

ALL STORIES
COMPLETE



OCTOBER

10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



**CHARITY BEGINS
AT HOMICIDE**

*A MAX LATIN
NOVELETTE BY*

NORBERT DAVIS

**BEEF TO
THE HEELS**

*A COLONEL KASPIR
STORY BY*

C.P. DONNEL, Jr.

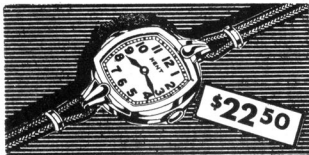
FREDERICK C. DAVIS

G.T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

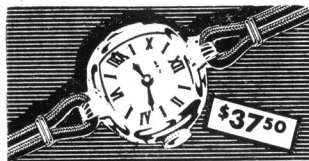
AND OTHERS!

Jewelry ON EASY TERMS

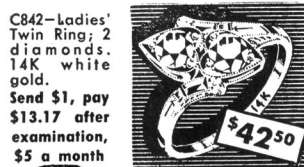
SEND \$1
PAY BALANCE OF 1/3 DOWN
AFTER EXAMINATION



P214—Dainty Kent Watch for Ladies. 7 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate. Send \$1, pay \$6.50 after examination, \$5 a month



T683—Ladies' 17 jewel Benrus Watch. 10K yellow rolled gold plate. Send \$1, pay \$11.50 after examination, \$5 a month



C842—Ladies' Twin Ring; 2 diamonds. 14K white gold. Send \$1, pay \$13.17 after examination, \$5 a month



1404—Man's Initial Ring. Initial on onyx. 14K yellow gold. Send \$1, pay \$7.25 after examination, \$5 a month



D214—Man's Twin Ring. 2 diamonds; simulated ruby or sapphire. Send \$1, pay \$18.98 after examination, \$5 a month



\$59⁹⁵



A105—Quality Diamond Solitaire. 14K yellow gold. Send \$1, pay \$10 after examination, \$5 a month



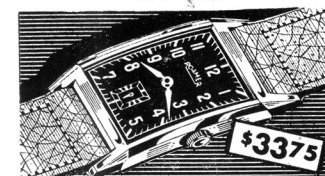
A402—Large brilliant Solitaire. 14K yellow or 18K white gold. Send \$1, pay \$25.65 after examination, \$5 a month



A4—Bridal Set. Diamond Engagement Ring; matching Wedding Ring. 14K yellow gold. Send \$1, pay \$7.25 after examination, \$5 a month



A320—Bridal Set. Select Diamond Engagement Ring; matching Wedding Ring. 14K yellow gold. Send \$1, pay \$17.33 after examination, \$5 a month



K104—15 jewel Watch for Men. Reverse dial. Steel case. Send \$1, pay \$10.25 after examination, \$5 a month

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"I'LL GIVE YOU your money back if not satisfied."

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I'll open an account for you and send your selection by express, subject to examination. If satisfied, you pay expressman the balance of the 1/3 of the purchase price (required by Federal Regulations), otherwise return the selection and your \$1 will be refunded. If accepted, I'll give you 15 days' trial and if you are not satisfied, return selection and I'll refund your money promptly. All prices include Federal Tax. Send your order to me personally.

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Sales Mgr.

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SAMPLE LESSON

GET BOTH FREE

64 PAGE BOOK



I will send you this FREE Lesson, "Getting Acquainted With Receiver Servicing," to show you how practical it is to train for Radio in spare time. It's a valuable lesson. Study it—keep it—use it—without obligation! Tells how "Superhet" Receivers work, gives hints on Receiver Servicing, Locating Defects, Repair of Loudspeaker, I. F. Transformer, Gang Tuning Condenser, etc. 31 illustrations. And with it I'll send my FREE 64-page book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." It describes many fascinating jobs Radio offers, explains how N.R.I. trains you for good pay in Radio!

See How I Train You at Home in Spare Time to BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN



J. E. SMITH
President
National Radio Institute
Established
28 Years

Here's your chance to get a good job in a busy wartime field with a bright peacetime future! There is a real shortage today of trained Radio Technicians and Operators. So mail the Coupon for my FREE Lesson and 64-page, illustrated book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." See for yourself how you can train for Radio at home in spare time!

And think of the NEW jobs Television, Frequency Modulation, Electronics and other Radio developments will open after the war! This is the sort of opportunity you shouldn't pass up.

Many Beginners Soon Make \$5, \$10 a Week Extra in Spare Time

There's probably an opportunity right in your neighborhood to make money in spare time fixing Radios. I'll give you the training that has started hundreds of N.R.I. students making \$5, \$10 a week extra within a few months after enrolling. The N.R.I. Course isn't something just prepared to take advantage of the present market for technical books and courses. It has been tried, tested, developed, perfected during the 28 years we have been teaching Radio.

Start Now Toward Radio's Rich Rewards!

MAIL THE COUPON! I'll send you the FREE Lesson and 64-page, illustrated book. NO obligation. You'll see what Radio offers YOU. You'll read more than 100 letters from men I trained telling what they are doing, earning. And you'll have my FREE lesson to keep. No salesman will call. Mail the Coupon NOW in envelope or pasted on penny postcard!—J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 3KSS, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

TRAINING MEN FOR VITAL RADIO JOBS

I Trained These Men

\$10 a Week in Spare Time
"I repaired some Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made \$600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of \$10 a week—just spare time." JOHN JERRY, 1337 Kalamath St., Denver, Colorado.

\$200 a Month in Own Business
"For several years I have been in business for myself making around \$200 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N.R.I. to thank for my start in this field." ARLIE J. FROEHLER, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.

Lieutenant in Signal Corps
"I cannot divulge any information as to my type of work, but I can say that N.R.I. training is certainly coming in mighty handy these days." (Name and address omitted for military reasons.)

Extra Pay in Army, Navy, Too
Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the coupon now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, MUCH HIGHER PAY. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. Over 1,700 service men now enrolled.

More Radio Technicians and Operators Now Make \$50 a Week Than Ever Before

There's a big shortage of capable Radio Technicians and Operators because so many have joined the Army and Navy. Fixing Radios pays better now than for years. With new Radios out of production, fixing old sets, which were formerly traded in, adds greatly to the normal number of servicing jobs.

Broadcasting Stations, Aviation and Police Radio, Ship Radio and other communications branches are scrambling for Operators and Technicians to replace men who are leaving. You may never see a time again when it will be so easy to get started in this fascinating field. The Government too needs hundreds of competent civilian and enlisted Radio men and women. Radio factories, now working on Government orders for radio equipment, employ trained men.

GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK **FREE**
SAMPLE LESSON

**Mr. J. E. Smith, President, Dept. 3KSS
NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE, Washington 9, D. C.**

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

Name Age.....

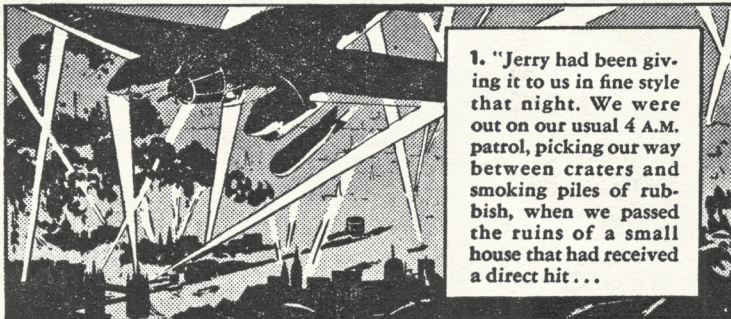
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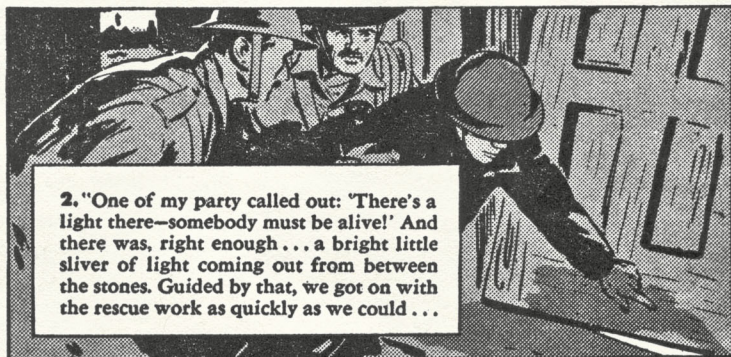
LONDON'S "MIDGET MARSHAL" TELLS BOMBING THRILLER!



This true story of the blitz was told to a war correspondent by Michael Davies, Chief Shelter Marshal, London Area. Mr. Davies is famous as the smallest Air Marshal in England; his height is 3 ft. 6 in. Mr. Davies was a practicing optometrist before the war, was active in organizing youth camps, is now in charge of one of the largest air shelters in England. The shelter extends 4 acres and includes 4 miles of underground corridors. Complete with interior radio communications and sixty-five large sleeping bays, it can normally house 10,000 people—in a pinch, 14,000. Over one and a half million bricks were used to build the blast wall.



1. "Jerry had been giving it to us in fine style that night. We were out on our usual 4 A.M. patrol, picking our way between craters and smoking piles of rubbish, when we passed the ruins of a small house that had received a direct hit . . .



2. "One of my party called out: 'There's a light there—somebody must be alive!' And there was, right enough . . . a bright little sliver of light coming out from between the stones. Guided by that, we got on with the rescue work as quickly as we could . . .



3. "... and found our man, half dead from injuries and bomb shock, his hand still gripping his flashlight like a vise. Seems he'd grabbed his flashlight to show others to the basement when the bomb fell. And that—plus having fresh batteries—was what saved his own life!"

PLEASE NOTE: Don't blame your dealer if he's out of "Eveready" flashlight batteries. The Armed Forces are taking enormous quantities, and the war industries with the highest priority ratings are taking the rest.

WRITE FOR YOUR FREE COPY of "You and the War," the new O.C.D. guidebook which tells you how you can train and what you can do to help win the war. There's a job, and an important one, for every man, woman and child in America! Address National Carbon Company, Dept. 51 30 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y.

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30 East 42nd Street, New York
Unit of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation



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



10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 43 CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER, 1943 No. 3

3—SMASHING COMPLETE SERIES-CHARACTER NOVELETTES—3

Come and register at the

Clinic For Corpses..... Frederick C. Davis 10
And watch Bill Brent, the *Recorder's* heart-throb healer, meet his double at the Academy of Family Problems, Inc., that peaceful little patcher-upper of domestic tiffs—with a blackmail racket and three murders as a sideline.

You may think it better to give than to receive—but not when

Charity Begins At Homicide..... Norbert Davis 58
With Max Latin and Carter-Heason, the guy strictly from Kipling, following the latest goings-on of the "charity" racket.

You don't need ration points for a slice of

Beef To The Heels..... C. P. Donnel, Jr. 78
And neither did Colonel Kaspir, the blimp-like boss of Section Five, when he waltzed off with the carcass of one of the Luftwaffe's leading lice.

2—NOVELETTE-LENGTH MIDNIGHT MURDER MYSTERIES—2

Get to Heron Lake

Between 11:00 And 11:15..... H. S. M. Kemp 43
And watch Corporal Brennan, R. C. M. P., start the hunt for the man with the scarred thumb—and for the person who smashed in Hackford's skull.

Don't be surprised if you find that

There's One In Every Graveyard..... G. T. Fleming-Roberts 88
For where else would a nagging shrew of a wife wind up—particularly with two murderers eager to try their skill, one by poison, one by electrocution.

A RIB-TICKLING SHORT DETECTIVE STORY

Watch Doc Pierce perform a

Painless Operation..... Richard Dermody 106
On Warm Wampum Wilbur, the guy with the bulging bankroll of crisp new bills—crisp as only fresh, home-grown cabbage can be.

AND—

We want to know if you are

Ready For The Rackets..... A Department 8
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 November Thrill Docket..... 6
Some of the sure-fire hits scheduled for production in the next DIME DETECTIVE.

Cover—"The man clamped a hand over Maude's mouth."
From *Beef to the Heels*.

The November Issue will be out October 8th

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THE NOVEMBER THRILL DOCKET



T. T. FLYNN takes us to Chicago—where you can still get to the races without spending gasoline coupons and getting in the OPA's hair—to watch Mr. Maddox, the bland Buddha of the bangtail circuit, navigate his portly bulk through the intricate mazes of—

WEATHER FAIR—TRACK BLOODY

—and squeeze past the judge's stand in a fantastic photo finish. Oscar is trotting alongside, of course, and Cassidy, track-detective extraordinary and Maddox' personal mote-in-the-eye keeps a hand on the halter.



With coffee rationing abated and the pot of bitter brew perking freely once again on its old twenty-four hour schedule in Inspector Allhoff's squalid diggings across the street from Headquarters, you might be led to think that a glimmer of sunshine would find a cranny in the character of the legless Satan of Centre Street and creep in momentarily. Guess again, pal! The mocha-mad brain-guy still isn't having anything but shadows, and D. L. CHAMPION tells you why next month in—

AARON HAD A ROD

—the greatest novelette yet in this perennially popular series by a man who knows his cops and robbers and how to get 'em down on paper.

Plus stories by H. H. STINSON, DAY KEENE and others. All in the new
NOVEMBER issue of—

**10^CDIME
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE**

On Sale October 8th.

New!

COYNE "Learn-by-Doing" Shop Course RADIO Operating and ELECTRONICS



AIRCRAFT RADIO

BROADCASTING

ELECTRONICS



MEN!
whether you're
16 or up to **50**
TRAIN AT COYNE
ON REAL RADIO
EQUIPMENT!

GET READY NOW FOR A GREAT VICTORY FUTURE

I'll Finance Your Training

War has created tremendous opportunities for men in RADIO OPERATING AND ELECTRONICS. Here is the practical "Learn-by-Doing" shop training in this big field. Not by correspondence, but actual experience on real Radio and Electronic apparatus.

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Find out all about the sensational new future for Coyne-trained Radio Operators and Industrial Electronic Specialists. My FREE BOOK is full of photos and job information. There's a place in this vast field for YOU. Age, lack of experience bars no one. Coyne has been training men 44 years—is nationally famous. Act now. Use handy coupon. No obligation; no salesman will call. Don't delay. Send it today!

START NOW—PAY LATER!

I make it easy for you to come to Chicago for my practical training. Don't let lack of money hold you back! You can pay tuition AFTER YOU GRADUATE. I'll even help you secure part-time work while at Coyne to help pay living expenses. My plan has aided thousands—coupon brings complete details.

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Many of the better Radio jobs require U. S. Govt. license. Coyne has prepared hundreds of men for this test. Our graduates hold good positions in broadcast stations, air transport, police radio and motion picture studios.



You'll Receive Personal Instructions on Fascinating Radio and Electronic Apparatus

It's the thrill of a lifetime when you first operate the amazing variety of up-to-the-minute Radio and Electronic equipment at Coyne! Experts show you each step, train you thoroughly. You'll learn to send Code rapidly—do actual trouble-shooting on Television, short-wave and electronic devices. With this training you get my LIFETIME EMPLOYMENT SERVICE. I train you for a real job, then help you get it!

H. C. LEWIS, President

COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL RADIO DIVISION

500 S. Paulina Street, Dept. 73-5H, Chicago, Ill.

See How Easily
YOU can get my
Radio Shop
Training!

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RADIO DIVISION
COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL, Dept. 73-5H
500 South Paulina St., Chicago, Ill.

Without obligating me, send your FREE BOOK, "Your Future in RADIO", and tell me about your "Pay-After-Graduation" plan.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... STATE.....

TALKING PICTURES

POLICE RADIO

TELEVISION

RADIO RECEIVERS

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 fore-knowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in, telling us your own personal experiences with chislers 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., 17, N. Y.

HERE'S an account of a really "small time" racket, but one that can net the perpetrator a tidy sum if worked often enough. So look out for it, salesclerks—'cause it's money out of your own pocket if you don't!

Racket Editor,
Dime Detective Magazine,
Dear Sir:

The following was worked in our little town lately and seems to net enough to allow two young women to tour the country. It is a form of short change racket. On reaching the town the two women split up and worked separately. It was worked in soda fountains, small taverns, five and ten cent stores, etc., where there was not too much business, as the success of the racket seems to depend on the fact that the same clerk remembers and follows the entire transaction.

It is worked as follows:—On entering the store the young woman ordered a soft drink or a dish of ice cream. She tendered a silver dollar in payment and pocketed the ninety cents change. On finishing the ice cream she started out, stopped, and asked for a package of gum. When the clerk handed her the gum she exclaimed: "The silver dollar I gave you I have been saving as a lucky pocket piece. Will you give it back to me please?" When it was returned to her she handed the clerk a paper dollar and said: "Take them both out of this." The clerk thereupon rang up the total of the ice cream and gum and handed her eighty-five cents change. This she placed in her pocket where she had already put the silver dollar and left the store. The clerk didn't awaken to the fact, for about an hour, that he had been beaten for the ninety cents change that he had given for the silver dollar.

Jesse D. Thornton,
Colon, Michigan.

HERE's another one—with the appeal on a "war-scarcity" item. So watch out for it, you housewives, and don't get taken in by the old "coupon" gag.

Racket Editor,
Dime Detective Magazine,
Dear Sir:

This is nasty, and also devilishly cunning in execution—with little or no hazard to the thief who promotes it. And because it is you can lay odds it will spread.

One afternoon recently my wife was attending a bridge party. There came a ring from the front door-bell. The woman of the house answered it, and brought back with her a young girl of eighteen who was known to a number of the housewives.

The girl had something to appeal to their bargain-hunting instincts—a special offer they'd have to grab now or forever hold their peace. She showed a stainless steel paring knife and a loaf of bread. It was good bread as everyone knew. And here was an opportunity to get the knife and twelve loaves for only 98c. . . .

They couldn't use twelve loaves, you say? Of course not! They got one loaf then, and nicely printed coupons—redeemable at any store, they were assured—for the balance. Naturally, all of them invested in this "bargain."

When they attempted to cash in on their neatly printed coupons, they discovered that the stores had no authority to redeem the coupons.

The girls who did the actual selling were almost heart-broken. They of course had acted in good faith, mostly in their own neighborhoods, having been hired by a fast talking gent with a promise of 13c commission on each deal. They'd answered a newspaper "ad." Strangely enough, they had been paid for what they sold. But this left the sharper plenty, for he'd bought a thousand loaves of bread from a chain baking concern at a cut-rate, pleading it was to be used for a gigantic picnic for "under-privileged children!" The knives were picked up by the gross from a cheap catalogue house.

Something tells me this particular neighborhood is going to be tough for a long time on door-to-door sales people with "bargains!"

Sincerely yours,
Edgar A. Russell,
Columbus, Ohio.



Buy UP TO \$1,000 safe LIFE INSURANCE

Why You Can Buy AMERICAN LIFE INSURANCE With Confidence Exceptionally Strong Financial Position

For each \$100.00 of obligations AMERICAN LIFE has \$109.15 in resources... a greater margin of assets than the average shown for leading companies!



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Deposits in Government bonds and approved securities are made with the State Insurance Department for the protection of all policyholders.

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President

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Imagine being able to get safe, liberal life insurance protection for only \$1.00 a month (less than 25c a week). And what a policy! No premiums to pay after 20 years. Generous cash and loan values. Popular double indemnity feature at no extra cost. Attached \$100.00 sight draft for emergency use, and many other extra liberal features you'll like. Issued to any man, woman or child in good health, age 1 day to 55 years. Amount of policy depends upon age.



NO DOCTOR'S EXAMINATION—No Agent or Collector Will Call

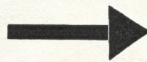
No doctor's examination required when you apply for this policy. No long application to fill out. No embarrassing questions to answer. No red tape. No agent or collector will ever call on you. Everything handled by mail.

Postman Takes Place of Agent—YOU SAVE BY MAIL!

Although this company maintains agency service in more than 100 cities, many persons prefer to apply for AMERICAN LIFE insurance protection and benefits this quick, easy, inexpensive way. You, too, can save money by dealing direct with our Mail Service Department!

SEND NO MONEY—Your Policy Mailed for FREE INSPECTION

You don't have to risk one penny to get this policy for 10 DAYS' FREE INSPECTION! Examine it carefully—compare its liberal features—then decide whether you want to keep it. No obligation to buy. Nothing to lose. So DON'T DELAY. Fill out and mail the coupon today!



FREE INSPECTION OFFER

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW

AMERICAN LIFE & ACC. INSURANCE CO.
230 American Life Bldg. • St. Louis, Mo.

Full Name
(Please print) City & State.....
Address..... Color
Date of Birth—..... or Race.....
Year.....Mo.....Day.....
Sex..... Height..... Weight..... Age.....
Describe Occupation.....
Name of Beneficiary Relationship
Are you in good health?..... Amount of Ins. Now Carried.....
Check if under Age 46 and Double Amount is wanted. Signature of Applicant or Parent
Printed in U. S. A.

More than \$30,000,000 worth of this low cost insurance already issued by AMERICAN LIFE. Without cost or obligation, get your actual policy for 10 days' free inspection!

