and glass-fronted wall-cases of little eggs. "It's my hobby," he explained proudly as he saw us blink. "A life's work, gentlemen." He gestured us to chairs, slid his bi-focals to the end of his nose and scrutinized me as though I were a rare old bobolink egg. "So this is the young fellow, eh?"

"Yup," I confirmed. "I'm the young fellow." I hadn't the slightest idea what it was all about.

"Your attorney, here—" our host indicated the Dean "—has been to me with your case history and a tragic one it is indeed. You and your sister out in the Ozark Mountains mining for bauxite, year after year—and no luck. Digging

with your hands, shovels, anything that would make a hole in the ground. Comes this carnival to town and your sister, discouraged, runs off with it. Then the very next day you strike a rich vein of valuable ore and are a made man! You want your sister back with you to enjoy your luxury! But she is gone, gone into the impenetrable labyrinth of the civilized world!"

The Dean said emphatically, "He's about ready for a sanitarium."

"I'm afraid you are chasing rainbows when you come to me. I run a placement agency for female secretaries, as you know. I'd like to help you but I don't think I can. Your attorney says that you are under the impression that two girls I represented—a Miss Sperry and Miss Dennison—are one and the same: your sister. Now Miss Sperry and Miss Dennison are definitely two distinct girls. I remember them distinctly. They were on my books at the same time and I have frequently talked to them simultaneously."

"Are they on your books now?" the Dean asked. "Where can we find them?"

Mr. Orville Johnston referred to his memoranda. "This is highly confidential. I'm sorry to say they're not on my books at present—or on the books of any employment agency in town. I haven't the slightest idea where you could find them. I imagine they've been forced to change their occupation from secretaries to waitresses or clerks. You see, we were forced to blacklist them."

"Blacklist them!" the Dean exclaimed. "And why, pray?"

"I placed them with a wealthy bachelor, consecutively, first the Dennison girl and then Miss Sperry. Their employer, a retired businessman named Terrill, fires each of them, *bing-bing*—just like that. His complaint to us charged them with being flirtatious. Their consequent conduct—neither had the courage to face us again at the office—confirmed our suspicions that their offense was much greater than coquetry. We took them off our ledgers."

"What," the Dean asked blandly, "do you think them actually guilty of?"

"Stealing—without a doubt. I'm an old hand at placing personnel in employment. You get so you develop a sixth sense. I

know the signs. What they stole, of course, I couldn't say."

"Thank you," the Dean remarked. "We'll not keep you any longer."

Our host took us to the door, flicked on the porchlight. "It's going to be a nasty night," he observed. Suddenly he gave me an awkward slap between the shoulder blades. "Brace up, old boy," he advised. "She'll wander back some day." A glint came into his eyes. "The Ozark Mountains, eh? They say it's wonderful bird country, I've never been there. What's the most prevalent bird in your particular section?"

I tried to talk like an ornithologist. I said: "The double-breasted red-beaked fitch."

He faltered. "I don't believe I ever—"

"You never heard of them, eh?" I chuckled heartily. "Don't feel bad about it. That's a characteristic of the fitch tribe—here today and gone tomorrow!"

**WE WERE** crossing the street on Archway Boulevard when a car came zooming down the other side of the street, made a U-turn flush in the face of oncoming traffic, and launched itself directly at us. The boss was on the curb, I cleared the gutter in a sprawl and reached for my gun. The car door opened and Lieutenant Bill Malloy leaned out and began to shout. "Why don't you look where you're going?" he yelled. "If I hadn't had my wits about me, I'd have run you down." Before we could retort, he lowered his voice. "I've been combing the town for you two. What's Constance Squires got to do with the Atkinson case?"

"Maybe little, maybe much. Why?" The Dean was genial.

"They've just found her bloody corpse stuffed under the bed of her room at the Elmyra Hotel. And don't give me that maybe-little-maybe-much stuff!"

The Dean inquired: "What makes you think she's tied with the Atkinson affair?"

Malloy retorted crisply: "Monty Atkinson was married secretly to a habitual female crook named Flo Conlin. Flo Conlin had been in the hotel room just previous to the knock-off. She left some personal identification."

"If you're referring to that copper beer

bucket," the Dean remarked pleasantly, "you're on the wrong track. We were at the Elmyra some hours ago chatting with Miss Squires. And the beer bucket was there at the time. As evidence it might be worth something—but as evidence for murder, it's out. . . . You've got this Conlin person down at the police station, I presume?"

Malloy nodded angrily.

"She's doing no good there," the Dean announced. "Bring her out to Phil Terrill's place at Castille Neck at twelve sharp tonight. We shall see what we shall see."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Boathouse

**YOU'VE** seen these midway boys smear a sheet of paper with charcoal and then pick out a picture with a kneaded eraser? They take this black surface and highlight it here and there and the first thing you know you're looking at, say, a landscape. That was what I was going through, everything was muggy and confused and suddenly the highlights begin taking form. I said to the chief: "You fox! It all comes clear to me now. A lot of gibberish you give me about when you locate these diamonds, you'll know how to get them. I get you now. You can't find the diamonds until you find the secretaries—Sperry and Dennison!"

He gave me an amused cut from the corner of his eye. "How's that?"

"Don't try to sidetrack me. I've got the right dope and you know it. Here's the way it breaks down: Terrill had the ice—"

"Terrill?" He pretended astonishment. "I thought you accused Bettelman—"

"I've changed my mind. Terrill had the stones—maybe he swiped them from Bettelman—anyway he had them. These secretaries stole them from him and skipped out. Catch the gals and you have the gems!"

He considered. "First comes Miss Dennison, she filches half. Terrill is annoyed, he discharges her. Then comes Miss Sperry, she cleans out the rest. By this time Terrill is definitely irritated, he fires her, too, and files a complaint with the employment office." The Dean nodded

gravely. "It's an interesting hypothesis. One that hadn't occurred to me—I'll have to consider it."

"If you don't want my help," I flared, "I'll go back to the apartment and take off my shoes. My feet hurt."

"Don't be that way," he snapped. "Of course I want your help. The success of the whole evening turns on you."

"On me?" I was partially mollified. "How so?"

"The lock," the Dean murmured. "I'll need you to pick the lock."

"Ah!" I choked. "It's my brawn as usual and not my brains—"

He wasn't even listening.

**T**HE little settlement of Castille Neck, laying in a hairpin bend of the river, was really having its share of the fog. We barrelled down the village Main Street, the neon lights of the shops powdered carmine and cobalt in the pea-soup mist, turned the corner at the tiny townhall—and pulled up before a newish, yellow-brick house. A name-plate on the door said, *Justice of the Peace*.

The Dean dragged out his old-fashioned clip-purse containing his assortment of miscellaneous cards, it was the chief's habit to save scrupulously any and every business and social card that came into his hands. He selected one without looking at it—I'd never seen him choose one at random before—pushed the doorbell and said: "Here we go again."

The Justice was an arrogant little pouter-pigeon of a man with a cleft chin, a pince-nez, and a drooping curl of taffy-colored hair. He kept the door on its chain, took the Dean's card and read it aloud. "*Lucious Higgens & Son, Musical Outfitters.*" He started to close the door. "I'm not interested in—"

"I must have the wrong place," the Dean said smoothly. "Could you direct me to the *Justice of the Peace*? I understand he's the most important man in town and it's stringently essential that I have a few words with him."

The guy began to purr. "I am the Justice, sir. But as to being an important personage, I'm no more important than, than, well perhaps I do swing a bit of weight when you come right down to it. How can I serve you, Mr. Higgens?"

"It's my violin rosin. I have three hundred cases of it."

"Gracious! I fail to see how I come in. I don't play the violin—"

"I don't actually own it," the Dean explained. "I'm just brokering it. I'm in quest of an empty room in which to store it. I thought, perhaps, that such a man as yourself—with his fingertips so busily engaged in the affairs of the community—might be able to suggest a possible warehouse."

The little guy grabbed a handful of his chin and shoved it into his cheek in a gesture of deep thought. "There's a vacant room over the Apex Grocery."

"An oversight," the Dean apologized. "I forgot to mention it to you. Any vacant room won't do. You see rosin is solidified abietic acid! When stored in quantity it throws off faintly poisonous gas. I had in mind someplace out in the country. Some abandoned farmhouse or the like."

The Justice shook his head. "There's no such building. The countryside hereabouts is very swanky with estates and such—there are no abandoned farmhouses." He puffed up his chest. "The idea is absurd." He bid us goodnight.

We were halfway to the sidewalk when the door popped open and he halloooed us back. "I've just reflected," he announced. "There is one deserted building that I recall. It's the lodge of the North River Boating Club. The club, established some years ago before the lot promotion here, dissolved from lack of funds. With their weekend parties and such we were glad to see them go. I've heard the place is owned at present by a man in the city named, strangely enough, Thomas Thomas. People have peculiar names, don't they?"

"They certainly do," the Dean agreed. "Where is this boating lodge?"

"It's just adjoining Mr. Phillip Terrill's estate, back of his grounds—between his place and the river."

"It sounds like an ideal location," the Dean smiled, "to store something valuable."

**T**ERRILL'S castle jutted in the layered mist like a ruddy, festered thumb. The Dean stamped his feet on the flag-

stone veranda, slapped down the knocker with a resounding whang. He was hair-trigger, tense. "I hope the man is tractable," he whispered. "It'll make it so much easier for us in the long run."

The ex-gambler received us with unmistakable expressions of relief. "Back again?" he observed. "That's fine. This time, I'm your client. Step in and consider yourselves hired!"

The Dean strode through the doorway grinning. "Always ready to turn an honest dollar. What's the proposition?"

Terrill led us back to his study. He was a boy that didn't improve in looks on acquaintance, as far as I was concerned he was even more repulsive than he had been in the afternoon. Those big, jaundiced hands with their fuzzy orange hair, his dapper, waxed mustache and shapeless, meaty nose.

THE Dean eased into the depths of a cool leather chair and gave the comfortable den an appreciative point-by-point survey. A bowl of frosted glass on a teak taboret in the corner flooded the little room with a gentle, restful light, the walls were a glossy blue-black, trimmed with delicate gold molding, and arched to at least twenty feet above our heads. A row of three slender lancet windows at the left looked out into the misty night. "A proper room to relax," the boss commented. "Did you design it?"

"No," Terrill said frankly. "It came with the rest of the works when I signed the check. My tastes run more to green baize and poker chips. I'm a gambler at heart. That's why I've got a sporting proposition for you. You gentlemen are private detectives? Okie-doke. Here's the deal: You keep me alive for twenty-four hours and I pay you off tomorrow with twenty-four hundred dollars. That's a C-note per hour. I'm warning you before you take me up—you're going to have a job of work on your hands."

The Dean said serenely: "You've rented yourself a couple of handymen."

Terrill's little fish-scale eyes went frigid. "Maybe I won't need you, maybe I can take care of myself—I've had the bee on me before." He began to talk, and with his flow of words he started that nervous darting about the room. Picking up imag-

inary flecks from the carpet, going through the empty gesture of tamping out the already extinguished cigarettes in the ashtray. "To begin with, I have to give you the real lowdown on Carmella.

"I haven't any sister Carmella and never did have. That's just a brass lotion bottle filled with ordinary black pepper. I just keep it around to scare gals off of me." That lunatic light crawled into his irises. "There's something about me that drugs them, it's my hotshot personality—"

The Dean came in pleasantly: "We've been over this before. Do I understand you to mean that you wish to hire us to defend you from *women*?"

Terrill wavered back to sanity. "No. Not women. Now I'm going to tell you something that nobody else knows. There was a guy knocked off in this town about five months ago—Monty Atkinson. He was tied up with me in the gambling racket. At the same time he was engaged in a little enterprise of his own. He was buying diamonds from a heist-guy named Clyde Watson. Now I know Monty like one of his own textbooks, in a way I was responsible for him coming to town. Monty wasn't buying those diamonds for himself. He had a little cabbage—but not that much. He was buying that ice for someone else. One morning he was gunned out. The way I figure is that was holding out on his backer and that his backer took it out of his hide."

"And?"

"And plenty. What happens? This backer wants his diamonds. Monty's dead and can't talk. The backer puts two and two together. He figures that if Monty and I are in cahoots in the gambling stunt, we're in cahoots on this diamond chisel."

"I think I understand now," the Dean said amiably, "why you want protection. They've been after you?"

Terrill hissed. "And how! I haven't had a peaceful moment." He walked to the lancet windows. "Sometimes I stand here late at night, in the dark. The river's just below. I hear the clank of oarlocks, it's a stakeout."

"That seems harmless enough," the Dean remarked, "as long as they don't—"

"But they do. They prowl my grounds! I've had them in the house tinkering with

the lights. Yesterday Little Clyde himself paid me a visit, rang the doorbell. Thought I didn't know him. Said he was some kind of an inspector, I walked out on the terrace and let him frisk the whole downstairs just to satisfy him." He curled his lip in a quick smile. "He didn't find the stones because I don't have them. But he did find out about my hoax cinerary urn. He'd tampered with it—just as you did this morning. I wonder what he thought of it!"

The Dean said: "It flabbergasted him. He figured it meant something but he didn't know what. He came around to my office just to tell me about it. So you want me to protect you against this man Clyde?"

"I can manage Little Clyde. It's Flo Conlin that worries me. She's a vicious, vindictive minx. I'd hate to be on her calling list."

"Come now," the Dean argued. "What's Flo Conlin got to do with this?"

"It's my guess that she has the stones—or knows where they are. Monty was her husband. That's just a guess, but this I do know, she's on the war-path for his murderer. If she's got the finger on me I'm going to be hard to save."

"But you didn't kill Atkinson."

"Heck, no! But Flo Conlin wouldn't much care if she made a few mistakes as long as she got the right party in the end."

The Dean prepared to leave. "I see. Well, we'll be gone for a little while. When we return there'll be other people present, quite an assembly. A parting injunction, if the guests should arrive before we return, keep them amused and kindly refrain from mentioning the fact that you have consulted us."

Terrill burst into frantic objection. "But you can't leave me! You're my bodyguards—"

"We'll bodyguard you at a distance. Come, Ben."

I'D SEEN lots of fog as a kid playing around the banana docks but as the Dean and I took the footpath away from Terrill's stone castle and headed toward the river—I saw a new kind of fog. Waterfront fog is like looking at a fuzzy world through sanded glass, this stuff

here in the woods was different. It lay like a flat veil among the trees—about waist high—eerie and sticky. We descended the trail into a hollow, waded through the haze. Fittful breeze gusts, rattling the wet foliage above our heads, churned the mucous-like mist to a roil of feathered shreds and an instant later it was back again, the eerie, level veil. It was something from an evil dream. "Do you know what we're doing?" I asked. "Or are we just killing time between trains?"

He didn't answer. The path left the hollow, skirted a windbreak of osage, crossed a rotten wooden footbridge and came out in a clearing.

We could make out two buildings in the haze. A little, low shedlike structure close at hand—and, barely distinguishable, back among the tree boles, a small bungalow. "This is it," the Dean observed. "Mr. Thomas Thomas's boating club. Gaze upon the scene in benevolence, my boy. Things are about to happen." He was more right than he realized.

I started for the lodge but he checked me with a touch on my arm. "Let's do this properly," he murmured. He pointed to the small shed. "We'll turn this off first."

The low, frame structure was a boat-house. It was built out over the river, about two thirds of it was on dry land and the front end was on pilings. A sagging door at the far back corner was fastened with a peg in a rusty hasp, we stepped inside.

The place was filled with the sour, almost animal smell of river water. We switched on our flashlights. The long bare building was floored about three quarters of its length, open water glistened from the other quarter. The Dean examined the flooring carefully, walked to the mooring ledge and peered down at the surface of the water. He wandered up a catwalk along the wall, threw open folding doors out onto the river.

The river was there, you couldn't see it or hear it but you could sense it. It was like being in a dark room with a sluggish python. The Dean stared outward at the blank cloud of mist. "They brought their boats in here," he explained vaguely, "tied them to the mooring rings and locked these doors from the inside." He

closed the panels. "Now for the lodge."

He paused at the boathouse door and did a funny thing. He grasped the hasp—heaved upwards, with his free hand he took a piece of paper from his pocket and slid it back and forth in the slot he forced at the hinge joints. He exhibited the paper to me. It was smeared with oil. "This building is not abandoned," he remarked. "It's being well taken care of. These hinges have been carefully lubricated."

The clubhouse was a pseudo log-cabin, one of those strange architectural cocktails that urban citizens invariably shake up for themselves when they flee the pavements and fireplugs for a bit of relaxation among the stink bugs and Jimson weed. The rustic cypress porch furniture was from Florida and the birch porch-railing was from Michigan, I'd have laid you ten to one, before we entered, that there was a Texas longhorn above the mantel and that the rugs were Arizona Navajo. A typical hodge-podge. "There you are," the Dean said. "Get that front door open. That's the lock I wanted you to pick."

"O.K.," I said tranquilly. "Give the man a little elbow room."

**I** GOT a surprise when I tackled it, it wasn't an ordinary lock. It was as mean a baby as I ever faced and cost as much as the steerhorns, the rugs, the porch furniture all put together. The Dean sensed that I was stalled. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Don't tell me you can't crack it?"

I could crack it all right, I used to be a trouble-shooter for a safe factory. But it would take time and patience—and the boss was short on both. I said: "It's a pushover. It's one of those new-fangled jobs, you work on it while I smoke a cigarette."

"This is no time," the Dean rasped vehemently, "to—"

I stepped off of the porch and disappeared into the bank of fog. I stood for a moment listening, I could hear him grumbling, fiddling with the escutcheon. I groped around the corner of the building, located the first window. It had an eight-cent catch on it. Crescent style. I took out my screw driver, sprung it, raised the sash. I climbed in the window, flicked on my torch—walked to the front

door and let the chief in. He was furious. He was standing there with a pair of nose tweezers in his hand. "Ah," I exclaimed. "You're a man of many characters—I never knew you carried burglar's tools! Pretty soon you'll be a locksmith yourself and then I won't have a job."

"You won't have a job," he said sweetly, "if you ever pull that one again. Me out there on the porch breaking my poor heart over a thing of steel and you—"

"Forget it," I retorted. "We're in, aren't we?"

The layout was just two rooms, a tiny kitchen, with a big icebox for beer—and a gawky parlor. Instead of a longhorn above the fieldstone fireplace there was a varnished muskelunge on an oval plaque. Everything else was a reasonable facsimile of just about what I'd expected. "When Mr. Thomas Thomas took over," the Dean ruminated, "he made some changes. Our job is to find them."

Five minutes of systematic search and we were just where we started. No soap, nothing was out of order. The place was almost empty of furniture, the walls were solid. It began to look like the Dean was wrong. I said as much. "We're being hasty," he replied. "It's here, we've just overlooked it."

"That musky looks mighty suspicious to me." I pointed to the mounted fish. "Brand new and shining! Everywhere I look my eyes keep coming back to it."

"That's what it's there for. It's a catch-eye, a distraction. We must look elsewhere."

It was I who found the safe and I discovered it entirely by accident. There was an old-fashioned phonograph, one of these affairs with a big, fluted morning-glory horn, on a stand just inside the archway to the kitchen. I was wondering if there mightn't be a paper or something under the contraption and tried to lift it up. Wow! It must have weighed a hundred and fifty pounds. I soon learned why. Inside the warped veneer cabinet—where the machinery was supposed to be—was a small safe. Really, it was more of a strong-box than a safe—but what a strongbox! I called the chief.

He came over and we examined it. It was about the size of a large cracker box. The combination was on top and the lid

was so finely machine-tooled that the naked eye couldn't catch even a hairline inset in its metallic surface. I tried the combination, the box was locked. "This is another tough break," I complained. "I can open it but it'll take maybe an hour! This Thomas Thomas guy sure puts out his dough on fancy locks!"

The Dean said thoughtfully: "When we passed through the kitchen I noticed an ice box. Go back and rummage around through it. Maybe you'll find the key."

He exasperated me. "This can doesn't use a key. A key wouldn't do you any good—"

He got mulish. "I'll go," I conceded. "I won't find anything and if I do it won't help us."

There wasn't any key, of course.

When I returned he was bent over the strongbox, his nose tweezers in his hand and the lid was open!

"How did you do that?" I gasped.

He beamed. "Mind over matter. Come here. Look what we've got our hands on." It was a flattish manilla envelope—tied up with four strands of bright colored ribbon: emerald green, raspberry red, purple and baby pink. The Dean unnoosed the gaudy bows. The envelope contained a small black velvet bag.

And the bag contained about eighty fine diamonds.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

"I hardly know!" I was dumbfounded. "It's hot ice, all right. But I don't get the ribbons. What are they? A charm?"

"No, not a charm," the Dean corrected. "They're actually functional." He stowed the black bag fondly in his wallet. "I told you there was money in this for us—insurance money." He reached toward the wall toggle to turn off the overhead light. A squeaky, reedlike voice from the dark kitchen said: "Elevate 'em!"

The Dean shot his cuffs uneasily, frowned. "Did someone call me? I can't seem to see you!"

**T**WO of them walked into the room and the first one was a stranger to us. He was wearing a filthy gray covert shirt, faded overalls and high-topped cowhide brogans, an ox of a man, with a lumpy stubbled face and reptilian eyes. I spotted him for what he was: a floater. The type

of unskilled killer you pick up by combing the jungles and flophouses. He carried a Spanish automatic and was eager to go to town.

Little Clyde, the go-getter, was at his side.

He was in the same rig—baggy tweed suit and poetic five inch collar-points. There was one thing different about him this time, however, he wasn't waving a midget .25 around. He was toting a .38 on a .44 frame and the front end of the cylinder certainly looked to me like it was studded with sharp shouldered wad-cutters. He said: "Hand them over. I despise to search a dead body."

The Dean said calmly: "I'd greatly appreciate it, sir, if you and your mangy roadrunner would depart from our presence as miraculously and silently as you entered it. And as speedily!" I gritted my teeth, when the chief began talking like a stewed orator, he had his timelock off and was hoping for the worst.

The drifter piped up stridently: "When I say elevate 'em I mean—"

"Please don't address me," the Dean said archly, "until you have been thoroughly bathed and adequately medicated. You are downright scabby!" He scrutinized Little Clyde from beneath lowered eyelids. "Let me give this the once-over lightly. Stop me if I'm wrong. For some time, goodness knows how long, you've been going back and forth across this broad land of ours—robbing and slaying. Diamonds were your specialty and you finally gravitated to an excellent and high-priced market: Monty Atkinson. You knew, or suspected, that the Professor was buying for a second party and that the stones were accumulating. Then came Atkinson's death which got you to thinking. Ah, you said avidly to yourself, any diamond that is worth stealing once is worth a repeat performance."

The bum shifted nervously. "Let's finish this up, Cap," he appealed. "I want—"

"You want to get back to your mulligan, eh?" the Dean remarked kindly. "I'm afraid it'll have to wait." He continued his analysis of Little Clyde. "Came Monty's death, as I have said, and you got as busy as an ant hill. The question was, who had the jewels? You covered the whole field—to win, show and place. You

tricked your way into Terrill's house, found nothing but the brass urn full of pepper—which, I might add, disturbed you no end. At this stage, no doubt, you began tailing everyone involved. Miss Squires and her escort, Mr. Bettelman, led you to me. I'd like to hear from your own lips just why you stood in my reception room and unloaded that fantastic story about pawning your aunt's cinerary urn."

The little triggerman said egotistically: "I don't make a practice of bragging but if you want the truth, I'm plenty, puh-lenty smart! I got a noodle under my hair-cut! I figure out things and then go and do them. I'm the creative type. Take your instance. Bettelman and Terrill have me stalled. I can't catch anything. Then I find that brass urn at Terrill's. It's too much for me so I take the story to you. I put you on Terrill's trail. Say I'm a lumberman floating logs down a river and a log-jam holds me up, I dynamite. Get the idea? I use you to blast this business loose. That's what I mean when I say I'm smart. Look where I am right now. Within grabbing distance of them eighty diamonds."

The banter was so easy-going that I thought everything was under control. Now, I have hay fever, I don't have it bad, but all this fog and ragweed finally got to me. My eyes had been watering more or less all evening, I raised my hand to cool my eyelid with my fingers, I didn't realize I was doing it. The butcher in the overalls went hog wild. There had been a bestial sort of confusion over him ever since he confronted us, jungle knifings and boxcar brawls he could grasp but fancy conversation left him at the siding. I just raised my hand about three inches—and he cut loose.

He held his gun in both hands, like it was a riveter. The little hunk of blue steel began to pop and crackle. One slug tore up through my hat brim, a couple churned up the floor around my feet and another *zinged* off the field-stone fireplace. The excitement of shooting to kill crazed him. He counted the shots aloud as he pulled the trigger. "One-two-three-four—"

There was a deep-throated drumlike blast, the hobo's lower jaw assumed the

sudden appearance of a red rubber sponge. "Five!" The Dean finished the count for him. The chief was poised, grinning, his big Magnum just clearing the top button of his immaculate coat.

Little Clyde, the go-getter, showed his true colors. Like many an ambitious lad, he couldn't hold down the receiving end. He folded. He took three steps backward, rapidly, as though he were afraid the Dean was going to strike him. I was pawing for my bulldog, he faltered in my direction, swiveled back to the Dean and then the chief's .357 roared again. "Five," the Dean said placidly, "—and one to grow on."

The Dean gazed pensively at the sprawled bodies. "A vicious pair," he observed. "I feel a little better." With a swift change of mood, he began a quibbling argument. "That Little Clyde! He was a shooting-gallery gunman." He spoke of him as though he were an acquaintance out of the almost forgotten past. "Little iron ducks—or diamond salesmen—he could hit. They don't shoot back. Alackaday! That's that. We'd best be ambling back to Brother Terrill's."

ON OUR silent trek through the muggy woodlot on our return to the stone castle, I said: "Boss, I know it sears your soul to be put on the spot but here's one thing I simply have to know. It's driving me buggy. Most of the stuff you flash around is deductions and such like, that I don't care about. Deductions, you are welcome to. But lock-picking is in my field, it's me that's supposed to be the locksmith. Have mercy on me—*how in the heck did you get that safe open?*"

"It was easy," the Dean answered confidentially. "I just tinkered with the combination knob."

"Holy Mackerel!" I could barely believe it. In all my life as a safeman I never heard the like! "There are thousands and thousands of possible errors and only one proper sequence to throw the tumblers!"

"Oh, that? I didn't bother with the possible errors, I just used the proper combination and it opened." He broke into a horse-laugh. "I knew the proper combination—and so should you have known. We read it in Monty Atkinson's



memo. The note said: Numbers have power—which of course they have. It listed the dexterous or right-hand numbers as three and eight. The sinister of left-hand numbers were given as five, six and two. You start with the greatest number group—the five, six and two and alternate them with three and eight. That is your combination. Left five, right three, left six, right eight, left two. You see?”

“I see,” I said. “But you couldn’t do it like a gentleman. You had to suck me in on a rib.” Then I remembered how I had kidded him by climbing in the window while he was fiddling with the front door lock. I changed the subject hurriedly. “What was Monty doing with the combination?”

“He was attempting to double-cross his principal.”

“Attempting to? It don’t make sense. If he knew the combination what was holding him back?”

The Dean bristled. “It makes good sense. He knew the combination but he didn’t know where the safe was hidden. Press me no further, please. This is taking my mind from more weighty matters.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Mr. Bettleman's Blisters

WHEN we stepped into soft blue-and-gold of Terrill’s study we were twenty minutes ahead of schedule—and already the buzzards had begun to flock. Lee Bettleman, lolling comfortably in an overstuffed chair, had arrived before us. Terrill was strolling neurotically about the room, lecturing, chattering. His fat guest, a syrup sweet cigar cocked daintily in his pudgy hand, was blowing smoke rings ceilingward and responding with noncommittal grunts. The scene was not unpleasant. They looked all the world like a couple of vestrymen discussing the erection of a new parish house. The Dean said: “*Noches*, fellow mortals.” To Bettleman he remarked: “You made it after all, I see. It couldn’t be that such was your intention all the time, that you were trying to get here first and steal a march on me?”

Bettleman shook his flabby jowls and said something that sounded like: “Ugh-

ugh!” Terrill blurted venomously: “He won’t talk. He just sits there and mumbles and grunts!”

“He’ll talk all right,” the Dean promised cheerfully, “when the time comes. Do you two men know each other?”

Terrill sneered. “I met Mr. Bettleman professionally—when I was in the entertainment business. He was lizards in my soup then and time hasn’t helped. He’s just as hard to take as he ever was. Why did you invite him to my home?”

“He’s only the beginning. Wait until Lieutenant Malloy gets here. The more the merrier, say I.” The chief made a deliberately unconvincing attempt at being gruff. “This is serious business. I’m going to have to ask you gentlemen for your guns. Mr. Bettleman, are you armed?”

The fat gambler chomped the frayed end of his cigar. “*Ugh-ugh.*”

“He’s lying,” Terrill informed us. “He always packs hardware.”

“And you, Mr. Terrill?”

Our host skittered across the floor to a small wall-desk. He pulled out a drawer and produced a handsome gambler’s gun. It had a mother-of-pearl stump grip and was etched in gold, it was a tiny thing—you could have almost covered it with a cigarette pack—but its two short barrels, one above the other, were caliber forty-five. A wicked instrument!

The Dean broke the pistol, satisfied himself that it was loaded, and wrapped it loosely in a handkerchief. “Perhaps,” he said soberly, “perhaps I’d better post you gentlemen on a few details before the law arrives. You ought to go into this thing knowing exactly how the land lies. Mr. Bettleman, it’s my unhappy fortune to apprise you of the demise of your fiancée. Have you heard that her battered body has been found beneath the bed in her Elmyra Hotel room?”

The fat gambler emitted a lazy smoke-ring, watched it dissipate itself into thin air. He peeled a wet flake of tobacco from his blubberous lower lip. Talk about dead-pans, you couldn’t help admiring his control, he acted as though he were listening to last year’s race results. “I hadn’t heard,” he said casually. “What brought it on?”

“Complications,” the Dean answered



She shot him twice. . . . He went back against the wall as if slammed by a sledge.

brutally. "She died of complications. And now here's a titbit for Terrill. Little Clyde, too, has landed in the obituary column. Foggy nights are bad, they always—"

Terrill broke out in a loathsome, feline grin. "You're my boy," he declared. "You come high but so does champagne! So Clyde is dead, eh? I'll send him a nice showy wreath—"

Malloy and Flo Conlin walked in on us.

