

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE



MAY

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

**A HEEL
OF THE
FIRST
WATER**
by
**W.T.
BALLARD**
AND OTHERS



HOME SWEET HOMICIDE

A BILL BRENT NOVELETTE
by **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**

DEATH IS FROM TAXES
A "PLATES" ORION STORY
by **DALE CLARK**



“HAS GOD FAILED?”

I don't think so. I don't believe the American people know too much about God. Certainly they know little of the actual existing Power of the Great Spirit—God. If they did, they would most certainly be able to use the superlative invisible Power against such world-disturbing human parasites as Hitler and Tojo—would they not?

We have all heard a lot about what terrible sinners we are. And we probably are. We have been told that we all were born in sin and shapen in iniquity. We have heard much about the terrible punishments which lie ahead of all who do not believe “this” or “that” about God. These stories probably are all true. But there is one thing we have heard nothing about. We have heard nothing about the invisible superhuman, living Power of God.

We have not been told that the American people can, individually, and collectively, establish a definite and permanent contact with the Spirit of God, not “after” we die but BEFORE WE DIE. For it is now we need the Power of God.

We have not been told that every human being, regardless of race, creed, or religious affiliation, can, here and now, draw upon an invisible Power so dynamic in its operations that its use by the individual can bring into every life, every right thing that

can be desired. Not only that, the invisible, heretofore undiscovered Power of God, can be used to throw out of the life everything in it which should not be there. And we mean materially, as well as spiritually.

No, God has not failed the American people—they just simply have never been told of the staggering, scintillating Power there is in the realm of God. They have not been told that this superhuman Power can be found and used by all—here and now. If the American people will allow us to—we can show them how to find and use the actual literal Power of God—not “above the sky” but right here on earth. And let us tell you that this war can be stopped, and will be stopped, when the American people discover, for the first time in their lives, the actual and literal Power of God.

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EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 42

CONTENTS FOR MAY, 1943

No. 2

4—SMASHING MIDNIGHT MURDER NOVELETTES—4

Listen to a strange tale of

Mind Over Murder.....Cornell Woolrich 8
In which a man is trapped in the dark with the one thing in the world he fears, with no hope of escape. Will Death answer his frantic summons and bring him merciful release from the straightjacket of terror?

Hold onto your valuables when you meet

A Heel of the First Water.....W. T. Ballard 26
Known to the trade as Doc Ryne, the card-sharp who owns his pawnshop just so he can lend himself a little pocket lettuce on the various and sundry baubles he picks up during his nefarious activities . . . till the fateful day he tries to hock the Egyptian Princess pin, with the emerald eye, behind whose glittering gaze lurks murder.

March 15 is a bad enough headache without frills, but it's worse when

Death Is From Taxes—A Plates O'Rion Novelette.....Dale Clark 82
As in the case of Old Man Sataw, who turns up slightly killed at his own birthday shindig . . . where Plates' delectable daughter Sal has dragged the pint-sized photog just to see how the upper crust lives, only to learn that rich men die just as easy as the hot polloi.

Watch Johnnie Dolan squirm as he denies that

Murder Is My Meat.....Duane Yarnell 96
On the night Sheriff Boone Davis catches him out on the river, rowing straight toward the hotseat with the corpse of his bitterest enemy—with a lady's silver slipper the only clue to Johnnie's innocence and no Cinderella-savior in sight.

A COMPLETE NOVEL-LENGTH BILL BRENT THRILLER

Accompany Brent in a raucous rendition of

Home Sweet Homicide.....Frederick C. Davis 48
When the hardboiled newshound wakes up one morning to learn he's been named correspondent in the divorce suit multi-millionaire Vic Sprague is waging with his beauteous blond wife Gloria—neither of whom Brent has ever laid eyes on—and finds himself neck-deep in theft, blackmail and murder with no out but to solve all three crimes, produce a substitute admirer for Gloria, and pacify the belligerent Sprague, all within twenty-four short hours.

AN UNUSUAL SHORT-SHORT STORY

Drop a line with the right

Bait.....Henry Norton 46
And catch a canny killer whose only mistake is to forget that, even in murder, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing.

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

Cover—"Ryne's Passage Through the Car Assumed Blitzkrieg Proportions."
From *A Heel of the First Water*

Watch for the June Issue

On the Newsstands May 5th

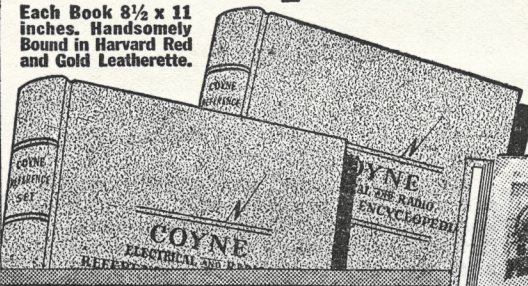
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THE JUNE THRILL DOCKET

WE never expected to see the day Inspector Allhoff, the coffee-bibbing scourge of Centre Street, would turn to tea for solace—but damned if he doesn't in *Thanks For The Ration Card*, D. L. CHAMPION'S latest and greatest complete novelette, coming up next month.

The pot begins to boil when Roy Gardiner, the pasty-faced punk, bribes his way out of a murder rap by planking two pounds of mocha—more precious than the diamonds in the case to Allhoff—on the legless inspector's desk. And it perks over shortly to mix and make a crimson crime blot on the onionskin carbon report of the wackiest homicide that ever confronted the unholy three who holed in across the way from headquarters.

Allhoff may have been forced to a liquid Oolong diet but it's no pink tea party when the cordite fumes begin to mix with the smoke in that South American landscape where the kill-clue lies. We're betting you won't be able to spot it any quicker than Battersly and Sergeant Simmonds did—and that means on the last page. Want to put up dough?

MERLE CONSTINER, who hasn't been with us since the last November issue, rings the gong when he puts his finger on *The Nervous Doorbell*, the smashing new story of the Dean in our next. Cousin Tipton's locked knee, a holograph letter from a French Bluebeard, a raincoat with pockets full of mothballs and a phantom phantom (that's what we said!) are just a few of the ingredients the author has stirred up to whet your curiosity and keep the gooseflesh in working order. It's the best yet in this perennially popular series.

Plus another amusing episode in Doc Pierce's backyard of bamboozlement by RICHARD DERMODY, stories by HUGH B. CAVE and others. This great JUNE issue will be on sale MAY 5th.

Ready for the Rackets

A Department

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

HERE'S the latest twist on a racket that's always with us—forgery. If the crooks are getting cagier, so must we. Check and double-check before you cash one!

Columbus, Ohio

Dear Sir:

The forgery racket was probably very seldom operated on a large scale. But when it was, forgers made plenty of money or so it seems from the way a friend of mine told it to me. He worked in a store which turned out to be a victim of such a fraud.

According to my friend's version the forgers who are usually three in number (possibly more) arrive in a large city on a Monday. There they open up a small office and have a telephone installed. They make all the negotiations necessary to establish a sales agency. They give their agency a phony name such as "The Davis-Brown Sales Agency," saying they are distributors of a nationally known product such as a toothpaste, soap, shaving cream, etc.

During the week checks are printed either by their own small printing press or a crooked printery. On these checks are the agency's name, address and telephone number. The checks are made out in denominations which are considered the average clerk's salary for one week in that city.

When Saturday afternoon rolls around and the banks are closed it is time for them to go to work. One man stays in the office at the telephone while the others begin passing the checks. Each passer has a separate route so that the same store is not called on twice.

When one of the passers enters a store he buys a small article usually costing less than a dollar and gives the check in payment. If the clerk or cashier is hesitant at accepting the check, he or she will secretly call the agency and inquire if the man named on the check works for them. The accomplice, stationed at the agency's office, will assure him or her that the man works for them and that the check is good.

When you stop to think that each passer

(Continued on page 111)

The 97 Pound Weakling

—Who became “The World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man”

“I’ll prove that YOU, too, can be a NEW MAN!”

Charles Atlas

I KNOW, myself, what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn’t know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs.! I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

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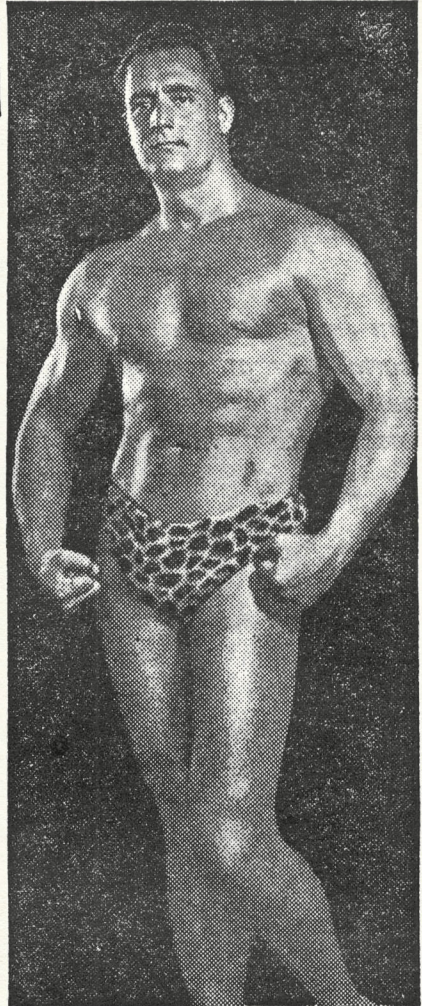
Do you want big, broad shoulders—a fine, powerful chest—biceps like steel—arms and legs rippling with muscular strength—a stomach ridged with bands of sinewy muscle—and a build you can be proud of? Then just give me the opportunity to prove that “Dynamic Tension” is what you need.

No “ifs,” “ands,” or “maybes.” Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, pepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about “Dynamic Tension” and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

“Dynamic Tension” is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it’s actually fun! “Dynamic Tension” does the work.

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MIND OVER MURDER

By **CORNELL WOOLRICH**

Author of "If the Shoe Fits," etc.

Can imagination cause death? Suppose a man had a mortal fear of something . . . and he found himself trapped in the dark with that fear, in a straitjacket of terror, with no hope of escape . . . Would Death, in the guise of Mercy, answer his frantic summons?



CHAPTER ONE

Dialogue on Death

TWO women were sitting having tea together in a crowded, fashionable restaurant. All about them were others like them, that throng such places at that hour in the afternoon, while

the men are for the most part busy at work in their offices. There was not a vacant table in the entire establishment, yet there was scarcely a man to be seen in the room. The vivacious hum of dozens of feminine conversations going on at once

restaurant along Fifth Avenue or Michigan Boulevard.

The two women were smartly-dressed, reasonably pretty, approximately the same age: in their late twenties or early thirties. One was a comely blonde; the other, the smaller of the two, a fair-skinned brunette. The blonde wore a wedding band upon



With a forked stick, the old woman lifted the glistening thing and came toward her.

all over the place filled the atmosphere.

Only the summery-hued dresses of the customers themselves, and a certain languorous warmth in the air, betrayed the fact that this was the semi-tropical climate of the deep South and not some smart

her finger. The brunette lacked one. There was absolutely nothing about them to set them apart from all the other women who gather at that hour, in just such places, all over the world.

The blonde, Pauline Baron, had been

doing most of the talking. The brunette, Marie Stewart, had been listening, with an occasional nod of understanding or brief comment of accord such as one gives to one's friends.

The topic of conversation could not possibly have been anything more important than a discussion of what was a good way to stop runs in silk stockings or a recital of one's latest shopping adventures and the bargains one had seen.

Yet if one had stepped closer to the little table, close enough to overhear—

PAULINE had stopped talking just then. A brief silence fell, as she concluded whatever her recital had been. Marie delicately tapped ash from her cigarette with one tapered nail. "Then why don't you kill him, if you hate him so greatly, and find living with him so unbearable, and yet he won't let you get away from him?" she suggested, without altering the even tenor of her voice. "Have you ever thought of that?"

Pauline looked at her as though uncertain whether to take her seriously or not. "Oh, many times," she admitted ruefully. "But what good does that do? That's as far as it goes."

Marie nodded understandingly. "Probably everyone has thought of things like that at one time or another. I know I often have myself—just theoretically, you know."

Pauline sighed with a hint of regret. "What's the good of joking about it? Even if I were serious, I—I'd never have the nerve. Wives that kill their husbands are arrested and tried, and have to go through all that notoriety, it gets in all the papers—"

Marie shrugged. "That's if they're foolish enough to get caught."

"You're always caught when you do a thing like that."

"That's if you do it in the usual foolish way," Marie said placidly. She took another sip of tea, lit another cigarette. "People always think of violent methods like guns and knives, or even poisons. It's so glaring, naturally they're found out. Now, if I were going to rid myself of anyone, if I wanted to kill someone—" She interrupted herself to ask: "I'm not shocking you, am I?"

"Of course not. We know each other so well, why should we be reticent with one another? I wouldn't discuss this with anyone else, of course—"

"Exactly. It's just theoretical, anyway." Marie poised her cigarette with charming detachment back toward her own shoulder. "The thing to do is find the person's own weak point or weakest point, and turn that against him."

Pauline eyed her friend questioningly, lashes upraised. "I'm not sure I know what you mean by weak point."

"Well, let's go at it in this way. Let's take your husband for a model, shall we? What is it that he's most afraid of?"

Pauline's face became slightly downcast. "He's not afraid of anything. He's unusually courageous, as a matter of fact."

"Everyone is afraid of some *one* thing, no matter how courageous they are in everything else," Marie insisted.

Pauline shook her head reflectively. "I can't think of anything, unless—well, there was an incident once—oh, it was nothing to speak of—but that might be it. I think he has a mortal fear of snakes."

"Most people have an aversion toward them."

"This seemed to be deeper than just that."

"Good, that's what we'd want, then. Tell it to me."

"We were in a newsreel theater one night. This was up in New York, before we came down here. A short 'clip' was flashed on the screen, taken at some snake farm. It showed them writhing on the ground. Just a brief shot, really; it hardly lasted any time. Nobody else in the audience turned a hair. I noticed he got up suddenly and left his seat. I thought he was simply on his way back to the washroom. But before he could take more than a step or two up the aisle, the scene was already over. He seemed to change his mind. He turned around and came back and sat down again. I noticed him mopping his forehead, though. Afterwards when we got home I asked him what had made him do that, and he admitted he had a horror of snakes, said he couldn't stand the sight of them. He didn't tell me what had caused it, and I didn't ask him. In fact we never spoke of it again from that time on."

"They are quite common down here," Marie said thoughtfully. "You don't see them in town where we are, of course, but the canefields outside are loaded with them." She tilted her nose, let a smoke-tendrill curl from her shapely nostrils without adding breath-pressure to it. "I know an old native woman, sort of a witch-doctor, who catches them by the bushel. Uses them in her cures and remedies, or something." She let her voice trail off.

Pauline looked down, as though a spot on the tablecloth hypnotized her.

MARIE was speaking again. "Carrying out this hypothetical example we're discussing, that would be the point of attack, then. The Achilles heel. This morbid dread, this phobia, of snakes. If, for instance, he were to think there were one at large, in the house with him—"

"How could he be made to think that? Simply by being *told* that, you mean?"

"That would be second-hand, wouldn't it? That wouldn't do. You see, this would be a death by the imagination. And though the imagination feeds on phantoms, it needs a premise in reality to begin with. Then it can go on from there under its own power. No, he would have to be *shown* one was in the house with him. Then let his imagination go on from there."

"I still don't—"

Marie sighed with the tolerance of a teacher toward a disciple. "The sight of the snake, according to our calculations, should bring on a fright-spasm, should it not?"

"Yes, but how would that cause death?"

"It wouldn't, if allowed to evaporate again. But if prolonged without respite, a thing like that could very easily lead to death. Would, I'm sure."

"But how could it be prolonged? Wouldn't the first thing he'd do be to take a stick or gun and go after it?"

Marie lidded her eyes briefly in well-bred impatience. "You must *construct* the thing so that he doesn't. You are not being constructive about it. I have given you the opening wedge, the point of attack, but you must construct from there. If you leave him his freedom of action, of course he chases it out, or runs away from it himself. It becomes simply a very

bad fright, quickly over. But if you constrict his freedom of action, so that he is held powerless, so that the fright is kept at boiling-point for God knows how long, then it becomes death, death through the imagination. Do you see what I mean?"

The blond Pauline, the wife of Donald Baron, didn't speak. She bit inscrutably at the far corner of one fingernail.

"Are there any solid, substantial doors in your house?" Marie purred.

"All of them are. They're made of heavy mahogany, inches thick. It would take an axe to cut through them."

Marie idly unlidded the teapot, looked in to see if there were any more in it, lidded it again. "Is there a closet in your house that's dark, that has no light inside it?"

"There's one under the stairs. It's the size of a small room, really. It takes up the whole base of the staircase."

"No one could break out of it, you are sure?"

"No one could, I am sure. Not the strongest man alive."

"If our theoretical victim should become trapped in that place, then. The imagination is given the phantom fact to feed on that the snake is in there with him. But his freedom of movement is taken away. He can neither get away from it, nor find it to kill it. He is held in a strait-jacket of terror. Fright becomes frenzy—frenzy, paroxysm—paroxysm, death. Within thirty minutes, forty at the most, he would be dead, *untouched by human hand*. They could examine him exhaustively afterwards, and what is there to say? Death by the imagination leaves no traces." She quenched her cigarette neatly within her teacup. "There's your murder—for which no after-price of punishment is paid."

Pauline shook her head as though dazzled. "It doesn't seem like murder at all, does it?" she marveled.

"Murder is such an elastic term, isn't it?"

"Wouldn't his screams, perhaps, be heard outside?"

"Not if there is a radio close by. It could be turned on rather loud."

"But he would be found afterward in the closet, and questions—"

"The person committing it could very

easily remove him, before investigation got under way."

PAULINE BARON had but one more question to ask, in this theoretical discussion that had proved so absorbing. "But would someone actually *die*, in that way? I mean, if they survived, it would be worse than if no attempt had been made—"

"Within forty minutes, I guarantee you, he will be dead of acute terror. The heart can stand just so much, and no more."

A silence fell.

Presently Marie said: "There is just one possible obstacle. Very few would be strong enough to carry it out. It would be unimaginably cruel, of course. I'm not sure anyone's hate would be strong enough to inflict that on another human being."

Marie began to draw on a pair of gossamer mesh gloves, with that precision which women habitually bring to the act—slowly stroking downward along each finger, one by one, until not a suggestion of a wrinkle remained. "What strange byways one's conversations can stray into, can't they?" she murmured apologetically. "Anybody overhearing us just now would have taken us seriously, would have thought we really meant it, wouldn't they?"

"Wouldn't they?" echoed Pauline Baron with a deprecating little laugh. She gathered up her own paraphernalia of table-occupancy, touched a small powder-puff twice to the tip of her nose and once to the point of her chin. "I really must be going," she sighed. "What did you say this native woman's name was?"

"I didn't say. But I think they call her Mama Fernanda," Marie drawled negligently. "I only know of her through my maid. You know how *they* are. You follow the road to the country club, oh for quite a distance out. And then at one place, there's a little foot-trail that strikes off from there. Or so I've heard my maid say. She has a hut along there someplace. They all go to her for this and that, I understand. She's quite a specialist in extracting the beneficial qualities from the er, wild life about her. Toads and frogs and lizards—and snakes." She was so completely uninterested that she kept

looking about her detachedly while she spoke. "She grinds their bones and compounds native cure-alls. Makes charms out of their skins. Milks them and even makes use of their venom in certain instances. Or so my maid tells me." For a moment her eyes looked piercingly into her friend's. "My maid's name is Martelita," she added quite inconsequentially.

They shifted their chairs to rise from the table. "I'll leave the tip, Marie," Pauline said. "It's been very—interesting having tea with you."

CHAPTER TWO

The Snake Woman

THE oncoming beams of a pair of headlights flowed like quicksilver along the narrow, rutted dirt trail, and the car behind them pushed aside the heavy foliage with a hissing sound. A rude hut of sun-baked mud bricks suddenly sprang upright into the silvery wash, as though it had been flat a moment before. A figure already stood in the opening, attracted by the oncoming brilliance, eyes slitted to peer into it under the sheltering shade of one hand. The figure of a gnarled woman with seamed coffee-colored skin, wisps of white hair escaping from under the shawl hooded closely about her head.

The car stopped with a slurring of brakes. The door opened and its occupant stepped down to the ground. She wore a "garden-party" hat with a large, floppy brim which bent downward in front to hide her entire face except for her mouth and the point of her chin. Her arms and throat, however, were milky white.

"The lady has lost her way?" the figure in the doorway croaked. "The country club is on the other road, the one that goes straight on out."

The arrival reached into the car and the headlight-beams suddenly dimmed, died out. They were left in starlit darkness. "I do not look for the country club," she said gropingly.

"Speak. Fernanda will understand," the old woman said encouragingly.

"Martelita sent me. She spoke of you to me. You know Martelita?"

For a moment the crone looked puzzled.

Then suddenly she nodded. "Ah, yes. The one who works for the fine lady in the town." She came forward helpfully. "The lady is sick?"

"No, I want to borrow something from you."

The old woman gestured with flowing arms. "My poor hut is yours." She opened the wattled door, motioned her into the darkness after her. The visitor, however, remained at the threshold. A twig was thrust into live embers glowing in a crude fireplace fashioned of flat stones on the floor. When it had kindled she carried it to a clay vessel filled with oil, from which a wick protruded. A wan, flickering light filled the interior, but the face of the caller remained shadowed under the capacious, downturned brim.

"What is it you want?"

"One of those things that go like this on the ground." One white wrist made a flurried writhing motion.

The old woman's jet-black eyes sparkled understandingly. "You want my remedy, that is made from them?"

"No, no, alive."

This time there was a pause, brief but eloquent. There was rebuke implicit in it, somehow.

Finally the old woman spoke again. "What does the fine lady want with such a thing?"

The wrists were busy dipping into a tasselled draw-bag. Silver coins clinked musically. "In my house are many small things. Mice, bugs that crawl, grasshoppers. For just one night or two I want it, to eat them up. Then I will bring it back to you. It must be the kind that is not dangerous, you understand?" She pinched the back of her own hand, then swept her fingers past the place to show it was not serious. "Not dangerous. The bite does not kill."

The old woman nodded alertly. "No poison. I understand. Harmless. No poison."

The old woman removed a quantity of sacking spread out in one corner of the hut. A number of clay jars and jugs of varying sizes were revealed, of the kind used for carrying water from wells. A peculiar dank odor of musk rose into the air.

The woman in the doorway took a

slight step backward, as if recoiling.

The old woman held the crude lamp over the mouth of one of the jugs, peered into it. Then the next. At the third, she stopped, thrust a forked stick inside.

THE visitor turned her head aside for a moment, as though overcome by unconquerable repugnance. When she looked back again, the old woman had taken down a flat straw basket that hung from the wall, was dropping something into it from the end of the stick. The basket was fairly wide in diameter but exceedingly shallow, not more than five or six inches in depth. It was lined with flat, dark leaves of some kind.

She came toward the woman with it, holding it with the top left off. The woman's chest began to rise and fall more rapidly, but she held her ground. Within was coiled a glistening silken thing like a polished rubber tube, one end moving a little. Very little.

The caller in the garden hat craned her neck gingerly. "So small? And it doesn't look very—not a bigger one, perhaps? One that looks more frightening?"

The old hag shrugged shrewdly. "You want the pests eaten, not just frightened, I thought." She went back to the row of water-jars, emptied the basket gently into the mouth of one, thrust the forked stick into still another.

She brought the basket back. An ugly, gray huddle of rags lay in it, almost feathery in its scaliness. Two small horns protruded from one end. The underside was creamy-yellow.

The woman grimaced at the hideous sight, warded up one hand toward her eyes. "It has no poison, you are sure?" she faltered.

"No poison. Look, I will show you—"

The old woman deliberately extended her gnarled, scrawny arm above the basket, while she shook it slightly with her other hand, to rouse its occupant.

The purchaser-to-be quickly stopped her, horrified. "No, no—for heaven's sake, don't! I don't want to see—"

The old woman fitted the flat lid over the basket. A leaf or two protruded around the edges, giving it the appearance of containing fruit or some such delicacy.

"He is a new one," she murmured

fondly. "I only caught him a few days ago. He is a little sleepy now, from eating. When he gets hungry he will wake up. When he wakes up he is quick and fast." She held the basket toward her flatly, with both hands.

The woman in the doorway instinctively recoiled.

"You wish that I carry it outside for you?"

"No, I—I'll train myself not to be afraid. Just stand there with it a minute, like that. Give me time to get up my courage."

She thrust out her hands, finally, a little shakily, and placed them on the rim of the basket. The coffee-colored ones withdrew. The transfer was effected.

The new owner took a deep breath.

"Nothing to be afraid of," the old woman said reassuringly. "Just hold it even, like that, so it doesn't spill out."

"When I want to pick it up, how do I—must I use my hand?"

"No, a stick. Look, like this." Mamma Fernanda showed her. "Flat on the ground, so. Underneath it. But always in the middle, not too far at one end, not too far at the other. Then lift, straight. It curls itself around it as it goes up. Or else it hangs straight."

"Here. Here is some money. Is that enough?"

"Oh, that is too much!"

"Take it anyway." The woman in the floppy hat moved carefully back to the car, holding the basket out before her. She placed it on the outside seat, went around to the opposite side and got in beside it. The headlight-glare splashed up again, bleaching the scene.

The old woman stood once more in the doorway of the hut, shading her eyes against it. "Bring it back when the mice are gone," she called out as the car began to move off backwards down the dirt lane.

A note of harsh, satiric laughter sounded from the obscured driver's seat, behind the flaming head-lamps. "I'll bring it back when the mice are gone!"

THERE were candles on the table, and Mr. and Mrs. Donald Baron sat at dinner. In the candlelight their faces were like two parchment masks against the

shadowy background of the walls. Eyeless masks, with the eyelids permanently lowered against the sight of one another. Under each a V-shaped shield of white peered out—in her case, the low decolletage of her dress; in his, the bosom of his dinner-shirt. Other than that, their forms above the table-line were hidden against the darkness, for both wore black.

There was complete silence at the table, save for the occasional whispered tread of the little maid who brought in or removed some dish or other. Neither spoke. Neither had spoken. Neither would speak. There is nothing more terrible than the stony silence of hatred.

He had a book open at his elbow, was reading it in the uncertain light while he ate, in an attempt to forget her presence opposite him. She was silently fluttering the fingers of one hand against the table-edge, over and over.

He looked up from the book finally, shot a look of impatience over the table. Not at her, simply at the restless hand. She dropped it to her lap and it lay still, like something dead. He looked down again, his forehead ridged with annoyance.

She made a slight motion with her hand, and the little serving-girl slipped out of the room, left them. He lit a cigarette, turned a page. She was worrying her wedding ring now, but down below the table where he could not see it. Twisting it around on her finger, endlessly, as though it were something that she were screwing off.

Suddenly she rose, moved away from the table, left the room by the same door the maid had just taken. She went into the kitchen, cheerful and bright by comparison with the torture-chamber she had just quitted. The maid and the fat cook had been whispering together. They jumped apart as she appeared.

"Something was wrong with the dinner, madam?" the cook asked anxiously.

"No. What is your night off?"

"Wednesday."

"I change it. Go tonight. You too, Pepita. Go at once, both of you."

They were both overwhelmed by this sudden generosity. "Thank you, madam, thank you."

"Never mind the sweet. We have finished."

She re-entered the pall-like dining-room again. He shifted the other way in his chair as she did so, cradling the book on one arm now, so that his back, or at least one shoulder, was turned toward her.

Her eyes sparked briefly, lidded themselves again. "Does it annoy you even if I come into the same room with you?" she said desperately, with leashed ferocity.

He didn't look up at her, as though he hadn't heard. "Everything about you annoys me," he answered, in an equally quiet voice. "Even to look at you annoys me."

"Then why don't you let me go? Why do you keep me chained to you? Why must you torture me like this, day after day, week after week?"

"The door is open. I have told you many times, go. You are the one who stays."

"You know I can't just walk out into the streets here. I am hundreds of miles from home. I have no money of my own to get back."

"You will have to stay, then. I stick to

my bargains, even the bad ones. I will not be a party to breaking up my own marriage."

"You don't love me—"

"I know, but I found that out too late."

"For the last time, let me go. I will never ask you this again. Donald, while there is still ti—" She stopped suddenly, went on: "Donald, before something happens, let me go."

He traced a line he was reading with the point of his finger, as though he only half-heard her. "Must you talk to me? I can't stand the sound of your voice."

She rose from the table, moved across the room to a massive carved mahogany sideboard, with a mirror above it. She stood there for a moment, with her back to him, watching him in the mirror. He continued to read, turned full-back to her now.

She removed a small key from the bodice of her dress, unlocked the lower section of the sideboard, opened one of the thick slabs. Within were several fat-bellied bottles of imported cordials that they habitually kept locked-away from the

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servants. She continued to watch him in the mirror. He went on reading, head inclined.

She relocked the slab, turned away. A flat circular straw-plaited basket stood on top of the sideboard now.

She reseated herself at the table, put a cigarette to her lips, drew one of the candles over toward her to light it by. The hand that held it shook a little. A shadow fell across his face for a moment as she did so, then cleared again as she replaced the candle with the others.

He looked up, annoyed at the momentary eclipse.

"I beg your pardon," she breathed coldly.

SILENCE fell between them. Neither one moved after that. The only signs of life in the entire room were three: the occasional turning of a page, the unraveling thread of smoke that rose from her neglected, waiting cigarette, and from time to time a flicker from the candle-flames.

A quarter of an hour went by.

He looked up at last and glanced toward the kitchen door, as though belatedly noting it had not opened for some time past.

"I want some fruit," he said curtly. "Where is the maid?"

"She has gone."

"I thought she went on Wednesdays."

"She took tonight instead. One of her relatives is sick. She asked me if she could, and I told her yes." She feigned a motion to rise. "I will get you some fruit."

"I don't care to have you do anything for me. I will get it myself." He got up and went toward the sideboard in the gloom.

He placed his hand on the lid of the basket.

She let the cigarette fall from between her fingers, flattened both her own hands against the edge of the table. Otherwise she did not move.

He turned away and came back again. Picked up one of the candles and returned to the sideboard a second time.

"What is in this basket? It looks as though it might have some fruit in it."

"I don't know what that is. One of the servants must have brought it in and left

it there by mistake. Something they wanted to take home with them, maybe, and forgot."

He held the candle aloft, raised the lid with his other hand.

The flame of the candle streaked downward through the air like a small comet, went out on the floor. He gave a scream like the whinny of a horse. The lid of the basket settled back into place again as his hand flew off it. He staggered backward, until the edge of the table against his back had brought him up short.

"There is a snake in there!" he said hoarsely.

"You must be mistaken," she said calmly. "The shadow over there fooled you. How could there be?"

He had rolled around forward against the table, was leaning heavily on it with both hands, breathing with difficulty.

"I saw it with my own eyes! It opened its mouth and reared at me as I—"

He was holding his stomach now with one hand, covering his eyes with the other. "I—I can't help it—they do something to me—" he coughed.

"Pull yourself together. You are ill."

She was at the sideboard now in turn. There was the quick click of a key. He was too overcome by nervous shock to watch her. She gave the hinged kitchen door a quick push with the flat of her hand that set it swinging lightly to and fro, as though she had just passed quickly in and out again.

"It's gone. Look. See for yourself. It's not there. I took it away."

"When I was a kid, one got into my bed," he panted. "I knew enough not to move, and I lay there all night long with it twined around my leg, waiting for them to come in to me the next morning. They managed to kill it without my being bitten, but the experience scarred my mind for life—"

"It's gone," she murmured again.

"I'm going upstairs and lie down. For God's sake, see that all the screen doors are closed tight. It may—it may come back in again in some way." He staggered out toward the stairs, as unsteady as a drunk. "I won't get over this for nights now. It's the first one I've ever been that close to since the first time it happened. My hand was *inches* away, I

could almost feel the current of its breath against my thumb—”

She watched him go up the stairs. How right she was, she thought remorselessly. How utterly right.

She heard him being sick upstairs. Then presently the sound of his shoes dropping off, and the creak of the bed-frame as he threw himself down upon it.

She waited a long while before doing anything. There was so much time, the night was so long. She went back to the table and sat there once more, alone now in the candlelight. She *played* with the idea in her own mind, worrying it, turning it over like a cat does a mouse.

She opened a small silver compact and looked at her face in its mirror. I am still guiltless, she thought, I have not done it yet. But I will look the same when I have done it. Nobody will know the difference by looking at me. She touched the little puff twice to her nose and once to her chin. She closed the compact and put it away.

CHAPTER THREE

Man Trap

IT WAS quiet upstairs now. He had stopped tossing and turning on the bed, he had fallen asleep.

She rose. It was time. She made her preparations slowly, with a calm detachment that had neither tension nor guilt in it. She carried a candle to the closet beneath the stairs first, examined the inside of that. Tested the lock, to make sure that it was in good order.

She went back to the sideboard then, removed the lethal basket. She left it there untouched a moment, went looking for something that might serve as a substitute receptacle. When she came back she had a large empty canister she had found on the kitchen shelf, that had once held flour or meal or something of the sort. Also a pointed stick that the cook used to poke up the fire in her stove apparently, for it was slightly charred at one end.

She placed the two side by side, basket and canister, opened both. She was not afraid. She had long ago overcome her original repugnance. You grew used to them, just like anything else. The knowl-



He gave a scream like the whinny of a horse and staggered backward.

edge that it was harmless, of course, helped. And then, this was not her focus of fear, as it was his.

It didn't move. It must have been his imagination that had made it seem to rear and widen its jaws.

It was hard to get the stick under it, for it was coiled now, not stretched out flat upon the floor. Twice it dribbled off it. Then, briefly, it did open its mouth each time, but the gusts of anger were quickly over and it lay supine again.

The third time she managed to clear it full-length from the basket, holding it like a ribbon up at full-length, doubled over the stick. She quickly transferred it, let it slither down into the canister, put the lid back on. Its tail got in the way and the lid wouldn't close over it altogether, but that didn't matter, she left it that way. It would draw itself in in its own time.

She carried the empty basket to the closet now. She separated the two halves. The lower part she placed in one corner, upside-down, so that its emptiness could not be immediately perceived, would remain questionable. The lid she placed over the opposite corner. That gave two foci of danger to contend with, one on each side. He could not retreat from one without drawing near the other. He would be held riveted between the two.

Either disk, revealed by the brief flare of a single match, might have covered something. Something already as good as released, since the two halves were now separate from one another.

She went upstairs to where he was now, moving softly. He lay there asleep, twitching, murmuring unintelligibly in inner torment. He had taken his jacket off. His matches would be in that, that was where they always carried them. She found a folder of them, stripped them all away but one. One she left him, to confirm his own danger by, to illuminate for a brief moment his doom. That and the sandpaper for striking it on. But even that one she shortened to half its length by tearing it in two, reducing its burning-time by that much. She deftly inserted it, and the sandpaper, in the side-pocket of his trouser, which gaped open.

She stiffened, as he turned and moaned a little in his sleep, lips parted in anguish, tormented by some dream that, had he known it, was but a premonition of what was to come. But no dream could hope to equal the reality that would soon—

He lay motionless again after that, and her own rigidity unlocked. She went from the room backwards, a step at a time, like a threatening specter in her black gauzy dress. A specter, though, that even as it retreated became more threatening. Then turned and sidled down the stairs at a biased angle, hand behind her back glancing along the rail.

She went back to the closet-opening and struck one of his own matches and explored closely all along the door-frame on the inside. She found at last what she wanted, something that glinted minutely like a pin-head. It was a small nailhead, not quite even with the woodwork. It could scarcely have been called a projection, it protruded so very slightly, but it was sufficient for her purposes. It was at the right height too.

She drew her shoulder close to it, so that she stood in the closet-opening facing outward into the room. In other words, so that it was just behind her back. Then, working behind her back, sought to catch or snag the lacy material of her dress on it, in such a way as might have happened had she brushed carelessly by it on her way out of the closet.

The fabric would not stay on. Twice she had to trail it along the frame before the little metal projection finally pierced it, clung tenuously by a single looped thread drawn out from the rest. The slightest move would have severed it, and freed her. She didn't want to sever it. She wanted him to.

She stood thus in the opening, half in, half out, and waited. Waited woodenly, patiently.

SHE looked around the room. There was nothing there that menaced—it was sterile of threat. A clock that ticked the minutes of the night away. A radio, to bring in cheerful, chipper music playing hundreds upon hundreds of miles away, in the city he had taken her from and she would be able to return to now, once she was—his widow. A canister upon the sideboard over there, its lid a little slanted, that was all, but nothing to show what lurked in it. How simple death without weapons was. How safe for the killer.

She was going to call up to him, first, but she knew he would not answer. He would hear her but he would not come. That was part of his torture of her. One night she had returned without her key, and though he had been upstairs at the time, had heard her below, had even looked out, he had made no move to admit her. She had had to stay there huddled on the doorstep until the servants came early in the morning.

She made her summons an indirect one, therefore. There was a small bench against the wall, just beyond the closet-opening. She hooked her toe beneath it, tilted it straight up, then let it upset itself legs upward. It struck the floor with a shattering clap that resounded through the silent house.

She heard him jolt upon the bed, start upright. She had roused him now, he would come down to see. She heard him come out to the head of the stairs in his stocking feet.

"What's that? Who's down there?" he called down in a voice blurred from recent sleep.

Instead of answering, she gave the overturned stool an added prod, that made another wooden clamor. This brought him

down to the foot of the stairs. He turned there and could see her. She was no longer motionless now, she was writhing, one arm bent behind her back as if in a vain effort to locate the hindrance and free herself.

"What the devil are you doing there?" he asked surlily.

She continued to writhe and wince facially in time with her supposed efforts. She had once hoped to be an actress, before she had met him. She could never have hoped for a part such as this. "The back of my dress, somewhere, is caught on a nail. I can't reach it."

He didn't come toward her at once. She had hardly expected him to. Hate had long ago withered all consideration between them. But he could be lured to coming to her aid without realizing it, that was what she was counting on. Lured to his death.

He crossed the room to where there was a humidor, stopped by it, took out a cigar. He passed this absently back and forth below his nose, lengthwise, inhaling its fragrance. Then he bit the end off. He felt for matches, noticed he had left his jacket upstairs. She saw him look over at one of the lighted candles, and sudden fright welled up in her. He went over to it, held it, lighted the cigar by it.

She hadn't expected this. That candle could save his life. If he retained it in his hand, went *in* there with it, it could show him there was nothing—

She swore within her own mind in maniacal silence. Even the crime without weapons had its pitfalls.

She was deathly afraid now. She didn't *want* him to come over, not while he was holding that candle.

He said to her over his shoulder: "What are you going to do, stand there all night? Why don't you just pull it?"

"I'm afraid of ruining my dress. It's the last good one I have. If I could only find it, I could work it off gently—" She continued to hitch in a half-circular movement, like a muscle-dancer in a sideshow.

"What were you doing in there anyway?"

"I stepped in for a minute to look for something." Why didn't he put it down! His cigar was lit now. Why didn't he put it *down!*

He turned, took an impatient step toward her, *candle in hand*. He was bringing it over with him, the very thing she had wanted him to do least of all! "What am I, your servant?" he muttered disobligingly.

"Don't bring that candle near me!" she called out sharply. "You'll set fire to me! This dress is all fluffy, and I just had it cleaned with benzine!"

To her surprise it worked. She hadn't expected it to. He set the candle down, placed his lighted cigar in a dish beside it, and came on without them. He'd discarded the only thing that could have saved his life. He came on to his death, empty-handed.

"Stand still a minute," he ordered brusquely. He stepped inside the closet-opening, went around to the back of her. She was between him and the outside room now.

THE rest was as instantaneous as the shuttering of a camera-lens. She suddenly whisked herself out of the entrance, the door swept around in a cyclonic arc, crashed into the frame, the lock fell shut automatically, and he was trapped.

The candle-flames spread out flat with the wind, then straightened again. Death had begun. No, not yet. Death had been unleashed. It still had not found the weak spot, the crevice, by which it was to enter.

Knowledge, now, came next. She would impart it. That would be the only weapon used in this from first to last: her voice, her message through this door. And how could such a weapon ever be found, ever be traced afterward?

She moved close to the door, already vibrating under his first trapped onrush. She moved so close to it she seemed to be pressing her face against it, though she was only aiming her lips at the seam, so he would not fail to hear her.

"Donald, do you hear me? Donald." Then she waited a moment. "Are you listening? In the pocket of your trousers, in the right-hand pocket, is a single match, and a tab of sandpaper. Take it out and light it a minute. I want you to see something."

He must have thought she was trying to help him. There was a faint orange wink for a moment along the seam.

"Look over your shoulder. Look over into the corner. Now into the other corner, quick—while it still lasts."

A curious moaning sound, like wind heard through a tube, came faintly through to her.

"Don't move. Stand still, and you'll be all right. It's—it's in there with you. I wanted to put it someplace where you wouldn't see it, and the basket dropped out of my hands and rolled. I—I think it opened. Donald, don't move, whatever you do. Stand perfectly still, that's your only chance."

A hollow voice as from a tomb groaned: "The match just went out. I'm in here in the dark with it." She heard his head go forward and strike the door.

And now death had begun. The weapon had been used. The weapon that no detective would ever find.

It was time to cover up the sounds it might make. The sounds that would come as soon as the first swooning vertigo of terror had passed away. It might take a long time.

She turned and came away from the door, smiling. Not very much, not in broad humor. Just a tiny little pinched uplift at each corner of her mouth. She looked around the room. The clock was still ticking peacefully. The candle-flames were still pointed jewel-like toward the ceiling. His cigar was still consuming itself on the dish where he'd left it just now. It was just as though nothing had happened. And what had, after all? A door had closed.