CLINIC FOR CORPSES

By
FREDERICK C. DAVIS

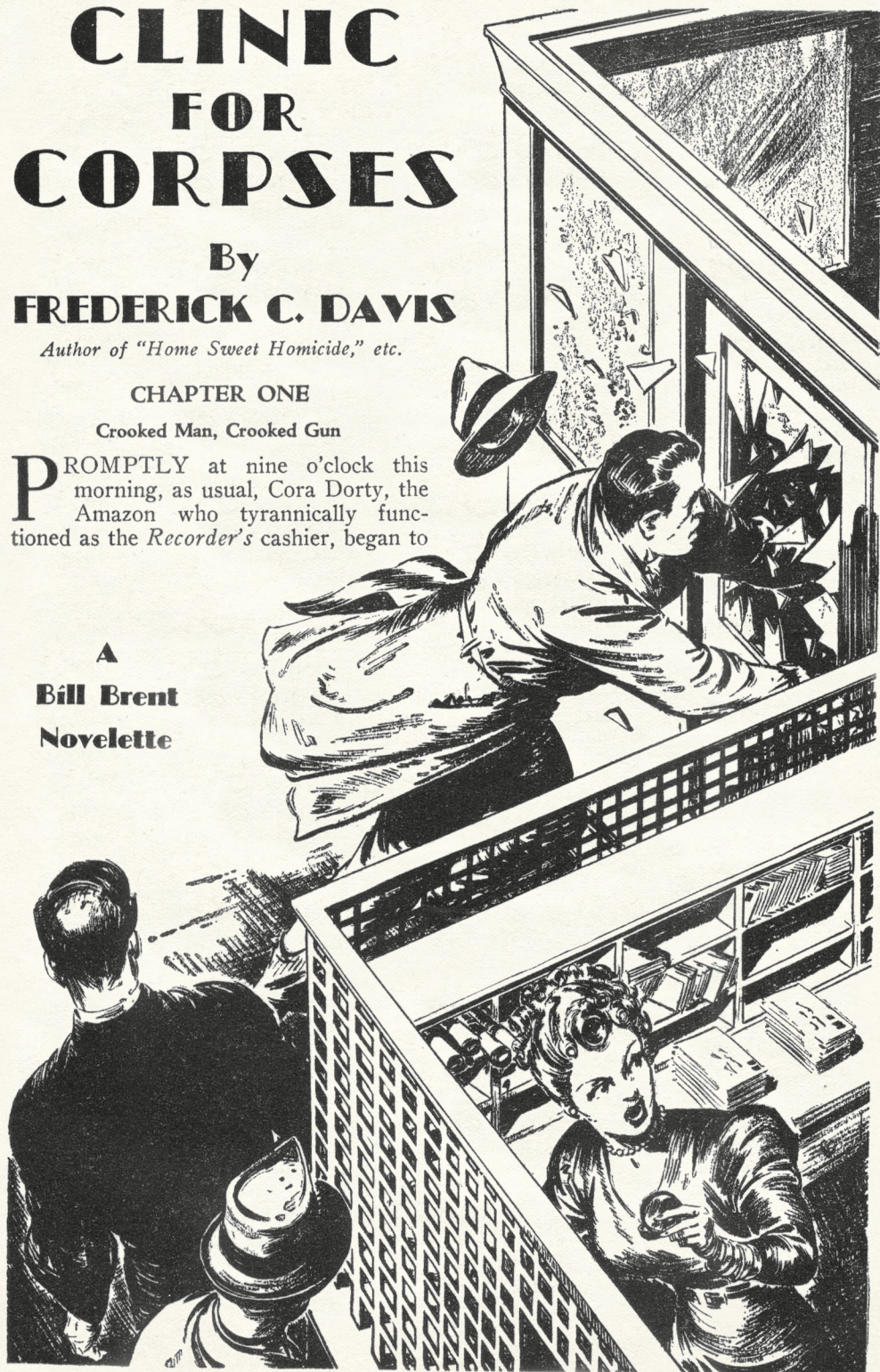
Author of "Home Sweet Homicide," etc.

CHAPTER ONE

Crooked Man, Crooked Gun

PROMPTLY at nine o'clock this morning, as usual, Cora Dorty, the Amazon who tyrannically functioned as the *Recorder's* cashier, began to

A
Bill Brent
Novelette





Brent smashed through the glass panel as Cora fired at the pudgy little man.

Does your husband beat you? Does your wife go through your pockets? Bill Brent became violent every time he thought of the daily drudgery he turned out for the Recorder as Lora Lorne, that mythical, all-wise solver of misguided amours and domestic tiffs. Lora was no figment of the acoustics, however, and neither was the Academy of Family Problems, Inc. with its neat little blackmail racket and three murders as a sideline.

sort the morning mail. Inside her spacious wire-mesh cage, which was located conveniently near the street entrance of the business offices, she held a thick pack of letters in one sizable hand and with the other she flipped them one by one into a bank of cubbyholes. Now and then a sardonic smile glimmered on her full-moon face. It recurred whenever she came upon another missive addressed to Lora Lorne, and it hinted that she was privy to a juicy secret concerning the *Recorder's* famous love seeress—which, as a matter of fact, she was.

"Have yourself another crop of heartaches, Lora, dearie," she murmured with sadistic pleasure as Miss Lorne's mail steadily accumulated. "You moralizing fraud!"

Continuing deftly to winnow the mail, Cora Dorthy directed breezy greetings to the incoming employees of the advertising and circulation departments who hurried past her cage with dripping raincoats and streaming umbrellas, but she didn't notice the pudgy man who paused just inside the entrance to snap rainwater off his Hom-burg.

His natty attire featured pearl-gray spats and a pink candy-stripe shirt with starched collar to match. He carried a briefcase initialed in gold. His blue button eyes beamed smugly, like those of a cat containing a canary, and his confident manner was that of a hot-shot salesman about to consummate an important deal. He strode briskly to a door in the partition behind the cashier's cage, stepped into an office and there found a blond girl who, having just arrived on the job, was wiping a few mud-spatters off her nicely made-up legs.

"Good morning," he said blandly. "May I see Miss Dorthy?"

Hannah Smythe, Miss Dorthy's assistant, answered prettily: "Why not? What's the name?"

"Tell Cora it's her old pal, Peanuts Poke. I'm a heister, see?" The little man jiggled with mirth as he uttered this witicism. "Tell her I've got a great big gun and I'm going to bump the joint."

Miss Smythe said brightly: "You'd better not, you'll get into trouble," and she tittered a little in return. "Just take a chair and I'll tell Cora you're here."

She passed through the connecting door, "Mr. Poke" admiring her admirable ankles, and when she was gone he seated himself as suggested—but in Miss Dorthy's own desk-chair. He quickly opened a drawer and from it he lifted a revolver, a weapon provided by the *Recorder's* business manager for the purpose of protecting its funds. Although for years it had nestled in the cashier's desk practically untouched, Cora Dorthy's caller now proceeded to handle it in a premeditated and peculiar manner.

He swung out its cylinder, discharged its six bullets into his palm and pocketed them. But he didn't stop there. From another pocket of his hound's-tooth vest he produced six other bullets of the same caliber with which he quickly reloaded the revolver. He polished the gun with his breast-pocket handkerchief, replaced it and closed the drawer. Next he shifted to another chair at the side of the desk, unstrapped his briefcase and left it flat on his lap with its flap open so that its contents would be readily available. It contained nothing other than another revolver.

Comfortably settled, with one plump hand in position for a quick grab, he waited cheerfully for his interview with Cora Dorthy.

Word of her caller's presence had not been taken directly to Miss Dorthy. Hannah Smythe had paused a moment just beyond the closed connecting door to dab a few last spots from her cosmetically tinted calves. Once this more pressing matter had been adjusted she got around to announcing: "A pal of yours is waiting to swap a bit of banter with you, Cora."

Miss Dorthy paused for a second's frown. She was still busy. The mail was important and urgent. It contained money, and money, in Cora Dorthy's estimation, was a substance never to be treated with indifference.

Invariably she handled the mail herself in order to sniff out those letters enclosing coins, stamps, currency, money orders and checks, for otherwise certain of these negotiable items might stray into a clerk's sticky fingers. Miss Dorthy saw to it that this could never happen. Even though this money was not her own, she warmly welcomed every little penny,

guarded them with powerful possessiveness and permitted none of them to leave her custody except unavoidably. Therefore she felt her caller was of secondary consideration. Continuing to sort the mail, she gave a special, almost contemptuous filipp to every envelope bearing the name of Lora Lorne, none of which ever contained so much as a dime.

She was finishing the task when Bill Brent trudged up to a window in the stout steel-mesh den enclosing her.

"My God!" Cora Dorthy said loudly, staring at him round-eyed. "What brings you into circulation at such an ungodly hour on such a sloppy morning?"

HER astonishment was well founded. The *Recorder* was a morning paper and the news staff, of which Bill Brent was a member in peculiarly poor standing, never showed up until around five in the afternoon. It was now only a little past nine in the morning, and never before had Brent made an appearance so premature.

There was also good cause for Cora Dorthy's uneasiness as she eyed him. Noticeably something was the matter with Brent. He had guided his size eleven brogans to the cage in the manner of a man walking a lofty and wobbly tightrope, and he seemed to be breathing as little as possible, as if afraid he might fall off. Obviously, too, he felt disinclined to explain.

"Give me the Lorne mail, Cora," Brent said tersely.

Cora didn't immediately give him the Lorne mail. For a moment they gazed at each other with open hostility. Brent's tired eyes saw her as a woman who could say "No" with a will even stronger than her massive muscles. Hard-faced and icy-eyed despite her Bohemian breeziness, this Chancelloress of the Exchequer had proved herself to be impervious to persuasion on the part of improvident reporters wistfully wishing an advance on their meager salaries. More than once she'd put a quick-freeze on Brent's highest hopes as a concocter of swindle-sheets. In this respect, since he'd previously considered himself a master padder of expense accounts, she had repeatedly humiliated him, and as a consequence he didn't love her.

Cora Dorthy, on the other hand, looked upon Brent, as she did upon other reporters also, as a kind of rodent constantly attempting to nibble at her money-bags. She felt scorn for them all, but Brent she scorned doubly, knowing him for the shameful two-faced creature he was.

Cora—among very few others—saw him not as a two-hundred-pound hulk of rugged masculinity with a broken nose grown crooked and a relish for bacchanals and nymphs, but as one who nursed a secret both dreadful and ludicrous. Bill Brent, to his everlasting mortification, conducted that daily column in the *Recorder* which was devoted to solving the problems of its readers' misguided amours, perverse passions and back-firing raptures. Cigar-savoring Brent, God help him, was none other than that revered handmaiden of Venus, that safeguarder of young womanhood's virginity, that tireless champion of chastity, that protector of innocence and defender of the sanctity of holy wedlock—Lora Lorne.

"Snap it up, Cora," Brent insisted through the grille in the tone of a haunted man expecting the worst. "The Lorne mail."

Holding his eyes with a distasteful stare, Cora yanked packets of letters from the racks. She plunked several of these into a wire basket for distribution by an office boy, dropped some into a drawer from which she removed others, filled her left hand with still others suspected of containing legal tender, and wound up by thrusting another fistful into Bill Brent's worried face.

"You can have 'em, sweetheart," Cora Dorthy retorted.

She removed more letters from the same drawer, turned and tramped into her office, there to give audience to her caller, while Brent gazed with pleased perplexity at his allotment. His uncertain expression was that of a man in a dentist's chair who, having expected it to hurt like hell, was vaguely elated to find it hadn't hurt at all. Brent, however, remained distrustful.

"This is too good to be true!" he murmured to himself. Rapidly counting through the varicolored envelopes, he wagged his head dazedly and added: "There's so few of 'em!"

THERE were indeed remarkably few, and Brent couldn't understand this state of affairs.

Usually Lora Lorne's mail descended on him in torrents. He was miserably accustomed to being deluged with an average of more than one hundred letters per day, day in and day out, six days a week, week after week, endlessly, with never a let-down. But recently, strangely enough, a let-down had come. Beginning about a month back, for some reason beyond Brent's powers of divination, these supplications to the matriarchial wisdom of Lora Lorne had begun to ebb to the point where, today for example, he estimated his cargo of woe to number about thirty appeals.

This phenomenon was unprecedented and practically unaccountable. Brent's was a world infested with legions of ardent dopes of both sexes, all industriously getting themselves entangled in an endless variety of amatory messes, and he couldn't believe that they'd seen the light suddenly, on a wholesale scale. Previously he'd borne the brunt of thousands upon thousands of rapturous morons who constantly yelped for Miss Lorne's help as a matter of life and death, and it didn't seem possible that most of them had abruptly ceased to need her inspired guidance. Either the populace was suffering an epidemic of good sense, Brent theorized, or else, having gone war-crazy, they were simply content to get into trouble and stay there, immorally wallowing and unsaved. None of these explanations satisfied Brent, however. He was sure of only one thing: it was happening.

Wagging his head again, he muttered morosely to himself: "It's too damned good to last."

Every day for the past month he'd told himself this. Today's light mail, he'd decided daily, was simply a queer happenstance. Tomorrow the usual flood of tribulations would catch up with him and he'd be swamped. But next day he hadn't been swamped after all. It was an incredibly lucky break which could never happen again except that it kept happening over and over anyhow. He felt like a condemned man being strapped in the electric chair regularly every twenty-four hours only to be reprieved at the last minute,

night after night. It had become a sort of nightmare of good fortune which Brent expected to disintegrate at any second, and finally, overwhelmed with incredulity and an inability to wait until five P. M., he'd dragged himself out of a cozy bed at this painful hour on this murkiest morning of the year and had come hustling down to the *Reporter* plant to embrace the inevitable bad news as soon as possible.

But here it was again. This thin packet of letters would, of course, be augmented slightly by later mails, but still they were so few that Brent was left delightfully baffled.

He turned away with the distrustfully relieved air of a man who'd just heard the doctor say his wife wouldn't be having her baby until tomorrow after all, but abruptly he paused.

Inside Cora Dorthy's office a noisy commotion had broken out.

Her voice raised to a pitch of fury, Miss Dorthy screeched: "You can't get away with that, you perfumed little jerk!"

Three swift, blasting gunshots followed.

CHAPTER TWO

The Sanguine Amazon

EVERY member of the *Reporter's* business staff peered toward the cashier's cage paralyzed with astonishment. Inside the mesh enclosure Miss Smythe simply paused in the act of applying her lipstick and stood gaping with her open mouth only half redecorated.

None of them could see what was happening, for Miss Dorthy's doors were closed and she was completely surrounded by partitions paned with pebbled glass. Brent, being nearest the entrance of her private office, took six quick strides and gripped the knob. He pushed at the door, but it met an obstacle that allowed it to yield only a fraction of an inch. Meanwhile violent sound effects occurred inside, indicating a strenuous struggle.

"You smelly little fancy-pants," Miss Dorthy yelled, "you can't rob me!"

A fourth shot crashed, echoed by a shattering sound almost directly in front of Brent. A triangular section cracked out of the pebbled pane near his face. Through the hole he glimpsed Cora Dorthy

and her assailant locked in combat near the desk. Miss Dorcy being a person of such muscular amplitude that Brent himself would never have undertaken to wrestle with her, the struggle ended abruptly. Fastening one paw on the pudgy man's neck and clenching a fistful of his fancy vest in the other, she simply hurled him bodily across the office. He hit the solid outer wall, bounced down and sat there with his fat legs spread, his face screwed up as if about to weep.

No one outside the cage had yet made a move to aid Miss Dorcy. On the contrary, they recoiled from the field of danger. Mindful of Miss Dorcy's durable physical construction, everyone seemed to feel she was well able to take care of herself, which actually she was. Only Miss Smythe acted. She yelled: "My gosh, he really meant it!" and ducked under the nearest counter. Brent, balked by the barricaded door, could do no more than watch. Miss Dorcy anyway was now so possessed with rage that any attempt to interfere would probably have been disastrous to her would-be rescuer.

Brent saw her snatch a revolver off the floor. She pushed it straight in the direction of the little man who was now tearfully hoisting himself to his spatted feet. The gun boomed twice, then clicked twice on shells previously discharged. The pudgy man looked down at his round stomach, found blood, screamed and flung himself at a broad window.

Cora Dorcy's blood was also flowing. Brent saw a bright splash on her massive left shoulder, another crimson stream reaching from her bulging right bicep to her elbow, a third trickle wriggling down from the gray-brown hair of her left temple. Her wounds were enough to have knocked any ordinary person flat, but she still stood firmly planted on her big feet, and she turned a furious glance through the broken pane at Brent.

"I've been shot," she said.

Brent drove his hard knuckles to the pane. Segments cracked inward. He reached through, grabbed the chair which had been propped under the inner knob, and twisted it aside. As he thrust in, Cora Dorcy wrathfully hurled the empty gun.

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It whizzed out the window, which was now wide open. The pudgy man was no longer inside the office. He had flung up the sash and had spilled himself over the sill. Outside the rain poured and the murk swirled in gray clouds, covering the course of his frantic escape. After one quick, unrewarded glance into the street Brent spun back to Cora Dorthy, who had meanwhile become even bloodier.

"Goddam if I haven't been shot!" she exclaimed.

Brent bawled to the business section generally: "Somebody call a doctor!"

Miss Dorthy herself amended this order. "Don't you dare get just any old sawbones, either! Get my boy-friend, Doc Mainley!" She was even able to supply his full name, address and telephone number. "Doctor Newton Mainley, Medical Arts Building, City 4593!"

Then she turned to a couch in the corner and plopped down with a sigh, still copiously shedding her blood.

"Cora!" Brent blurted. "Who did this to you?"

"I never even saw the damned little twirp before," Cora snapped, "and if he ever sees me again it'll be his last living look at anybody!"

"What did he get?" Brent asked quickly. "The cashbox?"

"Listen, Auntie Lora," Cora said scathingly and surprisingly. "I'll get around to that later. I don't feel like taking a trial balance just now. Let me bleed in peace."

Brent stared at her, astounded at her physical stamina, as doors behind him burst open. Hannah Smythe tripped in, saw all the gore dribbled about, and yipped in horror.

"Holy cats!" Miss Smythe bleated, amplifying her previous remark. "He told me he was going to bump the joint and he actually meant it!"

EXECUTIVES and stenographers came in a gibbering mob. Hustling among them was bald-headed, square-faced, shrewd-eyed Kimball Martin, the *Recorder's* managing editor, who was reputed to be capable of ordering his reporters into a blazing building for the sake of making a headline to the effect that several reporters had lost their lives

inside a blazing building. Peering down at the cashier, he saw her not as a seriously wounded woman but as a piece of front-page news.

"Get Garrett down here!" This request for the services of the *Recorder's* city editor was made in a squeaky voice which normally, and now especially, sounded like a kitchen pump in need of lubrication. Before anyone could respond, Martin snatched up Miss Dorthy's telephone. "Never mind, I'll get him myself!"

"Stay away from me," Cora Dorthy was commanding the crowd. "Give me air. Don't you dare touch me. I don't want to get killed by any of you first aid experts."

Certain that she meant it, Brent elbowed his way out of the crowd. His interest in this startling episode, like the managing editor's, lay chiefly in its value as spot news. Although he'd been kept from functioning as a reporter for too many long months now, the scent of crime still caused his instincts to bristle. He hoped that through snagging onto a sizzling-hot, exclusive story he might manage to divest himself of Lora Lorne's loathsome pantalettes and jockey himself back into his old police run, where he rightfully belonged. This time he felt he had his incisors buried in a page-one sensation which really held high promises of his long-deferred salvation—a wild gun-battle in the *Recorder's* own plant, with Brent actually an eye-witness! Nobody, he felt, could tear this one out of his teeth. Meaning grimly to hold on to it for all it was worth, he dropped out the open window and almost at once came upon the gun which Cora Dorthy had flung after the punctured fugitive.

It lay in the drenched grass of a strip of lawn separating the building from the sidewalk. Brent fished it up by inserting a pencil through the trigger-guard. Cuddling it inside his trenchcoat, he scouted farther in search of the man who contained several of the bullets it had fired.

It seemed improbable that he could have gone far, several precious minutes having passed since his hasty exit. Brent could find no traces of blood-drops on the sidewalk. The rain had already sluiced them away. After skirting up and down the block fruitlessly, and glancing into a few

parked cars, he legged it back into the *Recorder* building.

A frail, formally dressed man with a dignified brown Vandyke was fluttering into Cora Dorthy's office. That, Brent supposed, would be her medical boy-friend, Doctor Newton Mainley. Her office was still full of dismayed babbling. Brent looked in and saw that Cora had lapsed into a comatose condition caused, he supposed, by a slight degree of shock. While Dr. Mainley fussed over her, Kimball Martin picked a revolver off the floor, swung out its cylinder and ejected its six shells. He stared at them in consternation.

"Rim-fires!" he exclaimed. "Cora, Cora, how could such a thing happen? This is the paper's gun, put here to protect our money, but it's full of rim-fire cartridges made to be used in a rifle—cartridges that won't work in a revolver using center-fire bullets!" He gestured wonderingly to Brent. "But she tried! See? Hammer-dents made in all six shells. None of 'em went off, but Cora would've plugged him plenty if she hadn't been trying to shoot the wrong kind of bullets."

"He got plugged plenty as it was," Brent commented, "and with his own artillery."

BRENT abandoned the cashier's office in favor of a telephone booth in a corner beyond. Its door shut tightly, he dialed the number of police headquarters and asked for Smitty. Meanwhile he drew from his coat the revolver he'd found in the grass. When Smitty answered from the Bureau of Criminal Identification, Brent had a question ready and was told to wait a second.

"That gun," Smitty reported presently, having consulted his official files, "belongs to Walter Weir, home address 2376 Birch Street, office address 376 State Street. He's a broker, partner in the firm of Reyburn and Weir."