The Lieutenant reproved his host. "You should keep your front door bolted on a night like this. You householders are mighty careless. Comes burglars and you squawk your heads off." I knew, and the Dean knew, that Bill Malloy wasn't any too sure of himself, he was out of his sphere

of authority—Castille Neck was in the sheriff's bailiwick. Terrill hardly heard him, he was absorbed in the sight of the woman. "Hello, Flo," he said quietly.

**S**HE paused just within the archway, vital and magnetic in her little boxpleat skirt and perky polka-dot blouse, in the soft nimbus of the lamp her masklike face seemed sweet and beautiful. It was almost impossible to believe that she had been the bane of law and order for twenty and more years and that she was outlaw to the very tips of her impudent red mocassins. "Hi, Phil," she said. "Hi, Lee."

Bettleman scrutinized his cigar. "Ugh." He had the needle back again on the same old record.



The Dean bowed. "Now we can begin the spadework. The purpose of this cozy assembly is, of course, to come to some sort of agreement upon the identity of Monty Atkinson's slayer. When that virus has been isolated and neutralized the class will be dismissed. Phil Terrill brought the professor to town. He schooled him in a petty racket, together they trimmed the local gambling clique. It was dangerous but they got away with it. Monty branched out, he began buying stolen diamonds from a triggerman known as Little Clyde."

Flo Conlin objected. "Diamonds cost dough. Monty was always broke."

Bettleman regained his voice. He said ponderously: "Maybe you backed him, Flo. Could be, couldn't it?"

She glared at him in furious silence.

The Dean urged them on. "Come, come. Let's get a debate started! What's your verdict, Terrill?"

"It's the sort of deal that's down her alley," Terrill retorted. "Flo Conlin's a gal with commercial ideas. I say Flo backed him but someone else killed him."

"Now we're getting somewhere," the Dean agreed, "and I'll take it from here. You are all wrong. Monty was killed by his backer, by the person for whom he was purchasing the hot diamonds. This person bought an abandoned boating club out here on the Neck, installed a secret safe in the lodge and cached the stones as fast as they came in. Monty, by means which I will later explain, obtained the combination to the safe but was unable to locate it. He became a bit over anxious in his greed and gave himself away, his employer caught up with him and eliminated him—"

**FLO CONLIN'S** honied, husky voice said: "What was this party's name? I don't believe I caught the name."

The Dean pretended not to hear her. "The killer of Monty Atkinson was aware of the swindles being perpetrated by the Terrill-Atkinson gyp partnership, it was a natural cover for the real motive behind the slaying. The murderer hastened to call the police, tipping them off as to the gambling flimflam, he wrote the police anonymous letters. The press carried the story. The natural assumption was that Monty's irate victims had risen in their anger and demolished him. As a matter of fact, nothing of the sort happened, as I said before, it was a safety killing, not a revenge killing—"

Malloy had a hard, tense look about the corners of his eyes. "This party, this person, this backer, this employer! Always the runaround. Never any facts. What I want is the murderer's name!"

The Dean seemed astonished. "Why the name's Terrill. Phil Terrill. That is the name and here are the facts." He glanced about him at the strained faces. "Terrill backed him in the gambling gyp and it's obvious, and true, to assume that Terrill was behind him in the crooked diamond

trade. Monty bought diamonds for Terrill and Terrill, under the name of Thomas Thomas, acquired the boating club property and stashed them away in a safe. Monty, through a bit of hocus-pocus learned the combination but couldn't locate the safe itself. Terrill killed him."

Terrill's repulsive face contorted. "Why curse you, Rock, I'm your client!"

"Indeed you are," the Dean confirmed. "At the present moment we're as friendly as can be. I'm talking about the past, about when you, in the disguise of a plumber, tried to bomb me through Mrs. Duffy's roof, for instance. Now you've gotten me mixed up. Where was I? Oh, yes. You put the diamonds in the safe and tied them up with assorted colored ribbons. If they should ever be found by the police, here was a last ditch frame. Why, the police would ask themselves, why colored ribbons? Bettleman, someone would say, uses colored ribbons, he ties up his banknotes with them. So Bettleman is in the trap." The Dean paused. "Bettleman, however, uses those ribbons for a very sensible reason. He's a cagey man. He doesn't keep ledgers, he does everything on a cash basis. He does his bookkeeping with colored ribbons. Isn't that right, Lee?"

Bettleman shrugged. "Ugh."

"Phil Terrill," the Dean said genially, "you're a killer—and a killer from way back. If you'd let well enough alone, if you hadn't slapped that wacky no-marriage contract on Miss Squires you'd be perfectly safe this minute."

"No-marriage contract?" Malloy tried to get on the train. "I don't understand—"

"Neither did Lee Bettleman and that was why he brought Miss Squires to me with the strange document. Here is what lay behind it: Terrill is actually a man of many assets, property, real estate, and so on. He requires a confidential secretary but he has trouble keeping them. And when I say keeping them, I mean keeping them alive. Outsiders, interested in his diamond cache, get to them with bribery. Take Sperry and Dennison. They were both taking Monty's money and were on the prowl for the safe combination. One of them got it, probably from Terrill's wallet. Finally, Terrill acquired a gal from the Midwest, Miss Constance

Squires. Bettleman got to her. Constance was spying on you, Terrill, wasn't she? That's why you planted Flo Conlin's beer can in her hotel room and killed her with those big hands of yours."

Terrill said hoarsely: "You're staging evidence. You can't prove—"

"You caught Miss Sperry and Miss Dennison poking around the house—and killed them. They were well known in the village and their disappearance was commented on. To explain it you built up that nutty idea about your being irresistible to females. When you hired Miss Squires, in anticipation that she might go the way of the rest, you implanted the crazy statement in the contract to explain her disappearance as a nutty obsession of yours. You buried Sperry and Dennison beneath the plank flooring of the old boat-house. You had the door-hinge all oiled and ready for Squires—but she left your home—"

"You have no proof," Terrill yelled. "I've outsmarted you. I deny it all! Take it to court!" He went into a maniacal gurgling laugh.

Malloy was worried. "You got anything else, Rock?"

"Yes," the Dean murmured. "I have." He unfolded the handkerchief and produced Terrill's beautiful two-barreled pistol. "This is the gun that wraps it all up. Miss Conlin," he said gently, "have you ever seen this weapon before?"

Quizzically, she took it from his hands, examined it. "I'm telling you the gospel truth," she said earnestly. "I never had this thing in my hands before. Why?"

"That," the Dean said calmly, "is the gun that killed your husband."

Terrill had a Smith and Wesson half out of his hip-holster when she shot him. She shot him twice. He went back against the wall like he'd been slammed with a sledge.

Malloy said angrily: "But Monty was shot with a shotgun!"

The Dean looked embarrassed. "Is that so? I guess I'd forgotten it. Well, Mrs. Atkinson acted in her right and duty as a private citizen. She assumed temporary

police authority which was quite legal and proper. Take up the floor at the boat-house and you'll find your corpses."

Flo Conlin said: "Thank you." There was peace and tranquillity in her voice. We stared at her. Her silken cheeks were smooth, expressionless.

*And then the lights went down.* One minute the room was illuminated with the soft glow of the lamp and the next, darkness began to settle over us. The light faded in queer ripples, reached a point where we were almost but not entirely obscured from each other, and held it.

An instant later it was all over and the normal light was back again.

"EXCUSE me," the Dean said. "I was experimenting." He called us to him. In the center of the taboret was inset a small square of frosted glass, beneath the glass was a light bulb. Beside the illuminated square was an opaque flat-bottomed glass vase filled with water. "Here's a little device our killer had worked out. A home-made rheostat. The vase filled with water was always kept on the light-square. Just before bedtime, when the mood was on him to eliminate a secretary, he strolled to the mantel, got a handful of pepper, ambled to the lamp and dumped in the powder. Because of the oily nature of the granulations the grounds settled slowly, causing a fading of light, and eventually settled on the bottom, smothering most of the glare from below. He made a few practice tests with Miss Squires and she said that always *when he returned* the lights came up again. You see he simply walked over and set the vase off of the light-panel."

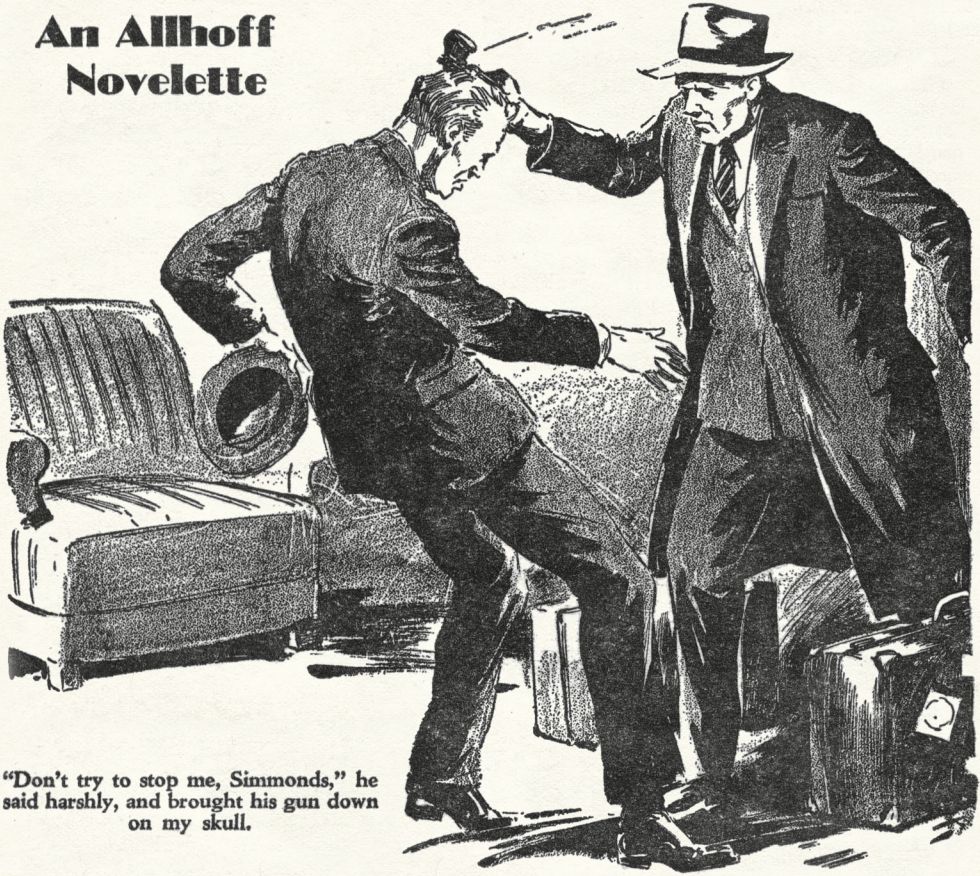
Bettleman beamed appreciatively. "You're plenty smart, brother. And I don't mean maybe. I'll come clean now. I did get those blisters just like you said—digging for corpses. I had a hunch that he'd knocked off Sperry and Dennison and dug up the beach from here to kingdom come. But how'd you guess it?"

"To that question," the Dean retorted pleasantly. "I will answer ugh!"



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## An Allhoff Novelette



"Don't try to stop me, Simmonds," he said harshly, and brought his gun down on my skull.

# A LEG ON MURDER

By **D. L. Champion**

*Author of "Murder in the Mirror," etc.*

*To the legless coffee-tippler of Centre Street, the Wiltern case looked like the sweetest slaying he'd ever attempted to solve between cups of his bitter brew. For hadn't Sergeant Simmonds been foolhardy enough to wager three months' sugar rations that Allhoff couldn't put his greedy finger on the playboy's killer?*

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Murder in a Sick-bed

**D**INNER was a meal I invariably enjoyed. The day's work, arduous and performed in an unwholesome and venomous environment, was thrust

completely from my mind. I munched good well-cooked food in a domestic atmosphere of affection which acted as an antitoxin for the hatred I had rubbed shoulders with at the office.

I was engaged in the pleasant demolition of a huge steak under the approving

eye of my wife when the doorbell rang. I ate on blissfully as she rose to answer the bell. A moment later I looked up, surprised almost to the point of being shocked, and beheld Battersly.

Embarrassment was stamped upon his youthful face as he stood over the kitchen table. He was clad in his patrolman's uniform, his cap in his hand, and an apologetic expression in his eyes. I waved him to a chair and continued eating. In all the years that I had known him he had never before paid me a personal call.

I was not, however, flattered. Rather, I was annoyed. Battersly, perforce, was part of my professional life, and my professional life was most unpleasant. To be reminded of it as I ate my dinner was a damned nuisance. Only Battersly's humble and abashed air prevented my saying so.

"Excuse me, Sergeant," he said, "for busting in like this. But I had to see you. There was a murder this afternoon. I want to talk to you about it."

For a single instant hope glowed within me. I suspended a forkful of meat in mid-air and asked with the breathless interest of a politician inquiring as to the health of a constituent's baby: "Was it Allhoff?"

Battersly looked at me blankly and my hope receded.

"I mean was Allhoff killed?"

"Oh, no. It wasn't Inspector Allhoff. It was Wiltern. Maxwell Wiltern. You know of him, don't you?"

I pursued a pool of gravy with a chunk of bread and nodded. If one were literate enough to follow the flawless sixth grade prose of a tabloid newspaper, he knew of Maxwell Wiltern. In his prime, Wiltern was a man possessed of tremendous appetites. Moreover, he was possessed of the money with which to satisfy them.

He had been written up all over the front pages of the more sensational journals. In recent years, however, age, stomach ulcers, and it was rumored cancer had improved Wiltern morally, if not physically. Anyway, his publicity and carnality had ceased simultaneously.

**I** PUSHED my plate away and accepted a cup of coffee from my wife. I offered one to Battersly but he refused. He seemed rather upset though I could not

guess why. I was as indifferent as the Sphinx to the death of Wiltern. I saw no reason for Battersly's concern in the matter.

"Wiltern," went on Battersly, "was killed sometime early this evening. Homicide arrested a fellow named Arthur Collier. They've got him now."

I munched a slab of apple pie and said: "So what?"

"Well," said Battersly, "I can hardly believe he did it and my mother's certain he didn't."

I lifted my eyebrows. Battersly was an indifferent detective, himself. I could hardly imagine his mother taking the trail of a criminal with any better success.

I said, incredulously: "Did you say your mother?"

"Yes. You see, this Collier is a distant cousin of mine. His mother and mine were brought up together. They're very close. So naturally—"

I saw the pattern now. "So," I said, "Mrs. Collier, hysterically, called your mother, like all coppers' mothers, believed you had more influence than you have and you were charged with getting cousin Arthur out of the toils. Is that it?"

Battersly nodded briskly. I sighed.

"So you, having no influence at all, come to me to handle the job for you. Is that it?"

"That's it, Sergeant. I called Homicide and they won't even tell me what it is they have on Arthur Collier. I don't know if it's a tight case or not. I thought, perhaps, they'd tell you."

I shook my head. "They're not particularly fond of anyone connected with Allhoff. If they've broken a case themselves they won't want Allhoff to have any part of it. However, I'll do what I can."

Battersly stood up and shook my hand. "Thanks," he said. "My mother made me come to see you. In the meantime I'll do what checking I can."

"All right. But I promise you nothing. It's quite probable Homicide's right, too. Distant cousins have committed murders before."

Battersly shook his head as he stood in the doorway. "My mother seems certain—" he began, but I waved him out of the doorway. When it comes to crime no one is more naive than mothers.

I thought it over for a while as I digested dinner. I knew Homicide would give me no information, so I decided to call Turner. Turner was a newspaperman who knew more inside stuff about town than the Mayor.

I lit my pipe, donned my hat and went out of the house. A few moments later I sat across a littered desk looking into the cold gray eyes of a middle-aged man with a surprisingly young face.

"I want a favor," I said coming to the point at once. "Homicide has a guy in the can for killing Maxwell Wiltern. Do you know what they've got on him?"

Turner shook his head and I thought I detected irritation in his manner, probably at being caught without knowledge of something important.

"I know nothing," he said. "I just heard of the killing. Homicide isn't talking to the press. This guy, Colter, that they have, I never heard of. However—"

A far-away thoughtful expression came into his eyes. "Wait," he said. "There's a pal of mine, an insurance agent, who was telling me a few weeks back that he'd sold a huge policy to Wiltern. The beneficiary was Dick Hurlbut, the bookmaker. That fact struck me as odd at the time."

I looked at him keenly. "Are you suggesting Hurlbut killed Wiltern?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm suggesting nothing. But it would please me if Homicide were wrong on this case. They've been rather short with me. See what you can see about Hurlbut. He's got a motive, all right. Find out if he has an alibi as well."

"All right," I said, "thanks." Then as I stood up I thought of something else. "Wiltern had a nephew, didn't he? Some cruising kid who figured to inherit? Maybe I ought to check him as well."

Turner waved this suggestion aside with an airy hand. "Save your time and energy," he said. "That kid had everything he wanted. Wiltern liked the way he played the night-clubs. Whatever he asked his uncle for, he got. There'd be little point in that kid knocking him off when he could draw on his inheritance just as easily."

"O.K.," I said, "I'll check Hurlbut at once."

"If you get anything—"

"Don't worry. I'll give it to you for the paper as soon as I have it myself."

I HIED myself off to Dick Hurlbut's apartment hotel feeling rather like a fool. After all, Homicide might well have a cast iron case. I was dabbling about in the dark. I thought of Allhoff's comment if he had known and I shuddered. However, I was in this deep, so I figured I might as well see it through.

I rang the bell of Hurlbut's apartment and waited an unusually long time before the door was opened by a stiff-shirted valet. I pushed into the room to find Hurlbut standing between two closed suitcases.

He stared at me with startled eyes and his face was paler than usual. "Simmonds," he said. "Good God, it's started already."

I said with notable naivete: "What's started?" and as I uttered the last word of the sentence, Hurlbut's hand dropped to his coat pocket and emerged again holding an automatic.

He spoke desperately, harshly: "Simmonds, you're a nice guy. I want you to live to collect your pension. But don't try to stop me. I don't know who's pulling this frame or why. But I'm damned if I'm going to stand for it. I'm taking a powder. I'm desperate and I'm tough. I assure you my next move is as much of a favor to you as anything else."

I stared at him bewildered, not having much idea of what he was talking about. He moved a step toward me and suddenly lifted his gun. He brought it down thudingly upon my skull.

I fell with slow dignity to the floor. My eyes closed and I could not open them. I remained in that condition for some time.

I recovered to find the valet who had admitted me swabbing my head with a damp cloth and solicitously offering me a shot of brandy. I waved the former aside, gulped the latter, and stood up. I blinked and said: "Where's Hurlbut?"

"On the lam, sir," said the valet with punctilious politeness, "I gathered from his remarks that he faced a murder charge."

I nodded my head. That last remark was encouraging enough for me to forget the aching in my head.



"Do you know where he was tonight?" I asked. "Say, between five and seven?"

"Well, he came home about four o'clock. He made a telephone call. To a Mr. Wiltern, I believe. I think he went out to meet him."

My pulse picked up a beat. It actually began to look as if I was going to break a case, alone, personally, and unaided.

"What makes you think that?"

"I heard him make the appointment over the phone, sir. He said he'd see Mr Wiltern without fail and at once."

Without daring to hope for another right answer to drop in my lap: "Was there any trouble between him and Wiltern, do you know? Any argument at any time? Were they enemies?"

He hesitated. I dragged out my shield. "This is murder," I reminded him. "A clean answer may save your being held in the can as a material witness."

He sighed and nodded his head. "I've heard him talk to Mr. Wiltern before over the phone. I've heard him use abusive language to him. Something about Mr. Wiltern's welching on a bet."

I mopped my brow and beamed like a searchlight. I'd often read of those copers into whose laps fell completely solved mysteries. I had never believed it might happen to me.

Rather to the valet's surprise I wrung his hand fervently. I went to the phone and called Homicide. I told them with a degree of condescension that they had the wrong man in the Wiltern case. I gave them the name of the right one and hung up before they plied me with questions. Then I put my hat on and went home feeling as smug and righteous as Allhoff ever had. I slept that night like a happy corpse who has died pleasantly from rich living.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Squalid Mission

I CLIMBED the rickety staircase to Allhoff's tenement apartment. I pushed the door open, entered, and as I threw up the window wondered how it was that Allhoff had never heard of the benefits of fresh air.

A crisp breeze came reluctantly over

the sill into the disorderly living room. The floor-boards held a veneer of dust and the sink was weighted with dirty dishes. The lid had fallen from the garbage pail and the atmosphere was redolent of ancient food about which cockroaches scurried happily.

The door of the bedroom was ajar, revealing a disarrayed bed and a pile of laundry that crawled up the wall like amounting heaps of soiled snow. The master of this untidy realm sat at his desk, his chest against its edge and his nose buried deep in a cup of coffee.

On the left side of the desk a blackened coffee-pot gurgled dispiritedly on its electric base. Allhoff sucked the black liquid from his cup with the sound of a lost soul disappearing in a quicksand, then put his chipped cup down with a banging sound which was the key to the mood he was in this morning.

Battersly was already at his place as I sat down. He winked at me and appeared very pleased with himself. Feeling precisely the same way I winked back. Neither of us, however, spoke. It was tradition that nothing was ever said in this slum until Allhoff had ingurgitated at least one quart of the steaming octopus ink which he was pleased to call coffee.

A uniformed copper entered suddenly, saluted and handed Allhoff a sealed envelope. He spun around and got out quickly before Allhoff had a chance to speak, a tactic, for which I gave him a great deal of credit.

Allhoff refilled his cup and slit the envelope open. He glanced at the sheets of typewritten paper inside and grunted.

"It seems Maxwell Wiltern is dead," he announced. "The Commissioner wants me to look into it. It seems Homicide is holding someone but as usual they're not sure. Since the papers are bound to plaster anything about Wiltern all over the front page the Department needs a good case. So I draw it."

He grunted with satisfaction. Any opportunity to prove Homicide, or for that matter, anyone else wrong, was meat and drink to him. He scanned the reports carefully. I stood up, beaming like the lad in the advertisements who, by a judicious use of Baxbum's toothpaste, has at last managed to land the contract, and

tapped Allhoff gently on the shoulder.

He swung his head around in his chair and regarded me as if I had just disembarked from a German submarine and landed on Ponte Vedra Beach. I returned his gaze blandly. I was about to hit him on the head with a figurative hammer by announcing that I had already turned up the killer in the Wiltern case.

Then, before I could speak Battersly had risen, slithered excitedly across the room and was speaking volubly.

"Inspector," he said, "I already turned in the guy in the Wiltern case. I did a little snooping around last night. I nailed a guy with motive, who gains financially by Wiltern's death and who, apparently, was at Wiltern's house around the time of the murder."

**A**LLHOFF blinked and looked at Battersly rather like a man observing an unpleasant miracle. I remained silent, surprised and aware of a mild annoyance that, Battersly, too, had found out about Hurlbut.

"Now, this guy," went on Battersly, "was the beneficiary of a big insurance policy on Wiltern's life. Besides that, there was bad blood between them. Further, this guy phoned Wiltern a few hours before the murder and made an appointment to see him last night around six o'clock."

I nodded my head in happy corroboration as I watched Allhoff's expression of utter bewilderment not unmingled with rage that Battersly should dare take it upon himself to embark upon the solution of a murder case.

Allhoff glanced down at the typewritten report in his hand. Then he looked up at us again. He said in an odd repressed tone which should have warned me: "And what is this murderer's name?"

Again I opened my mouth to answer and again Battersly spoke before me.

"Waverly," said Battersly. "Harry Waverly. He's a newspaper man on the Herald."

"Wait a minute," I said. "You've got that wrong. It's Hurlbut. Dick Hurlbut, the bookmaker. He slugged me last night when I went to question him."

Allhoff looked from Battersly to me and the color was crawling slowly into his

face like live steam into a red hot boiler.

"Well," he said, "make up your minds. Which one do we electrocute?"

Battersly and I exchanged confused glances. "He's made a mistake," I said, "on the name. I checked last night. I went to see Hurlbut. He slugged me making his getaway. The facts are the same. Battersly merely has the name wrong."

"Well?" said Allhoff, his hot little eyes on Battersly, who registered complete bewilderment.

"Why, Inspector, I know I'm right. I saw Wiltern's butler last night. He told me that Waverly had this insurance policy on Wiltern's life, that Wiltern was sore at him about something he wrote in the papers about him and that he had an appointment to see Wiltern last night. I tipped Homicide about it."

"And you," said Allhoff to me, "tipped Homicide about Hurlbut. Is that it?"

"Why sure I did. Naturally—"

Allhoff's hissing intake of breath interrupted me. His subsequent roar would have interrupted a barrage.

"Naturally," he bellowed. "Naturally, as a punishment for my more unmentionable iniquities I have been endowed with two of the stupidest assistants ever to exist. The Commissioner wants to know if this office has gone mad. It's turned in two killers of Wiltern. Battersly unearthed one, Simmonds has apprehended the other. Who told either of you to conduct private investigations? Why did you do it?"

I didn't answer. Battersly, not so tactful, said: "My mother was sure Homicide had the wrong man in Coller."

Allhoff achieved an expression which was a nice admixture of Vesuvius about to erupt and a munition dump about to explode. His voice hit a falsetto like a Stradivarius suffering a nervous breakdown.

"Your mother?" he shrieked. "Your mother thought he was innocent. Do I hear aright? Your mother?"

I came in desperately trying to empty drums of oil upon the raging waters.

"Coller's mother and Battersly's were old friends. Battersly wanted to look into the case. He asked my help, too. I got certain dope on Hurlbut. He got some more on Waverly. So we have two sus-

pects instead of one. But we certainly ought to have enough to clear Collier."

Allhoff gulped a cup of coffee like a man who has come upon an oasis. As he slammed the cup down again he had regained a measure of control.

"On the contrary," he said. "Collier's in the same spot as your two suspects. No better, no worse."

I blinked and thought that over. "It doesn't seem possible," I ventured mildly. "It doesn't seem that Homicide has as good a case against Collier as we have against our two men, Waverly and Hurlbut."

"It has," said Allhoff. "Just as good. Precisely as good. To the penny. Collier was the beneficiary of a life insurance policy of Wiltern's. To the amount of fifty thousand dollars. So were the other two. Collier once had an affair with a girl of Wiltern's. They had harsh words. That's motive as well as the policy. Moreover, Collier phoned Wiltern last night, promised to meet him about the time of the murder. He has no one to attest to an alibi."

**H**IS voice died away and the only sound in the room was the monotonous drumming of Allhoff's dirty forefinger on the desk top. Battersly and I stared at each other. On the face of it the whole damned setup was absurd.

Battersly, Homicide and myself had all solved the Wiltern murder. We had three different prisoners. All with the same motives, the same amount of dough involved, apparently, and all of whom had planned to be at the scene of the killing at the time of the murder.

I scratched my head and sat down. I was now quite willing to let Allhoff take over.

"For God's sake," I said, "how do you figure it?"

"Yeah," echoed Battersly. "How?"

"Eh," snarled Allhoff with feral satisfaction. "Now you two Sherlocks come to me. So, for that matter, does Homicide. Well, I don't know who killed Wiltern. But I promise you, I will. And knowing the records of you two and Homicide to be wrong, I'll bet none of those three guys you've pinned it on, did it at all."

His cocksure manner settled me.

"You've got a bet," I said. "How much?"

He looked at me for a moment and then his gaze fell on his depleted sugar-bowl. To Allhoff who used pounds of sugar a week rationing had come hard.

"Your sugar-book," he said. "For three months. Mine against yours."

"Done," I said. "You have a bet. Now what's the first move in the Wiltern murder case as you're handling it?"

Allhoff scanned once again over the report on his desk. "Wiltern's nephew, a tramp, I gather, Bob Newhall, is being sent over here by headquarters. We have a few questions to ask him. I'm also expecting a girl. Alice Darnell. It seems she was Wiltern's last fling. Anyway it appears she was the only woman he's been seeing since the doctors ordered him to lead a Christian life."

"When are they due?"

"Any minute. In the meantime, it seems, that Hurlbut hasn't been picked up yet. Waverly is held on suspicion and Collier's in the can."

Battersly shook his head. "I'm sure he's innocent, Inspector."

"I hope he is," growled Allhoff. "I hope he's so innocent that he can sue every copper on Homicide for ten grand and collect it."

He turned his head around, picked up his chipped coffee cup and thrust his corvine nose into its depths. Peace and quiet descended upon the office. They remained there for a quarter-hour, until the advent of Alice Darnell, Bob Newhall, and a fat pompous gentlemen named Weatherby, who it was announced was the attorney for Wiltern, the nephew and Miss Darnell.

**M**ISS DARNELL, in a word, was terrific. Even Allhoff, who as a rule was as indifferent to sex as a harem guard, took his nose from his cup and stared at her. She was tall, blond and startling. She possessed a pair of deep blue eyes which at times reminded you of a nun, at times of a madam. Her legs were so proportioned that they led one's thoughts directly to the gutter and her lips were a crimson invitation to deeds I am certain Battersly had never dreamed of.

He leaned forward in his chair and stared at her as she sat down, adjusted

her skirt and crossed her legs. Newhall, thin, of middle height and about thirty, seated himself beside her. The lawyer fluttered over them both. He rubbed a pair of hands together and said oleagiously: "Anything my clients or myself can do, Inspector, we shall be glad to—"

"You can shut up," said Allhoff. Weatherby registered indignant pain. Allhoff, paying no attention to him, turned to the others.

"First," he said, "you, Newhall. You were on good terms with your uncle?"

Newhall nodded. "The best. We were pals. Never a hard word between us. He gave me everything I wanted. And more."

Allhoff filled his coffee cup. Battersly stared at Alice Darnell's legs. She smiled at him as if acknowledging his tribute. "Of course," continued Allhoff, "we can check that easily enough."

"Certainly," put in the lawyer. "The cancelled checks will prove it. Mr. Wiltern allowed his nephew twenty-five hundred dollars a month and wrote checks freely for anything else required. The bank statements will bear that out."

Allhoff grunted as if he didn't like it. For the life of me I couldn't see why he was hunting for another suspect when he already had two too many.

"All right," he said sullenly. "Now what about you, Miss Darnell?"

La Darnell took her eyes away from Battersly who by no means took his away from her legs, and met Allhoff's gaze reluctantly. It was obvious that she didn't like him, which, of course, wasn't stop press news. No one else did, either. However, Darnell did not dissemble. Her expression said quite plainly that Allhoff, to her, was a horrible little man.

"Well," she said ungraciously, "what about me?"