She pressed the radio-switch, sank down into a chair close by it. Not one of the stiff upright ones they used at dinner, a sloping over-stuffed one that was his favorite for lounging in. The depression from his body was still in its cushioned seat and back. She crossed her knees and clasped her hands at the back of her head and lolled there in supine indolence.

Just a woman listening to a radio. A woman in her own home, with nothing to do, listening to the radio.

She had said: "You could not hate anyone that much." She was mistaken. What did *she* know? She felt so good right now, this must be hate, what else could it be?

Pattering music came on thinly, from the country club nearby. She didn't want that stuff. She wanted her own kind of music. She turned the dial.

There it was now. It was like a breath of heaven. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is New York—"

SOMETHING kept throbbing every once in awhile, as though there were some sort of dynamo or generator bedded under the floor of the house. And muffled sounds like static, that didn't come from the loud-speaker. Her own name, in ghostly echo. "*Pauline! Pauline!*"

It would have to be made a little louder. It, the other thing, was still coming through. She gave the dial a delicate little adjustment, sloped back again.

The music came into the room moderately loud and diamond-clear. Her old favorite, *Honeysuckle Rose*. She caught herself tapping her toe lightly against the floor in time with it. And then something new, that must have come out since she'd been away.

There was a reading-lamp there, over to the other side of her. They had electricity in the house, of course—it was just at his morbid insistence that they always used candles. So that he wouldn't have to see her so clearly, he'd once explained when she had asked him. This wasn't lighted now, but the chain-pulls dangling from it kept swaying a little, as though there were some unnoticeable vibration going on near at hand. Otherwise you couldn't tell anything. Only when there was a pause for station-identification could you hear anything discordant.

Sometimes a hurried scratching, like a cat trying its nails on a door. Sometimes a garbled screaming, as if from far away. "*Pauline! Pauline! Take a gun to me. There's one upstairs in my bureau-drawer. Bring it down and put it to my head, and end me fast! Only, in the name of common ordinary humanity, don't leave me in here like this—*"

The cigar was intact, had retained its recognizable torpedo-shape on the dish beside her, but slowly the brown of the tobacco-wrapping was being eaten away by the corrosive white of the advancing ash. Her eyes rested on it thoughtfully, as if it were a symbol. A cigar. A life.

The chain-pulls of the lamp kept up their intermittent jittering. Less often now than before, but more violently when they did. The radio kept up its jingling patter of monotonous two-four time notes, one combination of them scarcely distinguishable from another. The clock kept up its remorseless pit-pat, pit-pat, pit-pat. Time, the enemy of life.

The listener brooded, hand cupped to chin, face slanted downward, eyelids lowered. She had a new program on the radio now. A big-name bandleader was introducing his new songstress.

Male voice: "And now we'll hear from little Dixie Lee, our silver-voiced vocalist. Hello, Dixie, honey. What're you going to sing for the folks this evening?"

Female voice: "Gimme a Little Kiss, Will Ya, Huh?"

Male voice: "Sh, not so loud! My wife's out there in the audience. All right—hit it, boys."

A third voice, faintly: "*Mercy! Have mercy! I can't stand it! I can't stand it!*"

Orchestral introduction. Then female voice, nasally: "Gimme a little kiss, will ya, huh? What're ya gonna miss, will ya, huh. . . .?"

Third voice again, indistinctly: "*Take it away! Take it away from me! I can feel it sliding across my shoe!*"

The listener sat motionless. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder Without Weapons

SOMETHING attracted her eye suddenly, some flurry of motion on the floor, offside to where she was sitting. She

wasn't quick enough to catch what it was. As she turned her head to identify it, it seemed to merge with the shadows under the table, draw in under there. Either that, or else she had imagined it in the first place, it hadn't been real, she was seeing things.

Some afterthought made her look inquiringly over at the canister. The lid had become entirely dislodged, it wasn't on it at all any more. She got up and went over closer to examine it. It was empty. *It* wasn't in it any more. It had made its escape, unnoticed. It was at large in the house.

She wasn't unduly frightened by the discovery. It didn't matter so greatly. It was harmless. It would have to be found and put back, that was all. She was growing used to it.

She took up the stick she had used the first time and went looking for it. She picked up one of the candles and held it so that its light penetrated below the table, where she thought she had seen that receding scrap of motion just now. She peered under there.

It was down there. She located it almost at once. She got it on the stick the way the old woman had showed her and dredged it out. The table was an impediment, or something. The head hung too close to the hand with which she grasped the stick. It suddenly slashed at her. The pain was very little. Like jabbing yourself with a pin.

There was nothing to be frightened of. The old native woman had even offered to let it bite her on the arm as a test of its harmlessness, she remembered. She was annoyed, but that was all. She had



a momentary impulse to fling it away from her, but she didn't give in to it. She didn't even drop it. It had slashed a second time before she could get it back into the canister. Then it writhed a little and lay still. She replaced the lid, tightly this time, and went back to her former chair.

The back of her hand itched a little, where it had struck her. She scratched it, and her scratching reddened the skin slightly.

Female voice: ". . . Will ya, huh? And I'll give it right back to you."

A sobbing voice: "*Light. Light. Just a little light. Just for a minute. Just enough to show me where it is—*" Sounds of violent threshing, as of something heavy caught in a trap.

The clock: Pit-pat, pit-pat, pit-pat—forty-six seconds, forty-seven seconds, forty-eight seconds—Time, the enemy of life.

She changed stations on the radio once more. Then sat back again. She rubbed the back of her hand against her dress, to quell the insatiable tickling that seemed to afflict it. A five-pointed vermilion star was faintly visible on the back of it—with a white core, like an over-sized mosquito-bite.

A panting sound, as of a voracious animal tracing its muzzle close up against the seam of a door, came through. But not from the loud-speaker.

She had New York, her own town, again now. The town he'd taken her away from. "This is the National Broadcasting Company, W-E-A-F, New York—" In her mind's eye she could see the big double triangle, the lower half Times Square, the upper, Longacre, with the crowds moving slowly along—Loew's State, and the Astor, and Seventh Avenue splitting off from Broadway—

The clock: Pit-pat, pit-pat, pit-pat—fifty-eight seconds, fifty-nine seconds, sixty seconds—Time, the victor.

The white ash had reached the biting-end of the cigar now. There was no more unincinerated tobacco left to be consumed. There wasn't anywhere further for it to go. It was a cold cylinder, a dead cylinder. A ghost-cigar. A memory.

The chain-pulls on the lamp hung in a mathematically straight line, utterly still now.

The listener reached forward suddenly, there was the click of a switch, and the radio went off.

It had lasted fifty-five minutes.

SHE listened carefully first, without moving, eyes still in that downcast position. Complete silence. Only Time, the enemy, the victor, the eternal, still going pit-pat, pit-pat, pit-pat.

Finally she stood up with calm deliberation, moved slowly forward, in the careful way of a woman trying not to arouse someone who is sleeping. She went toward the sealed door, stopped close against it, stood motionless, head inclined. There was no sound.

She reached out, rapped questioningly on the inscrutable woodwork. There was no answer.

She was smiling as she turned away. That same smile as before, only at the corners of her mouth. She came back closer to the light and took out the silver compact and opened it once more. She looked at herself in its mirror.

She looked the same. You couldn't tell anything. She looked no different from before. She wondered what they meant about a guilty conscience.

The telephone rang, and for a moment it startled her almost to the point of dropping the compact, the sound was so unexpected in the new, the final, silence that had now fallen.

She went over to it, hesitated for just a moment, then picked it up. It was a woman's voice, and for a moment she had difficulty recognizing it.

"Pauline, this is Marie Stewart—"

She was impatient to the point of brusqueness. She didn't want any witnesses, any accessories, who might later be dangerous.

"Why did you call me now?"

"I had to. Pauline, listen to me. That old woman we were talking about the other day, you know the one I mean?"

Oh, no you don't, she thought. She wasn't going to get her to incriminate herself that easily! "I don't know what you mean. We didn't talk of any old woman. Will you excuse me now?"

"She has just been to see my maid. She walked all the way in from out there, to look her up. There was no other way she

knew of reaching you. And my maid just came running to me a minute ago with what she told her, frightened out of her wits. I had to reach you right away. Pauline, don't touch that thing you took from her. Don't go near it. There has been a terrible mistake."

"A mistake? Marie, what are you trying to say to me? What is it?" Her own voice had become hoarsely unrecognizable now.

"That—what you went there for. She gave you one of the wrong kind. She only found out after you were gone and it was too late. If it bites you, nothing can save you. You will be dead within fifteen minutes. There is not even a serum for it."

It had bitten her fully thirteen to fourteen minutes ago. Something started to swell up inside her head. It felt like a balloon.

seeking egress. Her breath was raucous in the stillness, like a bellows. Huff, huff, huff.

Then she fell flat again on the other side. She'd have to go on still further now. Help was so far away. And she had so little time.

THEY found her there when they arrived. She was still warm, but she was dead. They had arrived within a few minutes. They were used to many bad sights, but this was a bad one such as they had never seen yet. Their faces paled when they saw what she had done. She lay in a pool of blood on the kitchen floor. The meat-cleaver had dropped to one side of her. The severed hand, with the wedding band still on it, had stayed up on the edge of the table she had used for a chopping block.

IF YOUR COPY OF THIS MAGAZINE IS LATE—

We regret that, because of the difficulties of wartime transportation, your magazine may sometimes be a little late in reaching you. If this should happen, your patience will be much appreciated. Please do not write complaining of the delay. It occurs after the magazine leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond our control.—The Publishers.

"No one has ever been known to survive, unless they got immediate treatment, and that means amputation if it was on a hand or leg—"

The rest of the message went rushing upward toward the ceiling, with the voice speaking it, with the telephone, with the table that held it—and she was down upon her hands and knees, like a felled ox slowly buckling to the ground under the effects of a mallet-blow.

She lay there flat for a minute, mouth open an inch or two above the floor, unable to scream. Then she turned and began to crawl with a maddened patter of bare palms upon the floor, that carried her along it crabwise, sidling like some maimed thing.

She couldn't get up on her feet. She couldn't scream. There was no one, nothing, to scream to. There was a door there she wanted to get to, a door that might have help beyond it. When she'd reached it, she reared up against it on her knees, like a clever quadruped, a dog or cat,

They found him too, presently. He fell out upon them when they opened the closet door. He must have remained sagging half-upright against it. He too was still warm. But he was much more difficult to recognize than she was. The thing they carried out through the closet-opening was scarecrow-like. Tatters of torn shirt fluttered from it here and there. Gray dust was ground into its bared chest and forehead. Cobwebs festooned its eyebrows and matted hair. And the hands were wide-splayed, fingertips worn to the quick, skinless, all but nailless, slow drops of blood oozing from each one, drop by drop.

They found the snake, last of all.

They performed an autopsy, of course. The medical examiner's office reported by telephone to the police at five that afternoon.

"The amputation was unnecessary. She must have thought she had been bitten by a deadly variety. That species of snake, of course, is absolutely harmless, as we recognized immediately. Just to make

sure, however, we have tested it with several rabbits. All have survived the bite unharmed."

And the expert reporting went on: "The man through some accident became locked fast in the closet. The wind may have slammed the door on him. Or she may even have done it herself, playfully, as a sort of practical joke. Before she could release him again, the snake-bite had already occurred, and her terror robbed her of all further presence of mind, so that she forgot to unfasten the door. The frantic efforts he made to get out and go to her aid show him to have been blameless in whatever it was that occurred."

"Then the amputation was the cause of death—are those your findings?"

"On the contrary, the amputation was not the cause of death. We arrived quickly enough afterwards for her to have been still alive if it were simply a question of the amputation, even though she might have been weak or unconscious from shock and loss of blood. Our examination shows death to have been instantaneous. What caused it was a heart-attack, induced more by the terror of thinking she had been fatally bitten than by any amputation. It is what you might call a *death by the imagination*."

TWO heads close together in an invalid chair. A brunet one, and one streaked with white, the overnight white of shock. A man, resting in the chair itself, and a woman, perched on the arm of it, with her head close to his. Marie Stewart and Donald Baron.

"You will be better soon. Every day you get a little better, grow a little stronger. Soon you'll be over it altogether. It may have even helped, terrible as it was. It may have even cured you of that old fear, as a sort of shock-treatment would."

"I think what helped me to pull through was I lost consciousness altogether toward the end, and unconsciousness can be a great blessing. That way I escaped the full effects. You've been wonderful to me, Marie. Being with me, nursing me every day. Why have you been so good to me?"

"I've always loved you. I already loved you when I first knew you, back in the North, before your marriage. I loved you so much that—there isn't anything I wouldn't have done, to be with you like this." She stopped, then asked with a little flare of curiosity: "Donald, what *happened* to her that night? No one seems to know."

He didn't answer. She knew he'd never tell her that his wife had tried to kill him. He'd always keep it a secret from her, let her go on thinking that he'd accidentally locked himself in the closet. He was loyal that way, even to the memory of one who had tried to destroy him.

And looking at her, as she lay there nestled so fondly against him, it was impossible to guess that she too might have a secret from him.

The clever person can commit a murder without weapons, she had once said to someone.

But there's a cleverer one still, who can get someone else to commit it for her—and pay the price at the same time.





"I'm worried about Ma..."

This boy is a casualty.

A few days ago, he was a hardened fighting man—with a glint in his eye and a set to his mouth that boded ill for his Axis foes.

Tonight he's just a bewildered lad. Bad news from home has hit him—and put him out of action—as effectively as an enemy bullet. Desperately he has tried to solve a problem back home; his mother ill, lonely, helpless—and apparently nothing he can do about it.

Tortured by doubt and uncertainty, he's come to the Red Cross Field Director for help. He'll get it.

It is the job of Red Cross Field Men

to unravel human snarls. Across their desks, sometimes no better than battered crates, more than 1,500,000 men in the past year have poured their troubles—have asked for and received counsel and assistance. Daily and nightly, with our armed forces from Africa to India, from Iceland to New Guinea, they are keeping up the morale our fighting men *must* have.

Not only to the fighting men but to War's victims wherever they can be reached the Red Cross is carrying relief supplies, clothing, medicines. The cost is tremendous and ever-increasing.

The Second War Fund is greater than the First, but no greater than the increased needs.

Give more this year—give double if you can.

Your Dollars help **AMERICAN**  make possible the **RED CROSS**

This space contributed by the Publisher

A HEEL OF THE



"You devil—let me go!" "Not till you drop the gun."

Doc Ryne knew his princess pin was the only one of its kind in existence so no wonder the girl in the silver fox fur got a rise when she tried to pawn its twin in the Doc's own pawnshop. Death was hiding behind its jeweled surface, he learned shortly, and an opportunity to try to prove what he'd always maintained, that he was the world's prime heel. But globaloney will out—just as easily as murder.

CHAPTER ONE

As Like As Two Pins

FOR twenty years the three golden balls had hung in the same place, the only business sign which the *Square Deal Pawnshop* had. The balls, and the

deep-set windows, loaded with their treasure of unredeemed pledges bore mute evidence of long successful years.

Herman Reynolds was beyond the grilled partition, masking his office from the rest of the shop. A jeweler's glass screwed in his right eye, he examined a

FIRST WATER

By **W. T. BALLARD**

Author of "Murder Warden," etc.

diamond pin which had been thrust toward him through the small wicket.

He was a big man, this grandson of the shop's founder, with a soft, putty-like face, and big dull-looking blue eyes. His thin hair was parted in the middle and combed with infinite care, but it failed to conceal the bare spot at the top of his big head.

"A thousand is all I can give," he said in his slow, laborious voice.

"A thousand?" The man on the customer's side of the wicket was outraged. "Why, you've allowed me twice that much before on the same pin."

"Many times." Herman unscrewed the glass from his eye, wiped it carefully and placed it in the plush-lined case. "But then, I owned the shop and was risking my own money. Now, you own it, and my conscience will not permit me to risk your capital."

"A fine thing." Doc Ryne was angry. "Here, I own the damn shop. I won it in a poker game, and you won't advance me more than a thousand dollars of my own money on a pin that both of us know is worth at least five grand."

"Sell it then," Herman was indifferent,



He turned, every muscle in his body freezing.

"or take it somewhere else. We don't need your business." He came around the end of the partition, settled his bulk comfortably in an arm chair, picked up an accordion from the glass show case and leaned back. A look of dreamy bliss stole across his face and he closed his eyes as he gently squeezed the instrument.

"Hey," said Doc Ryne. "That bellows

belongs in stock. It's here to sell, not play."

Herman apparently did not hear and the notes of *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree* filled the store.

DOC RYNE regarded Herman with distaste. "A fine lot of respect I get," he grumbled. "No one would think that I own this joint. For two cents I'd fire you."

Herman stopped playing and sat up with a jerk. "Fire me, that is good. Fire me now." He rose hurriedly, went around the grilled partition and picked up his coat.

"Hey wait!" Doc Ryne was not large. His wiry body looked almost puny beside Herman's bulk. "Where do you think you're going?"

"You fired me." Even in his eagerness the big man could not speak hurriedly.

"Nix. I didn't."

Herman's cow-like eyes got liquid with feeling. "Please, Doc. We're friends, aren't we? Then fire me."

"Nothing doing," said Ryne. "A bargain is a bargain. When I let you bet the shop in that poker game, you said that if you lost, you'd stay and run it for five years. That was three months ago."

"But Doc . . ." Herman was pleading. "Other times you won the shop, you always sold it back. My sister Nellie will lend me twenty thousand and . . ."

"No." Ryne's face was thin, his eyes sharp and hard, his jaw firm, but the mouth quirked a little, loosening the grimness of his face. "Every time I get into a big game, I have to pawn my diamond pins. So now I own a pawn shop, I can borrow from myself and keep the profit in the family.

"I warned you not to gamble. You're a poor gambler. If I sold you the shop, you'd just lose it in another game."

Herman was still sad. "But you're a professional, Doc. I'm only an amateur. It wasn't fair."

"Look," said Ryne. "I'm an amateur when I bring a pin in to pawn. You're a professional. Do I squawk about that?"

Herman thought this over, slowly, carefully, the putty of his face creasing into a doubtful frown. "No . . . but . . ."

"There aren't any buts," said Ryne. "When I was a kid, I always wanted to own one of these joints. I used to stare at

the windows and see all the knives and watches and things. But cheer up, Herman, I'll give you the shop back as soon as my commission comes through from Washington."

The mournful expression stayed on Herman's face. "Stop kidding yourself, Doc. The Marines turned you out because of malaria. They ain't calling any sick men back."

"Who's sick?" the gambler demanded. "It ain't that, Herman. It's those admirals, back in Washington, they know that with all them new boots in the service, I'd get rich, playing poker. I'd clean up . . . I'd . . ." He was interrupted as a little man shuffled hurriedly into the pawn shop.

THE little man's suit was three sizes too big for him. He had a lean, tight little face with a sharp nose and popped brown eyes that were as soft as a spaniel's. His shirt lacked a button at the collar and was pulled together by a string tie.

"Letter for you, Doc. Two letters, one from Washington."

Ryne seized the long, official-looking envelope and waved it in the air. "My orders, Herman, my orders. They've come. Captain Ryne. Salute me, you dough-head."

Herman forgot his own woes as he crowded forward. "You got all the luck, Doc. Even the draft board wouldn't have me. They didn't like my feet."

"Flatter than pancakes," said Ryne unfeelingly. He ripped open the envelope and then the quick, eager look died in his slate gray eyes, leaving them hard and shiny and lifeless. "How do you like that?" His voice was toneless. "They're having another hearing. They'll have all the Japs dead before I get my orders. Run down to the telegraph office, Banjo-eyes, and send a wire to Knox. No, better make it to the President. . . ."

"I don't work here any more," said the little man, and turning, started for the door.

One of Ryne's long, slim, gambler's hands shot out and caught the gnome's collar, hauling him back with surprising strength. "What do you mean, you don't work here any more?" He spun the little man around to face him.

Banjo-eyes shifted from one tight shoe to the other, wanting to run, but unable to look away from Ryne's face. "It's the shipyards," he mumbled. "They're paying a buck ten an hour. . . ."

"And you're going to work there," Ryne's voice was a purr. "Do you hear that, Herman, we have mutiny on our hands. Who will sweep out this place when you're gone? Who will drive my car and take care of my apartment? Don't I pay you three hundred each month?"

The little was almost in tears. "But you win it all back again with those dice. . . ."

"Do I make you gamble?" Ryne's tone had changed to one of hurt surprise. "And to think that you would desert me in my hour of misfortune, when the whole navy department is keeping me out of the service. . . ."

"Geeze, Doc." A tear slipped from one of the little man's eyes and chased its wet trail down his pinched cheek. "It's only that. . . ."

"Go," said Ryne, releasing his grip on the man's coat collar so that he could point to the door. "Go, do not darken my shop again, but when you come back, broken and hungry, Herman and I will have the light burning for you in the window."

Herman had lost interest in the argument, removed his coat and tentatively picked up the accordion. "It's nine-thirty.

That game will be starting. Do you want to borrow on that pin or not? The price is still a thousand."

Doc Ryne glanced at the expensive watch on his wrist and became business-like. "Yeah, if I'm going to sit in on Big Jack's game and pluck his pigeon, I'd better be on the move." He pulled a bill from his pocket and thrust it into Banjo-eyes' hand. "Bring the car around in ten minutes, and no more nonsense." Then he turned back to the loan window and produced the pin.

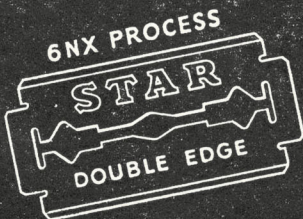
It was of curious design, the head of an Egyptian princess, the background enameled, the border of the head-dress a row of rubies, the crown of blue white diamonds, with a single enormous pearl set upright like a plume.

But the most valuable stone was the emerald eye which seemed to wink at you, green and deep and tantalizing.

Ryne held it in his hand, speaking as he might have spoken to a living woman. "Every time I hit the shorts and have to hock you, *Princess*, lady luck sits on my shoulder. And she'll be there tonight. Big Jack and the boys have found themselves a nice fat pigeon from the east. I don't work on pigeons, but I don't mind taking it away from them after they take it from the sucker. Hurry up, Herman, my thieving friend. Give me the thousand and let me go."

THE ARMY'S MADE YOU SMOOTHER!

IT'S NOT JUST THE ARMY. IT'S STAR BLADES!



4 for 10¢



But Herman was paying no attention to Ryne. His cow-like eyes were looking across Ryne's shoulder at the woman who had just entered the shop.

RYNE glanced around and caught his breath. The girl was beautiful. The silver fox furs at her throat were expensive and the tiny hat had cost at least a hundred dollars. Certainly from her garb, she was not a regular customer of pawn shops, and her manner was hesitant and almost apologetic.

Doc Ryne was always impressed by women. He slipped his pin into his pocket and turned around, a smile lighting the dark, sinister quality of his face.

"Good evening. Can I show you something?" His eyes roved about, looking for merchandise and settled on Herman's accorcion. He picked it up quickly. "Would you be interested in this? It sounds remarkable. In fact, it can play *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree* from memory."

An expression of agony crossed Herman's face and he opened his mouth for protest, then closed it slowly as if he realized that protest was hopeless, but the girl relieved his fear by shaking her head.

"I was afraid you wouldn't want it," Doc Ryne said, sadly. "No one wants it but Herman."

"I didn't come to buy anything." Her voice was low and clear and warm. "I—I want to borrow some money."

"Oh!" said Doc Ryne. "This way, please. Mister Reynolds will help you. He manages the loan department. But see that he gives you what your trinket is worth. From experience I know him to be a little close."

Herman did not smile. Neither did the girl. She stepped past Ryne toward the window and he watched her from the corner of his eye, his thin, handsome face looking a little more satanic than usual.

Herman went about the business at hand stoically, fitting the glass into his eye and accepting the jewelry she offered in his pudgy hand.

"Mr. Ryne! Could you step into the office for a moment?"

Doc was surprised. He knew nothing about gems, and it was the first time Herman had ever called for his help in making a loan. He went around the end of the

partition and followed the big man into the little private office. "What's the matter?"

"Look," said Herman. His voice was strained as he extended his broad, fattish palm.

Doc Ryne looked. Years of habit kept his face expressionless but it could not check his surprise for in Herman's hand lay his Egyptian Princess pin, the green eye winking up at him sardonically.

Instinctively he felt the vest pocket where he had dropped the *Princess* and his puzzlement grew. His pin was there. He drew it forth and held it close to Herman's hand. The two pins seemed to be identical.

"What is it, Herman?"

The pawnbroker was examining the pin with the aid of his glass. "Fake," he said, finally. "Someone must have copied your pin."

"What's it worth, the copy I mean?"

Herman shrugged. "How should I know? Not as much as it cost to have it made. Maybe fifty, maybe a hundred. For costume stuff, you gotta have a customer."

"Give her five hundred," said Ryne with quick decision, "and keep her here until I can get through the back door and around in front."

Herman opened his mouth to protest, then said instead: "What goes on?"

"That," said Doc Ryne, "is what I'm going to find out. This is no accident, too many people know my pin. Just keep her here until I can locate Banjo-eyes and the car, then give her five bills." He turned and moved quickly toward the rear exit.

CHAPTER TWO

The Corpse With the Broken Nose

THE apartment house before which the girl's car halted was like a hundred others in the city. There was no lobby, and no elevator. Doc Ryne gave her three minutes' lead and followed, reaching the stair head on the second floor in time to see her disappearing through a door at the far end of the passage.

He moved after her quickly. His tight long muscles co-ordinated so beautifully that he never seemed to hurry. All his

motions had a deceptive slowness. He gained the door through which she had vanished, and paused, frowning at the panel.

In the half-light of the hall, his face was further shadowed by the turned down brim of his pearl gray hat. His shoes glittered like black jet mirrors, and his shoulders were trim, and straight and wiry beneath the smartness of his top coat.

He knocked, and was surprised when the woman's voice called, directing him to enter. In his brain a tiny bell rang its warning. It was a warning which he seldom ignored. Too many times serious things had happened after the subconscious warning. But he ignored it this time, thrusting the door inward.

The room was small, cheaply furnished, but the furniture did not interest him at the moment. The door on the far side of the room had closed with a faint click which barely registered on his sensitive ear.

He stared at it hard, then raised his voice. "Hello!"

Nothing happened. The room was quiet, and no sound came from behind the closed door. He frowned, trying to think. Could this be the old badger game? If so, someone was making a mistake. Doc Ryne had no reputation whatever to think about. The perfect heel, everyone called him. He liked that. He tried to act the part. It wasn't much effort.

Also he was curious. It was his crowning vice. A girl was in this apartment somewhere. She seemed to be hiding. Why?

With cat-like steps he crossed the room, found the second door unlocked and pushed it wide. Nothing happened. The bedroom beyond seemed as empty as had the living-room that he had just left. Beyond the bed, a bathroom door stood half open. He crossed to this, saw a second door leading from the bath to another suite. The door was locked.

He frowned deeply, going back into the bedroom. That's all there was to the apartment, bedroom, sitting-room and bath. No kitchenette, no rear entrance.

Nothing remained save a clothes closet. The girl might be hiding in there, but why? The idea did not make sense.

Still, he went around the bed with its orange spread and pulled the closet door open.

The body fell out into his arms.

It was a big body, weighing a good two hundred pounds. It might well have carried Ryne to the floor beneath its falling weight, but he stepped back quickly, setting his leg muscles and held it in his arms, staring directly into the dead face of Big Jack Kollock, only inches from his own.

EVEN in life, Jack Kollock had been no beauty. Somewhere, sometime, the bridge of his big nose had been broken, and someone, probably an irritated loser, had drawn a knife across his left cheek. The wound had healed to a thin white scar which stood out against the normal redness of the man's face.

But the face was no longer red. It had the bluish gray color of death. The eyes were wide and staring, the dark pupils almost mocking in their intensity.

Ryne said something under his breath. He propped the body back against the jamb of the closet door, but it was not as yet stiff enough to stand. It crumpled, first at the knees, then fell, the arms swaying crazily.

Ryne made no effort to catch it. He was staring down to where blood had made a nasty smear across the expensive yellowness of his camel's hair coat.

He was so engrossed with the damage that he did not hear the squeaking sound which the apartment door made in opening, did not know that he was not alone until one of the two plainclothesmen who had paused in the bedroom entrance, spoke.

"Hi, Doc!"

He turned, then, every muscle in his lithe body freezing, every sense sharpened by danger.

"Hello Joe."

Joe Tripp came into the room. He was a gray man, short, and stocky. His hair was as gray as his eyes. The suit he wore was a neat, double-breasted gray, with a lighter stripe, carefully tailored. He didn't look like a police lieutenant. He looked like a businessman.

His partner was big, and he wore yellow shoes which turned up a little at

the tips. He had a horselike face, above the striped soft shirt. The shirt collar was too small and was not fastened. He tried to hold it in place with a knitted tie, but the tie had slipped so that the knot was riding around, under his left ear. He looked like a farmer and his name was Lawson.

Tripp walked around Ryne and touched the crumpled body with the toe of his polished shoe. "So you finally got him."

"I'm no killer," said Doc Ryne. "Jack and I didn't get along, but we settled our troubles with cards."

"I heard about that," said Tripp. "I heard you've been muscling into Jack's games and winning the gravy after his boys have plucked the suckers. I heard that Jack threatened to have you gunned out."

"That was Jack," said Ryne without expression. "You never heard me making any threats."

"No," said Joe Tripp. He sounded almost sad. "No one ever heard you making any threats, Doc, and no one has ever hung a rap on you, but there's talk. They say you're the most dangerous man in town. Let's have a look at that sleeve gun."

Ryne snapped his right arm and a thirty-two appeared as if by magic in his palm. He reversed the gun with a motion too swift for the eye to follow and offered it to Tripp, grip first.

The detective lieutenant accepted it, held the barrel to his nose, then broke the cylinder. It was full. He used a corner of his handkerchief on the barrel, then looked at Ryne.

"Hasn't been fired. What'd you kill him with, Doc?"

Ryne shook his head. "Wrong alley, Joe. You should know that I'm not sucker enough to handle a play this way."

"Then what happened?"

Ryne's eyes were smoky, his slim face twisted a little. "That," he said, softly, "is what I intend to find out. I don't like being in the middle. How'd you show up here?"

"Tip," the lieutenant told him. Swede Lawson had not spoken. He'd been walking around, strangely silent on those big yellow shoes. He came back now to stand at Ryne's elbow.

"Man or woman?" Doc asked.

"Woman."

RYNE didn't say anything. He stooped and went through Jack Kollock's pockets. Both of the detectives watched him, neither tried to interfere. He straightened with two handkerchiefs, a gold knife, a bunch of keys and a wallet. The wallet held six hundred dollars.

"What are you looking for?" said Tripp.

"His diamonds." Doc Ryne was frowning at the floor. "Jack Kollock had a hundred grand worth of diamonds. He always carried them, they were his insurance in case he had to lam in a hurry. Everyone knew it."

"Nuts," said Swede Lawson. "We've been after you a long time. We've got you now."

"Have you?" said Doc Ryne. He said it very softly. His left arm made the same peculiar snapping motion that his right had executed a few moments before and a little gun, the mate for the one which Tripp had taken appeared in his hand.

"No movement please." He was very courteous, very soft-spoken, but there was a steely glitter in his eyes. He got the gun Tripp had taken, got their own weapons and backed them into the closet.

Swede Lawson was red-faced, snarling, Tripp silent, watchful, the more dangerous of the two.

Ryne bolted the door. "Don't make too much noise, boys. I might be around to put a bullet through the panel." He turned and swiftly left the apartment. On his way toward the stairs, he noticed the number of the apartment next door. The girl must have gone that way, crossed the bathroom and through the connecting door. There was no other way she could have gotten out so rapidly.

Ryne went down the stairs, pausing to rap on a door marked *Manager* at the rear of the lobby. It was opened by a boy of ten or eleven who said importantly: "Mama ain't home. I'm in charge."

Ryne grinned. His long, slender fingers found a half dollar which he balanced before the boy's eyes. "A blond girl just left here a couple of minutes ago. She lives in 209 and she wears fox furs around her neck."

The boy's eyes almost crossed, watching the half dollar. "You mean Miss Boyson. She ain't been here long, just come yesterday. And she won't stay," he added confidentially. "This place ain't good enough for her. She's got class."

"That's what I thought," Ryne agreed. "You don't know where I can find her?"

"Sure," said the boy. "I followed her last night. She sings at the Poinard Club over on Melrose, only her name ain't Boyson over there. I saw her picture out in front."

Ryne slid the half dollar into his hand and moved swiftly toward the door. But he took a careful look at the dimmed-out street before he left the building. A police car sat at the curb, but it was empty. Evidently Tripp and Lawson had answered the call alone.

He rounded the corner and found Banjo-eyes awaiting him nervously. "Geeze, I thought you weren't coming. Them cops drove up and. . ."

"I thought that I wasn't coming myself," Ryne admitted. "Take me over to the Poinard and don't waste your time in worry. I do enough for both of us."

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Jackpot

THE POINARD CLUB was long and crowded and noisy and filled with smoke. Papa Poinard who looked like a poodle and Mama Poinard who looked like a walrus ran it, Papa standing at the entrance to the dining-room, an ill-fitting dinner-coat about his plump shoulders, beaming at the world.

He beamed as Doc Ryne came in and held up his hand, making a zero with his forefinger and thumb. "It's in the bag, Doc, under control."

Ryne had not the slightest idea what was in the bag or under control. It was Papa's standard greeting. He hadn't changed it in six years since the spot had first opened.

Ryne said, "Sure," and patted the little man's fat shoulder as he passed. He ignored the dining-room, seeking the bar. Through the open door at the end, he watched the floor-show as he sipped his benedictine.

The girl who had come into the pawnshop hesitated as she finished her song and then turned into the bar.

There was a seat beside Doc, the only empty stool in the place. She slid into it without looking at him and asked the bartender for a glass of water.

Doc waited until she was served, then said in a low voice: "Did you get what you thought the pin was worth?"

She turned and gave him a long, slow, measured look. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"No." Ryne's soft voice was deceptive. "I didn't think that you would, Helen. I didn't think that you would."

He could see her white teeth suddenly as she pressed them deep into the redness of her lower lip. "How did you know my name?"

"I read the papers," he said. "Miss Helen Travis of New York and Miami. Miss Helen Travis, golfer and horse-woman, singing in the Poinard Club. Give out, sister. It should be a good story."

Her eyes were deep with fear. He could see them in the back bar mirror although she kept her small head away from him. "I like to sing."

"And to pawn diamond pins?"

"You're crazy, or drunk." She had gotten control of herself now and turned back to face him.

"Someone," he said, "went to a lot of trouble to frame me. Someone who knew me very well, who knew about my *Princess* pin, who knew that I hung around the *Square Deal Pawnshop* and that I was curious as hell. Someone rented two apartments, and put a body into the closet of one." His words were still so low that they barely carried to her ears, but his voice had gained a cold, chipped deadly sound and he lashed her with the words as one might strike out with a blacksnake whip.

"Talk, sister. Who gave you that pin? Who sent you to pawn it, knowing that I would be in that shop, knowing that I would follow you?"

"You're crazy, I didn't. . ."

"Don't lie." His tapered hand bridged the distance between them and fastened about her slender wrist. "I can break this, Helen, twist it until the bone snaps and you won't dare cry out. Why

won't you dare to cry? Because there was a dead man in the closet of that apartment you led me too, a dead man. The cops are there now, and they ask questions, questions which you wouldn't like."

"You devil!" She tried to pull free and failed. "I heard that you were a devil. I couldn't believe anyone could be as evil. . . . There wasn't any body there unless you killed someone! Now, let me go!"

Instead Ryne's grip tightened. His fingers were stronger than they looked, much stronger. On occasion he had been known to tear a pack of cards in half.

"We're getting somewhere," he purred. "If there wasn't a body, why did you lure me to the place?"

SHE flushed, two spots of color which had not come from a make-up kit, flaring on the whiteness of her cheeks. "Because, that was the only way we could think of getting you away from your men, your army, your killers."

"Oh!" said Ryne. He was surprised, but did not show it. "So now I have an army, a bunch of killers."

"Do you deny it? Everyone knows it."

"It's part of the Ryne legend, the newspaper boys must have their fun."

She hardly heard him. "Mr. Kollock said that if I'd manage to get you to the apartment, he'd arrange that you returned my brother's property, but he couldn't get to you otherwise."

"Oh," said Ryne. "So Jack Kollock is in this picture?"

She was surprised. "Didn't you see him? Didn't he show up?"

"Yes," said Ryne. "Yes. He showed up, but he wasn't in any condition to explain things. It was Jack Kollock that died."

She caught her breath. "You . . . you killed him?"

Ryne did not bother to deny the charge. He had learned what he wanted to know. He slipped from the stool, releasing his grip on her wrist and headed for the door.

Behind him, a woman's voice rose, almost to a scream. "Stop him," she cried. "Stop him, he's a murderer!"

Confusion reigned in the long, crowded room. A drunk slid off his stool, directly in Ryne's path. He stretched out his arms and crouched like a football tackle.

Ryne hit him with his hip. One of his knees came up and caught the man neatly under the jaw. The drunk went over backward without sound. Papa Poinard was in the way. He scuttled aside like a frightened rabbit. A second later Ryne burst from the club door and gained his car.

Banjo-eyes needed no order. The car was in motion almost before Ryne had sat down. It swept down the dark street and vanished around the corner before the first of the bar's occupants could reach the sidewalk. . . .

Five men played poker in the hotel room. Smoke, like low eddying clouds, made a draping gray cushion between the green-shaded light and the tops of the players' heads.

Doc Ryne had come through the connecting door so silently that not one of the players had heard his entrance. He stood, just inside the door, his gray hat slanted back on the side of his head, his small hands on his hips, his eyes bleak and careful and watchful.

He knew all of the men at the table. Four of them were Kollock's gang. They worked together, and they had no love for Ryne.

Theirs was a racket as old as time. They played the hotels, the bars, and the better nightclubs. They scraped an acquaintance with wealthy visitors. They managed to suggest a game. They played as strangers to each other, letting the pigeon win the first few rounds, then closing in on his bankroll like so many wolves.

Ryne knew them, but he was not their friend. He took a special joy in horning into their little games, in winning money which they already counted as their own.

At first they had threatened him, then they had attempted to have him join the gang, but he refused all offers of peace. They dared not refuse him the chance to play, since they were posing as strangers to one another, and if there was an argument the pigeon might get wise.

Four of the men were Kollock's men, the fifth was Rodney Travis.

DOC RYNE'S lips tightened a little at sight of Travis. He was about thirty-five, a playboy who had drifted to the

coast, a pigeon who had been lured into one of Kollock's games a month before.

Ryne had horned into that game. Ryne had won six thousand dollars in bonds from Travis in the game, and here he was, back playing poker with the same men. That didn't make sense. Pigeons didn't come back for a second game, and Helen Travis, the man's sister, was singing in the Poinard Club and had lured Ryne to an apartment. And in the closet of that apartment, Jack Kollock was dead.

Ryne shifted his attention to the other players. The man seated at the head of the table was fat and Chinese. He posed as a wealthy and important importer of tea and spice from New York. He was in reality one of the cleverest card men in the business. There were few things that Chinese Sam could not do with a deck of cards.

The man at his elbow was called the Colonel. He had the red face of a hard drinking beef-eater and he posed as a retired British colonel. In reality his name was Allciski and he had been born in Cleveland.

On the other side, facing them were Al Henny, a small, meek-looking man with rimless eye glasses and a perpetual nervous expression that made him resemble a worried clerk, and Lucius Montell who had been a character actor in several pictures and who worked before the cameras occasionally.

"A fine crowd," thought Ryne, but none of his feeling showed in his voice when he said: "Good-evening, gentlemen. You wouldn't mind if a lonely man took a hand?"

All motion at the table ceased. The colonel who turned first, looked as if he would explode. Henny and Montell got nervous and the Chinese blinked once.

Only Travis showed no surprise. "The perfect pigeon," Ryne thought, always waiting to be plucked.

"Fine," said Travis. "I've been wanting to meet you again, Mr. Ryne. You have six thousand dollars of my money I believe. I've wanted a chance to get it back."

Ryne nodded. He pulled up a chair and the colonel moved over grudgingly to make room for him. The Chinese had been about to deal. He waited until Ryne

had purchased chips, then his hands moved rhythmically as the cards dropped exactly before each player.

Ryne gathered his up carefully. He glanced at them with casual disinterest and saw that he had three eights and a pair of queens.

He looked up to find that Chinese Sam was watching him without appearing to, and so he made a tiny bow to the Chinese, then he laid his cards carefully face down on the table. "By me," he said with regret.

The Chinese's eyes flickered once, then he smiled and his face was bland, and warm and friendly. "Too bad, Mr. Ryne, but it is always wise not to win the first hand."

"Always," said Doc Ryne, and found a long Turkish cigarette.

Al Henny had a pat hand on his left and won the pot with a full house, nines on jacks.

Doc Ryne smiled and said to no one in particular: "Lucky I didn't have a full house too, Mr. Henny, say eights on queens. You would have beaten me badly."

Henny, who had been nervously raking in his chips, stopped and stared unwinkingly at Ryne through his rimless glasses. "Very fortunate." His voice was low and dry and expressionless. "Very, very fortunate indeed."

"Where's Mr. Kollock?" Ryne was apparently looking at the lighted end of his cigarette when he asked the question. "I supposed that he would be playing tonight."

No one answered at once, but he sensed a tightening around the table as if several men had drawn in their breaths at the same time. Then the Chinese said: "Mr. Kollock had some business, I understand. He wanted to be present, but he found it impossible. It is your deal, Mr. Travis."

Travis took the cards, shuffled them and dealt rather expertly, but he dealt like a bridge player rather than using the mechanic's grip which most gamblers employed.