Brent's eyebrows shot up. Walter Weir's home was located in a most select section, his office address was that of an expensive building and the firm of Reyburn and Weir was well-known and respected among those having dealings with brokers. "What the hell!" he said.

"If you don't like it I can't help it,"

Smitty retorted. "That's what the record says."

Brent slotted another nickel. A girl answered brightly that this was Reyburn and Weir, good morning. Brent identified himself, asked for Mr. Weir and was informed that Mr. Weir was out, but would he care to talk to Mr. Reyburn? He would, and Mr. Reyburn duly said hello.

"Brent?" Reyburn asked. "Did you say this is Mr. Brent calling?"

Brent admitted it was and inquired: "Could you tell me offhand whether or not it was your partner who got shot three times a few minutes ago while attempting to rob the office of the *Reporter's* cashier?"

"What?" Letting it sink in, Brent heard Reyburn blurt: "Certainly not!"

"Then can you tell me how it happens that a revolver registered in Walter Weir's name was used in an attempt to mow down our Miss Dorthy?"

"Dorthy! What!" Reyburn made choking sounds. "Are you crazy?"

"I'm not crazy," Brent assured him. "It's a sober fact that our Miss Dorthy is bleeding all over the place. She hurts. The man who plunked those bullets into her, using your partner's gun, is also feeling none too well at the moment, wherever he may be, because she bounced a few back at him. Please stop spluttering at me and tell me where I can reach Mr. Weir."

"I'm going to check on this!" Reyburn asserted. "I'm going to call the police!"

He disconnected violently. Brent spent a third nickel, was told again that this was Reyburn and Weir, good morning, and next he was informed that Mr. Reyburn was busy just now. Brent let it go at that. Still cuddling the revolver and still determined to keep a grip on the case, he returned hastily to Cora Dorthy's office and there encountered Garrett.

The *Recorder's* city editor gave Brent one glance and continued to consult with a beauteous young woman named Valerie Randall. Having responded with all possible haste to his managing editor's summons, Garrett had nevertheless managed to appear with Miss Randall in tow. In Brent's estimation she was the most luscious, vine-ripened young female he had ever encountered in all his extensive re-

searches among her sex, and the only thing that kept him from going for her in the biggest way possible was the fact that he detested her. Val Randall was distinguished as the only police reporter in the Fourth Estate who rinsed pink panties in the bathroom washbowl every night. Under Garrett's fond tutelage she was actually attempting to work Brent's old trick. She didn't realize how preposterous this was. Full of a wholly groundless sense of professional self-assurance, Val also ignored Brent's presence this morning. Disdaining her in return, and intending to engage Garrett presently, Brent prowled about in search of evidence.

Somebody had evidently remembered to call the cops. Three headquarters dicks were in a huddle over a briefcase lying near the desk. Elbowing in, Brent noted the gold initials on it—L.L. Obviously these weren't the initials of Walter Weir. Probably they weren't the true initials of the culprit either. They were, however, those of Lora Lorne. Considering this a distasteful coincidence, Brent backed out and turned to the safe.

Two more headquarters dicks were poking into it, checking a list and wagging their heads.

"Nothing missing from here, Bill," one of them obligingly informed Brent.

Increasingly perplexed, Brent pawed over Cora Dorthy's desk. Scattered across it was some of the morning's mail, more of it littered the floor. At random Brent ripped open envelopes. In rapid succession he found a check for more than two-thousand dollars in payment of an advertiser's account, a money order for seventy-three cents settling for a classified insertion, and six one-dollar bills for a year's subscription. He gave up and took another look at the woman who had evidently routed an armed heister into a bloody and completely lootless escape.

Still inert and now plastered with red-stained gauze pads, Cora Dorthy was just then being laboriously transferred by four men to an ambulance litter while Doctor Mainley fussily supervised. Assuming she wouldn't have much to say for publication for hours to come, Brent button-holed Garrett.

"I'm an eye-witness," he informed his city editor. "Naturally it's my story."

"Naturally," Garrett said in his stony tones, "you're going to go right on devoting yourself to Cupid's capers regardless, Grandma."

Brent scowled. "Listen to me, you soulless martinet. You edit a paper. It prints news. I saw this particular piece of news in the very act of eruption. Nobody but me can give you the inside slant. I'm going back on the police trick right now and meanwhile Val can wear Lora Lorne's gaiters."

Garrett permitted himself an icy smile. "Madam," he said immovably, "you labor under misapprehensions. You have no exclusive inside story. Like a true newspaper woman, Cora refrained from passing out until after she'd babbled the whole terrible tale. In due time my very capable police reporter will relay to me any additional details available through headquarters' usual channels. They're now hot on the trail of the perpetrator, and no doubt they'll be greatly aided by this additional piece of evidence."

A shrewd and uncompromising glint in his eye, Garrett reached inside Brent's coat and snatched out the revolver, a glimmer of which Brent had inadvertently allowed to escape.

"You can't do this to me!" Brent protested. "If there's any justice left in the world, this story, of all stories is mine! Besides there's something screwy in this set-up and I'm the guy—"

Garrett interrupted with glacial calm: "Hustle upstairs, Val, and write it—under a by-line, of course. As for *you* . . ." In an utterly obdurate tone with which Brent had learned it was hopeless to argue, Garrett added: "Love and love alone is all that matters, Miss Lorne."

CHAPTER THREE

Dead on Arrival

ONCE away from the admission desk in the Heights Hospital, Brent avoided the slow elevators and stretched his legs up the stairs. An obliging clerk had told him Cora Dorthy had been deposited in Room 313. Accordingly, Brent's destination was the third floor.

Despite Garrett's orders and admonitions, Brent still felt this story was rightfully his private property. Miss Dorthy

having been strenuously lugged from the scene of the shooting, Garrett had hustled up to the city room with plans for a front-page splash which strictly excluded Brent. Even though Val Randall was now pounding out her stuff and giving it everything she had, Brent still believed he could pull off a superior reportorial performance that would relegate her to the oblivion she richly deserved. He'd trailed the ambulance to the hospital and his intention was to camp on the case so doggedly that soon no one would be able to contest his squatter's rights.

But immediately upon reaching the third floor he met with opposition. A man who looked mulishly stubborn stalked from the waiting room and planted himself stockily in Brent's path. His name was Delaney, his intimates called him Hardheaded Horace, and he was a detective lieutenant.

"Sorry, Bill," Delaney said with an air of finality. "No visitors."

"I'm covering this thing for the paper," Brent answered glibly. "One side, please."

"I've got orders, Bill," Delaney insisted, firmly blocking Brent's advance. "Nobody sees her except her nurse, Doctor Mainley, Mr. Martin, Mr. Garrett and Miss Randall." He ticked these five off on the fingers of one hand, which left none for Brent. "That's straight from the chief. Sorry, Bill."

"Nobody can keep me out of—"

"I can and I'm doing it," Delaney declared. "Orders is orders. Sorry."

All Delaney's sorrow was of no benefit to Brent's special story. Plainly this was Garrett's doing—more of his inflexible despotism. Frustrated, Brent could only peer down the forbidden corridor leading to Miss Dorthy's room. Near its end he saw the door numbered 313, so near and yet so inaccessible. Having no choice but to face about and retreat, he did so, muttering maledictions. Pushing out a rear entrance into the parking lot behind the hospital, he considered alternative ways and means.

Unhesitatingly he tackled the fire-escape. Mounting to the third floor platform, he found, to his relief, that the room beyond was not occupied. He eased the sash up, crawled in and crossed to the hallway door. A peek outward showed

him that Delaney had retired to the waiting room to watch the stairs and elevators. From this point he was not visible. About to step out, Brent paused, hearing the clack of an elevator panel and heelbeats approaching.

The man who passed Delaney unchallenged was Kimball Martin, the *Recorder's* Machiavellian managing editor. As soon as Martin had disappeared into Miss Dorthy's room, which adjoined this one, Brent eased into the corridor and sidled until he could eavesdrop. The solemn voice he heard speaking was that of the attending physician, Newton Mainley.

"Her temple was grazed and the wound in the bicep was a complete penetration," Dr. Mainley was reporting to Martin. "I'll remove the bullet from her shoulder later in the day. Strong as Cora is, her condition is quite serious. I've cancelled all my appointments in order to stay with her constantly."

His appointments, Brent reflected, couldn't have been many. Doctor Mainley's reputation had recently taken on an unsavory odor. It had to do with a patient to whom he'd issued too many prescriptions for morphine. As Brent remembered it, Doctor Mainley had defended himself by explaining that the patient suffered from a painful and incurable affliction, and it was only with the aid of the narcotic that he could carry on his work as a useful and respected citizen. Doctor Mainley had squeezed out of it, but narrowly, the scandalous publicity having decimated his practice. He doubtless remained a competent physician, however, and evidently the incident had not cost him any of Cora Dorthy's affection.

Next the physician said quickly: "What's that?"

"A gun, of course," Brent heard Kimball Martin answer. "The same gun Cora kept in her office, only now it's loaded with the right type of bullet—center-fires. Keep it handy. Watch her. Guard her."

"But surely, with a detective on duty, there's no need to . . ."

"Cora can identify the man who shot her, and he knows it," Martin explained. "What if he should sneak in here, try to save himself from a rap for attempted murder by silencing her? We can't take any chances. If anybody should show him-

self inside this room—anybody who's not supposed to come here—and that means *anybody* other than Cora's nurse, Garrett, Miss Randall and myself—don't waste time asking questions, understand? Shoot first!"

"Yes, yes, I understand!" Doctor Mainley answered in agitation. "I hadn't realized. You can depend on me. I'll protect Cora."

BRENT edged warily away from Cora's door. Martin, he suspected, really hoped an unauthorized approach to her bed would be attempted, for the spilling of more blood would mean more sensational news for the *Recorder*. Brent was also keenly aware that for him to stop a bullet or two wouldn't serve his purpose, and besides Doctor Mainley was of too nervous a temperament. Stymied, and realizing that after all no news would become available here so long as Cora lay inert, Brent backed into the adjoining unoccupied room. Hoping it would remain empty for his future use, he dropped off the bottom of the fire-escape and went on his dogged way, bitterly reflecting that never before had he been so rigidly debarred from a newsworthy domain which rightfully should be his alone.

In the *Recorder's* city room Brent found Val Randall feverishly punching her typewriter and Garrett, behind his desk in the corner, editing her copy as fast as she produced it. Although no other members of the news staff had yet appeared, both of them were working under a full head of steam. Disheartened, Brent plucked a handful of galley proofs from the spike on Garrett's desk and pored over them critically.

Val's story, he saw sourly, hadn't neglected the angle mysteriously involving Walter Weir's gun. According to Bertram Reyburn, Weir's business partner, this gun was usually kept in their office. Two nights ago, Reyburn reported, someone had broken in during the night, but since apparently nothing had been stolen they hadn't bothered to report it to the police. The revolver later used on Miss Dorthy had evidently been filched at that time, but no one had noticed its absence.

Concerning the briefcase initialed L.L., Reyburn professed complete ignorance.

As for Walter Weir himself, he had left very early this morning on a vacation trip to his camp cottage on Lake Azure. This region was rather far from the city and unusually difficult of access, which was precisely why Mr. Weir had selected it years ago as the site for his retreat. There was no telephone and no telegraph station within miles, and so far the messages dispatched by Mr. Reyburn had not reached Mr. Weir. Although Mr. Weir must be completely unaware of the crime committed with the aid of his gun, no doubt he would return post haste the moment he heard of it.

Garrett spoke, looking up stonily. "Grandma," he complained, "I grow very tired of reminding you that I need a Lorne column for the next edition."

"I grow even more goddam tired of producing a Lorne column for the next edition," Brent responded despondently. "In many ways I envy Cora. Her only trouble is a few trivial bullet-holes in her carcass."

He trudged into the farthest corner of the city room where two partitions formed an office isolating him from the self-respecting members of the staff. It was scarcely larger than an adult's coffin and it smelled to high heaven. The reek rose from the many perfumed letters addressed to Lora Lorne, which were piled on table and chairs and stuffed into file cabinets. With a nauseated expression Brent settled down to his noisome job, pulling from his pocket the letters Cora Dorthy had handed to him just before getting herself drilled.

Ripping them open and frowning over them, Brent noted another phenomenon fully as remarkable as their current scarcity. This was the fact that fewer sins were being confessed to Lora Lorne these days. Usually Brent was obliged to cope with an endless succession of misbegotten offspring, embezzlements, wife-desertions, child-abandonments, adulteries and other varieties of illicit amours. In today's shipment of tribulations he could find nothing more reprehensible than a few run-of-the-mill jiltings, torch-carryings, war-marriage problems and husbands needing to be cured of such minor bad habits as crap-shooting. He was still wondering why the city's morals seemed to have taken a step

or two upward when his door banged open.

THE man who glared down at Brent was a healthy-looking, conservative, good average American. His height and weight were average, he apparently possessed an average intelligence and he was garbed with an average lack of distinction. The only thing about him which was not average was the degree of his anger. He was seething.

"My name's Elias, Sidney Elias," he snapped. "I've got to see Miss Lora Lorne."

Brent had to parry this desire daily. Somebody was always coming in, usually tearfully, with a request for an urgent interview with Miss Lorne. Always Brent had to tell them it was impossible, but he could never truthfully explain why. The real reason was that Lora Lorne didn't exist and never had existed. She was simply a copyrighted "house name" conjured out of thin air. The portrait which adorned her agony column every day—it presented her as a crinkle-faced old dame with an excessively saccharine smile, combs in her snowy hair and eyeglasses chained to a reel pinned on one sympathetic shoulder—was a picture of nobody who'd ever lived. Ever since the damned column was first perpetrated twenty-three years ago it had been conducted by a succession of underpaid, female busybodies. Brent was insufferably distinguished as being the first male ever to hide behind Miss Lorne's petticoats.

Wearily he began his stock answer. "Miss Lorne never—"

"I demand to see her here and now!"

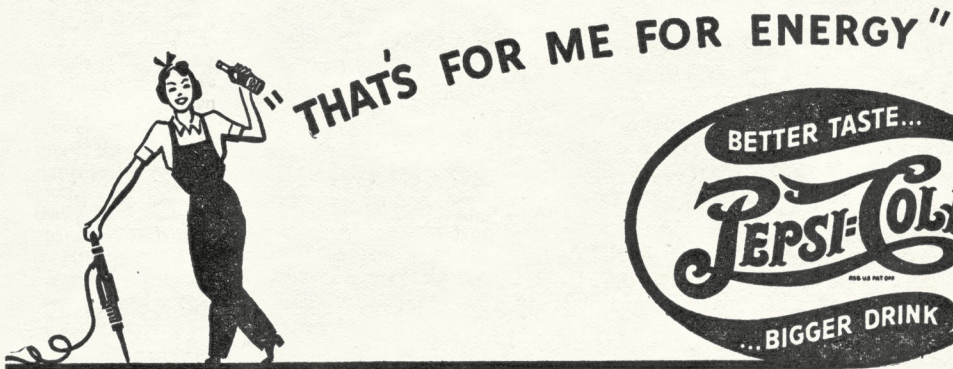
Sidney Elias broke in vehemently. "I want to tell her to her face that she's an addle-brained, vicious trouble-maker!"

Brent bristled. "Vicious trouble-maker!" he echoed, aghest.

Much as he loathed the passion column, he'd worn his nerves raw trying faithfully to discharge Lora Lorne's duties to her huge family of bewildered supplicants. He'd stayed awake nights studying Freud, Jung and Adler. He'd bled himself white in his conscientious efforts to solve equitably and morally hundreds of unsolvable problems. Elias's denunciation being so utterly unmerited, it stuck long-suffering Brent to the quick.

"Lora Lorne," he said incredulously, "who unselfishly and wholeheartedly devotes herself day and night to remedying the troubles of others, is a trouble-maker? Ungrateful nonsense!"

Stooping over Brent, Elias glared out his rage. "It's not nonsense that after fifteen years of happy marriage my wife's suing me for divorce and asking for a staggering amount of alimony! My unmarried secretary had a baby two weeks ago, yesterday she tried to commit suicide on my doorstep, and today she's suing me for a fortune for the child's support, and that's no nonsense either! The company that employed me for the last eighteen years has just fired me. My friends won't speak to me any more. I'm a pariah. I'm facing poverty and loneliness. My whole life's wrecked and you say it's nonsense! You won't think so once I've found a chance to wrap my mitts around the neck of the merciless, conniving _____ of a Lora Lorne who's responsible for all this!"



"What? How can you possibly accuse Miss Lorne—?"

"She's directly, personally and damnably to blame for turning my life into a hopeless shambles! I'll be damned forty ways from breakfast if I'm not going to see that she gets what she damned well deserves!"

Brent groaned. It was entirely too likely that in some way, but with the very best of intentions, he'd made a grave mistake in judgment. This possibility, in fact, was the worst aspect of his miserable job, the part that worried him the most.

The misfortunes of those who sought his aid were as nothing compared with Brent's own. Far back in happier days Garrett had brought him from New York to the *Recorder* under an iron-bound contract. Having begun his local career as a special police reporter by missing twenty or thirty editions, Brent had tried to explain that this was caused by the fact that he'd merely been getting acquainted with the city's tap-rooms and gazelles. Garrett, a stern disciplinarian without a drop of compassion in his make-up, had explained in return that henceforth and until further notice Brent and Lora Lorne would be one and the same.

Ever since then Brent had sweated, not daring to quit, for to break his contract would precipitate even sterner measures. He'd get the socks sued off him and be blacklisted out of the newspaper game forever. It wasn't enough that Garrett had forced him to broil in this purgatory far too long already. No, Garrett must add unmercifully to his punishment—keep Brent so intolerably situated that he must inevitably, though unwittingly, bring down upon his sensitive conscience such tragedies as the complete wreckage of the home, the marriage, the job, the reputation, the bank account and the extra-marital love-life of Sidney Elias.

SEEING that Elias was about to explode again, Brent quickly protested: "You must be exaggerating."

"It's impossible to exaggerate the damage that dim-witted meddler of a Lora Lorne has done to me! I admit I should have known better than to ask for the old tramp's help. I could have handled this thing myself and nothing would have

come of it. But I was rattled. I couldn't see a way out, and I thought Lora Lorne could show me. Instead, she played me for a sucker—my wife and my secretary, too—played us all against each other, three ways from the middle. She deliberately jockeyed us into this horrible calamity, meanwhile charging us all the traffic would bear!"

"Just a minute!" Brent said, sitting up. "The *Recorder* offers Miss Lorne's services absolutely free of charge. She never accepts a single cent from—"

"Oh, no?" Elias flung acidly into Brent's face. "What the hell do *you* know about it?"

The question stopped Brent momentarily. The bell saved him—the telephone bell. Automatically scooping up the receiver, he heard a woman's hushed voice.

"Is he there?" she asked quickly. "Mr. Elias, I mean?"

"He is, loudly," Brent admitted.

"This is Mrs. Elias speaking." In haste she added: "What's he telling you?"

"Plenty, all of it mistaken," Brent answered wryly. "At least I find it hard to swallow. Is it true that—?"

Elias, in no mood for interruptions, pushed the instrument away from Brent's face.

"Listen to me, whoever you are! You're not stopping me. Nobody's stopping me. I don't care what happens now. Nothing could make this mess any worse than it already is. I'm hitting back and hitting hard. Now, where's that triple-damned, four-flushing, blood-sucking Lorne leech?"

"You can't see her," Brent muttered, trying to carry on two conversations at once. "At least not until—" He did a double-take. "What did you call her?"

Elias roared: "I can't call her half the dirty names she is, the ———! You're trying to keep her out of my reach, are you? Well, you can't keep her out of the law's hands! This scandal-sheet's stinking publicity means nothing to me any more! I'm going straight down to the district attorney's office right now and Lora Lorne's going to spend the rest of her life rotting in jail!"

He strode out, beside himself with fury, leaving Brent stunned with bewilderment. Brent's memory contained no specific de-

tail which he could grasp. Evidently Elias, Elias's wife and Elias's secretary had all been in communication with Lora Lorne, yet Brent couldn't recall them. This in itself wasn't surprising. People were continually falling into stereotyped predicaments, and Brent's files swarmed with many cases almost identical with many others. Still, something was unmistakably wrong here. Elias had used fighting words, without apparent provocation, and yet he'd plainly meant them with all his tortured soul. At a loss, Brent muttered into the telephone, discovered that the woman was gone—he heard nothing except a peculiar squeaking sound—and disconnected.

Spurred by a determination to learn exactly what all this madness signified, Brent went after Sidney Elias. Striding from the building, buckling his trench-coat, he spied Elias purposefully ducking into a car parked on the opposite side of the street. Although the rain was spilling down again and the fog was still soupy, Brent was sure of his man. He ran, shouting, but Elias didn't hear him or didn't heed him. The car cut into the street, leaving Brent in a cloud of exhaust fumes.

As it veered swiftly at the corner, Brent jogged back to his own car. When he reached that same corner on two wheels a red light warned him to a stop. One full, precious minute passed before Brent could legally resume the chase.

Sloshing rapidly through the murky canyon of the street, he failed to spot his quarry. Elias wasn't wasting any time. Neither was Brent. If any charges, whatever they might be, and however unfounded, were going to be lodged with the D.A., Brent intended to hear them at first hand.

When he swung his car again, this time into City Plaza, one side of which was rimmed by new, white-stone municipal and county buildings, Brent found proof that Elias hadn't been kidding. Elias was just then shuttling his car into the parking space in front of the structure which housed the district attorney's office.