"You were Wiltern's last mistress, weren't you?"

The insult was gratuitous, but Darnell took it in her stride.

"That I don't know," she said. "I wasn't with him when he died."

Allhoff grunted again. "I suppose you're down for a hunk in his will?"

"I suppose I am," said Alice Darnell. "I might mention in that connection that I have a very lovely alibi."

"Besides," put in Weatherby, "Miss

Darnell's position was much the same as Mr. Newhall's. Mr. Wiltern begrudged her nothing. She could have had many times the amount the will will give her for the asking."

Allhoff drained his coffee cup. From the murky expression of his eyes I knew he was annoyed. Apparently, he didn't like the way the interview was going.

Darnell looked over at Battersly again and generously lifted her skirts another two inches. Battersly blinked happily. Allhoff slammed his cup down on the desk and glared like a beacon.

"Miss Darnell," he said, his lips twisting angrily, "this is a murder investigation, not a shack in Cocanut Grove, Panama. Battersly is a policeman, not a potential customer. Will you cover up your legs?"

Battersly jerked himself back to reality with a face as red as a cardinal's hat. Darnell stared at Allhoff coolly.

"I'll take care of my own morals, Inspector," she said evenly. "Besides, they are quite decent-looking legs. And even if they were thick and gnarled and ugly, I'll bet you wish you had them."

THE silence in the room was clammy. I heard Battersly's sharp intake of breath. Weatherby fluttered his hands ineffectually and Newhall looked with a degree of admiration at Darnell. She had picked up the gauntlet flung by Allhoff and thrown it back full in his crimson face.

However, I felt no admiration. I was aware of a queasy sickening sensation at the pit of my stomach. I knew what was coming and the fact that I had witnessed the scene a hundred times before made it no easier to bear.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Hater

ALLHOFF opened his mouth and uttered an animal bark of rage. He put his hands on the edge of his desk and pushed so hard that his chair traveled halfway across the room on its rollers. As his torso moved away from the concealment of the desk it was seen that the torso was the better part of Allhoff.

Where his thighs should have begun

were a pair of wooden stumps which now wriggled, beating furiously against the air. His hands hammered hard on the arms of his chair. His voice lifted up, crescendo, crashed against the roof and fell obscenely about our ears.

Harlot," he shrieked at Darnell. "Butcher," he howled at Battersly. "You yellow coward. You steal my legs then spend the rest of your life lustfully contemplating those of an immoral hussy. Insulted and mocked in my own home! Curse you both! I'll send you to the chair. I'll pin something on both of you. I'll—"

His mouth was like a machine-gun which had been loaded with pellets of mud. Panting and beating his chair with his clenched fists he screamed malediction down upon La Darnell and Battersly.

Battersly had risen. He stood with his back to the wall, figuratively and literally. His face was pale and a pitiful haunted expression shadowed his eyes. He avoided Allhoff's gaze. He epitomized guilt, conscience and misery.

Alice Darnell, on the other hand, was unmoved by Allhoff's frenzy. She regarded him with eyes that held a little of amusement, a little of contempt. A faint smile flickered over her full lips. Allhoff in the midst of a particularly biological interlude, turned his head and saw her.

He broke off abruptly. "Get out, Jezebel! Get out, all of you! Now, at once! Scram!"

I hastened across the room and aimed the three of them at the door. Allhoff went on.

"You will pay for this insult, Madam. I swear it. There are black days ahead of you. There are—"

Darnell turned in the doorway. She stared at him coolly. "Black days?" she said. "You're a weather prophet, too, eh, Inspector? How do you do it? By the rheumatism in your legs? Or the tingling of your corns? I knew an old farmer once who —"

Allhoff's shriek of rage was an insane tremulo. Hastily, I thrust Darnell from the room, slammed the door behind her. Allhoff had swung around in his chair. Without missing a curse he had transferred his attention from Darnell to Battersly who stood up beneath the storm of

epithet like a swaying, young sapling.

I poured a cup of coffee from the percolator. I waited until Allhoff was out of breath, then I thrust it swiftly into his hand. Gasping he held it to his lips, drained it. Then, panting and almost exhausted he drew his chair back to the desk and sat there, still, and staring bitterly at the scarred unpainted wall.

THE chains of misery that held the three of us here had been forged several years ago when Allhoff was the youngest inspector on the force. He had led a squad, directed by a stool-pigeon, upon a raid on upper West End Avenue.

Battersly, a raw recruit at the time had drawn the assignment of effecting an entrance through the rear and closing with the thug who, we had been informed, operated a Tommy gun upon the staircase which commanded the front door.

Battersly had got in the house all right, but then with zero hour upon him he had developed a sudden, and not surprising case of nerves. Instead of leaping upon his man he had gone to pieces and sought refuge in the upper stories of the house.

The result of that moment's lapse was that Allhoff came charging in the front door at the head of his men to be greeted by a hail of machine gun bullets, most of which bit savagely into his legs.

Gangrene set in and of necessity amputation followed. In the normal departmental sequence of events, he would have been pensioned and that would have been the end of Allhoff. As it happened, it was but the beginning.

The Commissioner was of no mind to lose his best man, legs or no. Devious departmental bookkeeping devices arranged it so that Allhoff still drew his full salary. He had taken up his abode in this miserable slum primarily because it was just across the street from headquarters.

And the price of his acceding to the Commissioner's demands was that Battersly be given him as assistant. With too nice a sense of poetic justice the Commissioner had granted this request. And beginning at that point Allhoff had begun to extract his insane vengeance.

I always thought that when Allhoff lost his legs he lost part of his mind along with

them. He was as forgiving as Genghis Khan. He lost no opportunity to needle Battersly, to remind him of that moment's cowardice of several years ago.

The situation was horrible and incessant. I had been detached from an idyllic desk job and sent over here, ostensibly to take care of the paper work, actually, to act as oil-poured-on-troubled-waters when Allhoff's frenzy reached exploding point. It was a task I detested and would have quit long ago had it not been for the two vital facts of my family and my forthcoming pension.

**T**HE following morning the coppers picked up Dick Hurlbut in Peekskill. They already had Waverly. And Coller, of course, was already in the can. Each of them told exactly the same story. That they had at one time or another quarrelled with Wiltern. That the fact of his taking out insurance and naming them as beneficiaries was an absolute surprise to them.

That much I, and the rest of the force, was prepared to swallow. However, the last part of their story was too far-fetched for the police department. Each of them claimed that upon the day of the killing, they had received a message to call Wiltern, that when they had done so he had made an appointment with each of them for six o'clock, announcing that he might be late, and to wait, as it were of vital importance.

I related these facts to Allhoff as I culled them from a report which had been sent over from across the street. He seemed strangely uninterested.

"So what?" he asked. "It's all quite possible, isn't it?"

"Possible," I said. "But highly improbable. Do you know where those guys claim their appointments were?"

"I'll bet somewhere where alibis were entirely out of order."

I looked at him oddly. "That's right. Hurlbut was waiting alone in a hotel room, Coller on a subway station and Waverly at a remote corner in the Bronx."

"Well, said Allhoff. "It's all very interesting. But suppose we get to work and find out who killed Wiltern."

"You've got three suspects to work on," I told him. "Do you want some more?"

"Three hell," snapped Allhoff. "I have two. You get Battersly and go uptown. That Darnell broad lives at the Regal Hotel. I want you to get her out of the way and go through her apartment with a fine-toothed comb. When you've done that go over to Wiltern's joint. Look it over. Question the servants. Then come back here and tell me what you've found."

"And then," I said ironically. "You'll tell us who killed Wiltern?"

Characteristically, he took me quite seriously. "Quite probably," he said, "I shall."

Entering Darnell's apartment was simple enough. We waited behind a dispirited potted palm in the lobby until we saw Darnell go out, then we flashed a badge on an impressed maid and got ushered into the apartment via the skeleton-key route.

One glimpse of the flat and no doubt remained that old man Wiltern indulged Darnell to any extravagant limit. The furniture was magnificent. There were more furs around the palace than in an igloo. With splendid carelessness Darnell had left thousands of dollars in jewelry lying around on the bureau.

With one single and apparently unimportant exception there was nothing of any significance in the apartment. It was Battersly who found the yellow pawn ticket. He took it from a writing desk and brought it over to me.

"Sarge," he said. "This is sort of queer. That dame seems to have all the money in the world. Why would she be hocking a ring?"

I looked at the ticket he handed me. It stated that Alice Darnell had pawned a solitaire diamond for twenty-five hundred bucks yesterday afternoon. I thought it over for a moment then came to what I figured a simple solution.

"Probably Wiltern's death caught her short of dough. She hocked this to carry her over until the will's probated."

"Shall we take it down to the Inspector?"

"No. It doesn't mean anything."

We left Darnell's and journeyed in a taxi across town to Wiltern's triplex apartment. A butler, ancient, wavering and decayed admitted us. He was prop-

erly awed by our credentials and naturally garrulous. We pumped him dry, stopped off for a beer and returned empty-handed to Allhoff's slum.

ALLHOFF sighed his God-what-I-have-to-put-up-with sigh. "Look," he said, "suppose you're outside the emperor's palace in Tokio and you suddenly hear that an American has just assassinated Hirohito, would you take a powder?"

"What's that to do with it? I—"

"You shut up," said Allhoff. "First tell me about Wiltern's. Did you hear anything there?"

"Thousands of words," I told him. "All uttered by a senile and prolix butler and all about nothing."

"Tell me," said Allhoff. "Everything you can recall."

I shrugged my shoulders and quit. He invariably treated me as if I were a retarded half-wit who wouldn't notice a bloody knife at the scene of a murder.

Battersly carried on. "Oh, the butler told us a lot of stuff," he said. "All about how sick Wiltern was. How he—"

"What precisely was the matter with him?"

"Stomach ulcers," I said, "and cancer, which, of course, explains why he was killed. Some medical student wanting to look at an interesting stomach dashed in with a gun and shot him in the head. He was about to open him up with a razor blade when interrupted by—"

"Shut up, you fool! Go on, Battersly."

"Well, he was sick, see? But it seemed he must've been getting better because for the past few years he'd been living on Graham crackers and milk and stuff, but this night—the night he was killed, he ordered a big feed. Steak, potatoes, pie. So the butler figured he was getting better, see? So—"

Allhoff scribbled furiously on his desk pad. I watched him and seethed. He was impressing us. Pretending he saw mighty clues where we saw nothing. Where, as I figured it, there *was* nothing.

"Who was his doctor?" asked Allhoff. "Did you get his name?"

Battersly shook his head. Allhoff frowned, opened his mouth to call us several profane brands of idiots. But I spoke

quickly, before his words were uttered.

"You can get that easily enough by phone." I told him.

He grunted, made another note, and signaled Battersly to continue. Battersly took up his rambling tale. Allhoff did not scribble or interrupt again until the story of the dog was reached.

TO ABRIDGE the butler's version considerably, it went like this: A long time ago the dog of a friend had bitten Wiltern. Three years later, Wiltern saw the dog again, remembered the bite and kicked the animal severely, breaking two of its ribs. The tale was calculated to impress us with Wiltern's relentlessness. I found it merely dull but Allhoff's eyes lit up and he scribbled furiously again. I decided on a slight needling process.

"So that's it," I said. "This dog had a sweetheart, a brooding bitch who never forgot the harm done her mate. She waited for years until she saved up enough dog biscuit to exchange for a gun. Then she sneaked up on Wiltern and blasted him. She—"

Allhoff's voice roared through the room like thunder. Even though I was prepared for it, I flushed at the term he used. However, I kept my mouth shut. After all, I'd asked for it.

"All right," he said at last. "That'll do on Wiltern. Now what about Darnell?"

"This time nothing at all," I said. "Not even the gabble of a butler. We went through the joint. We found nothing that even you could find significant."

Allhoff scowled. Battersly broke the silence saying, "Well, Sergeant, there was that pawn ticket."

Allhoff's eyes narrowed and he inhaled swiftly. "What pawn ticket?"

"For a ring," said Battersly. "I kinda thought it funny. She seemed to have so much dough, why should she hock a ring?"

"What sort of a ring?" barked Allhoff. "When did she hock it and for how much?"

"A diamond," I said. "Solitaire. For twenty-five hundred bucks and she hocked it yesterday, which, of course, explains how Wiltern was killed. The pawnshop keeper—"

Allhoff glared at me. "Give me one

more theory," he said, "and I'll have you brought up on charges. Insubordination."

I shut up. The Commissioner had a very bad habit of believing Allhoff.

Allhoff poured himself another cup of coffee. I noted that the hand which held the percolator trembled slightly. "A solitaire," he muttered. "Hocked yesterday. Steak and potatoes. Stomach ulcers. Good God."

I looked at him with distaste. If he got anything out of those three items I was prepared to eat them. Now, my case against Hurlbut—

"You mugs," said Allhoff suddenly. "Go back to Wiltern's. Look around again."

"What are we looking for?" I asked. "A written confession?"

"Look in the bathroom," said Allhoff. "Look around for anything poisonous. Look in the room where he was found shot. See if there's any weapon there. Anything that might be used to kill a man."

Both Battersly and I stared at him. "Have you gone completely wacky?" I inquired. "In the first place, Wiltern was shot, so why are we looking for poison? Second, why should the murder-weapon be hidden in the house if—"

"Third," yelled Allhoff, "why should they butcher steers and let you live? Get out. Do as I tell you!"

So we went back to Wiltern's. There was, I am happy to relate, no poison in the bathroom. There was no weapon in the study where Wiltern's body had been found, and short of the meat-cleaver in the kitchen there wasn't a lethal instrument in all the house.

I used Wiltern's phone to call Allhoff and tell him so. There was a long pause on his end of the wire. Then at last: "Are you sure, Simmonds? Have you looked everywhere?"

"Sure. We've looked everywhere."

"But there must be something. You must have missed somewhere. You—"

"We've missed nothing," I told him angrily. "The only weapon is a chair and he didn't die from being hit over the head with a piece of Chippendale. We've been through the house thoroughly. Even looked in the fireplace."

"Fireplace?" said Allhoff electrically.

"Yes, fireplace."

"My God, why didn't you tell me there was a fireplace? Look up the chimney. I'll hold the wire."

I put down the receiver and with Battersly's eyes on me, walked across the room and stuck my head into the fireplace. I twisted my neck around and peered up the chimney.

Then, I blinked, reached up, and seized the gun. It was a thirty-eight and I had some trouble pulling it out of the flue. Around its trigger-guard was attached a thick length of rubber, the other end of which was fixed to a spike driven in the bricks of the chimney. Finally I detached and removed it.

I went unhappily back to the phone and reported. Allhoff's shout of triumph was discord to my ears. But then Battersly who was examining the gun said something and my spirits picked up.

"Hold the wire," I said to Allhoff. "You'll be discouraged to know that Battersly's just looked the gun over. It's completely loaded and apparently never been fired."

"Why should I be discouraged?"

"Because if it hasn't been fired it can't be the murder weapon!"

"Well," said Allhoff, and there was honest surprise in his tone. "who in the name of God *expected* it to be the murder weapon?"

That one I couldn't answer, or even encompass.

"Bring it down here right away," said Allhoff. "And incidentally, I hope you have your sugar book with you."

I hung up and back we went to Allhoff's.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Chief Is Mysterious

THE next day Battersly and I arrived simultaneously at the tenement. Allhoff, apparently, had been up for some time. I could tell by his bland manner that he had already imbibed at least a pint of coffee.

However, there was something in his mien I definitely did not care for. He wore a cocky air. I was very much afraid that he had something important on the



Wiltern killing. I was even more afraid that it didn't concern Hurlbut, Waverly or Coller. In which event my wife was going to make a lot of trouble regarding the loss of several pounds of sugar.

Allhoff drained his coffee cup with the poise of an Army dredge draining a swamp and said too casually: "Well, I expect to clean up this mess today."

Battersly blinked. He said, hopefully: "Was it Waverly, maybe, Inspector?"

Allhoff shook his head.

"Hurlbut?" I asked.

Allhoff shook his head again. "Nor Coller," he said. "I just ordered Coller released. And Homicide is laying off those other two suckers as well."

I sighed and looked around the unkempt room. I noted, somewhat to my surprise that the bedroom door was shut. This was a most unusual circumstance. I wrinkled my brow and performed a simple feat of deduction.

I figured that he had arranged to interview Alice Darnell again. She had put him upon the defensive in their last engagement, so he wasn't leaving himself any wider open than necessary. Or perhaps there remained a vestige of shame in him insofar as he didn't want a woman to observe the chaotic filth of his boudoir.

When I heard footfalls on the stairs outside I was sure I was right, hence I was a little surprised when the door opened and Bob Newhall, accompanied by Weatherby, the lawyer, entered the room.

Weatherby said: "You sent for us?"

"I sent for Newhall," said Allhoff uncompromisingly. He emptied his cup, refilled it and looked around the room.

"In a case such as the killing of Maxwell Wiltern," he announced, "we must first consider the character of the victim. This Wiltern was something of a nut."

Weatherby frowned and Newhall bridled. "I resent that," he said.

"What you should resent," said Allhoff evenly, "is your own impatience. You should have waited another hour or so."

"Waited? For what?"

Allhoff ignored the question. He repeated: "Yes, Wiltern was a nut. Maybe he wasn't quite so screwy when he was painting Broadway red. But the fact of his leading a monk's life made him a bitter

old man, brooding about his fancied wrongs. He hated certain people. He satisfied that hate in an odd manner.

"Take that story of the dog who once bit him. Wiltern remembered that for three years. Then he broke the animal's ribs. He was vindictive—patient, too. You didn't inherit that quality, did you, Mr. Newhall?"

Weatherby, Battersly and myself looked puzzled at this repetitious reference to Newhall's impatience. Newhall, it seemed to me, looked puzzled and worried.

"There were three men," said Allhoff, "whom Wiltern hated above all others. They were Coller, who once took a girl away from him, Hurlbut, the bookmaker who had won a lot of his money, and Waverly, the journalist who had held him up to ridicule in the press. Headed for the grave Wiltern was prepared to forgive everyone else he hated, but not those three. He cooked up a neat little plan not without overtones of ironic humor."

"Sure," I said sarcastically, "he left them all a pot full of money."

"Your perception is limited," said Allhoff icily. "Sure, he took out insurance in their favor—deliberately. The premiums meant nothing to him. It was all nicely diabolical. That gave each of them a financial motive for killing him. In addition it could easily be established that they all disliked him. Moreover, he arranged it so that witnesses would testify that each of them had an appointment with him just before he died and that none of them had an alibi."

He paused and refilled his cup. All that he said was apparently true. But it wasn't enough. After all, Wiltern was dead, wasn't he? If my inkling of what Allhoff drove at was true, it implied that Wiltern had known he was going to die.

"So," said Allhoff, "Wiltern dies. Each of those three he hated is suspected of his murder. There is a good case against each of them. Moreover, each of the three insurance companies will fight like hell to see that the beneficiary on their policy is convicted so that they won't have to pay."

"Under the circumstances," put in Weatherby, "it is quite possible a court may rule that none of those policies are paid because each beneficiary is under suspicion of murdering Wiltern."

"Exactly," said Allhoff. "Wiltern figured that. He figured one or more of them might burn for killing him. They'd all have a damned unpleasant time, rendered even more so by the fight for all that dough, more dough than they ever dreamed of. Wiltern wanted to make those three guys miserable. It was foolproof."

"Wait a minute," I said. "It was wonderfully foolproof. But the fact remains that Wiltern is dead. Do you mean that he knew someone other than Coller, Waverly and Hurlbut was going to kill him? That's why he plotted so elaborately against them?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"Then who did he figure was going to kill him?"

"Wiltern."

"Wiltern? You mean Wiltern was going to kill Wiltern?"

"Precisely," said Allhoff. He grinned.

Across the room Newhall exhaled loudly. "So that was it," he said. "My uncle killed himself. He *had* been quite despondent about his condition, you know."

"Easy," said Allhoff, "you're going a trifle too fast. Let us move on to that condemned man's meal Wiltern ate shortly before he died. His servant figured that Wiltern fell to upon a mess of rare steak and pie because he was getting better. I spoke, via phone, with Wiltern's doctor who assured me the contrary was true."

I reasoned that one out myself as Allhoff devoted a moment to gulping another pint of coffee.

"**Y**OU mean that Wiltern's condition was hopeless? That eating a decent meal with his ulcers and cancer would cause him excruciating agony later? So he intended killing himself before the pain began?"

"Your perception improves," said Allhoff.

Newhall sighed again. "It's too bad," he said heavily. "He was a decent old guy."

"But the gun," said Weatherby. "How could he commit suicide and dispose of the weapon in order that those three men would be suspected?"

"He had that worked out, too," said

Allhoff. "He fastened a thick rubber band to the trigger guard of a revolver. It was his intention to blow his brains out. The rubber band would jerk the gun from his inert hand."

"Jerk it up the chimney," I said brightly. "The other end of the rubber was fastened to a spike driven into the bricks of the chimney. No one would think of looking up a chimney for a gun."

"Except me," said Allhoff.

"Those three men owe you a great debt, Inspector," said Weatherby. "You've cleared them. You've—"

"Wait a minute," said Battersly. "That gun in the chimney, Inspector. It hadn't been fired."

I felt like a congressman explaining why he voted as he did on the Conscription Bill. I am no Einstein, but never before had Battersly got in ahead of me. And it was seldom enough we had a chance to correct Allhoff.

Newhall frowned. "Then," said Weatherby, "Wiltern couldn't have killed himself. You're wrong, Inspector."

"I didn't say he killed himself," said Allhoff. "I said he intended to."

"Then, for the love of God," I said, "who *did* kill him?"

"Now," said Allhoff, "we come to the point of Mr. Newhall's impatience, his unfortunate impetuosity."

"Then *come* to the damned point," I said, irritated. "You've been evading it long enough."

Oddly enough he didn't even swear at me. "The point," he said. "The wonderful ironic point, is that Newhall killed his uncle just about half an hour before Wiltern intended to do the job himself."

**T**HERE was momentary and complete silence in the room. Weatherby frowned and fluttered his hands. Battersly looked baffled. Newhall kept his eyes on Allhoff who returned his gaze with what I read as mockery.

"You're crazy," said Newhall suddenly. "Why should I kill him?"

Allhoff sipped coffee delicately like a shoat plunging its snout in a trough. "For money," he said between gulps.

"Ridiculous," said Weatherby. "Newhall had everything he asked his uncle for. That we can prove in any court."

"True," said Allhoff. "But he knew that Wiltern wouldn't live, much longer and he wanted to insure his getting all the money he wanted after his uncle was dead, too."

"That's even crazier," said Newhall, and I observed his voice was raised. "I was the sole heir."

"You were afraid you wouldn't be if your uncle had lived a few more days."

"Will you make yourself clear?" demanded Weatherby.

Newhall shook his head violently. "It's a lie," he yelled. "A frame. There must be a motive in a murder case. There is none here."

"Originally," said Allhoff, "the motive was known only to you and your victim. A little later, you realized that Alice Darnell would know it, too. So you told her. Now I know it. Miss Darnell responded to my questioning. So three of us know the motive now."

Newhall stared at Allhoff. "What are you talking about? What motive?"

"Why, the marriage motive. If Wiltern married Darnell, his money would go to her, his widow, not to you. You heard that he was about to marry her. So you fought with him about it. Then killed him before he could make an honest woman of her."

Newhall's chair scraped against the floor. He stood up and literally put his back against the wall.

"Damn you," he yelled. "She told you! She told you! She was the only one who knew. Well, she's in it with me. If she's sold me out I can sell her. She's an accessory after the fact. I'll drag her down with me. I'll—"

"Open the bedroom door," said Allhoff. "Bring her out."

**B**EWILDERED, I opened the bedroom door. I stood, astonished, on the threshold. Alice Darnell sat on Allhoff's bed. A dirty handkerchief was in her mouth. Handcuffs held her wrists to the bedstead and her ankles were tied to the radiator pipe that ran along the side wall. Her eyes were flecked with rage and hate as I released her.

But as she strode into the other room her glare was directed at Newhall, not Allhoff.

"You miserable stupid fool," she said. "You've talked yourself into the chair and me into prison."

"You told him," cried Newhall, almost hysterically. "You told him."

"I told him nothing."

Allhoff beamed complacently. Newhall, pale as carded wool, said: "You must have. How did he know?"

"He probably figured it out somehow. Everyone isn't as stupid as you."

"Indeed not," said Allhoff looking like

(Continued on page 113)



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**Adventure**  
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# NECKTIE PARTY

By  
**DALE CLARK**

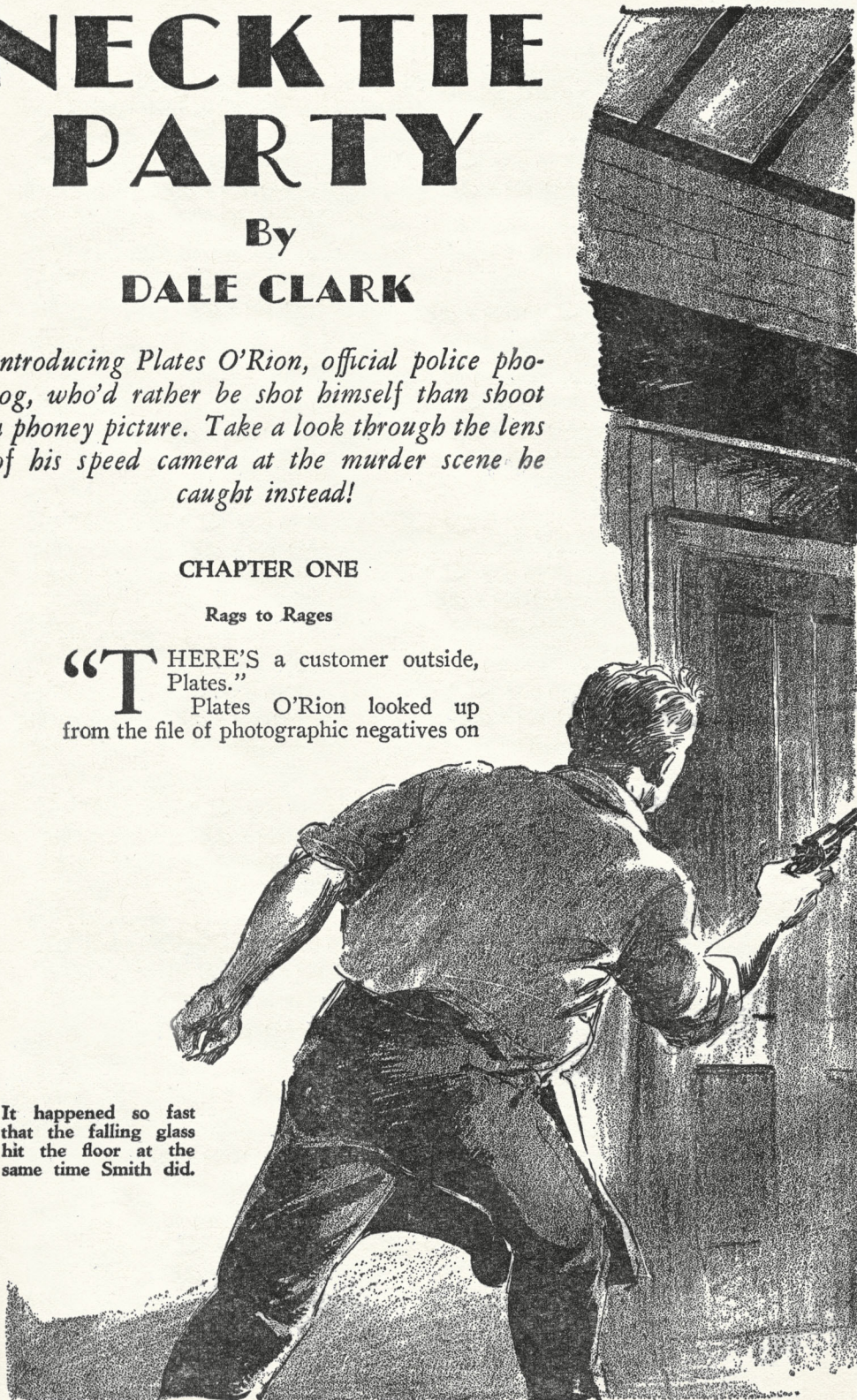
*Introducing Plates O'Rion, official police photog, who'd rather be shot himself than shoot a phoney picture. Take a look through the lens of his speed camera at the murder scene he caught instead!*

## CHAPTER ONE

Rags to Rages

“**T**HERE'S a customer outside, Plates.”  
Plates O'Rion looked up from the file of photographic negatives on

It happened so fast that the falling glass hit the floor at the same time Smith did.





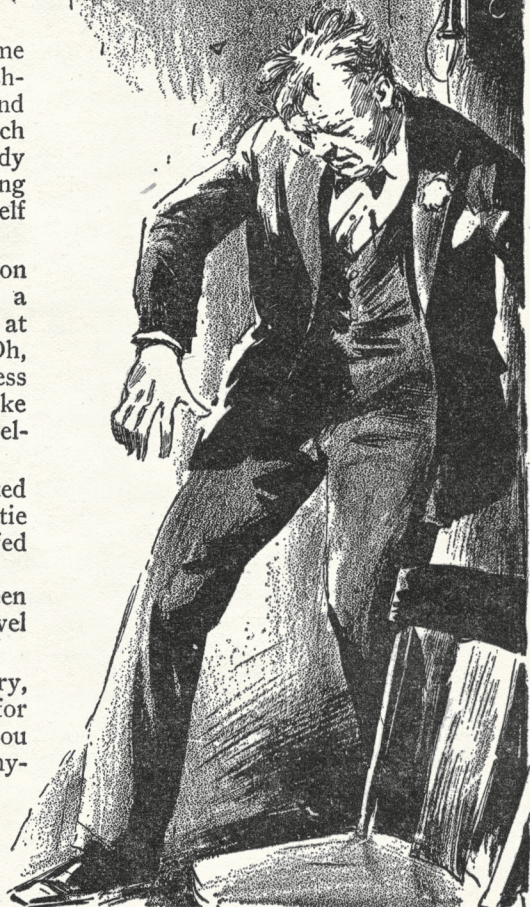
the battered office desk. The nickname was as much a part of him as his Irish-blue eyes, his scrubby gray mustache, and the perpetually rumpled necktie which trademarked his appearance. Nobody ever called him anything else—including the daughter who had appointed herself his office girl.