DOC RYNE picked up his cards and discovered a pair of kings. He glanced around at the other players. The Chinese had thrown in his hand and was

sitting back with his eyes closed. Ryne considered him. There was little that Chinese Sam would not do for a hundred thousand dollars, and that was the worth of the stones which should have been in the special pocket of Jack Kollock's coat and were not. He glanced next at the colonel, then let his eyes range around the table to Henny and Montell. These men were dangerous, and they hated him. It was like playing cards with death.

They didn't hate Travis. They regarded him with a mixture of amusement and contempt. He was a pigeon, a sucker to be relieved of his money. But Ryne was different. Ryne was an outlaw who refused to hunt with the pack. He was dangerous to them and they feared him, and with men of their type, fear and hate were closely aligned.

The colonel opened for a dollar, and Ryne stayed. Henny raised it five, and Travis after carefully studying his hand, stayed. The colonel dropped and Ryne stood the raise, drawing three cards.

The first off was a king. He looked at it thoughtfully and then at Travis. The man had drawn two cards and they lay face down before him while he studied his hand as if trying to decide which to hold. He made his decision, picked up his draw and his eyes flickered slightly with a shade of disappointment.

The colonel, the original bettor, was out. Doc was under the gun and he checked to the raise. Henny bet ten. Travis hesitated, then called. Doc Ryne was watching him closely. Then he studied his cards and casually shoved a hundred dollars into the center of the table.

Henny gave him one sharp penetrating stare. He fiddled with the chips in front of him, then tossed in his hand.

Travis wet his lips. He studied his cards. His well-formed fingers played with his chips. "Raise you a hundred." His voice had a dry, strained sound like the rustling of ripe leaves.

Doc Ryne layed a stack of chips beside the growing pile in the center of the table. "What you got?"

Travis showed him three aces.

"Beats a pair of kings," Doc said, exposing two of the kellys. He folded the rest of his hand neatly into the discard.

Travis was staring. "You mean that was all you had, that you called me on two kings?"

"Why not," said Doc. "Give you a chance to get some of those bonds back. By the way, I met your sister tonight."

"My sister? You're crazy. She's in Florida."

Ryne expressed surprise. "Certainly looked like her newspaper pictures," he said. "Whose deal?"

At three o'clock he rose. He had lost twelve hundred dollars. Travis had it, along with some ten thousand that belonged to the other players. He was so nervous that he couldn't deal. His eyes were shining and there was a sheen of beaded sweat across his high forehead.

"Never saw such luck." His voice had a squeaky note, put there by excitement. "Think I'll go too." He cashed in his chips to Henny who was serving as banker. The little man was glum, the colonel more red-faced than ever. Montell looked as if he would cry. Only the Chinese was unaffected. He kept smiling blandly although five thousand dollars had slipped through his fingers.

In the lobby downstairs Travis suggested a cup of coffee. "I certainly am glad that I met you gentlemen. I felt really bad the other evening, losing all that money. But I got it back tonight, with interest."

"Sure," said Doc Ryne. "Be seeing you." He rose and left the hotel. There was no cab in sight and he decided to walk.

He had covered less than a block before the shot came.

It was sharp, whip-like, a small caliber gun and the bullet cut so close to his ear that he heard it whine.

He dropped, the motion was entirely instinctive. Dropped and rolled until he was in the deep shadow next to the brick wall of the building which he had been passing. As he fell, he'd shaken one sleeve gun from its place, catching it neatly in his hand.

He lay there, not moving, waiting for his assailant to come closer. His quick ear caught the sound of feet in the darkness, but they were not coming toward him, they were going hurriedly in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER FOUR

The World's Greatest Heel

BANJO-EYES was smaller and more pinched looking by daylight. "I thought you'd be here." He had let himself into the single room and stood looking across at the bed. "When you didn't come home, and the cops did, I figured that you'd be here."

Ryne looked around. It was a single room in a cheap hotel on Sixth. He maintained it by the year, under a name not his own, a convenient hide-away on occasion, and it gave him an established identity. To the hotel, he was a traveling salesman who spent little time in Los Angeles, but who used the hotel as his home address.

"So the cops showed up. Tripp, I suppose?"

"And Lawson," said Banjo-eyes. "You are in trouble, Doc, big trouble this time. Have you seen the papers?"

"Show me."

The little man drew a morning paper from his coat pocket. Under a head, *Gambler's War*, Ryne read the story of Kollock's death.

"The police," the article said, "are searching for Doc Ryne, well-known gambler and underworld character who escaped from the scene of the crime. There is little doubt but that Ryne killed Kollock. It is an open secret that the two have been feuding for many months."

"You'd better lam," said Banjo-eyes. "They're going to button you up this time, Doc, and I'm not kidding."

"Bah!" said Ryne. "Besides, I can't run out with a murder rap hanging over my head. You forget, Banjo, that I'm waiting for a commission. You don't think the navy is going to pass out a commission to a man that lammed on a rap do you?"

"No . . . but . . ."

"There are no buts," said Ryne. "Did you go back and trail that dame as I told you to?"

"Sure."

"Find out where she's living?"

"You told me to, didn't you?"

"All right," said Ryne. "Slip out and rent a car. Too many people know mine. And be at the side door in an hour."

"I already did it."

Ryne looked at him with growing fondness. "Sometimes I think that I don't pay you enough," he told the little man. "If Herman had half your brains I'd give him back the pawnshop. O.K. Wait until I get into some clothes and we'll go calling."

THE apartment in which Helen Travis lived was much more in keeping with her background than the one to which she had lured Ryne on the preceding evening.

It was on Wilshire, far out into Westwood, standing on a little hill from which you could catch a glimpse of the ocean. There was a desk, and Ryne approached it with confidence.

"Miss Travis?"

The clerk was spruce and groomed and careful. "Who is calling, please?"

"Her brother," said Ryne.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Travis. One moment."

He turned to the house-phone, then he came back. "You are to go up at once. It's number 310."

Ryne moved toward the elevator. He rode it to the third floor, and walked down the hall, his shining shoes making no sound on the thick rug. The door was standing open a little and a voice called at his knock. "Come on in."

Ryne went in. The girl was standing across the room. A small overnight case was open on an end table before her. She turned, her face alight with a smile of greeting. It froze, leaving her face stiff and mask-like, but still smiling.

Doc Ryne said: "Remember me?" He closed the door with the heel of his shoe, never taking his gray eyes from her face. "You're really beautiful, you know."

Anger rode the surprise out of her face. "What do you mean by coming here? How dare you come here? Every policeman in town is looking for you."

Ryne's voice was indifferent. "I've been looked for a number of times. They seldom find me unless I want them to. . . . No you don't." He jumped forward as she turned toward the case, and grasped her by both wrists from behind, reaching around her body.

She tried to kick backward with her high heels to reach his shins, and missed.

She was struggling to break his grip, sobbing a little. "You devil! Let me go!"

"Not until you drop the gun."

She struggled an instant longer, then, as if realizing the hopelessness of breaking his hold, she let go the gun which had been lying in the small dressing-case.

He pulled her backward away from the end table before he released her. She was angry, panting a little from the physical effort of trying to free herself. Doc Ryne was breathing normally.

"Take it easy, sister. You'll live longer that way."

"What do you want? Why did you come here?"

"To talk to you," he said. "I'm very interested in finding Big Jack's murderer, and my reasons aren't altruistic."

"You killed him."

"No," he said. "And you don't even believe that I did, now, do you?"

She stared at him for a long moment in silence and then the cardboard stiffness of her face broke and she smiled surprisingly. "I don't," she said. "I heard before I came out here that you were a devil, that you had no morals and less honor. You amaze me. Sometimes you talk like a bum out of a gutter—at others, like an educated man. Who are you, Doc Ryne? What are you, and why?"

He gave her a twisted smile. "What I choose to be," he said. "The world's greatest heel, a gambler who preys on suckers."

She shook her head. "No," she said. "You're something more, something mysterious and exciting and interesting. What is it you want to know?"

"What you're doing here," he said. "Why you're singing at Poinard's. Why you tried to pawn that copy of my pin."

SHE took a long moment to answer. "It's rather simple. I got a letter from my brother. He said that he'd gotten into a card game and lost, not only more than he could afford, but also six thousand dollars' worth of stock that does not exactly belong to him. He wanted to borrow from me, but I did not have the money. We're not rich, Mr. Ryne, despite what you read in the papers. We each have a small income, enough to live on without unnecessary expenses."

"So?"

"So I came out here. I flew. I didn't tell my brother. I can sing a little and I talked my way into Papa Poinard's. I did that because I learned that one of the men with whom my brother had been gambling made a habit of spending time at that bar."

"Kollock?"

"Kollock," the girl admitted. "I met him finally. I told him a hard-luck story about how poor we were, and how the stock which my brother had lost did not belong to him, but actually to an aunt who would raise the very devil when she found out."

"He was very sorry." She smiled grimly. "He said that he'd like to help me, but it wasn't he or any of his men who had won the stock. It was you. I asked him if he couldn't get it back and he laughed. Then I said that there must be some way, that perhaps if we cornered you or something and forced you to give it up . . . and he laughed all the harder. He said that he'd like nothing better than to get you alone, but that you were always surrounded by guards."

"I . . ." she blushed a little, "I suggested that I might make a play for you, but he said that that was no good, that you never had anything to do with women. Then he told me a plan. He told me about your pin. He said that you were curious, and that if I tried to pawn an imitation pin at your pawnshop, you'd follow me. I was to lead you to that apartment, slip through the connecting bathroom to the next suite, and leave. He'd hide in the closet, hold you up and make you return the bonds."

"Who knew of this? Your brother?"

"He didn't know I was in town," she said. "No one knew it from me. Mr. Kollock had the pin made by a friend of his. . . ."

"Didn't Kollock's men know?"

She shook her head. "You've got me there," she told him. "I don't know."

"Someone knew," he said. "Someone killed Jack and got a hundred thousand in diamonds that he always carried."

She caught her breath, sharply. "A hundred thousand. . . ."

"Yes." He looked at her speculatively. "I'm leaving now. I don't know quite

what to do with you. If I don't tie you up, you might call copper."

She came forward slowly. "Look at me, Doc Ryne."

He looked at her. It was the easiest thing that a man had ever done. "I believe your story," she said. "I like you, despite your reputation and the things that they say about you. I won't call copper. Just remember that, because, when this is all cleared up, I want to see you again."

Ryne grinned, a tiny, self-mocking little smile. He put his slim strong hands on her shoulders, pulled her against him and kissed her fully. The hard contour of her lips broke against the firmness of his, and was soft and warm.

He let her go, stepping back quickly. "I'll be seeing you, Helen. That's something to remember."

BANJO-EYES stopped the car beside the hotel and said, in objection: "I think that you're a fool to come back here."

"Where do you want me to go?" Ryne asked. "The police station?"

"Be funny." The little man was disapproving. "Sometime you'll get yourself out on a limb so far that you can't get back." He drove away and Ryne walked into the elevator. He rode it to his floor and went along the hall to his room, fumbling for the key as he did so. The key stuck a little and he had difficulty in throwing over the bolt, then he walked into his room, slamming the door.

It was like walking into the waiting-room of a doctor's office. There were four men in the place, Chinese Sam occupying

the only chair, his three partners ranged along the edge of the bed like a row of buzzards seated on a fence.

"Hello," said Ryne. He didn't seem startled or amazed. It was as if he had expected them to be there, waiting for him.

The Chinese smiled, and Ryne smiled in return. He knew that the fat man was as dangerous as his fellows, but he rather liked Sam.

The man was a patriot for one thing. He wore two tiny, crossed flags in his buttonhole, the stars and stripes and the flag of free China. He also made it a point to invest at least a fourth of his earnings in War Bonds.

Also, he could handle cards. Doc Ryne admired skill of any kind, and next to himself, Chinese Sam could do more with a deck than any man that Ryne had ever known.

Then too, he wasn't a four-flusher like the colonel. The colonel was four-flushing now. He had a gun in his hand and his face was redder than usual.

"No tricks," he warned. "I don't like you, Ryne. I never have, and it would delight me no end to blow a hole in your belly."

Ryne looked at him, knowing the man spoke the truth. The colonel hated him, but he doubted whether the red-faced one would have the nerve to shoot him down, here in the hotel where the shot would be heard. The colonel was much more apt to pick a dark street for his murders.

"So what do you vultures want, and how'd you find me?"

Montell snickered. "We've known about this little hide-away for a long



time, Doc. We may not be the fools that you think we are."

"You couldn't be," said Ryne, without expression.

The actor flushed and started to get off the bed. Henny pulled him back. The little gambler was more nervous than usual. "Let Sam talk," he pleaded. "We all agreed to let Sam do the talking."

"A wise suggestion," Ryne said. "He's the only one in the tribe that has sense enough to open his mouth. What is it, Sam? What's cooking?"

The Chinese shifted his bulk in the chair so that it creaked protestingly. "I don't want trouble with you, Doc," he said in his liquid smooth voice. "I believe in *live and let live* for everyone but Japs. But fun is fun. If you had to kill Big Jack, I suppose you had to kill him, but there were a hundred thousand dollars' worth of rocks in his pocket when he died. We want them."

"So," said Doc Ryne. "You think that I got the diamonds?"

"They weren't turned in at police headquarters," said the Chinese, pointedly.

"No," Ryne told him, "they weren't turned in at headquarters. Someone got them all right. The man that killed Jack got them. But you see, Sam, I didn't kill him."

SAM'S face remained bland, but managed to look disbelieving at the same time. The colonel swore hoarsely. Henny stirred in nervousness, and Montell wet his lips.

Ryne said: "Look at it this way. I walked into that apartment without knowing what was going on. I wasn't prepared for anything. If I had killed Jack, it would have been on the spur of the moment. Right?"

"I guess so." The Chinese was not convinced.

"The cops came in and found me. They would have found the stones on me if I'd had them. So look, someone else knew about the frame, someone that knew that Jack always carried diamonds. Someone stepped in and grabbed the stones, killed him, and scrambled—knowing that I was coming, that I'd be blamed for Jack's death."

"Who?"

"That," said Doc Ryne, "is something that you should be able to answer better than I can."

"What do you mean?" The Chinese was suddenly dangerous. His voice had lost none of its blandness, and the smile still creased his fat face, but Ryne knew that he was ready to strike, and that no fear would keep Sam from striking once he made up his mind.

"I mean," said Ryne, "that you might be able to guess who knew about the frame that Jack Kollock was pulling on me. Someone knew, and it might well be one of you in this room. At least you knew about the diamonds."

They looked at each other then, and there was a wave of distrust which cut like a sharp knife through the quiet air.

"You knew," said the Chinese, looking at the red-faced colonel.

"So'd you," the colonel shot back at him. "It was you that had the pin made."

"Yes, but I was at the card room before any of you were."

"So what?" The colonel had forgotten Ryne. "None of us got there before ten. You could have killed Kollock, slipped out and gotten through to the card room before any of us arrived."

Ryne was looking at Montell. "I've seen you put on your woman impersonation act," he said softly. "The tip that sent the police out to that apartment was turned in by a woman—or by a man imitating a woman's voice."

Montell's face was dead white, his eyes looking big and staring. "Damn you." He was on his feet. "Damn you!" He snatched under his armpit for his gun.

Al Henny knocked the gun from his grasp. "No you don't," he shrilled. His nervousness was gone, his rimless glasses had fallen from his nose and dangled from the end of their black ribbon, but he did not seem to notice. "So you tried to cross us, you. . . ."

His free hand suddenly held a knife, and he brought the point toward the actor's throat with a deft, swift motion.

Doc Ryne did not move, and there might have been murder done had not the door behind him suddenly opened to admit a half score of police.

They were on Ryne before he realized what had happened, Swede Lawson lock-

ing Ryne's arms at his back and shaking them to free the sleeve gun.

The other men had sprung to their feet and were looking for a means of exit. Only the Chinese had not moved. He sat perfectly still, where he was, smiling benignly as if he found the whole show highly amusing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Heavy Sugar

LAWSON took no chances with Ryne. He linked the gambler's wrist to his own with a click of the hand-cuffs, and snarled: "Let's see you pull a sleight of hand and get free of those."

Ryne didn't say anything. Two uniformed men were taking the knife away from Henny and having trouble doing it. The meek little man seemed to have gone crazy. He fought like a wildcat and it took a blow on the head from an official blackjack to quiet him.

Lawson led Ryne outside and to the elevator, jerking at the cuff unnecessarily. Ryne didn't say anything, but his gray eyes glinted each time the cuff was jerked. Outside there were two squad cars with a uniformed driver lounging against the front of the hotel as if on guard.

"All clear," said Lawson. "Take us downtown. They can call the wagon for the rest of those babies. They aren't important."

The driver moved to the squad car, opened the rear door for them, then climbed into the front and slid across the seat until he was under the wheel. He started the motor and put in the gear. Not until then did Banjo-eyes straighten. He had been crouching on the street side of the car and there was a big gun in his small hand.

"Drive," he told the man beneath the wheel. "You," he was addressing Lawson, "keep very quiet. I don't like your face."

Lawson started to swell. Ryne thought that the man might explode. He reached across, got the key from Lawson's vest and loosened his wrist. Then he got his guns from the man's pocket and slipped them into place. Next he took Lawson's gun and told Banjo-eyes to climb inside.

"Neat," he said. "Very neat."

Lawson was fuming. "I'll fix you for this, you little rat."

Banjo-eyes made a face. "Hush, I do not like coppers."

Ryne chuckled, then he ordered the driver to turn north toward the hills and fifteen minutes later had the pleasure of fastening the detectives back to back with a small oak tree between them.

"I seem to be always leaving you," he told Lawson.

"Some day," the red-faced one threatened, "I'll put you where you won't be leaving for a long time."

"What happens now?" Banjo-eyes asked, as they turned the squad car down the grade.

"We'll lose this hack," Doc said. "Then I want you to beat it downtown. They'll be turning those gamblers loose pretty soon. They haven't got a thing on them except maybe a concealed weapon charge, and if I know that crowd, they won't be held without bail on that."

"Follow the Chinese, he's the smartest of the bunch, and the one that I'm afraid of. Then meet me at the station, in Pasadena, tonight at eight."

"At the station?" the little man gasped. "You must be nuts. The station is the very place that the cops will watch for you."

"Sure," said Ryne, with his thin smile. "That's just what I want them to be doing, to be watching for me at the station." He pulled the squad car to the curb and got out. "You can get a cab at the next corner. Scram."

The train was beginning to pick up headway through the yards as Doc Ryne caught the handle and managed to swing onto the step. The platform was down and the door above it closed—and it was quite a trick. But he managed to reach up, turn the knob, push the door inward, then swing himself up and shut the door behind him.

He stood for an instant, breathing a little hoarsely in the windiness of the swaying platform, then he turned and entered the Pullman. He walked the length of three cars before he found the one that he wanted, then he paused, straightened his coat carefully, and pushed open the door.

THE man and woman within the compartment had been staring out at the moving yard lights. They turned quickly and the man came half-way to his feet, a startled oath escaping his lips.

"Relax," Doc Ryne grinned. "I just couldn't bear to let your sister go without saying good-bye."

The girl was watching him carefully with her beautiful eyes. She managed to smile now, although it wasn't much of an attempt. "Why, how nice!" Her voice had a cooling note.

"Yes," said Doc Ryne. "Very nice, but I'm a strange guy. I couldn't let a girl that had kissed me go up for murder."

The eyes got wide and the smile wiped away from her lips. "Murder?"

"The cops are going to search the train at Pasadena," he told her. "I just wanted to make certain that you hide the diamonds well enough so that they would not be found."

Her hand made an instinctive motion toward the front of her dress, then fell back to her lap.

Travis' hand had moved toward his coat pocket. "I wouldn't," said Doc Ryne. His arm made the peculiar jerky motion, and his sleeve gun was in his hand.

Travis stared at it, wetting his lips. "What do you want?"

"Half," said Ryne. "You two made several mistakes. First—society gamblers, people who play the country clubs and the big hotels, taking the fancy society dames at bridge, should stay in their own league.

"You got out here, and Kollock picked you for a pigeon, and got you in his game. You lost, but somehow you found out about his diamonds, so you sent for sister here, had her get a singing job at Poinard's and pull the stall about you losing more than you could afford. You thought that Kollock would be putty in her hands. He wasn't. He suggested dragging me in to get those bonds.

"That gave you your chance. You let him frame it, killed him, got the diamonds, knowing that I'd be there for the police to find."

Travis wet his lips. "You know a lot," he said.

"It's my business to know a lot," said

Ryne. "You made other mistakes. You thought that I'd just keep those bonds. I've been around a long time. I had the numbers checked the day after I won them—they were hot, stolen from an old dame in Florida. That's why you wanted to get them back, you lost your head in that first game, ran out of cash, and used the bonds, expecting to win, but I out-dealt you."

"Well?" said the girl.

Ryne smiled. "You're nice," he said. "I've been looking for someone like you for a long time. Play it my way and the three of us can join forces, but I want half the stones."

"When we get safe."

"Right," he said. "Go into the diner. Be there when the cops come through the train at Pasadena. Put the stones in the sugar bowl."

She nodded, her eyes glinting. "I love you, Doc Ryne. You're swell." She rose and put her mouth against his, hard. Travis rose also and shook his hand. "I'd think that you'd be sore that we tried to frame you."

"A heel never gets sore," said Ryne, "it doesn't pay." The train was slowing down. He turned and let himself out into the corridor, and stepped quickly to the platform. A moment later he saw them leave the stateroom and hurry in the opposite direction. He went back quickly, slid the door open and disappeared. He was gone a moment, then he came out, walked to the platform, opened the door, and as the train slowed down, dropped to the loose gravel.

Joe Tripp was standing on the platform edge, frowning. "It's screwy," he said. "The tip is screwy, but I've got to follow it."

"I would." He turned to see Doc Ryne smiling at him, and sucked in his breath.

"Where'd you come from?"

"Just drove out to see the fun. They're in stateroom A, car 410."

"Yeah," said Tripp, "I know, but how . . ." he broke off. "You're the one that phoned me," he said accusingly.

"Yeah," said Ryne. "I phoned you."

"You've got a lot of nerve," Tripp told him. "Every cop in this part of the country is looking for you. I don't trust you, Doc. This smells to me."

Ryne shrugged. "Go ahead, let them out of your sight, let that train get away. You aren't after the murderers of Jack Kollock, all you want to do is to nail me to a cross."

"But hell," said Tripp, "I haven't got anything against these people."

"Search them," said Doc. "Search their baggage. If they killed Kollock, they'll have the stones planted somewhere."

"And if they don't, it's going to be very tough on you, my friend." Tripp glared at him. "I'll turn you over to Lawson. He's sore as the devil. He caught cold, sitting up in those hills."

Doc Ryne did not answer. Tripp nodded to one of his men. "Watch this guy. If you let him get away, I'll have your badge. Come on." He turned and led his other followers toward the train.

THEY were gone a long time. The train was being held, the passengers kept looking at their watches impatiently. Doc Ryne began to worry. He saw Banjo-eyes lurking at the edge of the crowd. He hoped that the little man could think of

something. He began to think that he would need it. And then, Tripp came back, and the Travis family were with him, handcuffed together.

The girl saw Ryne and her eyes widened. For an instant she thought that he too was a prisoner, then she saw that his wrists were free. Her face reddened with anger and her voice shrilled.

"So! He put the finger on us! He crossed us! He framed this, copper. You have got to take him in too."

Tripp was red-faced. He'd evidently been having trouble, and he was not in a mood to take suggestions from his prisoners. "What do you mean, framed you? Your brother broke down when we found those rocks in his suitcase."

"Look in Ryne's vest pocket," she insisted. "Take a look in his pocket. You'll find some stones there."

Tripp swung around to look at Ryne. Doc shrugged and spread his hands wide. "Go ahead, look. You won't be happy until you do."

"I won't for a fact," said Tripp and stepping forward, ran his hands first over

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SAVE A GRAVE FOR ME

That's the intriguing title of FRED-ERICK C. DAVIS' new novelette in which he introduces us to Peter Trapp II, a guy you'll agree belongs in the front rank of the long list of crime-solving gentry. Here's the memorandum he sent to Inspector Waite at Police Headquarters—

From: Peter Trapp II, private investigator, formerly with the Wright Detective Agency, currently "at liberty."

Subject: My unwelcome participation in the Fowler case, involving not only authentic murder but also six or more corpses which walk the streets in broad daylight and will continue to do so until the law manages to catch up with them.

The fabulous document appended—Trapp's breakdown of the sinister slay set-up—isn't anything to read by fits and starts, so steer clear of it till you can wangle time for an uninterrupted thrill-session.

WALTER C. BROWN brings back "Sah-Jin" O'Hara to unravel the mystery of *Mark Hoy's Death-Stick*, and explain how a meek little Chinatown scrivener sitting quietly in a prison cell could murder his enemy ten miles away. Plus stories by WILLIAM BRANDON, DAY KEENE, C. P. DONNEL, Jr. and others. This great MAY issue is on sale now!

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Doc's vest and then over his own pockets. The girl was watching expectantly. As she saw the detective turn away, empty-handed, her face changed.

"So that's it. I thought that there'd been a mistake, that I'd dropped a couple in the bag and the cops found them. I see it now. You framed us. You devil. . . ." She was so angry that she did not mind what she said.

Ryne told Tripp: "Get her away. You are drawing a crowd. She can tell her little story any time."

Tripp gave the signal and the protesting woman and her brother were led forcibly toward the waiting squad cars. Tripp scratched his jaw.

"There's something funny going on here. I don't get it."

"I turned them in, didn't I?"

"That's one of the things that I don't get. I think that I'll take you downtown for questioning."

Doc Ryne looked at the train. It was being held now until the dispatcher cleared it. "Look, Joe. I'll follow you in. Banjo-eyes is waiting. I've never failed to do something when I gave my word, have I?"

"No, but. . . ."

"I don't want to ride with that dame," Doc said. "She's pretty. I already feel bad, turning her in."

Tripp hesitated a moment longer. "O.K., you come in under your own power, but no monkey-shines. If you aren't at my office in forty minutes, I'll get a general alarm out for you and have this train met at San Berdoo." He turned and walked toward the police cars.

Doc turned also. He made certain that Tripp didn't see him scramble hurriedly up the train steps, but once aboard, he almost ran toward the diner.

Several people were still at the tables. Doc wasted no time. He went through the car like a young cyclone, dumping the sugar bowls from the empty tables into his coat pocket. He didn't know which one held the diamonds and he did not have time to find out.

The steward was so surprised that he made no move to stop him. One of the women diners gasped: "George, look! Imagine, people don't care what they do to beat rationing, do they?"

Another fainted and by the time Ryne had passed through the car the babble of horrified chatter had magnified his passage to blitzkrieg proportions complete with the theft of a fortune in jewelry at flaming gun-point.

THE train was already moving when he shoved a porter aside and dropped from the train. Banjo-eyes came out of the crowd to meet him. "Gee, where you been? I figured you were lamming out."

Doc grinned. "Not yet, my pal. I had a little deal in sugar to take care of."

The small man did not understand, but he knew better than to question his boss.

Doc said: "I've got to be in Joe Tripp's office in half an hour. Use the parkway, and here, you'd better take these. The cops might be nasty enough to search me again." He was dipping sugar from his coat pocket, separating the small hard pieces of carbon which were Jack Kollock's diamonds.

The little man's eyes popped further from his head. "Gee, where'd those come from?"

"A lady," said Ryne. "I gave her a chance to make a getaway, but she was too crooked. She had to try and frame me, by planting some of the stones in my vest pocket when she gave me a good-bye kiss. I suppose she meant to wire Tripp from San Berdoo."

"But what. . . ."

Ryne grinned. "I merely took the stones which she planted on me and put them back in her suitcase where Tripp found them." He went on to tell Banjo-eyes what had happened. "Joe thinks that he's got all the rocks. He'll never know about the ones in the sugarbowl unless the Travis dame tells him, and I've a hunch that she won't. After she cools down a bit, she'll clam up, especially after a smart lawyer gets hold of her. She can't tell about the sugar bowl without admitting that she had the diamonds and put half of them there."

Banjo-eyes never ceased to be surprised at what his boss did. "But what made you suspect them?"

Ryne shrugged. He had finished cleaning his pocket and was cradling the diamonds in his palm. He'd have to find out from Herman what they were worth.

"A lot of things," he said. "They were crooks—Travis lost hot bonds to me. I saw two railroad tickets in the girl's apartment this morning. They were for this evening train. That told me that they were lamming out.

"I played poker with Travis twice. I can tell a sharper a mile away, but that didn't prove that they had killed Jack Kollock. One of his buddies might have done the job.

"But when the cops walked into my hotel room this morning, I knew that Helen Travis had trailed us from her place and called copper. That cinched things. It had to be the girl. No one else could know where I was holed up, except Kollock's gang, and they were all in the room with me. They certainly wouldn't have called copper on themselves."

BANJO-EYES had started the big car and turned it down the parkway toward Los Angeles. "But Doc, what if the girl had played on the level with you? Would you have let them get away?"

"Hard to tell," said Doc Ryne. "She

was pretty, very, very pretty, but I knew that she'd try something. She's a crook, and crooks are all alike."

"You're calling her a crook?"

"I'm not a crook," said Doc Ryne indignantly. "I'm a heel. There's a vast difference. A very great difference."

"Then we keep those diamonds?"

"Keep the diamonds?" Ryne was surprised. "Certainly we don't keep them. Did we buy those diamonds? Did we win them in an honest card game? Of course we don't keep them, you little crook."

"Then what. . . ?"

"We give them to the U.S.O. Jack didn't have any heirs."

Banjo-eyes bit his lip to keep from grinning. "You're a nice guy, Doc, a nice. . . ."

Ryne turned toward him, startled, then scowled. "The hell I am!" His scowl deepened and his gray eyes glinted. "If you ever tell anyone about these diamonds, I'll cut your throat. Remember that. I'll cut your throat with a dull razor. I'm a heel, a heel of the first water." He lapsed into angry silence.

"THE MIRACLE OF HORSE HEAVEN"

W. C. Tuttle, with the aid of the not-too-Reverend Exodus Jones, has once again corralled that inimitable quartet—Brazos Butler, Panamint Peters, Poco Martinez and Sawtooth Slade—on the road to Sheep Flats, Arizona, and induced them to take an active part in performing the miracle mentioned above. Don't miss this hilarious saga of the West in which Tut describes what happens when cowpunchers meet up with sheepherders in a nine-inning free-for-all.

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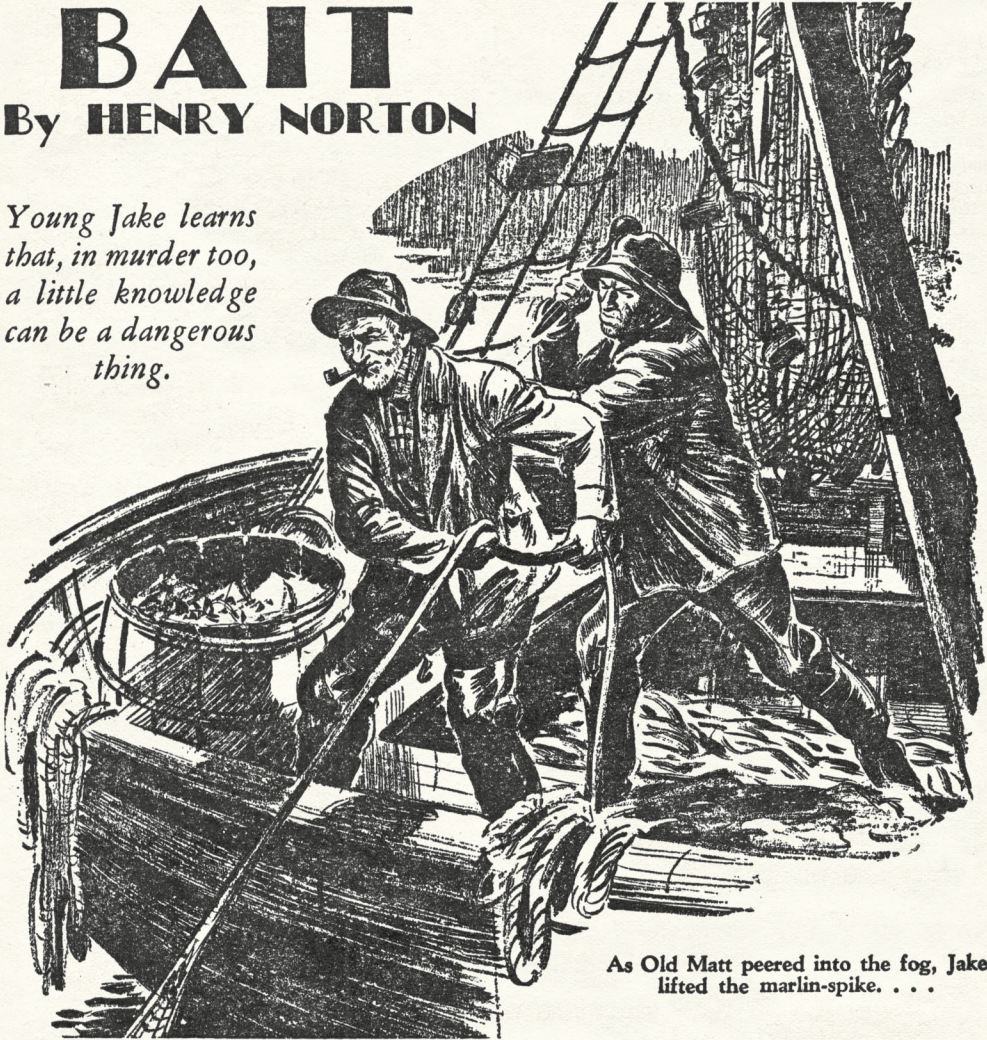


Adventure
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BAIT

By HENRY NORTON

Young Jake learns that, in murder too, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing.



As Old Matt peered into the fog, Jake lifted the marlin-spike. . . .

OLD MATT SCARSI turned to grin over his shoulder at Jake, while his bare, hairy arms kept paying back line. The younger man tried to keep up, coiling the gear in place as Old Matt hauled it in. Already the floats of the seine net were bobbing offside, riding low in the water from the weight of the prisoned fish.

"I win two dollar from that sheriff," Matt called.

Jake took the words as an excuse to stop. He looked at his red hands, blistered and healed and blistered again from hauling rope on his uncle's fishing boat. He hugged them under his arms.

"You hope," he commented.

Matt laughed. "She's a cinch. I bet him I get six-thousand-dollar catch this

trip. This fish sells for three hundred a ton—we got most twenty ton already."

"Why'd the sheriff make a damn-fool bet like that?"

"He thinks I'm still fishing for pilchard," said Matt. "That's them little fish they pack for sardines. But I fool him. I'm fishing albacore tuna."

Jake said nothing. If the cargo was worth six thousand dollars, that suited him fine. For he intended to have cargo, boat and all for himself this trip. Matt had made that possible, and Jake wasn't one to pass up easy money. He'd sell the *Olga S.* at the season's end for several thousand more—she was a trim and tidy fishing craft, as good as any of the fifty or more that beat to sea from Santa Ysabel.

Not bad, considering Jake had been dodging the draft when he hit the little fishing port. His thought in looking up his uncle Matt Scarsi had been no more at that time than a wish to hide his whereabouts from the draft board. Uncle Matt had accepted his rather hastily thrown-together story and taken him to sea, hauling nets.

What a job that was, Jake thought. Back-breaking, endless toil on a little hammered-silver sea, with the fog a woolly wall around the boat. It was the perfect hide-out. A man was lost to man and God on these bobbing reaches of the western sea.

Old Matt had put the idea into Jake's head first, with his talk about giving the boat to Jake if anything happened to him. Matt was a bachelor. This black-haired, sullen nephew not only eased his loneliness—he was a godsend with men so scarce.

"Jake," he'd said, "you're my sister's own boy. Anything happen to me, you take my boat, my house, everything."

"What could happen to you?"

Matt had shaken his head wisely. "I might fall in the fish and smother to death. Engine might blow up."

It'd been Matt's idea, too, to leave a scribbled note with Sheriff Graves, giving Jake all his worldly goods in the event of his death. The sheriff had stuck the rude will into a littered desk and nodded solemnly at Matt. That had settled the matter.

It had settled that Matt would die on this trip. It was all clear in Jake's mind. The way he was to die, everything. And this was it—now.

Jake moved close behind Matt, curling his hand around the shank of a marlin-spike. He said, "The net's broke, isn't it?" and as Matt peered into the fog he lifted his arms and struck the old man on the back of the head. Matt staggered, and turned, and in his eyes was the look of a man betrayed, bewildered, hurt. Jake hit him again, across the temple, and Matt's knees crumpled. He pitched head foremost into the open hatch, onto the catch.

Jake finished pulling in the net, dumping the shining, slapping fish in on top of the senseless old man.

THERE were fifty eager hands to snug the *Olga S.* to her berth alongside the unloading dock in Santa Ysabel, and a score of voices to hail the ship, for this was the first time the *Olga S.* had ever returned without Old Matt waving genially from its high bridge. That was trouble, sure as if the tiny American flag were flying upside-down. Jake stumbled ashore, shaking his head at the questions, and went lurching down the street to Sheriff Graves' office.

"What happened?" the sheriff asked.

"Matt fell in the fish hold," Jake said. "I couldn't get him—he went right down. He's in there now, smothered."

The sheriff shook his head and clucked sympathetically. "I been afraid of somethin' like that," he said. "Matt was gettin' old, and he wasn't careful enough." He heaved his bulk up out of the chair and went to his desk. "Well," he said, "here's that paper. You take his gear."

"You think I ought to throw away the fish, since . . ."

If the sheriff was surprised at the practicality of the question he gave no sign. "I wouldn't," he said. "Unload right away and you won't have to jettison your catch."

Jake went to the door and turned back. "There's something else," he said. "Matt won his bet from you. Do I collect that?"

"He got six thousand dollars worth of pilchard?"

"Tuna. He was fishing for albacore."

"You got a hold full of albacore tuna?"

Jake nodded. The sheriff rubbed his fat jaw and blinked several times rapidly.

"Matt never fell," he said. "You killed him."

Jake leaned easily against the door and returned the sheriff's stare. "You'll have a hell of a time proving that, Graves."

The sheriff cleared his throat noisily and said: "No. Not to anybody that knows fish. A man won't sink in tuna, Jake. Pilchard, yes. Fellow falls in them little bitty fish, he goes right down. Albacore tuna, now, or salmon, he only sinks to his hips."

He went to Jake, moving swiftly, and snapped handcuffs on his wrists.

"If you'd been a mite better fisherman," he said reprovingly, "you'd kept what you caught, 'stead of takin' a two-dollar bait."

HOMÉ SWEET HOMICIDE

A Bill Brent Novelette

By
FREDERICK C. DAVIS

Author of "More Deadly Than the Male," etc.



Brent had just returned the necklace to the jewel case when Sprague and Rocky burst in.

CHAPTER ONE

Dame With a Gun

THE woman's voice on the interphone said in a breathless whisper: "I simply couldn't raise it sooner, Ellis, but I'll be right out."

Excessively polite, Ellis answered: "Very good, madam. Thank you, madam."



A smug chuckle in his throat, Ellis hooked the receiver to the little button-studded instrument in the vestibule of the servants' cottage, then turned to the entrance. It was closed against a lashing rain. Fat drops pelted the panes, bursting into bleary streams. Ellis peered through the murk of this stormy afternoon toward the house sitting sixty yards away, amid drenched gardens.

All the windows of the huge house gleamed. Across those on the first floor shadows incessantly passed, crowding one

another. The rooms behind them were filled with milling guests, dance music issuing from a mammoth Capehart and high-pitched, babbling voices. A cocktail party was going full tilt—another of those four-to-seven parties of Mrs. Sprague's that usually didn't wind up until seven the next morning.

Being the Spragues' chauffeur Ellis was, of course, excluded from it, but he wasn't in the least envious. He considered he was spending his time much more profitably.

Ellis's greedy eyes shifted to another light shining across the rain-soaked lawn—a glow radiating through the glass walls and the glass roof of the greenhouse. The storm preventing any work outdoors, the Spragues' gardener was busy among his flower-pots and hotbeds of enriched loam, a figure in neat overalls and a light chore coat, industriously pumping a sprayer. Ellis uttered another derisive chuckle, for the downpour and the cocktail party meant hours of idleness for him while the gardener must keep working. Too, Ellis was left conveniently alone in the cottage.

Stepping into his cozy living-room, he took up a copy of the morning's *Recorder*. He turned to page ten and with sly gratification regarded the department occupying the two outer columns on the right. Its heading featured a portrait of a grandmotherly old soul with snowy hair, her crinkled eyes gazing with sympathetic wisdom through a pair of spectacles chained delicately to a reel pinned on one cuddly shoulder. Printed beside this familiar picture, which appeared regularly every day, was a name equally well-known—Lora Lorne, that of the conductress of the *Recorder's* famous heartaches column.

Smirking back at her, Ellis took up a razor blade. From the top of the department he cut a pair of items. The first, a letter printed in roman type, was an appeal to the oracular Miss Lorne, signed *Loyal*. The second, answering it in italics, was Miss Lorne's inspired solution of *Loyal's* problem. Ellis re-read both with lip-smacking relish. He was about to stow the clipping in his wallet for possible future use when a knock interrupted.

LEAVING it on the table, he returned to the vestibule. His one hand twisted the entrance knob as his other lifted to

a wall-switch. Ellis' smirk broadened.

"Don't turn on the lights, Ellis!" a woman's voice snapped—the same anxious voice that had spoken to him over the house-phone in a whisper just a few moments earlier.

A dripping shadow, she stood just outside the door in the downpour, her high galoshes in a puddle, her whole head hidden in the hood of her rain-cape. Her quick shoulder-wise glance toward the house showed that she was wary of being seen.

"I'm not coming in, Ellis," she said rapidly. "Here."

She extended a small white fist. Ellis's hand met it. He felt the gratifying crackle of currency. The gloom was too thick to permit him to read the denominations of the banknotes she'd given him, but that detail, like her perturbation, didn't concern him. He thrust the money into his tunic pocket with arrogant confidence and retorted: "It's not enough."