Halfway across the plaza another red light held Brent back. He saw Elias alighting, still highly indignant and purposeful. At the same time Brent heard a whizzing sound at his side. A car flashed

past him, boldly jumping the light. In the fog it was a fleet, phantom-like shape, its headlamps glaring. Its driver, invisible to Brent, swerved swiftly past a rubber-coated patrolman whose back was turned. It weaved, dodging the cross-traffic, heading straight for Sidney Elias.

Spellbound, Brent saw an arm poking out of its front right window, a gun dimly glittering in a clenched fist. Two quick fiery flickers sprang from it and two reports blasted out. Elias paused, turned around as if too tired to go on, sat down on the wet curbstone, then gently toppled into the flowing gutter.

Brent jammed his car into second gear, jabbing at the gas-pedal. The other car, having scarcely stopped, was again swiftly weaving. A ghostly thing on wheels, it swung again, causing street-crossing pedestrians to scatter frantically. Brent, jackrabbiting deeper into the plaza, found himself chasing nothing. Already the death-car was gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mr. Brent, Meet Miss Lorne

WHILE Brent rolled, the traffic lights again changed their hue. Traffic poured across the plaza and into the street down which his quarry had disappeared. With at least twenty cars impeding him, Brent saw at once the hopelessness of a chase. He braked again, observed that Sidney Elias still lay inert in the gutter, then noticed two men curiously poking heads out of a window of the district attorney's office two floors above.

Brent prudently held back until a crowd had massed about Elias. Then prowling on its fringe, he heard voices chattering that the man was dead. Brent believed it, regretted it and abided by it. Elias, having irately threatened Lora Lorne with drastic legal action, had been shot down practically on the district attorney's doormat, and under such suspicious circumstances Brent felt he should remain as unnoticeable as possible.

He ducked his hat in order to avoid recognition by District Attorney Porter Gates. The dynamic D.A. had put on a raincoat and had hurried down with a second man—presumably the same man

whom Brent had seen craning out of the window. Aided by the cops who were now taking charge, both of them elbowed into the crowd for a close-up view of the murder victim. Edging closer, Brent caught the D.A.'s astonished voice.

"What's that? You know him?"

"Why, yes!" the other answered. "That's the very same crank I came to complain about!"

Although the D.A. dropped his voice it remained audible to Brent. "Let's get this straight. This man Elias came bulling into your office, raising hell about a business deal you know nothing about and threatening you. Then, at the very moment when you were sitting at my desk, asking for protection because he might be dangerous, he gets shot dead right under my window. How do you explain that?"

The second man answered: "I'm not trying to explain it. I'm simply telling you this is that same screwball who promised to kill me for some reason I'd never even heard of."

Brent stretched on tip-toes, trying to glimpse the second man, but at that moment a nightstick prodded his ribs. He retreated, feeling slightly relieved. If Elias was actually a nut who went about threatening innocent people baselessly, then, of course, his wild accusations against Lora Lorne weren't worth serious consideration. Still, trudging back to his car, Brent was troubled by several other angles. Elias, having been so average, was simply not the type to run berserk, and even if he had indiscriminately spouted too much verbal abuse, that was scarcely reason enough for someone to kill him publicly, with such desperate tactics as Brent had witnessed.

In his car Brent headed back to the *Reporter* plant. Pushing through the swinging doors of the city room, he met Val Randall rushing out. This meant, of course, that headquarters had flashed the Elias killing to the city desk, and that Garrett's pet reporter was hot on its trail. One glance at Garrett's flinty face convinced Brent it would be futile for him to put in a claim. Instead, letting Val have it, he trudded into his smelly cubicle and pored over a copy of yesterday's home edition.

There it was—Elias's tale of woe pre-

served in print. Mrs. Elias was actually suing her husband for divorce, charging adultery. She was demanding substantial alimony. Simultaneously a Miss Sally Samuels was alleging that Elias had sired her brand new baby daughter and demanding enormous sums for its support. Mr. Elias's employment with the Apex Chemical Company, which he had begun eighteen years ago as a stock boy, had been abruptly terminated. It all checked. For all this Elias had furiously blamed Lora Lorne, and now he had suffered the further grievance of getting shot to death.

Brent spent a feverish moment digging into his files, gave it up, consulted the telephone directory, then hastened out.

IN a residential section of average class he stopped his car in front of an average-looking home. His ring at the door was answered by a woman who also looked undistinguished, except that she seemed exceptionally unhappy.

"Mrs. Elias, my name is Brent. I'm the man you talked to over the telephone about forty minutes ago."

Mrs. Elias seemed puzzled. "Brent? Telephone? I haven't received any calls this morning."

Mrs. Elias," Brent said patiently, "I'm the man who talked to you when you rang the *Recorder*."

She shook her head. "I haven't made any calls, either."

"Mrs. Elias," Brent insisted, "I realize your mind is disturbed, but please try to concentrate. Less than an hour ago your husband went to the *Recorder* building. You must have known he was going there, and why. Apparently you were concerned about it because he was so emotionally upset, so you phoned the paper and were connected with me. Before we could say very much he rushed out and I had to go after him. You remember now, don't you, Mrs. Elias?"

Mrs. Elias said: "No, I don't. I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

Staring at her, baffled, Brent carefully thought up a new approach. "There was," he ventured, "some trouble revolving around certain advice which Lora Lorne supposedly gave your husband concerning—"

Mrs. Elias' response to this was immediate and emphatic. "There certainly was!" she exclaimed. "Lora Lorne made terrible fools of us all! It all started because my husband asked for her advice. Advice!" Mrs. Elias was becoming strident. "What advice! Instead of telling my husband to break away from that little tramp and go back to his wife, as he properly should, she told him there wasn't any reason he shouldn't go right ahead having an affair with the brazen little hussy so long as he could get away with it. Psychology, she called it!"

Brent blinked. "What!"

"Then Lora Lorne turned right around and told me what was going on and how I should break it up. But I couldn't break it up because Lora Lorne turned right around again, behind my back, and told the girl, Sally Samuels, how awful it was for me to make so much trouble for her. It was a case of true, beautiful love between this Sally Samuels and my husband, Lora Lorne said, and she ought to fight for her rights. Lora Lorne's advice drove everybody crazy, that's what it did! And then, to top it all off, when Lora Lorne heard I was filing for a divorce she said I was being wronged so terribly that she'd help me to get all the alimony I deserved—for a percentage."

"My God!" Horrified and utterly befuddled, Brent tried to find a grip on himself. "One moment. There seem to be numerous mistakes here. Let's try to get it cleared up by working from today backwards. This morning your husband, at his wits' end, went down to Lora Lorne's office at the *Recorder* and—"

"He didn't either," Mrs. Elias snapped. "He went to the Academy."

Drawing a breath, Brent asked: "What Academy?"

"The Academy of Family Problems, of course!"

Brent had never heard of it. "Miss Lorne," he said, "has absolutely no connection with any such institution."

"Don't be silly! That's where I always saw her."

Knowing full well it was impossible that anyone could ever have seen non-existent Lora Lorne anywhere, Brent answered carefully: "Of course, Mrs. Elias, she wasn't really there. I'm quite sure—"

"Young man!" Mrs. Elias snapped. "I can certainly credit my own senses. More than once I've seen and talked with Lora Lorne just as close as I'm seeing and talking to you right now."

Brent stiffened, convinced that this woman was as stark mad as her husband had been. "Mrs. Elias," he inquired gently, "you've talked with Lora Lorne face to face?"

"Certainly!" Then, as a bell rang somewhere in the room behind her, she said with automatic politeness: "Excuse me."

It was the telephone. Brent lingered at the door, believing he'd perturbed himself needlessly over a husband and wife who both suffered from delusions. Nevertheless he was reminded that a report of this marital snarl had been printed in the *Recorder* as news. The girl in the case, her infant and her attempt at suicide were not figments of anyone's fancy—they were real enough. Likewise it was nobody's dream that Sidney Elias was a victim of murder. That also was a bloody fact. Evidently it had just been communicated rather belatedly to his widow. Through the door Brent heard her moaning, "Dead! . . . Dead!"

He went away from there, striving to straighten it out in his mind. After driving blindly for some minutes he swung to the curb, hastened into a drugstore and consulted another telephone directory. To his astonishment, he found it—a listing that read, *Academy of Family Problems, Inc.* There was also an address. Back in his car, Brent headed for it.

IT was a white stone-fronted unit in a row of three-story buildings with bay windows and brass-railed stoops. Once homes, they had been remodeled into professional offices. No glaring advertisements defaced them. Instead, small, neat, golden letters on the glass of the entrance formed the same legend, *Academy of Family Problems, Inc.*

In the foyer another sign invited Brent to walk in. He did so, his chin thrust out hard. In the tastefully and comfortably furnished reception room he found himself the focus of a circle of curious eyes. Twelve females, ranging in age from fifteen to sixty-odd, and three men, were quietly and anxiously waiting. Immedi-

ately a door opened and a receptionist appeared, poised and smiling, causing the fifteen clients to stir eagerly in their chairs, each with hope of being summoned into the inner sanctum. Instead, she gave full priority to the Academy's latest visitor.

"Come right in, Mr. Brent."

His perplexity growing, Brent stepped through a door and into a corridor lined with other doors before asking her: "How did you know my name?"

"Aren't you funny!" she said. "But why did you come in the front way? Why didn't you use the back door, as usual?" Without waiting for an answer, which would have given Brent some difficulty anyway, she looked into an office and announced: "Mr. Brent's here, Mr. Redman."

She vanished and at the same time there appeared a tall, trimly tailored man of forty with closely cropped, curly hair the color of rust. At sight of Brent he beamed as if upon an esteemed and long-absent friend.

"Bill!" he said affably, pumping Brent's. "It isn't often you come around. I'm really delighted to see you again!"

"Wait a minute," Brent said. "I'm a little confused. So far as I know, this is the first time I've ever been in this place, and I've never met you before."

Redman laughed good-naturedly. "Of course, of course," he said in a low tone. "We're swarming with clients this morning and some of them have pretty sharp ears. Well, everything's running as smoothly as you could wish, Bill."

Meanwhile Redman was guiding Brent by the arm into another office. The open door bore the name, *Mr. Dacy*. From his desk Mr. Dacy looked up—a muscular young man with a square, flat face. He looked like a pugilist. At once he bounced up, grinning, grabbed Brent's hand and crushed it.

"Bill! Mighty glad you came! There's a question here about our bookkeeping system." Before Brent could insert a word, he launched into a question of the proper allocation of departmental expenses which to Brent was incomprehensible, and he wound up by inquiring: "How do you want it done, Bill? What do you think?"

Staring at him, Brent tried to remember him and couldn't. Neither could he understand why he should be consulted concerning the Academy's ledgers. He still felt he was really a stranger here, although he was growing none too sure of it.

"I think," he answered, "that I'm going slightly wacky."

Both Mr. Redman and Mr. Dacy laughed as if at an excellent quip.

"Now listen!" Brent said. "Unless I've just recovered from an attack of amnesia, which I doubt, I don't know you two guys. I don't know why you're both treating me like an old pal. Evidently I enjoy certain privileges here, for some reason which escapes me, but I've never before been inside this joint. Whatever this set-up may be, I know from nothing. You've evidently mistaken me for somebody else."

Mr. Redman and Mr. Dacy laughed again with appreciative understanding.

"All right, Bill, if that's the way you want it," Redman assured him. "Still, as I understand it, the last time we conferred on policy we decided your connection needn't be kept under wraps any longer. On the contrary, it has advantages, so I've already acted on your suggestion to play it up."

Again he was leading Brent down the corridor, as if on a tour. Brent passed closed doors, evidently those of confessional booths, and heard a buzz of voices indicating that a number of interviews were in progress.

"Rest assured that we're functioning perfectly and making the weekly deposits regularly," Redman was continuing. "Feel perfectly free to check as far as you please, Bill. Of course you'd like to have a word with your old friend Miss Lorne?"

Brent halted stiffly. "Of course I'd *what?*"

"You'd like to talk things over with Miss Lorne, Bill, naturally. She's not in conference at the moment. Go right in, old man."

Dizzily Brent found himself staring at a closed door bearing the legend, *Lora Lorne*. He blinked in an effort to clear his vision, but the name stayed there. Then he realized that Redman was opening the door marked *Lora Lorne* and he was being steered across the sill.

Brent halted again, frozen and numbed with dumbfoundment.

At the desk in the center of this office sat a woman of advanced age. She wore a sedate, black, full-skirted dress. Her hair was snowy white. A delicate chain dangled from her old-fashioned glasses to a reel pinned on one soft shoulder. She was smiling at Brent with revolting sweetness.

In a slightly quavering voice that fitted her perfectly she said: "Bill, Bill, my dear old friend, do come in."

Brent didn't come in any farther. Utterly incapable of taking another step, he goggled at this grandmotherly apparition. Finally he heard something that sounded roughly like his own voice.

"Who the good almighty hell," he was asking, "are you?"

"Why, Bill!" she said solicitously, rising with difficulty. "What's the matter, dear? Are you ill? Bill, my dear, dear, boy, do sit down. Why, you poor thing, I'm going to call a doctor."

"Hold still!" Brent squawked.

She did, while Brent tried desperately to tell himself that he'd suddenly become a victim of delirium tremens or some other affliction that played even worse tricks on the optic nerves. It was utterly impossible that he could be seeing her, and yet he saw her in detail. Behind her he saw also a framed portrait hanging on the wall. Incredibly, it was the same picture of Lora Lorne which daily adorned the *Recorder's* passion pillar—the same in every line. Brent could even make out the signature of the artist and a date, 1920. Staring from it to the woman, he realized numbly that it resembled her as generally as any portrait, idealized to begin with, could resemble its subject after twenty-three years.

"As God is my judge," Brent heard himself saying hoarsely, "*you're Lora Lorne in the flesh!*"

"Why, Bill, dear, of course I am," she cooed placatingly.

Frantically Brent tried to pull himself together. One half of his horrified mind reminded him that Lora Lorne had never been born. It swore to him that Lora Lorne was nobody's real name. It asserted that if anybody on earth was Lora

Lorne, he, Bill Brent, Heaven help him, was she. It told him also that any elderly woman with a soft round face could whiten her hair, find an ancestor's dress in an attic trunk, put on a pair of those trick eyeglasses and a sugary smile, and pass herself off as Lora Lorne or a reasonable facsimile thereof. The other half of his mind meanwhile registered the phantasmal fact that Lora Lorne herself was right here, alive, breathing, speaking and smirking at him.

Overstrained as Brent's nerves already were, this was entirely too much for him to bear.

"Lemme out of here!" he muttered wildly.

A hand was on his arm. It swung him from the office and he yielded to it willingly. It was Mr. Dacy who was hurriedly conducting him into another office in an el of the hall. The other members of the Academy's staff were evidently busy with clients, and no one saw Mr. Dacy in the act of buttonholing Brent. Only vaguely aware of what was going on, Brent found himself in a small conference room, behind a closed door. Mr. Dacy's manner was no longer comradely. It was sly, intense.

"Listen, Brent! They think they've got you hooked into this set-up so deep you won't dare squawk. Well, they've outsmarted themselves. They don't realize they've played right into your hands. Instead of them having *you* spiked down, you've got *them* right where you want 'em. Do you get it?"

This question Brent could answer with reasonable certitude. He said, "No."

"Don't let 'em play you for a damned fool!" Mr. Dacy advised vehemently. "I know they're using you and collecting plenty. You're not getting a cent out of it now, but if we swing it right, you and I can ride the whole damned racket. Move in, Brent! Be exactly what they've made you! Be the king snipe! They'll have to take it and like it. My God, man, this is a gold mine!"

NOW Brent was certain that both his mind and his eyes had failed him. Abruptly he was unable to see a thing. An instant ago he'd been staring into Mr. Dacy's flat, evilly eager face, but now Mr.

Dacy was merely a vague presence in almost complete blackness. Brent was also suddenly afflicted with noises in his ears. He heard a loud report, as if somebody had set off a cannon cracker, then two more in quick succession.

Immediately following the first blast Mr. Dacy said, "Ow!" Then he said it twice more, in tempo with the outbursts—"Ow! . . . Ow!" and dropped at Brent's feet.

Brent twisted about, his senses clearing a little. The darkness, he realized now, was caused by the fact that somebody had snapped a wall-switch. The loud noises had been made by a gun. Three bullets had snapped past Brent and stopped inside Mr. Dacy. They had come from the direction of an inner door connecting with the adjacent office which was also dark.

In the doorway a shadowy-figure loomed. It had a queer, uncertain shape. To Brent's confused senses it seemed to be either a ballet dancer wearing the usual short skirt, or else it was something clad in a coat of peculiar length—possibly the coat of a zoot suit—but no pants. He had no time to clear up the question of its nature before it leaped at him, oversweeping him with terrible force.

Very dimly Brent registered a series of delirious impressions. His head ached horribly. He was lying down on one side of his face. It felt like the bottom of a rocking rowboat that was constantly bumping against submerged rocks. While this continued endlessly he heard a wailing sound that rose and fell, rose and fell. It sounded like the cries of a condemned soul teetering on the brink of Hades' deepest pit. It stopped but then it came back, more faintly. Meanwhile the rowboat kept thumping against shoals and presently some of them hit the top of Brent's skull.

His head still throbbed when he opened his eyes. He pushed himself to a sitting position and despite the pain he experienced a surge of relief. All the horrible things he remembered, he told himself at once, hadn't really happened. The simple explanation of them, he assured himself, was that he'd merely had a nightmare. It couldn't have been anything else because he'd just found himself in his own bed in his own apartment.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dead Spot

HAVING risen, Brent revised his opinion. His bathroom mirror showed him a slightly bloody mound behind his right ear and another just where he parted his hair. No dream-creature could account for them. Their real cause being obscure, like his presence in his apartment, he grimly set about tracing himself back in the hope of eventually reaching a point where he might be able to distinguish between realities and phantasms.

He found his sedan parked in front of the building where he usually left it. From the pocket where he usually kept it he fished out his ignition key. He drove through the eternal rain and fog and when he curbed the car it was in front of the respectable-looking, white building that housed the Academy of Family Problems, Incorporated.

Going in, Brent avoided the reception room. Instead, he tramped to the end of the hallway. There a door gave into a yard flanked in the rear by an alley. Another door marked *Employees' Entrance* opened into the end of the Academy's corridor.

Brent stepped first into the little office where the worst phase of his living nightmare had begun. It was here also that Mr. Dacy had absorbed three bullets. Brent felt reasonably sure of this and yet, glancing about, he could find not the slightest indication of blood or violence.

Next he strode to the door marked *Lora Lorne* and pushed it open. He muttered. The office was empty.

Persisting, he found the office of Mr. Redman. Looking up from a typewritten list, Mr. Redman smiled his affable smile.

"Finished now, Bill?" he inquired.

"Practically, God knows," Brent said grimly. "Where's Dacy?"

"Dacy just stepped out to lunch."

"He what?"

"Out to lunch," Redman repeated. "He'll be back soon. Want to see him about something?"

"Yes," Brent said. "I want to see him about being dead."

Redman frowned. "Dead? Who's dead? Dacy? Bill, listen. Is it possible

you're suffering from a nervous breakdown or something? You've been saying queer things."

"I damned well have," Brent admitted. "You listen. Dacy was talking to me in a rear room a while ago when somebody turned out the lights and shot him three times. Who did that? What became of his body? Do you realize this is murder you're covering up?"

Redman sat back, seeming seriously concerned for Brent's mental well-being. "Bill," he said patiently, as if humoring a lunatic, "I didn't hear any shots. Nobody did. No shots were fired. I'm sure Dacy isn't dead. He just walked out of here, saying he was hungry. Dead men don't go out for a plate of soup and a sandwich, Bill. Surely it's obvious you're mistaken about all this this. Look around you. The whole office is functioning as smoothly and quietly as always."

Brent looked around. It was. He even rose, opened the reception room door a crack and saw a dozen clients calmly waiting there to have their domestic headaches diagnosed. In an adjoining office he heard two stenographers deploring the ineffectiveness of ersatz girdles. If a human being had just been murdered on these premises the incident had created less of a stir than the falling of a sparrow into the Grand Canyon. All around Brent found such a normal degree of tranquillity that he perforce went back to doubting his own senses.

"Better get yourself some rest, Bill," Redman was recommending. "Don't worry about this office. We'll carry on for you without a hitch."

A little more of this, Brent felt, and he'd

break down into gibbering imbecility. Without further argument, holding tightly to what was left of himself, he rose. Halfway down the hall he paused to look into an office where a pretty girl of twenty was punching a typewriter.

"Who got shot?" he inquired.

"Lincoln," she told him, dead-pan.

Frowning, he took up the topmost of the form-letters she was typing. While carrying it out he read it.

Addressed to a Mrs. Michael Grady, it was a skillfully couched sales talk extolling the merits of the Academy's unique services. The letter itself interested Brent less than the letterhead. At this he stared.

Below the name of the Academy was the line, *Lora Lorne, Chief Consultant*. In one upper corner was printed, *William Coleridge Brent, Director* and in the other, *Stoneleigh Garrett, Supervisor*.

HIS jaw clenched, Brent kept moving until finally he paused inside the Recorder's city room to stare at the Academy's flinty-eyed supervisor.