“And what a customer!” Sally O’Rion continued gleefully. “He’s practically a one-man Easter parade. And look at *you!* Look at your necktie again! Oh, Plates, how can you expect to impress clients when you go around looking like a fugitive from a Salvation Army shelter?”

With swift, lithe steps she darted around the desk, jerked the necktie straight—then stepped back, and sniffed suspiciously at her slim fingers.

“Hypo!” she wailed. “You’ve been using your tie for a darkroom towel again!”

O’Rion flinched guiltily. “I’m sorry, hon. I just plain forgot. It’s hard for an old dog to unlearn his tricks, you know.” He added with sly humor: “Anyway, the customers are interested in my pictures, not me. If my pix are O. K., it’s immaterial to them whether I’ve got a silk tie or a piece of clothesline around my neck.”



"Could be. But it could be you'd get a lot higher prices for your pix if you'd look more like a successful business man," Sally retorted.

His grin was sheer Irish blarney. "Shucks, Sal. You're all the eye-appeal any one office needs."

She turned to the door—and Plates wondered at the freak of heredity which had permitted his angular, pint-sized, snub-nosed self to sire the utterly lovely Sally. It wasn't as if she took after her mother, either, or she'd have weighed 150 pounds instead of a slimly contoured 110.

Sally O'Rion was the family miracle, which no doubt explained why they'd spoiled the hell out of her!

But Plates' parental reflections were halted by his daughter's voice. "This way, sir. Mr. O'Rion will see you now."

**T**HE young-old man who strode in from the outer office *was* an Easter parade, all right. Over-dressed, Plates thought, letting his glance slide over the pastel soft collar, foulard tie, and crisply creased Oxford gray flannels. A bit too much padding tufted the flaring shoulders, a trifle too nifty a line tried to slim the fellow's waistline. . .

Plates noticed such things, not because he knew or gave a damn for men's fashions, but simply and solely because he'd toted a newspaper camera for too many years. He'd photographed too many celebrities, ranging from international bankers to prize fight managers, ever to be taken in by a phoney!

No doubt the form-fitted flannels had cost a three-figure price, yet Plates sensed that no member of the Social Register would have been caught conscious in it. Neither would a business or professional man.

His blue glance dropped to the caller's twin-toned footgear, then flashed up to the hard-set, thin-lipped face. A face young in years, but old in experience. The eyes could easily have been left in an icebox freezing tray overnight, Plates thought. The whites had that frozen look, and the pupils were chilled black pits.

Sally O'Rion had noticed none of these details, because nothing in her eighteen sheltered years had taught her to dis-

trust other people's motives. But Plates had been kicked around a lot by life, so he was as wary as a sub commander in hostile waters.

Warily, he waved his hand. "Sit down, Mr.— I guess I didn't get your name?"

The flannel-clad man's voice fitted his face. Clipped, harsh. "Smith will do."

Plates O'Rion decided he didn't like the way things were starting. "Oh. Well, what can I do for you—Smith?"

"What the hell do you think? You're a photographer, ain't you? I want a picture."

"A picture of yourself?"

"How'd you guess?"—dryly.

Plates shrugged, smiled. "You've come to the wrong shop. This isn't a portrait studio. I'm a legal photographer. I specialize in pictures to be used as courtroom evidence. It's somewhat like police laboratory work, except that it's concerned mostly with private, civil lawsuits."

He spoke with the quiet pride of a man who had practically invented a brand-new profession. "My clients are lawyers, insurance adjusters, businessmen. I photograph accident scenes, industrial processes, do ultra-violet analysis of suspected documents, identification work for large companies—"

"O. K! O. K!" interrupted the man who called himself Smith. "You got a swell set-up. You're equipped to tackle any kind of a job. You're just the guy I want."

"To take a portrait of yourself?" the little photographer stared.

Smith's nod was a forceful head jerk, indicating impatience more than agreement.

"Yeah. Me and another guy. It's got to be taken at the Zoo, though."

Plates said in mild surprise: "I don't see why you've come to me. That's simple enough. There's an itinerant photographer who hangs around the Zoo—"

Smith cut in coldly. "It ain't so simple. The other guy won't be there."

**P**LATES' wiry figure gave an involuntary jerk. It sounded like he was being propositioned to fake a picture! Quite unconsciously, his perspiring hand slid up his coatfront and clutched hold of his

necktie. He began to wipe his hand on it mechanically.

It was a habit of years' standing. In the darkroom, he'd never been able to remember to fumble for a hand towel. It was better to soil a fifty cent necktie than to ruin a possibly irreplaceable negative, wasn't it?

He'd got the habit—and never been able to break it. He'd even tried going without the necktie, but that merely meant he used a two-dollar shirt instead.

Smith didn't notice.

"Here," he clipped. "I got a picture of him. All you got to do is take one of me in the same place, and then dummy the two together."

Plates O'Rion barely glanced at the snapshot Smith flipped out his pigskin wallet onto the desk. He *was* being asked to fake a picture—and every fiber in the little man's makeup recoiled in stunned, well-nigh unbelieving protest.

He didn't get it. The snapshot merely depicted a man in the act of flipping peanuts into a monkey cage. The reason for adding Smith's figure to that innocent spectacle wholly escaped Plates' imagination. Not that he'd touch the proposition with a ten-foot pole, but the sheer fantasy of the suggestion wrung a word out of him: "*Why?*"

"What the hell do you care why?" Smith shrugged. "You'll get paid well for the job. Fifty frogskins—*aih!* Hell!"

His seal-sleek tailored figure whirled out of the chair as the camera clicked.

Sally O'Rion stood in the doorway. Her blond head was still at the level of the eye-finder, her fingers curled on the old Speed Graphic's cable release.

Smith dived at her like a man shot out of a cannon. He ripped the box out of her hands, whipped it head-high, started it streaking downward. . .

Plates O'Rion shook off a momentary coma of amazed shock. Moving with incredible, electrified energy, his pint-sized figure flew around the desk. A wild, goatish leap brought him abreast of the raging, berserk Smith.

"No! Wait! I—"

Smith's flannel-clad knee flexed into Plates' groin. The little photographer skidded across the floor, moved the desk a full yard as he crashed into it. A pound-

ing wave of hot agony made the facial muscles stand out like ropes under his pallid skin.

But he stayed on his feet, and the camera was snug in his two wiry hands!

Sally flung through the doorway, skirts a-swirl from her Nylon-hosed knees as she whirled between Smith and her father, raging: "You brute! You beast! A man half your size—and you fouled him like that!" She took the camera out of Plates' hands and started for the darkroom with it.

Smith's pretense of gentlemanly appearance was discarded like a snake's sloughed-off skin. Naked fury distorted his face as he raced after the girl into the darkroom—with Plates just one jump ahead of him.

"Gimme that camera! Nobody's gonna get away with double-crossing me!" he gritted through bared, clenched teeth.

"No!" Plates panted. "It was *me*. She was taking my picture. Not yours."

Sheer astonishment halted Smith, slackened his jaw. "Huh? Why the hell—"

Plates panted. "Because she's my kid. I—I was spoiling my necktie. She made me promise her a dollar—for every picture of me doing it. To break me of the habit."

"I don't give a damn! I'm in that shot with you, and it don't go!" The flannel-clad sleeve jabbed out savagely.

"Hold it, mister!" Plates with a camera had something in common with a tigress defending her young. "You don't have to smash the box. Cameras cost money! They—they're like watches. All you have to do is remove the holder. Show him, Sally."

Sally's practiced fingers flicked out the 4x5 oblong holder, revealing a coated surface of film. She held it up to the light.

"You see?" said Plates. "It's completely fogged. She didn't even have a chance to replace the black slide."

"Oh, yeah?" said Smith. Suddenly he whipped out a gun from his waistband and put a bullet through the film that Sally held.

Plates had snatched up a heavy bottle of hypo, but before he could bring it down on the visitor's head, he found himself covered by the automatic.

**T**HROUGH tight lips, Smith rasped: "Come on, O'Rion, we got a date at the Zoo."

"Well!" exclaimed Sally O'Rion hotly. "If Plates is dumb enough to have anything more to do with you, he deserves to be locked up in that monkey cage!"

But Plates' spinning brain had already figured out the answer. After seeing Smith in action, he wanted no more trouble—not with Sally right in the middle of it.

"Damn it, Sal!" he raged loudly. "I'm old enough to run my business without any of your lip!"

"But—Plates!"

"Fifty bucks is folding money! I'm not going to turn it down because a brat butts in with her fool monkeyshines!"

Never in her eighteen years had Sally heard her father rave at her like this. For a moment she stared at him with tear-blinded eyes—then her chin jerked up, and with a toss of her blond head she darted back to the outer office.

"Put up the gun," Plates breathed. "I'll go quietly. Just so you leave the kid out of it."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Monkey Business

**T**HE thronging, sunlit street made Plates half-wonder whether the whole thing wasn't a pipe dream. It didn't seem possible a man could be kidnapped in broad daylight, snatched out of his own office in a downtown building.

Would Smith dare to use the gun, supposing Plates simply took to his heels?

The chance was gone as swiftly as he thought of it. A hand at his elbow trundled the photographer half a dozen yards to the mouth of an alley, shoved him into a coupe parked there. Smith raced for the other side of the machine.

Plates fumbled for the inner door latch—found that it had been removed. And then Smith was sliding under the wheel, punching a key into the dash lock, toeing the motor alive.

"Don't yell at any traffic cops. Not if you want to come back here alive." The flannel-clad man sent the coupe bumping over the cobblestones. At the end of the

block, Plates saw that his captor intended to stay in the alley.

There was precious little chance of yelling at a street corner cop, if he'd dared to risk it. There wasn't much to do except sit back and relax—and think.

Presently he said: "We'll have to stop at a drugstore, Smith."

"Why?"

"To buy a box camera."

Smith's cold glance dropped to the camera case between Plates' feet. Even if it hadn't been a habit, he'd have taken his equipment to fool Sally. "What's wrong with the camera you got?"

"It's too good."

"That don't make sense!"

Plates sighed, flicked his thumbnail against the Zoo snapshot that was still in his hand. "This picture was taken with a box camera. You don't expect me to match up the work of a simple meniscus lens with the product of a highly critical, corrected anastigmat, do you?"

"Huh? What's the difference?"

"Plenty," Plates said disgustedly. "The good lens takes infinitely sharper detail. It has a definite depth of field. The field of the inexpensive box camera lens is fixed, anywhere from eight feet to infinity. Trying to combine the results of the two would be like putting a Tiffany diamond into a dime store ring."

"O. K! O. K! We'll get you a box camera!"

Maybe, Plates thought hopefully, that would be his chance. They'd stop at a drugstore, in all likelihood. He might find an opportunity to whisper a word to the druggist while picking out the camera. Better yet, he would watch for a chance to slip the man a written note. A handful of cops closing in on the monkey cages would make short work, indeed, of Smith's plotting.

**M**EANWHILE, he peered interestedly at the snapshot. It provided a fair likeness of the subject, a lanky man clad in a belted ulster and pork-pie, felt hat. Trees in the background were leafed out, but the ulster led Plates to conclude the picture had been taken sometime in the early spring.

But why Smith wanted to be included in the scene was an utter mystery, one to



which Plates had not the faintest clue. Except that the motive was undoubtedly illegal! The man's berserk rage at the click of the camera proved it.

Well, the motive was for the police to worry about. Plates' only interest was in escaping from his dilemma at the earliest opportunity. Certainly he had no intention of going through with the thing. If worse came to worst, he resolved to bungle the job—turn out a fake so preposterously raw that Smith couldn't possibly make use of it.

Not far from the Zoo, the coupe braked in front of a neighborhood drugstore. Smith bolted around, unlatched the door from the outside. "Come on, O'Rion, but keep your trap shut. I'll do the talking."

Smith had all the luck. The drugstore was deserted, nobody in the place besides a shirt-sleeved and short-sighted proprietor.

"Gimme a box camera." The man started setting out cameras on the showcase top, but Smith waved his hand at the first. "That one'll do. Load 'er up with some film."

He disdained having his purchase wrapped, tossed a bill onto the showcase, swept up his change with one hand. The other hand stayed close to his waistband, and at an instant's warning he could have whipped out the belly-gun and disposed of Plates—the druggist, too, for that matter.

They might run into a cop at the Zoo, Plates hoped. But here again luck favored Smith—luck, and the set-up of the place. It was a public park zoo, charging no admission fee so there was no gauntlet of ticket window and turnstile to run.

Smith hurried matters now, fairly plunging from the parking spot across the park lawn.

For one moment, the glimpse of a blue-clad officer rocketed hope in Plates' chest. But the cop was looking the other way. And Smith's hand on his arm jerked the little photographer around the corner of a building. "One yip outa you, and I'll klonk you—you'll be lion bait!"

He hustled the older man past the moat behind which the big cats padded, past the seal pool, to the monkey house with its outdoor cages.

THERE was a crowd here—a crowd of kids, being instructed by a lady guide on the life history and intellectual attainments of the chimpanzee. "The smartest creatures in the Zoo!" she enthused. "They're almost human, you know. As a matter of fact, their body temperature is identically the same as yours, and they catch exactly the same colds you have, which is why the Zoo *doesn't* want you to feed them. They might catch your germs, you see. We never let them outside except when the temperature is up in the 70's at least—"

Smith twitched under his breath: "Scram, for God's sake!" His eye ranged aloft. "The shadows will be wrong in a minute—" the one detail of photography he seemed to understand, and the one that explained his burning haste.

Plates O'Rion wondered whether he ought to mention that Smith didn't have to stand in front of the cages, that any other background would have served as well.

But the man's luck still held. A chimp scratched indelicately, a kid with less brains than the chimp giggled, and the guide hurried her brood on toward the seal pool.

Smith raced into position. "Shoot!"

*Click.*

"Better take another, just in case," Plates stalled.

*Click.*

"One more," Plates wheedled.

The luck might be changing at last. Wending his way toward them was the professional who worked the Zoo day in and day out. The old fellow packed one of those jiffy outfits, your picture snapped, developed, fixed, all in five minutes. Feeling sorry for the ancient, Plates had posed more times than once with Sally in the not-so-long ago past when she wanted to be taken to the Zoo.

The old boy wouldn't remember. Yet he'd be intelligent enough to see something screwy in the sight of Plates—with a Speed Graphic cased at his side—using a box camera instead!

"That's enough!" Smith rasped. "You either got it, or it's going to be too bad for you! Come on!"

Plates had to change his mind. There was still some other reason, yet to be discovered, for the flannel-clad man's pound-

ing hurry. The mad race began once more.

Back to the coupe again on the double-quick, though arcing wide of the lion moat and the cop this time. In and away.

Plates' hand was up and entangled with his necktie, as city block after city block ticked by on the return journey. Return to the office—and Sally. So that she'd be in peril, again, equalling Plates' own.

**T**HE pintsize photographer was a peaceful man, let alone. He was smart. He'd learned to rely on his wits and agility rather than his fists.

But sometimes men, like nations, must fight. He had to fight now.

His wary, wise mind raced ahead of the coupe to plan a campaign of battle. Doubtless, he mused, Smith would park again in the convenient alley. There was a step, eighteen inches high, from the alley level to the sidewalk. There would be the place . . .

He relaxed, now that it was decided. His fingers were steady, unhurried, as he wound the film through the box camera, removed the roll, gummed it, dropped it into his pocket.

To Smith's watchful eye, the little man looked resigned and spiritless as the coupe nosed into the alley again. Smith braked, jumped out, raced around to open the other door and grip the photographer's arm.

"Come on—attaboy—you're getting some sense at last." To a casual passer-by, the two men rounding out of the alley's mouth would have seemed a pair of friends, one chatting to the other.

Smith's flannel-clad leg swung up, shoe leather to the level of the sidewalk.

Now! Plates O'Rion surged sideways and bunted into his captor with all the force in his shoulders, torso, and short, straining legs. Caught on one foot, Smith catapulted hard against the corner of the building.

*Crash-h!*

The bullet whanged between the two, through the very panel of space Smith had occupied an instant previously.

Plates' head jerked up at the gun roar, the yard-distant lance of fire. He caught the one hundredth of a second glimpse of black, scowling brows, smouldering eyes, lips stretched in a rubber-red snarl—

and below, the blued shine of the gun.

*Crash-h!*

Leaning against the building corner, Smith had his chunky weapon out and smoking. He shot wildly, a frantic, unaimed trigger squeeze at the very instant the gun cleared its nest inside his trouser top. He hit nothing, but he sent the black browed man scuttling back.

The trouble with thought-out plans in battle is—you can't re-think them in the time of a watch tick. For a precious second Plates O'Rion stood stunned by the wierd, incomprehensible turn of events. It was long enough for Smith to yank him along as he ducked back into the alley. Literally at arm's length Smith swung him dizzily at the coupe.

*Crash-uh-h!* That was farther down the alley, gaining a rolling echo from the high walls.

"In! In! You want to get killed?" Smith shrieked.

Fresh, rolling gun thunder from the alley depths convinced the photographer. If Smith didn't kill him for resisting, the other pair would. He scrambled in, was flattened under Smith's weight as the flannel-clad man hurtled over and on top of him.

*Crash-h-uh!* That one was in the windshield, making a Jack Frost pattern in the safety glass. Smith cursed, stuck out his arm, drove the black browed man to cover with more gunfire.

*Crash. Crash-uh.* In the middle of it, the motor roared alive. With utter disregard for pedestrian life, Smith reversed the coupe from the alley's mouth into the street, shifted gears, streaked by the margin of a cat's whisker across an oncoming line of traffic, and zoomed up the alley in the opposite direction and next block.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Blackroom Magic

**S**MITH must have been the seventh son of a same, born with a caul, under the luckiest star in the heavens. How else could he make it, thread that bullet-marked coupe through the cross-town traffic, in the very teeth of oncoming waves of police cars sirening to the strange

scene of the utterly reckless shooting?

But make it he did, whipping the machine into a mile-distant, dingier alley, then into a rat-run parking area between squat, smoke-dimmed walls. "Pile out, O'Rion. We can't go back there. You work here."

"Are you crazy? What with?"

"What do you need?"

"Everything. Blackout materials, paper, chemicals, trays, ruby bulb, printing box, masking tape, photofloods for copying—"

"Make out a list. We'll get it for you."

We?

Smith crowded him up a wooden stairs that angled down the wall of the nearest building, shoved him through a door into a skylighted loft that had—once—been some impecunious painter's studio. The address fringed on the city's bohemia, a few rabbit warren blocks given over to Greenwich Village literati, sculptors, Dadaists, and just plain nances. The man who rose from his chair as they entered was none of these. Fifty, his face was granite blocked under an iron-gray mane, he might have been a successful lawyer, doctor, merchant—or con man.

"You've got it?" this man asked.

Smith cursed. "Hell, no! Somebody tipped them off, Frasee! I had to shoot my way out!"

Frasee peered at little Plates. "This isn't one of—?"

"No, he's the guy I told you about. Get busy, O'Rion. The list, the list."

The photographer's trained eye skimmed his surroundings. The place was an archeologist's trove, showing its successive lives in layers. Bottom-most, it had been a store loft originally, as the crude flooring testified, in the second stage, the loft had been partitioned into a slum flat, then came the artist era, when some of the partitions were torn out and murals daubed on the walls, now, clearly, it was a crook's hide-out. But what interested him most was the phone in this room's corner.

"You'll have to let me call the kid," he blurted. "Just to let her know I'm O. K. She heard all that shooting, and she might get to thinking—"

Smith shrugged. "Go head, try. But I got a hunch you're going to be surprised."

Plates peered at him a moment, then walked to the telephone. It was a wall instrument, one with names and numbers scrawled on the wall below. He got nothing out of it, when he'd dialed, except the *br-r-r* of unanswered ringing in the office.

"Damn you!" He forgot he was a pint-size of middle-aged man, armed with nothing more lethal than the camera slung from his shoulder. He sprang twelve feet across the room, straight at Smith's throat.

As a terrier can worry a bear, so the sheer audacity of the little man's infuriated attack took the larger, younger Smith by surprise and drove him back onto his heels. Smith floundered, off-balance, cartwheeling with both flying hands.

Had they been alone, Plates might have gotten that belly gun from the guy's middle.

But Frasee stepped swiftly, grabbed him from behind in a thick-armed hug.

"Damn!" swore Smith. "For a little guy, ain't he the heller?"

"Relax," Frasee said—quietly—into the struggling photographer's ear. "They've got your daughter. Not us. They moved in on your office. And you don't know who they are."

**H**IS calm logic was more effective than his thick arms in subduing Plates. "Don't you see?" Frasee urged. "What good would it do you if you pulled a gun and shot the two of us dead? It wouldn't get the girl back. You still wouldn't know what to do or where to turn next. We're the only ones who can help you now."

"Sure. That's right," Smith jerked. "You play ball, do the job for us, and then we'll see what we can do about your kid."

Plates' brain was in tumult, his blue eyes flashing from Frasee's solid face to Smith's narrow, grim one. "But that'll take time! I have to develop, fix, wash a negative—a print—and then another print and negative after that!"

"You better get started on that list then. It's your only out, O'Rion."

Plates wetted his lips, clutched at his necktie desperately. He didn't believe Smith. The hoodlum would back down on his bargain. Plates felt ice-sure of it.

But what other chance had he? He had to play along, if possible wring the truth out of Smith by trickery while he pretended to swallow the bait.

"All right. It's a deal." Hurriedly, he jotted down the list of necessities, a list with which Frasee immediately departed. "Come on, Smith, we'll rig up some kind of a darkroom while we're waiting."

He discarded the bathroom after a glance—it was too cramped and airless for the work. The kitchenette would have to serve. Fortunately, it had only one window.

He fished out his pocket knife, dropped to his knees, and started hacking out a square from the linoleum flooring. "We'll tack this over the window. Then just go around the edges and the door cracks with Scotch tape, when Frasee gets back." As he worked, he growled out a question. "How good does the job have to be, anyway?"

"It's got to be perfect!"

"Yeah. But perfect for what? Is some amateur just going to glance at it, or has it got to stand up under a microscopic investigation by experts?" Plates' voice worried impatiently. "It makes a lot of difference who's going to pass on it."

"The D. A.—" Smith's fervent answer came without thinking. He stopped short, swore at himself. Then: "I said that much, I might as well give it to you cold. I'm being framed. I'm the goat for the filthiest frame-up that ever came down the pike. I've got an alibi, a guy who could clear me, but the blackhearted rat sold out!"

His voice rang with passionate sincerity. But out of his newspaper experience, Plates knew that the pleas of crooks always did. You could walk down the corridors of the state pen, and not a man in those cells but would assure you—with that same throbbing sincerity—that he'd been framed.

"And this picture?" he asked.

"It's my out. My real alibi's out. I've got to have a different one. It puts me three hundred miles away at the day and almost the hour the thing happened."

Three hundred miles wouldn't have told Plates O'Rion so much, if he hadn't hooked it up with his previous conviction that the earlier snapshot had been taken last spring. Say, on an April after-

noon, at about three P. M., as its shadows indicated.

The Capitol Hill kill, as the newspapers called it, because the murder had occurred in the State Capitol building—almost exactly three hundred miles distant! The legislature had been in session last April. Somebody had walked into an anteroom and shot down a witness, an obscure little accountant, who'd been about to tell a senatorial committee some truths about the milk inspection scandal.

PLATES O'RION jumped up, slammed the piece of linoleum against the window—to hide what he knew must be in his face.

The murder hadn't worked out as its sponsors must have hoped. True, it had silenced the witness. But at the same time, murder under the very dome of the Capitol had aroused influential men and women and thereby focused glaring publicity onto the machinations of the noxious political crew who were using the milk inspection laws as a lever to highjack millions from the wage-earning public.

Plates didn't doubt for a minute the mysterious boss behind the scenes would be willing to frame somebody—anybody—to shut off that deadly white glare. A nation fighting a war like this one was in no mood to put up with thieving, racketeering rats in the public food supply.

So—Smith might be telling the truth at that. But if so, then Plates O'Rion was in the deadliest, grimmest sort of peril. For Smith wouldn't—couldn't—daren't—let the one man live who could demonstrate that this picture, on which life itself depended, was a faked phoney!

"I don't get it!" Plates gulped. "I don't see how it could—"

"The picture? It's simple, easy, unbeatable," Smith boasted. "The guy in that snapshot is Ballard Allen."

"The explorer?" Plates' tone put a whole row of question marks after the comment. "How could *he* be mixed up in—in this?"

"He ain't. He was in town here that one day, stopped off to see the Zoo about some freak animal he's getting them down in the jungles of Brazil now. So if I'm in the same snapshot with him, I couldn't have—I couldn't be out of town that day.

It's a cinch," Smith bragged, "if you do your part of the job right."

"You mean it's a cinch if there aren't more of those pictures, showing him *alone*, in circulation."

"Don't worry, there ain't. Frasee handled that angle. He's a smart mouthpiece."

Plates' tongue was flooded with more questions that he dared not ask, for already the smart mouthpiece could be heard laboring up the steps with his purchases.

**H**E WENT to work. Mixing solutions, which of course he'd ordered in convenient packaged form, setting out trays, screwing a ruby bulb into the droplight fixture, drying his hands on his necktie before stripping the film from its paper roll.

Smith was parked right outside the door, listening to every move in the dark-room. "If you try going through that window, O'Rion, I'm coming shooting."

Plates grunted, intent on his work. He knew all the newspaper aces rush short-cuts. Fast development in concentrated solution, two minutes fix in hypo, a wash-off and then a bath in alcohol—after which he touched a match to the film! The flame licked up briefly, left the negative unharmed and dry.

Almost as swiftly, he rushed through the printing of contact papers, this time using an oven-heated ferro-plate to speed the drying.

A photo-flood bulb went into the light fixture. The little photographer whipped open a case of retouching tools, tiny precise instruments designed for hairline work on delicate negatives. With unbelievable bold accuracy, he scalped a figure from one picture, smeared the back of the cut-out with rubber cement, squeezed it onto the surface of another.

The job was only half done. He had to set up the Speed Graphic at double extension, photograph the pasted-up picture, develop that negative, make from it the final print. . . .

"O.K., Smith, come on in." Plates was haggard, perspiring, his necktie a dripping, sodden wreck. He held out the tray for inspection. "It's still in the wash water, but you can take a look, and it's a

damned fine job if I say it for myself—"

Smith's hard-set face bent over the tray, eyes bulging at the floating bit of surfaced paper. Plates snapped his wrists.

Smith shot straight up, blind, screaming, his hands gouging at eyes that were full of acetic acid.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Killer Behind You

**P**LATES O'RION moved in, like a pint-sized and very blond Joe Louis stalking a punch-riddled foe. He sprang clear off the floor as he flailed his small hard fist at Smith's loose-hung, oath-forming jaw. The flannel-clad form slammed hard to the floor and lay without twitching. Plates bent over the hoodlum.

The belly gun was cleverly concealed. Smith wore a patented inner web belt having rigid stay-pieces that angled out slightly to engage the waist band's inside gallus buttons. The perfectly creased trousers had a floating fit so that a gun trussed in the web belt made absolutely no bulge.

Gripping the weapon, the photographer raced through the other rooms a little like a champion setter in a field trial. He was looking for Frasee, but the mouthpiece had vanished.

Plates sped back to the kitchenette sink, ran a fresh tray of water, spooned in bicarbonate of soda. He propped open the unresisting eyelids and laved the solution into Smith's blankly staring eyes.

Then, as jerks of returning consciousness agitated the one-man Easter parade, Plates stepped back with the gun snugly balanced in his hand.

Smith lurched to his feet. "My eyes! Oh, God, I gotta have a doctor!"

It hadn't been that strong a solution for the good and simple reason that glacial—straight—acetic acid is a war commodity practically impossible for photographic purposes unless the photographer has a priority number. The acid Plates had used was merely a commercial hardener in diluted form.

"To hell with your eyes!" the photographer retorted grimly. "You're going to spill your guts first!"

"I'm going blind! I—" Smith whirled and raced for the phone in the other room. His vision was sufficiently good to find the instrument, and also to see both the gun in Plates' hand and the raging look on the cameraman's face.

"Not until you tell me where to start looking for Sally," the little photographer said fiercely. "You're coming clean with the whole story, Smith, or you *will* go blind—and deaf and dumb, too. Because I'll kill you if you try any tricks when my kid's life is at stake."

Plates' normally quiet voice grated with ugly threat that carried conviction because he meant every word he said.

"I—I—O. K., you win!" Smith anguished. "Those guys in the alley gunning for me were. . . ."

A man-made thunderclap resounded overhead.

Smith flattened against the wall, hung there an awful instant as though an invisible bayonet pinned him there. His gaping, glazing eyes flung a frantic glance aloft.

Suddenly, as if a plug had been pulled, a gush of blood fountained out of his throat. He slid down the wall.

**I**T ALL happened so fast that the falling glass hit the floor at the same time Smith did.

Plates O'Rion whirled, his gun hand flying up at the skylight overhead. What he saw stunned the photographer, froze his trigger finger into immobility. The face that peered down through the broken skylight was a familiar one. It was the same that had undergone Plates' squeegee treatment this afternoon. It belonged to Ballard Allen, the explorer who was supposed to be some thousands of miles away in the wilds of Brazil.

Plates' brain grappled with the evidence supplied by his own eyes, and refused to believe it.

The face was gone.

Over at the side of the room lay a ladder. Smith had intended it, doubtless, to make good his own escape over the rooftops if necessity arose.

Plates shot a glance at the hoodlum. The man was dead. The truth, or whatever he had intended to tell, had been lead-locked by the swift bullet that had

severed the carotid artery in his throat.

The photographer stumbled to the ladder, hoisted it up to the shattered skylight. He scrambled up, knowing that to poke his head about roof level was to invite Smith's own fate. He poked it through the opening anyway.

The roof, and the one that adjoined it, was deserted. The killer's lanky form had already sprinted to some exit-way—again, no doubt, the same means of escape Smith had planned to use in emergency.

Plates crawled down the ladder. He fluttered the pages of the phone book, found a listing of Frasee's office number. But a dulcetly polite voice informed him that the lawyer had quitted his office for the day. Home number? Sor-ree, she couldn't give that information.

The perspiring Plates stepped back, fists clenched in an agony of indecision. Call the cops? He wanted to—but Frasee, a mouthpiece who'd connived with a client to forge an alibi, would clam up in the presence of the police. The way to tackle Frasee was privately . . . if you could only find him.

He flung himself to the ghastly task of ransacking the corpse's pockets, finding two hundred dollars worth of fresh folding money, and no other result at all.