The woman's breath quickened, but she didn't move.

"You've got to jack it up," Ellis added in an ominous tone, "or else. You know damned well where I can get your ante raised plenty."

"Well, then, Ellis," the woman said, her voice much quieter now, "here's something more for you."

Her hand reappeared through the slit of her wet cape, and Ellis's raised again to meet it. Since the light was so dim, she allowed him to touch the thing she held. Instantly the mocking quirk left his lips. He stared down at a startling metallic glitter. The thing looked ridiculously small, but it was pointed straight at his abdomen and it was a gun.

"Don't!" Ellis blurted.

He snatched at the gun, but the woman jerked it free of his suddenly numbed fingers. Rattled, he thrust at her invisible face with one hand and grabbed the door with the other. He slammed the door on her, but she remained just outside the panes, menacing phantom in the foggy twilight, as he frantically fumbled the bolt into its socket. Then she fired.

Incredulous still, he couldn't realize at first that she'd really done it. Dismay swept over him as he became aware of a burning sensation in his right side, just

above the belt, and a tickling flow of warm blood.

"You devil!" Ellis said.

He sprawled backward on the stairway leading up to the gardener's quarters above. He heard the woman running, her footfalls a rapid, sloshing, receding sound. He waited for death—and at that moment the house-phone began to buzz.

It rasped and rasped again, with impatient disregard for the fact that Ellis was dying, rapidly becoming a victim of deliberate murder.

unhooked the receiver an imperiously good-natured voice bawled out of it.

"Ellis, if I told ya once I told ya twenty times, you gotta keep your harem outa there during working hours!"

This was the boss. The remark was a comradely rib. In this typically crude way—unaware that a woman had actually visited the cottage, with homicidal rather than amatory impulses—the boss was jokingly accounting for Ellis's delay in answering his call. He was not, as might reasonably be judged from the costly setup

When Vic Sprague, multi-millionaire industrial tycoon, named Bill Brent as correspondent in the divorce suit he was waging with his beauteous blond wife, Brent had never even met the guy—much less come within kissing distance of his glamorous spouse. But before he could straighten out the error, the hardboiled newshound found himself floundering neck-deep in theft, blackmail and murder—with no out but to solve all three crimes, produce a substitute inamorato for Gloria and pacify the belligerent Sprague within 24 short hours. . .

A perplexed expression crossed Ellis's face. He'd fully expected to be dead by now, but somehow—Although he was scared witless, and that spot in his side throbbed, he otherwise felt almost normally well. Able to squirm and get painfully to his feet, he groped into the living-room, unbuckled his belt, zippered his breeches open, pawed up his bloodied singlet and peered bewildered at his wound. Already it had almost stopped bleeding of its own accord. It was scarcely more than a deep scratch.

"But she tried to kill me!" Ellis blurted vehemently, "I'll get her for that!"

STILL the call of the house-phone drilled at him. With a snarl of annoyance he hobbled back into the vestibule, his clothing remaining parted in the middle. An apprehensive glance through the entrance—the starry bullet-hole in the corner pane sharpened his vindictive anger—told him that the woman had vanished and that the gardener in the greenhouse, not having heard the report, was still spraying his blooms. The moment Ellis

of this fine old estate, a soft-spoken gentleman of breeding and culture. On the contrary, as his tone and his enunciation indicated, the boss was rough and tough.

"Too bad, Ellis, but you also gotta tear yourself away from that bottle of Scotch you snatched outa my cellar last night. Get a car out—any car. You know where the Recorder building is? Hop over there right now, and no horsing around, see?"

"No, sir," Ellis muttered.

"Pick up a guy named Brent. He works on the paper, see? He prob'ly don't know it yet, but he'll be wanting to come here. Bring him!"

"Yes, Mr. Sprague."

"If he ain't there, wait for him. He's a big bruiser with a busted nose. Ex-football player. Usually goes around worried as hell and sour on life. When you see him he'll prob'ly be madder'n Donald Duck. All right, Ellis, get the lead outa your pants!"

"Mr. Sprague." Lines of shrewd cupid-ity in his pinched face, Ellis suggested:

"Before I leave I'd like to see you, sir—about a personal matter. It's important, sir—"

"Not now!" the boss's voice boomed. "I'm busy having Rocky knock my ears down!"

"But this is about—about something you're very interested in, Mr. Sprague. It'll only take a minute to tell you—privately—"

"Dammit, Ellis, you go pick up Brent pronto or after this I'll keep all my humidors locked!"

The boss guffawed, considering this uproariously funny, and clinched the command with a crashing disconnection. Ellis, seeing no humor in the threat—it was too true that he had frequently filched his employer's liquor and cigars—muttered oaths as he hobbled into his bathroom. There he plastered gauze over his injury and reassembled his uniform on himself. He mouthed blasphemy. He'd been shot at with deadly intent, but at the moment, and under these special circumstances, there was nothing he could do about it. The boss expected his orders to be carried out promptly. Ellis's sly mind, however, began to simmer with thoughts of an effective reprisal. An expression of vindictive determination set on his face in anticipation of the crack-down he could pull off once he returned.

Putting on a slicker, he snatched up the item he'd cut out from the day's Lora Lorne column, thrust it into his tunic pocket and ducked out into the gray rain. At the wheel of a limousine he rolled along the driveway toward the gate. As he passed the house he saw the silhouette of a woman at one of the ground floor windows. She was peering out at him.

Ellis growled unholy promises at her shadow—but he swung on, all unaware, as was most of the world, that Lora Lorne, matriarchal mentor of the heartbroken, and Bill Brent, the twist-nosed ex-full-back whom he'd been ordered to find and deliver, were actually the same person.

BILL BRENT was nowhere in the Recorder plant. At a time when he should have been resuming his onerous tasks as the paper's love seeress, he was occupied elsewhere with an even grimmer matter.

He emerged into a storm-washed downtown street through a door lettered *United States Marine Corps*, slamming it behind him and looking bellicose. Belting his trench-coat tightly around his middle and thrusting out his blunt chin, he tramped past the corner to the central post-office. Inside he found another door bearing the legend, *United States Navy Recruiting Office*.

Twenty minutes later he banged out through that door. His fists hardened with belligerence, his heels hitting hard, he approached a third door on which a sign read, *Recruiting, United States Army*.

This time only ten minutes elapsed before Brent reappeared in a state of even higher indignation. Growls of wrath in his throat, he left the post-office and purposefully approached the building located on the next corner. The rain had let up and the mist was thickening into a soupy fog, but he paid the weather no attention. Repeatedly he muttered the name of Garrett, who was his city editor, and promised himself the pleasure of tearing the dastard limb from living limb. He was too hotly incensed to notice, as he turned to the entrance of the Recorder plant, that a man wearing a chauffeur's uniform under a slicker stepped from a parked limousine toward him.

"Beg pardon, sir, but are you—?"

Brent brushed past, no sound in his ears but the pounding of outraged blood. He pushed in, ran up three flights of iron stairs, thrust apart the swinging doors of the city-room and charged straight for Garrett's desk. Then he stopped, seeing that his violent designs on Garrett were momentarily frustrated. Garrett was evidently in consultation with the managing editor. The city desk was deserted.

Pent-up breath sighing from his lungs, but determined to wait and engage Garrett the moment the city editor appeared, Brent turned to his own office. It was an office in name only. Scarcely longer and wider than an adult's casket, it was relegated to the remotest corner of the city-room and properly separated from the bona fide reporters who self-respectingly worked at desks spacioously arranged in the central section.

Just inside it Brent halted again, his

expression becoming one of revulsion. During his absence a delivery of mail had heightened the inexhaustible mound of correspondence awaiting him on his cluttered table—letters written on stationery ranging in tint from baby blue to passionate pink, in ink varying from old-fashioned lavender to rapturous red, most being noisomely scented and all addressed to Lora Lorne.

Brent fell into a chair and viewed them with soul-deep disgust. For too many months now it had been his accursed lot to function as the *Recorder's* specialist in *Amour*. It was his moral duty to admonish dissatisfied wives who had good cause for complaint, scold fickle husbands who couldn't reasonably be blamed for their philandering, uphold the sanctity of homes which might preferably be dynamited, and guide the wandering footsteps of maidens who knew what they wanted better than anyone else could know how to dissuade them from getting it. To Brent it seemed the whole world was busy day and night involving itself in a staggering variety of amatory messes, and the obvious futility of his efforts, conscientious as they were, had soured him on life.

For a long while Brent's own predicament had seemed, ironically, hopeless beyond solution. Garrett had brought him to the *Recorder* from New York as a special reporter under contract. Shortly thereafter, merely because Brent had undertaken a personal survey of the city's bars and boudoirs, thereby inadvertently missing twenty or thirty editions, Garrett had punitively ordered him to conduct the arbor department.

Under the contractual conditions of his servitude, Brent couldn't quit without precipitating a disastrous lawsuit and permanent blacklisting. Until such time as Garrett might relent he was doomed to continue as Cupid's counsel, and so far Garrett, a hard-bitten disciplinarian, had shown no sign of mercy. Escape for Brent had seemed impossible until an inspiration had exploded in his distressed mind like a reconnaissance pilot's flare.

This accounted for his rapid succession of visits to the three recruiting offices. It had appeared to be such a beautiful way out! Once in the armed forces, Brent had

realized, Garrett could sue and whistle. Legal action against a service man must be held in abeyance until such time as he could appear in court, which must mean a deferment at least six months longer than the duration. By that time Brent had hoped to distinguish himself under fire to such a degree of glory that no patriotic newspaper publisher would dare deny him a new job. If worst came to worst, he would infinitely prefer to stop a few Axis bullets, fatally, than remain hobbled to Lora Lorne's detestable apron strings. A brilliant inspiration indeed, this plan to escape the endless rapture-born distress of womankind—except that it hadn't worked.

RECALLING three dead-pan recruiting officers obdurately shaking their heads at him, Brent saw Garrett emerge from the managing editor's sanctum. As Garrett crossed the city-room to his desk, Brent went purposefully at his heels. Brent waited until Garrett was seated, gray eyes stonily lifted, before he cut loose.

"Garrett, you loathsome louse," he said through his teeth, "I'm about to draw and quarter you, after which I'm going to sue the hair off you for libel, slander, malicious persecution and defamation of character."

"I suggest, Grandma," Garrett answered, unperturbed, "that you get back to work instead. Your column for today, as usual, is overdue."

"You leprous polecat!" Brent insisted. "You thought of it first. You went to every recruiting station in town and lied yourself purple in the face about me. Claiming that the dissemination of news is a vital civilian service, you told 'em my job's essential to the *Recorder*, which is the foulest falsehood ever perpetrated. God only knows what further moonshine you fed 'em! They won't repeat your filthy innuendoes, or even think of allowing me inside a fourth-class delousing camp. And as if that wasn't enough, Garrett, you unconscionable fraud, you warned 'em that one of my chief purposes in enlisting was to evade an impending legal action. Of all the ratty—"

"Isn't it?" Garrett inquired calmly.

"You know damn well no legal action's

impending against me!" Brent roared. "It's another of your stinking—"

"Then," Garrett interrupted with a crackle in his voice, "what about this?"

From a spike on his desk he plucked eight inches of galley proof, one of the first items to be set in type for tomorrow morning's earliest editions. Topped by a two-column headline, and leading off with an astounding statement which caused Brent's jaw to drop, it read:

VICTOR SPRAGUE SUES FOR DIVORCE

NEWSPAPER MAN NAMED CORRESPONDENT

Charging adultery, and naming as correspondent William Coleridge Brent, a staff member of this newspaper, Victor Sprague, prominent local manufacturer, today filed suit for divorce against his wife and business partner, Gloria Lord Sprague.

The complainant husband charges Mrs. Sprague and Brent with having repeatedly—

Brent goggled. "It's another of your scurvy tricks!"

"The policy of this newspaper," Garrett retorted immovably, "does not permit the publication of fantasies. That item consists of the straight facts. It came through our regular reliable channels. I've checked it directly with Vic Sprague himself. He's assured me that this is exactly how the official record reads. Beyond all question he's suing his wife for divorce on the most serious grounds and naming you, Brent, as the interloper in the case."

Brent stared stunned at a halftone cut decorating the item, which Garrett would undoubtedly place prominently on the front page. It pictured a highly attractive blonde of the vivid type which Brent liked best and of an age which he thoroughly approved. The caption beneath it identified her as the defendant, Gloria Lord Sprague.

"It makes no sense!" Brent protested. True, he had once met Victor Sprague, but as for Sprague's wife—"I don't know this woman. I've never met this woman. Not once in all my life have I ever seen this woman! How the hell can her husband name me as correspondent when, so far as I'm aware, this woman and I have

never even perched on the same barroom stool? This whole thing's a terrible mistake! You can't print this scurrilous stuff!"

"I can print it," Garrett asserted, "and I fully intend to do so, for the simple reason that it's hot news. If your incontinence has at last caught up with you, Brent, that's your personal worry—but don't let it distract you from your job. Get busy, Grandma."

Numbly, Brent said: "What? In the face of this—this incredible— You expect me—"

"I want copy from you as usual and in a hurry. Under these special circumstances," Garrett added, permitting himself a wry smile, "I suggest you devote today's column to a few moralizings on the subject of errant wives and a searching critique on the topic of incautious Casanovas."

CHAPTER TWO

Corpse on Wheels

OVERWHELMED with confusion, Brent carried the appalling bit of proof into his cubicle. There, hemmed in by malodorous stacks of Lorne letters awaiting his unwilling attention, he continued to scrutinize the portrait of Gloria Lord Sprague while conducting a thorough-going search of his more intimate memories.

In the series of bemusing recollections passing through his mind Mrs. Sprague was at no time a participant. After baffled minutes he definitely affirmed his earlier conclusion that he had never encountered the woman with whom he was publicly accused of having shared a scandalous liaison.

His indignation persisting, Brent caught up the telephone and the local directory and called the Sprague home. He heard the busy signal, tried again and heard it again. Then he rose. As he strode to the swinging doors Garrett bawled out a severe "Come back here, Grandma!" at him, but, with ominous intent, he pushed out.

Turning into the murky street from the building entrance, he was again accosted by the waiting man who wore a chauffeur's uniform under a slicker.

"Mr. Brent? Mr. Sprague sent his car for you."

Brent stopped short. "Sprague? Car? For me?"

"He said he thought you'd want to see him at his home, sir."

"He thought right," Brent agreed grimly. "But why the hell should the guy send—"

"I don't know, sir, but if you'll step into the car—"

His confusion growing, Brent hesitated only a second. Though it was logical that Victor Sprague should anticipate a visit from Brent, it was hard to understand his reason for courteously placing a car and chauffeur at Brent's disposal. Brent, however, was inclined to make expeditious use of them.

"O.K.! Step on it!"

He noticed that the chauffeur, who also seemed to be in a hurry, slid under the steering-wheel with painful stiff-jointedness. He might have asked a few pointed questions but for the fact that Ellis began to mutter to himself immediately the limousine rolled. The chauffeur seemed also to be troubled, though his worries could not, of course, possibly compare in gravity with Brent's. Puzzled, Brent impressed himself on the luxurious morocco upholstery and, while Ellis mumbled and navigated through the fog, tried to clarify his situation.

It was so fraught with portentous possibilities that Brent shuddered. His degrading billet as the *Recorder's* heart-throb specialist was supposed to be strictly an intramural secret, and Brent was everlastingly anxious to keep it one. The name, picture and wisdom of Lora Lorne were pure fabrications. This offensively noble old dame had never actually existed. She was real only in the sense that some long-unlamented feature-minded editor, now deservedly dead, had conjured her up twenty-two years ago and copyrighted her. Heretofore her erotic responsibilities had been discharged, and her *nom-de-l'amour* perpetuated, by a succession of female quidnuncs, which Brent considered to be no more than right. Unfortunately he was distinguished as the first male ever to hide behind Lora Lorne's saccharine falseface, which he considered grossly unfair and humiliating. He quailed at the

mere thought that his ridiculous masquerade might become generally known.

Brent had already endured countless jibes from staff-members of the *Recorder* in the know. Endeavor as he might to take it, he still bridled when smirkingly called "Miss Lorne" and particularly when Garrett addressed him, with scathing sarcasm, as "Grandma." If ever it should become public knowledge that satiric Brent and moralistic Miss Lorne were actually the same person, he could never hope to escape the world's mocking horse-laughs.

Brent visualized himself pilloried in the witness chair in a crowded courtroom. As a principal in this sensational divorce suit, he saw himself perforce swearing to testify with the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Then he pictured the righteous counsel for the plaintiff leveling a finger in his face and inquiring: "Now, Mr. Brent, in just what capacity are you employed by the *Recorder*?"

The truth, the whole truth and nothing but . . .! Brent winced, knowing full well that even should he perjure himself into prison in self-defense, other employees of the paper would, if summoned, necessarily reveal the shameful facts. Once known, they would echo to the ends of the earth and concerted howls of derisive mirth would roll up from the bellies of the entire populace. What possibly, Brent wondered in agony, could be more delicious? Lora Lorne, safe-guarder of the generation's virginity, advocate of virtue, champion of chastity, protector of innocence, defender of the sanctity of our homes and the fidelity of our families—Lora Lorne unfrocked as actually a man denounced in open trial for having committed the most reprehensible of the sins which she herself—or, rather, he himself—had so unremittingly and righteously decried!

IT WAS too ghastly to contemplate. The mere prospect of it caused Brent to squirm in the soft leather of the Sprague limousine. He was muttering to himself, just as Ellis continued to mutter separately in the front seat, when the limousine turned into the puddled driveway of the Sprague estate.

Preoccupied in his agitation, Brent scarcely heard the sharp sound that popped through the fog just as the big car rolled beyond the gate. He didn't even glance aside. Neither did Ellis turn his head or shift his position. The single mist-muffled report occurred and was gone and the limousine purred on.

Brent stirred only when, being jounced, he became aware that the tires were cutting off the curving gravel lane. With no slackening of speed, the car brushed past a young poplar and proceeded on a straight line, taking a tangential course across the soggy lawn. Astonished and alarmed, Brent saw Ellis sitting unperturbed at the wheel while steering directly toward a pattern of garden plots and a gleaming greenhouse farther beyond.

He blurted, "Wake up!" and for another half-second Ellis remained motionless. Then, as the wheels slashed deep ruts through the flower bed, crushing square yards of blossoms, Ellis toppled gently to the right, hands slipping from the wheel—slid down in the seat while the engine steadily hummed, revealing the red blood dribbling from his temple.

Brent made wild grabbing motions, trying to open the sliding glass panel separating the rear seat from the driver's. Another jounce threw him off balance. The car, lurching out of the muddy garden, veered across the lawn again. Ellis's inert foot pressing the gas pedal, it now advanced with massive quietness toward the side of the house.

Brent slammed the panel aside, then thrust one arm and his head into a rectangular opening too small to pass both his shoulders. Reaching across Ellis's lax body, he grabbed the wheel and spun it sharply. The car swerved, but kept going. Brent groped for the parking brake, missed, then stretched to the ignition key. Twisting it, he felt the power go out of the car. As it stopped within a foot of the wall, Brent remained there, breathless, wedged in the aperture, staring down at the sprawled chauffeur.

The hole in Ellis's temple was small and dark, but deadly.

STILL in his awkward position, Brent pressed his fingers to Ellis's uppermost wrist. He wagged his head. If

Ellis's heart was still beating, his pulse was too feeble to feel.

Incongruously, sounds of laughter and merry chatter reached Brent. Looking up, he was able to gaze directly into a window that gave him a broad view of the party in progress—a crowd unaware that a dead or dying man lay so near to them.

Scores of well-dressed guests were standing about with cocktail glasses and cigarettes. A few couples were essaying a samba while a monster radio-phonograph blared. Prominently in front of all this a convivial group had gathered around a table. On it sat an empty Scotch bottle. On top of the bottle's neck, precariously piled, was a criss-cross structure of safety matches. While Brent watched, an attractive woman of less than thirty gingerly added another match to it, squealing in fear that the whole edifice might topple. It didn't, so she squealed again, this time with delight, and ventured to superimpose still another match.

Over the body of the man upon whom a homicidal act had been perpetrated, Brent stared at the playful woman. Her vivid color and the sheen of her blond, upswept ringlets told him that she was his unknown paramour, Gloria Lord Sprague.

Brent backed out of the car. A quick look around showed him, diagonally across the broad estate, a greenhouse with light glowing through the glass of its roof and walls. Inside it a man in overalls and chore coat was tying a climbing vine to a trellis, as unaware of the shooting as the hilarious party guests mobbing the house.

Hastening, Brent retraced the tracks the car had left across the grass and the garden. They led him to a mass of drenched greenery. Someone, it was clear, had crouched behind these clumps of bushes and had waited in the fog for the limousine to enter the gate. The gun had been fired at its living target from a distance of only ten feet and at a point where the car had moved slowly. While the shock of the bullet in his brain had held the chauffeur rigid at the wheel, the culprit had dodged away through the wet gloom—had, by this time, either fled the estate or returned circuitously to the

house. No doubt footprints had been left, but Brent took no time to find them in the thick and springy grass. Facing about, he strode back to the car.

He leaned into the chauffeur's seat, looking for information pertinent to the shooting, and reached inside Ellis's tunic. His hand came out with a wallet. The cards inside told him the victim's name was Harvey Ellis. Its plumpness struck Brent as noteworthy. It contained a pack of banknotes, once crumpled and not since entirely smoothed out, totaling two hundred odd dollars. A triangle of newsprint protruding from another flap also interested Brent. Withdrawing it, he saw it was a pair of letters clipped from the Lora Lorne column of that same morning.

Unexpectedly, as if protesting Brent's prying, Ellis stirred. Eyes closed, he squirmed on the seat and muttered: "No, Mrs. Sprague!"

Brent frowned over him. The bullet had, he surmised, knocked Ellis's brain from its moorings. The chauffeur's voice was the thick moan of a man in delirium, or of one emerging from an anesthetic sleep. As he repeated his words his voice gained the force of a shouted chant. "No, Mrs. Sprague! No, Mrs. Sprague! No—no!"

With equal unexpectedness a second voice spoke. Also a man's, coming from a point behind Brent, it asked in annoyance: "Why'd he ruin my dahlias?"

BRENT glanced over his shoulder. The second man, his dark-hatted head bent, a bulky figure in a raincoat, was making gestures of dismay over the ruined garden. Evidently having noticed the peculiar position of the car, its headlights splashing against the white wall, he'd hastened across the lawn from the greenhouse with the intention of helping, but the wreckage of the flowers had distracted him. Taking advantage of the gardener's momentary pause, Brent returned the money-filled wallet to Ellis's pocket, but retained the clipping, balling it in his hand.

"Who did this to you, Ellis?" Brent shook the chauffeur's arm. "Who should the cops get for this?"

Ellis's voice lifted to a screeching note. "Pick up Brent! *Pick up Brent!*"

Ellis's body quaked once, then became still. Behind Brent the gardener spoke again.

"What's that? What did he mean?"

The gardener hustled close with his raincoat rattling and crowded Brent aside. To Brent's view he was a stooped, oil-skinned back and a hat from which moisture dripped. Unmoving, he bent over the corpse, staring—and Brent, backing away, felt inclined to let him have it.

Brent was already embroiled in too much trouble. He wanted no part of this murder so long as Victor Sprague labored under such unaccountable misapprehensions concerning his wife's extra-marital love-life. He owed this corpse, he felt, only one duty—to notify the police.

"Where's a telephone?"

The gardener lifted an arm without taking his stare from Ellis's dead face. "In there—cottage. Good lord!"

Brent cut across the lawn. At the entrance of the servants' cottage he saw, in one of the panes, a round hole rimmed with frosty white, obviously punched by a bullet. Opening the door, he found another hole in a riser of the stairs opposite, where the same bullet's flight had ended. Though Lora Lorne seemed to be obscurely involved in the homicide, Brent wasn't greatly interested. His impatient desire was simply to pass it on to the police, where it belonged, so that he could go about pointing out the baselessness of Sprague's suspicions without further delay.

He climbed the stairs and on the landing, just outside the gardener's neat room, came upon the public phone. Apparently it had no extension connection with Sprague's private line. After dialing the number of headquarters and asking for Captain Russo, chief of the Homicide Squad, he heard an answer in a voice seeming to echo in the depths of a tomb.

"Brent calling, Captain, from the Sprague estate. I regret to say I've a fresh corpse for you. It's male, aged forty, named Ellis and entirely unintentional on my part. It belongs to a chauffeur who was merely driving me into this place when he intercepted a bullet traveling from an uncertain source. I know next to nothing else about it. If you're curious as to my visit here, I refer you to the

front page of tomorrow morning's editions. Please don't bother me with this trivial slaying, I'm much too busy. Good-bye, Captain."

Before Russo's lugubrious tones could carry a question to him, Brent disconnected. He circled back to the front entrance of the house. The Capehart was still booming and the scores of guests were still out-babbling one another. Having rung three times without getting a response, Brent urgently twisted the knob and stepped in.

The hostess saw him and turned toward him with another woman, slightly older, who seemed vaguely familiar to Brent. Mrs. Sprague had abandoned her match game, the heap had collapsed, and now an excessively beautiful male guest was recommencing the constructional operation. Brent eyed her warily, but not without approval. She was a most attractive and personable young woman, and he almost regretted the charges against him had no basis in fact.

"I'm here to see your husband, Mrs. Sprague," he announced. "My name is Brent."

"Mr. Brent!" Gloria Lord Sprague exclaimed, with evident delight. "Why, you're my lover, aren't you? How nice to meet you at last!"

BRENT found an answer difficult to frame, particularly since the woman at Mrs. Sprague's side immediately began an absorbed, detailed survey of him. She was strikingly dark, made up with theatrical finesse, and frankly intense in her interest. Brent hoped she would conclude the whole idea was ridiculous, but she gave him a quick, pleased smile.

"You're not as handsome as Gloria's husband," she remarked candidly, "but you do seem to have something he hasn't got."

"A granddaddy of a headache," Brent informed her.

Mrs. Sprague went on at once, toying with the pendant jewel of her necklace—a magnificent star ruby worth, Brent judged, nearly ten thousand dollars: "This is Mrs. Lytham, Mr. Brent. Marget's my very best friend. I do think she and my lover should meet, don't you? You know, Marget, Mr. Brent and I have

been having the most scandalous sort of an affair, really! It's been going on for months now, simply torried! . . . But Mr. Brent, what's your given name? Since you and I've been so terribly intimate for so long, don't you think it's time you told me that?"

"Mrs. Sprague!" Brent blurted. "I can't laugh about this thing when, to me, it's so ghastly serious. Your reputation doesn't worry you, apparently, but mine does. That may strike you as odd, but I'm touchier about it than a deaconess, with good reason. I've got to talk with your husband—get this thing straightened out—make him see—"

"Vic's upstairs." It was Marget Lytham who answered, still enchantedly smiling. "Let me take him up, Gloria. You mustn't leave your lovely party. You know very well Charles can't bear to have you tear yourself away from him. Come, Mr. Brent—you bad, bad boy."

Speechlessly Brent submitted while Marget Lytham curled a lovely arm through his and Gloria returned to the loathsomely pulchritudinous, match-building young man, who evidently was the inseparable Charles. As Marget led him toward the broad staircase she informed everyone she passed, in a stage whisper: "This is Mr. Brent, people—you know, *Gloria's* Mr. Brent."

Gloria's Mr. Brent colored with indignation while eyes opened wide at him. He felt he was going a little wacky. Why Mrs. Sprague should throw a cocktail party on the very eve of the announcement of her divorce action was one puzzle—although, of course, the invitations might have been sent out far in advance. The complicating presence of Charles, to whom Mrs. Sprague's proximity seemed so dear, was another—and most baffling of all was the fact that Mrs. Sprague seemed actually to welcome Brent as the man in the case without, evidently having bothered to disabuse her misguided husband. Brent was glad to escape from the spreading whispers of the crowd behind him. He hurried Marget Lytham up the stairway and abruptly he found her opening a door.

"Vic!" she called through it. "Here he is! Here's Gloria's wonderful new man!"

She gave Brent a firm push and drew the door shut behind him. Brent froze, warned by what he saw to expect the worst.

The large room was cluttered with the equipment of a gymnasium. A full-size boxing ring occupied its center. Inside the ropes, two men had paused to peer at Brent—one a chunky, brick-headed young gorilla, evidently a paid trainer; the other a massive, muscular man with curly black-gray hair and a ruggedly handsome face, whom Brent recognized as Victor Sprague. Both wore fighting trunks and regulation six-ounce gloves. Sweaty and panting, they'd evidently been pounding each other with unsparing vigor. Vic Sprague instantly ducked through the ropes and advanced on Brent with mitts lifted, his dark eyes fierce.

"Just a minute!" Brent interposed. "This whole thing is a horrible mistake!"

Abruptly a bellowing laugh burst up from Vic Sprague's toes. It shook the room, a roaring "Haw-haw-haw!" It was so lusty and genuine, and it rang with such unalloyed good nature, that Brent blinked. Next Sprague grabbed for Brent's right hand with both gloves and heartily pumped it.

"Gladda meetcha, Brent! Certainly gladda meetcha, chum! Have a drink? Rocky, rustle up a Scotch for my pal, Bill Brent—best in the house. Bring him a cigar, Rocky. Siddown, Bill. Here, this chair—take it easy. Make yaself comf'ble. Bill, old sock, I'm gladda see ya, I certainly am mighty gladda see ya!"

CHAPTER THREE

While the Corpse Cooled

BRENT found himself maneuvered into an easy chair with a well-laced high-ball. In his teeth, instead of the left hook he'd expected, he had an excellent cigar, lighted. In front of him, on a padded operating table, Victor Sprague lay relaxed and naked. The young gorilla named Rocky industriously oiled, pummeled, kneaded and slapped portions of his boss's admirable physique while Sprague grinned companionably at Brent.

"Never touch liquor any more," he said, his words interspersed with involun-

tary grunts wrung from him by the force of Rocky's mauling. "Don't smoke neither. Got a dietician, and Rocky's my trainer and bodyguard. Gotta take good care of myself. Keep inna pink. Last thing inna world I want to do is die. Longer I live, the less they'll like it." He roared with laughter again. "Remember where you met me before, pal?"

Dizzily, Brent did.

"At a banquet coupla months ago," Sprague explained unnecessarily, still grunting. "Guy named Brooks interduced us. Advertising manager of the same paper you work for. Me, I'm a big advertiser inna *Recorder*. Sprague and Lord, Locks and Safes. Don't make the old line any more. Got big defense contracts. Breech locks and firing mechanisms, working three shifts. Brooks told me about you, Bill."

With quick hostility Brent asked: "Just how much did he tell you?"

Sprague quietly answered, "Enough," and Brent moaned inwardly, knowing that Sprague knew the dread truth.

Apprehensively Brent recalled how Brooks had termed Sprague "a diamond in the rough, none finer." An ordinary mechanic twelve years ago, he'd boosted himself through his inventiveness and aggressive ambition. The Sprague and Lord plant, located just outside the city, was an industrial achievement. To have accomplished it Sprague, unpolished as he was, must possess an unusually shrewd native intelligence. In his own canny way, obliquely, he was apparently approaching an explanation of the situation which so disquietingly embroiled Brent. Brent sipped, boiled inwardly and listened.

"Brooks told me all about how you cracked a lotta murder cases," Sprague continued affably, soft-pedaling the ominous hint that he might, if he wished, make the most of Brent's secret hermaphroditism. "First-class crime-buster, that's Bill Brent, eh? They don't come any smarter! Just the ticket! Couldn't mix a no-good private shamus into this mess the way I wanted, could I? Or a dumb police dick? Hell, no! But you, Bill—pal, you're a natural!" Leaving this cryptic remark hanging in midair, Sprague asked next: "Remember another guy name of Storer?"

Brent remembered Storer as an attorney with a reputation for daring forensic tactics. Early this week Storer had telephoned Brent to broach a mysterious proposition. He'd had a delicate, confidential matter on which he'd wished Brent's collaboration. The details, he'd said, couldn't be divulged until Brent had expressed a willingness to accept such an assignment. Unfortunately Storer had caught Brent at a time when he was then planning to enlist forthwith, and when the task of compiling a Lorne column was bleeding him white. Brent had impatiently brushed him off.

Storer had persistently called again the next day, with the same result, and on the third day had come personally to the city-room to renew his appeal. Even then his promise of a generous compensation hadn't impressed Brent. At that juncture Lora Lorne was attempting to cope with a particularly abundant crop of illegitimate offspring, there having been a beautifully bright and balmy moon about nine months previous. In a burst of agitation, and without having learned the nature of the attorney's guarded purpose, Brent had ordered Storer for God's sake to scam and stay gone, which Storer had quietly and thoughtfully done.

"Storer," Vic Sprague said, "is my lawyer." At once, adding to Brent's outraged perplexity, he went off on another tack, while Rocky's punches still propelled gusts of breath from his lungs. "Wonderful woman, my wife. Handles tools like a magician. A honey with a turret lathe. Got to be the finest plant manager I could ever hope to find. I guess you read all about that in your paper once. Helluva smart girl, Gloria, but never satisfied. Me, I ain't cut out to be no social lion. I like to sit around with my shoes off and suspenders down. She's gotta mix in with all them lorgnettes, though. She wants the real McCoy, with all the frills, including her name in that book with the blue covers. That's more important to her than anything—see, Bill? Climbing up from nothing, 'way up until she makes herself the hottest social hot-shot in town. With me she can't reach it. But she'll get it another way. Unless I can outsmart her—and so far she's cut rings around me."

A CANNY light shone in Sprague's eyes, and a glitter suggested pain not caused by Rocky's knuckles.

"I seen the change come over her," he went on more quietly. "She's got that kind of glow, the way a woman does when she goes for a guy. Next thing I knew, Storer told me she'd gone to see him about getting a divorce, and he had to tell her she didn't have no grounds to file for one."

He was beginning to get at it now, Brent felt.

"You know what are the grounds for divorce in this state, Bill? One is refusal to cohabit. Haw! Another's absence for two years, but I been sticking around all along. Next there's imprisonment for a felony, but my record's clean like a new collar. Insanity—not a chance. Neglect to provide—" Sprague chuckled. "Adultery—I'm never alone, always with some pal, so busy I can account for every minute of my time for years back. Cruel and barbarous treatment— Why, everybody talks about what a good-natured guy I am. Even this thing I'm doing now, I'm doing it without no hard feelings. So Gloria found out she couldn't divorce me in this state. Storer told her an out-of-the-state divorce might not stick, so then she decided she wouldn't take no chances and figured she'd get me to divorce her, right here, and good. She'd have to change her tactics.

"That's when she begun stepping out." Sprague's voice was rather sad now. "Night after night. Sometimes she stayed out till dawn. Then the other night, on accounta I never squawked about it, she leveled. Told me she's in love with another guy—how many times she'd been with him—how being with him makes me seem as classy as a sewer-digger. I didn't believe all that, but—well, she bruises easy. Bill, she shamed me into going ahead with it—starting a suit for divorce myself—and besides, I got my own special reasons."

Brent's blood hadn't ceased to boil, and here, at last, was the crucial point where he desperately needed to enlighten Vic Sprague. But he kept his silence. Vaguely he felt trapped. He was not merely the victim of a correctable mistake on Sprague's part, he sensed, but a pawn in

a shrewdly contrived and unrelenting strategy. Interrupting Sprague for a moment in an agitated effort to dope it, Brent pushed himself to his feet and scowled out of a window.

A car bearing the official insignia of the police department had stopped in the driveway. The Homicide Squad was quietly working around the limousine in which Ellis's corpse lay. The lean, droop-shouldered man was Captain Russo, whom corpses saddened. While Russo sorrowfully performed his duties outside, the laughter of the guests was continuously audible below. In a moment now, however, the news of the cadaver would dampen the party. Brent saw Captain Russo moving like a phantom to the front entrance.

"So today I begun divorcing Gloria—" Still incensed by the predicament foisted on him for reasons remaining obscure, Brent turned back to find Sprague dressing. "But hell, Bill," Sprague added abruptly, "I know *you* ain't the guy."

Startled, Brent strode to him. "You *know* that? Yet you deliberately named me the corespondent in your damned divorce action! Why the hell?"

"Steady, pal," Sprague admonished. "I got reasons for all this, but it's hard telling about 'em. The twirp Gloria's went out with a hundred times inna past two months is named Charlie Finch, see? She and him—"

"Then why, for God's sake; didn't you name Charlie Finch instead of—"

"Listen. I hired a shamus. This shamus trailed Gloria to night clubs, to roadhouses, to hotels, everywhere. The only guy she was ever seen with was this Charlie Finch. So I got another shamus. I got four more. They kept reporting back the same stuff, telling me I got enough evidence for fifty divorces. But it's no good, Bill. Not for me. Charlie Finch ain't the guy neither. He can't be."

"Why can't he?" Brent demanded to know.

"He don't fit. This guy what Gloria's gone for has to be out of the top drawer—a guy what'll be able to give her everything she wants and hasn't got now, see? Real social position, fancy-pants friends who'll make her one of 'em, the sorta people what drips pedigrees. Now take

Charlie Finch. He's got no family, no background, not even no job—no nothing, except looks. Gloria don't lose her head—she'd never go for somebody who's just a pretty boy who don't know where his next bottle of hair oil's coming from."

"Then why does she—"

"He's just a dummy for show, Bill, see? Window-dressing, see? She's paying him to put on this act with her. He's just a hired gigolo, that's all. There's absolutely nothing between 'em except that business arrangement. See?"

"No," Brent said. "I'm damned if I see."

"I've hadda be smart. I couldn't miss any angles, so I figured the straight dope behind this whole setup between Gloria and Charlie Finch. There's a law in this state what says"—Sprague squinted, trying to recall verbatim an explanation which evidently Storer had given him—"a law in this state what says that a defendant charged with adultery in a divorce action can't marry the corespondent named in the case so long as the complaining spouse stays alive."

BRENT leaned forward intently. "Say that again."

Sprague lifted his head. "It's like this, Bill. I'm suing Gloria for divorce on the grounds of adultery, the only one I can or will use. Now, if I named the right guy as corespondent—the guy she's really daffy about—she'd never be able to marry him afterward, because the law wouldn't let her. Gloria's known that all along too, so that's why Charlie Finch. He's camouflage. He's the guy she *wants* me to name as corespondent, see? She wants Finch to appear in court, and then his part would be done. Then Gloria'd have her divorce and she could go right ahead and marry the other guy she's been wanting to marry all along. Get it now?"

"I get it now. But—"

"Other states has got the same law—Pennsylvania, for instance—and it's iron-clad. If I named the right guy, and if Gloria tried to marry him afterward in some other state, even then this state wouldn't recognize that marriage. Marriage, Bill—that's the big thing with her. She can't get the social rating she wants by living with somebody in sin—she's got

to marry this guy. So the one thing what Gloria absolutely can't let happen is to have me put the right guy's name in that divorce summons."

"That much I now have clear," Brent said, "but—"

"It all comes down to just this, Bill. Gloria's made up her mind to marry that guy come hell and high water. She'd never be able to marry him if I named him, so she's done her damndest to keep him out of the divorce papers. So's to keep him out, she's set up Charlie Finch instead, a hired phoney to be her correspondent. But since I know he's a phoney, being used by Gloria to cover up the real guy, I rustled me up a better idea."

"To name me instead?" Brent persisted. "Why not, for God's sake, simply name the right guy?"

Sprague paused in the midst of tying an unsightly knot in a five-dollar cravat. "Because, Bill, I still ain't got the damndest, foggiest idea who the right guy really is."

Enlightenment flashed through Brent's mind. Clearly now he saw how he was being jockeyed. He strode rebelliously and confronted Sprague, his chin out-thrust.

"Pal, you don't need to tell me the rest. I've got this cute little dodge of yours slanted now. All your high-priced shamuses have let you down. No police dick could or would take on a freelance job. You then decided I was a better bet as a sleuth anyway, so you delegated Storer to hook me into it. I kept brushing him off, but that didn't stop you. Sticking to it, you dreamed up this bright little plan to name me in the divorce papers. The kicker in it is your belief that thereby you'd force me into the job of proving the papers wrong. In order to save myself, you figured, I'd have to pull off the job that's already thrown all your other Hawkshaws—rustling up Gloria's real guy. There, Sprague, is the blueprint of your bonny little scheme to drive me into cleaning up this domestic mess of yours regardless of my own wishes in the matter. Very neat! But no you don't!"

Sprague's shrewd eyes were fixed shamelessly and relentlessly on Brent's.

"You can go jump off a kite, pal. I run into too many such headaches during

my regular eighteen-hour day. They're damned near killing me as it is. I want none of your woes piled onto my weary back besides. This rope trick you're trying to pull off is slick indeed, but I'm not your workhorse—I'm slipping out of the hobble. Nuts to that! Nuts to you, chum! And so long!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Female on the Prowl

BEFORE he could reach the gymnasium door, incidents piled up on Brent. Sprague grabbed for him and missed. A telephone had begun to ring and Rocky, answering it, shouted after him: "This call's for you." Next, the door sprang open. Gloria Sprague and Marget Lytham appeared, a cadaverous man following them with his joints seeming to creak like a skeleton's—Captain Russo.

"Vic, a perfectly terrible thing's happened!" Gloria explained quickly. "Ellis has been shot—killed!"

While Russo's dead gray eyes studied Brent, Brent in turn thoughtfully watched Sprague's frown darken.

"Somebody's been wasting bullets," Sprague observed, "but anyway it's gonna save me plenty in Scotch and Coronas."

Rocky touched Brent's shoulder and announced again: "This call's for you." Resignedly Brent took it, rightly expecting to hear Garrett's flinty tones on the wire.