It had never before occurred to Brent that Garrett might have a first name. Stoneleigh—appropriate as it was, Brent could understand why Garrett had wished to conceal it. Brent suspected that Garrett might also be concealing other more important aspects of himself. Somebody was master-minding the Academy's racket, and in Brent's opinion the heartless Garrett was easily capable of trafficking in other peoples misfortunes. Still, Brent knew better than to accuse him bluntly. He was both hard-hided and shrewd and, as had been observed by the dead man who'd gone out to lunch, Brent himself

NEW SUCCESS OVER ATHLETE'S FOOT

NEW SCIENTIFIC 2-WAY TREATMENT WITH **QUINSANA** POWDER - ON FEET AND IN SHOES - IS PRODUCING AMAZING RESULTS. IN TESTS ON THOUSANDS OF PERSONS, PRACTICALLY ALL CASES OF ATHLETE'S FOOT CLEARED UP IN A SHORT TIME.



was so entangled in this murderous intrigue that to make a single false step might be fatal.

Deciding to withhold his fire until he'd formulated a plan whereby Garrett might be led into betraying himself, Brent studied his man while pretending to study the galley proofs on the city editor's spike. Val's account of the Elias killing was not yet written, but several of her gems on the gun-battle in Cora Dorthy's office were now in type. These said chiefly that the police had not yet apprehended the man who'd plugged Cora and vice versa.

"Garrett," Brent inquired, looking for signs of guilty knowledge in his city editor's granite-hard face, "was there an air-raid alert late this morning?"

"If you hadn't gotten lost inside a bar-room late this morning you'd know there was no air-raid alert," Garrett retorted. "And where the hell's today's Lorne column, Grandma?"

"Why not get it from Miss Lorne herself?" Brent suggested.

Garrett's response to this was an inscrutable stare that told Brent nothing. He trudged into his odorous cubbyhole and set about garnering information over the telephone. From the Heights Hospital, Doctor Mainley told him Cora Dorthy was still in no condition to talk. The Office of Civilian Defense answered a query from Brent by saying that none of the surrounding suburbs or villages regularly tested its air-raid siren at noon on this particular weekday. He inquired further if permission had been granted for a special test anywhere nearby.

"Yes. Westmoreland. They've had trouble with the new one installed last week, so they've been trying it out every day since."

Brent went back to the city desk and said, still concentrating on Garrett's reactions: "The day's crop of corpses is not yet completely harvested. If you'll come with me I'll dig up another one for you."

Garrett eyed him coldly. "Are you kidding, madam?"

"I'm not kidding. You've got the time and I've got the scent. Let's go."

Warily Garrett asked: "Where is it?"

"I don't know its exact second of latitude and longitude, but it's somewhere near Westmoreland."

"Whose is it?"

"The name was Dacy."

The name of Dacy produced not a flicker in Garrett's eyes. He did, however, rise. Brent was surprised, but pleased at the opportunity to observe his man more closely. Perhaps, Brent thought further, Garrett expected an emergency to rise and knew he must prepare to meet it. It might be true, too, that Garrett was simply tired of working at the city desk and glad of a chance to get out into the open, but Brent doubted this. Whatever his real reason might be, Garrett accompanied Brent down to the street. In Brent's car they started off wordlessly and they remained silent until the city was behind them.

"Sometimes," Garrett said finally, displaying the first spark of humanity that Brent had ever seen in him, "I feel like chucking the damned newspaper game in favor of running a chicken farm."

"Buying or equipping a chicken farm," Brent pointed out, "calls for a considerable investment."

"I know that."

Brent's suspicions said, "Ah!" Garrett, on the other hand, said nothing as to whether he expected to acquire the necessary funds.

THROUGH rain and fog they plowed into the village of Westmoreland, a four-corners consisting of a general store, a service garage, a volunteer fire station and a cluster of frame houses. Braking, Brent spotted a new-looking mechanism atop the fire station's tower. The station's door was locked, so Brent shifted to the general store. Its proprietor was a bald, bothered-looking man wearing a dirty apron.

"Who's in charge of that siren?" Brent began.

"Me. I'm Chief Sector Warden here," said the storekeeper boastfully.

"I'm Brent, Field Co-ordinator for Civilian Defense. I've had a report that there are dead spots where that siren can't be heard at all."

"Only one," the Chief Sector Warden said. "Down Dark Hollow."

"Where's that?"

He pointed. "Fifteen minutes walk. Quicker by car."

"You go over," Brent directed him offi-

ciously, "and start the siren. Keep it going for five minutes. I've got to map these dead spots."

Sure, that's important."

The storekeeper hustled across to the fire-house while Brent and Garrett returned to the sedan. Brent reflected that Garrett was remaining stone-calm to an exasperating degree. This guy, Brent thought, must be a crook utterly without conscience. Even when the siren began to wail, its note rising and falling, Garrett seemed almost bored. Determined to jolt him, Brent sent the car sloshing over a puddled dirt road, listening to the fluctuating wail as it grew fainter.

Abruptly it became entirely inaudible. At that point the road dipped between steep banks. This was the acoustically dead spot. At another point several hundred yards farther along, the siren reached Brent's ears again. Here the road was level with rank fields on both sides. Brent looked for a creek and found a gully deeply eroded and lushly overgrown with brambles and bushes. He parked there and led Garrett along its soggy rim.

When he stopped it was to point at a dark shape lying half-concealed in the earthy depths. Garrett quickly heeled down beside him. They turned the body over on its back. It was drenched. The three bullet holes were visible in its head, neck and chest.

"I thought you said this stiff's name was Dacy," Garrett complained.

"Isn't it?"

It's Barry Fowler. When there were automobiles for sale he used to sell automobiles."

"Ah!" Brent said. "You do know him!"

"Naturally, having bought my last car from him," Garrett answered. "How the hell did you tumble to this? Who tipped you?"

"It's surprisig what Lora Lorne gets wind of sometimes," Brent said. "Even so, I realize I hold no option on this cadaver. It's Val's, of course. Would you like us to carry it in to her personally, or do we call Captain Russo?"

Garrett answered by climbing back up the bank. Brent noticed the siren had stopped. While returning to Westmoreland, they eyed each other, Garrett with

distrust for Brent, Brent glittering silent accusations at Garrett. Neither spoke aloud until Garrett reached the telephone in the general store. He informed the chief of the homicide squad of his discovery while Brent graciously thanked the Chief Sector Warden for his cooperation. Brent was waiting at the steering wheel when Garrett opened the car door and, about to step in, paused.

"How long have you been freighting this one around, Brent?"

Brent twisted, stared down in amazement and answered: "Good Lord! All day, I suppose!"

The pudgy little man lay on the mat behind the front seat. He'd died while huddling there in torment, his gray-spatted feet drawn up, his plump hands clenched over the front of his hound's-tooth vest. His candy-stripe shirt wasn't pink now, but blackish-red with crusted blood. Brent scrambled out for a closer stare at him.

It was plain enough that Cora Dorty's assailant hadn't fled far from the embattled cashier's office. Under cover of the fog and rain, he'd simply stumbled into the shelter of the nearest parked car, which had happened to be Brent's. He'd dragged the blanket over himself in a further agonized attempt at concealment—his last act. And that had occurred hours ago, at a little past nine this morning.

"I've actually been driving this corpse around town all day without knowing it!" Brent blurted.

While Garrett scowled skeptically he plucked at the dead man's clothing and straightened with an expensive billfold in his hand. Inside it Brent found a packet of twenty-odd checks. Their amounts varied from ten to one hundred dollars. Without exception they were personal checks, and one of them, for twenty dollars, was signed by Sally Samuels. They had been issued to the Academy of Family Problems, Incorporated, they bore the Academy's red-stamped endorsement and under the stamp on each was written, *Pay to Willis Wallace*, although no authorizing signature was appended. Also finding a driver's license in the billfold, Brent lifted his head to scrutinize Garrett's graven face.

"You recognize this corpse too?"

"No."

"You should," Brent said grimly and cryptically. "Its name was Walter Weir."

CHAPTER SIX

All Roads Lead to Blackmail

UNAVOIDABLY Brent's and Garrett's return to the city was delayed. Captain Russo, having arrived and taken custody of Dacy-Fowler's remains, had insisted on asking a great many questions. His chief interest lay in hearing Brent and Garrett explain, if Brent and Garrett could, why a well-known broker of excellent reputation and apparently comfortable means should invade the *Recorder's* treasury with the purpose of robbing it of a comparatively trifling sum. The only answer Brent and Garrett made was to refer Russo to Walter Weir himself, which ended the inquiry in a stalemate.

It was past six o'clock when Garrett hustled into the news room with Brent in his wake. The staff was now concertedly on the job. Typewriters constantly clattered, teletypes incessantly clicked and from the pressroom in the basement came a steady rumble of massive machinery pouring out the mail edition. Garrett had phoned several flashes to Val Randall and Val was still feverishly trying to catch up with developments. At once Garrett went into frenzied activity, editing Val's copy and tubing it down to the compositors as fast as she knocked it out, and with all this he found time to bawl at Brent.

"I still need the Lorne column, Grandma!"

Brent was caught in the teeth of certain obscure criminal machinations, and his professional predicament was such that he didn't dare try to do anything about it until he'd first produced a Lorne column. He went about it in disgusted haste, selecting the longest letters he could find and writing his sibylline answers with telegraphic brevity. Having produced it mostly by means of shears and paste-pot, he carried it to the city desk and thrust it into Garrett's face. By then the copy boy was distributing the mail edition.

In it Brent read that Walter Weir's body had been found in a car "belonging to an employee of the *Recorder*." Another item, which Val had naively treated

as entirely unrelated, stated that the police had been led to Barry Fowler's corpse "by the *Recorder's* city editor as the result of a telephoned tip," which was actually the way Brent had accounted for it to Russo. This anonymity was all the credit Brent got.

Doggedly Brent pulled a chair close to Garrett's. He'd had a little time for a little mind-airing. He felt hard-pressed enough to demand a show-down. He was determined to have it here and now, although Garrett continued busily to slash his blue pencil across pages of copy, ignoring him.

"You give me no credit, Garrett, but I give you plenty. You're a past-master at the art of smoke-screening yourself, you predatory hyena. You didn't print a hint of it, but you know damned well how I actually smelled out Fowler's body."

"Do I?" Garrett said, still working. He hadn't really heard.

"Fowler was shot down right under my nose," Brent went on levelly. "Then I was clubbed with the butt of that same gun. Both Fowler and I were lugged out the back way and loaded into a car. Although I was practically conked out, I felt the rough road, heard the siren being tested and remembered the dead spot. Once Fowler was dumped—that being the more pressing task, since to have a corpse cluttering up the Academy might have given the clients an unfavorable impression—I was carted home. Meanwhile someone else, having taken my keys, had brought my car. Finally I was put to bed and left to wallow in bafflement. I'm not so baffled any more. Now, my fine friend, suppose you prove to me, if you can, that you didn't gun Fowler for a double-crosser."

Garrett muttered: "Too busy for banter."

With one hand Brent grabbed his arm. With the other Brent pushed into Garrett's face the letter he'd brought from the Academy. Pointedly he indicated Garrett's printed name. At last he had his city editor's undivided attention.

"This is a fraud!" Garrett snapped.

"You're telling me!" Brent held up a hand. "But don't tell me any more—not yet. We're going to have this out with the chief for a witness."

BRENT snatched the letter back and strode directly to the managing editor's door. With an ominous frown Garrett trailed him. Kimball Martin lifted his canny eyes from his desk, saw their formidable facial expressions and put on an expectant look. When Brent slapped the form-letter onto the blotter in front of him he read it rapidly and all but smacked his lips.

"You must drop over there some time, chief," Brent suggested in a bitter tone, "and meet Lora Lorne personally."

"Mmm," Martin said, as if tasting a succulent tidbit. "Go on, gentlemen. What have you to say?"

"All I can say," Garrett answered, "is that I don't know a damned thing about it."

"Me, I can say a hell of a lot more than that!" Brent exploded. "I can begin on a subdued note by calling it the dirtiest, foulest, stinkiest deal ever perpetrated. This so-called Academy is a blackmail mill. It gets hold of people who need to be helped out of serious trouble and makes them its victims. It charges stiff consultation fees, but that's only the beginning. It gets to the others involved in any scandalous predicament and, for example, plays husband against mistress, mistress against wife, wife against husband, collecting more fees all along the line in payment for so-called advice that actually and deliberately makes their troubles ten times worse for all of them. It threatens them with ruinous publicity in this newspaper. Those poor bedeviled clients have damned good reason for being scared out of their wits, for isn't Stoneleigh Garrett, the Academy's supervisor, the same Garrett who's the *Recorder's* city editor?"

Garrett began to snap, "I tell you—"

"You get the set-up, chief?" Brent interrupted vehemently, bending over Martin, who was lapping up every word of this. "My Lorne column sincerely tries to help the unfortunate. This Academy, trading criminally on Lora Lorne's good name, actually sucks their blood, makes 'em pay through the nose for it until they're drained white and hopelessly wrecked. Sidney Elias was a tragic example. This outfit smashed up his life, and his wife's and his secretary's, so unmercifully that he ran amok, but in the

direction of the D.A.'s office. That's why they killed him—to silence him and save their big-paying racket."

Garrett began again: "All this is news—"

"The possibilities are enormous, staggering even to think about, chief!" Brent rushed on. "Anyone going to them for help becomes a candidate for slaughter. Knowing what Lora Lorne has coped with for years, I can realize better than anybody else what ghastly pickings they find. Men now living respectably but having old prison records, unfaithful but repentant wives and husbands who'll never do it again, divorced mothers who can lose the custody of their children because of minor indiscretions, girls who secretly have illegitimate babies, couples secretly married, other couples living together bigamously but harmoniously, good girls with bad pasts about to marry good guys. They don't get the help they need so desperately. Instead they get preyed upon. Think of it and shudder!"

Kimball Martin shuddered, but with a grim sort of glee.

"It's a diabolically masterful job of criminal engineering, this set-up," Brent sped on. "They know I'm the real Lora Lorne and they also knew I'd sooner or later tumble to their damnable frauds, so they planned from the beginning to keep me from squawking. That's why, unknown to me, I've been tied so tightly into it. See the way they slanted it? I'm made to appear to be one of the big-shots of the racket, so if I howl I'll incriminate myself. They figured I won't dare to sit in open court and testify under oath to the mortifying truth that I'm Lora Lorne. They pictured me scrambling like mad to keep the whole thing under wraps. They've clamped this frame on me so tightly that they probably think I'll even come in for a small percentage of the take on the theory that I'd as soon get hung for a ram as for a sheep.

"But their devilish planning goes deeper than that. Even the *Recorder* won't risk having the law on them, as they schemed it, because to do so would destroy for all time the Lorne column that pulls more readers than any other feature in the paper. The *Recorder* can disclaim all connection with the Academy, but that same

disclaimer will convince legions of wise guys that there actually was a connection, and so the paper's prestige will be undermined, its influence weakened. A crooked scandal-sheet, the *Recorder*, everyone will say! The brain behind this contemptible conspiracy still believes we'll shrink from exposing them—that we'll keep quiet to save our skins, and so they'll be free to go right on sucking themselves fat with blood."

Brent drew a breath. "Well, they figured wrong. Maybe I'm screwy, but handling the Lorne column, much as I loathe it, has done things to me. God help me, it's made me an evangelist, a crusader for the right. It's even made me willing to martyr myself. So I'm going to do my damndest to nail these blackmailers and killers even if it means I'll have to molder in prison alongside them."

Jiggling in his chair, Kimball Martin inquired: "What answer do you make to this, Garrett?"

Garrett's answer was as terse as Brent's exposition had been profuse. "I deny any complicity."

"Sure he does," Brent snorted, "but before I'm finished somebody pretty close at hand is going to get spiked for murder. What I want to hear from you right now, chief, is this: what's the *Recorder*, on its part, going to do about it?"

"We won't let 'em get away with it a minute longer," Martin declared, almost too self-righteously. "I've got to have legal advice, but there's no reason, Brent, why you shouldn't plow into that place and blast the pants off of 'em right now. Don't worry—I'll be right behind you, with plenty of legal power in tow."

"That suits me!"

BRENT charged out. The fog had deepened into a smoky-gray twilight and rain still spattered. Everything was dampened except Brent's resolution. Purposefully he ducked into his car. His head bumped something very hard—the head of Garrett, who was climbing in through the opposite door.

They stared at each other a moment in silent and intense rancor. Garrett grimly settled down. Brent clenched the wheel. The car spurted off, aimed directly for the Academy of Family Problems, Inc.

"There's one good thing about this," Brent said through his teeth. "If worst comes to worst I won't be writing any more Lorne columns. I'll be too dead. And I'm damned if I can see you running any chicken farm, either."

Garrett reserved comment.

"I'd also like to point out," Brent added levelly, "that our esteemed journal could never have been made part of this frame-up if a woman had been doing the Lorne stuff. In that case the Academy wouldn't have stood a chance—the paper could torpedo it without a moment's hesitation."

Garrett said nothing.

"As it is," Brent persisted, "Dacy, or Fowler, was really playing a smart angle. He was right—I had 'em under my thumb. I could've turned the frame to my advantage, stepped in, set myself up as kingpin and grabbed the lion's share of the loot. Unfortunately I have an ingrown conscience. Unfortunately for Fowler-Dacy too, his play was too smart, so smart it was fatal."

Garrett remained wordless.

Swinging to the front of the chaste white building, Brent saw lights in the windows. Garrett followed him into the reception room and there they surveyed a new assortment of clients waiting to be bled. The Academy was being managed on such an efficient basis that it must remain open at night in order to accommodate all its victims. Brent paused to admonish them.

"If you know what's good for you, you dim-wits," he proclaimed, "you'll scam out of here while the scrambling's good."

They snubbed him, evidently believing him to be drunk and disorderly. Brent abandoned them, jerking a door open and brushing aside the receptionist. Garrett still at his heels, he tramped hard into Mr. Redman's private office.

Mr. Redman was there and smiled his smile. "Really, Bill," he said, "you needn't worry so much about the business. We're perfectly capable of running it for you." Then he saw Garrett. "Why, hello, Stoneleigh, old man!"

With a visible effort Garrett refrained from socking him. Brent knocked aside his extended hand, pushed him back into his chair and sat on the desk, portentously towering over him.

"Get this straight to start with," Brent grated. "Cut out your pretense that I'm your business associate of long standing. I've had nothing whatever to do with this damned emotional abattoir and you damned well know it."

Redman wagged his head. "I don't understand what's happened to your mind, Bill. You not only helped to organize the Academy, you own a substantial share in it. You mapped out our promotion program, formulated our policies, and you're our chief source of new clients. Actually, Bill, we wouldn't know what to do without you."

Brent's threatening glare prompted Redman to reach for documentary proof. It was a book that looked like a ledger, brought out of a drawer. Flipping from page to page, he indicated neatly written names.

"You've been present at all our board meetings. These are our secretary's minutes. You see here, under every single date is the record: 'Present, Mr. Brent, Mr. Garrett, Miss Lorne . . .'"

"Redman!" Brent snarled. "You're a double-damned liar! Everything about this place is a lie, including that nauseatingly sweet old hag whom you call Lora Lorne."

"But Bill," Redman protested, "she is Lora Lorne. Lora Lorne is her name, Bill, actually. At least, she changed from her real name to the name of Lora Lorne in a court out West, as you suggested, so—"

Brent cut in: "And I suppose this Academy also pays me a handsome stipend?"

"Of course!" Redman exclaimed. "In exact accordance with your instructions, we've deposited two hundred dollars weekly in a special account at the First National which we opened for you for that very purpose."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Return to the Amazon

BRENT groaned hopelessly, and at that moment the door snapped open behind him. Two men came in briskly. First was Kimball Martin, looking eager for the fireworks. The second, to Brent's discom-

figure, was the dynamic Porter Gates, the district attorney. They peered sharply from face to face, and Brent was jolted again when the D.A. spoke with excessive cordiality to the man behind the desk.

"A very good evening, Mr. Bertram Reyburn."

Redman, or Reyburn, shrank under Brent's stare.

"Bertram Reyburn, Walter Weir's partner in their brokerage firm?" Brent said. "This joint should've been called the Institute of Two-Faced Vultures. All these fancy extortionists functioned under special aliases here. Walter Weir was Willis Wallace, Reyburn was Redman, Fowler was Dacy, and so on. The brokerage business hasn't been so good lately, has it, Reyburn, and neither has the automobile trade, but since there's plenty of money running loose the blackmail industry is booming." Of the D.A. Brent inquired: "Reyburn a choice personal friend of yours, no doubt?"

"Not at all," Porter Gates answered. "I met him for the first time this afternoon when he came to my office to complain he was being hounded for no good reason by a dangerous crank named Elias."

Brent asked quickly: "Reyburn was with you when Elias was gunned?"

"He was," the D.A. said. "However many other crimes he may have committed, I can vouch for the fact that he's not Elias's murderer."

Chin set, Brent watched Kimball Martin. The managing editor was pawing through Reyburn's records. The book of minutes excited him, and he was also delighted by a sheaf of deposit slips. As Reyburn had said, these showed that the First National Bank had received a weekly deposit of \$200 to the account of William C. Brent, Special.

"Listen, chief!" Brent said desperately. "All this is part of the frame on me. From the very beginning I've been woven into this thing without even knowing it. Although I'd never been here, I was written into the minutes. A cut of the swag was ostensibly handed to me through a bank account which I never knew existed. All these crooks were primed for the moment when I'd come barging in here, wanting to know what the hell. They'd gotten to know me by sight and they'd pointed me

out to certain key employees so I'd be recognized on my arrival. When I finally showed up they put on a very neat act, treating me like a fellow hot shot—an act so convincing it left me groggy."