He raced to the bedroom, dived into a clothes closet there. Half a dozen suits hung in a row. The suits were all new, tailored in the cuffless and flapless style, supplying evidence that Smith's prosperity was of recent origin. Since spring, in fact! But no card, no address book, no memo—

"Fool!" Plates yelled at himself, and raced back to the mine of information that had been in front of his eyes all the time. The phone numbers scabbled onto the wall. Frasee's downtown office number was bracketed with another, residential exchange one.

It supplied a lead, not an answer. He knew the lawyer wouldn't unload such information to a mere voice on a phone.

Plates dialed *Official 2121*, the local phone company's confidential service number. It wasn't available to the general public, but from having once camera'd a police beat he knew the service existed. He snapped out Frasee's residence number and the special service

operator came back with a Catalpa Way address.

**D**RIVING as if a rubber shortage didn't exist, he tooled Smith's coupe out to the exclusive Catalpa Way. Frasee lived in multi-patioed, Spanish architected magnificence. The grave flunky who responded to the door chimes seemed unsurprised by the appearance of a haggard, perspiring caller. In the routine of the mouthpiece's profession, there must have been many such—accused clients a bare jump ahead of the law.

Plates was escorted down a flagged hallway, bowed into a sealed sepulcher of waiting-room. "I will inform the marster."

Frasee came in through that same doorway, his staid, solid face lighting up in surprise. "You—"

"Yeah. I filled my part of the bargain,"—Plates fumbled, fetched out the damp, faked picture he'd remembered to pocket at the last minute—"now it's up to you to do your part."

"But, Smith—"

"They got Smith."

Frasee said: "I'm not surprised. I've had clients like him before. I don't have them very long. It's impossible for a mad dog to run the streets without coming to grief, and very quickly, too."

"He told me he was innocent."

"Of that particular charge, yes, he was. He'd been framed, no doubt of that. But, O'Rion, you know very well your face or mine wouldn't fit into that frame. Smith was picked for a fall-guy because he fitted, because he was a gun-crazed, conscienceless mad dog."

Plates grunted. "Maybe. But we're wasting time. I came out here to get help about my kid."

The lawyer's face was impassive. "I understand that. Unfortunately, Smith's death changes matters. This picture is totally valueless now. Moreover, I've got no client to compensate me for running risks in the matter. I don't see why I should stick my neck out."

The little photographer's face changed color. His breath rasped. "You damned shyster! You fat, crooked rat! You know who was gunning for Smith, don't you?"

"Don't call names, O'Rion."

"I'll call—oh, hell! You know who

those men are. You're not going to clam up on me, damn you!"

Frasee shrugged. "I don't think your daughter's in any danger, my good man. No doubt she'll be released, now that the interested parties have gained their ends in other ways."

"I'll go to the police, Frasee, if she's not."

"Naturally. You are at perfect liberty to do so. Indeed, I advise you to, and at once."

Plates stared. "You say that, knowing what I can spill about *you*?"

Frasee said, smiling: "Smith was my client. But I knew nothing of any plot to introduce falsified evidence into the case. It will be your word against mine, O'Rion. And my word won't lack support. I can prove I spent the entire day, up to half an hour ago, in my own office. I can produce the clients with whom I was closeted at the time you'll say I visited Smith's hide-out."

Plates rocked his thin figure. "*Why?* What the hell are you trying to cover up?"

"I must protect myself." Frasee was quiet, inexorable. "To admit the truth of your story would gain me nothing except disbarment. Besides, the men involved in this thing would know I told you. I would probably be *shot down* as Smith was."

"*Shot!*" Plates rocketed the word. "Who told you he was shot? You know more—"

"Relax, friend. Shooting is the natural assumption in these hoodlum killings. I would be a fool, indeed, to assume Smith met his death by poison or snake-bite."

But the attorney's face had turned chalky!

**P**LATES O'RION grunted. "I've got more than that on you, Frasee! Smith told me *you* figured out the picture fake. He said *you* were seeing to it no more of those pictures, or the original negative, were in circulation!"

It was impossible for the mouthpiece to control the involuntary process which emptied the blood out of his lardy cheeks. But in every other way he stood rock-firm. He even brought a note of condescending amusement into his tone. "Anything Smith told you is hearsay evidence,

quite inadmissible in a court of law."

"The statement of a dying man is legal evidence, Frasee!"

"Preposterous. A man shot through the throat, his larynx blasted to hell, makes no dying statement."

"By God! You do know how he died! You're in this thing up to your fat neck!"

Frasee didn't deny it. He said almost with admiration, "You *are* a little heller, Smith was right! I don't doubt you did trap him into damaging admissions. But you're not dealing with a kill-crazed, gun-witted moron. I know the law, know what your wild mouthings will get you, and it's absolutely nothing."

He paused.

"Go to the police, O'Rion. Tell them that Smith kidnapped you, that he forced you to fake this picture. But say no more than that. If you persist in making insane, unprovable charges against me, I warn you—you may never see your daughter again except at her funeral."

Plates gulped. Unconsciously, his hand came up and rubbed against his necktie. "If I tell them just that much—?"

"You'll get your kid back. I promise."

The little photographer wetted his lips. "No! I've seen how you keep your promises! I'm not through with you . . . I've got more. It isn't hearsay, either. Those chemicals you bought, for one thing! And I know you tricked Smith with a picture that wasn't a snap of Ballard Allen. A picture of the guy who killed him is lying in that kitchen!"

Frasee stiffened. "You recognized—? You saw too much, then. Don't move. You're covered. Look behind you."

Plates laughed. "Bluffer!"

"It's no bluff. I've entertained desperate men in this room before. There's a niche concealed by the window drapes. The man who killed Smith is standing there."

A voice behind Plates jarred: "Damn right, pal!"

No smile of triumph dawned on Frasee's watchful, chalky face. He looked genuinely regretful. His voice was tired. "I'm sorry, O'Rion. It's too bad for both of us. I—we meant no harm to you. It's just a damned bad break all around. We'll have to change our plans because of this."

The little photographer scarcely heard. Late afternoon light slanting through the window threw the killer's shadow so far that Plates could see it beside him. He had Smith's belly gun tucked inside his belt, but how could he hope to spin and use it?

**H**E STALLED, thick-voiced. "I—I don't get it—"

Frasee growled: "You wouldn't. You're just a dumb shanty Irishman on the war path. You probably think Smith was innocent. He wasn't. He committed the Capitol Hill murder. Unfortunately, the police were becoming suspicious of the fact. We believed that if arrested he would rat on the men who hired him."

"So you murdered him!" Plates tugged at his necktie. The move brought his hand very close to the belly gun.

"Mere murder wasn't enough. Smith had to leave behind conclusive proof of his guilt. As his attorney, he didn't suspect me. I persuaded him the faked picture would be an out if he were picked up," Frasee said.

The lawyer was thinking aloud, trying to save something out of his too-hot-to-handle kill plot: "Damn it, O'Rion, you spoiled everything. We *wanted* you to live. We wanted the cops to hear your story, for hell's sake! It would convince them that Smith, crazed with fear, was trying to establish an alibi for the hour and day of that killing. A talk with me would leave no doubt of that in their minds. They'd think he was rubbed out because the mob knew he was cracking. It'd be just another hoodlum killing, one that would serve to push the milk investigation out of the limelight. One hood killing another who richly deserved it—the public would be perfectly satisfied with that."

Plates O'Rion stared at the shadow on the floor. He could get the belly gun, all right, but gelid waves followed his spine as he measured the chances of using it before he was shot in the back. A move to whirl around would be his death warrant, and he knew it.

"That's why we kidnapped your kid," Frasee was saying. "We figured it'd send you to the cops for sure. We intended no harm to the girl, either. As a matter of



fact, she's in the next room—blindfolded, tied in a chair, but otherwise unhurt.

"The whole thing simply blew to hell when you pushed Smith at the very moment our man triggered. If you hadn't done that, Smith'd have been dead, your girl would have been found in his flat, and I'd be at Headquarters right now telling just enough to close the books on the Capitol Hill kill. Instead of that, now we'll have to blot you out and, in some damned way, pin the blame onto Smith—"

The little photographer wasn't listening at all. A flash of photographic lore sparked alive in his fertile, frantic brain. In the old days, the boys had "stolen" pictures occasionally by simply putting the camera underarm and walking away from the reluctant subject. In those days, most people hadn't been camera-conscious enough to realize a lens might be pointed at them even though its owner's back was turned.

He gave his tie a final jerk, tugged at the gun in his belt, pointed it around so the barrel aimed parallel with the shadow on the floor. It was the fastest move he'd ever made in his life.

The whole room seemed to jump at the roar. Yet the killer behind Plates might not have heard it. More than the photographer's unpractised hand seemed to be guiding the dead Smith's weapon. The hand of ironic fate—or poetic justice—

was on it, too. The shot took him in the throat, crashed him to the floor.

The horrified Frazee hadn't stirred from his tracks when Plates leaped and crashed the smoking gun across his skull.

**T**HEY rode downtown in a police car —Plates and a white-lipped Sally.

"Frazee—he was Mr. Big in the milk racket?"

"One of the bigs. I guess the cop'll find out plenty about that, time they're through shaking down his private records. Sal," said Plates, "what are you so blamed trembly about?"

"I was just thinking . . . Suppose Smith hadn't fallen for that acid trick, and gotten away with that faked picture. Even if he didn't kill you, you might have wound up taking a different kind of a ride in this badge buggy for faking evidence!"

The little photographer grinned. "It wouldn't've done him a bit of good, hon. Instead of transferring his picture to the other one, I put the imitation Ballard Allen onto that snapshot of Smith."

"But—I don't see—"

"It wouldn't stand up a minute under investigation. The snapshot couldn't have been taken last spring," Plates confided, "for it showed chimpanzees in the cage. And they never let the chimps outdoors in April, overcoat weather—so the Zoo lady said today."

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# There Goes The Doctor

By Marvin L. DeVries

*Mysterious epidemics were spreading throughout the local war plants. Deschal, head of the powder works had gone stone blind. When Dean trumped his partner's ace at the daily bridge session, Doc Otis felt it was high time to investigate—even though he knew he was sticking his neck out for murder.*



A pretty girl stood on the far shore. That was all I saw. A second later, I got a blow on the head . . .

**A**NYONE who makes a habit of playing bridge, and having his fingers manicured, while he is eating his noon lunch, could, in most instances, safely be classified on the wacky side, but that was what Doc Otis did, and no one considered him in the least unhinged. It wouldn't have surprised me any to have him take on a barber and a chiropodist, too, if it had occurred to him. Maybe I'll live to see the day. It wasn't the big-

executive-busy-as-a-beaver stunt, either. It was just Doc, being himself, while the rest of us Elks looked on, and wondered why we didn't think of those kinds of things.

He claimed it was soothing. Poor little Zelma, who handled the manicuring end, always looked exhausted after a session, and she was a pretty girl to feel sorry for, too. She had to watch him like a hawk, and when he wanted to take a

trick, or ponder his next move, which necessitated tapping his forehead, or put some food into his mouth, she had to let everything go, and wait patiently until he got organized again.

We were playing the last round for the day—the last round for a number of days, as it turned out. But nobody knew that. Nobody knew that one of us, or two of us, if I consider myself, and who wouldn't, was ripe for murder. Harry Dean, blinking out of red, over-worked eyes, and Tut, were our opponents. They were taking a good trimming, and, at ten cents a point, their agony was real and earnest. They were blowing up. Dean went so far as to trump his partner's ace, and then almost sank through the floor. "I didn't see it," he apologized.

"Use your eyes, pal," Tut grumbled. Then he bit his lip, sorry he had said it.

"The trouble is, he uses 'em too much," Doc said. "He's just like Deschal."

Doc didn't mean to be callous but he certainly laid an egg in the middle of the table for all of us to stare at. Deschal owns the local powder plant, the Deschal Powder Company, which, according to editorial comment, would some day blow us all to bits unless the spies and saboteurs, residing in our midst, were promptly hung and quartered. Deschal is by way of being practically our only tycoon. He was expanding his plants, and building new ones. He was working on a deadly explosive, much more effective than anything heretofore known. But now, Deschal had gone blind—stone blind, and to tell Dean to his face that he was just like him, was pretty blunt talk. But Doc had a real reason for blurting it out. "The trouble is you all work too hard," he went on, stubbornly.

"We've got to keep things going," Dean muttered. His factory had been converted to making gas masks, and he was having his troubles, no doubt.

"You can't make all the gas masks in one day," Doc said.

"We've got to turn out as many as we can."

"I happen to know your production is all shot to pieces, worse than it was a month ago." Doc ought to know. He does most of the local industrial work, and it's his business to keep the men in

shape. "Your men over there have been dragging around like fish in a molasses barrel."

"I'll admit they aren't up to par. There've been several epidemics, flu, measles—even the mumps."

"And worse," Doc said, soberly. "Much worse! The beginnings of typhus, undulant fever, stuff like that. I couldn't figure it out, but I've finally got it licked. I know what's going on."

"You mean there's something fishy about it?"

Doc put two fingers to his nose, and Zelma had to let go, and wait for the little pantomime. "I'm going to see Rathbone in the morning, throw it all in his lap."

**R**ATHBONE is the only man on the local police force who could find out who killed Cock Robin, if asked to do so. The only reason Doc mentioned him was to say that he had police business on his mind, saying it in such a way that none of us could miss it. But, of course, none of us realized that he was deliberately sticking his neck out, and asking for murder.

We were getting along to the tag-end of the noon hour. Our psychic bidding put the finishing touches on Tut and Dean, and they tossed in their cards. Dean let go the ace of hearts that had died in his hands, like a grape on the vine. Doc put the strewn cards together, and while they were paying up, he said to Dean: "What does Charlane say about your eyes, Harry?"

Dean shrugged. "Not much. He's treating them. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just wondering how you were getting on."

"I thought maybe I'd go to Chicago, and let a specialist have a look."

"Charlane's just as good as you can find anywhere," Doc stated. "He's been to Vienna and Berlin and a lot of fancy places, if that means anything. At any rate, I can tell you he knows his stuff."

"He seems uneasy about my case, but I guess they'll clear up . . . Deschal's stone blind, eh?" It sounded just the way you would say it, if you were in that situation. He was frightened, and was trying to hold back his panic.

I got the impression that Doc was trying to make up his mind whether to say more or not. But all he said, finally, was: "You're overworking."

"I can't slow down. I've got to get this stuff out."

I suppose that's true. The gas masks he makes don't grow on trees, unfortunately. I pocketed the five-spot Tut reluctantly handed me. Doc was still riffing the deck. Suddenly, I saw him draw out a card, the ace of hearts that Dean had died with, and when he thought no one was looking he slid it into his pocket. I stared a moment, then turned away.

Zelma picked up her tray and went back to her shop next door. Doc held his fingers at arm's length, and admired them. "She's perfect," he remarked. "If I could handle a scissors like she can, I'd operate on everybody for everything, to show off."

On my way back to work, I wondered if Doc was trying to finagle a new deck out of the management, or whether he liked to know where the aces were, or what. I wondered what would happen the next day—if the card would show up, or if we'd get a new deck. I didn't know that simply by seeing him palm that card, I had put myself on the spot.

**A**BOUT eight o'clock that same evening, I got a call from Doc, at least someone calling for him, to say that his car had been stripped, and the tires stolen, and would I come out. I'm in charge of tire-rationing—heaven help me!—so this sounded like my business. "I can't get any tires now," I told the party, "it's too late. But I'll come out, if he needs help. Where is he?"

"Out on the river road. You know that place they call Spooner's Swamp?"

Of course I knew. Spooner was a man's name, but the place seems to be a magnet for local young people, with petting on the brain, so the name had peculiar significance. Hell, I've been there myself when I was younger. "For heaven's sake!" I said. "Is he alone?"

He hung up without giving my mild effort at humor a chance to jell. It couldn't have taken me more than a half-hour to get out there. The car stood near the road, facing a patch of willows that grew densely along the river bank. It

was stripped to the bone, all right. No one was around. The door on the driver's side stood open. The key was in the switch. A medicine kit stood on the ledge behind the seat, so there wasn't any doubt about its being Doc's car. But Doc wasn't around. I wondered what had become of him, until I saw a smear of blood, still wet and sticky to the touch, on the mohair seat. It sent a chill up my back.

It was pitch dark by this time. My flashlight whipped around in a wide circle, but the light went dead at the willows. They made a blank wall, with the hood of the car nosing into them. Finally, I noticed something unusual. At one place, about a foot wide, and five feet high, the leaves looked a little different. They threw back a paler reflection. At first, I couldn't figure it out, but I finally decided that the leaves had been turned or twisted, and the lighter-colored backs made a different reflection.

I pushed in a short distance. My surmise was correct. Someone had made a passage through the long, whip-like branches, which had closed in again behind him. It looked as though someone had been dragged along the damp ground. Long, thin spears of grass were flattened out, and lay close to the ground, all slanting in one direction.

I followed it to the river, and came out at a spot where a tree had tipped partway across the water, forming a hollow dome of tangled roots and sod that shook when I stepped on it. At one place, the edge had been freshly broken off. "Well," I thought, "this is one way to obtain tires—one hell of a way."

I figured someone with his own ideas on the subject had killed Doc while he was sitting in the car, dragged his body to the river, and skipped with the tires. And I wasn't far wrong.

It didn't seem entirely wise to hang around the place, but I got on my knees, and looked over the edge. There was a deep pool of water under the tree. The water was clear and black, with whirlpools cutting into the tangle of roots under me. A moth flew against my flashlight lens, blurring the light. Mosquitoes swarmed. A twig crackled behind me, like a mousetrap. I could have tried to make myself believe it was rabbits on

the prow, but I knew better. I knew there was someone in the bushes behind me, close behind me, and I knew he wasn't looking for a place to pitch a tent.

My stomach crawled. I should have dived in. My hands were on the roots, and I could have slid out from under him like a snake. But I didn't. Maybe my reflexes aren't up to par. At any rate, I started to swing the flashlight around, intending to flash it up in his face. And say "Boo!" no doubt. But it didn't work that way. My hand rammed into a broken root, I lost my grip on the barrel, and the thing slid down to the water, whipping end over end.

I saw only one thing in the swift kaleidoscope, and maybe it was worth while—an extravagantly pretty girl in a red jacket, standing, half-hidden, among the banana-shaped papaw leaves on the far shore. She had one hand around a branch, a little above her. She was leaning slightly forward, as though she had come to a sudden halt, and didn't know which way to run next. That was all I saw. A second later, I got a blow on the head that ended my interest in mundane affairs for a long time to come.

**N**O DOUBT a hospital, even at its best, is not to be compared to the Great Beyond. But, arriving at one the way I did, I may be forgiven the momentary illusion when I opened my eyes at last, and saw blue plaster walls, and Venetian blinds with the sun shining through, and pretty girls moving past my door. A push-button lay beside my pillow, and I gave it a feeble prod, mildly curious whether I would get a nurse or an angel. It turned out to be neither, however. Apparently, my night's adventure had won me a small measure of fame, for Dr. Beresh, who ran the hospital, came in himself to see me. He said he had left word to be called the moment I recovered consciousness. He was on the pompous order, and I was supposed to be impressed. I had heard Doc mention him occasionally, without comment. "Well," I asked, feeling of my head and face, "what's the bad news?"

"You're a lucky man," he smiled. "You've got a number of cuts and abrasions on the face and head, and a slight

concussion, perhaps, but—you'll be all right, I feel sure."

I found several numb spots, and my head was wrapped up like a Sikh's. "It doesn't feel lucky," I remarked.

"Someone tried to murder you, man!"

I shook my head, and it felt like a pendulum going from side to side. I could hardly stop it. "I can't understand it," I said. "Who would do anything like that to me?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you."

"I don't know anything about it. Somebody came at me from behind, and slugged me. It was pitch dark, so I couldn't see anything. How did I get here?"

"Someone called the police, and they found you out there in Spooner's Swamp."

"Lying on the bank of the river?"

"Yes."

"What about Doc?" I held my breath, waiting for the answer.

"Who?"

"Doc—Dr. Otis!"

He looked as though I had somehow offended him. "Is he your doctor?"

"Sure he is, but I mean—"

"I'll tell him as soon as he comes in. I did these bandages myself, because I happened to be around when you were brought in, but if you want Dr. Otis—"

"Is he all right then?"

"I presume so. He hasn't come in this morning yet, but—"

I got it all of a sudden. They didn't know anything about it. They didn't know why I'd gone out there. They didn't know what had happened to Doc. My voice shook when I told him. "He won't be in this morning, Dr. Beresh," I said. "He's dead."

It didn't have the effect I expected. Dr. Beresh began to smile indulgently.

"It's the truth!" I shouted. "His car was out there, stripped. That's why they called me. Where're the police? What about his car?" I must have been getting shrill as a buzz-saw.

It made him a little nettled. "The police will see you as soon as you can talk coherently."

"I can right now," I yelled some more. "I am. What do you think I was doing out there on the river—frogging? I got called out. Doc's car was out there,

stripped. He was killed, and dragged to the river."

He pushed the buzzer, and a nurse came in. He spoke to her briefly, and a moment later she gave me a shot in the arm. I didn't realize just why until it began to take effect. After that, I saw her hovering around like something in a dream. I saw her through cobwebs. I fought the stuff, because I had things to tell. "Look, sister," I cried, and I imagined it was at the top of my voice, "Doc Otis is dead. Doc's been killed. There's been a murder." But the words must have turned to mush in my mouth, because they didn't make any impression.

I don't know how long that lasted. Finally, my eyes started to focus again. She was still there—pretty, young, and supple as a whippet. The nursing uniform set her off like a framed picture. I was going to say something complimentary, but she told me to keep quiet, just to keep quiet, or she would have to give me another hypodermic. "Lay off those shots," I said. "I don't need them. Call the police!"

"Hush!"

"Hells bells!" I exploded. "Call the police. Call somebody with some sense. What is this, anyway? Who's tryin' to give me the run-around?"

She started for the door. She got out into the hall. All I could see of her was her heels going around the door. "Wait!" I called. "Wait a moment!"

She stopped, and swung back, looking around the edge of the door. Her body was bent forward, her mouth slightly open. Right then, I knew I had seen her before. It was the way she stood there that made me realize it. It was exactly the way she had stood, the night before, in the pawpaw trees, one hand up, her knees cocked like a young colt's, ready to run.

"Go ahead," I said weakly, "get your needle. I need it."

**I**T DIDN'T take them long to discover, however, that what I was trying to tell them was true, and after that I had Rathbone for breakfast, dinner, and supper. He couldn't understand why I didn't tell them right away. "Why didn't you speak up?" he asked me.

"I did. I yelled my head off around here, but nobody paid any attention."

"They thought you were off, Bill."

"Well, what about his car? It was right next to mine."

"No, it wasn't. It was a mile down the road in that sand pit."

"Not when I saw it, it wasn't." I told him about the call I'd gotten, and what I saw when I got out there, and this time, I had a good listener.

"But you haven't any idea who hit you?" he asked finally.

"No," I said slowly, holding back about the girl, because she was so pretty, I suppose. "My flashlight slid out of my hand."

"Who called you up to come out there, a man or woman?"

"It was a man's voice."

"But you didn't recognize it. It wasn't Doc's?"

"No. I never heard it before."

"Weren't you suspicious?"

"Of what? The only thing they told me was to come out, because Doc's tires had been stolen. I was the only one who could do him any good. Maybe it was someone who went out there with a girl, maybe a married man, or something like that, and he didn't want to get involved. Maybe they knew I was a friend of Doc."

"Did you see any other cars out there?"

"No."

"When did you see Doc last?"

"At noon. We had a game at the Elks."

"Everything as usual?"

"Yes, I guess so. We talked about the war."

"Did he seem to have anything special on his mind?"

"No-o-o. He did say he was coming up to see you the next morning."

"He did?" There was a glint of interest in his voice.

"Yes."

"What about?"

"Well, he seemed to be concerned about the slow-downs at the defense plants in town. He said he knew where the trouble was, and he had it licked, and he was going to see you in the morning."

"Did he mean sabotage of some kind?"

"That's what it sounded like."

"There's none of that in those places."

"I don't think he meant that either, exactly, because a little later he talked about everybody overworking, as though he blamed these epidemics they've been getting on that."

"Who heard him say he was coming to see me?"

"Harry Dean, and Tut, and I—and Zelma, I suppose. She was doing his nails. But I think she closes her ears to our talk most the time, in pure self-defense. I don't believe there was anyone else standing around."

"If we knew what he was going to tell me, we might know something."

"Maybe so."

"Maybe the mere fact that he said he was coming to see me did the business."

"Yes. That might be. But don't get any wild ideas about us. He may have been talking all over town."

"Did he say any more?"

"No. That was toward the end of the game. They talked about Harry's eyes a moment, and then I left."

"Nothing else happened?"

"No." I thought a moment, and then said: "Yes, there was something. I don't know whether it was just absent-mindedness, or what it was, but while he was talking to Harry he had the deck of cards that we'd been playing with in his hands. Just before I left, I saw him take out the ace of hearts, the card Harry Dean had died with, and slip it into his pocket."

"He did!"

"The deck was worn out. Maybe he thought he'd put it out of commission for good that way, or—or—I don't know what he was thinking. At any rate, I don't suppose it had anything to do with tires." I thought I'd put him back on the right track.

"And that's all you know?"

"That's all I know."

"Hmmm!"

"Incidentally, I have been wondering why you don't find out what happened to Doc." He'd been prodding at me so much I thought I was entitled to my inning.

"We've almost scooped the river dry," he confessed, "but we haven't found anything—except a piece of that card you mentioned."

"You did?"

"Yes. And your flashlight."

"Oh."

"And now, if you'll tell me what you're holding out on me, maybe we can get somewhere."

"Me?" I exclaimed as though he were doing me a great injustice.

"Yeah. You're bulging with it, like a balloon."

"You must be silly, Rath," I told him. "That's only my burnoose." I didn't want to tell. I thought he might spoil my strategic position, having her for my nurse. I might be able to find out a few things if I pretended I hadn't seen her. The only trouble with that was that she might be cleverer than I, and make me keep my secret permanently by slipping some poison into my porridge when I wasn't looking. But I made up my mind to take the risk, and do a little pumping of my own as soon as I got a chance.

**M**Y CHANCE came the next morning when she was getting me organized for the day. To get her into the right mood for confidences, I first threw a pretty bouquet at her by saying that I didn't know such pretty nurses came with the ordinary-priced rooms.

She blushed, but she liked it.

"Pretty de luxe equipment," I went on.

"Shall I get another hypo?" she asked.

"No, I knew what I was talking about then, and I do now, too."

She went about her business silently, and I had to prod the conversation back into bloom. "Seems to me I've seen you somewhere before." It sounded pretty banal, but if I needed an excuse, I could always plead that my head was under wraps. I was trying to get at the point that she frequented Spooner's Swamp. "I'll bet you've got a beau in every bush."

"I have only one," she said.

You should have heard the way she said that. It warmed my heart. It came from so deep down inside of her, she couldn't have held it back if she had wanted to. She was still dazed by all that it meant. She wanted to shout it from the housetops, she thought it was so wonderful. It put a lump in my throat. "Who's the lucky man?" I asked, and I wasn't snaking out a murder clue. I meant "lucky."

"Rick Marne." There was a tremor in her voice, and her eyes shone like sky washed clean by summer rain. "He works here. He's a laboratory technician."

"Oh. I think I've heard Doc mention him."

"He and Doc are good friends." She stammered a little and said: "Th-they were, that is."

"Is that so?"

"You and Doc were too, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"I—I hope this will all be cleared up quickly."

"I, too. There're some rather odd angles." I was getting into my theme, in spite of my callow beginning.

"You don't know me, do you?" she surprised me by saying.

I shook my head. I hadn't heard anybody mention her name. She looked like something special, but, at the same time, she fitted what she was doing. "Why? Should I?"

"Oh no. I'm Rene Deschal."

"Oh, are you?" I floundered a little. It wouldn't have surprised me any more if she had said she was The Faerie Queene. She was the daughter of the man Doc had talked about that noon at lunch, the man who had gone blind.

"I'm not a graduate nurse," she went on. "I'm only helping out because the hospital's short-handed. So many of the registered nurses have gone into the service."

"Well, if you ever want a diploma, come to me," I said. Then I thought I'd spring my own little surprise by saying that I knew where I'd seen her before, but before I could get it out, Dr. Beresh came in, and spoiled it all. "Well, well, well," he cried heartily. "How's our maharajah this morning?"

I didn't react right, so I suppose he put me down as a stupid lout, not knowing what a maharajah was. He gave me that impression, of not having a very high regard for the layman's intelligence. "I'm all right," I said. "I get a ray of sunshine every morning." I bowed to Rene, which was quite an undertaking with my head twice its normal size.

"Oh, yes . . . Miss Deschal has unusual talent." It sounded as though it went against the grain to say something

nice about a nurse, even one with such distinguished lineage. Like Charlane, Dean's doctor, he had had some pretty rarefied training—Vienna, Berlin, Paris. Maybe they're diploma mills, but he must have learned hospital organization somewhere. I remembered reading about him a year or two ago when he first came. "I'm sorry I misunderstood your anxiety about Dr. Otis yesterday," he remarked.

"That's all right."

"I can't understand why they can't find his body."

"No."

"What an inconceivable thing to do for a set of tires. We'll miss Dr. Otis." He let out a long sigh.

I nodded, and stared at the ceiling. "Yes. You know, we always had lunch together downtown, and a little bridge."

"Oh, yes, I've heard about it."

"Is that so?"

"As a matter of fact, he invited me over several times, but I never went."

"You ought to come along sometime."

"I'd like to."

"I'll give you a ring sometime, if Doc—" Then I stopped suddenly, and felt silly. Of course, it was all over.

Rene came in for my tray, and waited for me to munch the last piece of toast. When I was finished, she picked it up, and started out. But before she got to the door, Rathbone came in.

"Like a pill after every meal!" I muttered.

"But this time I've got news that'll cheer you up. I just dropped in to tell you the whole thing's settled. I've got my man."

"You have?"

"He had one of Doc's tires on his car. I got a tip, and came over to have a look. He's connected with the hospital!"

"No!" Dr. Beresh looked shocked.

"Who is it?"

"His name's Rick Marne. He's the laboratory technician."

Rene was still standing at the door. She had heard it all. For a second she didn't move. She looked as though she couldn't. Then the tray she was holding slid out of her hands, and clattered to the floor, throwing broken crockery and tumblers in all directions. She didn't try to pick up the mess. I don't think she even saw



it. She simply stumbled through it, and got out of there.