"I warned you, Grandma, not to let your personal troubles interfere with your work. I need a column from you, and I need it now. If you miss the milk-train edition, forty thousand farmers' wives will howl to high heaven tomorrow morning for their daily dish of passionate pabulum. Also if you miss tonight's deadline, I'll increase your space from a mere two columns to one full page seven days a week. You've got about one hour to make it. Bestow a reluctant good-bye kiss on receptive Mrs. Sprague and blow—or else."

Brent swallowed. This was one of Garrett's stock threats, but it lost none of its effectiveness through repetition. That Garrett meant it Brent couldn't doubt. The mere prospect of a full page of Lorne

letters to be sweated out every day—four times his present soul-killing stint—was enough to reduce him to trembling submission. He turned quickly, but found Captain Russo's funereal countenance hovering close.

"Are you filing a claim on this corpse, Brent?"

"Any connection I may have with the damned thing is purely coincidental," Brent snapped. "I haven't a spare minute to give it. It's all yours."

"Thank you," Russo said with toneless sarcasm. "You may go, then, Brent—until later."

Turning with an indignantly lifted finger to Vic Sprague, Brent added: "Also, you can have your damned marital maladjustments in toto. Right now I've a pressing engagement with six hundred distressed dames, all of them crying their little hearts out for me. As for your screwy divorce case, I'm going to get it thrown out of court, then I'm going to sue the socks off you for libel."

He banged from the room. He ran down the stairs. The cocktail party was no longer a hilarious affair. Incorruptible-looking detectives were stationed at the doors while others circulated, jotting down names and addresses. The guests had congealed into sobered, whispering groups. Wandering uneasily among them was the young man whose beauty Brent had previously noted—the frequent companion of Mrs. Sprague whom her husband had disdained to mention in the divorce papers.

Brent appraised him with narrowed eyes. Hired straw-man or not, he was a key figure in this imbroglio. Possibly, Brent reflected, he knew far more about Mrs. Sprague's secret ardors than her husband imagined. Angrily struggling against the teeth of Sprague's legal trap, Brent saw him as a possible means of escape. Brent went at him with an intent frown.

"Charles Finch?"

The young man nodded his beautiful head. The only unbeautiful thing about him was his mouth. It was thin-lipped, pinched with stubbornness, as if no power could persuade him to speak against his will. It didn't however, discourage Brent.

"I'm from the *Recorder*. We're short

of men. Gloria tells me you might be interested in a staff job."

Finch's beautiful eyes lighted eagerly.

"Where'd you work last?"

At once the light went out of Finch. "Lytham and Son, but if you've got to have references—"

"Just sit tight," Brent interrupted. "I'll get in touch with you."

Preferably he'd get in touch with Finch through the medium of five or ten knuckles. A clip or two to the point of that dimpled chin might help, he hoped, to substitute Finch's name for his in the official papers. That pleasant experiment, though of no benefit to Sprague, might rescue Brent from catastrophe. It would have to come later, however. Still prodred by Garrett's threat, Brent headed out. The detectives at the entrance, having received orders from Russo over the interphone, permitted him to pass.

BRENT trudged along the driveway. The Sprague chauffeur having become unavailable, and taxis being scarce in this outlying section, he faced a long walk. Head down and fists thrust into his trench-coat pockets, he was nearing the gate when he was startled by a quick rustling in the west shrubbery.

He stepped aside and halted in a shadow, seeing a movement against the hedge. Someone was stealing along it, seeking a way to leave the grounds unobserved. The spot was near that where a murderer had waited for Ellis. Presently the vague figure melted catlike around the nearest gate-post and dematerialized into the street.

Brent went quietly after it. Reaching the sidewalk, he saw a girl hurrying along. With a frightened backward glance she veered toward a parked coupe. Brent strode more rapidly as she vanished into it. The starter was grinding when he jerked the door open and put his head in.

The very pretty girl was about twenty-two, and her blue eyes in the glow of the dash looked both incensed and frightened. Her dress, visible through her transparent raincoat, was trim, dark and inexpensive, suggesting that she was not a cocktail guest bent on fleeing the homicide investigation. If she wasn't a maid, then she didn't belong on the Sprague estate

at all. Brent had startled a gasp out of her, and one neat foot was frozen on the depressed clutch.

"My car's full of bugs," Brent said glibly. "Going back through town?"

She said: "Oh. Yes. All right."

She sent the car spurting off as soon as he'd slid in. At once she seemed to forget him. Driving automatically, she appeared to be preoccupied with special troubles, just as Ellis had been, and alternately she looked mad and teary. If this young woman had done any murdering, Brent was at a loss to understand why she'd lingered about for so long afterward. On her lap lay a handbag, large and lumpy, which might contain the usual junk habitually lugged about by young women—or, on the other hand, it might contain a gun.

Brent put out a feeler. "Too bad about Ellis."

"Who's Ellis?"

Brent let it go. She didn't notice that he didn't explain. She kept driving, her lower lip protruding, her long-lashed lids blinking back her tears. Presently she remembered again that Brent was there.

"Where can I drop you off?"

"Anywhere near the *Recorder* building."

She swung to a stop directly in front of it. Brent had decided against asking questions, both in consideration of her mental agitation and the fact that, thanks to Garrett's imperious demands, he had no time for them. He simply said, "Thanks," and ducked out.

She leaned quickly toward him. "What do you do on the *Recorder*?"

"Oh, God!" Brent moaned.

"There's someone who works in there that I'd like to see. Her name's Lora Lorne."

Brent was not astonished. The girl's distress made this desire almost inevitable. Moreover, experience had taught him that legions of unfortunates wished to consult Lora Lorne urgently, personally and privately. One of his major problems was to divert and pacify them. "Miss Lorne never sees anyone," he explained, as usual. His conscience overstraining his capacity for taking punishment, he added: "Better write her a letter."

"But I already have, and she hasn't

answered it yet. Please, won't you ask her to look it up?"

"It's a little out of her line," Brent remarked, "to advise young women who prow around dark places where men have been murdered."

He left her gasping and hoped that the effect of this parting shot would last until he looked her up. Her license number registered in his memory, he hurried into the building.

BEFORE Brent had reached the iron stairs leading to the city-room he heard his name called with an unpleasant intonation. The bald, paunchy man who hurried after him was Brooks, the advertising manager.

"Look here!" Brooks puffed along as Brent continued to climb. "I've just had a call from Vic Sprague. He's still a big advertiser. Good will stuff, now that his factory's in war work. We can't afford to lose that account, but Sprague's hopping mad—threatening to cancel because of this terrible thing between his wife and you, one of our employees."

Brent halted hopefully. "Am I fired?" Repeatedly but vainly he'd tried to get himself bounced. "Am I fired?"

"Garrett says he won't stand for that, but Marlin"—the managing editor—"says if Sprague cancels the contract we'll have to make up the loss through large deductions from your salary."

Morosely, muttering maledictions upon Sprague's shrewd but hard-shelled head, Brent climbed on. He split open the city-room doors, passed a corps of reporters peacefully at work at green metal desks, and strode into Garrett's corner.

"You've got to kill that Sprague divorce story. My alleged part in it is a bald-faced lie. Sprague's deliberately crucifying me, not because I'm so hot as a lover, but because he thinks I'm hotter as a mystery-solver. He admitted as much. In the name of common decency you've got to kill—"

"The official record stands uncorrected, so far as I know," Garrett retorted without looking up from his flashing blue pencil. "What I want from you, Grandma, is not complaints, but copy. Please wring out two columns full of your heart's blood, at once."

Brent had recognized the hopelessness of his demand even before making it. Turning about to obey orders perforce, he encountered Valerie Randall. Miss Randall, though a most luscious, vine-ripened young woman, had earned Brent's undying enmity by attempting to fit her petite feet into his size eleven brogans as the *Recorder's* police reporter. She had her pencil and her folder of newsprint scratch.

"I'm helping with the courthouse trick, Bill," she said sweetly. "We'd like an interview with the correspondent in the Sprague divorce. Tell me, in what capacity are you employed by the *Recorder*?"

"Get away from me," Brent roared, "or I'll maim you!"

One minute later he was roaring again, this time into the telephone. The firm, factual voice on the other end of the line soon forced calmness upon him. It was that of Storer, the attorney.

"You simply can't manage it, Brent. You might hire forty other lawyers and still there'd be no way you can kill that suit. It'll go through precisely as it stands and precisely as far as Sprague wishes to press it. By the way, what do you do on the *Recorder*?"

"I suffer!" Brent howled.

HE HAD just barely succeeded in turning his mind to the intolerable task of compiling a Lorne column when his telephone clattered at him. With a harassed glance at Garrett and the relentless clock, he grabbed it up. The Sprague case was hounding him again in the form of Vic Sprague's voice.

"Storer gave it to you straight, pal. The wringer's only begun to squeeze you. Besides, I got plenty of money to buy plenty of witnesses."

Brent gaped. "You actually mean you'll go ahead with your court action—using perjured testimony—"

"Look at it my way, Bill. You made me handle it like this. You're the one man I gotta have, and I couldn't get you no other way. But it ain't as bad as it seems, Bill. All you gotta do is find out for me who Gloria's guy is."

"I can't give a hoot who Gloria's guy is so long as I've got a martinet of a city editor saddled on my neck," Brent re-

torted. "Besides, there surely must be a hundred other ways you could dope it."

"Maybe a hundred ways of *trying*, Bill," Sprague answered. "So far as I can tell, I ain't never seen Gloria near this guy. I guess I never even met him anywheres. None of my pals knows who he might be. Those five shamuses I hired, none of em's ever spotted him. She sees him, Bill—she sees him often—but where, or how she works it, nobody's ever been able to figure."

"The hell nobody has," Brent said. "Ellis did—and look at the condition he's in now."

"My chauffeur? Naw."

"He found out!" Brent insisted. "This proves it. Listen."

From a pocket he retrieved the balled clipping which Ellis had cut from the morning's Lorne column. He read it aloud.

Dear Miss Lorne:

I'm employed in a domestic capacity by a man I esteem very highly. He and I are real friends, even though I just work for him. Lately I've discovered that my employer's wife is being shamefully unfaithful to him. I know all about what's going on between her and a certain other man. My employer, however, is still unaware of it. I'm in a quandary, Miss Lorne!

If I remain silent, my employer will surely feel, once he learns about it elsewhere, that I've failed my duty to him. He may even believe I actually helped to keep him blind to the situation. On the other hand, if I should tell him the truth about his wife who no longer deserves his devotion, it will cause terrible trouble. He might blame me as a meddler. Either way, he'll very likely fire me. I'm so worried I can't straighten it out in my own mind. Please tell me, Miss Lorne, what's the right thing for me to do?

Loyal.

Lora Lorne's answer had become immaterial. Loyal's letter, Brent perceived now, was not really an appeal to her wisdom. Ellis had used the heartbreak column with an ulterior purpose—to his eternal regret.

"Ellis not only found out," Brent argued. "He was blackmailing somebody—either your wife, or her guy, or both. He had blood money in his wallet when he was bumped. He—"

"Pal," Sprague said patiently, "this mess here in this house ain't no secret.

All the servants figured a divorce was in the wind, including Ellis. They all knew as well as I do Charlie Finch is a phoney and the other guy, the real one, is still hid in the bedclothes somewhere. Ellis got a sneaky idea of trying to cash in on it, that's all. Sure, he sent that letter to the Lorne column. Getting it printed boosted the pressure, and the Lorne column was the only place where he could get it printed in. I read it this morning, but I shrugged it off, because it's a bluff. Ellis didn't have no way of knowing—"

"Look," Brent said, pounding the point. "He says very plainly, 'I know *all about*,' and so on, 'a certain other man.'"

"Horse chestnuts," Sprague declared. "When Gloria went out to meet her guy, Ellis never once drove her. She always drove herself. She's never made a single slip, never once led anybody anywhere near the real guy. Ellis never had one-tenth the ways of finding out that I did, and I still don't know from nothing, so how could he tumble? Was he slicker than me? Was he smarter than five shamuses? Was he a mind-reader? Naw! I'm telling you, Bill, there's absolutely no way Ellis coulda knew!"

"He knew," Brent insisted. "Otherwise, how could he be so damned dead? I've no desire to crawl into his casket with him, and besides, you don't need me. In due time Russo will nail the killer. If it doesn't turn out to be your wife, it'll probably have to be your wife's guy. In either case your problem will be solved. Instead of getting married, one or the other of them will get fried—and that'll be O.K. with me, chum."

He smashed the receiver down.

CHAPTER FIVE

Red Trail

AFTER protracted agony Brent came up for air with the Lorne column for the morrow's editions. When he carried it to Garrett's desk the clock was nudging the deadline. Garrett received it with a grim nod, the glint in his stony eyes reminding Brent that another one was due within twenty-four hours. Feeling like a man who'd been working a twenty-four-

hour shift steadily since the landing of the Pilgrims, Brent trudged back into his miserable cubbyhole.

He tackled more letters. He continued to slit them open rapidly and vehemently, wishing that each was its sender's throat instead. After giving each a quick glance he tossed them into a new pile, which grew high before he paused. At last he uncovered the particular letter he'd been looking for. It was weeks old.

Dear Miss Lorne:

I'm heartbroken. I can't understand what's happening between me and my boy-friend. He used to see me every night, but now he hardly ever sees me at all. He just calls me up to make more excuses. At first he lied to me, saying he'd found a new night job, but then I forced him to admit he's seeing another woman. I would think he'd just thrown me over for her, Miss Lorne, except that he swears he loves me as much as ever. He keeps saying this other woman doesn't mean anything to him at all, and yet he goes out with her every night and leaves me sitting in my room alone—and he won't even tell me who she is! He says he *has* to see this woman every time *she* asks *him* to go out—and that's what I just can't understand.

If he really loves me, Miss Lorne, why doesn't he come around any more? If his friendship with this woman is purely platonic, as he claims, why is he so terribly devoted to her? What kind of hold can she have over him, and do you think he's telling me the truth? I suppose I ought to break off with him entirely, but I can't do that because he's so terribly handsome and I'm honestly so mad about him. Please, Miss Lorne, help me! Tell me what I should do!

Jilted(?)

This was the letter, written by the girl whom Brent had discovered prowling about the spot marked X, which Lora Lorne hadn't gotten around to answering. A response was plainly still required, and Miss Lorne could now make one with unusual prescience, for the reason that the mysteriously wandering boy-friend must be Charles Finch. Finch's late hours as Gloria's hired gigolo had precipitated this subsidiary complication—quite reasonably, Brent felt. The letter yielded no clue as to the identity of *Jilted* (?), but Brent could later learn it through her memorized license number. Meanwhile the Finch angle needed a bit of groundwork.

He trudged out, got into his car and drove.

The plant of Lytham and Son was an enormous, low brick building with light leaking from a thousand blacked-out windows. It hummed with mechanical noises and above it, in a spotlight's beam, an Army-Navy "E" pennant waved. Guards at the gate stopped Brent. Questioning him as to his mission, one of them phoned to an inner office. A favorable answer being received, the other then gave him a pass and marched him along the walk stretching past thousands of parked cars to the building entrance. A bulletin board just inside announced that the company, formerly manufacturers of auto accessories, was now making vacuum gauges, altimeters, tachometers, synchrosopes, propeller governors, exhaust analyzers, gyrohorizons and other intricate instruments of navigation for our war planes.

Just beyond a door lettered *Lyman Lytham*, which gave into a luxurious anteroom, Brent paused to gaze at a girl who was attempting to control a fit of weeping. Astonished, he recognized her as the same girl whom he'd found haunting the Sprague grounds following Ellis's murder—the same girl who had solicited Lora Lorne's guidance under the *nom-de-plume* of Jilted (?).

She bit her lovely lips as she gazed at Brent over a plaque identifying her as Miss Berry. If she recognized him as her recent passenger she considered it unimportant, being too abstracted by her distress. When he told her he'd come to see the elder Mr. Lytham she sobbed softly, sniffled into a wet little ball of handkerchief, momentarily composed herself and disappeared through an inner door.

A heavily dignified voice said: "Show him in, Ona."

As she returned, nodding lachrymously to Brent, the telephone on her desk began to ring. She sprang at it, plainly hoping the call was a personal one.

Brent reflected how small murder made the world. Ellis's mysterious death had begun to reveal a web of relationships both devious and logical. It was clear that Miss Berry's attachment to her beautiful but ambulant boy-friend had risen from the fact that Charlie Finch had once worked in this same office, and it was natural that she should later communicate her obscurely blighted love affair to Lora

Lorne. This much explained, Brent's purpose here took on more significance. He meant to learn, if possible, in what manner Charlie Finch had become acquainted with and entangled in the Sprague divorce situation.

AS Brent entered the inner office a second inner door also opened and a second man simultaneously entered. The other man was young, dapper and deeply sun-browned. Both he and Brent approached Lyman Lytham, who rose at his desk and welcomed them both, aiming his conversation at first one and then the other.

"Be seated, Mr. Brent. Matt, son, I'm sorry I had to call you in, late as it is." To Brent: "This is my son, Matthew Lytham." To Matt: "Feeling better?" To Brent: "My son isn't well. Under a doctor's care. Bad lungs. Needs lots of sun and fresh air." Obviously Matthew Lytham had been getting an abundance of both. To Matt: "I called you in because I thought I'd need you on the Boston sub-contract, but it's already straightened out. Bad weather for you, son. Better go back to the solarium and get an extra big dose of ultra-violet this evening."

Nodding, Matt Lytham drifted out of the office while casually cleaning his fingernails with a gold pocketknife.

To Brent: "You told my secretary a confidential matter?"

Brent was mentally sorting over several more significant relationships. This double-barreled conversationalist, he recalled now, was the ex-husband of Marget Lytham. She'd been his second wife, and they'd been divorced about a year ago, the testimony in the case having been of such an intimate nature that the public had been excluded from the courtroom. In this instance a man of position far more formidable than Brent's had been protected from embarrassment in a manner which Brent could never hope for in his similar predicament.

Lyman Lytham was probably twenty years older than his ex-wife and also, Brent realized suddenly, he was everything Gloria's guy must logically be, as hypothetically described by Sprague, excepting the single detail of his age. Perhaps his seniority would make no real dif-

ference to Gloria—she was only a little younger than Marget—considering his other qualifications. He probably possessed even greater wealth than Victor Sprague, and after the war his auto-parts business would zoom into an unprecedented boom. Also, Lyman Lytham ranked among the biggest of social bigwigs, which would make him doubly anxious to avoid getting himself named as the real correspondent in the Sprague divorce action.

Very likely, however, Brent's suspicions had gone off half-cocked. Marget's friendship with Gloria had suggested there might be an obscure relationship between Gloria and Marget's ex-husband, just as there was a definite tie-up between Gloria and Charles Finch, an ex-employee of Marget's ex-husband. Still, it was a tenuous association, and Brent couldn't picture self-important Lyman Lytham keeping frequent romantic rendezvous, and keeping them with such clever secrecy as to outwit five sharp-eyed shamuses.

"I represent the United States Employment Service," Brent said. "We're having trouble placing Charles Finch. His references—"

"Yes," Lyman Lytham broke in with a busy air of righteousness. "For several years, until several months ago, Charles Finch was employed here as an assistant bookkeeper. His latest salary was twenty-two dollars a week. We discovered certain irregularities in his accounts. The amount he stole wasn't large. Rather than press criminal charges against him, we simply discharged him. When he subsequently applied for employment elsewhere we, of course, as his last employers, received requests for information concerning him. My son Matt used to handle such matters, but I now do so. Under the circumstances I couldn't recommend young Finch."

"Perhaps he's learned his lesson," Brent said. "We're particularly interested in placing him, if we can, with Sprague and Lord. I believe you've received a query from them."

Lytham's expression didn't change. Consulting his memory, he answered: "No, I'm sure Sprague and Lord has never gotten in touch with us concerning young Finch. Personally, I'd never trust him again. If you wish to place him else-

where, you'll do so on your own responsibility."

"Thank you." Brent rose. Again he put out his feeler. "Too bad about Ellis, wasn't it?"

Lytham's response was so vocally violent as to jar Brent. "Ellis!" He choked the name out. "You dare mention him to me! What the devil do you mean, it's too bad about him? Whatever's happened to him, I know nothing about it. Furthermore, I don't care to hear about it. It couldn't possibly be too bad. You've offended me profoundly, sir! Don't attempt to explain or apologize. You've already said much too much. Good-evening!"

Blinking, but necessarily leaving it at that—and making a mental note to trace down one more significant relationship—Brent withdrew.

IN the anteroom he found Ona Berry still clinging to the telephone. Lytham's secretary was no less tearful now, but she was decidedly more indignant.

"I don't believe a word of it! Maybe you're really at a cocktail party, but I don't for a minute believe— You promised you wouldn't stay late, but look what time it is? . . . Don't tell me again the police are there and won't let you go! That's silly. You've told me so many lies, you ought to be able to think up a better one than that. . . Oh, shut up, you louse!"

She disconnected with a crash, squealing softly with feminine rage. Pausing at the outer door, Brent saw that she was on the point of throwing things. Also seeing her as an opportunity, he speculated. To bring this furious female face to face with Gloria Sprague certainly wouldn't make the divorce situation any easier for anyone involved, except possibly Brent. Doubtless they would attempt to placate Miss Berry, and the resulting turmoil might, in fact, force out the truth. Turning back, Brent bent over her in a manner of comradely confidence.

"Remember me? I asked Miss Lorne to read your letter right away. Of course she feels it's very unfair of Charlie to keep you in the dark. As it happens, I'm in a position to help you simply because I was at the Sprague home this afternoon. I don't know everything that Charlie's told

you, of course, but he really is there."

Her blue eyes flared. "He is, is he!"

"If you'd care to come with me—"

Already she was bouncing out of her chair. "Don't worry, I'm coming! I'll fix his wagon! I'll scratch somebody's eyes out!"

Brent's immediate difficulty was to keep up with her. He trailed the glister of her raincoat into the immense parking space surrounding the plant. He had no opportunity to suggest that they use his car, she was hell-bent under her own power. Settled beside her in the seat of her coupe as she looped toward the gate, he shuddered a little. Here was a woman scorned, she had no mercy in her. She meant to tear at her adversaries with tooth and nail, never sparing them.

Once outside the plant gate, she plowed through the fog with reckless speed and asked: "How'd you find out about Charlie and me?"

"I'm a very close and very dear friend of Gloria Sprague's," Brent answered bitterly. "When you sent your letter to Lora Lorne you wrote that Charlie wouldn't tell you who the other woman is, but you seem to have found out since."

"No, I haven't—not that. I got him to tell me a little more—he confessed *why* he's seeing so much of her—and I've made it my business to find out the rest." Ona Berry's words snapped. "This afternoon Charlie said he was going to a cocktail party, but he wouldn't say where, so I sneaked out of the office and trailed him."

Brent warily eyed her large, lumpy purse. "You didn't by any chance think it was Charlie wearing a chauffeur's uniform and driving that limousine, did you?"

Impatiently she answered: "What're you talking about? I wanted to find out who Charlie's so-called platonic girl-friend is. I knew he'd be with her at the party. I'm not sure what I intended to do—peek in windows, I guess. I didn't dare go near any window. There were men prowling all over the place with flashlights. I was afraid they'd see me, so I decided to make myself scarce. Now I don't care what I wade into. I've had enough of this run-around Charlie's been giving me. I'm going to have it out with him and that woman!"

"Her name," Brent offered hopefully, "is Mrs. Victor Sprague, and I wish you every success."

ONA BERRY swung the car sharply into the Sprague driveway. The limousine in which Ellis had died still stood near the house, its lights out. Although the house was quiet, indicating that the guests had been permitted to leave, the Homicide Squad was still pressing its inquiry. On the lighted portico several of Captain Russo's men were again questioning the gardener. Braking squarely in front of the house, Miss Berry hopped out.

Brent hurried up the steps in her wake. Near the entrance she stopped short, causing him to collide with her. Recovering his balance, he found her face astonishingly changed. It no longer pictured feline vindictiveness. Her blue eyes were very wide and elatedly lighted. It was as if an inspiration striking out of the sky had instantly revealed the perfect solution of all her problems.

Glancing around, Brent perceived nothing to account for this magical transformation. The squad men were leaving the portico, led by the gardener toward the servants' cottage in the rear of the grounds, and that was all. But now Ona Berry's expression was one anticipating sweet triumph. She said tersely, "You'd better keep out of this," and she gave the bell-button a decisive punch.

Brent acted on her suggestion. He preferred to be elsewhere when hell erupted inside this house, as it would, he felt, the moment Ona Berry cut loose. It was the result of her visit, not the visit itself, which he hoped might answer his prayers for deliverance. He stepped back as the entrance was opened by a maid. Miss Berry injected herself, and Brent selected a chair on the portico where he could wait in high anticipation.

He pictured the scene as he would stage-direct it. Ona Berry, Charlie Finch and Gloria Sprague would participate. If Vic Sprague were also present, so much the better. Ona would fling outraged accusations of infidelity and immorality at Gloria and Finch. Assuming that Finch doted on Ona as deeply as he averred, he would spout protestations. Gloria would

thereby be put in a spot. At all costs, because it was so necessary for her to keep her real lover under the covers, she would be forced to deny Finch's vows that there was really nothing between them but a business arrangement. This would, in turn, bring on a sharp emotional clash between Gloria and Finch. Finch would shout that Gloria wasn't really his mistress—Gloria would insistently scream the falsehood that she was. To prove his point to Ona, Finch would then—provided he possessed such knowledge—strike back with the name of Gloria's real guy. At last the closely guarded secret would be out. If Vic Sprague were listening, he'd pounce on it. The upshot would be blessed relief for Brent. Visualizing all this, he smiled in deepest gratification.

The sudden opening of the entrance caught him by surprise. He hadn't yet heard any high-strung voices inside. He hadn't expected Ona Berry to reappear so soon. Neither had he expected to see her looking so brightly and slyly pleased. How she could have achieved such complete satisfaction with such alacrity Brent couldn't imagine, but the triumphant gleam in her eyes told him that all her worries were washed away.

"Charlie'd left, but that didn't matter," she said liltingly. "I didn't see anyone but Gloria, but she and I are pals now, and everything's just lovely." Her voice hardened a little. "As for you, I think you'd better mind your own business after this!"

Ungratefully she whisked past Brent. By the time he'd reorganized himself she was already inside her car. He jumped after her when her coupe was already rolling. Left standing in the driveway, he watched taillights streaking for the gate. It was as complete a brush-off as he'd ever experienced.

She'd been too fast for his legs, but not for his eyes—eyes that were narrowed now. He'd seen the sparkle of a jewel inside her raincoat as she'd turned away—the pendant of a necklace she hadn't been wearing before—the blood-red radiance of a costly star ruby.

A GAIN Brent was left without transportation. Again he realized the scarcity of taxis in this neighborhood. He

trudged block after block, angrily but with a certain apprehension, before he found even a drugstore. Then he wedged himself into a phone booth and made two calls. The first was to demand a cab in haste. The second went to the Bureau of Criminal Identification at police headquarters, where Sergeant Flaherty, an old pal of Brent's, given Ona Berry's auto license number, dawdled around for interminable minutes before coming up with her home address.

Though Brent felt his mission to be urgent, he was obliged to wait until the taxi drifted along. Ducking in, he sent it toward the address Flaherty had given him. It took twenty minutes to get there. Brent instructed the driver to wait. In the foyer of the apartment house, which advertised vacancies at moderate rentals, he thumbed a button under Ona Berry's name. Four rings having brought no response, he doggedly penetrated deeper into the building—a walk-up, Miss Berry's apartment apparently being on the fourth floor.

Brent had emphatic things to say to her. She'd evidently learned a great deal from Gloria Sprague in a very short time. All her heartquakes over Charlie Finch had been miraculously remedied. It was even possible she'd learned the name of Gloria's guy. If so, Brent meant to point out that in the light of what had happened to Ellis such knowledge might be fatal. Despite the danger, he meant to share it—get it out of her. After knocking on her door, then twisting the knob, opening it and putting his head in, he recognized with a chill shock that he never would.

Darkness filled the little apartment, but the bulbs in the hallway sent a shaft diagonally across it. As in a spotlight, Ona Berry sat in an easy chair, very still. Her arms drooped. Her head lay back, and an amused, mocking expression lingered on her face. There was a spot on her throat from which blood had streaked down—blood as red as the ruby dangling below the bullet-hole.

Brent broke the cold fixity of his muscles and sidled in. His hand raised to a table lamp. An instinctive tightening of his nerves gave him too late a warning. The footfall behind him had been almost inaudible. The arm that hooked itself under

his chin closed like a spring trap. His assailant's left hand was free, gripping something heavy. It cracked down on Brent's head twice.

Brent found his hands and knees before his mind had entirely cleared. Riveters were at work repairing his cranium. He couldn't guess how many minutes he'd passed in unconsciousness, but they'd been enough. When he snapped the lamp-switch, the glare exploding in his eyeballs, he saw that his attacker had fled. The corpse of Ona Berry sat precisely as he had last seen it—but the star-ruby necklace was gone.

CHAPTER SIX

Design in Black

BRENT'S failure to notify Captain Russo was illegal according to the book, and Russo wasn't going to like the look of any of this. Both the cabby and Flaherty could place Brent at the scene of Ona Berry's murder at a time when her body was still warm. The mere formality of notifying headquarters couldn't save Brent from the implications of that circumstance, and his silence would only delay the evil hour, but he was feeling impatient with technicalities.

Back in the taxi, he directed the driver to the Lytham and Son plant. There he paid up and retrieved his own car. He headed again into the city. At the portico of the Sprague home he bucked to a stop. He poked the bell-button and already had the entrance open while the maid was still approaching. He demanded of her: "Where's Mrs. Sprague?"

"But you can't see her now, sir! She's going to bed!"

"That's exactly where it's reputed I usually see her!"

Brent brushed past and started taking the stairs three steps at a stride. The maid fluttered ahead of him. Reaching the second floor, she didn't turn toward the master bedroom in the front. Instead, she veered toward the rear, thereby telegraphing to Brent that Gloria's room was far removed from her husband's. Brent passed a service stairs, armed the maid aside and pushed in a door.

In a spacious room decorated in dreamy

soft tints but colorfully spotted with flowers, Gloria Sprague sat on a bench in front of an enormous round mirror. Her nightgown was scarcely present. Her reflection coolly studied Brent. Wholly unperturbed, she took up a lipstick and calmly applied it to her mouth.

"Hello, my lover," she said.

"You haven't been out of the house tonight, of course, sweetheart?" Brent inquired.

"But of course not, darling." Her eyes grew innocently wider. "I've been expecting you, and how could I bear to keep you waiting?"

"How could you, indeed, my own," Brent said, "particularly when I can see fingermarks just above your right knee—still prettily pink."

Without haste she rose to put on a red house-robe. She belted it snugly, smiling.

"Your new-found friendship with Ona Berry didn't last long," Brent observed. "It took a quick turn for the worse."

Gloria paled. "But don't be silly, darling!" Turning to a vase, she selected two flowers, snipped their stems off with her long red thumbnail, brought them to Brent and tucked them into his lapel.

"Damned if I don't think your guy's got something in view worth murdering people for!" Brent sighed.

She reached for one of those button-studded house-phones. The move suited Brent. He crossed to her dresser, snapped up the lid of a jewel case, then another. When he turned back a thin golden chain trickled through his fingers and a star-ruby pendant swung and sparkled redly in the light.

"A gift?" Brent asked.

"Of course a gift, darling," Gloria answered. "Don't you remember? A gift from you!" Then into the telephone she said: "Victor, in case you're interested, my lover is here now."

This dame, Brent reflected, was magnificent. A murderess, or a murderer's prize, either way you wanted to take her, she was magnificent. He had just returned the necklace to the jewel case when sluffing footfalls rushed down the hall and the door snapped open to admit Victor Sprague's head.

Sprague looked grim but seemed to find nothing objectionable in Brent's visit

to his wife's boudoir. Other matters apparently on his mind, he grabbed Brent's arm. As he steered Brent out, Gloria said softly: "Good night, darlings—both of you."

VIC SPRAGUE hustled Brent along the hallway. Rocky had followed his boss, both wore dazzling pajamas. They jostled Brent into the huge master bedroom and into a chair placed between the twin beds. Again lavish measures to put Brent at his ease were forced upon him. Inside half a minute he had another potent Scotch in his hand, another lighted cigar in his teeth. Rocky hovered close while Brent sat facing Sprague.

"You got me worried, pal. I been in a lather ever since you said over the phone Gloria might fry for bumping Ellis. That's terrible! I can't have no cops hounding her, Bill. If the killer's gotta turn out to be either Gloria or her guy, then it's gotta be the guy. You gotta protect her by nailing him for it—but first you gotta find out who he is."

"I don't have to save anybody from getting nailed for murder," Brent retorted through fragrant smoke. "As for finding out who Gloria's guy is, use your head. Tap her telephone wire. Read her mail. Beat hell out of her!"

"The phone's been tapped for weeks," Sprague said. "They never call each other. They don't exchange no letters, neither. I could slam Gloria around until she came apart and she'd never peep. The cops could strap a lie detector on her and she'd blow the fuses out of the thing, she's got such control. Gloria won't talk—it means too much to her. No matter what way I tried to find out, Bill, none of 'em's been no damn good."

Frowning, Brent asked: "Don't you even know where she met this snake?"

"She coulda met him anywheres of a thousand different joints. Wherever she meets him now, she keeps it covered in such a slick way I get dizzy trying to guess. She's smart like a fox, Bill. God, she's smart!"

"If you merely want to know who he is, it's simple," Brent said. "Just let her go ahead and marry the guy—and that'll help a long way toward getting him nabbed for murder."

"My whole idea is to *keep* her from marrying the guy." Sprague wriggled his toes anxiously. "Bill, I love my wife. Even after what's happened, I don't want to lose her. I think she's the swellest woman on earth. Besides, she's far and away the best plant manager I'll ever find. Without her I'd be sunk forty ways from breakfast. I ain't going to let that happen." Sprague looked fierce again. "There ain't nothing I won't do to keep Gloria—*nothing*. There ain't nothing I won't do to save her from a murder rap."

Brent reflected. At the very least the damned woman had been repeatedly unfaithful to her husband. Under such circumstances many another man might do a little judicious gunning, or at least boot the dame out of his life and consider it good riddance. But not Vic Sprague. No, Sprague had to stay wacky about her. He had to forgive her and treasure her regardless and go to cockeyed lengths in doing so. Privately Brent had no patience with such fidelity to the disloyal, but still, he realized wryly, this was precisely the course which Lora Lorne, preserver of threatened homes, would advise.

"Suing Gloria for divorce is one hell of a way to keep her as your wife!" he snorted.

"It's the only way I got left," Sprague asserted. "Look, Bill. Two things I gotta do. First, I gotta find out who the right guy is. Second, I gotta divorce Gloria, naming that guy as correspondent. That'll make it so she can't marry him. Then, when she sees it's no dice—then, Bill, she'll come back. She really likes me, in her way, and finally she'll marry me again."

"Damn it all, man," Brent retorted, "can't you see that by naming me correspondent you're giving her a green light on the other guy!"

"No I ain't, Bill, because—I keep telling you—you're gonna find out who he is. I'm desperate, pal. You're my last chance. Do this little job for me and we'll both be a lot happier. I'll go right down the line with you. Ask me anything. Come around any time of the day or night. Ring me any hour. Go the limit. When you find out who this guy is, then I'll throw out the papers naming you and get new ones naming him instead. Besides that,

I'll gladly hand you a check for five grand."

Brent weakened, but he protested: "What good will all that do if—"

"But if you let me down, Bill—" Now the fierceness in Sprague outshone his good nature. "Then I'll press this divorce suit, as it stands now, right up to the hilt. I'll let Storer call dozens of witnesses. He'll grill the juice out of you. The works, Bill, that's what you'll get—the wringer! Right up until the point where the judge is about to give his decision. Then I'll withdraw the suit—call the whole thing off—but not until then!"

BRENT groaned inwardly, feeling the teeth of Sprague's trap. A horrifying picture returned to his mind. Again he visualized himself squirming in the witness chair, with a mobbed courtroom watching him and a righteous attorney demanding inexorably: "And in what capacity are you employed by the *Recorder*, Mr. Brent? *In just what capacity—*"

If such a crisis could possibly be circumvented, God knew Brent desired with all his soul to avert it. With diabolical if good-natured ingenuity—Sprague's comradely grin was back again—Brent had been maneuvered into an unbearably humiliating spot from which he could now hope to escape in only one way. He'd been so cannily manipulated that he had no conceivable choice. It was so simple—all he had to do was learn a certain man's name—yet, in the light of Sprague's fruitless efforts it seemed an unattainable objective. Brent's enforced assignment confronted him with the task of accomplishing the apparently impossible, with ludicrously tragic penalties in the very likely event of failure.

"I dunno how you're gonna do it, Bill," Sprague admitted quietly, "but you're gonna do it. What's more, you're gonna keep Gloria clear of this murder rap, or you'll soon get to thinking what a lucky guy Ellis is right now, God help ya!" "Ellis is only the half of it," Brent said levelly. "The other half is an equally dead young woman named Ona Berry."

Sprague stared.

"Both of them were killed because they'd dabbled in blackmail. They'd learned too much. I'd rather not stretch

out alongside them in the morgue—although I'll confess it would be preferable to seeing your damned divorce trial through."

Sprague was implacable. "You're gonna do it, Bill—keep Gloria in the clear—"

"Listen to me, chum! When I first came into this house this afternoon, during the cocktail party, Gloria was wearing a star-ruby necklace costing probably ten grand—a gift from her lover, as you no doubt know. Later tonight a sly, spiteful kid named Ona Berry came to this house to see Gloria about their mutual boyfriend, Charlie Finch, and when Ona left she was wearing that same necklace. Within an hour, while still wearing it, Ona was killed. Minutes later the necklace was filched off her dead body. Right now that identical necklace is back in your wife's jewel case. And in the face of that evidence you tell me my job's to keep Gloria in the clear!"

Sprague was shaken, but he repeated obdurately: "You gotta do it, Bill!"

"Can you prove Gloria did not leave this house tonight?"

Sprague wagged his head miserably. "I can't prove nothing, but you gotta—"

"Gloria knows Ona Berry is dead. Also, she's seen her lover again tonight. Probably it was only for a minute or two, but she was with him. How could she have managed that?"

"I dunno, Bill. That's what you're gonna find out."

"Or else." Brent nodded grimly and stiffened to his feet. "Then answer me a few crucial questions. First, where did Gloria meet Marget?"

"I dunno. A party, I guess, a few months ago."

"Next, where did Gloria meet Charlie Finch?"

"She said at the plant, when he come around looking for a job, right after he got fired out by Lytham and Son."

"Do your office records verify that?"

"I ain't checked."

"Then check. Third, has there been any attempt made on your life?"

Sprague straightened. "How could there be? I got Rocky as a bodyguard. No, Bill—nobody's tried to kill me."

"Then has anyone attempted to frame you for any sort of felony?"

"There ain't been a smell of anything like that, Bill."

"But your wife's been paying out blackmail?"

"I looked in our checkbook. Every week for two-three months now she's wrote a big check to cash—a couple hundred at a clip. The endorsements show she cashed every one of 'em herself at the plant." Admitting this, Sprague squirmed. "But Bill, she swears she never paid a single cent to Ellis. I believe her. She can lie your hair off when she wants to, but I can tell when she's telling the truth."

"O.K. That helps some, but there are still plenty of chances for migraine the way you don't want it—and here they come."

He took up the telephone on Sprague's bedside table. Sprague watched him tensely as he dialed the number of police headquarters. He asked for connection with the Homicide Bureau. Captain Russo's ghostly tones answered. The captain was having a long day, and Brent proceeded perforce to make it even longer.

"I regret to report, Russo, that in Apartment D, on the fourth floor, in the building at 516 Beech Street, a fresh young female cadaver is available to you. You'll find it full of significance. And if it should lead you where I'm damned sure it will, God help me!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Flowers From Madame

THURSTING the swinging doors apart, Brent found the city-room deserted. The last edition had been put to bed and the news staff had dispersed. He circled to the file-room, split open a bound volume of the *Recorder* dating back a year, and dug for information.

Here was the personality sketch of his wife that Sprague had mentioned. Two photographs decorated it, one showing Gloria Sprague clad in coveralls while operating a drill press, the other picturing her in a smart suit, dictating at her executive desk. Gloria Lord and Vic Sprague had met twelve years ago when he'd operated a small shop. He'd hired her as a stenographer, but she'd soon abandoned her typewriter in favor of his

milling machines. She'd developed into a master mechanic. They'd married, making the firm Sprague and Lord, and built it up to enormous, profitable proportions. Sprague's delineation of his wife was honest. She'd started as an ambitious little nobody from across the tracks. She'd climbed steadily, and although she wasn't yet accepted by the plushiest elite, she meant to keep clawing her way up until she had the run of the privileged pinnacles.

More spadework uncovered for Brent the guarded story of Lyman Lytham's divorce from Marget. Lytham's first wife had died when their son Matt was still a boy. Marget had been an actress, socially nonexistent until she'd become the second Mrs. Lyman Lytham. The marriage had lasted three years. The details concerning the divorce action itself were handled with kid gloves, Lytham being such a prominent figure and an extensive advertiser in the *Recorder*. The trial had been held *in camera*, Lytham charging Marget with "grave misbehavior", meaning adultery. The divorce had been awarded with neither a property settlement nor alimony, which meant the charges had been proved beyond question. The story divulged nothing further except the names of several witnesses, among them—Brent's eyebrows climbed—that of the recently discharged Lytham chauffeur, Harvey Ellis.

More obscure relationships! They made Brent a little dizzy, though they threw light on Marget Lytham's attachment to Gloria Sprague. Following her divorce, with its scandalous implications, Marget's social position had hit the skids and bumped the bottom. She was now obviously endeavoring to regain lost ground through Gloria.

Brent left the year-old volume in haste. He consulted the telephone directory, noted the present addresses of both Lyman Lytham and the ex-Mrs. Lytham, and continued in haste to his car.