"Mmm," said Martin.

"I disavow every appearance of collusion," Brent said impressively. "It'll be easy enough to check all the Academy's victims. You won't find one of them who ever had any contact with me. None of them will know me from Adam. A lie-detector test will expose this gigantic sham on Reyburn's part. In spite of all this he'll probably try to keep it up even yet, but I swear to you by all that's holy—"

"Reyburn," the D.A. interrupted, "is this man Brent actually a ringleader in this racket?"

Reyburn looked sullen. "If I'm going to get rapped for it, I'm damned if I'll let him squeeze out of it. Of course he is, and so is Garrett as well."

Garrett furiously began to snap: "You lousy rat—!"

Simultaneously Brent began to roar: "That's a filthy—!"

"Quiet!" Porter Gates howled, and the force of his voice stifled theirs. In the ensuing hush he inquired of Kimball Martin: "Have you anything to say now, Mart?"

"I have indeed," the managing editor answered with smug self-assurance. "I've convinced you, I believe, Porter, that the *Recorder* is in no way whatever involved in these repugnant crimes. I've also promised you that the *Recorder* will stop at nothing to vindicate itself and to punish the perpetrators. With our full backing, you may proceed officially."

"Very well." From his pocket the D.A. drew two legal documents. "The lesser culprits will be taken care of promptly and meanwhile this will serve as an excellent beginning. I have here warrants for the arrest of William Coleridge Brent and Stoneleigh Garrett on charges of blackmail."

BRENT peered speechlessly at Kimball Martin, realizing he should have expected exactly this from a man of the managing editor's ilk. Martin's ruthless tactics were appallingly clear. Brent's denials, true as they were, meant absolutely

nothing to his cunning mind. In order to protect the *Recorder* and himself he was unhesitatingly throwing Brent to the wolves. Unconscionably betraying a loyal employee, he meant to horsewhip Brent publicly and with such furious piety that no one could doubt Brent's guilt or the paper's snow-white innocence. He hadn't given a thought to the barbarous injustice of it. It might even cost him the Lorne column, although he was probably scheming to preserve that asset by means of further devious tricks. Brent had declared he was willing to martyr himself, and Martin, taking him at his word, was seeing to it that Brent would be martyred, but good.

Porter Gates repeated, so that there could be no misunderstanding: "Under arrest, both of you, on charges of blackmail."

Brent, his mind grimly clicking, said tersely: "Why stop there? Why ignore the murders?"

The D.A. and Martin gazed at him with heightened interest.

"What about the murders?" Gates asked. "Did you commit them, Brent?"

"Certainly," Brent said.

The effect was like that of a silent bombshell. Nervous shock held them frozen a moment. Garrett blinked in dismay, Martin put on an expression like that of an ecstatic demon, Gates prepared to pounce and Reyburn looked dumbfounded. Brent alone, and for the first time today, was self-possessed.

"Tell me about them, Brent," the D.A. suggested.

"O.K.," Brent responded. "Take Elias. It was very simple. Reyburn warned me by phone that Elias was raising a big stink. Elias himself came to me and ranted about spilling the works to you, Mr. District Attorney. I had to slant it pretty fast. I phoned Reyburn back, told him to rush down to your office and complain that Elias was a half-crazy crank who'd made dangerous threats to Reyburn in his brokerage office. That, of course, was a cover-up both for the Academy and for Reyburn, my most valuable associate here. Meanwhile I chased Elias in my car, and when I caught up with him right in front of your office, Mr. District Attorney, I shot him dead. I was afraid I might be

found with the gun on me, so as soon as Reyburn left you I passed it to him and he disposed of it."

Reyburn looked horrified. "This man's cracked!" he protested. "I had no part—"

Gates silenced him with a gesture. "Go on, Brent. What about Fowler?"

"Oh, Fowler," Brent said. "A double-crosser. He demanded a bigger cut and said he'd sing to the law if he didn't get it. Of course I had to shut him up. Reyburn held him while I shot him. Then Reyburn and I carted his body out to Westmoreland and dumped it. It was simply another cover-up when I went back and pretended to find it myself."

"You confess freely and voluntarily to these two murders, realizing that what you've just said will be used against you?" the D.A. asked carefully. "Furthermore you name Bertram Reyburn as your accomplice in both murders?"

"Oh, sure," Brent said.

Reyburn sprang up. "It's insane!"

Brent advised him: "Take it easy, Bert, old man. They've got us dead to rights."

"It's insane!" Reyburn screeched again. "I didn't dispose of any murder gun! I didn't hold anybody while he got shot! I admit I've been running this office in—in a rather improper way, but there's not a drop of blood on my hands. Can't you see it's a pack of lies, all this wild talk about how I helped with these two murders?"

"I admit I did 'em," Brent said levelly. "I say you helped me. But if you want to waste your breath denying it, go ahead."

"I do deny it!" Reyburn was in a white-faced frenzy. "It can't be true! It can't possibly be true because Brent couldn't have had a ghost of a motive for committing them—because the fact of the matter is that he's never had any connection whatever with this Academy, and so I couldn't have—"

BRENT, his purpose accomplished, snapped about to confront the district attorney. "You heard that! At last he admits it. 'Brent never had any connection with this Academy,' he said. All right, tear up that warrant!"

Reyburn stood with his jaw dropped, realizing he'd blundered headlong into a trap, and he succumbed despairingly into his chair. Kimball Martin's face, however,

Brent saw, remained slyly set. Porter Gates remained singularly unimpressed. He waved the warrants in Brent's face.

"This man Reyburn is admittedly a crook of the most reprehensible type," the D.A. pointed out, "and you expect me to accept his word as gospel when he white-washes you? Hardly, Brent. You're a long way from being cleared. I'm unalterably determined, with the *Recorder's* backing, to destroy this foul Academy and everyone associated with it, down to the lowliest scrub-woman. This warrant still holds. You're under arrest for blackmail—both of you—and on the basis of the sound, material evidence available here I promise you I'll make it stick."

A sound of rage broke from Brent. "The hell with you and your goddam warrant!" he said, and started for the door.

Porter Gates grabbed at him. It was Garrett who pushed Gates back against the desk. Brent's desperation had communicated itself to Garrett. Continuing to run interference for Brent, he jerked the door open. Brent jostled him out just as Kimball Martin lurched at them. Brent seized with grim delight upon the opportunity presented by Martin's open chin. His knuckles cracked to the target like a whiplash, and Martin flew backward. The office was in turmoil, with Gates grabbing frantically for the telephone, when Brent departed.

Garrett raced after him into the el of the corridor, through two doors, across the back yards and into the alleyway.

Stopping in a fog-clouded doorway, short of breath, Brent was astonished to find Garrett at his side.

"Look, pal," Brent said sourly. "I didn't invite you to come along. I find no pleasure in your companionship. If you have any decency left in your makeup you'll go back, confess and absolve me."

"Cut it out," Garrett retorted with equal sourness. "I've been roped into this mess in exactly the same way you were. I didn't know one damned thing about the Academy for Family Problems, Incorporated, until you showed me that letter-head. Nevertheless Gates meant it when he said he'd make those charges stick. We haven't done ourselves any good by turning ourselves into a couple of fugitives."

"This phase of it won't last long, anyway," Brent said pessimistically. "Probably before the night's out we'll be comfortably settled in two choice suites in the hoosegow. We haven't much time to put into trying to worm out of it. The trouble is, we came in rather late. This little festival of evil really began bright and early this morning with the duel in our cashier's office."

"By this time Cora may be able to tell us what the hell Weir was really after."

"My hope exactly," Brent said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bullets for Grandma

THEY dodged along the street, blessing the thick weather. Although certain that every squad in the city was prowling for them, they reached the rear of the Heights Hospital without detection. They eased through a back door, entered an elevator and on the third floor stepped out to find themselves being looked at by a detective lieutenant. Hardheaded Horace Delaney was still dutifully guarding Cora.

"It's O.K. to pass Brent in with me this once," Garrett said.

Delaney didn't argue the point. Quietly they opened the door of Cora Dorthy's room. At once Doctor Mainley alertly rose to meet them. He gestured solicitously for quiet. They gazed at Cora. She lay still under a sheet, her eyes closed.

"Under opiates," Doctor Mainley whispered. "Condition still very serious. You mustn't disturb her."

Brent and Garrett went to her bedside. She was breathing very slowly. Except for the even surging of her ample bosom she lay as still as a corpse.

"Can you hear me, Cora?"

"Shh!" Doctor Mainley protested.

"Shut up yourself," Brent said shortly. His tone was normal, yet it seemed to boom in the room. "Garrett, we've got to scramble to save our necks, and this is the place to do it."

Doctor Mainley whispered frantically: "Leave this room! I can't allow you to endanger my patient. Leave at once!"

"Doctor," Brent said, no less quietly, "watch yourself. You're dealing with a couple of desperate men. We're as dan-

gerous as a couple of starved gorillas. Get in our way and we'll tear you limb from limb. So long as we're going to get rapped for a flock of killings anyway, we won't bat an eye if forced to add you to the list of our victims. You can't stop us now. Sit in that chair over there and behave yourself. You heard me! Sit down!"

Doctor Mainley's reaction was a strange one. He became remarkably quiet and submissive. Obediently he turned about, sat down and folded his hands in his lap.

"Brent," Garrett said, still guarding his voice, "hadn't we better be careful here? After all, Cora was nudged by three bullets this morning. We don't want our Cora to have a relapse."

"My God," Brent answered, "is it possible *you're* turning chicken-hearted? Look. We've been framed. We're due to fry. How can we squeeze out of it? Only by slapping these killings onto somebody else. Well, then, let's slap it, without worrying too much about how innocent our fall-guy may be. Let's get ourselves clear and let *her* worry about proving her own innocence afterward."

"Her?"

"Certainly!" Brent hurried on. "Who's our best candidate? Martin? No, we wouldn't stand a chance of framing him. Who, then? Well, look at the day's news. It includes three homicides. We begin building up our story by saying a common motive lies behind them. Fowler's death was caused by his cupidity. So was Weir's. Elias's trip to the D.A. also would've been costly to the racket. The common motive is that well-known root of all evil, love of money. And who adores money, who fondles it, who guards it and hugs it warmly to her heart more than does our Cora?"

"Cora?" Garrett echoed. "You're going to try to push this thing off on her? That's dirty. Besides, it's also slightly impossible."

BRENT gazed down at Cora Dorthy. She continued to lay still and calm.

"I think we can twist it onto her," Brent insisted. "Look how we can shape it up, Garrett. Weir was a partner in the Academy racket. He felt he wasn't getting enough of the loot. This morning he took the gun from his brokerage office,

then borrowed Lora Lorne's briefcase to carry it in—the Academy's Lora, I mean, of course—and made a choice selection of checks from the Academy's receipts. Prepared to talk turkey, he went down to the *Recorder*. All he wanted was Cora to endorse those checks over to him."

Garrett wagged his head. "I'm a hard guy," he said, "but this is brutal the way you're trying to stick Cora for this."

"This is no time for you, of all guys, to turn sentimental," Brent protested. "Cora's our best bet regardless, and we've got to make the most of her. Brutal or not, let me go on.

"Weir was demanding a bigger cut, but at the same time he was afraid of Cora. That's why he changed the shell in her revolver—in case she turned it on him, he wouldn't get hurt. At the same time he could force her to bargain under his own gun, which would actually shoot. If it became necessary he could plug her and claim self-defense against a woman who'd unaccountably gone shooting-mad, in which case the *Recorder's* gun, with its dented rim-fire bullets, would prove she'd tried to shoot him first. It wouldn't be a comfortable spot for him, to be sure, but his reputation would support him, and he considered it worth the risk. His big mistake was that he didn't really realize how deeply Cora prized those dollars he

wanted and how passionately she'd fight to keep them."

Again Brent gazed down at the massive figure on the bed. Cora merely breathed, a monumental, placid mass.

"So what happened next?" Brent went on. "Cora promptly twisted Weir's game right back on him. She could shoot him dead and claim he'd tried to rob the office. Having Weir dead would've been fine with Cora, because there would then be one less crony to cut in on the loot. But her gun wouldn't go off. She grabbed for Weir's and in the struggle she got shot three times. Then the gun was hers and she pumped the rest of the bullets into Weir. It was a profitable job. Her blood was less precious to Cora than her loot."

Garrett wagged his head, deploring Brent's ruthlessness. Cora lay as before, enormously still.

"But all hell went right on popping. Next it was Elias, fuming with threats of legal retaliation. First he went to the Academy, demanding an opportunity to throttle Lora Lorne. They got rid of him, so he next tackled the *Recorder*, naturally, because our own version of Lora Lorne has been so long a part of the paper. Meanwhile Reyburn, using the telephone, had located Cora at the Heights Hospital. She hadn't passed out. She was merely playing it doggo so she could dream up a

I NEVER MET A
MAN WITH SO
SMOOTH A CHIN!

YOUR FRIENDS
DON'T USE STAR
BLADES, HONEY!



4 for 10¢



convincing yarn to tell the cops. Reyburn warned her that Elias was about to bomb the works, and Cora acted immediately.

"Phoning and pretending to be Mrs. Elias, she learned Elias was with me. While the line was open Cora heard Elias announce that he was going directly to the district attorney. She immediately called Reyburn back and ordered Reyburn to get to the D.A. first with a cooked-up yarn that would make Elias seem to be a screwball. Cora realized at once, however, that this wouldn't be enough. The D.A. might believe Elias regardless and start probing. It would be disastrous. Then Cora really did go into action. She hustled out of this hospital so fast she didn't even stop to put on any extra clothes. Wearing nothing but a patient's customary gown, she—"

"Left this hospital?" Garrett echoed. "How?"

"The same way I'd sneaked in a little earlier. She simply shifted into the next room and scurried down the fire-escape to a car. The fog and rain covered her, as it covered everything else today. She—"

"My God, Brent," Garrett protested, "she was badly wounded."

"Those wounds impeded her only a little more than a bee-sting would impede a loco cow. Painful, yes, but the only inconvenient one was the hole in her left shoulder. She still had her useful right arm and both useful legs. She reached the plaza just as Elias was heading into the D.A.'s office and plugged him very effectively, using the gun that Martin had left here for her protection. During her absence, of course, her medical friend, Mainley, wasn't letting anybody in the room."

GARRETT was still wagging his head. "I can't help you pull such a filthy frame on Cora. Besides, it'll never stick. We'd better go back to the D.A."

"Not yet! Let me finish." Almost fiercely Brent pursued his theme. "After drilling Elias, Cora had to take cover fast. The Academy's not far from the plaza. She ducked her car into the yard behind it. Wanting to make sure she hadn't been chased, she hid in a rear office. None of the Academy's staff knew she was there—certainly not Fowler. When he proposed his double-cross to me, he had the ex-

traordinary bad luck to do it in the office adjoining the one where Cora was holed in. She heard him. Desperately on the warpath, she made short work of him, shooting him down and clubbing me. Next, with Reyburn's help, despite his denials—Fowler's dead body and my unconscious one were loaded into her car. After Fowler had been dumped and I'd been put to bed, still conked out, Cora hurried back to this hospital room."

Garrett remained dubious. "This whole cockeyed yarn of yours makes Cora the brains behind the Academy."

"Of course!" Brent said. "We claim she organized it. She supplied the victims by intercepting my Lora Lorne mail. She began about a month ago by holding out a fistful of letters every day. Very soon she had enough of it so that she could hold out today's mail every day and give me yesterday's. She smuggled the letters home, steamed them open, kept the hottest for the Academy and brought the rest back to me. People don't usually supply their names and addresses when they write to me as Lora Lorne—usually they sign with their initials, or a fancy *nom de l'amour*—but most of the dopes automatically write their return address on the envelope anyway. That gave the Academy a direct lead for their form-letters. Even in cases where the sender supplied no name and address at all, a little detective work could ferret them out by means of the postmarks of branch postoffices, neighborhood gossip, questions asked of stationery dealers and so on. Well, it does build up, doesn't it, Garrett? It's even better than the case the D.A. has against us. Let Cora worry about squeezing out."

"It's no good," Garrett said flatly. "It won't stand up. There's no proof at all."

Brent faced him intently. "Proof? It's a fact that beginning a month ago my mail dropped to one-half or one-third of its former volume, and what little there was left became strangely innocuous. All the dirt was being sifted out of it and diverted to the Academy. Well, how could the Academy get hold of so much of my mail? Not by stealing it from the mail-truck. Not by bribing a postman. Cora alone could intercept it day in and day out."

"We'll need a hell of a lot more proof than that before—"

"Proof?" Brent broke in. "Listen! In the sanctum of the Academy's Lora Lorne hangs a drawing—a drawing of *our* Lora Lorne. It's the original picture from which our cut was made—the cut used every day to decorate my column. It hangs there to show the gullible that the Academy's Lora Lorne and the *Recorder's* Lora Lorne are the same woman, falsely, of course. Where did they get that picture? From the files of our art department! Who had a better chance to steal it than a member of our own staff? Cora!"

"Even that—"

"Proof!" Brent barked at the skeptical Garrett. "A woman phoned me, pretending to be Mrs. Elias. Just before the connection broke I heard a sound come over the wire—a squeak."

Brent pushed at the service table straddling the foot of Cora Dorty's bed, and as it moved its casters squeaked.

"That was Cora getting up, going into action. Proof you ask for? When Fowler was shot down under my very nose, I saw his killer standing in the doorway, a vague shadow wearing a queer costume. That was Cora, bare-legged, still clad in nothing except the usual hospital gown, a bulky, shapeless garment reaching to a point halfway between her hips and her knees. You want still more proof?"

Garrett was staring at him. "This is no frame-up on your part, Brent!" he realized. "You're talking facts!"

"You're damned right I am," Brent asserted, facing him grimly. "The final proof of it is the death bullets—evidence which Cora thought would never in this world catch up with her because she's supposed to have been lying here in the hospital all day, wounded and in a state of shock. But the bullets that killed Elias and Fowler can easily be matched up to the gun . . ."

Garrett, his back momentarily turned to the bed, saw a peculiar expression cross Brent's face.

Brent wound up in a hollow tone, "The gun she's got in her fist right now."

GARRETT twisted about in alarm. He hadn't heard the flick of the sheet as it was thrown back. Frozen, he saw Cora Dorty rising—Cora still clad in the loose hospital gown, thrusting her thick legs

out of bed, eying them narrowly. All this while she'd held the revolver hidden beneath the sheet while pretending to be deep under the influence of drugs, and now, fully awake, she was ominously waving its business end at them.

Doctor Mainley wailed: "Cora, Cora, my dear, don't!"

"Shut up!" Cora said. "You two smart guys stay right where you are. I'm leaving now. If you take so much as one step after me, so help me I'll cut you down."

Her face congealed with fury, a deadly glitter in her icy eyes, she drifted her bare feet toward the hallway. Garrett stood immobile. Brent leaned forward a little, his hands lifting as if to grab. He made no other movement. At close range, Cora kept her gun trained on him as the preferable target. She backed to the door while Doctor Mainley sobbed. Suddenly she snatched it open and was gone, running on her massive bare legs.

Brent dove for the door.

The instant his head appeared in the hallway Cora's first shot blasted. Two more of her gunshots roared as she retreated to the elevator doors. These brought Detective Lieutenant Delaney into the corridor, where he stood stock still, staring dumbfounded. He remained there until Cora banged another bullet at him, whereupon he leaped headlong for the shelter of the stairs. In front of the elevators now, Cora stood in a thin shaft of light streaming out through the partially open panel. With one big hand she slid the panel farther open and with the other she swung her weapon back at Brent.

Two more bullets rocketed past Brent. A click followed, signifying that Cora's gun was now empty. In a mad, elephantine rage she flung the gun at Brent, just as she had flung another gun after Walter Weir early this morning. At the same instant she leaped through the elevator doorway, disappearing.

A shrill scream echoed and swiftly faded. Brent dodged forward, then stopped cold. He realized now that he and Garrett, when entering, had inadvertently left the elevator panel slightly open. The cab meanwhile, however, had risen to a higher floor. Behind the panel lay the open shaft. Brent peered over the iron sill, and far down at the shaft's bottom he saw

something smeared with black and red—grease from the channels and blood—something that had once been Cora Dorty.

He snatched up the gun, heading into the room that had been Cora Dorty's. He was not surprised to find that Garrett had a fistful of telephone.

"Val!" the city editor was howling. "Stop the presses! Rip out the front page! I want an eight-column banner and a two-column lead. Here it is! 'Confronted with incontestable evidence proving her to be the ringleader of a merciless blackmail ring, as well as the perpetrator of three murders, Cora Dorty, a long-time employee of the *Recorder*, attempted this evening to escape from the Heights Hospital which—' You heard me, Val! I said Cora Dorty!"

Brent, darkly frowning, was backing Doctor Newton Mainley into a corner. "Don't omit to nail this rat as Cora's accomplice, Garrett. He covered her while she was out on her murder-spree. He let her use his car." Probing into Mainley's pockets, Brent brought up a small carton. "My God, he even went out to buy her a box of cartridges in case she'd need them! Mainley, you're through being a physician and you're now on your way to being a cinder."

Garrett was staring at him. "My God, Brent, when you take a chance you certainly play it long! You wormed out of a blackmail rap by confessing to murder. Then all you had to do was sidestep the murder rap somehow!"

"The risk was trifling," Brent retorted. "Death in the electric chair is infinitely to be preferred to a life spent in sweating out an endless series of Lorne columns."