**D**R. CHARLANE wore a tiny black mustache that seemed to be one of the major disappointments of his young life. At least, he was always pulling at it, as though he wanted it to grow. Frankly, I didn't like him, but I couldn't have given a sound reason. My resentment at seeing Zelma doing his hands the first time I got back to the Elks for lunch wasn't even legitimate, because I knew she did his every Wednesday noon. He wasn't imitating Doc, and if I had known what was going to happen to him before many hours passed, I'd have felt like a heel to think the way I did.

He was leaning back, with his head against a plaster pillar, holding a sandwich in one hand, the other lying on Zelma's tray. He was facing the door when I came in. The purple-pansy, yellow-cosmos effect that had seeped down across my face ought to have been a pretty good disguise, but most everybody recognized me, or guessed who I was. I still wore my head drapery, but I felt all right.

Harry Dean was at our table alone, and I went toward him. He was getting more bleary-eyed than ever, and fumbled with his knife and fork. It seemed to me that Charlane was watching him. But just before I sat down, I saw his head jerk toward the door. It was so noticeable that I followed his look.

It was a double door, with a small entry between. The man he had noticed had come into the entry, and was moving slowly forward with one hand outstretched ahead of him. It was Deschal, Rene's father. He came in through the next door, then stood still a moment as though to get his bearings. He had a Seeing-Eye dog on a harness, a big, alert, intelligent-looking creature, that waited patiently for the next move. Deschal looked confused, but he finally turned to his left, and before anyone, even the dog, could stop him, he crashed into the wall. The trouble was, he thought he was in the bank next door.

Charlane watched it all with a frozen look, as though trying to hypnotize Deschal into doing the right thing. When

Deschal crashed, Charlane's face went white, and his eyes glazed with agony, as though he had gotten hit himself. Several men near the door got up to help, and Charlane did, too. But he didn't stop when he got to Deschal. He didn't seem to see him at all. His face was contorted. He stumbled blindly past the tables, past Deschal and the dog, and got outside. As soon as he reached the sidewalk, he started to run, and the last I ever saw of him alive, he was running down the street as though pursued by a thousand devils.

Lunch, especially with Harry Dean at the table, was a dismal affair after that. I got out as soon as I could, and walked over to police headquarters. I didn't like what I was going to do—tell Rathbone what I had seen that night—but there wasn't any help for it. It had to be done.

When I went in, he was sitting at his desk with a row of test-tubes, stoppered with cotton wads, set up on a rack before him. He looked like a cat, gloating over a row of dead mice. "I want to get something off my chest," I told him.

"Sure. Go ahead—shoot. I wondered when it was coming."

"If she was a shade prettier, you'd never find out. As it is, I know she didn't have anything to do with it."

"Let's start with names," he said. "Rene Deschal. Now go ahead."

I might have known he'd know. Otherwise he wouldn't have been so patient about it. Anyway, I told him what I had seen that night in the papaw trees, and what she had told me about being in love with Marne.

"I ought to put you in the pokey, too, for obstructing justice. But I had a hunch about it, anyway. That's why she dropped the tray, of course."

"You've got to get to the bottom of this, Rath," I growled. "They wouldn't do anything like that for a set of lousy tires."

"I'm getting to the bottom of it," he said, and swung his hand along the row of test-tubes.

"What have those got to do with it?"

"Plenty. They're cultures, germ cultures out of Marne's laboratory. As you said, he wouldn't commit murder for a set of tires. But he'd have to kill anybody

who knew what was in those test-tubes. And Doc knew. Don't you see? This is what Doc was going to see me about. Marne had to act fast to stop him."

"They were friends."

"That's what Marne says."

"Well, what about them?"

"Just this—there's just about every plague in the book in that row of test-tubes. I've had 'em all analyzed. There's death in them, in big doses, and somehow or other, Marne was channeling it into the factories. That's where those epidemics Doc was talking about came from."

I STARED at the sinister things. For a while, everything he had told me seemed to fit in its place in my brain. But there was one thing still strolling around without a home, and that was why I had gotten dragged into it.

Rathbone had an answer for that, though, too. He opened a desk drawer, took out a small manila envelope, and tipped it upside-down on his desk. Two pieces of stiff paper came out, one moldy and spongy, as though it had been in water, the other still crisp and smooth. The edges of the two, however, still fitted haphazardly together, and made half a playing card—one to which I had given particular attention before—the ace of hearts. "I suppose this is the one you found in the river," I said, touching the spongy piece.

"Yes. And the other—in Marne's laboratory."

"Oh."

"So you see how you come in."

"I can't say that I do."

"You saw Doc take this card out of the deck. That was darn near fatal for you, Bill. If anyone else had seen it, he'd have gotten his head bashed in, too."

"I don't see the connection."

"It was the card Dean had in his hands. That's why Doc wanted it. He thought he could find out something about Dean's eyes, if he got a chemical analysis of the card. It might have been only a sudden hunch, from what you four had been talking about."

"I didn't tell anyone I saw him do it. Why would anyone pick on me?"

"Somebody saw you watching."

"Who?"

"There were a lot of people there, weren't there?"

"Yes. Dean, himself, Tut, Zelma—"

"Was Charlane there?"

I thought a moment. This was all getting pretty sinister and grisly. I could almost fathom what he was getting at, but not quite. "Why, yes," I said, slowly. "He was there."

He pushed the two pieces back into the envelope with his paperknife. "I've had a chemist analyze a piece of the card. He found traces of a soluble proteid, something like snake venom, that attacks the nerve tissue—the optic nerve, for instance. Salt tends to activate the substance, so if it comes in contact with the eyes, you see what happens."

"I guess so."

"Deschal's blind, and Dean's going blind. Both of them are mainstays in their plants. They're damned important."

"You know," I said, slowly, "when we were talking that noon Doc mentioned that Charlane knew his stuff. He said he'd been to Vienna, and Berlin, and places like that. Maybe he was just fitting things together in his mind. Maybe he had those germ cultures figured out, and then this other thing came to him right there that noon."

"Maybe."

"I just saw Charlane. He was at the Elks."

"Is that so? Alone?"

"Yes. He was eating. Zelma was doing his nails, like she used to do Doc's. Then Deschal came in with his dog. I happened to notice Charlane watching him. Deschal turned the wrong way, he thought he was at the bank, and crashed into the wall. It was about all Charlane could stand. He got up, and stumbled out, and when he got out on the sidewalk he started to run."

"Toward his office?"

"He went in that direction, but it's Wednesday afternoon. It's the doctor's day off."

"I'm going up there now, and see," Rathbone said. "Like to come along?"

I nodded, and got up. "If this thing shapes up like this, then Marne would be a fool to have one of Doc's tires on his car, and he isn't a fool. You'll have to clear that up somehow."

"I guess you're right at that."

Charlane's office was in the same building as mine. Because it was a professional building, and Wednesday afternoon, only one passenger elevator was running. I asked the operator whether he had seen Dr. Charlane go up. He said he had.

The office stood a little apart from the others, forming a T in the corner. The door stood slightly ajar. I saw someone inside, against the frosted glass, moving from the waiting-room into an inside office as we came down the hall. I thought it might be the reception clerk, but it wasn't. Her desk was closed for the day.

"Dr. Charlane!" Rathbone called, as soon as we got inside.

No one answered. I heard stealthy footsteps in the next room. An instant later an instrument of some kind clattered noisily across the tile floor.

"Dr. Charlane!" Rathbone called again.

We went into the next room. It was long and narrow, like a miniature theater. Optical charts, and a silver screen stood at one end. Near us, in an alcove behind the door, was a swivel chair, set on a small round platform. Charlane was in the chair, his arms hanging limply over the edges. His head lay back against the head-rest the way I had seen him leaning against the pillar at the Elks. Blood dripped from the tip of one of his tapering fingers, forming a dark star on the floor. A scissors glinted beside it like the narrow blade of a stiletto. And crouching against the wall across from us, her face dead-white against the black of the wall, her hand to her mouth, choking back stark horror, her eyes fixed on the figure in the chair, stood Rene Deschal.

**I** DIDN'T know that Charlane had killed himself until the the next day, when Rathbone told me. "He took poison," he said.

"But I saw blood dripping."

"Yes, but that wasn't it. That was something else. That was from his fingernail. One of them was cut short, right down into the quick."

Maybe I looked stunned and puzzled. I tried to, because I knew more than he did about that fingernail. While Rathbone had been telephoning from Charlane's office, right after we discovered

him, Rene had managed to slip a crumpled ball of paper into my hand. I slid it into my pocket, and kept it there until I was alone. There were two pieces, one crumpled inside of the other. On the outer one she had scribbled a hasty note that read: "If you're a friend of Doc, get this to my house. I guess I'm stuck."

It didn't say anything about not looking inside, so I had taken a peek. The thing that was inside that crumpled paper was the missing fingernail, the one that Rathbone was talking about now. I had handed it to the Deschal butler. He had taken it as though nothing on this earth would ever surprise him again, and closed the door in my face.

"I suppose," I remarked, tentatively, "that Charlane went off the deep end, then, when he saw Deschal in that condition at the Elks!"

"Maybe—or he knew we were closing in on him, and took the easy way out."

"Have you found out what Rene was doing up there?"

"I'm not sure. Are you?" He spoke as though he knew I knew. I guess it comes out of my pores. "Let's hear it."

"How do you know these things?" I sputtered. "She got a piece of that fingernail. She slipped it to me, and asked me to take it to her house."

"You followed her directions?"

"Yes."

"Who took it?"

"The butler."

"Well," he said, "when you talk, you do tell the truth, anyway. I had you followed to see what you were going to do with it."

"Oh," I said.

"I wish you'd realize that someone tried to kill you once, and they'll try it again."

"Yes, I know. That's why I'd like to see the right party in jail."

"We'll get him," Rathbone said. It made me feel better because it showed he had his doubts about Marne now.

"Suppose, for a change, you admit you're wrong—about Marne, I mean. Would you like to hear me talk a while on that basis?"

"Sure—go ahead." I told him that I thought Marne and Rene and Doc were friends, that they were working together

on this, that Marne had made the germ cultures for Doc, getting some proof in shape so they could expose the whole business.

"Why doesn't Marne say so, then?"

"Because he doesn't want to scare off the man they're after. He's still hoping, still trying to work along those lines."

"With Doc dead—and Marne in jail?"

"Well, I don't know."

"Well, go ahead. What about the tire?"

"Somebody planted it on him, to pin Doc's murder on him."

It sounded pretty lame, but when he looked up again he said: "I've got it."

"What?"

"Who killed—er—who tried to kill you."

"Well—who?"

He didn't tell me. "We've still got to pin it down," he said. "We'll finish what Doc started that noon at the Elks."

"How?"

"By putting you in Doc's place. They tried to get you once, and they'll try it again, if they get a chance. We'll give 'em that chance."

"How?"

"The same way he did. We'll set the stage again, like it was in the first act. I mean, you've got to fix up a bridge game for this noon, the way you used to."

I looked at my watch. "I've got to go to the hospital for a new dressing," I told him. "But I guess I can make it. I—I don't know who to get for a fourth, though."

"I want everything the way you used to have it." He brushed aside my objection, his voice excited, driving. "Have Dean there, and Tut, and Zelma. Make a date with her for yourself."

"Me?"

"Yeah."

"All right, anything you say. Say, maybe I could get Dr. Beresh for a fourth. I talked to him about it once, and he seemed to be interested. Would that be all right?"

He thought a moment, then said: "Yes, I guess Beresh will do."

**I** DIDN'T know just how well Dr. Beresh would do until it was all over. He and I got downtown at twelve thirty. That was the time Rathbone wanted, and

I kept it to the dot. I found a parking space in front of the club, and we went in. Harry Dean was at the table alone. Tut wasn't there, and it made me nervous.

Rathbone was several tables away, hiding behind his newspaper. Zelma came in with her tray, and sat down beside me. I gave her a sheepish smile. Rathbone peeked around the edge of his newspaper, and somehow or other, it tied my stomach up in a knot. Dean and Dr. Beresh knew each other, and they talked about his eyes, and what had happened to Charlane. I studied the menu card, but didn't know what to eat. I didn't have any more appetite than a newt. I had done everything Rathbone wanted me to. Apparently, I was in the act of sticking out my neck, but I didn't know in what direction it was sticking. Where was Tut? He had told me he would be there, but he wasn't. Did he know what was going on? Was he Rathbone's quarry? In the state I was in, I had him headed straight for the hangman already.

We got our food, finally. The playing cards lay on the edge of the table, as usual—the same old deck, I noticed. The minutes ticked past. Rathbone, behind Beresh, riffled his newspaper, and looked at the clock. "He knows who murdered Doc," I thought, "and he can sit there and read a newspaper."

Zelma finished one hand, and was going to go after the other when our fourth at bridge showed up. Not Tut, no indeed—but Doc. Doc, himself, wearing a turban like mine, but with a sort of cocky air that I couldn't manage. I wore mine like a plate, balanced on my head.

Foley, at the steam counter, let his mouth fall open, and his slicing knife slid to the floor. Doc only grinned, and came straight to our table. Beresh and Dean and I jumped up. My knees shook, and I had to sit down again. Doc glanced around briefly. I thought his eyes made a brief pause on Rathbone, but I wasn't sure. He had an especially warm greeting for Zelma, but she choked and gulped, and couldn't get out a word. "Don't try," he told her, "I'll do the talking." He sat down in the vacant chair. "It looks like this might develop into a bridge game. Think we're still psychic, Bill?"

"We'll need a new deck," I said, in a hollow voice.

"Oh, yes, that's right. I ran off with the ace of hearts, didn't I?"

"Yes," I said. "And if it isn't too much of a strain on you to tell us why—"

"Let's hear the whole story," Harry Dean broke in.

"I hate to bore you," Doc protested. "But you can stop me if you've heard any of it before. I hardly know where to start."

"At the beginning," I said, "right from the time you left the table that noon."

"Oh, yes. Well, you remember I said something about going to Rathbone with some information. I announced that deliberately before all of you because I had tracked down those epidemics. I knew where they started. They started right here, with me. I was a walking plague, and I knew how I carried it, and why. I had had Marne checking up for weeks. We had everything ready to spring, but if we sprung it right then, I was afraid the brains behind what was going on would get away. That's why I announced it that noon, figuring that he'd show his hand."

"Then Marne isn't guilty," Dr Beresh murmured, with a sigh of relief.

"No indeed, he's been my mainstay. During the afternoon, I waited for something to happen, but nothing did. That evening I got a call from Marne. He was out at Spooner's Swamp, and had a flat tire. It sounded like his voice, but I know now it was someone else calling. Anyway, I knew he and Rene went out there, so I didn't suspect anything. When I got there, I saw the car in the bushes. I started to get out of my car, and then I got conked on the head. I had my back to the man who hit me, and he didn't get in a good blow. I came to, when I hit the cold water, enough to wiggle to the far shore."

"You didn't see the man who did it?" Dr. Beresh asked.

"No."

"They weren't after your tires then?" Dean remarked.

"No. That was just window-dressing, to plant the murder on Marne. One of my tires showed up on his car later. Well, after they finished with me, they called

you, Bill, because you saw me take the card."

"I should have known better than to prowl around there," I muttered. "The only thing that saved me was when my flashlight lit on Rene. It must have flustered the man."

"I don't believe he saw her. If he had, he wouldn't have bothered to drag my car a mile up the road to the gravel pit. As a matter of fact, Rene and Marne got there before you did, Bill, but they were more cautious because Marne knew a little of what was in the wind. They went in, looking for me, and they found me. I've been at Rene's house ever since."

"That's why that butler closed the door in my face, so I wouldn't come in and snoop around," I said.

"He had his orders," Doc observed.

"So your ruse to—to trap the brains didn't work?" Dr. Beresh asked.

"No, but I still had something left to work on—the card. I left a piece of it with Marne that afternoon for an analysis. I got the hunch that noon, Dean, that both you and Deschal were being systematically blinded. As it turned out, the card you'd been handling proved it. You had rubbed your eyes, and then fingered the card. Rathbone had it analyzed, and found out what it is. Your eyes'll be all right, now that we've caught it in time. I should have thought it out before, but I didn't. It would have saved Deschal. All I needed after I knew what was on the card, was to hook it onto Charlane. That's why I sent Rene up there for a clip of his fingernail. You know what she found."

"Then he—" Dr. Beresh was going to ask whether Charlane was deliberately blinding the two men, but Doc shook his head before he could ask it.

"He didn't know what he was doing," he said. "I sent Rene up there today, because I knew he usually had his fingers done on Wednesday. You see, Zelma?"

Zelma was paper-white. She couldn't move. Her eyes were glazed with terror. I had to keep on thinking of Deschal, with his Seeing-Eye dog, and Charlane, dead in his examining chair, from sheer despair, and Harry Dean, for that matter, staring out of red, festering eyes, to keep from feeling sorry for her.

"It's a lie," she finally choked out. "It's a lie. I didn't do anything to his fingers."

Doc smiled. "I've been checking it for weeks on my own fingers, sweetheart," he said. "You'd have gotten away with it, too, if I hadn't come back, alive and kicking. The only person you had to worry about was Bill, because he saw me take out the ace of hearts from the deck. I wouldn't be surprised, Bill, if she was taking care of you right now. That hand Zelma just manicured—you'd better not handle any food with it."

Damn Rathbone, I thought. So that's what he meant by sticking my neck out. He might have killed me. I looked at Zelma. I could see it was true. Doc had hit the nail on the head. She was cornered, trapped, and wild with fear. But, as far as I could see, everything stood exactly where it had that noon when he had first announced he was going to Rathbone. He knew Zelma was in it then already, so I couldn't figure out what the stage-setting was for. But I found out a second later. What Doc said next, he said only because he knew it was true, not because he could prove it. But he expected the proof to develop. That was what the stage-setting was for. His saying it, was the crux of the whole situation, just as his announcing that he was going to Rathbone had been once before. "So you see, Dr. Beresh," were his words, "your game is up. Zelma's told us all about it."

I knew it wasn't true. Anyone who wasn't in a panic, who could have thought a moment would have known it wasn't true. But Beresh wasn't thinking. "She's told us how you furnished her with the germ cultures, and the poison," Doc went on in his quiet voice.

I felt as though a bomb had been placed on the table between us. It might explode in anybody's face, but I wanted it to go off. It had to go off. That was what this little seance was for. Zelma hadn't said a word to anyone. She never would, perhaps, but if Beresh believed she had, if only for a second, he might

blow up. And he did. His chair clattered back, suddenly. His savage tongue ripped at her like a sword blade, cutting her down to a terror-stricken, quivering huddle. For a second, she seemed to try to quiet him, realizing, of course, what kind of a trap had been set for him. But she couldn't get in a word. So she waited, and only when he was finished did she say: "I have said nothing."

Beresh knew it was true, and, because it was, he was stung to new fury. He whipped out a gun. I don't know whom he intended to shoot. Maybe no one. Maybe he had a wild idea of backing out of the place, and getting free. My ears got set for the noise of the gun, but it didn't come off. Rathbone practically jumped over his table, getting to Beresh, and he had him pinned down before any bullets flew.

**T**UT came in just after it was all over, terribly put out that Rathbone had made him miss it all. He'd phoned him and told him to stay away.

"You could have had my place with the greatest pleasure," I told him.

"Never mind," Doc said. "We can have a game."

So that was what we did. We were right back where we started from. But Doc was uneasy. He fidgeted constantly, and I could see he wasn't comfortable. Every once in a while, he'd look at his fingernails, and then back at his cards. Finally, he felt of the edges of his hair, and announced: "I need a haircut. Hey, Foley, call up Ike, the barber, and tell him to come over here, and give me a haircut."

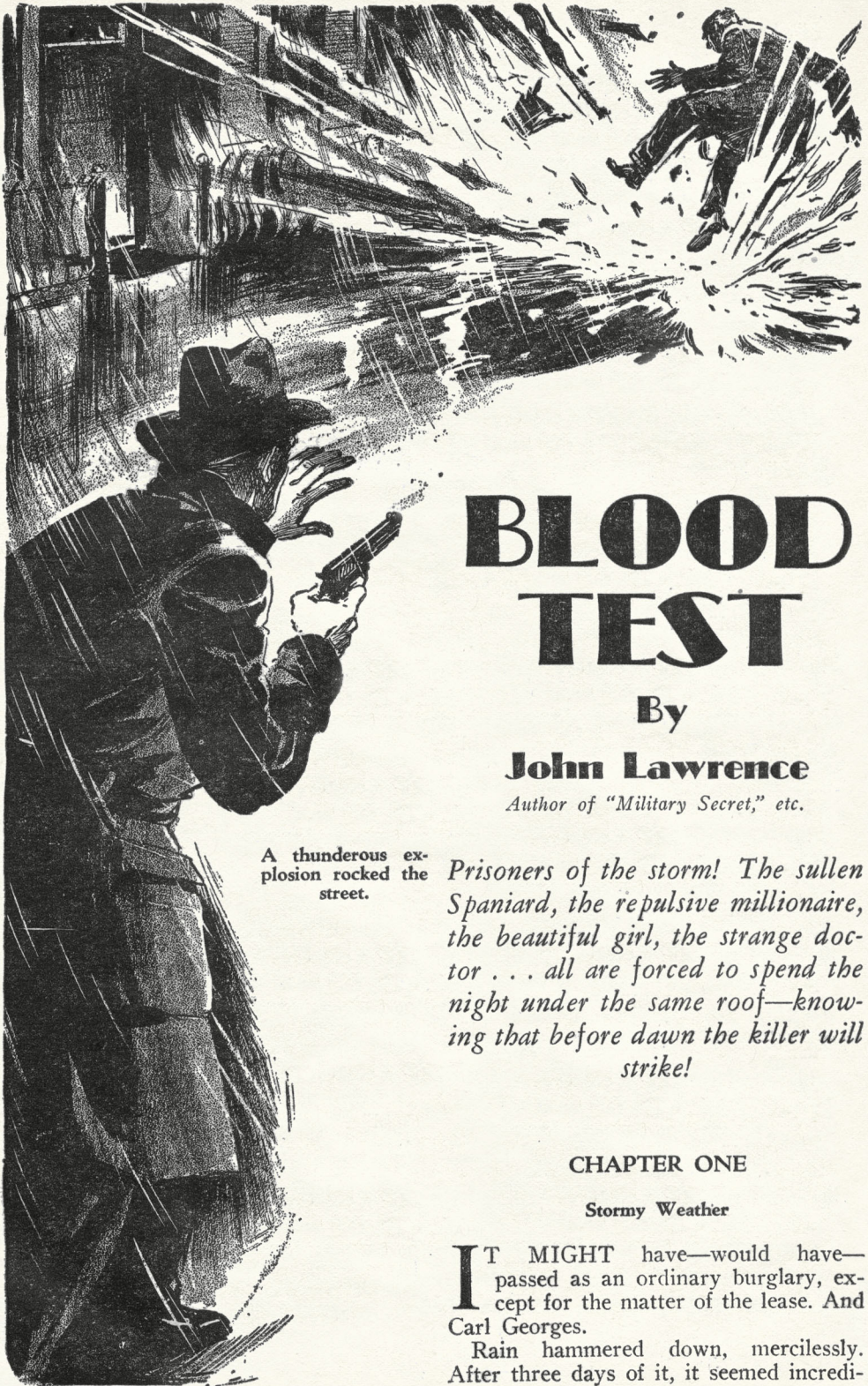
"Listen, Doc," I protested, "you can't get a haircut. Your head's all wrapped up."

"Oh, that's right." He settled down again, but he was still fidgety, and a little later, he said: "Dammit, I don't feel right. It's my feet I guess. I wonder if there's a chiropodist around somewhere."

Well, as I said, I knew he'd get around to it sometime, if he ever thought of it.



**FOR VICTORY . . . BUY WAR BONDS!**



# BLOOD TEST

By

**John Lawrence**

*Author of "Military Secret," etc.*

A thunderous explosion rocked the street.

*Prisoners of the storm! The sullen Spaniard, the repulsive millionaire, the beautiful girl, the strange doctor . . . all are forced to spend the night under the same roof—knowing that before dawn the killer will strike!*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Stormy Weather

**I**T MIGHT have—would have—passed as an ordinary burglary, except for the matter of the lease. And Carl Georges.

Rain hammered down, mercilessly. After three days of it, it seemed incredi-

ble that there could be any more rain to *come* down. First Avenue, in the Sutton Place neighborhood, swirled like an ankle-deep river.

Georges huddled in a doorway, cursing the elements, the neighborhood, and the Fate that had booted him from his snug berth as a headquarters specialist and returned him to precinct duty just two weeks ago. All because he had accepted a suit of clothes from a wealthy clothing manufacturer with whom he played tennis in his off hours. By no stretch of imagination could the man be considered a criminal or even a potential criminal, and the suit of clothes could positively not be classified as any sort of a bribe, but—a puritanical inspector had blown his top and so Georges stood in the pouring rain.

Defiantly, he was wearing the suit of clothes in question, under his gabardine—a gesture he was already regretting, as the moisture seeped through his raincoat.

The streets were deserted. At nine o'clock, it looked like midnight. A few shopkeepers stood glumly in their doorways here and there, staring dully out at the rain, mentally estimating the blow to their respective businesses. One of them—a confectionery shop directly opposite Georges—was dimming its lights preparatory to closing, as Georges stared from the gloom of a darkened store-well just south of Fifty-third Street.

Fully aware that he should be off down at the other end of the beat, Georges mooned in glum rebellion, watching dull-eyed while the confectionery-shop owner and his plump wife bustled around inside the dim store, setting things to rights for the night. A vague hypnosis of procrastination lulled him, and he followed each move of the two with mournful vague interest.

Presently the shop was in readiness, and the mustached proprietor and the dumpy woman stood in the open doorway, while the man reached back and turned off the main lights inside. The woman struggled to open an umbrella. She got it up, and the door closed. They poised, both shrunk under the umbrella's shelter—then swung out in perfect step, hastening for the corner of Fifty-third.

They were within three paces of the corner, were banking to swing over towards Sutton, when a distinguished-looking, tall, slender man plowed round in front of them—and jumped as though he'd touched a charged wire. He was muffled to the chin in a long, shapeless black topcoat, a fawn Jimmy Walker hat dripping atop his silver-gray hair, and he carried a typewriter case in one fawn-gloved hand.

There was never much danger of colliding. The two under the umbrella stopped almost dead at sight of the other, and jiggled, prepared to pass on either side, at his pleasure.

But the tall man lit wildly out in the gutter, one hand flinging round in a protective motion, round the typewriter case. Even from across the street, Georges could see his eyes burning, as he clipped something at the inoffensive old couple. Then he deliberately waded in the gutter, the water halfway up to his knees, till he had circled widely. Not till he was exaggeratedly clear of them did he mount the sidewalk again. He gave them a final, malevolent glance and, holding the typewriter case gingerly out from his side, hurried on south on First Avenue. The bewildered old couple vanished down the side street.

Georges thought little of it. He watched the retreating back of the distinguished-looking man with only cursory interest.

**T**HEN his curiosity began to build—or perhaps it was just the sound instinct of a good cop. At any rate, by the time the hurrying man reached the corner below, Georges was frowning, scratching his brick-red hair. Come to think of it, a man did not have to be so elaborately careful of a typewriter. Of course, other things than a typewriter could be carried in a typewriter case. . . .

The tall man crossed the street and, as he mounted to Georges' side, he gave a quick hasty glance in each direction, momentarily almost stopping. For a moment, even as he eased his own red head back into concealment, Georges had a look at the drawn, sensitive lines of the man's thin, ascetic face under the corner street lamp—and a vague mist of memory stirred



inside him. In the moment that the man disappeared beyond the corner, Georges got the quick notion that he knew him, or had seen him somewhere before. It was this—this disquieting effort at placing him—as much as anything else that decided him finally to take a short, exploratory meander on the other's trail.

The man had a half block or more start on him, as Georges put his nose around the corner below, and slid after him. The slashing rain, of course, reduced visibility and, when the tall, silver-haired man turned south at the *next* corner—at Second Avenue—Georges had to lengthen his casual stride, in order to keep in range.

Once he came round behind him on that street, his feeling that the man was attention-worthy increased, for the other had quickened his pace greatly. Almost as Georges came in sight, he was turning again to the left, thus in effect, doubling back. And, with rising interest, Georges realized that the other was taking precautions to make sure that he was not being followed.

That made it easy, for an experienced, shrewd, forty-year-old bloodhound who had risen from the pavements to a crack academic post in the department. Georges put on a neat display of his craft, settled curiously in the other's wake.

It was no simple wake, at that. The slender tall man seemed obsessed with fear that somebody, a phantom perhaps, because Georges was dead certain that the man had not observed *him*, was interested in his movements. They trailed back to First Avenue, turned down First, headed across and up Beekman Place, wandering in and out of the little maze of streets on Beekman Hill—only to emerge again on First. And, in the end, the man walked back up First until he was again at Fifty-second, took one final look behind him—and strode briskly back into Fifty-second. Georges, now sourly impatient, and forced to lag back on the wide, well-lighted Avenue, almost broke into a trot, got across and hastened up to the corner, peered round—and swore roundly under his breath.

The stretch of pavement between himself and Second Avenue was utterly, completely bare. There was no sign of his man. Somewhere along the block, he had

dissolved. It now became clear that all the merry-go-rounding had been of no consequence, and that the silver-haired man had been headed for this block from the first.

In the shadows, Georges catfooted swiftly along, squinting in hopes of catching a flash of motion at the entrance of one of the small houses that lined the block. He knew the district well enough to know that there were none of the little converted apartments and rooming-houses habitually left unlocked at this hour.

By the time he had hastened to the center of the block—a converted residence that the owner had somehow managed to kick around till it was a three-story office building, housing real estate agents on the ground floor—he had spotted nothing. He jammed his hands in his pockets sourly, aware that he had missed the boat, that his quarry was now safely under cover, and slogged down the remainder of the block, disgusted with himself for being outfooted, if not outwitted.

He brought up finally at the corner, turned back to stare angrily—and, on the instant, there was a sharp *craaack* from midway the block.

**H**E TOOK a surprised step, straining his ears. His eye ran swiftly back—and settled on the real estate office, half-way back to First Avenue.

On his toes, he waited, tense, for a repetition of the sound—and a swift catalogue of what he knew about the building flipped through the back of his mind. Resentment or no resentment, he was not too proud to take his precinct assignment seriously. Nor was it the first time he had been assigned to this section. His knowledge of his district was good, if not encyclopedic. Now, staring through the rain at the little building, he recalled hearing that the second floor had recently been occupied by a new tenant—a lawyer named Trumbull. This occupancy dated from just about the same time as George's reappearance on the beat, and up till now he had had no sight of the newly settled lawyer. Perhaps—conceivably—the furtive, typewriter-toter was this Trumbull. . . .