The Lytham establishment, he found, made the Sprague estate seem squalid by comparison. It appeared to be a vast landscaped park surrounding a modern castle-like hotel. Among its countless windows only a few downstairs were lighted. Feeling lost in this dark, private kingdom, Brent made a solitary expedition to a

bell-button, which brought Matthew Lytham to an entrance as massive as that of a bank vault.

"Your father?"

"Retired for the night," Matt Lytham answered quietly. "I'd rather not disturb him. What is it?"

"Nasty stuff," Brent said. "Murder, blackmail and even older types of sin."

He stepped in uninvited. Matt Lytham followed him into a room which combined the qualities of a drawing-room, an art museum and the main section of a metropolitan railway terminal.

"A man named Harvey Ellis, chauffeur for Victor Sprague, was shot dead this afternoon," Brent said, halting in the cavernous quiet. "Previously he was your father's chauffeur. His employment here ceased a year or so ago, shortly before Marget ceased being your mother-in-law. Ellis was the correspondent named by your father in the divorce action against Marget. That must have been fairly obvious to his multitude of friends the moment the charges were brought. He still feels rancorous toward her for preferring one of the hired help to him, and no doubt she still hates him for catching her at it. That brings up a blunt question, which I ask off the record as an investigator for the *Recorder*. Just what went on afterward between Marget and Ellis?"

Matt Lytham's sun-browned face didn't harden. He remained casually at ease. "Very little. They couldn't marry, you know. The law wouldn't permit it, and anyway Marget didn't want it. After they drifted apart Marget never saw him except as the Sprague's chauffeur. I believe she arranged that job for him after meeting Mrs. Sprague."

"Without either a property settlement or alimony, how does she manage to live?"

Matt Lytham looked up. "She and I've stayed good friends. I help her all I can. It isn't much, but she has to eat, much as my father disapproves of it."

"She apparently eats very well and dresses even better. Where does the rest of her money come from?"

"Has she other money?" young Lytham asked in a tone implying she hadn't. "Perhaps there are a few generous men friends in the picture. I wouldn't wonder."

"Or perhaps there's another answer which you can't or won't give me. Possibly Marget has wrangled an extra-legal income from your father. She may be tasting the sweetness of revenge. If so, the worst may still lie ahead of him. I think he'd have a tough time influencing the law to hold a murder trial *in camera*." Brent added abruptly: "Good-night."

He felt Matt Lytham's troubled gaze on his back as he strode out.

THE address where Marget now lived threw more doubts on her ex-son-in-law's statement that her income wasn't much. The apartment building, all chromium and deep green rugs, wasn't one which a lady with little peanuts could inhabit. Brent had to talk his way past three liveried flunkies. When he reached her door she was waiting. Costly furnishings surrounding them, he eyed her while she sat with a cigarette, eyes sleeplessly alert, tauntingly seductive in a black negligee.

"It's late, Marget, so let's make it snappy," he began. "Just tell me who you've been blackmailing."

She laughed softly.

"Your ex-husband? On the basis that he's the hidden man in Gloria's case?"

Her face grew cruel. "I wish he were!"

"And to whom, in turn, have you been paying blackmail?" Brent persisted. "Ellis?"

"Ellis! Of all men! Why should I? Everyone concerned knows what Ellis and I were to each other, so what possible grounds could he have had for getting money from me?"

"There's blackmail here," Brent asserted. "Blackmail weaving in and out of this whole case. I'm going to—"

"Mr. Brent." Marget rose, turned to a desk and produced a checkbook. Flipping it open at random, she gestured that Brent was free to examine it. "It's the only account I have. You're able to prove that to your own satisfaction. It shows every check I've written, all for legitimate bills, and all the deposits I've made—every cent Matt's given me, bless him. I couldn't have paid blackmail to anyone if it had been demanded of me, except in chicken feed." Since Brent showed no interest in the book, she flipped it shut again. "But

isn't this a little off your beat, Mr. Brent? Gloria must miss you."

"My whole life," Brent said vehemently, "is cursed with the damnedest varieties of women!"

He slammed out. Rage kept him going rapidly until, through sheer habit, he found himself back in his closet-size office in the *Recorder's* city-room. His mounds of Lorne letters seemed almost pleasant to contemplate in comparison with his extra-mural tribulations—though he was bothered by what seemed to be an unusually offensive effluvium rising from them. Sitting miserably in the noisome hush, he ventured to phone headquarters. Captain Russo answered, still on the job, still moaning like a condemned soul.

"I'd like to know just one thing, Captain, which you'll tell me on the give-'em-enough-rope principle. How long and how profitably had Ellis been practicing extortion?"

"We've so far found no bank accounts in Harvey Ellis's name," Russo mourned, "no safe deposit boxes, and no stuffed mattresses. There's no evidence whatever to indicate Ellis was paid any blackmail whatever by anyone at all prior to today. The two hundred dollars found in his wallet was evidently the first such payment he'd ever collected, and certainly the last. By the way, Brent. Concerning the trivial matter of the Berry slaying—"

Brent hastily hung up. "Blackmail everywhere," he muttered, "but nobody paying it and nobody taking it!"

Again he became acutely aware of that floral stench. Suddenly he located its source—the two flowers which Gloria Sprague had tucked into his buttonhole. He plucked them out and frowned over them—one a tiger lily, now wilted, the other a faded rhododendron.

They comprised the damnedest boutonniere Brent had ever seen. Struck with a wacky hunch, he went curiously to the city-room's unabridged dictionary. In it he found a full page headed, *A Partial List of Flowers With Their Symbolic Meanings*. "The following," it added, "is a list of the principal flowers and the sentimental philology, amusing if not instructive, associated with them." And when Brent rose from an intent consultation he was bemused.

The rhododendron meant, *Be careful, I'm dangerous*, and the tiger lily, *I dare you to love me*.

IT WAS late afternoon again when Brent returned to the city-room, faced with the heart-twisting drudgery of another Lorne column, and full of foreboding. All day the police front had been too quiet. Captain Russo, not having cornered him concerning his knowledge of the Berry corpse, appeared to be paying out an abundance of suicidal rope to Brent. Sprague's tactical trap still held him fast, and as if all this wasn't perturbing enough he suffered another shock the moment he parted the swinging doors.

One of the green metal desks allotted to the news reporters was occupied by a newcomer—and it was none other than Charlie Finch.

Brent stared at Finch. He strode into Garrett's corner. Pointing, he demanded to know: "What's that?"

"New man," Garrett answered. "Needed somebody to fill the courthouse trick. He's never had any newspaper experience, but I hope he knows a comma from a dollar sign. Salary to start, eighteen a week. What're you looking so scandalized about, Grandma? You sent him up, didn't you? He said so."

"My God," Brent said, "I didn't mean it. That twirp will hock all our typewriters. Have you checked his references?"

"Called Lytham and Son, his last employers, who gave him a clean bill."

Brent was sobered. "They did, did they? Have you heard that a girl named Ona Berry was bumped last night? The cops are probably looking for her boyfriend, and here he is, right in the middle of our city-room."

"They know it. His alibi checks. Don't concern yourself needlessly, Miss Lorne. Confine yourself to Cupid's cute little capers. I'm referring to today's column. I want it preferably a second or two ahead of the deadline."

With grim quiet Brent passed Charles Finch's new desk. Valerie Randall, leaning over it, was being helpful in a big-sisterly way. Once inside his cubbyhole, where more mail had been delivered during the day, it struck Brent as bitterly

ironical that Finch should rate a self-respecting reporter's berth while he must continue to wallow in the sloughs of Woman's despond. He was still boiling over it when, looking up, he saw Finch smiling handsomely over his overloaded work table.

"Thanks a lot for helping me to get this job, Mr. Brent. Funny thing, but I'm covering the Sprague divorce case now. I'm supposed to get an interview with you. First, Mr. Brent, just what do you do on our paper?"

The entire city-room was suddenly alarmed by a loud, glassy crash. Every startled member of the staff stared at the water-cooler. It had toppled over, having been struck broadside by a projectile. The projectile was Charles Finch. He now sprawled beside it, stunned, while the big bottle slopped its distilled contents onto the seat of his pants. He was dizzily endeavoring to rise when Brent grabbed him by the nape.

"Never ask me that question again! When you find out, keep your trap shut! Now answer one of mine. Do you know who Gloria's guy is?"

"N-no!" Finch chattered. "Honest to God, I d-don't know!"

Brent left Finch to the ministrations of the rest of the staff. As the red faded from in front of his eyes he realized his telephone was ringing. His misgivings, when he grabbed it up, proved to be chillingly correct. The special voice on the wire was Captain Russo's.

"You have an appointment with me at the Sprague home, Brent. Don't take time to put your affairs in order. There are just two things I want you to bring with you—first, the original of the letter signed Loyal, and second, an attitude of resignation to your fate. Make it in ten minutes."

This time it was Russo who peremptorily broke the connection, leaving Brent numbed. This cryptically ominous summons couldn't be ignored. Necessarily Brent's mind and legs both went into high gear. Out of his cubicle at once, and back across the city-room, he again crowded on Charlie Finch, grabbing his arm.

"You're in on this, my esteemed confrere," Brent said with a bite. "It's the pay-off."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Funeral Will Be Private

ENTERING the Sprague living-room, Brent felt like a man making a farewell appearance before a select audience. Vic and Gloria Sprague awaited him with Marget Lytham, Captain Russo being solemnly in charge of the portentous conference. Brent waded into the thick of it, nudging Finch toward a chair and growling: "I'll want two words from you, one at a time, and that's all."

Russo's dead-seeming eyes were fixed on him. "Did you bring along with you the original of the letter Ellis wrote to Lora Lorne?"

"I don't keep letters after they've been published. It's somewhere in a bale of waste paper."

"I thought you wouldn't produce it, Brent, but the real reason is different. The letter you printed over the signature of Loyal was an expurgated version of the letter Ellis wrote."

"No," Brent said. "It was printed unchanged."

"You can't prove you didn't alter it, and other circumstances in the case indicate you did," Russo insisted hollowly. "Ellis's original letter gave more facts than you permitted to reach the public. You extracted certain details for your own use and printed the remainder. Ellis' purpose was blackmail. So was yours. When you failed to effect an agreement with Ellis as to a cut of the loot, you cut him out altogether. This accounts for the murder of Ellis."

"To your weird mind," Brent said. "Not to mine."

"My conclusion is verified by the fact that Ellis, when dying, was heard by Briggs, the Spragues' gardener, to shout the words, 'Pick up Brent'—obviously a tip-off for the police."

"More obviously," Brent retorted, "it was the product of a fatally shocked brain deliriously repeating the man's last orders from his employer, and they were to pick me up in the car at the Recorder building."

His convictions unshaken, Captain Russo continued sadly: "We now consider the death of Ona Berry, who had also, in

some way, come upon the same basis for blackmail which you had preferred not to share with Ellis. Neither did you wish to share it with her. I have witnesses to your presence in her apartment at the time of her death. Eliminating her gave you the whole track. You'd now proceed to blackmail Mrs. Sprague, as you'd planned, except that I'm nailing you."

"You're having a dust-storm in your brain," Brent argued. "All this falsely assumes I've a basis for blackmailing Mrs. Sprague. That basis would have to be a knowledge of the identity of the man she wishes to marry after divorcing her present husband. At the time of the two murders I didn't know that. If I had, I wouldn't have wasted a thought on mere money. I'd have told it to Vic Sprague, but quick, in order to get my name the hell out of those divorce papers."

Sprague's eyes filled with fire. "You mean you know it now, chum—who Gloria's real guy is?"

"I know who it's got to be. It'll help if you can give me the right answer to a question. Last night I asked you to check whether or not your office records show that Charles Finch applied there for a job. Do they?"

"They don't."

"Then that helps to tear it," Brent asserted. "Only one man can explain many of the tie-ups in this well-knit case. The position of only one man can explain, first, how Gloria really met Charles Finch—second, how she became so chummy with Marget—third how Ellis could know Gloria's secret when five shamuses couldn't—fourth, how Ona Berry also unexpectedly tumbled to it—fifth, how Finch was able to land a job on my paper—sixth, how Gloria contrived to see this man repeatedly but without detection—seventh . . . but that's enough. I assume you'd like me to produce him? Gladly! At first it seemed impossible, but now it's easier than plucking a rabbit from a trick hat. By merely—"

Brent gazed into the hall beyond the living-room, where the maid was passing with a vase of freshly cut flowers, on her way upstairs. He put on a wry smile, and at the same moment Gloria rose.

"I—I don't feel well," she murmured. "Please excuse me."

She hurried from the room. Elatedly Brent caught Vic Sprague's arm. He hustled Sprague into the adjoining library, with Russo trailing like a specter. The shelves there were loaded with expensive but untouched volumes. Brent found an unabridged dictionary and cleaved it open at the F section.

"I'm no horticulturist, but I recognized two kinds of flowers in that vase—oleanders and Jacob's ladders. Look at this list, chum. The first means *Beware*, and the second, *Come down*. O.K.! Let's go get 'em."

Brent turned back to Charles Finch. "Last night Ona phoned you from her apartment, didn't she? It was after she'd left this house. She talked in a superior and secretive manner, giving you to understand she now had the upper hand in this whole business. She teased you along without telling you just how come. Didn't she? Yes or no!"

Finch hesitantly answered, "Yes."

"Then she told you to phone Lytham and Son, and just what to say in order to land a new job elsewhere, with good recommendations. Yes or no!"

"Y-yes."

"Those are the two words I wanted from you. You can thank God that Ona teased you instead of telling you what she'd learned. Otherwise you'd probably be cooling off in the city morgue this morning right alongside her."

BRENT left Finch goggling. Sprague followed him grimly, and Russo sorrowfully, to a rear door. Just outside, Brent paused to point. A woman was hurrying across the lawn. They went after her as she vanished into the servants' quarters. Brent was first up the stairs. The door on the landing was shut. Brent had trouble opening it—he heard gasps inside and felt a resisting pressure. "That's no good," he said. "Sooner or later you'll have to come out of there, Matt."

There was a feminine wail of despair inside. The resistance of the door melted. Brent eased it open and gestured Sprague in first. Gloria shrank from him, her face tearily twisted up. The gardener stood with hands hard in the pockets of his chore coat, his browned face resignedly set.

"Briggs is the fake name he gave you when you hired him, pal," Brent explained to Sprague. "His real name's Matthew Lytham. It'll look very good in those damned legal papers."

Gloria sank into a chair, her eyes hating Brent. Matt Lytham looked more than a little ill. The moment was Vic Sprague's. His face shone with fierce elation.

"He's stayed out of the office of Lytham and Son for weeks, pretending to be taking it easy under a doctor's orders, when actually he's been working a full-time job here as your gardener," Brent continued. "His father has believed all along he's been lolling under sunlamps in a downtown health emporium. Lyman Lytham didn't know that whenever he phoned his son at the so-called solarium he was actually calling the number of this servants' cottage. Your mistake, chum, was in believing that Gloria and her guy kept their rendezvous so far afield when actually they were seeing each other right here on this property."

"This," Sprague blurted, his eyes gleaming first at Matt, then at Gloria, "is swell!"

A glance showed Brent that Marget Lytham had appeared in the doorway.

"At first, after Gloria and Matt had met at some party several months ago, they saw each other at Marget's apartment. But such meetings were too open to discovery, Vic, so they planned all this. You'd never met Matt. When he applied for the job as your gardener, so he and Gloria could see each other constantly but secretly, you took him at his face value. Whenever anyone who knew him came around, he merely obscured himself in his menial job—kept his face turned away, as he did when Ellis's body brought him and me together yesterday. It was safe enough.

"Then Gloria saw the need for a dummy lover, in order to throw you further off the scent, and it was Matt who thought of beautiful Charlie Finch for the part. Finch had just been fired by the elder Lytham and needed the money, so Gloria looked him up. Finch actually hasn't known that Matt is really the man in the case.

"It was even more than love between

Matt and Gloria. After the war the business of Lytham and Son will skyrocket, not only in its old field, but also making parts for a flood of refrigerators, washing machines, vacuum cleaners and so on. As an executive Gloria would be very valuable there. Lyman Lytham won't live forever, and eventually Gloria and Matt would own and run the plant together—bigger even than Sprague and Lord. And since Gloria already owns half of Sprague and Lord, she could sell her share to the new corporation and absorb you, Vic, forcing you out of the field. Gloria's and Matt's interest in each other, therefore, is three-fold, involving big business, social position and applied biology. Here we see not only dreams of love and aspirations to high society, but also plans for industrial empire."

RUSSO'S hollow tones rose. "I must remind you, Brent, that this marital merry-go-round is of minor importance to me. I'm chiefly concerned with two murders."

"The hell with 'em," Brent retorted. "I've wanted to squeeze out of this damned divorce mess, that's all—and now, thank God, I'm out of it."

Sprague grabbed his arm. "No you ain't, chum! I told ya, your job was double. Finding Gloria's guy is only half of it. The other half's keeping her clear of a murder rap."

Brent laughed in a voice as hollow as Russo's. "Take a good look at this setup, pal. Ellis was already working here when Matt came on as your gardener. Of course Ellis knew who Matt was, having previously worked for the Lythams. It was also clear to him that Matt was here for reasons of illicit romance. He played the thing along, keeping his mouth shut, until the divorce action began to cook. That gave him a perfect setup for blackmail. One payment, however, was as much as he'd received before he also received a slug in the head."

"Gloria never done that!" Sprague protested. "It's gotta be this guy of hers, Matt Lytham!"

Brent shrugged. "Take another look at what happened last night. Ona Berry came here. She'd already wheedled from Finch the admission that he was putting

on an act with Gloria to cover some other man. He hadn't told her who that man was, because he didn't know. But on the portico last night she glimpsed your gardener's face while the Homicide Squad was questioning him. Of course she recognized him instantly as Matt Lytham, one of her two bosses. Instantly she saw the whole divorce setup. She thought it was wonderful, thought it put the reins in her hand. Actually it sealed her doom.

"Incidentally, Miss Berry has no one but herself to blame for her demise. If only she'd leveled with me, the whole thing would've been cleared up then and there. But no, she had to handle it in her own vindictive way.

"She invited Gloria to hush her up. Gloria, having nothing else available at the moment, paid over the ruby necklace. The moment Ona left, Gloria phoned out the news of this dangerous development. Ona was in a position to wreck the whole works and demand unlimited blackmail. She'd made herself a terrific hazard. She was so obviously superior about it. Her hold over Matt would show in their office relationship. She'd soon blab to Finch, who'd thereby become one more danger. She was an untrustworthy holder of too big a secret. So no time was lost in removing her."

Brent eyed Matt Lytham. "You were in her apartment when I barged in and found her dead. You didn't dare let the cops find on her body a necklace which you'd bought and given to Gloria. You had to smack me down to get it, then you brought it back to Gloria."

Matt blurted: "Ona was dead when I found her!"

Sprague was gripping Brent's arm. "Let him have it, pal! You gotta prove Gloria never had no hand in it. Show it was *him* who killed 'em both!"

"That's a perfectly ducky theory," Brent remarked, "except that it's as wrong as a lavender lemon."

Russo said with almost human impatience: "Make up your mind, Brent!"

"It was made up long ago," Brent answered. "The easiest way out of their predicament for Gloria and Matt would have been simply to murder Vic. They might have gambled on getting away with it, which would've left them perfectly free

to marry—but they didn't even try it. Neither did they try to frame him for a minor felony, which would have given Gloria grounds to divorce him. Their scheming went so far, but no further. No matter how you might frown upon their moral characters, it's a demonstrated fact that there's no murder in them.

"Fact is," Brent added, "I can give them both water-tight alibis. Twenty seconds by the clock after Ellis was shot, I saw Gloria inside the house, building matches on a bottle. She couldn't possibly have gotten back inside so fast. At precisely that same moment I saw the gardener working in his greenhouse—Matt. Since Ona was killed by the same person who'd killed Ellis—the death bullets prove that, don't they, Russo?—Gloria and Matt are completely out."

Glancing at Gloria, Sprague sighed with relief—but glancing at Matt, he scowled with disappointment. "Then who—"

Russo echoed lugubriously: "Yes, Brent, who?"

"GOOD lord," Brent complained, "do I have to spell it out? Don't you see what a sweet position both Ellis and Ona were in? If Gloria refused to pay them enough, they could sell their information to Vic instead. Their alternative provided one of the two motives which drove the murderer to kill. The first was that any payments made to Ellis or Ona necessarily cut in on the payments already being made to the original blackmailer—Gloria's and Matt's capital not being inexhaustible, he not yet having control of the Lytham fortune. The second motive was the pressing necessity that Gloria's secret must be kept from Vic for as long as possible—because the longer the affair was strung out, the more profitable it would be to the original blackmailer, and Vic's learning would end it. Our murderer was desperately anxious to make hay as long as she could keep the sun shining."

Russo mourned, "She?"

"Marget's known from the beginning who Gloria's guy is. She used their necessity for secrecy as a lever. The friendship she forced on Gloria was her means of boosting herself back up the social scale

to the point from which she'd taken a nose-dive. Once Gloria was married to Matt, Marget, as Gloria's closest friend, would be back in the blue chips, thumbing her nose at Lyman Lytham. That wasn't all. Gloria paid Marget plenty. It was all cash, none of it showing in Marget's bank account. The money was important to her, and both Ellis and Ona were cutting in—but far more important were the lasting benefits she'd derive from Gloria's marriage to Matt. She couldn't let Ellis or Ona live, because either of them might, at any moment, sell their information to Vic, who so desperately desired it, for more money than anyone else could pay for it. The moment Vic learned, marriage would become impossible for Gloria and Matt. Marget's income would stop. All her plans would be destroyed.

"Marget's sudden affluence had told Ellis that she was collecting from Gloria and Matt. Instead of bleeding them directly, he attached himself to her, his old mistress. Yesterday afternoon Marget hushed him temporarily by handing him two hundred dollars. He must have warned her that she'd have to pay him still more, or else he'd get more from Sprague. After having contributed to the collapse of Marget's luxurious marriage to Lytham, he was now threatening her with the collapse of her vitally important scheme to re-establish herself. Marget knew the rat would do it, too. So she waited for him to come rolling back through the gate in the limousine, and after she'd fired the shot she circled into the rear of the house without anyone's noticing, in all the confusion, that she'd been out.

"Last night, after Ona left this house, it was to Marget that Gloria phoned. Marget made haste to corner Ona. Ona, realizing she held the whip, must have laughed at Marget. She probably repeated the same threat that had proven fatal to Ellis—if the others didn't pay up, that is, Sprague would. Again Marget shot and scrambled. Meanwhile Gloria had also warned Matt about Ona. He went to the apartment to find Ona dead. You were damned sure at once, weren't you, Matt, that it was Marget who'd done the shooting?"

Silent, Matt looked dog-sick.

Russo said sadly: "If all this is true, Brent, she must still have her little gun, and ballistics will prove it." Then he added, still sadly, but quickly: "Please come back, Mrs. Lytham!"

Marget had been standing rigidly just inside the door. Now she was gone. Brent heard her speeding down the stairs. He bounded after her, with Russo and Matt at his heels. They spread out the cottage door, seeing her running wildly, blindly across the lawn. As she raced she lost one of her pumps. She went on at a swift, crazy limp. Next she flung aside her gaping purse. Brent was close, and Russo was cutting her off from the house, when she swerved—toward the greenhouse.

She slammed its door and they heard the key squeak in the lock. Dimly through the glass they saw her fleeing down the aisle between the beds of blooms. Brent's fist smashed a pane. Russo pressed in behind him. They were searching for a light switch when they heard the single, strangely soft report.

As they ran to the far end of the greenhouse Matt Lytham snapped on the lights. Brent and Russo paused, peering down at Marget Lytham. She lay huddled on the board floor, a trickling little spot in one temple, the little pearl-handled automatic slipping from her lax hand. She'd fired the bullet while standing. In falling, one of her arms had flailed into a bed of flowers, tearing up several by the roots. She clutched them to her breast as she lay there—calla lilies.

Brent turned upon Vic Sprague. "That's all for now, brother," he said, "except this," and he delivered accurately to the button of Sprague's jaw a single whole-souled wallop.

BRENT went purposefully into the Recorder's city-room. He had cause to feel jubilant. Sprague had not only forgiven the haymaker, but had taken it as evidence that Brent was a man after his own heart. Already Sprague had ordered Storer to remove Brent's name from the divorce papers and to substitute that of Matt Lytham. Sprague had also phoned Garrett, insisting that the correction be given a prominent first-page position. In

(Continued on page 113)

DEATH IS FROM TAXES

By DALE CLARK

Author of "Death Blows Out the Candles," etc.

A Plates O'Rion
Novelette



When Plates' sultry daughter, Sal, dragged her old man to the Sataw shindig to see how the upper crust lives, the only thing she learned was that rich men die just as easy as the boi polloi—and Plates didn't even get the pix he went after . . . though the murder scene the little lensman caught paid off just as well.

CHAPTER ONE

Invitation to the Brawl

"**T**IME to get dressed, Plates!" Plates O'Rion was doing night homework on his income tax return. In his newspaper days, the little photog's return had been a cinch—

just adding up his annual salary and deducting the allowance for his wife and daughter.

But since the pint-sized veteran had set up in business as a specialist in legal photography, his income tax problem was one to be taken with aspirin. The Irish-blue eyes he lifted to his daughter were

absent-minded and figure-fogged. To his amazement, Sally O'Rion was wearing an evening gown out of which her slim, bare shoulders rose dazzlingly.

Even more amazingly, she dropped onto his desk a costume which he recognized as his own soup-and-fish. The tailcoat had been embalmed in mothballs for years. He hadn't worn it since the days when he used to cover the Governor's Ball.

He gaped. "I'm supposed to get dolled up in *that*? In God's name, why?"

"Because," dimpled Sally O'Rion, "today's Brooke Sataw's seventieth birthday."

Plates' bewilderment increased. Brooke Sataw, he recalled without effort, was an extremely crusty old eccentric—a retired Wall Street pirate, living on so wealthy a scale that burglars, paying his country home a Christmas Eve visit, had been able to pick up nearly fifty thousand dollars worth of trinkets lying around the premises.

He knew this from skimming the headlines, though, and not because Brooke Sataw was a personal friend of his. His list of personal friends didn't include any eccentric millionaires, so the tailcoat remained a pointless mystery.

"Today is probably lots of guys' birthdays," he grumbled, "but do I have to put on a monkey suit to celebrate it?"

"You're going to take the birthday picture," his daughter explained. "The *Tribune* phoned and asked if you could take the assignment, and I told them yes."

It began to make sense now. Plates had retired from newspaper work, but the manpower shortage left the local dailies desperately short-handed and they frequently begged him to cover the photo angle on an assignment.

"O.K. But why do I have to go disguised like a headwaiter from the Ritz?" he protested.

Sally O'Rion drew a deep breath.

"Plates," she warned, "everyone else at that party will be dressed formally, and you're not going looking like you bor-



The uniformed man's arm shot out with the speed of a striking cobra.

rowed your costume from a scarecrow! Not with me, you're not!"

The little photog blinked, gulped: "You—you . . .?"

"I'm going along. I can pose as your assistant. I've always wanted to see how the other half lives—the upper half—and this is my chance."

"Wonderful!" gritted Plates O'Rion. "You want to go slumming in high society, so I'm supposed to dress up in—well! It's things like this make me realize what paddles are made for!"

Sally tossed her blond head, unintimidated by her parent's tooth-edged tones. The eighteen years of her do-as-she-pleased existence had taught her that Plates was just a big bluff, incapable of putting such threats into action.

"It's almost eight o'clock. I'll be back in ten minutes to fix your white tie," she announced, and stepped lithely toward the door.

Plates crouched over the soup-and-fish, rubbing a forefinger at his scrubby gray mustache as he stared after his delectable daughter. By some freak of heredity, Nature had juggled the chromosomes and bestowed upon the O'Rions a family miracle in the shape of their slim, blond, movie-starlet-type offspring.

And after eighteen years, Plates was still stunned by the miracle. Which explained why Sally always had her way with him!

"So she wants me to help her crash Brooke Sataw's birthday party, does she?" The photographer grinned complacently to himself. "Well—I bet she'll be the prettiest girl there, at that. Yes, sir! Sal will put all those rich dames so far in the shadow—"

No suspicion crossed his mind that the affair in the big, lonely Sataw country mansion wasn't going to be that kind of a party. . .

PRACTICALLY an hour later, Sally O'Rion located the Sataw doorbell with her thumb, and then turned to Plates.

"Your gardenia!" she gasped.

He'd managed to crush the flower in his lapel when he lifted his camera case out of his jalopy and slung the strap across his shoulder.

With swift, deft fingers Sally pounced

at it, got the flower smoothed to something like its former shape, and was adjusting his white bow tie to the horizontal when the butler inched open the massive, carved oak door.

Sheep-faced and beef-shouldered, the butler's disillusioned stare took in Plates, the girl, and the jalopy. "Ya-a-awss?" he articulated, apparently around some loose gravel in his mouth.

Sally twirled, gave him her brightest smile. "We're the O'Rions," she began confidently. "The *Tribune* sent us—"

"Aw-wh." The butler's mutton features froze into a well-trained sneer. "The photograwphers. You will find the—hawh—servants' entrance at the rear!"

His voice fairly dripped disdain onto the callers. For himself, Plates didn't care. Years of toting a news camera had hardened him to the foibles of the upper crust—and likewise, to snobbish butlers. Front entrance or back door, it was all the same to the veteran lens man—who would have dived headfirst into a sewer to get a picture he wanted.

But he heard Sally O'Rion's involuntary gasp—he caught the look on the eighteen-year-old's face!

It galvanized his wiry figure into a frantic, forward leap.

"Why—listen, you big hunk of Stilton!" he howled indignantly.

He was too late. His protesting voice merely bounced off the carved oak as the door slammed shut in their faces.

Plates gulped back profanity, quivering as he saw Sally's hot, embarrassed blush. He knew what she was wishing, that a trapdoor would open up and swallow her from his sight. The little photog's proud, parental heart seethed with sympathetic rage.

"Hell!" he ground out. "Never mind, hon! I say you're good enough to walk in anybody's front door! If old Sataw doesn't realize it, that's his hard luck. He can whistle for his birthday pix in the paper. Come on, we're scrambling out of here!"

Slender, girlish fingers clutched his arm as he swung toward the jalopy. "Wait a minute, Plates," Sally began thinly.

"What for?" her parent gritted. "I don't want to snap the old geezer! I didn't ask the *Trib* for this job, did I?"

The girl shook her blond head. "No, you didn't. It was all my idea . . . expecting to be treated like invited guests! Getting us dressed up in these silly clothes, and burning up rationed gas to drive out here. So I'm a silly little fool who didn't realize mere photographers were supposed to use the servants' entrance! But that's no reason *you* should waste your evening for nothing."

She tugged at her father's sleeve.

"We'll just go around to the back door and take that pix," she proclaimed, "and collect our ten bucks from the *Tribune!*"

She was right, and Plates' common sense admitted it. Only he wasn't going to settle for cash where Sally's pride was involved!

He hung back, scowling. "No! Hell with it! I don't need the dough that bad!"

"It isn't just the money, Plates. It's the assignment. You never fell down on one yet, and I won't let you start now."

Releasing his arm, she sprang ahead along the shrub-bordered path that encircled the big house. Plates hesitated, tugging perplexedly at his white tie. Slowly it dawned upon him that Sally's pride would suffer less by going through with this.

He trudged behind the girl—yards behind, as she vanished around the house corner.

HE didn't see how it started . . . only heard Sally's startled outcry, the hiss of ripping silk, and the bellow of a bull-throated voice.

"You double-crossing she-tramp!" the voice basso'd hotly.

Sally O'Rion screamed. The sodden thud of a fist slammed into her soft flesh and broke the scream in half!

All of it had happened in a matter of seconds—the few seconds it took Plates to come careening around the corner of the big house. Vague lights filtering from an overhead, open window show him Sally O'Rion sprawled limp on the walk, and showed him the man towering over the girl.

Normally, Plates was a peaceful guy. Indeed, his size compelled him to be so. Equipped with only a flyweight physique, he'd long ago learned to talk, think, and

trick his way out of any risky situation.

But anyone daring to lay a finger on Sal was enough to drive the pint-sized photog berserk!

His stare jumped up from the girl—caught the twinkle of highly polished puttees, the glimmer of brass buttons on a whipcord uniform, topped off by a lean, hawky face under a pulled-down cap visor.

"You damn, overgrown ape!" Plates yelped, lashing out furiously at the hawky face.

His flailing fist fell six inches short! It pounded futilely on a rock-hard, whipcord-clad shoulder. Next, the uniformed man's arm shot out with the striking speed of a cobra.

The fellow was powerful. His steely fingers gripped onto Plates' throat, crushing the little photog's fancy dress collar. Those fingers applied their brute pressure to the carotid arteries, instantly flooding the cameraman's skull with intolerable pressure. Plates' five foot four figure dangled at the end of the whipcord sleeve like a fish on a spear.

"Relax, pal." The voice drawled contemptuously into his bursting eardrums. "It's all a mistake, see? I thought she was somebody else."

The arm flicked, tossed the strangling photog aside. He banged joltingly against a veranda railing, and hung onto it.

The other man turned, slammed away through the shrubbery.

"P-Plates!" moaned Sally O'Rion.

He tottered onto the walk, dropped shakily to his knees beside the girl. "Sal!" he panted. "Sal, hon, are you all right?"

"I—I guess so. He slapped me so hard across the mouth—it dazed me for a minute—"

Plates cursed fervently at the sight of a red trickle starting from the eighteen-year-old's lip. Her dress was torn, too, revealing angry bruises where fingers had grasped her shoulder.

He tugged out a handkerchief, dabbed tenderly at the trickle of blood. "Ah, hell! This ends it! I'm getting you out of here first thing—and then I'm coming back with a cop and a warrant for that big baboon!" he promised bitterly.

A voice said silkily: "That won't be necessary, O'Rion. You *are* O'Rion, aren't you?"

Plates O'Rion tilted his head to peer upward at the male silhouette hanging out over the veranda rail.

"Yeah!" snarled the incensed photographer. "And who the devil are *you?*"

"The name is Boddle. Wilfred Boddle. I'm Mr. Sataw's secretary. I saw the whole thing, incidentally." The plump Boddle swung his legs over the veranda rail and dropped onto the walk in front of Plates. The light from the open window outlined his rotund features and highlighted a few, fuzzy hairs sprouting from a practically bald pate.

"It was really unintentional," he wheezed. "A case of mistaken identity. Pitchard ought to eat more carrots and improve his night vision."

"Pitchard . . . You mean that big ape?"

Boddle's bald head bobbed. "Quite so. Mike Pitchard. He's the family chauffeur. He happens to be carrying a torch for Ginger, who's one of the housemaids. He suspects her of two-timing him with some other chap, and he's laying to knock them both loose from their eye teeth."

He clapped a confiding hand on Plates' shoulder. "I wouldn't call a cop," he observed ingratiatingly. "It's not very dignified to get mixed up in the servants' quarrels, you know. Anyway, what's the good of it? Pitchard might get ten days in the clink, but there's nothing in that for you."

Sally O'Rion was struggling to her feet. "Well," the eighteen-year-old stated hotly, "I'll have you know somebody's going to pay for my dress!"

"You take the words out of my mouth. That's the very point I intended to make," soothed the secretary. "I'm sure Mr. Sataw will be glad to make handsome financial amends. Moreover, he'll dock Pitchard's pay—which is something a cop wouldn't do."

"O.K.," agreed Sally O'Rion. She turned to the reluctant, grumbling Plates. "After all, what can we lose? If we're not satisfied, we can still call the cop!"

"Follow me," murmured Wilfred Boddle.

SO they didn't go in the servants' entrance, after all. Boddle's plump figure escorted them up the side veranda

steps and through a pair of French doors.

Sally took one glimpse and gulped.

"Is this a party? It looks more like a wake!"

The room they entered had the sultry temperature of a hot-house. But except for the high-eighties heat, it wasn't any more hospitable than a museum after visiting hours. The handful of elderly guests all looked like relatives of the family, and moreover like relatives who were barely on speaking terms with each other.

Plates could see that Brooke Sataw's birthday party was off to the same gala start as Milan being raided by the RAF. The guests resembled a flock of refugees from a bomb blast—who were expecting the next bomb to fall any minute now.

He suspected they hadn't gotten over the shock of the three-months-old jewel robbery. Years of newspaper experience had equipped the little lens man with an almost infallible memory for headline stories. The Sataw gems, he recalled, hadn't been insured. There had been no need for insurance, since the heirlooms had been ensconced in a bank vault ever since Mrs. Sataw's death, twenty years ago.

It had been Brooke Sataw's announced intention to distribute the gems among the relatives, so the day before Christmas he'd taken the gems out of the bank vault. When he got home, however, it was to find two masked gunmen waiting for him. The unholy pair left Brooke Sataw trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey and so gagged he'd have been drowned in his own spit if his secretary hadn't overheard the old man's muffled groans.

Plates' memory was skimming the cream off all this while Sally hesitated, flushing as she tried to adjust her torn bodice.

"Do you suppose I could borrow a pin anywhere?" the girl asked.

"Upstairs," replied Wilfred Boddle. "The room at the head of the stairs. Ginger will make repairs, I'm sure."

Sally O'Rion darted hurriedly away. The secretary watched her go, then gestured to Plates. He guided the photographer along a hallway, opened a door for them both to enter.

Wilfred Boddle froze in the doorway. His breath clogged, and then blurted in a

stumbling whisper: "Mr. Sataw! Oh, my God!"

Plates O'Rion ducked inside, skittering past the shock-stunned secretary. With the habit of years, the little photographer whipped his camera eye-high. Framed in the finder, he saw Brooke Sataw sprawled askew in an armchair.

The old millionaire had a face like a battlefield. White, bristling brows stretched their barbed wire entanglement over eye sockets in which the staring pupils were like mute sentries. The campaigns of a lifetime had dug deep, trench-wrinkles in the sallow, fleshless cheeks.

The battlefield was a bloody one now. The crimson lifestream started from Sataw's temple, trickled down his trench-wrinkled cheek to flood the expanse of his white shirtfront.

As Plates' finger triggered to explode a flashbulb at the scene, he realized that Brooke Sataw's birthday pix was also his burial picture.

CHAPTER TWO

Much Ado About Murder

A TALL, tuxedo-clad figure whirled from the wall beyond the dead millionaire's chair.

"What the hell?" it screamed in a high falsetto of fright.

Plates O'Rion blinked. Recognition of the tall, pale-eyed youth was easy. Every newspaperman in the city knew Steve Sataw. The guy was the playboy black sheep of the Sataw tribe.

Some of his harebrained exploits were famous, like the time he'd dressed up in fireman's clothes and turned a waterhose on a New Year's Eve night club party. It was very funny, only three people got crippled in the resulting panic. Of course, that was a high point in Steve's career. Generally his stunts were more modest, such as moving a chair just before someone sat down. . .

Plates hadn't noticed the playboy before, because his camera eye had been glued on the blood-drenched Brooke Sataw. He wondered why Steve hadn't noticed him come in, hadn't heard Wilfred Boddle's exclamation.

Then the little photographer figured he

knew why, as he spotted the open wall safe at Steve Sataw's shoulder. The playboy had been ransacking the safe with such absorbed industry it took a blazing flashbulb to snap him out of it.

"S-Steve!" chattered Wilfred Boddle. "W-what happened here?"

Young Sataw jerked his pale, furious eyes momentarily away from Plates.

"I don't know," he responded. "I just got here. The butler said my uncle wanted to see me in the study. I came in and found him like this. The safe was wide open, so I looked to see if anything was missing."

The secretary wrung his plump hands in anguish.

"It's impossible!" he declared. "Mr. Sataw was alive ten minutes ago. The whole family has been gathered a few yards down the hall. Nobody heard any shot."

Plates edged closer and peered down at the gun in the millionaire's blanket-wrapped lap. It was a Bankers' Special .22—loaded with high-speed, hollow-pointed slugs, he noted, as he draped it inside a handkerchief to break out the chambers. One cartridge had been fired. The weapon had acted as a paperweight, holding down some papers—tax forms—Brooke Sataw had been poring over.

"You didn't happen to know the safe combination?" he asked Steve Sataw.

The playboy ruffled. "God, no! My uncle never told me anything about his private business."

Plates looked interested. "In that case," he doubted aloud, "how would you know whether anything was missing from the safe?"

Steve Sataw glared speechlessly. He was rescued by Boddle's voice. The secretary had stepped to the desk and picked up the telephone.

"The wire's dead!" he exclaimed. "Somebody must have cut it!"

Never slow on the uptake, it took little Plates O'Rion's alert brain less than a second to plumb the depths of the secretary's discovery. Brooke Sataw's demise might have been suicide, but suicides don't cut telephone wires. That could have been done for only one reason: to delay notification of the police!

Murder, mused Plates. And the killer

either needed time to cover up his tracks, or else he intended to pile some other crime atop the slaying.

The little cameraman broke with the thought, dived for the door.

Steve Sataw was right behind him, clutching at Plates' shoulder as the two reached the hallway.

"Damn you!" the playboy panted. "Where do you think you're going? Where do you fit into all this, anyway?"

"I'm a newspaperman," Plates retorted. "And I'm covering this story."

"You're— Burning hell! Give me that picture!"

His face was distorted. He was as pretty as a rat in a trap as he clawed at Plates' sleeve. "You damned little jackal! You're not going to drag Uncle Brooke's name through a stinking newspaper scandal!"

THE playboy's sudden aversion to publicity failed to impress Plates.

"Is that so?" he gibed. "Or are you really scared out of your pants because that pix shows *you* going through the old man's safe?"

Steve Sataw reacted in predictably hot-headed fashion. He cut loose and pitched a punch at the pint-sized photographer's jaw. It was just what Plates expected!