Garrett howled into the telephone again. "Stop gibbering, Val! Yes, this is your story. No, it's not Brent's—it's nobody's but yours. Quit going to pieces and put it on paper. Go on from there. 'Upon evidence supplied by a member of the *Recorder's* staff—'"

Savagely Brent glowered at him. "This is the thanks I get for saving you from a murder frame, you skunk! If ever you again get headed for the death-house I'll slam the door on you and throw the switch myself!" He clenched a fist over the box of cartridges he'd taken from Doctor Mainley. "These I need!"

HE CHARGED out and he kept going until he reached the rear door of the Academy for Family Problems, Incorporated. The joint still blazed with lights. There were cops in the hallway. Brent elbowed past them, allowing them to close in behind him. The D.A., he surmised, was busily grilling the Academy's staff. Brent wasn't interested in that phase. He stored to the door labeled *Lora Lorne*.

Ignoring the detectives in the office, he glowered at the elderly woman seated at the desk. Her appearance in most respects was still that of fabulous Lora Lorne—white hair, eyeglasses, reel on shoulder, full skirts. Otherwise, however, she had reverted to type. Her face wasn't sweet now. It was twisted into a mean sneer. On the desk in front of her sat a quart of rye and a jigger from which she'd evidently been taking it straight and fast. In a raucous tone she was intensely denouncing the dicks who had arrested her.

"Should be ashamed of yourself for treating a sweet old lady like me so shamefully, you dirty———s!"

Brent said tersely: "Hold still. This is important to me. It's a moment I've dreamed of a thousand times. It's well worth any penalty I may have to pay. Don't move, anybody. Here and now I'm going to have the ineffable pleasure, the supreme bliss, the superlative satisfaction of murdering Lora Lorne."

He raised the revolver. It was full of fresh cartridges, for he'd reloaded it on the way. He aimed squarely, finger tightening on the trigger.

The move paralyzed the detectives, but not Lora Lorne II. She sprang up, screaming oaths. She swung the bottle, flung it wildly at Brent, whirled away. The bottle thumped the wall and fell to the floor, rolling, while the fabricated Miss Lorne leaped for the nearest doorway, still screeching.

Six gunshots rocked the office.

The framed picture on the opposite wall flew from its nail and crashed to the floor. Brent eyed it, nodding with gratification over the fact that Miss Lorne's sweetly beaming likeness was now punctured by six black holes.

Then he picked up the bottle. With profound bitterness he said: "Here's to love!" and devoutly applied himself to it.

BETWEEN 11:00 AND 11:15

By H. S. M. KEMP

Corporal Phil Brennan couldn't really blame the person who smashed in Hackford's skull—a more shady character never lived—but the Mounties don't have that motto for nothing. And so the hunt began—not for the femme this time—but for the man with the scarred thumb!



He was sitting on the bed facing the murderer when he got it.

CHAPTER ONE

The Literary Corpse

AS MURDERS GO, it was pretty crude. Hackford lay sprawled on his back across the cot in the tent with horrified wonder in his staring eyes. Corporal Phil Brennan saw this first as he shoved through the handful of white

men, Indians and halfbreeds and came face to face with the happening. He noted that the cot took up most of the tent's far wall-space and that Hackford's head and shoulders hung down grotesquely over the cot's far edge.

The insolent, sneering smile was gone from Hackford's lips forever, and his kinky, brilliantined hair was both messy and clotted.

He straightened up, looked around him. There was an initialed club-bag, and a valise, a typewriter on a collapsible table, a camera and a gasoline lantern hanging from the ridgepole above. But of the murder-weapon there was no sign, and even at this early stage in his investigations, Brennan knew that such a thing would have helped a lot.

He took off his Stetson and mopped his forehead. Phil Brennan had hurried from his detachment, and for a man who carried two hundred pounds in weight and a string of ribbons from the first World War, hurrying wasn't wise. He turned to the curious, staring mob. "Who found him?" he asked.

Sam Harkness spoke up. Harkness was the grizzled Hudson's Bay manager, on whose property—and particularly the grassy sward that sloped down from the dwelling on the hill—the tent had been erected. "Jeff," he answered. "When he went to call him for breakfast."

Jeff Fawcett said: "Yes, me. And I haven't got over it yet." Fawcett was bookkeeper for Sam Harkness, a big man, prematurely gray. But even big men are not entirely proof against such shocks as these.

Corporal Phil Brennan gave a grunt, turned. He put the back of his hand against the dead man's cheek, flexed an arm, and a leg.

"Got it some time last night, I'd say," he muttered softly. "He's fairly stiff already."

By his strapwatch, it was eight-fifteen. Already the July sun was high in the sky and the tent was too warm for comfort. He came out, again mopping at his forehead.

Ahead of him was the rear entrance to the Hudson's Bay store, beyond that, softly-lapping Heron Lake. His glance flicked to a dog-corral nearby, and to another building beyond it. "Yeah," he grunted. Then he spoke to Sam Harkness, the Hudson's Bay man.

"Tell you," he said. "There's a space in your ice-house between door and ice. If we rolled him—" indicating the dead man—"in a good stout cover, would it hurt to keep him in there for a while?" Harkness, fifty, sparing of speech, gave a grunt. "Wouldn't hurt him. But I got

to use that ice. How long you want to keep him?"

"Not too long. Till we hold an inquest and the plane comes south. Till tomorrow night, I guess."

"O.K. But I don't like him no more dead than I did alive."

But before the body was moved, Phil Brennan gave it a thorough going over. One thing was plainly evident—Hackford had been killed before he retired. He was still wearing his high boots and whipcords, and an expensive cravat was knotted about the neck of his shirt. Brennan would determine the approximate time the man generally retired and when he had last been seen, and from these facts he could pretty well judge the hour of the murder. Moreover, it was qually evident that Hackford had neither been struck from behind nor while standing. The wound, being on the top of the head, proved the first conclusion, and Hackford's height the second. Hackford was over six feet tall, and had another man, even as tall as himself, struck out at him, the wound would have involved both skull and forehead.

"So," Brennan argued, "he was sitting down on the bed and facing the murderer when he got it. He either didn't expect to get it, or he didn't dare stand up."

Hackford's strapwatch had stopped at three-fifteen. A test showed it had run down, so that had no bearing on the case. As there was no blood anywhere save on the ground at the back of the cot, Hackford had keeled over as soon as the blow had fallen.

"Died instantly," Brennan told himself. "And why not—with a hole in the head like that!"

So they moved the dead man's body onto his own blankets, wrapped him into them and carried him over to the ice-house. Then Phil Brennan fastened the tent and put an Indian to do guard-duty.

THE corporal had not yet breakfasted, and to do much work, and particularly brain-work, on an empty stomach was beyond him. So he told Sam Harkness to put it around that no one should leave the village until further orders. Then he betook himself to his detachment and started a fire.

While waiting for the bacon to fry and the kettle to boil, he stood, fork in hand, in the open doorway. It was the best hour of the morning—the haze over the lake indicating the heat to come, a faint breeze stirring the flag in front of the whitewashed police detachment, a canoe gliding wraith-like in from a fish-net, smoke spiraling upwards from a dozen yellowing teepees. Peace, calm, a typical Northern settlement beginning another lazy day—and a murdered man down in Sam Harkness' ice-house.

Somewhat new though he was to Heron Lake, Corporal Phil Brennan had become accustomed to the scenery, so it took no great effort to concentrate on the matter of Cyril Hackford.

Straightaway he told himself that if Hackford hadn't merited that smashed-in skull, he rated something pretty close to it. For Hackford had been his immediate predecessor at the detachment of Heron Lake, and Phil Brennan knew quite a lot about him. For there were policemen and policemen. Some did their job fairly, with a nice mixture of conscientiousness and sympathy, others gloried in their powers and delighted in converting every little act of law-infringement into downright criminal action. Phil Brennan himself, in his years in the North, had tried to be a right guy, a policeman of the former school. Cyril Hackford took sadistic pleasure in filling the role of the latter. They told Brennan that when Hackford first landed at Heron Lake, two years before, he had given out the information that he was going to be hell-on-wheels. They, the residents of Heron Lake, had kicked the law around too long and needed straightening up. And he, Cyril Hackford, was just the little boy to do it!

And he had. A dozen swift convictions before Justice of the Peace Fred Benton showed what he meant, and while Hackford brought straight-laced law-and-order to Heron Lake, he made plenty of enemies in the doing of it.

What helped was his manner—his sneer, his gloating over the cases he won. Then someone wrote a little note to his O.C., and that was the beginning of the end for Cyril Hackford.

There were rumors of heavy poker-

losses. The authorities looked into this. They checked his expense-accounts, his swindle-sheets. Always a camera-fiend as well as a man of education, they found that Hackford had been turning out articles contrary to Mounted Police rules and selling them to magazines on both sides of the International Line. But he might have got away with all this had it not been discovered that Hackford had callously deserted a wife and small daughter in Montreal and enlisted in the Force as a single man. So one day he went south on the mail-plane—and didn't return.

Phil Brennan nodded solemnly. "Yup. Once they get wise to 'em, the Force won't keep no Cyril Hackfords on the roll."

But Brennan's ruminating was cut short. There was the smell of burning bacon. Not until he sat down to his meal was he able to return to the matter again.

Hackford, he recalled, had come in on the mail-plane just two days before. He had been more cynical, more offensive than ever. Police service, according to Hackford, was a mug's game. He was now in the money, doing articles with photographs for big American magazines. What did he find to write about? Hackford had smiled patronizingly. Wasn't Pete Schwab running the North's biggest fur-farm over on Crawfish River? Weren't they drilling for oil on the Black-sand? Or what about the local Red Cross hospital, giving service to the white men and Indians who roamed the thousands of square miles of surrounding country? Any mug could do that—if he used his head!

Brennan remembered Hackford's superior laugh, but just now he was remembering the hospital. And the girl who was in charge of it—the girl who was to have married Len Finlay.

A frown puckered the corporal's forehead. He was still wearing it when he stood up and set the dishes, unwashed, into a pan of water.

"He had it coming to him, sure he did. But I got to nail the guy who did it."

THE Indian still stood guard at the tent. Phil Brennan gave the man a nod, threw a glance at a few other natives waiting expectantly on the grass nearby, opened the tent-flaps and stepped inside.

The place was even hotter than when he had left it a while before and a bull-fly buzzed and battered against the ridge-pole. But despite the heat which Brennan knew would bring out a prickly sweat on him, he commenced the chore of locating Cyril Hackford's murderer.

Brennan had hoped for some sort of a clue, a match-stick, a cigarette-butt. He had run into these helpful trifles on other murder cases, but in this instance it appeared that luck was not to be his. Neither would it be much use hoping for fingerprints. Brennan had brought his outfit along, but now that he was here, he didn't know where to use it. However, he dusted the shift-bar of the typewriter, the nicked furnishings of valise and club-bag and took shots of the results. These he would compare with prints he would make of Hackford's own fingers, and he hoped that the trouble would be worthwhile.

But he doubted very much. As he saw it, the murderer had visited Hackford in the tent, engaged him in conversation of some sort, then had promptly crashed him over the skull. By the position of Hackford's body, no struggle worth mentioning had ensued. To corroborate this, Brennan glanced around and the only thing he found out of place was a framed photograph of a girl lying on the canvas floor behind the table.

He glanced down, remembered he wanted fingerprints and gingerly picked the thing up.

By some standards, the girl of the photograph would have been judged beautiful. That is if one liked lush blondes and didn't object to a certain hardness about the mouth and the eyes. But she wasn't the sort to appeal to Phil Brennan. So after a glance he gave a sour grunt. "Sure. With him, there had to be a woman around."

Then he considered. The photograph might have been jolted from the flimsy table. If so, it wouldn't be of much assistance. But there was the possibility that Hackford's visitor had handled it.

"O.K., so we'll see what we'll see." And he gave it the same attention he had given club-bag and valise.

Now, satisfied that fingerprinting could go no further, he felt free to move about.

On the table where he set the photo-

graph was a box of typewriting paper. There was also a large-sized envelope containing several sheets of completed manuscript. Some time Phil Brennan might nose into this and see the sort of hokum that Hackford had been producing, but at the moment he left it to turn his attention to the rest of the dead man's gear.

The two pieces of baggage proved a disappointment. There were letters, clothing, a carton of camera films, and two or three spools of exposures, but after a half-hour of painstaking scrutiny, the policeman decided he wasn't much ahead by it all.

At last he ducked out of the tent with the sweat he had promised himself. He fastened the door, returned the Indian to his guard-duty and headed up to the Post dwelling.

SAM HARKNESS and Jeff Fawcett seemed to be expecting him.

"Figured you'd want a talk with us," offered Harkness. That's why we didn't go down to the store."

Brennan nodded. He took a chair and shoved back his Stetson.

"Got to get a few facts lined up," he pointed out. "And I'll sort of jot 'em down as we go along."

He pulled a notebook and a pencil from his pocket, tipped his chair back against the wall and used his knee as a desk.

"O.K., Sam," he told Harkness. "Let's have what you know."

The Hudson's Bay man cleared his throat. "Dunno much anyway," he began. "I never liked Hackford, but when he asked if he could eat his meals here I told him yes. The company," he explained, "expects us to do things like that."

"Sure," nodded the policeman. "Go ahead."

"Well, the last I seen of him was about eleven o'clock—eleven o'clock last night. He was up here with his typewriter. Asked could he do some work in the house because the mosquitoes were bad in the tent."

"Work?" put in Phil Brennan. "This magazine stuff?"

"Yeah. He'd hit on the idea of writing up that old cannibal-case for some detective magazine in the States and was in a

hurry to get it done. Said he'd got photos already, or rather, films of them. One he'd snapped of old Weenusk talking to Jeff here outside the store, and a couple of pictures of the old man's daughter."

Phil Brennan remembered the case. In a tough winter ten years before, Weenusk, a Cree Indian, was supposed to have murdered his wife and eaten her to keep him and the rest of his family from starving. It had taken the police six months of gruelling work to garner all the facts, and after a long and argumentative trial, the Indian had been freed.

"Hackford would spread himself on that one," Brennan remarked. "It wouldn't lose much in the telling. But he probably didn't finish the yarn up here," he observed. "His typewriter was on the table, opened."

Harkness agreed. "That's what I say. He was here till eleven o'clock. Then I told him we were going to bed, and he cleared out. Mebbe he did a bit more down there in his tent."

"He did," put in Jeff Fawcett. "Last thing at night I went out to cut some kindling. I heard him going at it. That was about eleven-fifteen, I'd say."

"And this morning?" suggested the policeman.

"The woman had breakfast ready at about a quarter to eight. I went down to give him a call—and you know what I found."

The corporal jotted a note. "Did you go into the tent?"

"Not me!" Fawcett fervently assured him. His features took on a look of remembrance. "One glance at that mess, and I ran for Sam."

Brennan asked both men if they had heard anything unusual during the night. They had heard nothing, had seen no one around.

Brennan sighed, pocketed his notebook and stood up.

"Guess I got to go a bit further afield."

CHAPTER TWO

The Scarred Thumb

PHIL BRENNAN was a better-than-average amateur photographer, and in the interests of his hobby he had fitted up a dark-room in the detachment. So, returning home, he spent an hour in the room, and when he emerged to blink in the sunlight, he was carrying a dozen wet prints.

These he laid on the table and compared them with the fingerprints he had taken from Cyril Hackford after leaving the company's post. The result was interesting. The fingerprints on the club-bag, valise and typewriter were definitely those of Hackford, but on the glass of the luscious blonde's photograph, the prints of another man appeared.

At the discovery, the corporal gave a satisfied grunt. He got out a magnifying glass and studied them closely. One print drew his attention more than the rest. This was a thumb-print, clean-cut, heavy, and made by a thumb that had a scar on it running laterally and a full inch long.

"That," said Brennan, "will help a lot. Or," he added, "will it?" For he suddenly realized that if he found the owner of the scarred thumb, he might not be much further ahead. Hackford had been in the



place two days, and although there were those who disliked him intensely, there were bound to be others who had gone out of their way to drop in on him. These would have seen the photograph. They might have admired it, picked it up. One of them could have been the man with the scarred thumb, and by picking up the photograph he had merely left evidence of his admiration behind him.

Brennan gave a sigh. "Anyway," he said philosophically, "we're no worse off than we were, and in the meantime, we'll locate this other bird."

He returned the photographs to the dark-room, and with this done sat down at his table and busied himself with the crime-files of earlier years. These covered the period of Hackford's tenure of office at the police detachment, and as he turned them over he jotted down several names on a scrap of paper. The job completed, he counted up his list. He had the names of five Indians, six white men and a half-breed.

He filled his pipe, lit it, studied the list for some moments. Ultimately he scored off the Indian names and four of the whites, got up and pushed across to the open doorway.

Nearby a couple of Indian youngsters were endeavoring to dislodge a sparrowhawk from its roost atop a spruce tree with bow-and-arrow. He called them over, and gave them the three remaining names.

"Tell these men," he ordered them, "to come and see me at once."

He did not have long to wait. Within five minutes, a shortish, untidy man in overalls and well-scuffed moccasins put in an appearance. Joe Daly, for better or worse, had married a squaw, and by what he could see, Brennan judged that neither Joe nor his wife had gained much on the deal. Now the man edged into the detachment, blinked nervously and wanted to know if anything was wrong.

Phil Brennan waved him to a chair, asked him if he had heard of the death of Cyril Hackford. Joe Daly, brightening somewhat, said he sure had and he wasn't doin' no cryin' over it.

"He pinched you one time, didn't he, Joe?" suggested Brennan. "For killing a beaver?"

Daly's face darkened. "I'd had tough

luck that spring and was up ag'inst it. We was outa grub and six days from home. So I shot this beaver to eat. And because I couldn't pay no fifty-dollar fine, I drew a month in jail."

"And where did you say you were last night—say around eleven, or eleven-fifteen?"

Joe Daly blinked. "Me? Last night? I dunno. Home, I guess."

"You 'guess'," observed the policeman.

"Well, er, why shore I was!" Joe Daly suddenly looked worried. "You kin ask the wife!"

"Can I?"

"Cert'n'y! And if you think I was mixed up in this Hackford business—well, you'd best start thinkin' ag'in!"

For a second or so Brennan studied the man's distressed features, then he reached into the table drawer, picked out an empty gin-flask by the neck and passed it over. "Ever see one of these before?"

Joe Daly took the thing, twisted it around, read the label. "Who ain't?" he asked. "But she shore ain't mine. Why, whereja find it?"

"Isn't yours, eh?" Brennan returned the flask to the drawer. "O.K., then, Joe. Run along now. And if I want you again you'll be right in the village. See?"

Joe Daly understood. He gulped, nodded. "Shore. I'll be around."

AS THE man left the detachment, Phil Brennan's red face drew into a smile. He picked up a pencil and scored the name of Joe Daly from his list. And he was still smiling when two other men walked in.

One was a white man, the other a halfbreed. The white man was about thirty years of age, tall, lean, hard-looking. The halfbreed was almost as tall but younger, with narrow-set eyes, high cheekbones and lank, black hair. These two Brennan allowed to stand in front of him at the table.

He gave them a nod, and spread out a couple of files. He asked them, then: "I suppose you heard about the killing of Cyril Hackford?" And when both men said yes, he asked a second question. "Where were you last night? Say, between eleven and twelve?"

The halfbreed's face didn't alter. The

white man colored a bit. "Why are you askin' me?" he demanded.

"Why?" Phil Brennan picked up the nearer of the two files, turned a sheet of it. This," he observed, concerns a matter between the King and Art Johnson. Johnson omitted to register his rifle as required by law and paid a fine of forty dollars and costs. That," he said flatly, "is why I'm asking you."

Art Johnson gave a thin, cold smile. "You haven't told it all. You could add that the whole case was a dirty frame-up—that I'd only been in the village two days at the time and didn't know a thing about the new regulation. So that's part of the story, too."

Phil Brennan agreed. "But still only a part of it. Didn't Art Johnson tell Hackford that it was a long lane that had no turning and that sooner or later he'd 'get' him?"

Johnson blinked. "Who told you all this?"

"Tell me first where you were."

"O.K., then!" Johnson's hard face showed his defiance. "I was in a poker-game at Charley Russett's."

"At the time Hackford was killed?"

"Why sure . . ." Johnson caught himself. "What I mean," he added quickly, "I was there till around midnight."

Brennan looked steadily at the man. "At just what time," he asked slowly, "was Hackford killed?"

Something blazed in Johnson's cold eyes. "What're you tryin' to put over? I don't know when he was killed! You asked me where I was between eleven and midnight. If that was when Hackford was killed, I was up at Charley Russett's."

He turned to the halfbreed. "And where were you?"

"Me?" The man seemed to hedge. "Oh, around."

"Around where?"

"Well, all over."

"All over, eh? From ten till midnight?"

"Sure." The man's face drew into a surly scowl. "Sure. I was sick. Toothache. When I walked around she wasn't so bad."

"Anyone see you 'walking around'?"

"I guess so. Only it was dark."

The policeman consulted the second of the files.

"Joe Roberts," he observed. "Seventy-five dollars and costs for killing a moose out of season." He looked up. "Well?"

The halfbreed looked back at him.

"That was last summer," he went on. "D'you mean did I shoot that moose? Sure I did. Same as everyone else does when he's short of meat. I got pinched, and I paid the fine. So what?"

Phil Brennan caught the insolence of the question but preferred to ignore it. "And it's been griping you ever since. You talked, every time you got full, about what you'd do to Hackford if you got the chance. Perhaps last night you had your chance—while you were 'walking around' with the toothache."