He started silently back, as no further

sound eventuated. The little realty building had a flat, red-brick face, with an arched entrance in the lower left-hand corner for the use of the tenants of the top two floors. The broad, plate-glass front of the realty office stretched across the rest of the facade.

He slipped up to it and stooped, peering into the blob of darkness that represented the little corner entrance—and a door bumped softly within.

Suspicion became conviction, that the flat sound he had heard was the jimmying of a door, this door, and the breaking of the lock.

That would make the intruder *not* Trumbull. He went in quickly.

The door hung ajar, the latch broken. Georges' hand went swiftly to his hip. He slid in. He dared not risk light. He squinted, till he could discern that he was at the foot of a square-angling little stairs, with a landing halfway up to the second story. He eased a foot onto the bottom step, hefting his gun. He went up, silent step by silent step, on the rubber runner of the stairs.

He reached the landing. He edged around, started delicately up the reverse section of the stairs. . . .

With a sudden scampering rush, footsteps raced out of the niche below him—the niche just inside the street door—beside which he had stood a moment since. The door banged open, and a dark figure charged away out into the rain.

Georges exploded in a startled oath, whirled back and plunged headlong down the stairs in pursuit. He banged into the closing door, treadmilled momentarily on the slippery sill and went to one knee as he scabbled with the door, gathered himself hastily, and plunged out.

His head whipped back toward First Avenue—and then toward Second. He roared at the hunched, speeding figure, now two-thirds the way to the corner: "Stop, you! Come back here, or I'll—" and, as the figure fairly flew, ziz-zagging wildly, he ran out, set himself grimly, and fired carefully at the fugitive's legs.

A blazing eruption of orange seemed to mushroom up out of the sidewalk—an ear-crashing, thunderous explosion that rocked the street. Georges had one horrified glimpse, in the monstrous sheet

of flame, of the slender man, actually blown high in the air.

Then rain-hissing silence—and a huge pall of smoke rolling away.

They found the body of the slender man, thirty feet along Second Avenue, legs and torso practically blown from his body, his vitals all over the wet sidewalk, his face a powder-blackened raw bloody mask. He was, of course, quite dead.

The typewriter case had contained—as well as the now obvious container of "soup" or nitroglycerine—a complete set of safe-cracking tools.

Within twenty minutes of the sirening arrival of the first dolly cars, someone had identified the dead man. He was Dapper Don McCoy, an old-time confidence man and pickpocket, with three felony convictions registered against him in New York State. It seemed incredible that he, with no apparent knowledge of safe-cracking, would deliberately risk his neck in this way. "This way" being, beyond any reasonable doubt, in an attempt to break in and crack a safe in the realty building.

Furthermore—inasmuch as it immediately developed that the upper floor of the building was vacant—it became obvious that it was the safe of the lawyer, Trumbull, on which he had designs.

**T**HE real stinger came after another thirty minutes, when they tried to get hold of Trumbull.

He was not listed in the phone book and the phone company had only this office address for him. They dug the realty agent out of bed, and then the thing began to look even queerer. The renting agent, it seemed, had never seen his second-floor tenant. The application to rent had come by mail, together with a money order for two months rent. The return address was a General Delivery designation on the upper west side. The agent had been only too glad to rent the place, had forwarded a lease and, upon receiving it back, signed, had mailed the keys, as per request. Nor hide nor hair of the tenant had been seen, although a cartage company had moved in a complete set of office furniture—used—and a small floor safe. The police examined all this, found locked steel files and all the impedimenta of a struggling law office.

"Damn it," Georges finally raged, "the guy isn't a phantom. He must have been seen by somebody."

"I dunno," the renting agent said worriedly. "The janitor never saw him. Somebody said there was light here late at night once or twice. I was beginning to wonder *before* this."

"Well, where's this lease—and the letters you say you got?" Georges said.

His lieutenant, now on the scene, snapped: "Wait a minute, Georges. You're not a handwriting expert any longer, remember? You're a precinct dick—under me."

"I can look at the only existing evidence of this ghost Trumbull, can't I? It's my case, isn't it?"

"You can look—yes. But it's your case—*no*. I'll take charge of it myself."

Examining the papers brought Georges' memory to life. After five years in the I Bureau downtown, specializing in handwriting, he had developed an almost uncanny retention of the various significant scribbles that came under his eye. This scrawl was fancy—all doodads and whirls, silly curlicues. The moment he saw the filled-in lease, he knew he had seen it before. In two minutes of concentrated effort he conjured a name up out of the past—and almost popped off with it. The circumstances in which he had seen it dawned on him just in time, however, and he refrained.

He had seen the writing—eight long years before. He had seen it in connection with a murder case. The murder case had never been solved. A specimen of this scrawl had been brought to him in the hopes of his matching it with certain samples. Unfortunately, he had been unable to do so—unfortunately, because the project was put to him by a close personal friend who was desperately anxious to have the samples match. Had they done so, it would have pinned the murder job on the writer.

The writer was one John Treadwell. The killing was the death of the press agent, Fletcher Thorne, found in New York harbor with part of his skull sawed away, and a great slice of his abdomen cut out. The close personal friend who had worked the case and brought the samples to Georges was—me.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Dead Hero

GEORGES knew this score was still an open wound, as far as I was concerned. I had wanted to nail John Treadwell for Thorne's death more than I ever wanted anything. I had squeezed the case dry, had fevered over it for nearly a year. I had given up because it ran dry—because it came to the point where I simply had nothing but my own convictions left with which to hammer away at Treadwell. The company, Amalgamated Airlines, for which I was chief-and-only investigator, finally made me quit.

They didn't make me quit burning because they couldn't. I was still as hungry for an excuse—any excuse at all, that would let me climb his frame again—and still convinced that if I could haunt him, badger him, pound away at him, I could trick out the truth somehow. Admittedly, I didn't quite know how. All I knew was that he was a devious gent and that he hated attention like poison.

All of which I had told Carl Georges over a dozen billiard games. And because he was a friend, and because he didn't care for the lieutenant's attitude, he was only too glad to throw me this morsel privately.

His call caught me in the middle of a poker game.

He didn't imagine, of course, any connection between the explosive little Fifty-second Street ugliness and the eight-year-old Fletcher Thorne job. Nor did I. It was just a question of an excuse to force myself on John Treadwell again.

It took me only forty quick heartbeats after I hung up to smother any slight hesitancy due to vagueness. It took me five minutes phoning to learn that Treadwell was not in New York, and another five to locate him out at his Westchester estate.

Ten minutes after that, I was nosing my old coupe out of the garage, pointing it grimly toward Marien, praying that my precious tires and gasoline would get me there.

It was a wild trip. I battled the storm stolidly. I mulled over the little drama

of the exploding burglar with vague curiosity. Mostly I thought of Fletcher Thorne.

He had been press agent for Amalgamated. Naturally, we had worked together. But how little *that* told!

I first "met" him in 1918—four thousand feet over Brussels. I was flying an ancient Handley-Page, had my cockpit half full of reconnaissance photographs and was trying desperately to get home with them. Over Brussels, two sleek black Fokkers had suddenly roared down on me out of a cloudbank.

All I could do was stall, sideslip, stunt desperately and hopelessly to keep their tracers out of my engine—or my belly—as long as possible. I was a dead duck.

Fletcher Thorne's Jenny had simply appeared out of nowhere—was suddenly charging in like an angry hornet, boldly challenging the two superior Hun planes.

Pure, blazing nerve, and skill, had whipped him in and around the two of them in a breath-taking, crackling ninety seconds—and then all three of them had plunged down together, black smoke pouring from the two Fokkers, Thorne's Jenny in flames.

Fortunately, he had been able to bail out—but he had looked death squarely in the face. Machine-gun bullets had caught him in the throat—gone through his throat. He had landed in enemy territory, while I raced for home with the vital pictures. They—or I—would never have reached the drome but for him, of course. He had spent the last few months of the war in Germany.

Twelve years later, when Fate brought us face to face again in the office of Amalgamated, I don't hesitate to say I got all choked up. The surgery he had received from the Boche was outstanding. They had saved not only his life, but his voice. He carried, and would carry all his life, a puckered, angry scar just under his Adam's apple—the marks of three bullet-wounds—an indented shamrock of scar tissue. By a miracle of fate and care, he had come off with only that. But if ever I was in danger of forgetting what I owed him, I had only to look at that scar to bring it poignantly back.

I won't say we were exactly inseparable at Amalgamated. He played Broadway

too hard for my modest salary. But when, out of a clear sky, his torn body turned up in the harbor, it hit me where I live.

Not catching his killer hit me even harder. Not that it would do him any good—but I ached bitterly to burn somebody for it. And one of his Broadway pals finally told me of a phone call he had gotten one recent night at a night club. He had gone pale and feverish on the instant, but refused to tell what was the matter. However, later in the evening, having drunk a prodigious quantity, he did let slip in a feverish mumble a man's name. The man's name, of course, was John Treadwell. And that was every last thing I could find to go on when, three days later, the harbor police pulled him out.

I had thrown myself at the job of untangling the mystery in a white rage—and I had wound up exactly nowhere.

Mainly, I got nowhere, because all cooperation mysteriously seemed to cease at once when John Treadwell's name was mentioned. It was uncanny. I wound up with a hint, a blazing certainty in my own mind, and nothing more. The hint came from Fletcher Thorne's own lawyer—a Broadway friend. He told me feverishly to forget the whole thing, that it was hopeless, that "too many people wouldn't tread on John Treadwell's toes."

I went to work on John Treadwell. Even I had never heard of him till then. I gradually acquired an astonishing picture—a picture of a rich man without a business, but with apparent tremendous influence in various high places. He never interviewed me without a gun within inches of his hand. He kept me ten paces distant and you could search New York without finding anyone who would admit knowing the red-faced, nasty-tongued little Croesus. In the end, I was driven to the unshakable belief that he had made a career of blackmail, expanded his list of "customers" patiently and deliberately over a period of years, as another man would build up a law practice. And out of this, somehow, I had the dead certainty that Fletcher Thorne's death had arisen.

It had remained just that—a gnawing, tormenting certainty—without the shred of evidence to support it—for eight long

years. A chance to go back at it was like the breath of life. Even this oblique, rather far-fetched chance.

**Y**OU don't care about the details of the trip out.

When I finally battled up the long rise outside of Marien to the gate of his enormous estate and dived off my running board to swing it open, I ached in every bone. If I'd skidded in one full circle on the way out, I'd skidded in thirty. The storm was beyond even my imaginings.

The vast property, I recalled, had a border of woods on all sides—and thereafter was steeply-rolling farm land. Rolling land, at this stage, would mean shallow lakes with hills sticking up out of them. And the road—clay—was beginning to go out under my very tires. There was only one thing to do, once I was through the woods and out into the open—grit my teeth, jam down the accelerator, and ride the shoot-the-shoots.

I did that, fighting the wheel, swooping headlong down into one after another of the explosive water-hazards, battling to the top of the next rise, and then repeating the process.

I got almost to the house. I strained and coughed up a final rise and was looking across a raging black hollow at a black huddle of trees that leaked twinkling light. I sleeved sweat from my face, growled smugly as I tipped downwards for the last plunge—and suddenly every light on my car fizzled out. I was blotted instantly into smothering, rain-thundering blackness. My wiring was finally gone. I braked instantly, breathlessly, skidded a few hair-raising yards downwards and sideways—and drifted to a stop, slanting across the road.

The car refused the starter. I was mired.

There was no alternative but to hoof it the rest of the way. I buttoned my slicker tight, rolled up the windows and slid down the oatmeal-like slope.

I slithered and stumbled the thirty-odd yards down, hesitated. I stared glumly at the rain-lashed ocean at the bottom, shivered, set my teeth—and then the sound behind me cut through the storm—the thin hum of a racing motor.

I jerked back, aghast—and the nimbus

of glow grew up over the brow of the hill like a kindled fire. I gasped and tried to run back, yelling. The glaring discs of headlights burst over the brow, dipped down.

There was a shrill scream of brakes as the driver saw my car and tried frantically to check, he whirled broadside in a pinwheeling skid. He spun to the left—then hit a stone or something, and whipped back to the right—and thundered into my coupe. My shouts, of course, might never have been, the storm simply absorbed them.

My coupe was blasted over on its side, sent sliding a few yards downwards. The sedan bounced off sideways, its right wheel suddenly rolling off into the soup-like field. It tilted over and down, its axle digging into the road. With a queer blue flash, the other car's lights and motor died and, in a wink, the lashing storm had blotted from my sight.

I couldn't see how the driver's neck could be unbroken. I ran back, feverishly slithering and stumbling. I had to plunge calf-deep in the soupy field to get round my fallen coupe. My flashlight's finger spotted the drunken sedan up ahead, looking as if it had been standing there, abandoned, for ages. I scrambled and ran flounderingly up till I could jump on the uplifted running-board to poke light through the window.

I poked it squarely into a round, bespectacled man's face, sweat-streaked and desperate with anxiety, but—furiously alive. He was heaving, straining, to open the jammed door.

He began to blurt in wild exasperation: "Well? For God's sake, help me. Can't you see this damned thing? How is he? I'm not too late? Nothing's happened, has it?"

I stared, astounded. "You—you're all right?" I stammered. "You're not hurt?"

"Are you blind?" he raged. "Of course I'm all right. How is he—Treadwell? Has anything happened yet? God's sake—get me out of here—get me up there before I'm too late."

**I** AM not a complete moron. The implications of what he was saying needled through my confusion, startled

me. Questions jumped to my lips—and were clamped there. And—being a sleuth for fifteen years shapes your mind. For the moment, the matter of Dapper Dan went onto a shelf at the back of my brain, as I focused sharply on this development.

I hastily framed a shouted question, "What did they tell *you* was wrong?" as I laid hold of the door and yanked.

"That he was . . ." The door shot open, almost pitching him out on his round little face. His queer, sugar-loaf hat fell askew, exposing wild, bushy-gray reddish hair to match his thick eyebrows. He jackknifed over the running board, writhed back to snatch a square black doctor's bag, wriggled out like an eel into the mud. He had a queer, humorous, little up-tilted nose and, but for the strain in his bright gray eyes, they would have been gnome-like and cheerful.

"I just got here," I shouted. "What's the trouble? What are they . . . ?"

He was already stumbling down the hill. He flung feverishly over his shoulder. "Plenty . . . ! God's sake, come on, man!"

Perforce I stumbled in his wake, holding my flashlight high to light his scurrying, stumbling progress. For all his short legs, he fairly flew, keeping ahead of me as we splashed and floundered down, waded through the rain-slashed lake at the bottom and up the other side.

The blaze of lights in the house among the trees became visible as I topped the rise. He was already off at a trot across the water-soaked lawn. The house was a wide, shallow pile of modern gray stone, trying to look like an old farmhouse, with a miniature colonial porch tacked on in front. No one was in sight. The roar of the storm must have swallowed up even the explosive sounds of the collision.

Not till we had stumbled halfway across the sodden, streaming ground, did anyone appear—and then it was a girl, on the brightly lighted little porch.

She took my breath. Her hair was golden-bronze, parted in the middle, yet somehow drawn back over her ears to fall in a long bob. She had a somber, almost impassive face, yet every feature was delicate, young—a high round little forehead, softly-shadowed cheeks, soft, level lips and starry blue eyes as solemn as a child's.

She was slender, delicate, in a peach-taffeta dinner dress. Her eyes moved somberly back and forth between the doctor and myself as she withdrew to let him in.

I followed blandly, suddenly recollecting that I had heard that Treadwell had acquired a young wife, since I had last seen him. This must be she.

The doctor burst excitedly; "How is he, Eileen? Has anything happened? Where is he?" He struggled out of his dripping trench coat.

She nodded upwards, her eyes somber on me. "In his room, in bed," she told him. "You're to go right up."

Upstairs in this house was really a three-sided gallery. The huge hall was a duplex, with a broad flight of stairs bisecting the rear wall. I calmly peeled my slicker and dripping hat as he sped away and dropped my things atop his. "I'm the detective Mr. Treadwell sent for."

She didn't move. "All right," she said. "I suppose you'd better go up."

I turned and took the stairs easily, three at a time, reached the top as the doctor hustled into a room at the front, right-hand corner of the gallery. He said something, ending in, ". . . my dear fellow."

I was only a few paces behind him as I turned into an austere gray-and-maroon bedroom. John Treadwell was lying in a nest of pillows on a high bed, a maroon silk dressing-gown over his collarless boiled shirt. His fringes of sandy-white hair were matted, his tomato face an unhealthy purple-gray. His little red eyes were hot and dry. I noticed the light shining out from the green-tiled bathroom adjoining, and also the tin box of dry mustard beside the tumbler on his bedside table. He had one chunky pink hand outside the coverlet, gripping a square black pistol. His breathing was a little labored.

He was snarling huskily: "That whelp tried to kill me."

**I** LOOKED to where his head bobbed. A dark youth in immaculate dinner clothes stood motionless against the far wall, arms folded. He eyed me with smoldering black eyes that were hard and defiant. He was Latin, olive-skinned,

almost too handsome, slender-hipped and tall.

"How?" I asked Treadwell. "How did he try to kill you?"

"Look in . . ." His breath suddenly went out like a punctured balloon. "Gentle hell! Who are *you*? Where did you come from?"

I said, "You remember me. The Airlines sleuth," hoping that he didn't.

"Oh, yes," he said muddily after a minute—not remembering me. "Well, what the hell are you here for?"

"Somebody got killed, breaking in to crack the safe in your Trumbull office," I said. "But that'll wait. Maybe it's lucky I came—if somebody's trying to kill you. You were going to say *how* he tried."

He stared hard at me for a full ten seconds. Then he tightened his lips and ground: "Look in there!" He jerked his head toward the bathroom. "I use eye-drops—wash my eyes thoroughly every four hours. He doctored 'em."

"With what?"

"I don't know. But they smell queer. Smell them."

The little doctor pawed his bushy hair, worried eyes on mine. I told him, "See if you can make anything of them—but don't touch them." As he scurried toward the bathroom, I looked at the bad color and the sweat that shone on Treadwell's flushed forehead. "Just what effect did these drops have on you?"

"I wasn't stupid enough to use them. And I cleaned my stomach out"—he indicated the mustard—"in case he'd fixed my dinner, too."

Inside the bathroom, the doctor erupted excitedly, "Conine!" He popped back into the open door, his bright gray eyes hot. "Conine! It's conine!" he said hoarsely. "They are doped—I'll take oath on it."

I joined him in the bathroom, looked at the six-ounce bottle of a popular brand of eyedrops. A twisted scrap of black cellulose cork-seal was on the floor. The bottle was open, spreading the musty smell of conine.

"Where's the cork?" I asked.

"Here," Treadwell called.

We went back and he opened a sweating, liver-spotted pink hand and showed

it to us. "Look at it carefully—there—right in the center. There's a hole. And look." He reversed it and spread the bottom of the cork by pressure. A little mouth appeared in the smooth surface. "Whatever was put in there was squirted *through* the cork—before the bottle was ever opened—with a hypodermic needle, I'd say."

He struggled excitedly up to one elbow, his eyes gaunt on the black-eyed Latin, and snarled: "And for your information, Mr. Don Vargas there—Mr. Vargas, the tennis bum, who has no visible means of support *except* tennis—Mr. Vargas who came here weeks ago to play in the Scimitar Club tournament, and who still lingers on, months after it's over—Mr. Vargas takes some sort of iron shots. He takes them himself, with a hypodermic needle—and he doesn't care who sees him. He's flashed the damned thing all over the beach—at the stores—anywhere. I think it's just a gag to duck the draft, but be that as it may—I'll guarantee there's a hypo on him right this minute!"

The Spaniard stood upright, wooden-faced, sliding slender dark fingers into his jacket trousers.

He met my eyes burningly. "As an officer, you will perhaps appreciate the value of a—what do you call it?—an alibi." Only the barest sibilance betrayed his accent.

From the corner of my eye, I saw that the lovely bronze-haired Eileen Treadwell had come to stand silently in the open door. A cigarette sent smoke up from her hanging hand and her eyes were somber as Vargas went on: "I do not demean myself to answer this tirade—except with incontrovertible facts. Mr. Treadwell has admitted that he purchased these drops in Huntsville this afternoon, carried them home and unwrapped them in his bathroom at five o'clock.

"Five o'clock. Mark that. He lay down to sleep for an hour. He rose at six. He does not leave his room. He stays here.

"I, meanwhile, am not even in the house till after six. I am driving Mrs. Treadwell to shopping all afternoon. I have bring my dinner clothing in a bag. She is so kind to grant me a room. I go there directly and change, then come

downstairs. Not till then does Mr. Treadwell leave his room here. We have dinner together. I am not for an instant out of his sight. Then, presently, he come up and find somebody has tamper with his drops. I—I have not possibly been anywhere near them. Well?"

Treadwell's face was turgid. "Nobody's denying you're a slippery rat, you rat. How you did it, even I can't figure out yet. But you'll tell us. Or else. Take him away, copper."

I blinked. "You mean arrest him?"

"What the hell else? Look at him! You think I want him loose, dreaming up new schemes to murder me, now that this one's flopped? Get him behind bars—at once!"

I shook my head. "This needs a little more thought—and evidence."

His face flooded. "Evidence? God's sake! Are you so thick you can't add two and two? This greaseball wants to get at my wife—or don't you even realize that? And that stuff's poisoned, isn't it?"

"That doesn't quite prove that he poisoned it."

"Are you mad? Who the hell else would have . . . ?"

"Maybe I can find out," I said, and, to short-circuit further argument, "You'd better let the doctor here look you over, till I consider. You don't look so good to me. Mr. Vargas—please wait downstairs with Mrs. Treadwell," and, when I had closed the two of them out, "All right, Doctor. This is just a precautionary. . . ."

"You can get out, too," Treadwell raged. "And get some real law here—get the local sheriff on the phone and tell him I want him. By God, you—I remember you now. I was wondering why you didn't seem much disturbed about all this. Now I remember. Maybe you'd like to see me get murdered."

I had the answer to that one on the tip of my tongue—and then I suddenly came to, and realized that it was the wrong answer.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Strange Household

**I** CERTAINLY didn't want him to get murdered—not right this minute—not with me on the premises. I was here in

too left-handed a way. If he became a corpse, I would have some damned searching questions tossed at me—and I wasn't sure I had the right answers.

I closed myself out on the balcony, with the first beginnings of worry on that angle troubling me. Below, I saw Vargas and the bronze-haired Eileen Treadwell disappearing into the living-room. It was an ironic twist. Despite my feelings toward Treadwell, it behooved me to take very good care that no homicide occurred to him.

I rapidly considered the thing that had brought me here—the Trumbull office and the death of Dapper Don—but it didn't seem relevant. However, the first thing was obviously to spot this would-be killer of Treadwell.

Who was it?

I rehearsed with infinite care the alibi presented by Don Vargas—and, incidentally, by Mrs. Treadwell—and it was sound. Since Treadwell hadn't denied the details, I had to conclude that they were true. And if they were—the alibi was flawless. Conceivably Vargas might lose his head over the girl's soft-fleshed loveliness—anyone could—and have the urge, but the fact remained that he simply could not have planted the poison between five and six o'clock.

Who could have? The servants? Or possibly there had been some visitor here. . . .

I went down the stairs and along the hall to the door at the rear, opened it and was in the vast, ultra-modern metal kitchen. Big Mamie, the three-hundred-pound cook whom I remembered from before, was making sandwiches on a gleaming counter. A raw-boned youngish man with an oversize doughy face and dull, sullen almond eyes was setting out a vast silver tray to receive them. He wore a black livery that might have been either a butler's or a chauffeur's.

He went suddenly still, eyeing me without friendliness. Big Mamie greeted me with a cordial: "H'lo, Mr. Donnelly."

"Who called here this afternoon, Mamie—late this afternoon?"

"Called here? Lord bless you—nobody."

"Somebody must have. Maybe they got in without your seeing them."



She looked at me in astonishment. "How? Ain't nobody could—less'n they sneaked through the fields or like that. And today, they'd be drowned. No, ain't nobody come here today, Mist' Donn'ly."

"Then who was in the house, say, between five o'clock and six?"

"Why, nobody—only Mist' Treadwell—and Cha'les here and myself." Then she added: "This the maid's week-end off. They went to N'Yawk Friday night. Right now they m'rooned at the Havensport station. Cha'les here. He"—she jerked her kinky head at the liveried man—"just on the phone a few minutes back, talkin' to them, when the wire went down."

I blinked. "You mean the phone's gone out, too?"

"What do you think she means?" he asked nastily.

"Where were you between five and six o'clock?" I asked him.

His almond eyes got even duller. "I drove Mr. Treadwell home around five. Then I stayed in the garage, tryin' to get the mud off the car before it caked. What do you think I was doin'?"

"Well, I could at least see if you did that—not that it would prove *when*." I said. "No, you needn't come with me. Just tell me the way."

**T**HERE was a cement underground passageway from the cellar to the garage. I went down, pressed the light switch by the passageway door and went along till a flight of cement steps brought me up again to ground level at the rear of the garage.

It was a wide, six-car frame garage, but there were only three cars in it—a long blue limousine, a blue convertible, and a cream-colored coupe. It was a second before I made out the monogram on the cream coupe—DV—and realized that it was Don Vargas' car.

The limousine's wheels and mudguards were wiped fairly clean.

I squatted there. I could not seriously bring myself to suspect the dough-faced Charles, irritating as he was. And yet—damn it—excepting Mamie, who could not get her three hundred pounds up a flight of stairs—there appeared no one else who could physically have got to

those eye-drops. Perhaps the butler-chauffeur had been bribed. . . .

That opened a whole Pandora's box of possibilities. It brought Treadwell's furtive, hidden existence—his New York existence—crowding into the picture. Anybody might be the brain behind Charles, if the flunkey were just a hired hand. . . . And it was only too probable that Treadwell was involved in things unsavory enough to spawn the wish to kill him, on the part of many people.

I don't know what drew my hot eyes to Vargas' cream-colored car. Hunch, or something. I finally wandered over and peered in. The glove compartment was empty. I strolled back and tried the luggage-rack. The door-lid of this was locked.

The lock of a luggage-compartment was not too hard a problem for me, although it took me two or three minutes to ease it open. Then I looked in at three matching-type airplane suitcases, of different sizes. I snapped the top one open. The top garment inside was a lacy, cream-satin nightgown.

I stared at it for a full minute. Then I snapped the bag shut, lowered the compartment lid and re-locked it, and walked slowly back to the house.

As I came back up the steps into the kitchen, Charles, the butler-chauffeur, appeared directly in my path.

"If it's of any interest to you," he said, "*Mister* Vargas sent me to get his car out."

I grunted, "Just forget it," and pushed through the door into the front hall.

Don Vargas was just reaching his black gabardine coat from the coat-rack. Eileen Treadwell stood with her arms behind her, while he said, ". . . likes it or not. I really feel it best for me to go."

I said, "I'm afraid not."

He flushed, tightened his lips. "I have a host and hostess, my friend, who will be worried about me. I have waited—I have submitted to all this without a word of protest. It is late—far past midnight—so I go."

"That isn't exactly the point. You see—even if you could negotiate the roadbed, which is doubtful—the doctor and I had a collision out there and the road is completely blocked. Till we can get a wreck-

er, I'm afraid none of us is going out."

Color jumped into his olive cheeks. He snapped, after a moment, "Then I shall phone for someone to come and pick me up. I do not propose . . ."

"Sorry, but the wires are down."

He breathed furiously.

"You'd better just forget it temporarily," I advised him. "And besides, I want to talk to you—both of you—in a minute. Suppose you go back in and sit down."

Perforce, he turned grudgingly after a minute, and I watched them go slowly back into the living-room. I cocked an eye up at Treadwell's door above.

By then, it had dawned on me that I had an A-I mystery on my hands. It was plain enough what the basic equation was—now. Treadwell hadn't been kidding when he said Vargas was after the girl. I wondered if he knew how right he was. Nevertheless, in view of the alibis of the pair, it was still impossible to mesh their romancing with the murder attempt. . . .

I looked again upwards—and suddenly wondered what was keeping the doctor in Treadwell's room. I started frowningly toward the staircase.

I brushed against the coat-rack and my dripping slicker slipped off and fell to the floor. I stooped down quickly to pick it up—and something crawled on my hand.

In startled reflex I jammed the coat on the hook, jerked my hand back. A spider ran up my wrist. Irrationally queasy, I whipped my hand frantically to dislodge it, sent it flying to the floor. I jumped to step on it—and then jerked my foot aside in the last moment. I dropped quickly down to my hunkers beside the thing—and stared.

My startled glance had been unmissable. I could see plainly at close range the hour glass on the spider's belly. It was a black widow.

I squashed it with my toe, remained hunkered there, staring at it with amazed question. A coincidence? An accident?

They do have occasional black widows in Westchester. And the truth is that they are not nearly so deadly as some people believe. But . . .

**A** VOICE above me—the doctor's—said in sudden concern: "What . . . ? What is it, officer? What are you doing?"

I looked up at Treadwell's door, came slowly to my feet. The little doctor was not there, but was standing before another door—at the rear corner of the gallery, on the opposite side. He was wiping his hands on a towel. He craned his neck. "What . . . ?"

I made a beckoning gesture which he interpreted as I meant it—as an urge to silence also. He threw the towel behind him through the open door, came hurrying down, his be-spectacled gray eyes concerned. "What . . . ?"

I pointed with my toe. "A black widow spider—somehow got into my coat."

I could see the veins swell out on his round little forehead, and he looked up at me with frightened eyes. "Good Lord . . . You don't mean that someone . . . You don't think . . . ?"

I shrugged. He jerked a handkerchief from his breast pocket, mopped his neck and round little face. He was really scared. He gulped huskily, "What's going on here? Do you . . . that Spaniard . . . do you think—after all . . . ?"

"It could be. Is Treadwell all right?"

"Yes, I think so. I could find no trace of any alternative poison." He searched my eyes feverishly. "Is—is it true that this Spaniard chap is in—in love with Mrs. Treadwell?"

"I guess."

"But—couldn't you—couldn't you take him into custody or something? Even if it isn't strictly legitimate?"

"I couldn't take him anywhere. We're marooned here. Even the phone is out."

"What? But—Good God, I was supposed to do an important operation tonight in New— What on earth are we going to do?"