He scuttled backwards with fealike agility, ducked under Sataw's wildly flailing fist, and thrust out his foot to trip the onrushing playboy.

The mousetrap tactics worked even better than Plates had dared hope. The big idea was to start the playboy swinging so Plates could duck and run—something he couldn't do while Sataw was hanging onto his arm.

With relieved glee, he saw Steve go hurtling headfirst across the hall, polishing the floor with his face as he skidded to a painful stop.

Plates tucked his camera under his arm and raced for the stairs.

"Sal!" he shouted as he bounded up the steps, three at a stride.

It wasn't Sally O'Rion who welcomed him at the head of the stairs. It was a sense-alluring vision in the tightest of black, kneecap-length dresses who confronted the breathless photographer. A trifling tidbit of white apron and a lace

pancake atop her auburn hair advertised her position in the household.

"I saw it all!" she giggled. "Gee, you were wonderful!"

The auburn-haired wench was one of the maids, certainly. And Plates could guess which one, remembering the plight of the infatuated Pitchard. For if ever there was a maid a chauffeur would inevitably fall in love with, she was it. And if ever the maid lived who would probably doublecross the chauffeur with some other guy—she was that, too!

She was the faithless Ginger. She must be, because there couldn't be two of the type under one roof. Couldn't be, Plates thought, because one would have clawed the other's eyes out. . .

He didn't have much time to think about anything, though. Ginger's slim hands had captured his lapels! Her perfume was mingling with the aroma of mothballs which clung to his soup-and-fish!

"Sweetheart!" she breathed. "I love you! The way that you gave that damn Steve his lumps!"

Her lips were on a level with the shrinking Plates' own, almost brushing his scrubby mustache as she breathed the words. Her supple figure moved closer, clinging to the photographer like an iron filing to a magnet.

"Hellcat!" yelled Plates, twisting frantically away from the soft arm that tried to capture his neck.

Ginger's expression changed. She became a redheaded Fury. "You insult me?" she squealed. Her nails, tailored to razor-sharp edges, raked at the little photog's face.

Plates swore. The heel of his open hand slammed against Ginger's chin. She flew violently backwards and landed on the floor, lay there with her shapely legs waving wildly.

A door popped open, revealing Sally O'Rion's blond head. "*Plates!*" the eighteen-year-old gasped.

He was crouched over his camera, breathing hard.

"She made a play for me," he explained grimly, "and tried to swipe the holder out of my box in the clinch!"

Sally O'Rion's surprised eyes saw Ginger scramble to her feet. The redhead

whipped down the hallway toward the back stairs as if all the fiends of hell pursued her.

"Come on!" ordered Plates. "We're scrambling, too!"

He was perspiring like a tank corps in desert maneuvers, expecting to find a berserk Steve Sataw lying in wait in the lower hall. The playboy had disappeared, though. Not even the butler was in sight now, as he shoved open the carved oak front door.

On the double-quick, Plates urged Sally toward the jalopy. He'd almost reached it when he stopped short, sniffed the tainted air.

"*Judas X. Priest!*" he bellowed like an aroused bull-buffalo. "*Look at it!*"

The jalopy's worn tires stood in a pink lake. By the time he'd raced around behind the machine and flopped to his knees to peer upward, the gasoline had stopped dripping.

"Some son-of-a-witch punched a hole in the gas tank!" howled Plates wrathfully.

CHAPTER THREE

Hide and Go Seek

SALLY O'RION complained: "First the chauffeur jumps out of a bush and plays caveman games with me. Next I find you knocking that redhaired siren for a loop. And now it's our gas tank." She shook her blond head. "I wish somebody'd give me just a hint what all this is about."

"It's murder," Plates responded glumly, "and we're in the middle of it. The gas tank was to keep us from leaving here. It couldn't be anything else."

"What—what do we do now?"

Plates gnawed at his underlip, asking himself the same question. They could set off afoot, he mused. But probably that was just what the killer hoped for. What could appeal to a murderous mind more than the prospect of trailing a victim across a dark countryside, out of sight and sound of the house?

He snapped sharply: "You're beating it back inside, that's what!"

Sally O'Rion blinked at the unaccustomed note of command.

"Go on!" he reiterated hoarsely. "It's

the pix they're after. As long as you haven't got that, you're safe enough."

"But what about *you?*" his daughter worried.

Little Plates O'Rion shrugged. A photo of the slain millionaire, with one of the heirs ransacking the safe in the back-ground, was worth a lot of dough. As a family man, with a war-sized income tax to pay, he couldn't afford to be caught without a barrel just when the sky promised to open up and rain down dollars.

True, the film might be considered a death warrant while he carried it around in his camera. But once safely hidden away, it would have just the opposite effect.

The problem was how and where to conceal a 4x5 inch oblong of photographic film that had to be kept in absolute darkness until developed! Especially when he had the impression he was being watched right now—that every move he made from now on would be watched.

His eyes followed Sally O'Rion to the big front door while his wary brain scouted for an answer. The girl disappeared inside—and Plates spun around, his stare hunting past the Sataw mansion to the barely seen, smaller building across the yard.

"The garage," he muttered.

Why not? It was surely the last move anyone would expect from him now.

His heart was throat-high as he leaped into the fifty yard sprint across the lawn. Apparently the strategy was O.K., though. He reached the refuge unmolested.

Ignoring the wide front doors, he darted around to a smaller side one, shoved it open, lurched inside. Breathing hard, he fumbled to strike a match. Its yellow glow showed him three cars in the place, two seemingly in running condition, the third jacked up and covered with newspapers.

"I couldn't be lucky enough to find a key in one of these buses," Plates doubted aloud.

He wasn't.

He turned from the second machine—and ducked from the wrench that came whirling into the cave of light supplied by his match. Inches closer, and it would have chipped the photographer's skull.

A frantic clink of flying heels stampeded from around the jacked-up and news-

paper-clad machine. He'd dropped his match as he dodged the wrench, so Plates got only a glimpse of the short-skirted figure diving out through the door.

"Ginger!" he breathed. "The little she-devil. . ."

The photog struck a fresh match, stooped, scooped the wrench off the floor. Stairs, he observed, angled up the garage's sidewall. "That ape of a Pitchard must have quarters above here," he decided. Maybe Ginger had been paying the guy a call.

He eased up the creaking steps, tried the door at the top. Plates pressed his lips tightly together and fumbled to find a wall switch. The place appeared empty of occupants. It contained a divan, armchairs, a table, just the usual furnishings. He plodded through the apartment until he found a bathroom.

A MEDICINE chest mirror gave him a glimpse of the fiery cat-scratches where Ginger had clawed his face. There was lipstick on one corner of his mustache, Plates noted. He yanked the chest open and explored its shelves.

A tin container labeled *Sodium Perborate* looked like just the ticket. Plates pried off the top, shook the white, powdery contents into the wash-basin. Behind him was a shower stall. He clicked off the light and groped his way inside the stall.

In the darkness, it took his experienced fingers only a moment to yank the double-holder out of his Graphic, peel out an oblong of film, and twirl this into a snug roll. The roll he tucked into the can, and then recapped it.

The mirror reflected the ghost of a grin under his mustache when he switched on the light again. It also reflected a smear of white powder on his tailcoat lapel. Plates' attention was concentrated on the pocket provided in the nether regions of the tailcoat. He tucked the holder away there, and then sauntered out into the first room again. He strolled over to its window and peered down into the night.

With the ceiling bulb blazing behind him, his pint-sized figure made a perfect target for any eyes that happened to be in the yard below. He prayed mutely he wouldn't prove the target for anything more lethal.

Fifty yards away, and directly opposite him, Plates could make out the study window. He could even see the master of the house sprawled in his death chair.

Brooke Sataw was not alone. Plates' stare picked out a hawky silhouette, so tall it had to bend over to peer inside the wall safe. The chauffeur, Pitchard, was going through the vault as Steve Sataw already had before him.

Plates' attention was jerked abruptly away from the scene in the study. He heard footfalls clattering up the garage stairs.

"Hello?" a hoarse voice appealed. The door flung open, revealing Wilfred Boddle. "Oh, it's you," the secretary mumbled. "I'm looking for Pitchard. He's got to go for the State Police. We can't let Steve run around loose here."

Plates cocked an eyebrow. "Steve?" "He's crazy, you know." Wilfred Boddle propped himself against the inner edge of the door jamb. He whisked out a handkerchief and towed his perspiring face. "That's why he isn't in the armed services. He was drafted, but the Army psychiatrists turned thumbs down."

Plates thought it over. "Then those drunken pranks of his. . .?" he mused.

"Weren't drunken pranks at all!" snapped Boddle. "They were the products of a diseased brain. Naturally the family tried to hush it up, but Steve's as crazy as a loon. That murder tonight is just what anyone could have expected from him!"

Plates gave a twisted smile. "You're sure it was Steve?"

"It couldn't be anyone else." Wilfred Boddle phrased the accusation doggedly. "The rest of the relatives were all together, in another room. Steve's the only one who had the opportunity. He had plenty of motive, too. The old man wanted to see him alone, and I suppose threatened to cut him out of his will because of Ginger."

"Ginger!" Plates echoed.

The secretary nodded. "I told you she was two-timing Pitchard with another guy. Well, Steve was the other guy. The old gentleman probably got wind of the mess and ordered the thing stopped. In a crazy rage, Steve grabbed the gun and shot him."

"Grabbed—"

"Out of the desk." Impatience edged Wilfred Boddle's tone. "It's Mr. Sataw's own gun. He bought it after that robbery last Christmas. All Steve had to do was pick it up and shoot. There's no mystery about it, not when you know Steve."

Plates deliberated. There was nothing essentially wrong with Boddle's theory. It covered the murder neatly. Trouble was, it didn't quite cover all that had happened since the murder.

He jerked his thumb. "Take a look over into the study," he suggested, "and see what you see."

The secretary hurried to the window. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed.

Plates, grinning wryly, peered over the other's shoulder. His grin dropped like mercury in a Russian thermometer. For a moment he couldn't believe his bulging eyes.

There were two figures in the study. One, as before, was that of Brooke Sataw. But the chauffeur's tan-clad silhouette had vanished from the scene. Instead, sprawled across the study desk lay a slim, bare-shouldered shape, dazzling blond head limply a-hang over the desk's edge.

"Hell's fire!" raved Plates O'Rion. "It's Sal!"

He whirled and pounded into agonized flight.

CHAPTER FOUR

The \$47,300 Motive

LITTLE Plates O'Rion raced toward the big house with all the speed in his wiry legs. He double-cursed himself for his folly in sending Sal back into the murder mansion alone. He damned himself for being the possessor of a one-track brain, for imagining she was perfectly safe so long as she had nothing to do with his pix.

He knew now the pix played only a minor part in the enigma. Pitchard hadn't been hunting for photographic film in the study. Sally O'Rion must have ventured in there just in time to catch the chauffeur red-handed. The brute had knocked her cold—or worse.

His flying strides had carried him al-

most to the veranda when it happened. His eyes, glued on his goal, didn't see the convulsive movement of the figure that crouched in the shrubbery. He didn't see the length of garden hose that suddenly jerked up off the lawn.

The hose snagged Plates across his ankles. His pint-sized figure grooved the air with a catapulting belly dive. He crash-landed on the turf with force that pounded the breath out of his lungs.

The stunning impact of the fall dizzied Plates, flung his wits into a ring-around-the-rosy whirl. He floundered helplessly in the grass as Steve Sataw hopped out of the bushes. The playboy spotted a flashlight around, stopped it on Plates' camera beside the panting photographer.

"Get up!" he gritted. "What the hell you done with it?"

Plates inhaled rackingly. "You mean—film. It's where—you—won't find it." He got the words out in broken-winded gulps.

"Get up," the playboy repeated, gesturing. Plates saw the guy had a gun in his fist. It looked like the identical Banker's Special .22 Long Rifle that had been parked in Brooke Sataw's lap.

The photographer struggled lamely to his feet. "Listen!" he appealed desperately. "My kid's been hurt! I gotta go to her—"

"Nuts to that! Get going! Right back where you came from!"

Plates started stumbling toward the garage, with Steve Sataw gun-herding him along. The photog figured his captor might be demented enough to start shooting. He'd seen Brooke Sataw's fate, resulting from the Special's load of high speed, hollow-pointed cartridges. Ammunition of that type, even in the small caliber version, possessed plenty of lethal potentiality!

A dose of such lead poisoning would be of no help to Plates, or to Sally, either. He submitted tamely to being herded inside the garage. Steve Sataw switched on the lights in there, jerked his head toward the stairs.

"You were up there—I saw you at the window," the playboy growled.

Plates climbed, wistfully picturing a Wilfred Boddle who might be waiting behind the door, wrench in hand. The

hope expired reluctantly as he stepped into the vacant quarters. Boddle must have taken his departure promptly on Plates' heels. . .

"Where'd you hide it?" Steve Sataw demanded.

When Plates shook his head, the playboy started prowling the place. He toured the room until he reached the divan, knocked over its cushions with a swipe of his hand.

Plates O'Rion blinked at what he saw there. Tucked down back of the cushions had been concealed a Savage bolt-action Hornet rifle, one equipped with a telescopic sight.

"Wicked!" he commented. "They knock off woodchucks at two hundred yards with those."

Steve Sataw's pale eyes jerked up. His lips twitched as he stared at Plates. He exploded into speech. "Hah! That wasn't on you before!"

THE playboy bore down, stuck out a hand to finger the white smudge on the photographer's lapel. He garnered a grain or so of the white substance, sniffed at it, gingerly transferred it to the tip of his tongue. A knowing glitter flashed into his pale eyes.

"Tooth powder, or mouthwash maybe," he diagnosed. "The bathroom, huh? Get going!"

He crowded Plates ahead of him. Clicking on the bathroom light, he clucked his tongue over the whitish residue in the wash-basin. Then he made a pawing, left-handed grab at the medicine chest front.

Plates took one look at the shelves. The sodium perborate can wasn't where he'd left it—wasn't here at all.

The little photog's lips puckered around a whistling sound. "Beat you to it," he breathed.

"Huh? What the hell—"

Plates shrugged. "You're not the only one smart enough to dope out what that smudge on my coat meant. Wilfred Boddle must have followed the same line of reasoning, but first."

"Boddle! You're lying!" the playboy screamed. "No, by God! I bet it's the truth!"

He looked fully as crazy now as the secretary had proclaimed him to be. Cer-

tainly there wasn't room in his neurotic brain for more than one train of thought at a time.

"Boddle!" he choked, and then flung around as if Plates O'Rion had ceased to exist. His feet fairly rocketed in their flight across the floor.

Almost weak-kneed with relief, Plates tottered out into the other room. He stumbled to the window and stared across the yard into the study.

Sally O'Rion no longer rested limply across the desk. She was leaning against it, and talking to the beef-faced butler.

"Thank God!" whispered the little photog gratefully.

He crossed to the divan and picked up the Hornet rifle, peered at its chamber load of high speed hollow points, and tucked it under his arm. He hurried down the steps, and had reached the concrete floor below when he became aware of the sound.

Plash, it said, *plash*, *plash*.

Like a leaking faucet. Only a little thicker—like a car leaking oil, maybe.

His stare slid over the two nearest machines, vaguely noting that both carried B stickers. The sound was more distant, though. It seemed to come from the third vehicle, the one that had been jacked up for the duration.

Plates' forehead grooved into a frown. He dropped down on one knee and stared under the machine. The red puddle he saw there lifted the hairs on the nape of his neck.

He sprinted around to the back of the car. The trunk compartment was locked. He dived to the garage's workbench, grabbed a ball-peen hammer, returned to smash savagely at the lock handle. Perspiration flowed from his forehead as he yanked up the trunk lid and exposed its contents.

"Ye gods!" The little photog's breath sawed through his teeth, expelling an oath of horror.

Before his bulging eyes lay cramped the figure of the maid, Ginger. Her head was wedged into the restricted space in such fashion that the descending hinge had crushed her features when the compartment was closed. It explained the spilled blood, but not the cause of death.

She'd been strangled, with a noose of

wire that twined deep in the swollen, discolored throat.

Plates started to lower the lid, stopped with revulsion twisting his stomach. He couldn't jam that steel hinge down again into the dead girl's face. But neither did he want to leave the trunk compartment open, displaying the corpse to whoever came along.

He decided to compromise, prop the compartment slightly open with the tool bag that lay inside. He reached for it—and knew instantly, by the feel, it didn't contain tools.

Plates snatched it, pawed at the drawstring, shook out a palmful of its contents. The trinkets that cascaded into his fingers flashed like liquid fire. . .

THE photog's brain clicked like a camera shutter. It didn't take him more than one-hundredth of a second to realize the truth. Ginger's murder had inadvertently turned up the stolen Sataw gems.

Thoughtfully, he trickled the loot back into its bag, tucked the bag away into the tails of his monkey coat. Ideas were popping inside his skull with the brilliance of exploding flashbulbs.

Clutching the Hornet rifle in a moist grip of excitement, he sped toward the house. This time no Indian rope tricks with garden hoses barred his way. . . The crime cast was assembled in the study. Steve Sataw cowered against the wall, his face the unpleasant color of slightly spoiled salmon.

Wilfred Boddle plunged into explanation. "The damned lunatic came at me with a pistol. Luckily, Mike Pitchard entered in the nick of time. Otherwise, Steve would have killed me as he did his uncle, and with the same gun, too."

Pitchard sat with one tan-garbed, puttee-clad leg a-dangle over the edge of the study desk. His hawky visage tried hard to wear a look of modesty.

"It wasn't nothing much," he disclaimed. "I just bopped the bozo, was all."

Wilfred Boddle continued: "Meanwhile, Jenkins here has found where the phone wire was cut. He made repairs, and the State Police ought to arrive in a matter of minutes."

The beefy-featured butler tried to look

modest, too. Sally O'Rion was making herself inconspicuous against the side wall. Plates peered anxiously at his offspring.

"What happened to you, hon?" he demanded.

Sal answered shakily. "I—I'm not sure. Somebody hit me from behind. It was that film-holder you told me to hide. I was going to lock it up in the safe here until the police came."

Astonished sound faltered in Plates' throat. For a dread instant, he feared the blow must have addled the eighteen-year-old's wits. He hadn't given her any film-holder to hide. She seemed to be in the grip of some inexplicable delusion.

"Your daughter's experience clinches matters," Wilfred Boddle pronounced. "I was with you at the time. Mike Pitchard had just stepped out of the study a moment before. He was with Jenkins in the front hall when Miss O'Rion cried out and fell. That leaves Steve as the only one who could have assailed her."

"It's a dirty frame-up," sweated the playboy.

Little Plates O'Rion was staring helplessly at his daughter. Besides being knocked addle-witted, something seemed to ail her left eyelid. It took him a moment to catch on. Sal was trying to tip him the wink. . .

The little photog's worried expression lifted. "You're sniffing the wrong trail, Boddle," he announced. "Steve didn't kill his uncle, at least not with that revolver. Brooke Sataw was killed with this rifle."

Wilfred Boddle ogled the Hornet in Plates' hands, "I don't understand," he protested.

"Just use your reason, Boddle. A revolver shot might or might not have been heard by the family a few yards down the hall. The killer couldn't run that risk. He potted Brooke Sataw from inside the garage apartment, using the telescopic sight so he couldn't possibly miss at a mere fifty yards."

"But the difference in bullets. . .?"

"There's no difference. Both guns are loaded with high speed, hollow-point .22 cartridges."

The chauffeur slid off his perch on the desk. "Just who the hell are you accusing?" he menaced.

"Stand back, you!" Plates jerked the Hornet to waist level. He moistened his lips. "I'm adding up a few details in my mind, is all. This overheated house—a waste of fuel oil. Those passenger cars with B permits in the garage—I can't see why one old man needed that large a gas ration."

Pitchard flushed. "You can't hang any of that on me! I just work here."

"Naturally," nodded Plates O'Rion. "My remarks are aimed at your employer, not at you. I hate to speak ill of the dead, but I'm afraid Brooke Sataw was lacking in patriotism!"

PLATES stepped over to the corpse and picked up the income tax return from the blanket-draped lap.

"For instance," he muttered, "there's a little item of \$47,300. Brooke Sataw claimed the deduction as a loss from that jewel robbery last Christmas."

"What's wrong with that?" Wilfred Boddle asked. "Losses from theft are a permissible deduction."

Plates O'Rion grunted: "Everything's wrong with it. There was no such loss. The two masked bandits never existed, except in Brooke Sataw's imagination. The old pirate had the gems locked up in his wall safe all the time." Plates paused. "And furthermore, Boddle, you damned well knew it!"

"I? How could I?"

"You were the one who untied him, Boddle. You must have realized the knots were self-tied. You kept your mouth shut because you also realized if anything happened to Brooke Sataw, the first comer could cop onto \$47,300!"

Plates turned to Jenkins. The butler was pop-eyed. "Now," murmured the photographer, "who told you Brooke Sataw wanted to see Steve in the study?"

"Why, Boddle did," gulped the butler.

"Yeah! And who told you to send the *Tribune* photographer around to the servants' entrance?"

"Why, Boddle, too," Jenkins said.

"Stage work," commented Plates. He addressed the secretary. "You're the guy who phoned the *Tribune* and arranged for a photog to cover this birthday party. That's how you knew my name in advance. The scheme was to delay me until

Steve arrived, then march me in there to catch him with his murdered uncle. You must have been sweating blood when he arrived first, but the damned idiot saved the day by prowling inside the safe."

The playboy breathed hard. "I wanted to see what I had coming in the will."

Wilfred Boddle scraped his fingers over his chin. "It sounds like you're accusing me of murder," he surmised. "It won't wash, O'Rion. You'll find I spent the evening with the relatives. Only after you rang the doorbell did I step out onto the veranda."

"I'm not through yet," Plates warned. "Sure, you've got an alibi. You figured out a way of getting Brooke Sataw killed without any personal risk at all. That's where Ginger came into the plot. You told me she was double-crossing Pitchard with some other guy, but you left out the important part. The other guy was you!"

Mike Pitchard rocked on his puttee-wrapped legs. "What the hell!" he raved.

Plates grinned at the incensed chauffeur. "You were the sucker, Mike! Ginger could twist you around her little finger. She sold you Boddle's idea, the idea that the jewels were in the safe. You were the actual killer, the dumb bozo who squeezed the rifle trigger."

Pitchard cursed. "That's a filthy lie!"

The photographer continued placidly: "Ginger was supposed to be watching from an upstairs window. She would slip downstairs, park the revolver from which one shot had been fired in the old man's lap, and grab the gems out of the safe. She told you she'd found out the combination—of course, it was Boddle who knew that secret!"

"But she didn't show up. It began to trickle through your thick skull you were being double-crossed. That's why you were prowling around in the shrubbery outside—why you grabbed Sal by mistake." Plates swung a challenging stare to Wilfred Boddle. "Getting back to you," he resumed. "It was a sweet set-up. Mike Pitchard had done the kill-job for you. Steve Sataw, a neurotic nut the Army couldn't use, was doing everything he could to elect himself fall guy. The cut phone wire and a hole in my gas tank gave you time to attend to the one other detail before the cops could be called."

The secretary managed a mocking smile. "Meaning what?"

"Ginger," said Plates softly. "She'd already two-timed Pitchard. You knew she might do the same with you. In fact, she tried to. She was in the garage to-night, trying to lift the loot you'd hidden in what you thought was the unlikeliest spot of all. You were trailing me to the garage, and when she dashed out of there—you knew what she'd been up to. That's why you killed her, Boddle."

"Killed!" the chauffeur exploded. "He killed—why—you damned fat hog!"

Boddle squealed with panic, whipped up the revolver he'd gotten away from Steve Sataw.

The .22 slug in his belly didn't stop Pitchard. He stumbled, but he got his hands on the secretary's plump throat. "I'm spilling," he muttered. "I'll take the so-and-so to the chair with me. He's the brain that put me and Ginger up to it—"

THEY journeyed back to town—hauled by a tow-car.

"One thing," Plates sighed, "I haven't

figured out though—is who slugged you?"

Sally O'Rion confessed: "Nobody did."

He blurted: "But, Sal—"

"It was my feminine intuition," the eighteen-year-old sparkled. "I just pretended somebody stole the film from me. That way, they'd each think one of the others had it—and that way they'd let you alone."

"Intuition!" gasped the little photog. "Listen, you didn't fool anybody but your old man! Boddle had already glogged onto that sodium perborate can—he knew the pix would show the open window—the way Brooke Sataw really got shot!"

Sally O'Rion sighed. "Well, you weren't too smart yourself. Spilling powder all over yourself to show exactly where you hid the darned thing!"

"I wasn't so dumb, either. It was a double holder, Sal. It had two films in it. The one I parked in that bathroom didn't have any picture on it at all." And Plates allowed himself a contented chuckle. "I figured nobody who tracked my moves that far would guess I had the real pix in my coat-tail, after all."

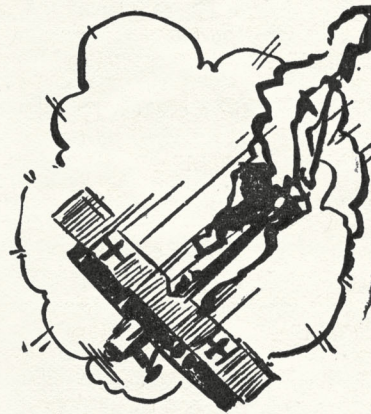
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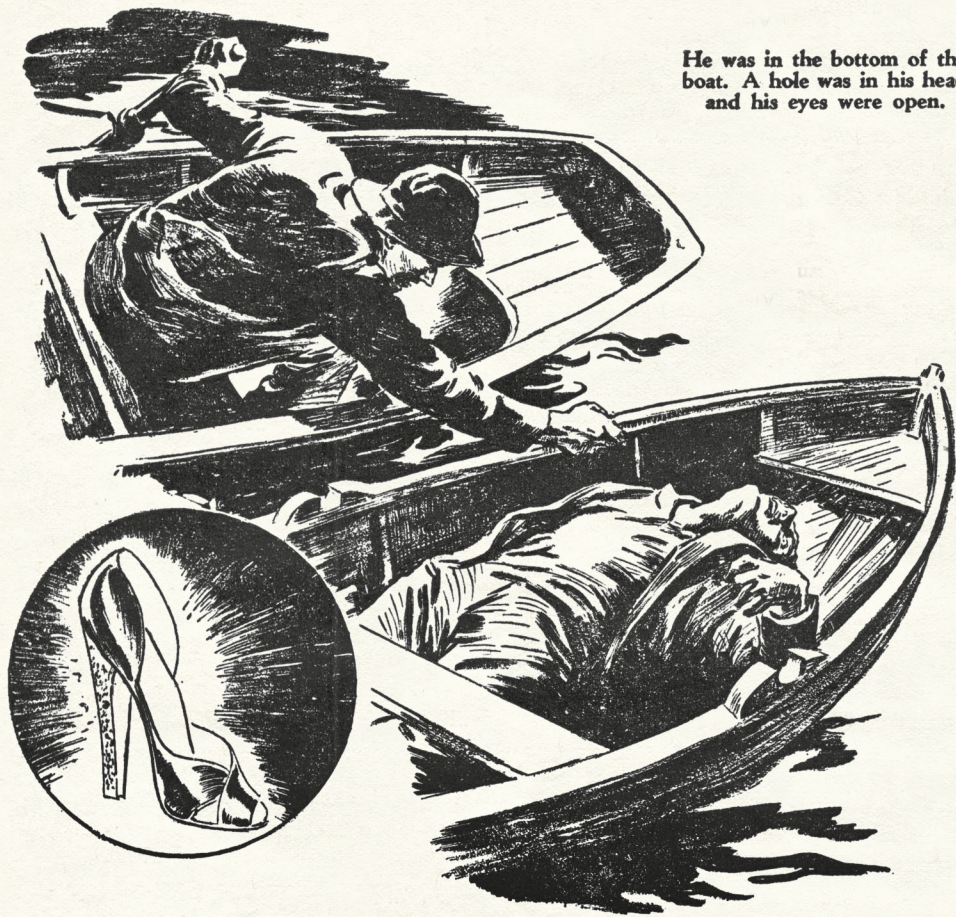
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He was in the bottom of the boat. A hole was in his head and his eyes were open.

MURDER IS MY MEAT

By DUANE YARNELL

When Johnnie Dolan went out on the river that night with a loaded gun the sheriff hoped he was rowing straight for the hot seat. And when Eb Squibb's corpse turned up a few hours later it looked like his hope had come true. But there are more ways than one to cheat the chair—and other game besides man a hunter can go after by moonlight.

CHAPTER ONE

Death in Deep Water

THE barrel came wobbling down the dock through the mist. It was six feet away before Johnnie Dolan saw the legs and knew it was a man.

He weighed maybe three hundred. The

flapping, khaki slicker made him look even dumpier than he was. He took a long pull at the candy bar in his hand. He cocked an eye at Johnnie.

"Kinda nasty weather to be goin' out in a boat, ain't it, Slick?"

Johnnie Dolan didn't pay much attention. He was still thinking of the way

Eb Squibb's face had been when the cowed jury brought back the verdict of not guilty of murder. He kept remembering the leer of that face and the way Eb Squibb had swaggered out of the courtroom a free man. It did something to him. It put a tight knot in his stomach.

"You wouldn't be lookin' for Eb Squibb, would you, Slick?" the fat man asked.

Johnnie was getting annoyed. "If I answer that one, do I get a set of encyclopedias?"

The fat man finished the candy bar in one inhalation. He flicked the wrapper into the muddying stream. "You're kind of cute, ain't you, Slick?"

Johnnie said: "The name's Dolan. Do I send for a derrick, or can you get off my boat chain under your own power?"

The fat one moved fast. He stepped off the chain and the bow of Johnnie's rented boat went low in the water under the increased weight. The big one's slicker parted and the bright six pointed star loomed in the mist.

"Maybe you ain't heard, Slick, but I'm the law in this county."

Johnnie Dolan's lips curled bitterly. "You shouldn't be proud of it!"

The fat man, Sheriff Boone Davis, clamped a big hand on Johnnie's shoulder. His eyes were hard. "An honest jury decided Eb Squibb shot your old man in self defense. If you ain't satisfied with the verdict, I can't help it. But I'm warnin' you—don't go stalkin' Eb Squibb."

Johnnie flared. "Maybe the jury was honest. But a lot of honest people around here are scared of Eb Squibb. They're afraid to cross him, afraid they'll wake up with a knife between their shoulder blades the way my Dad did. If Eb Squibb says Dad attacked him, he's a liar. Eb murdered my old man! Murdered him in cold blood and then frightened a jury into freeing him. If you haven't got the guts to get the truth out of him, then I have! Get out of my boat, Sheriff!"

Boone Davis said: "I think maybe I'll take you down and give you a free room until you cool out, Slick."

Johnnie was getting sore. "I'm no criminal. Arrest me and I'll sue the hell out of you and your county. I'll spend every dime Dad left and I'll make you

look like the two bit hick gun toter you are. Right now, I'm going fishing. You can't stop me."

Boone Davis knew Johnnie wasn't bluffing. His voice took on a sugary purr. "O.K., Slick. But you ain't really goin' fishin' in this weather and you know it."

Johnnie said: "I can wipe my own nose. If it matters, I've got a fishing license."

"Eb Squibb lives up the river, Slick. You aimin' to fish up that way?"

Johnnie said: "There's no law against it."

Boone Davis' tone was triumphant. "But there is a law against packin' a gun on your hip. You got a gun, Slick. You bought bullets for it at the hardware store."

"And I bought a hunting license, too," Johnnie said.

"Duck season ain't in, yet. Federal charge to shoot 'em. Besides, a guy don't hunt ducks with a .32."

Johnnie said: "Maybe I like to hunt frogs. Maybe I don't like the way your ears flap. So I'm giving you one minute to arrest me and suffer the consequences—or get out of here."

The sheriff was mad. But Johnnie was in the clear. Boone Davis shrugged, stepped up to the dock. "I'm warnin' you, Slick," he called. "Keep away from Eb Squibb!"

JOHNNIE headed upstream toward Eb Squibb's river shack. He rowed quietly, angrily, steadily. And as he rowed, as the drizzle turned into a driving rain that eclipsed what little of the late light remained, some of his calmness returned.

For the first time since the trial, for the first time since Eb Squibb had murdered his Dad—Johnnie was sure of that point—he considered this thing clearly.

The law had taken its course, true enough. Johnnie wasn't going to improve upon that point. But he was going to face Eb Squibb and he wasn't going to be frightened by that knife the river man carried—the long, slim blade of steel that would flash open at the pressure of Eb Squibb's thumb.

Johnnie carried the .32 for that purpose. He was going to make Eb Squibb throw

that knife into the river and a moment later, when the gun followed the knife, Eb Squibb would find himself in a fair fight.

From that point on, it would be up to Johnnie. If Johnnie could batter that leer off Eb's face, if he could prove to him that he had no fear of him, there might be a good chance of beating a confession from the man. That was the way Johnnie wanted it. Man to man. He knew his Dad would have wanted it that way too. . .

He rowed against the current for half an hour. A decrepit old shack loomed like a tug in a fog. There was a rickety dock in front. Johnnie pulled up to the dock. Eb Squibb's boat was gone. Darkness was coming down fast and there was no light in the house. Johnnie pulled the slicker closer about his slim, hard body. He shivered. If necessary, he would wait all night for Eb Squibb to come home.

The gun pressed hard against his hip. The pressure was reassuring. He took the gun out, broke it open. The shells, new and shiny, were in place, ready if he needed them.

A frog croaked on the bank and Johnnie snapped a shot at it. His shot was wide and the frog disappeared with a loud splash. Upstream, a flight of startled ducks took wing, swirled low around a clump of willows.

The sounds came out of the night too swiftly to make a pattern. Three sounds Johnnie heard, although later, he forgot the order. There was a sputter as a motorboat began to churn. There was a hoarse shout. There was also a shot.

It came from around the bend, upstream. Johnnie unhooked the chain from the dock. He began to bend the oars against the current. The night was black, now.

He rounded the bend. A rowboat came out of the darkness, going the other way. Johnnie shouted. The man was bent low over the oars. He was wearing a slicker, but his hat was gone. His hair was white or gray. It was light hair and there was plenty of it. The night swallowed the man and there was nothing but the gurgle of water beneath Johnnie's oars.

That puzzled him. He started to turn back. His boat banged gently against a tin

rowboat, caught in a group of lily pads. The boat was empty.

Johnnie flashed his light against it. Eb Squibb's name was on the side. Johnnie looked over the gunnel and his breath dried the lining of his throat.

Eb Squibb was in the bottom of the boat. There was a hole in his forehead and his eyes were open, staring at the rain. Johnnie bent over, touched the still warm forehead. His fingers were stained a deep brown.

It was not iodine.

Johnnie Dolan's first thought was of self preservation. He had stalked a man and he had come upon that man—murdered. If he ran, he would establish his guilt in the eyes of the law. And if he stayed, Boone Davis would railroad him through a trial in which he wouldn't have a chance.

Someone had murdered Eb Squibb. Who had done it, what the motive was, Johnnie didn't know. But he meant to find out. And fast. Unless he could hang this murder on the guilty party, he knew he didn't stand a chance coming out of it with a whole skin.

He could still hear the motorboat, laboring against the current upstream. Pursuit was out. He remembered the boat that had passed him going the other way. Catching the man in this blackness was also an improbability.

Johnnie stabbed the darkness with his flashlight. The iron girders of a bridge took shape in the distance. A door opened in a highway joint up the road and before it closed again, a couple of bars of jazz came out and into the night. The rain was letting up. He didn't hear the motorboat any more.

His flashlight caught the slipper. The slipper was in the boat, beside Eb Squibb's right hand. It was a small, silver slipper, size 3AA. It was a three inch heel and it sparkled with rhinestones where the mud hadn't covered it. He turned it over in his fingers. It hadn't come from a mail order catalogue.

A car rattled over the bridge, stopped. Johnnie swore and doused his light. Another light stabbed the water, played around until it caught him in the glare. The light waggled over the bank and down the sandbar toward him.

Boone Davis loomed back of the flashlight. He waded through the shallow water, stepped into Johnnie's boat. A couple of guys waited, on the bank.

Boone Davis took his time, opened a fresh candy bar. His eyes, above the light, were hard. "I figured I'd run over to Eb's and keep an eye on you, Slick. If I hadn'ta stopped for some fresh carbyhyderts, I mighta saved you goin' to the hot seat."

Johnnie said. "You don't think that—"

"Save it till we get back," Boone Davis grunted. "And you better be thinkin' fast. That start you made is as lousy as any I ever heard." Boone Davis' teeth made a little clinking sound as they snapped down on a chocolate covered nut.

Johnnie's right hand was behind him. He shoved the silver slipper into his rear pocket. Somehow, he didn't know why, he felt that slipper might be the key to this river murder. If he gave it to Boone Davis, if he tried to explain that he'd found the shoe in Eb's boat, the sheriff would laugh at him. Boone Davis would say Johnnie had planted the slipper to throw off suspicion. If the slipper was the key that would unlock the jail door that would soon snap shut on Johnnie Dolan, then Johnnie wanted that slipper very close to him. . .

THE light blazed in Johnnie's eyes. He nodded his head but Boone Davis threw another pan of ice water in his face.

Boone Davis said: "I'm losin' my temper, Slick. You kept me up all night." Boone Davis stepped close so Johnnie could see his face. He sucked the last drop from the malted milk glass, then sank his fangs into a chocolate cookie. "You could have some carbyhyderts yourself, Slick, if you'd open up and talk."

Johnnie said: "Quote, go to hell, unquote."

"Gimme a confession," the sheriff wheedled, "and I'll put in a word for you. Go to trial and you'll get the hot seat sure."

"I didn't do it!" Johnnie insisted. His head was splitting from the light.

"You shot him in the back," Boone Davis said. "It was a .32 that done the job. . ."

"Every man on the river probably owns a .32!" Johnnie flared. "Besides, you didn't find the slug."

"Yeah. But every man on the river ain't flunked out in my little nitrate test. You did the shootin', Slick. You had the motive. I'm losin' my patience with you. After you shot him, what'd you do?"

"I ordered some lime from a mail order house and I was just sprinklin' it on the body when the G-men arrived!" Johnnie said bitterly.

A hand cracked against Johnnie's mouth and his head rocked back. "You got five minutes to make up your mind, Slick. I'm gettin' sleepy."

Johnnie said: "What about the gray-headed guy I saw on the river?"

"That's a gray-headed gag, Slick."

"How about lettin' me take off this slicker?" Johnnie asked.

"You'll wish you had that extra insulation when they clamp you in the hot seat."

Johnnie Dolan knew the big man had reached the end of his tolerance. He had surrendered his .32 and he had been brought straight up to this little room above the jail. The slipper was still in his hip pocket, nicely covered by the loose slicker.

"You know something?" Johnnie said.

"Spill it, Slick."

"I won't go to the hot seat."

The sheriff could still laugh.

"I won't go," Johnnie said, "because ten minutes after I swallow this thing, I'll be pushin' up daisies. . ."

Johnnie's hand became a fist and it darted for his mouth. Boone Davis swore as he dived. Fat fingers groped at Johnnie's closed mouth. "Don't swallow it, damn you!" Boone Davis yelled. "You don't get out that easy!"

Johnnie let him get good and worked up. He waited until the chin was close to his own chest. He brought his right fist up. It cracked along a padded jaw bone and the sheriff shuddered like a blimp plowing into a mountain.

Johnnie caught him, eased the gun out of the sheriff's holster. He leaped past the two guys at the door, slammed it, pushed the bolt from the outside. He took the steps two at a time, emerged into the street. In the east, gray light was beginning to appear.

CHAPTER TWO

Riverhouse Ghost

RIVERSIDE was a resort project that hadn't jelled as the promoters had planned. There were half a dozen road houses, a business block, four tourist camps and the boat house. Before the resort could be built, properly, the promoters had run out of funds and so the town had languished, half built.

The town's income came from the tourists who came to fish and hunt ducks, from those city people who came weekends to live in their hillside cabins.

The population was 1,004. It was not a very promising place for a wanted man to find refuge. By nightfall, every vacant cabin would have been searched. Common sense told Johnnie Dolan to scram. But if he did, he'd never be able to stop running. His only chance was to stay and unravel the murder that hung like a death sentence about his neck.

He took a long shot. Eb Squibb was a river man, a native. He had been a bachelor and he was now dead. So Johnnie Dolan went to Eb Squibb's river shack to catch some sleep.

He hid the slipper in the attic. If he got caught again, he wanted the slipper where he might someday be able to get to it again.

He stretched out on the bed and went to sleep.

He didn't dream about the fingers. They were going over him, pocket by pocket. He opened his eyes, leaned forward. A gun jabbed his chest, the gun he'd taken from the sheriff.

The man had white hair. Lots of white hair. He was about forty-five and his face had a prison pallor. He said: "Where's the silver slipper?" He had a calm, even voice.

Johnnie said: "What silver slipper?"

The man backed away, sat down on the chair. He kept his gun on Johnnie. "The slipper I watched you slip into your pocket last night. The slipper you got out of Eb Squibb's boat."

Johnnie said: "So you turned around when you passed me. You came back. You murdered Eb Squibb and then you came back to get the slipper."

The man nodded. "I came back, all right. But I didn't murder Eb Squibb."

"Then why do you want the slipper?"

Whitey shrugged. "That's my business."

Johnnie said: "It must be pretty important."

"I wouldn't be here, if it wasn't."

Johnnie said, guardedly: "Maybe I gave it to Boone Davis."

"Maybe you didn't, too. I climbed up the gutter of the jail. I listened to him grill you all night. I could see the slipper through your slicker when you left. I couldn't follow you right away because I was up there on the roof and there were a lot of guys milling around the jail."

"Then how'd you know I was here?" Johnnie demanded.

The man grinned wisely. "When a guy's been hunted a couple of times, he learns all the dodges. This is the place I would have picked."

Johnnie Dolan didn't get it. Not any of it. The man had said he hadn't murdered Eb Squibb and somehow, his voice had the ring of truth in it.

Johnnie said: "You're an ex-con."

"Why shouldn't I admit it—to you? You're jammed worse than I am."

Johnnie said: "Where do we go from here?"

"First, we get the slipper."

"Why should I tell you where it is?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

Johnnie stretched his cramped muscles, but the gun stayed on him. "Maybe I don't like the jam I'm in. Maybe I don't want to give up the one thing that can get me out of this mess."

"The slipper won't help you," the guy said.

Johnnie said: "It was in the boat."

"I left it there," the guy said.

"The next thing, you'll say Eb Squibb committed suicide. You don't make sense."

"I saw the murder," the guy said.

That made sense.

"Who did it?" Johnnie demanded.

"I don't know. I didn't see him."

Johnnie blinked. "What's the visiting hours at your nut-house? Next time I have an afternoon off, I'll run up for tea."

The white-headed one grinned. He put his gun away.

"Maybe we better work together," he said.

"Not if it makes me talk like you," Johnnie grunted. "I'd rather free lance."

WHITEY ignored him. He said: "In the first place, I'm down here where the cops of Massachusetts aren't apt to wonder about me. They've got reason to think I'm dead and since there's a little deal they wanted me for, it's up to me to let 'em keep thinking I'm dead. It's a bum rap. The first two times I was guilty as hell and I served my time. But the third time it was the double cross. You follow me?"

"This is a good place to disappear," Johnnie admitted.

"So I'm fishing for bass in the rain," Whitey said. "I hear voices and I can see two boats together. There's a shot and then a motorboat pulls out and it's so rainy I can't recognize anyone. Up the bank, I happen to see a girl running. I figure she's been shot at and I follow her a little piece until I come to this silver slipper. She's disappeared. I look back over the bank and there, in the boat, is this stiff. To make sure, I go down and see. He's dead, all right, so I get the hell out of there!"

"And leave the slipper," Johnnie said.

"Yeah . . . a muddy slipper that's lousy with my prints. Look, guy, Boone Davis is no fool. Why'd you think he questioned you so long if he has an airtight case against you. Now that you're gone, he'll be diggin' around. Pretty soon, he's gonna find this girl's prints. He maybe'll find the other shoe. He'll find the girl and he'll sweat her until she cracks. Or maybe it'll be easier than that. Maybe somebody besides me saw her. That slipper's mixed up in murder. The girl must have seen what went on—and she must have seen me. If my prints ever get to Washington, then they put the heat on me again for that bum rap. I don't want any of it."

Johnnie said: "If I give you the slipper, you're in the clear."

"Like hell," Whitey said. "I'm not in the clear until this thing's solved the way it oughta be. Neither are you. We're both in a crack. So maybe we better work together. Tell me where that slipper is, let

me get my prints off it and I'll help you until we find the answer. What've you got to lose?"

Johnnie debated. Right now, he needed help. Plenty of help. He could gain nothing by involving a man he felt sure hadn't done the job. And if he used the slipper as a whip to make Whitey testify that Johnnie hadn't done the killing, what would that gain him? He knew how valueless was an ex-con's testimony on the stand. He decided to play along.

He got the slipper. He let Whitey wipe the prints off it. He said: "Now, I've helped you, Whitey. What do I get in return?"

Whitey nodded, satisfied. "Much obliged," he said. "Now here's what I know. There was something in Eb Squibb's hand last night. I got it here. It looks screwy, but it might be a lead."

Johnnie held out his hand. He looked down at his palm. His stomach had a queer, tight feeling. He was looking at three grains of corn.

"Is this a gag?" Johnnie demanded bitterly.

"It's no gag," Whitey said. "It's the McCoy, just like I told you. Personally, I've got a hunch. I want to follow it. I want out of this mess the same as you do. I don't know what the dame saw—except she probably saw me. If she decides to talk she could give me plenty of trouble. We got two angles to follow up. The slipper and the corn. You find the dame and see what she knows. I'll figure out the corn. I've got a cabin down the river and we'll both work from there."

Johnnie said: "How can I get out to work on it?"

Whitey grinned. "Ever hear of the Riverside Little Theatre Group? They've got plenty of makeup, brother. I'll help you bust in there tonight and when we get through with you, even your mother wouldn't know you."

JOHNNIE DOLAN waited until just before closing time before going into the Riverside Mercantile. The owner, a short bald little man, was fussing with the small change in the cash drawer.

Johnnie caught a glimpse of himself in a full length mirror. Three days had given him a good start on a mustache.

His once dark hair was now a deep red and the temples were tinged with powder. The dime store glasses gave him a scholarly look. He was satisfied with himself.

"I'm from the Acme Shoe Company," Johnnie said.

The store owner scowled. "I'm not buyin' any shoes. Cow hides is cheap and shoes is higher'n Pike's Peak."

Johnnie said: "My shoes are different." He unwrapped the silver sandal with the rhinestone heel. He held it out for examination. "My shoes are exclusive models. We make just one pair and then destroy the pattern."

The owner squinted. "World's full of crooks. That shoe ain't hand made. It's one like I ordered for the girl who sings at the Gun Club."

Johnnie Dolan's eyes glowed and he was glad he wore the glasses. "Not just exactly," he said. "It couldn't be. . ."

"Just exactly, young man! I reckon I know shoes when I see 'em! I wouldn't order anything from your company, if it was the last thing I ever did! Now get out before I lose my temper!"

"Mercy!" Johnnie said.

He went out. He felt the little man's eyes upon him. He walked into a hamburger joint and ordered a Merchant's plate with pie. He said to the kid: "Nice singer they got at the Gun Club."

"Raven?" the kid said, grinning. "She's a dinger."

"Good voice," Johnnie said.

"Good everything," the kid grunted. He cocked an eye at Johnnie. "You a drummer? Yeah, you got the look, all right. Take a tip, friend. Keep away from Raven. Jeff Hooley who owns the joint has plenty of sweet on for her. He maybe don't look dangerous, but looks ain't everything." The kid lowered his voice. "Done two terms in the federal pen, they tell me. Dangerous as hell, even if he is a little guy."

Johnnie clucked. "He sounds bad."

"Used the mails to defraud," the kid said seriously.

"He's a mean man, all right," Johnnie admitted. He was feeling better. The girl's name was Raven and she worked at the Gun Club, a little place on the edge of town that catered to the whims of the

few tourists who frequented Riverside. Johnnie had cased the town well. The Gun Club consisted of tennis courts, a skeet range, a couple of gas pumps, and at night there was dancing and chicken dinners.

The kid said: "Howdy, Boone."

Boone Davis came in and sat beside Johnnie and the pie was already giving Johnnie indigestion.

"Gimme some carbyhyderts," Boone said. "Hot chocolate and a piece o' that nut cake."

"Yes sir, comin' right up, Boone." The kid poured water into the chocolate heater. "You got anything on that Dolan guy that bumped Eb Squibb, Boone?"

The sheriff snorted. "I got a good lead. But I'm not talkin'. I'm watchin' with both eyes. Ain't anybody I don't look at twice, just to make sure." Johnnie Dolan felt Boone Davis' eyes on him. His back muscles went taut. He looked straight at the sheriff.

"I'm from over Central City way," Johnnie said in a piping falsetto. "We're taking donations to build a new Community Club. I'm calling on the influential men of Riverside. I've got you down for a ten dollar donation, Sheriff. I'll take your check."

Boone Davis got up fast. He didn't wait for his hot chocolate. He took his cake in his right hand and smiled frozenly.

"See me later. I got something important I just thought of."

Johnnie listened to the door shut. "I'll take another piece of pie, kid. Cut one for yourself."

The kid grinned. "Yes, sir! Coming up!"

CHAPTER THREE

Murderer's Mask

THE girl was too good for a little dump like the Gun Club. Johnnie knew it before Raven had sung four bars. The baby blue spot caught the curving shimmer of her black gown. It put red flecks in the sheen of her deep jet hair.

She was slim and tall and her throat was the white stem of a flower. She sang with her eyes closed, with the dusky line of her lashes across her high cheeks.

Her voice was husky and her tone well formed by full crimson lips that sang each word as a separate caress. The men leaned forward. The women fingered their water goblets and looked at their men.

From the front table, a little man watched her every move. He was about fifty and he owned the Gun Club. His name was Jeff Hooley. He watched the girl, hypnotized. Johnnie paid little attention to him.

A man eased in beside Johnnie.

Johnnie said: "You're carrying a jag, Whitey."

Whitey's hands shook. "Hell's gonna break loose around here any time, now. I just heard the song and dance Boone Davis gave some city reporters. He knows Raven was on the river about the time of the murder. He found her prints late today."

Johnnie was puzzled. "The murder was three days ago. How'd he know when the prints were left?"

Whitey said: "That's easy. It didn't begin to rain until just before the murder. The ground was hard until just a few minutes before Eb Squibb got bumped. It quit raining when the sheriff arrived. The footprints had the sides washed in. It hasn't rained since then. You get it? She had to be there about the time of the murder to leave prints like that. Besides that, a truck driver saw her duck in the Gun Club a few minutes after eight. She was coming from the river. . ."

Johnnie said: "What does that get him?"

"I don't know. But the girl hasn't spilled, so she must be covering somebody. If she did see the murder . . . and if she's covering, what's to keep her from saying she saw you do it, if Boone puts the heat on her?"

Johnnie blinked. "I think I'll talk to her," he said.

"Maybe," Whitey said, "I'll have this case broke open before the girl can hurt you. I've got a hot lead. I'll know in a little while. I want another drink, though."

Johnnie waited until the girl finished her number. He'd underestimated Boone Davis. He'd played the guy for a fool. But Boone Davis had gone after every angle of this case and, slowly, the threads

were beginning to weave a pattern. The pattern wasn't clear, yet. But Johnnie Dolan had a hunch he wasn't going to like the finished picture.

Whitey nudged him. "Ever see that guy before?"

Johnnie looked toward the door where a barrel shaped man stood munching a chocolate bar.

"He don't look like Santa Claus," Johnnie admitted.

Whitey got up, went over to the bar. Johnnie called a waiter. "When Raven finishes her encore, tell her I want to talk to her on the veranda."

The waiter said: "The boss would push your nose in. He's funny about guys who make a play for Raven."

Johnnie said: "Tell her the fairy prince wants to slip the silver slipper on Cinderella's tootsie."

The waiter looked dubious. "I think you had enough beer, bud."

Johnnie handed him a bill. "Tell her what I said," he repeated.

The waiter blinked. "For ten bucks, I'd tell the boss I was sweet on her myself."

THE waiter moved toward the girl who was taking a bow after her encore. She listened to the waiter and her face got white. She got up and walked outside.

Boone Davis was pounding the side of a candy machine, trying to shake a bar out of it. Johnnie ducked out unobserved. He found the girl, sitting in a glider, well hidden from the door.

She said: "You wanted to see me, Hamlet?"

Johnnie grinned: "Is the disguise that bad?"

"You look like a ham actor if I ever saw one. Your picture is in all the papers and that red hair dye is the kind you see in every theatrical boarding house. I saw Boone Davis out there. You'd better be running."

Johnnie said: "I think he came to see you."

Raven's fingers crept to her white, curved throat. "Give me a cigarette, Hamlet." She was fighting for control. "Why should he want me?"

Johnnie watched her eyes. "He knows you saw a murder."

The girl said: "I don't understand." But he knew she did.

"Why stall, Raven? Murder isn't funny." He showed her the slipper. "It's yours. You lost it the night Eb Squibb was killed."

She stared at it. Her eyes were big. She was fascinated into immobility. "It . . . was stolen from me," she whispered.

Johnnie said: "What a lousy liar you make."

She grew sullen. "You're wasting my time. I was asleep that night. . ."

Johnnie said: "Maybe it don't matter to you. But I, personally, think a lot of my neck. Boone Davis is going to talk to you and I want to be darned sure you don't tell him you saw me do it."

She said: "Why should I tell him that?"

Johnnie studied her. "You're covering someone. You don't look like the kind to hide a murder without a good reason. How do I know you won't put the finger on me instead of the guy you saw do it?"

"I didn't see anything," the girl insisted.

"This is where I came in," Johnnie said.

"I'm scared." She *was* scared. She began to cry, soundlessly. The tears came down her cheeks and her mouth formed sobs that shook her. It didn't last long.

"I was on the river," she admitted, softly.

"Who murdered Eb Squibb?" Johnnie demanded.

"I . . . I don't know," she said.

Johnnie shrugged. She was lying. He was sure of it.

"Maybe you did it," he suggested.

She got up. He didn't understand, for a minute. Then he caught the sweet smell of fresh chocolate. Boone Davis was standing in the doorway. Raven walked over to the other side of the veranda. She had saved him. Why? He couldn't figure her at all.

Boone Davis said: "I want to talk to you, sister."

"Shall we go inside?" the girl asked.

"We'll take care of everything out here," Boone said. "A red-headed guy came this way. He happens to be Johnnie Dolan. Where is he?"

Johnnie waited, hovering back against the glider.

The girl said: "I saw him go down the road toward the bridge."

The sheriff grunted. "Won't get far. I got my men spotted around here. As for you, sister, you're in a spot. Concealin' a murder ain't funny. Gimme a confession you saw Dolan do it and you can play on the state's team."

Raven said: "I don't follow you."

"O.K. So you wanta stall. You think I don't know anything. Listen to this. I got you cold, by your footprints and by a truck driver that saw you. Dolan saw you, too. He found your slipper and traced you by it. Pete Hanson at the Mercantile told me that. Pete Hanson recognized the suit Dolan was wearin', too. Belonged to Whitey Carson. We found a stolen makeup box at Whitey's. And an open bottle of red hair dye."

"Out of all that picture, we get this: Dolan did the job. You saw it. Whitey saw it, too, probably. Dolan went to Whitey's, probably to shut him up. Whitey wasn't home, so Dolan made his disguise, stole Whitey's clothes, then blew. He traced you through the slipper. Tonight, he tried to proposition you to keep quiet. Ain't that it, sister?"

The girl didn't say anything and Johnnie Dolan, listening, blessed her for her brave silence.

"You still ain't talking. O.K. Then suppose we look at it this way. Suppose you knew Johnnie Dolan in Chicago—you see, I already checked on you. Suppose you were sweet on him and you knew he wanted to get Eb Squibb. So you lured Eb out on the river and put him on a spot and Dolan come along and let him have it. How does that sound?"

The girl was sobbing again and Johnnie Dolan swore under his breath. He wanted to smash Boone Davis, but he dared not move.

"You'd fit in a spot like that," Boone Davis grunted. His voice was suddenly harsh. "You're not exactly lily-white, yourself. Your old man's in the pen, sweetheart. . ."

The girl said huskily: "You know that?"

"You want me to advertise it? Or do you want to spill what you know?"

The girl's voice was defiant. "All right. I saw it. Johnnie Dolan did it. I was down

there trying to find a ring I'd lost the last time I went fishing."

Johnnie Dolan's neck began to throb. He'd been sold down the river.

Boone Davis said: "You get up to your room. Lock it. If Dolan finds out you spilled your story, he'll do to you what he done to Eb Squibb. And what he's maybe done to Whitey Carson. Whitey was here earlier tonight. I ain't seen him for awhile. If Dolan finds him, God help Whitey. And if my guys find Dolan, God help him. I told 'em to shoot and ask questions afterward."

THE pair went inside and a shadow moved along the deeper shadows of the veranda. Johnnie Dolan stepped off the stone terrace, circled the building.

Gravel crunched beneath a light, cat tread. Johnnie cocked a fist, then relaxed. He saw Whitey move across a little clearing ahead of him. There was a small building across the lane. Whitey went in and closed the door.

Johnnie started to follow. A light flickered across the clearing. One of Boone Davis' deputies came into view. Johnnie Dolan dived into an empty rain barrel, waited for hell to break loose. The steps came closer, stopped.

A match scratched the barrel and to Johnnie, it was like scraping a long fingernail upon a blackboard. The steps moved away and Johnnie waited five minutes before getting out.

He moved across the clearing, hugging the ground. He pushed the door of the shed open, closed it. He said, "Whitey," softly. His words bounced off the walls.

The back door was standing open. The place smelled damp. Johnnie Dolan struck a match. The room sprang into yellow, shimmering relief.

He was in a slaughterhouse.

There was a meat block, freshly scraped. The floor was a brownish red from a recent kill. The air was heavy with the acrid smell of burned feathers, as if someone had recently singed a chicken. There were half a dozen packing boxes, the kind you see on meat trucks. Johnnie struck another match and read the label: *COUNTRY KILLED MEATS FROM THE RIVERSIDE GUN CLUB.*

The match was dying in his fingers.

Johnnie turned, stiffened. Whitey Carson was lying on a meat block in the most distant corner of the slaughterhouse.

Blood was coming out around the meat cleaver in his back.

Johnnie Dolan took one step and the world fell in on him. The form dropped down from the rafters. A knife drove deep through his coat. He felt the heat of the blade as it grazed his ribs. He shouted, involuntarily. Another shout came from near the Gun Club and footsteps rang along the gravel.

Johnnie Dolan swung, but his blow never landed. A fist caught him below the ear, blacked him out. He was down on his knees, crawling toward the rear door.

He got through before Boone Davis came in the front way. Boone yelled: "Dolan got Whitey Carson. Get him, men! And this time, shoot and don't ask questions!"

Johnnie Dolan was up off his knees, running. He circled the stabbing lights. In every direction, flashlights were fanning the shadows in swift search of him. He would have sold his chances of living for a short beer.

Johnnie made it to the rear of the Gun Club. He shinned up a drain pipe, slipped through a window. The air was heavy with the scent of sandalwood. A girl screamed.

Johnnie husked: "Raven. . ."

He heard footsteps beating up the stairway. He made out the dim shape of a wall bunk. He dived into it, on the back side. He pulled the covers over his head. He felt the warmth of the girl beside him. He heard the pounding of her pulse. Or maybe it was his own pulse he heard.

A knock banged the door. "Raven. . ."

The girl said, "Yes," softly.

"Open up, Raven."

Johnnie said: "Send him away."

The girl said: "It's nothing, Jeff. . ."

There was a little pause. The door shattered as a shoulder hit the thin panel. A flashlight glared and Johnnie Dolan sat up, blinking. Jeff Hooley leaped into the room.

Jeff Hooley said: "What's the idea, guy?"

Johnnie said: "I'm working my way through college."

He leaped. The flashlight caught him hard over the ear. The floor came up and took a bite of his face. He lay there, trying to move, failing.

He didn't know how long it was. It couldn't have been longer than a few seconds. A hand jerked at him, drew him upward. The same hand slapped him back to consciousness, caught him again.

Boone Davis said: "This time, you won't get away. This time, I'll be with you every minute until you burn."

Johnnie got up. He turned to the girl. His eyes were bitter. "Tell them I didn't murder Eb Squibb!"

The girl shrugged. Her face was ashen. "I don't know what you're talking about!" she said.

Boone Davis gave her a funny look. "I'll talk to you later, sister. Dolan, this thing in your back ain't my finger. Keep one step ahead of me."

CHAPTER FOUR

Shoot on Sight!

THEY went downstairs, Johnnie and Boone Davis. They went out the side door and back around the building. They moved past the gutter pipe that led up to the girl's room. Johnnie Dolan cursed at the thought of her. Perhaps she couldn't have cleared him. But she could have helped.

The sound back of him was that of a beer bottle shattering over a thick skull. He turned around swiftly. Boone Davis was slumping to the ground. Johnnie heard running steps. The air was filled with the scent of sandalwood.

He didn't stop to wonder why Raven had slugged Boone Davis for him. He knew, only, that he had to get out of there. And fast. He saw the deputy guarding the slaughterhouse. He went around the little building, keeping in the shadows. He climbed up the shed roof, lay there, waited for a chance to escape.

Half an hour later, a truck rumbled up. It backed up to the slaughterhouse. Jeff Hooley came out. He said to the trucker: "I just got an order for a rush load of fresh pork. Go in and have a beer. It won't take me very long to pack the stuff."

The deputy went inside with the trucker and when Johnnie saw his chance, he ducked off the roof and into the small truck. He rolled up under a tarp and after a short wait, the truck was loaded and the back end locked.

Johnnie looked at the luminous dial of his watch. Nine thirty. The truck rolled along at a fast clip. Forty minutes later, it stopped. Johnnie waited for the guy to unload. Then he stepped into the alley. There was a small sign over the back door. He was looking into the kitchen of the Central City Hottentot Club.

Johnnie circled the block. The Hottentot Club was, according to the sign, a private club that catered to those who wished fine foods and fine lodging.

The building was the J. Ellery and Sons Building and it had been built in 1933. Johnnie remembered the name on the cornerstone, then walked to the front door.

"Your card, sir," the doorman said.

"Card?" Johnnie said.

"This is a private club, sir."

Johnnie said: "Sure, I know. I'm a guest. Ellery told me to meet him here tonight."

"You mean one of the young Mr. Ellerys, sir?"

"That's it," Johnnie said.

"Which of them, sir?"

Johnnie said: "The oldest one. You know..."

"Mr. Tom? That's peculiar. He went out early. Are you sure he understood it was this evening?"

Johnnie said: "I'll wait. He'll be back."

The doorman opened the glass panel and called to a man inside. "This gentleman wishes to wait for Mr. Tom."

Johnnie tossed the doorman a dollar and followed the man into a dining-room. There were plenty of empty tables. But Johnnie chose one back of a marble pillar.

"Have you dined, sir?" the uniformed man asked.

Johnnie was hungry again. He said: "What have you?"

"We have some nice steaks, sir."

"How about pork?" Johnnie asked.

"We're out of pork," the man said.

Johnnie thought that was funny.

"Perhaps you'd like some wild duck," the man said.

That was funny, too. Johnnie said: "Ducks are out of season."

The man smiled smugly. "For the common herd, yes. But we try to please our guests."

"I'll try a steak," Johnnie said.

He was eating around the T-bone when Raven came in. Raven was walking beside Jeff Hooley. She was wearing lots of makeup. Her skin was pale beneath it.

She didn't see him, at first. But when she did notice him, her skin turned another shade lighter. She cast her eyes down. She didn't look back at him.

Jeff Hooley left her for a moment. She took out her lipstick, then began to write on a napkin. A few moments later, Jeff Hooley came back and the girl got up and followed him out.

Johnnie went over to the table. The napkin was wadded in a tight knot. He opened it, read the crimson message: *Wait until I call you, Hamlet. Raven.*

She called, an hour later. A man came through the dining-room. "Call for Mr. Hamlet," he said.

Johnnie went to the phone. The girl said: "Johnnie. This is Raven. I'm at the Riverside Tavern. I can tell you who murdered Eb Squibb, now. And I can tell you why. Take a taxi. Hurry. Honk three times when you get here."

He didn't know why, but he said: "Are you all right, Raven?"

"I never felt better," the girl said.

SHE hung up. There was another click, the kind you hear when someone else is listening in on your line. A chill spidered up Johnnie's back. He stepped out of the booth. The guy in the monkey suit was coming toward him.

The dining-room was half filled. Johnnie took advantage of it. He ran through the room, among the guests. He went out the front door. The doorman dropped a wall telephone receiver and leaped for Johnnie.

Johnnie was throwing punches on the run. He drilled a hard right to the doorman's ear. He crossed with a left and tried his right again. The doorman sagged and Johnnie leaped into a cab.

"Ten bucks for every minute under thirty that it takes you to get me to the Riverside Tavern in Riverside," he said.

"It'll cost you plenty, brother," the cabbie grinned.

It cost Johnnie forty bucks.

Three times, in fast succession, he had the driver honk, outside the Riverside Tavern. Nothing happened. Johnnie said: "Do it again."

A guy came out. He was sore.

"Why the racket? You're the second bum that's done that in the last fifteen minutes. What is this three beep racket? A club?"

Johnnie Dolan was sick. He said: "Gun Club, cabbie. And fast. You get the rest of this hundred."

They made it in five minutes. They drove up under the canopy and Johnnie leaped out. One of Boone Davis' deputies was lolling in the lobby. Johnnie hit him hard, before the man knew what was happening. He hit him with that left of his and then he dragged the man back of the deserted counter. He listened to the deep breathing and he knew the guy was out for a while.

Raven wasn't in her room. Down the hallway, light shone from a crack beneath a door. Johnnie tiptoed, softly. He fingered the knob and the door creaked as it swung open.

Jeff Hooley was at his desk. He looked up.

"Hello, Dolan," he said.

Johnnie said: "Where's Raven?"

Jeff Hooley shrugged. "How should I know?"

Johnnie said: "Don't give me that stuff. You know."

Jeff Hooley said: "Really, Dolan, you're being a fool. Don't you realize this place is surrounded? All I have to do is lift a window and call to one of Boone Davis' men."

The man got up. Johnnie said: "I wouldn't, Hooley, because if you do I'll tell them why you killed Eb Squibb. And I'll tell them that you killed Whitey Carson to keep him from talking." His voice grew ragged and a tightness came down across his chest. "And Raven . . . you killed her, too?"

Jeff Hooley turned around. His eyes had a faint glint in them that hadn't been there before.

There was a gun in his hand, now. It meant business.

Jeff Hooley was tense. Johnnie Dolan knew that the end was near. He saw the gun hand tighten and he knew he had to divert the man's attention or die.

He couldn't leap ten feet without stopping lead. So he smiled. He forced a smile that came from a soul that was as cold, emotionally, as a cake of ice.

The smile upset Jeff Hooley and Johnnie began to talk.

"First, there's this business you're in of selling ducks out of season. You served two terms in the federal pen and you knew if you ever got caught selling federally protected game birds out of season, it would go hard on you. You had a sweet set-up. A place on the river and a gun club as a blind so that people wouldn't be suspicious when they heard shooting in this vicinity. You baited the water, Hooley, with corn. And when the ducks came down, you slaughtered them. You must have learned that little trick from Eb Squibb, didn't you, Hooley?"

Jeff Hooley was smiling the smile of a man who has an animal trapped and is about to kill it.

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Why not admit it? You'll never live to tell it. All I have to do is pull the trigger, my friend, and I'll be a local hero. . ."

Johnnie said: "Eb Squibb was baiting the water for you the night you killed him. You decided you didn't need him any more." Johnnie saw the hand tighten upon the gun again and he cried: "Wait, Hooley. One more thing. My father. He was an Izaak Walton. He hated men who killed game out of season. He found out about your little racket while he was out with Eb Squibb. He protested and Eb killed him. Is that right?"

"Eb killed him, just the way I'm going to kill you. You won't mind it, Dolan. A shot is easier than a meat cleaver through the back. That's what happened to Whitey Carson when he stumbled onto the answer. He tried to blackmail me, Dolan. And he got his."

Johnnie knew the end was near. He couldn't expect to live. Not with the secret he knew. Strangely, then, he was thinking of the girl. Of the way she had helped him escape. His voice was hollow in his ears.

"When Raven called the Hottentot

Club, they heard her say she knew the killer. They called you back because all of you are in this racket together. You picked her up at the Riverside Tavern. What did you do to her, Hooley? If you say you killed her, I'll have my fingers around your throat before my heart stops pumping!"

Hooley's eyes were narrowed ominously now.

"I had to do it," he said. "It was the only way. . ."

The door creaked behind them. Johnnie turned, involuntarily. Raven stood there. There was a blood streak across her ghost white face. Her clothes were dripping wet.

It was a crazy tableau, without time or space or meaning.

THE girl smiled. "You killed me, did you, Jeff?"

Jeff Hooley stood there, frozen. Johnnie Dolan was frozen too, but only momentarily. He leaped. The gun barked in Jeff Hooley's fist. Lead fanned Johnnie's cheek.

The second slug caught Johnnie Dolan in the shoulder, high up. It knocked him down and he lay there while the room spun around him.

Boone Davis came crashing into the room. He leveled his gun, stepped around the girl. Glass shattered and Johnnie saw a pair of feet disappear through the opening.

Boone Davis said, "Damn!" and went to the window. He yelled: "Stop that guy, men!"

A voice called back: "He ain't goin' no place, Boone."

"He hurt?" Boone demanded.

"A little bit. His neck's kind of broke. Boone, you ever see a guy layin' on his back with his head underneath him?"

The girl was beside Johnnie. She was ripping away his shirt, probing at the wound. She was crying a little, but mostly she was smiling.

"It'll mend, Hamlet," she said.

Johnnie was beginning to see straight again.

"You don't look so good," he said, huskily.

She shrugged. "Jeff hit me, but it was a

(Continued on page 110)

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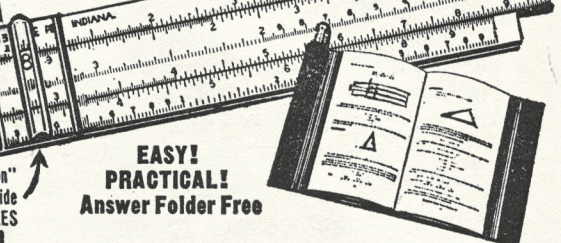
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Dime Detective Magazine

(Continued from page 108)

glancing blow. I played dead. Then he took me to the river and held me under. He didn't know that I swam in a water act at the World's Fair."

Boone Davis was studying the girl. "I heard enough to get everything, except about you, sweetheart. Maybe you can untangle me."

"And me," Johnnie said.

"There isn't much," Raven told them. "My father was framed into prison by Jeff Hooley. Jeff used father for a blind in a mail scheme to bilk the public. I was in New York at the time. I got a job with Jeff by telling him I was wanted back east and needed a place to hide out. I needed to get the proof that would save my father."

Johnnie said: "So that's why you didn't tell that you saw Jeff Hooley kill Eb Squibb. If you told, if Jeff got the chair before you got your proof, your father couldn't be cleared."

The girl said: "You're learning, Hamlet. I knew as long as you were free, I still had a chance to get my proof. I got it tonight, while Jeff was downstairs. That's when I called you."

Johnnie said: "One more thing. How'd you happen to witness the murder?"

"I saw Jeff Hooley start for the river with his gun. I'd been looking for an opportunity to search his room, and I followed him, hoping he'd take his motor boat and head up the river. Instead he met Eb Squibb and killed him. Everyone in town knew that you were looking for Eb, and since Jeff didn't need Eb any longer, he had a perfect opportunity to get rid of him and make you the goat."

Johnnie grinned. "For a few hours tonight I thought you were trying to make me the goat, too."

The girl leaned closer to him. "You don't mean that, Hamlet." She kissed him, which seemed to him to be a good idea.

Then she helped him to his feet and they went outside together.

Johnnie heard Boone Davis snort. He heard a candy wrapper rustle. Then Boone Davis said: "I kinda hate to see that guy go. I bet he'da sure smelt good fryin' in the hot seat."

Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 6)

passes 50 or more checks of approximately \$30 each, you can readily realize the amount of money they take in.

These forgers will sometimes open a small drawing account at a local bank and thereby use the bank's checks. The same results are obtained. But they usually steer clear of them because a bank will sometimes make an investigation which foils their plans completely.

William Evans.

DON'T answer that phone call! That is, not if you have to leave your premises unguarded to do it—it may be a decoy to get you away just long enough to rifle the till.

Indianapolis, Ind.

Dear Sir:

I never thought I would be one of the contributors to your racket exposition column in Dime Detective, but here it is, for today I was victimized by one of the cleverest little ruses ever visited upon an unsuspecting gal.

I work in a small community cleaning and pressing shop. I am assistant to Mr. Albert Betham. Mr. Betham and I take a half hour each for lunch, staggering the time so that our shop need not close.

I was alone today, busying myself putting buttons on an overcoat when the front door opened and Mr. Lane, the butcher from the butcher shop next door appeared in the doorway shouting: "Cookie! There's a party waiting you on our telephone. Says he's been trying to call you for almost half an hour."

Instantly I leaped to my feet. I glanced at our telephone and wondered why they didn't call us on it. Just then Mr. Lane shouted: "He says your phone is out of whack. Coming?"

I didn't want to go and leave the shop alone. But then I thought it would only be for a moment. I figured it must be important if they would go to the trouble to get Mr. Lane to call us. And come to think about it—I hadn't heard our phone ring for almost two hours. "I'll come," I called to Mr. Lane.

When I got over to the grocery store phone there was a man who identified himself as Fredrick Whistler. He went into a long drawn out spiel about the trouble he had getting us and advised that I call the telephone company and have them check our phone. I told him to hurry as I had left the place without anybody to take charge and he began to question me about the cleaning of expensive drapes. It seemed that he and his wife had just taken an exclusive apartment and he was particular about having the proper establishment to clean the drapes so that they would be ready for Christmas. He held me on the line for fifteen minutes with questions about one

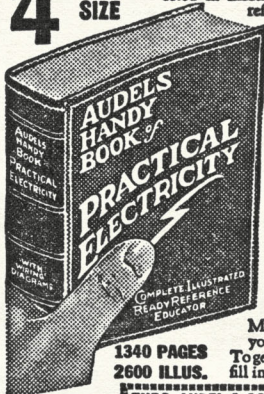
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Dime Detective Magazine

thing and another and then told me to have the delivery boy pick them up as soon as possible.

I thanked him and Mr. Lane and went back to the shop determined to have Mr. Betham get in touch with the phone company about our line.

I fairly flew out the door and into our own, and offered a silent prayer that nobody was waiting. It would have been embarrassing to me if the boss had returned. When I got inside I started to pick up the overcoat and resume my sewing when a funny feeling hit me in the pit of my stomach. I looked at the cash register. I had rung \$.75 up on it just as Mr. Betham left. The same figure showed that it had not been touched. Yet that feeling began to grow and grow.

I went over to the register and hit the No Sale and as the drawer flew open my eyes almost bugged out. The drawer was empty. While I was out somebody had stepped in and stolen \$41.80.

You guessed it. I told the police what happened and they went over to the address given me by Mr. Whistler who had the drapes to be cleaned. It was a phony. The call had been a decoy to get me out of the store while my boss was at lunch. While I was out, a confederate of the telephone caller had stepped in and robbed our cash register.

I hope you let others know this to keep them from answering any such telephone calls.

Grace Cook.

WHEN you get news of a legacy you didn't expect—look out, it's likely to be phoney. The one thing we all inherit is curiosity—so don't let yours trip you!

Hammond, Ind.,

Dear Editor:

One morning, several weeks ago, my helper reported for work, highly elated. His face, instead of glum and solemn, was bright, anticipant.

"Inherit a fortune?" I asked puzzled.

When he surprised me with a nod, I promptly pumped him.

He had received a letter from some national administrator's agency stating that an estate was due him. Would he fill in the enclosed questionnaire, with emphasis stressed on correct name, address and place of business or employment? Also his mother's maiden name? And for further verification: the names and addresses and places of employment of four or five close friends.

They were anxious to settle the estate. Would he procure the needed information and submit same at his earliest convenience?

Would he? Little need be added to illustrate the enthusiasm and haste he exercised in submitting the report.

Home Sweet Homicide

Came hectic days, sleepless nights, spent scheming, planning. Mutual association with him was impossible!

At long last came the much expected letter. A quick fervent dig at the contents revealed a shiny penny, together with a curt note claiming the estate closed and settled. Further correspondence with them was emphatically discouraged.

Friendly reconciliation with him is utterly out of the question. My friend is down on everyone.

What a racket! What possibilities! My pal lost nothing financially in the deal, but he did supply the outfit with an accurate and active mailing list that could be sold over and over until the pages became dog-eared.

A shady mail order dealer could peddle inferior merchandise prepaid, and bill the sucker later. In reluctant cases he could even contact the sucker's employer, and then—

If the mailman drops a similar letter into your box, disregard it! Especially if your ticker is weak. But if curiosity gets the better of you . . . well . . . that's their ultimate aim.

F. Warner Buege.

Home Sweet Homicide

(Continued from page 81)

Brent's pocket was Sprague's check for five grand, and Brent's hand still ached with the heartfelt force of Sprague's farewell handclasp. But he trudged into Garrett's corner with a thunder-dark scowl.

"Now, you scurvy hyena!" he said. "You're coming with me to the Marine recruiting office. You're going to help get me into the service—today, right now! Unless you want the living bejezes knocked out of you, you'll undo—"

"Will I, Brent?" Garrett said calmly. "Well, yes, I'll clean up your record, seeing that you've handed me a top flight murder story, all neatly cracked. But I must remind you that today's Lorne column is still due. I suggest you get back to work as usual, Grandma—and you may muse over this headline."

Wryly Garrett handed Brent a copy of the *Recorder's* earliest edition. It had come off the presses during Brent's absence from the office. He hadn't seen it until now. Staring at it, he understood too well Garrett's ironical acquiescence to his demands. He felt profound nausea surge through him more despairingly.

The headline read: *F. D. R. HALTS ALL ENLISTMENTS!*

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Accounting | <input type="checkbox"/> Advertising | <input type="checkbox"/> College Preparatory | <input type="checkbox"/> First Year College | <input type="checkbox"/> Railway Postal Clerk |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bookkeeping | <input type="checkbox"/> Business Correspondence | <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial | <input type="checkbox"/> Foremanship <input type="checkbox"/> French | <input type="checkbox"/> Salesmanship |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Business Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Business Correspondence | <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial Illustrating | <input type="checkbox"/> Good English | <input type="checkbox"/> Secretarial <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cartooning <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Service | <input type="checkbox"/> Cost Accounting | <input type="checkbox"/> Cost Accounting | <input type="checkbox"/> High School | <input type="checkbox"/> Showcard and Sign Lettering |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> C. P. Accounting | <input type="checkbox"/> Managing Men at Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Traffic Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Tea Room and Cafeteria Management, Catering |

HOME ECONOMICS COURSES

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced Dressmaking | <input type="checkbox"/> Home Dressmaking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Foods and Cookery | <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Dressmaking and Designing |

Name.....Age.....Address.....
 City.....State.....Present Position.....

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Lee is proud to work with you and for you. Proud that so many of you prefer Lee work clothing to any other brand.

Proud to be known as maker of Clothes for Working America!



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1 CUSTOM-MADE FABRICS
Woven for Lee—strength, wear-resistance, color-fastness!

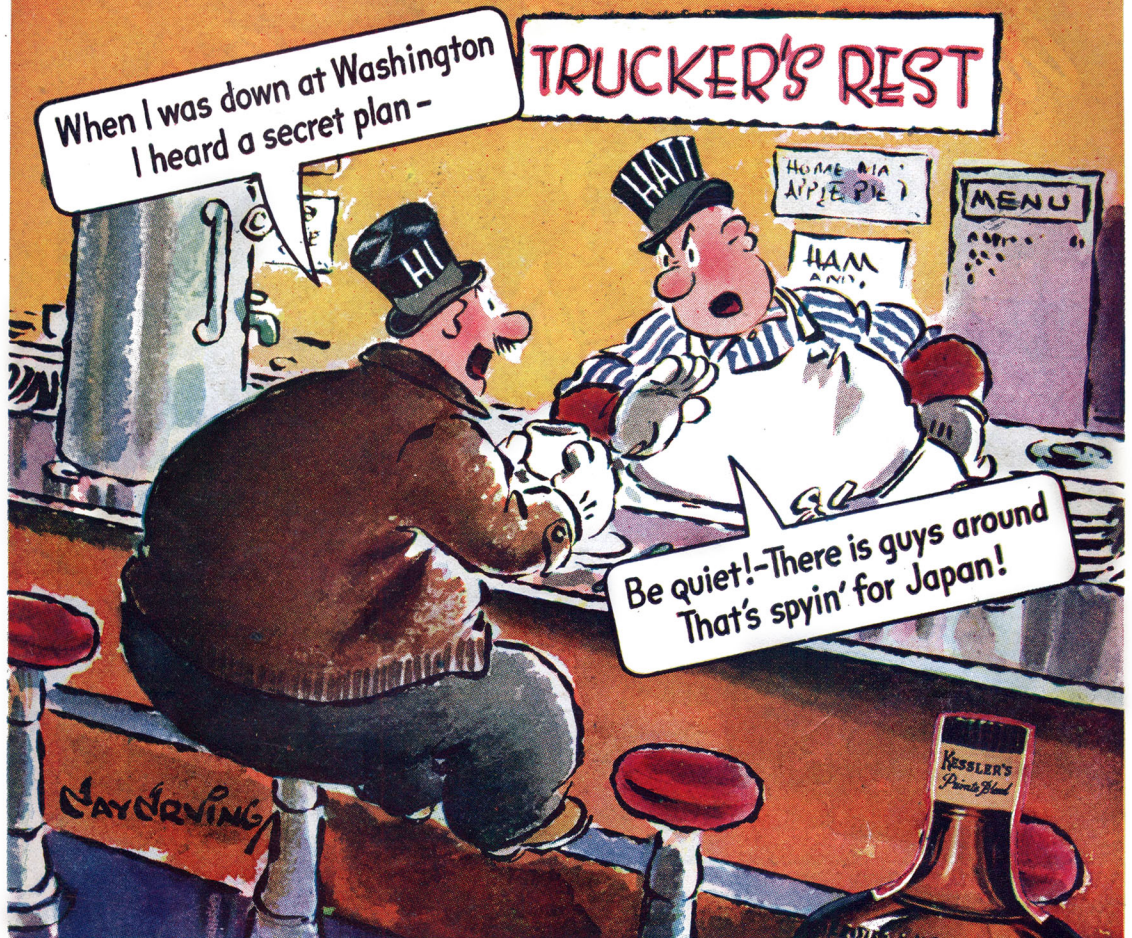


2 TAILORED SIZES
Designed to fit every build—tall, short, slim, stout, average.



3 ABSOLUTELY GUARANTEED
Your Lee must fit better, wear longer...or your money back!

"Gossip Serves the Enemy!"-says HATT to HI



DON'T SPILL THE BEANS!

To counter-act them rumors
A feller sometimes hears,
Just act as if some cotton
Was stuffin' up your ears...
In fightin' for our freedom,
The job is every man's,
So don't assist the Axis
By tellin' 'em our plans!



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