"Pray for the storm to stop. That's all—" Suddenly, I recognized the bandy-legged little man. He was Dr. Merle Brainerd, head surgeon at the ultra-swank, ultra-modern Mercy Hospital, back in New York.

I stammered: "You—you're Dr. Brainerd, aren't you?"

He ran a harassed hand over his bushy red-gray hair. "Yes, of course."

"You—I mean, Mr. Treadwell must be an old and valued patient of yours—your coming out here on a night like this—and in this weather. . . ."

His preoccupied, hot little eyes gave me a vague look. "Yes, yes, a very old patient," he said distractedly. "And, of course, Mrs. Treadwell was my nurse before she was married."

I was startled. I don't know why. I said: "What? Mrs. Treadwell was a nurse?"

"Yes, yes, of course. That's where John met her—in my office." He gave me an agonized look. "For heaven's sake, what's all that matter? Look—isn't there any way—*any* way we can get out tonight?"

"No."

The door at the rear of the hall opened, and Charles, the sullen-eyed, dough-faced butler, emerged, pushing a tea-tray laden with food.

"Go on in and have some coffee," I urged the fretting doctor. "There's really nothing to be done at the moment, except make ourselves comfortable." I got rid of him in the wake of the tray.

I glanced suddenly up at Treadwell's room. He had the door open a crack and was peeping down at me. He started to whip it closed, realized it was too late and instead flung it open and bellowed down at me: "Well? Did you call the sheriff to come out?"

"No. There's no road and no phone. We're stuck till morning."

He raged: "Gentle God! Are you serious? You mean I've got to spend the night under the same roof as that snake? He'll kill me! He'll find a way . . . !"

"Nobody'll kill you," I said irritably. "I'll take care of that."

"You? You? You damned moron—what good are you? That snake could wriggle around a dozen like you. Gentle God, I'll—he'll—God Almighty!" He slammed the door.

I stood there and thought, and thought—and got no place.

When Charles had returned to his kitchen, I finally decided to play it safe. I went to the door of the living-room and asked Eileen if I could speak to her a minute.

**S**HE came out, giving me a long, deep look from her somber dark eyes, stepping up my blood-count plenty. Her little, soft, appealing mouth was expressionless.

"I think it would be better if nobody wandered loosely around the house for the rest of the night—and maybe somebody would like to sleep. Could you . . . ?"

"Put them up? Yes, of course."

"It would be best if they could all be away from each other—no connecting rooms or anything like that."

She nodded thoughtfully, looked up at the balcony—and her eyes widened as she saw the door of the lighted room that the doctor had left open. "Brainerd appropriated that room," I told her. "I guess your husband told him to."

"Oh, well—" She indicated the room at the extreme front of the house, on the left. "I've already put Don in there. Is that all right?"

Since it was the farthest possible one from Treadwell's, I nodded.

"And I can put you next to the one Dr. Brainerd—"

"Never mind me. I'll hold forth on that couch at the top of the stairs. Where will you be?"

She eyed me quizzically. "I usually sleep next door to my husband. We share a bathroom."

"Not tonight," I said. "He's going to be sealed in alone."

She continued to search my eyes. Finally she said, "All right." She pointed up in the direction of the couch. "I'll sleep in the room facing you. I shall have to get some things, of course."

"Get them now. Or wait—" I checked her as she turned. "I wanted to ask you about this Charles, the butler or whatever he is. Has he been with you long?"

"Four years. Why?" And, as I pulled my ear, "Don't tell me you think *he* attempted to poison my husband?"

"Well, someone might have hired him to."

There was a glint in her eyes that I could not identify. "It's hardly possible. My husband is paying Charles' son's way through law school, and—well, Charles is very devoted. To my husband, that is."

That was a setback. If Charles were ruled out as the actual tamperer with the drops, then who . . . ? How . . . ?

I was back where I started. I made a desperate grope in another direction. "Do you know any of your husband's

business enemies who might have . . . ?”

Her eyebrows went up. “No. I know nothing about his business affairs.”

“That hardly *could* be—that you know *nothing*. Hasn’t he mentioned anyone with whom he’s having—or has had—trouble?”

“I assure you, I know absolutely nothing about that. In fact, it’s only within the last two years that I realized he was a lawyer.”

“You mean you married him without knowing his business?”

“Yes.”

“That’s incredible. You knew nothing about him, and yet . . . ?”

She searched my eyes for moments. “I know that he was a very forceful and strong person. That was all I cared about. I was not long out of the hospital and I’d come to loathe and detest sick, weak people. I don’t suppose that means anything to you, but that’s the way it was.”

“But he’s twenty years older than you—and not in good health.”

“He was then—or I thought he was. He’s changed terribly in ten years. When I met him—”

“How did you meet him? He was a patient when you started working for Brainerd?”

“No. He came in one night and brought an emergency patient to the doctor. After that he started coming in himself.”

“What was wrong with him?”

“He was smashed up in an automobile accident, I think. I was just going home—the doctor said he didn’t need me. His clothes were half torn off and he was all bloody and he seemed in a daze.”

“Wait a minute. John Treadwell came in that way?”

“No, no—this emergency patient. There was nothing wrong with John.”

“But you said he started coming back regularly.”

She shrugged. “Frankly, I think that was to see me. It was just about then that Dr. Brainerd decided to send me for a four-months’ course in X-ray, to California. John came out once or twice to see me and after we got back—well, we got married.”

I said grimly: “He hasn’t changed much in one respect, has he? He’s still *forceful*, as you put it.”

She shivered a little, looked down. “Yes.”

“Are you afraid of him?”

She didn’t answer, just raised two opaque dark eyes and looked at me. It was on my tongue to add, “Enough afraid so you wouldn’t dare run out on him without being sure he couldn’t follow,” but there was no point in such a question.

And the clock said neither she nor Vargas had poisoned the drops.

I gave up temporarily. “Look—I’m not accusing anybody of anything. But if you—or Vargas—or the both of you—were mad enough to attempt this—don’t do it any more. I don’t think anybody can be convicted on what’s happened—although I’m not guaranteeing that, either. But believe me—”

She cut in evenly, softly, “Please.”

“All right,” I said tight-lipped. “But take my word—nothing is going to happen to your husband tonight. I’ll get him through tonight and tomorrow I’ll turn the whole thing over to the sheriff and wash my hands of it. You can pass that on to anybody you’ve a mind to. Now—if you please, get your things.”

She gave me a long, slow look, then turned and went up. I followed slowly after her. Through the open door of her room, I could hear her explaining casually—via the connecting bathroom—to Treadwell. He answered her with grunts. I waited till she came out with cosmetics and filmy things in her arms.

“The servants sleep downstairs? And how do you lock the house?”

“That’s easy. It’s air-conditioned—fitted electrically. We just throw a switch. And of course the windows don’t open. Shall I lock up?”

“Please. And tell the others, as soon as they’ve finished their supper, that I want them to get in their rooms.”

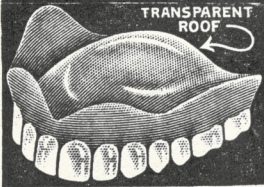
I WENT in and surprised intent thought on Treadwell’s face. He wore Shantung silk pajamas and the maroon robe now. His color had returned in large part and he looked again like a tomato with ears on it, a small hooked bony nose, red moist lips and a pointed chin. He scowled instantly and his muddy-brown eyes reddened. “What do you want?”

(Continued on page 102)

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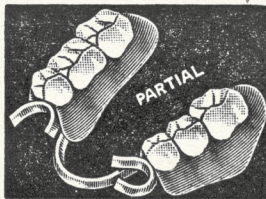
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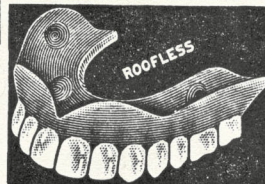
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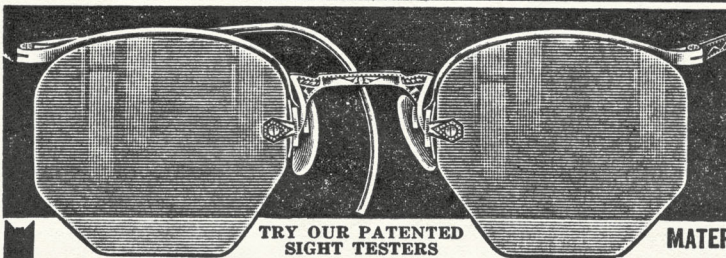
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## Dime Detective Magazine

(Continued from page 100)

"To search this room."  
"Get out," he snarled. "You couldn't find a bomb in your pocket."

I enlightened him: "You'll shut up, Mr. Treadwell. Such as I am, I'm the law at this moment and, much as it pains you, murder is an offense against the State—as well as against the victim. The State doesn't want you killed—for some reason."

Rather to my surprise, he shut up, lay watching me between half-closed eyes while I went over his room. Then I went through the bathroom and searched Eileen's room. I locked her door from inside, came back and locked the bathroom door to cut it off from her room and to tell Treadwell: "I'll be on the gallery outside all night. Lock your door when I go out of here. If you have the slightest cause for worry—call me."

He lay watching me thoughtfully, but as I went down the hall outside, I heard his lock snick.

The others were drifting up the stairs, Brainerd's face worried and questioning, Vargas' cold and defiant. Eileen Treadwell was standing in her own door.

I cut off all conversation by saying curtly: "Good-night. If the phone comes back in, I'll let you know."

Finally they were all behind closed doors. I retired to my couch and let out breath. Certainly I couldn't have asked for a better setup over which to stand guard. The balcony, *in toto*, was under my eye and, for that matter, every door was visible from every other one. There were no other stairs, no outside porches. The windows wouldn't open. Ruffled feelings or no, there would be no murdering here tonight. Whoever the killer in the house might be, I had him stopped—at least for tonight.

He struck exactly twenty minutes later.

### CHAPTER FOUR

#### Living Death

**I**T WAS a kind of death I had never seen before—and one I never want to see again.

## Blood Test

I had cigarettes, magazines, an ashtray, beside me on the couch—Eileen's goodnight gift. I had just lit a cigarette and taken the towel-wrapped eye-drop bottle from my pocket and settled back with it under the light. The rain drummed overhead. Then a man shouted.

Ashtray, burning cigarette and bottle tumbled to the floor as I came to my feet. The shout—a strangled man's frantic cry from behind the closed door—came again. I ran toward Treadwell's room.

A hand fumbled at a knob, burst the door open—but it was not Treadwell's door!

Directly across the house from him, Don Vargas' door banged open and the Spaniard, in shirt-sleeves, his tie-ends and cuffs dangling, plunged out and caught himself on the railing. His face was like wet sand, his teeth chattering madly. He began to twitch and shake as he raised a hand at me, clawed the air; his eyes were swollen, frantic, agonized.

I whirled back, my hair on end, raced for him, stammering, "Doc—doc—come out here!" Vargas stumbled, clutched the railing desperately.

He took another step and then terrible convulsions racked him. His head suddenly jerked upright till his chin was pointing at the ceiling. Heavy veins in his face stood out like tiny blue worms. He pitched forward.

He didn't crumple. He fell hard, rocked forward on his belly. His heels came up behind him as though a huge bowstring were pulling his throat and ankles together. Then suddenly it was as though the string snapped and he flopped on his side, his knees jerking up in front of him, his chin whipping down. I dived to his side, stammering hoarsely, "What is it? What happened . . .?" but there was no longer any sense in his bulging eyes. His breath was like a great jerking rasp. He began to whip backwards and forwards, first his legs jerked up behind him, then in front of him. He was like a salmon being pulled from the water. The contortions were faster and faster—and the terrible rasp in his throat was a sob of unbearable agony.

Then suddenly he arched up in one final spasm, to head and heels, his back

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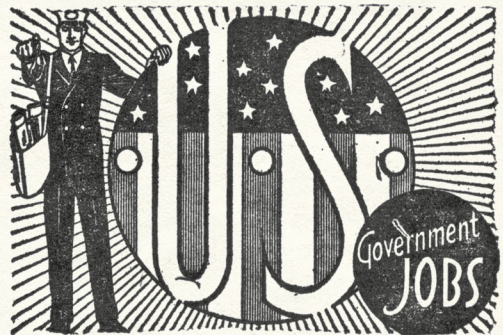
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**Dime Detective Magazine**

as curved as a scimitar; a terrible, wrenching groan came from his chest, dissolving into a strangling, hacking cough; sweat poured from his livid face, and he crashed down on his side. He shivered from head to foot once, relaxed slowly, his bulging, frantic eyes turned upwards—and lay still.

His flesh was as cold as ice. I flung up to yell, "Doctor! Quick, for—" and Brainerd almost dived into me, his striped shirt flapping out over his trousers, his feet bare. He peeled me aside hastily, knelt down.

Astonishment grew on his shining round face and in his bright gray eyes. He croaked frantically, bewilderedly: "Why, Great Jehovah—he's dead—my God, he's dead! What—what happened to him?"

I heard the other doors whip open and saw, from the corner of my eye, through the railing of the balcony, the dough-faced Charles run hastily out into the downstairs hall and stand staring up.

I ordered hoarsely, "Everybody stay right where you are," and ran into the Spaniard's room.

Vargas' coat lay across the turned-down bed. On the peach-colored carpet in the room's center, where they had fallen, lay a medium-sized, silvered hypodermic syringe and a brown bottle of his brown liquid. The bottle was uncorked, lying on its side, its contents rapidly soaking into the carpet. I righted it hastily, looked at the hypo. The plunger was all the way down. Vargas had just taken one of his shots; the syringe was still wet with the medicine.

Then I saw the queer two-colored trickle that had run down the lip of the bottle onto the white druggist's label. It was partly brown, partly bright, rich crimson—the color of blood!

I snatched the bottle up. The smear was not yet dry. My head burned—and then the horrible explanation leaped at me. I turned and almost ran into the gray-eyed, leaden-faced Brainerd hurrying in, his red-gray hair flying.

"Doc—look—blood! Somebody put blood in with his shot-medicine—on top of it! He must have shot an ounce or more into himself—somebody else's blood!"



## Blood Test

Brainerd's jaw dropped open.

Over his shoulder, across the open gallery, I saw Treadwell standing in the open door of his bedroom. He was looking down at the spot where Vargas lay. His eyes were red discs, smug, satisfied.

One possibility laced sharply across my mind. Could Treadwell have killed him in anticipatory self-defense, as it were? Actually fearing that the Spaniard *would* somehow get to him during the night? Logically, that could add up—his sneaking into Vargas' room while we were all occupied downstairs, drawing off a quantity of his own blood—probably with Vargas' own needle—and floating it on the Spaniard's injection—medicine. Even the spider in my coat—that could be a gesture on the altar of confusion—something meant to mask the real cause of the Spaniard's subsequent death—to bend our thinking away from the truth. For only the most delicate clinical tests would reveal the fantastically simple and fantastically ugly *modus*—blood—the bane that the medical profession had only just learned to guard against—anti-type blood—the strange, deadly reaction of conflicting types in human veins. . . .

**E**ILEEN TREADWELL, her soft face starch, her somber eyes, for once, hollow and terrified, cried out in a desperate voice: "Oh, what happened?"

"He's dead," I bit. "Somebody drew off an ounce of their own blood—a different type than his—and planted it for Vargas to inject himself with. It's killed him—as it was intended to." My eyes were burning on the squat little tomato-faced Treadwell across the gallery.

"Oh," she gasped, "but who . . . ?"

Treadwell made a rasping sound in his throat—and, behind him, a telephone bell rang, clear and sharp.

That was the first that I knew of the extension-phone in his room, it did not seem to mean anything at this point. I started grimly around the gallery.

Treadwell's eyes shrank. "Now, wait a minute," he snarled. "You're not going to try to accuse . . . ?"

He read his answer in my face, apparently. He suddenly whipped back inside his door and I heard the lock snick.

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## Dime Detective Magazine

But what stopped me was Eileen's sudden blurted cry: "Wait—wait! You—you mean someone deliberately took their own blood and . . . But *how?* How . . . ?"

"By jabbing themselves with Vargas' own needle and taking a syringe-full, I imagine."

"But—but—then it couldn't have been John! He—my God—he's a bleeder—don't you understand? The slightest pin-prick is dangerous to him. He wouldn't deliberately start himself bleeding—because he might not be able to stop it! That's why he always carries that gun—why he won't ever let anyone close to him unless he's sure that they won't harm him in any way! He's kept it secret for fear someone *would* find out how easy it would be to dispose of him—Dr. Brainerd! You know! Tell him what I say is true!"

Brainerd said in a husky voice: "It's true enough. God knows."

I felt as though a band were pulled tight around my temples. "W-what? Are you sure?"

"Of course we're sure," the girl cried tormentedly. "Nobody knew it but us. And a specialist in California. When I was out there in nineteen thirty-four—I told you he came out. That was *why* he came—to see this specialist. I just found it out a few years ago. . . ."

I turned and stared down at the dead Vargas with burning eyes. My brain was thick and unbelieving. What kind of fantasy was here? Vargas had motive to try to kill Treadwell—but a sound alibi said he hadn't done it. Treadwell had motive to kill Vargas—but this revelation cleared him of the deed, because of the method. And nobody else had reason to kill *either* of them, let alone both. Unless, in some obscure way the girl. . . .

I SNAPPED, "Charles, go—" and I checked myself. I turned and dropped down beside the still-groggy-eyed Brainerd and raced my fingers through Vargas' clothes. I found his car keys in his vest, stood up and called down, "Catch these." Charles caught them.

"Go out to Mr. Vargas' car and bring

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 106)

in what you find in the luggage compartment," I ordered.

He stared sourly, finally shuffled away.

The door of John Treadwell's bedroom whipped open again. "O.K., gumshoe. The sheriff is on his way here. You're obviously so far out of your class that you're worse than useless. Thank God the phone came in—before we're all dead."

I didn't seem to even mind the crack. I was tormented in trying to fuse an idea I'd begun to get that might merge all this chaos. . . . "Nobody else will get dead," I said.

"No? I suppose you're in complete command of the situation? Know who tried to kill me—and who *did* kill Vargas there!"

I was scarcely aware that I answered. "Maybe I do," I said finally. "I think I do—if only . . ."

"What? Who, then? If you're going to say *me*, then don't bother. It just so happens that jabbing a hypo into my arm is the *one* thing in the whole world I *wouldn't* do, for certain reasons. . . ."

"We know all about it. Your wife just let it out. We—"

I whipped suddenly blazing eyes around at Eileen Treadwell:

"You—you said he went to California to see this specialist in nineteen thirty-four. You were there on a six-months' course."

"Ye—yes."

"When did Dr. Brainerd—or whoever—send you out there?"

"Why—why in February of that year."

"Unexpectedly—and out of a clear sky? He suddenly decided to whisk you off out there—and keep you there for six months. Gentle God—how it lines up now! He—or not the doctor, of course, but your husband, chases you out there in February of eight years ago. No, you don't even have to answer this, because it has to be so—that sudden exodus developed—within a few days of the night that Treadwell brought that first-aid case in to the doctor—the man you said was hurt in an automobile accident, didn't it?"

"Why—why, yes, I guess it did. What has that . . . ?"

## Blood Test

I said huskily, "Lady—if you ever remembered anything—rack your brain now. Think back to that night, to that first-aid victim." I swung round on the kneeling doctor. "Do you remember that case?" I shot at him. "What was wrong with that man Treadwell brought in?"

He blinked in bewilderment. "Why yes, I believe I remember it. He had no serious injuries—superficial lacerations, contusions, a slight concussion . . ."

"What did you do for him?"

"Do? Little more than clean him up and dress his cuts, so—so Mr. Treadwell could take him home. I advised hospitalization, but Mr. Treadwell didn't think it necessary."

I turned back to face the little red-faced Treadwell, across the well. "Well, it took a long time to come out, didn't it? Not that you haven't been half-expecting it for a long, long time,"

**H**IS eyes were lambent, small. "Have you gone completely mad? Who cares about all that, those things that happened eight years ago? We want to know who tried to kill me *tonight*. . . ."

"That's the one answer in all this maze that's only *too* simple. *Nobody* tried to kill you tonight."

"What? By God, you *are* mad . . . !"

"No, you are. If you think I don't realize that it was all a plant. You needed those eyedrops yourself."

"I? I? What in hell would I . . . ?"

The door of the hall below opened and Charles shuffled in, with the finery-filled luggage, set it down.

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I looked over at Eileen. "You should have known that you and a dozen Vargases weren't foxy enough to out-slick a devious rat like your husband. Evidently you *do* realize the one queer complication that has turned this whole thing topsyturvy from the first—the odd complication that your husband fell for you, personally, and that he's still that way.

"But I don't think you fully grasp just how much that's done for you. Because, in my book, that's the only rational reason why he didn't kill you years ago. Why he's let you walk around—very carefully under his thumb, of course, but let you walk around all this time, *carrying his death-warrant in your head*. Let you walk around even up to the very point where you were about to slip out from under his thumb. And even *then* he schemed and devised to concoct a devious solution that would still let him keep you in one piece. Even though it's *you* that's the danger to him—not Vargas—except inasmuch as you might spill the thing that's locked in your head *to* Vargas."

"But what?" the girl cried wildly. "What is it? I don't know anything—" "You do—even if you're not aware of it."

"But *what* is it? What *do* I know?" "That's what I'm just about to hammer out of you. I don't know exactly what it is myself, but I've boiled it down to a very small range. Now—I asked you to think back to that night Treadwell brought the bloody first-aid victim to your office. Close your eyes—try to conjure it up. Try to think what the injured man looked like. Try. . . ."

I caught the movement of Treadwell's hand into his pocket and whipped my gun around to center on his belly. "Take it out!" I snarled. "Hurry up—drop it on the floor, or so help me, I'll let. . . ."

## Blood Test

He dropped the pistol to the rug.  
I swung back on the girl.

She blurted suddenly, desperately,  
"Oh, I can't remember! He was so covered with blood and dirt—and his clothes all muddy—I—I can't describe him."

"Would you know him if you saw him?"

"I—I don't know. Yes, I think so."

"Do you think you could identify him from a picture?"

"Oh, I—I don't know. I couldn't be—oh! Oh—I remember one thing. He had a big scar here at his throat—all puckered. Like a shamrock."

**T**HERE was an instant of silence. She focussed her haunted eyes on me. "Does that mean anything?"

My voice was so choked that I could hardly husk it out. "It means plenty. Doesn't it, Treadwell? It means she can go on the stand and swear she saw you that night dragging Fletcher Thorne into a doctor's office—covered with blood. And when she tells how you whisked her out of town a few days later—after your desperate efforts to save Thorne's life had failed—after you'd finally had to give up and cut away the organs that contained evidence of how he died and throw him in the harbor—and how you even married her. . . .

"That'll give plenty of substance to the D. A.'s story that you were bloodsucking Thorne, that he became desperate and managed to catch up with you somewhere and that you had to stop him with bullets or he would have got his hands on your throat, yeah, it'll really give us something to go on, won't it?"

"Especially when we throw in what happened here tonight—how you cut Vargas down so as to keep your wife where you wanted her."

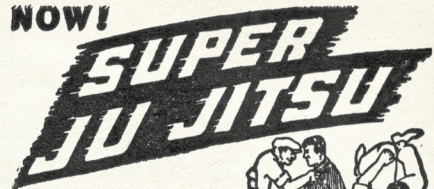
"But—but," the tormented girl cried.

"He—he didn't! You know he didn't do that thing with the hypodermic."

"Oh he didn't do it in person. He was afraid of Vargas physically—like he's afraid of anyone. And he didn't want to shoot him or use any method that would land the rap instantly in his lap. So he enlisted a stooge.

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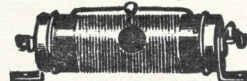
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that was above reproach—and one who could scheme out a nice method.

"Of course he had to put some pressure on, to needle such a guy up to killing. So he tried to stage an elaborate little drama to make it seem that Vargas was not only going to steal the girl, but that he knew things. The pair of you fooled him a little on the time angle and he had to hurry his plans more than he'd expected, but he tried to stage a safe-cracking of one of his offices in New York, and then this attempted murder of himself, to give his stooge the idea that the danger was immediate. Not only danger to him, but to the stooge, too—especially to the stooge, if Treadwell died. Because then the stooge would be the *only* one left for Vargas to blackmail.

"I hardly have to name the stooge, do I? The guy who, years ago, was accomplice-after-the-fact to the killing of Fletcher Thorne—the doctor who cut away the telltale organs and . . ."

Brainerd sobbed and kicked my ankles from under me.

I was prepared for it, of course. I wasn't leaning too far out over the balcony edge that I couldn't catch myself. I whirled back and threw myself down sideways, carrying him crashing to the floor.

From the corner of my eye I saw Treadwell scoop up his gun, saw him come running around the balcony yelling hoarsely, "Hold him, Doc—hold him!"

I whacked the flat of my gun viciously across the doctor's temple and scrambled clear of him, as Treadwell raced past the head of the stairs. I whipped up my gun. Treadwell screamed, staggered back, dropping his weapon.

I don't know what was in the cosmetic bottle that Eileen discharged full in his face as he came abreast of her, but it must have stung his eyes intolerably. He stumbled backwards, clawing at face and eyes—and his foot slipped over the edge of the top step of the stairs.

He crashed down, yelping queerly, flung up his arms, hit his head thumpingly against the banister, somersaulted, flying wildly—to crash to the floor below and lie there, motionless. He was still unconscious—shackled to Brainerd's wrist—when the sheriff finally arrived, at dawn.



(Continued from page 59)

a bear who has come upon a honey cache. "Yet it was partly your fault, Miss Darnell."

Darnell turned her eyes on him, and they glared like forest fires.

"Yes," said Allhoff. "If Newhall was impatient, I'm afraid your cupidity got the better of you."

She stared at him silently.

"Yes," said Allhoff. "You told Newhall that Wiltern had promised to marry you, had given you an engagement ring. Of course he only did it to shut you up. He had no intention of marrying. He intended merely to die. However, Newhall charged him with it, they fought and Newhall shot him. He realized, then, that though the motive would be unknown to anyone else, it would be transparent to you. Hence, he was forced to confide in you. What did he offer? Half the estate?"

"A third," said Darnell dully. "I'll talk. I want to see the D. A. I'll make a deal."

"You had to get rid of your engagement ring," said Allhoff as if she hadn't spoken. "You should have hidden it, or tossed it in the East River. But you like money too much. You wanted cash for it. You hocked it. I found the ticket. From there on it was easy figuring."

"How?" I asked.

"Obviously Darnell didn't need the cash. Wiltern was liberal with her. There was more valuable jewelry in her flat and she hocked it the day after he gave it to her. An odd thing to do with an engagement ring. There was only one answer and I arrived at it."

"I want the D. A.," said the girl. "I'll make a deal."

Allhoff looked at her and the hatred in his yellow eyes was hotter, more furious than the rage in hers.

"You're an accessory after the fact," he said. "You can burn as well as Newhall."

"If you were the D. A. and the jury I would. As it is he'll need a witness. I'm it. I'll take a prison rap, thank you."

Allhoff shook his head sadly as if the thought of Alice Darnell in prison rather than in the chair was a particularly gloomy thought.

"I suppose you're right," he said.

"Battersly, take them both across the street and book them."

Battersly stood up. He took Darnell's arm reluctantly. They walked toward the door, where Battersly grabbed Newhall's coat sleeve.

THEY were almost at the stairhead, when Allhoff called: "Battersly."

The trio halted. Battersly said: "Sir?"

"When that woman climbs the steps to headquarters take a good look at her legs. It's probably the last time you'll ever see them. Certainly it's the last time you'll see them in silk and without callouses on the knees from washing prison floors. And when she comes out she'll be old, unable to attract men. She'll probably starve to death, take to drink and finish in the gutter. Take a last look at the body, Battersly. I'm glad she's going to live, after all. Glad! Glad!"

His horrible laughter followed them down the stairs. I said, more to distract him than anything else: "How did that girl get in your bedroom? You know you broke at least three laws holding her there by force."

"My emotions got the better of me for once. I had to break one of them down. I knew Newhall would be easier than the girl but I wanted the satisfaction of cracking her. Well, she wouldn't break. Newhall was due any minute and I didn't want her to talk to him first, stiffen him up. I had nothing to put her in the can for, so at the point of a gun I tied her up myself where she could hear Newhall break down."

I shook my head. "You hate everybody, don't you?"

"No more than they hate me," he said bitterly. For a moment he was silent, remorse. He brightened suddenly. "You," he said, "bring me two pounds of sugar tomorrow. And on every ration day thereafter."

He was silent for another moment then became even more bright. "I'd like to see you explaining that to your wife," he said, and laughed uproariously.

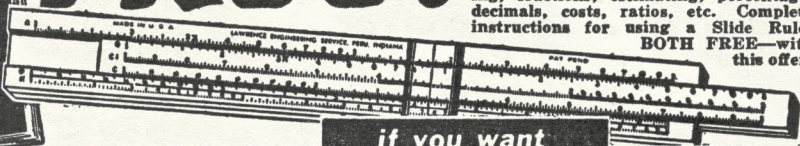
I bit my lip. I would have sooner faced a hold-up gang than my wife's wrath when she discovered I'd gambled away the sugar for six months.

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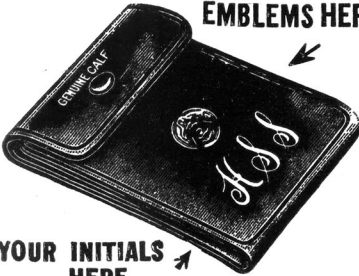


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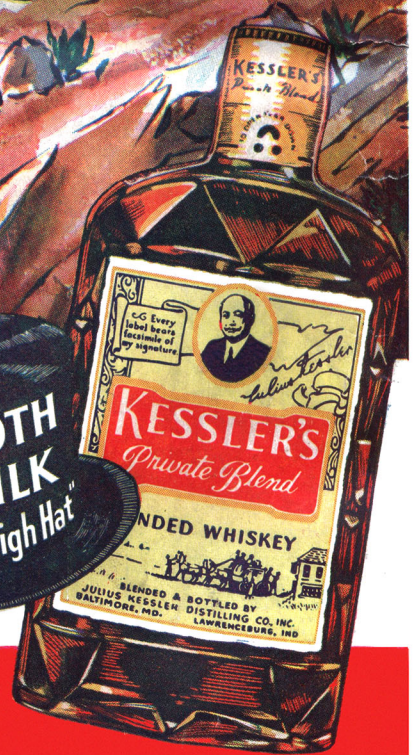
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