The corporal expected some outbreak from Joe Roberts. None came. Instead the halfbreed's face set in lines of stubborn sulkiness. In that mood, Phil Brennan knew he would get little out of him. Perhaps the better thing to do was to allow the halfbreed to think that his story was believed, to turn him loose, and watch him. Anyway, Brennan wanted to be rid of both men for a few minutes, so to each he handed an empty beer-bottle.

"Recognize either of these?" he asked.

As Joe Daly had done, the pair twisted the bottle around in their fingers and seemed mystified.

"One of these crocks supposed to have killed him?" asked Johnson.

Brennan shrugged. "I merely asked if you recognized them. If you don't—" he reached over and repossessed the bottles—"it don't matter." Then he gave them a nod. "All right. You can go."

Joe Roberts took him at his word, but Art Johnson stood for a moment with a crooked smile on his face.

"Just like that, eh? I can go. Well, it's nice you feel that way about it. Only if you get any more bright ideas," he told Brennan, "let me hear about 'em."

"You'll hear about 'em," the corporal promised. "Right off the bat."

LEFT to himself, Brennan gave a grim little smile. "If I get any more bright ideas . . . Yeah, if I do they'll all know about 'em."

He heaved to his feet, placed the two bottles and the gin-flask on the table and produced his dusting-powder. Treating the

articles with the powder brought the fingerprints to light, and with them, thumbprints as well.

But from Brennan's angle, they weren't made by the right kind of thumbs. Each was free from scar of any kind.

"Might have expected it," the corporal told himself, sourly. "Which makes me just as far ahead as I was a couple of hours ago."

But time, he reckoned, didn't matter a lot. The man who had killed Hackford was probably still in the village. And in a village where everybody knew everybody else, the killer would be foolish to court publicity by making a break.

In the meantime there were Hackford's effects to be put under lock-and-key, and the corporal knew he should do it. But when he got down to the Hudson's Bay store he found a canoe beaching and a white man stepping ashore.

Recognizing him, Brennan gave a whimsical sort of smile. Len Finlay's romance with Beth McMillan had been shattered by Cyril Hackford. Hackford didn't want the girl, couldn't have married her, but she hadn't known this and it pleased Cyril Hackford to string her along. Now, with the damage done, the two were left to recall their past while Hackford lay in the ice-house shrouded in a blanket.

Brennan decided to be on hand when Len Finlay heard the news, so he arranged to be buying some shotgun shells at Sam Harkness' counter when Finlay walked in.

An American, Finlay, from Denver. Three years before, he came into the country with a prospecting party, and when the others returned, he stayed on. Combining prospecting and trapping with a moderate income of his own, Finlay was reported to be doing all right. He had a neat little cabin at the far end of Heron Lake and a flower-garden that was the talk of the district. Now he entered the store, dragged his lanky length to a counter-top and informed Sam Harkness that he was dying for a smoke.

"Been out of tobacco for a week. And a week," he told the trader, "is seven days too long."

Jeff Fawcett, behind the counter, reached down a packet of Finlay's known brand. "Any time I'm out of it that long, I'd travel all night."

"Not paddling," grinned Finlay. "No tobacco for myself, no gas for the outboard. A swell combination. I was glad to crawl into camp ten miles from here and call it a day."

Then a lull fell over the store. Phil Brennan juggled the box of shells. Sam Harkness stared moodily out of the window.

Finlay looked from one man to the other. "Fur-market crash?" he suggested. "Or a death in the family?"

The other two glanced at Brennan, waiting for him to reply.

"Not in the family," Brennan said. "But a death just the same."

"Who?" Finlay asked.

"Friend of yours. Cyril Hackford."

Finlay's brows came together. "Hackford?" He stared at Sam Harkness, at Jeff Fawcett, back to Brennan. "Hackford, you say?" He shook his head. "Guess I don't understand."

"Maybe Hackford didn't understand either," observed the policeman. "Only some other friend of his rubbed him out last night in his tent just back of here."

"Back of here?" Finlay's mystification seemed more intense.

"Sure. He was on a trip. Came in two-three days ago. And last night someone finished him."

The packet of tobacco, half-opened, shook in Len Finlay's fingers. For a long moment he said nothing. Then in a flat voice, he asked Phil Brennan: "Who did it?"

"We don't know," was the corporal's answer. "And perhaps we can't guess. But I can name quite a few of the boys who'd have loved to have done it if their inhibitions about murder hadn't restrained 'em."

Len Finlay nodded, hate in his dark eyes. "I'll name one if you'll name the others."

"Yeah? And mebbe it's just as well for this one," pointed out the corporal, "that he wasn't in the village last night."

The strain seemed to pass. Finlay's hands still trembled as he pulled papers from his shirt pocket and built himself a cigarette. He lifted his hat, plowed fingers through wavy black hair, put the hat on again.

"So he got it at last, eh?" He turned

to Phil Brennan. "Know anything else?"

"About Hackford?" Phil Brennan shrugged. He sketched in the account of how the man had spent the previous evening and how, that morning, he had been found.

"Hmm." Lost in thought, Len Finlay rubbed one palm slowly against the other. And still in thought, he scratched absently at an inch-long scar on his left thumb.

Phil Brennan saw it, and at once something clicked in his brain. He tore his eyes away as Finlay looked up, heard the man saying something about Hackford's death squaring a lot of accounts. Then he saw that Finlay was sucking at his unlit cigarette while he grubbed in a pocket for a match.

For the second time something clicked in the corporal's brain.

"Match?" he asked Finlay. "Here, use this—if it works." And he pulled out a silver lighter.

But before he passed it over he wiped it on the sleeve of his tunic.

"Leaks a bit, and cheap gas stinks. Try it now."

When Finlay handed it back to him, he allowed it to fall in his open palm.

CHAPTER THREE

New Evidence

SUDDENLY, Finlay seemed curious. "Where's the tent? Seems sort of morbid, but it's the way I am."

Phil Brennan jerked his head. "Out the back. I was going to get the whole outfit taken up to the detachment." He turned to the door with Len Finlay following him.

It was two hours and more since the body had been found, but the Indian, now squatting with his pals, remained on guard. They walked into the tent, and without seeming to do so, the corporal kept an eye on Finlay.

The man first noticed the picture. "Another dame," he grunted.

"Oh, sure," agreed Brennan. He saw Finlay lift the picture from the table. Purposely the policeman turned his back and shut tight the club-bag. "And don't touch it," he cautioned. "I've dusted some fingerprints on it and want a picture of them."

Finlay gave an exclamation. "Why in thunder didn't you tell me? Guess I've got 'em all smeared!"

The corporal wheeled. He grabbed the photograph from Finlay's hands and looked at the hopelessly-blurred prints. "You did it!" he gritted.

Finlay was all penitence. "I'm sorry as the devil. If I'd known . . . Why, d'you think it matters a lot?"

"Matters a lot?" Brennan glared at him, at last forced a smile. "I don't know. I was sort of hoping that whoever killed Hackford had handled that picture. But maybe not. Maybe the prints I dusted were only Hackford's."

"Couldn't you try somewhere else?" suggested Finlay. "Say, the lamp up there, or the typewriter?"

"Lamp won't be any good," demurred the corporal. "I don't think it was touched. It's empty. Must have burned itself out last night after the murderer left. And as for the typewriter, I've been over that once." Brennan showed the dusted prints on the shift-bar. "They're probably Hackford's, too."

As the corporal set about getting the dead man's effects together, Finlay remarked that the air was too hot for him.

"Is, kind of," Brennan agreed, and was glad when the man walked away.

At once he called in a couple of the Indians to help him, and when, half an hour later, the effects were stored in the detachment, he turned his attention to the cigarette-lighter and anything it might have to tell.

He found it—the evidence he had been looking for, the identity of the owner of the scarred thumb. Len Finlay was the man who had called on Cyril Hackford the night before, the man who had left the imprint of his visit on the glass of the photograph frame.

IT WAS not a pleasing discovery, but not entirely unexpected. Phil Brennan recalled Finlay's uneasiness in the store, his desire to get into Hackford's tent, the way he had seized on the photograph and the manner in which he had obliterated the fingerprints upon it.

All this now was natural of understanding. Somewhere between last midnight and this morning, Finlay had remembered

that men were convicted on fingerprint evidence alone. He had recalled handling the photograph, wondered if he had placed his neck in jeopardy, had finally succeeded—or so he thought—in wiping the evidence of his visit away.

Phil Brennan sighed, snugged his tunic about him. "Well, may's well get it over with right now."

With a pair of handcuffs in his breeches' pocket he struck off for the Hudson's Bay store. Len Finlay was still there, sitting on the counter and rolling another cigarette. With him, too, were Sam Harkness and Jeff Fawcett. Brennan wasted no time.

He walked the three paces to the counter, said: "Hold everything, Len." Then added: "I'm arresting you for the murder of Cyril Hackford."

Finlay stiffened. The tobacco dropped from his fingers and the paper fluttered down. With a motion born of long practice, Brennan snapped the steel about his wrists.

Then Finlay blinked, seemed to be waking from a stupor. He looked at his wrists up to the stern face of Phil Brennan.

"Murder—?" he said thickly. "Murder of Cyril Hackford?"

"And don't forget," Brennan cut in, "that whatever you say may be used against you. Meaning, don't talk."

Behind the counter, Harkness and Fawcett seemed frozen. Then Harkness blurted: "Murder? Len wasn't in the place—!"

"Only just got here!" put in Fawcett.

Brennan ignored them. "Let's go!" he told Finlay.

In a sort of daze, Finlay let the policeman elbow him from the store. Nor did he say a word till they were halfway to the barracks. Then, passing down the spruce-lined trail, he asked: "What have you got on me, anyway?"

Brennan gave a short grunt. "You'll learn, at the inquest."

"But I wasn't in town!"

"Mebbe," allowed Brennan. "I wouldn't know."

Finlay said nothing further till the door of the steel cage in the detachment clicked shut behind him. Then he turned, muddy-looking beneath his tan.

"If I wasn't in town and didn't even know the guy was here, how in the devil

could I possibly have murdered him?"

Brennan's face went hard. "I told you not to talk. It's for your own good. And I mean it."

Then he went over to the table, pulled out a sheet of paper and slid it into the typewriter rolls.

THE grapevine traveled fast. On the way from store to barracks they had met but two or three Indians, yet within ten minutes a halfbreed youngster came into Brennan with a note in his hand.

Brennan scanned it quickly. It was from Beth McMillan, the nurse at the Red Cross hospital. It asked, as a personal favor, if Corporal Brennan could come up to the hospital for a few moments to save the writer the embarrassment of coming down.

Brennan read the note through twice, folded it, shoved it into his pocket. He dismissed the youngster, threw a glance at Len Finlay on the steel cot of the cage, went out and locked the detachment door.

The hospital was located at Phil Brennan's end of the village, a low cottage-roofed building of white-painted lumber. Of the two resident nurses, Beth McMillan was the one in charge. She was waiting for him as he came through the picket-fence, and as he stepped onto the wide veranda, she offered him a seat in a gaily-colored deck-chair. She herself took another.

But now, with her request granted for a few moments of Phil Brennan's time, she seemed at a loss as to how to use them. She was a tall, slim girl in her uniform, with blue-black hair and contrasting gray eyes. Now her eyes, looking unseeing across the lake, were troubled, and her fingers played nervously with the watch she wore on her wrist.

Phil Brennan gave a little cough. "Perhaps," he suggested, "it's about Len Finlay?"

Quickly she turned to face him. Brennan found her eyes hard to meet.

"He is—he's at the detachment?"

Brennan nodded.

"And you've arrested him, I hear. For murder?"

Brennan gave a shrug. "Couldn't do anything else."

There was a pause. Then the girl said:

"Would it be in order to say what evidence you have against him?"

The corporal almost said no, then wondered how he could let her down lightly. "You don't expect me to tell you, do you?" he countered. "I tell you, you tell him—"

"But I can't tell him," the girl pointed out. "If he's at the detachment and you refuse him visitors . . ." She shrugged. "I thought I might be able to help him." She added: "And perhaps you, too."

Brennan gave her a frown. "I can't imagine you helping me to convict him, if that's what you mean."

She almost smiled. "I didn't mean that. I mean help you from making a grave mistake."

The girl's tone stirred Phil Brennan. His frown deepened. Did she really know something about this affair? Could she, as she had suggested, help? He pondered the point while he scrubbed his heavy jaw. So far as had ever heard, the affair between Beth McMillan and Len Finlay was all washed up. But—but she wanted to save Corporal Phil Brennan from making a "grave mistake."

He turned, caught the full frankness of her eyes upon him.

"O.K.," he capitulated. "Len is supposed to have camped ten miles out of here last night and got in just now. That's what he says. But he's lying. I have definite proof that not only was he in the village last night, but he was right in Cyril Hackford's tent."

The girl nodded, surprised him by saying: "I know."

"You know?" echoed Brennan. "How do you know?"

"Because he told me so, last night," she said unhesitatingly.

The corporal knew when to hold his tongue. After a little pause, the girl continued.

"Don't you see? I couldn't have told you that Len was in the village last night in case you hadn't known it before. That information might have been disastrous for him. But since you *do* know it, we're on even ground."

Phil Brennan felt a lot easier. "All right, Miss McMillan. Now we can put our cards on the table. But you put 'em down first."

THERE was no hesitancy in the girl's manner.

"Len arrived here a little before ten o'clock last night. He was out of both gasoline for his canoe-motor and tobacco for himself, but it was the tobacco that made him travel so late. When he landed at the company's, he found a tent pitched behind the store and thought Sam Harkness was sleeping there. Sam did, last summer. So he flashed his light through the doorway of the tent, and the first thing he saw was a club-bag with Cyril's initials on it. He saw, as well, a typewriter-case and a camera, and he connected the three things at once." For a moment the girl hesitated. "Len is high-strung. He pushed into the tent to confirm his suspicions, and as Cyril wasn't around, he assumed that he was—well, was visiting me."

"Hm-hmm!" grunted Brennan. "But go ahead."

"He came up here himself. I was sleeping on the veranda—I always do—and I heard the latch click on the gate. I say I was 'sleeping'. I meant I was going off to sleep," the girl amended. "And when the latch clicked, I thought it was another professional call. My watch showed it to be a little before eleven, so I got into my slippers and robe. It was Len." The girl paused again, went on. "His manner was queer, ice-cold, I think you'd call it. Said he was looking for Cyril Hackford. It was the first time I'd spoken to Len for a year, but I had a feeling at once that something dreadful would happen. I couldn't talk much on the veranda in case I woke Nell Simmonds, so I went with him down to the gate. Finally I convinced him that Cyril wasn't around at all and hadn't been in the two days he had been in the place. Moreover, I told him that I'd heard about the wife and child he deserted down East, and that I'd never speak to him again as long as I lived."

There was now a longer pause, and Beth McMillan began to fiddle again with her watch.

"Len has a terrible temper as well as being high-strung. When he left me to go back to the company's, I decided to follow him. It was dark, so he didn't see me. And when he went into the tent the second time, I stood only a few yards off, positively shivering with fear."

Little beads of moisture broke out on the girl's upper lip.

"There was a light burning in the tent. Then he suddenly came out and ran. He almost bumped into me. He told me what he'd found. Cyril—murdered."

THE corporal waited till the girl had regained her composure. Then he asked: "And did you see Hackford?"

"I made Len go back with me. I said perhaps Cyril wasn't dead, that perhaps he had only been wounded. Len gave a funny little laugh. 'Not the shape he's in now!' he told me. But we went back anyway, and after I'd gone up close to him, I knew there was nothing more I could do for Cyril Hackford."

Phil Brennan digested the story, and his police instincts made him ask a vital question. "How long was Len in the tent the second time?"

"The barest moment. As long as it would take him to step in, take a good look and run right out again."

"Not long enough to have killed the guy?"

"Of course not!" she said emphatically. "Anyway, I was so close—waiting, listening for any sort of a row to come between them—that I would have heard anything going wrong."

The corporal, from his deck-chair, was facing her, looking steadily into her eyes. She returned the look, unflinchingly. But she gave a heady little laugh.

"It sounds impossible, I know. The sort of stuff you read about." Her laugh died, leaving her face full of troubled earnestness. "But I swear it is the absolute truth."

Brennan said: "And what did Len do then?"

"He said he had to get out. That if you knew he was in the village and had been near the tent you'd pin the murder on him. He said he'd camp somewhere up the lake and come in again in the morning."

Again the corporal mauled his jaw. Down at the far end of the garden he saw Nell Simmonds strolling with a moss-bagged Indian baby. He turned to Beth McMillan, a quizzical little smile about his lips.

"You've gone a long way for Len. Right

now, there's little to stop me roping you in as an accessory. By your own admission you had no more love for the guy than he had."

"Love!" The word was scornful.

"Love, yeah." Then: "I'm talking about Hackford, y'know," he added quickly. "Not Len."

The girl colored. "Of course, Corporal. And except for seeing that justice is served, I'm not greatly concerned about either of them."

Phil Brennan grinned. "That," he told her, "is what *you* think!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Pictures Don't Lie

SURE, but what should Phil Brennan think?

The question nagged him all the way back to the detachment. If the girl's story were to be believed, he had got the wrong sow by the ear. Or rather, the wrong bird in the cage. Here was a guy butchered in cold blood without the semblance of a clue as to who did the butchering. It was irritating, it was galling. Worst of all, it meant that if Phil Brennan couldn't turn up something in a hurry he'd have to send out the S.O.S. And that meant something else—that the first thing he knew there'd be a flock of high-pressure detectives landing at Heron Lake from the Mounted Police C. I. B. in Regina. And maybe the Old Man, too.

It was a cheerless prospect. Hitherto he had always managed to kill his own skunks, and after twenty-eight years in the Force and superannuation just around the bend, he hated to yelp for assistance on the last lap.

"But what've I got?" he gritted. "A Grade-A heel bumped off by any one of a dozen guys who've all got the finest reasons for doing it. And with no fingerprints, no shoe-tracks or anything of that nature, all I got to depend on is the old noggin!"

So it was in that frame of mind that he turned his key in the detachment door and clumped into the main room. Len Finlay sat dejectedly on the steel cot and only gave the corporal passing interest. Len, too, seemed to have his troubles.

But he didn't speak, and at this stage of the investigation, Phil Brennan wasn't going to tell of his conversation with the girl. Conversely, Len Finlay wasn't apt to do any talking, either. His was a tough spot. He didn't know what the policeman knew, and if he offered his real defense, the truth, the case would only look blacker against him.

But the mail-plane would be along in an hour or so, and it was necessary to turn out some kind of a report. He hated to waste the time, but there was the chance that setting the facts out in cold print would uncover a point he had missed previously. It had worked in other cases, and it might work in this.

So for the better part of half an hour he pecked away at his battered typewriter, then suddenly he stopped. He got up, reached for his pipe and absently crammed tobacco into the bowl. He walked over to the window, scowled across the vista of lake, point and island. He consulted notes he had taken, the typing he had just completed, ended up by going over to the company post for confirmation of the details as supplied by the two Hudson's Bay men.

They were at dinner, and Harkness invited him to take a chair. He sat in with them after Harkness had promised him a meal to take back to Len Finlay.

As dinner progressed he gleaned added bits of information. Both men were emphatic on one point—that Len Finlay couldn't have killed Hackford when he was ten or fifteen miles away. Phil Brennan shrugged, and passed it off. He asked questions concerning Art Johnson and Joe Roberts. Sam Harkness agreed that Art Johnson would be a bad baby to tangle with, and Jeff Fawcett said that the only thing he knew about Joe Roberts was that he had a nose for bootleg hooch. Finally the meal concluded, the corporal passed his cigarettes around and they got up.

"Have to keep plugging," said Brennan. "Plugging—and hope for a break."

"But what about my ice?" Sam Harkness wanted to know. "I won't fancy it if you're going to keep the place for a morgue. Why not hold an inquest and get him out of the way?"

Brennan considered the point. "Tell you, Sam. Instead of spoiling the ice, how

about giving me two-three blocks of it? I'll shift the lamented up to that old warehouse and pack the ice around him."

"But the inquest?" persisted Harkness. "Soon."

THE mail-plane passed through an hour afterwards, and during that hour Corporal Phil Brennan was the busiest man in Heron Lake. But three days later he reaped his reward when the plane returned.

Almost at once he got Fred Benton, the J. P., in from his fox-farm, called an inquest and corraled his jury. The proceedings were held in the Mounted Police detachment, and Brennan made certain that several interested parties were on hand. As well as Len Finlay, a seat was reserved for Art Johnson and Joe Roberts. Beth McMillan was given a place near Finlay himself and Jeff Fawcett acted as a sort of clerk of the court.

With the opening ceremonies disposed of, the corporal called on his witnesses, one by one. Jeff Fawcett told of finding the body, and his evidence was corroborated by the Indian who had been dispatched at that time to summon Phil Brennan. Sam Harkness related how the deceased had worked in the company's dwelling on the evening of his death. Then Brennan himself took the stand. He told of having been called down, and touched on some of the highlights of his investigations. After that he had Len Finlay placed on the stand.

Finlay looked thinner, somewhat more careworn than when he had arrived in the village three days before. Whether or not he wriggled out of the murder-rape, Len Finlay had learned a lesson. If he did get clear, that temper of his might be more easily controlled.

The corporal already had his procedure pretty well lined up. If the blunt question were put to him concerning his whereabouts on the night of the murder, Finlay would probably lie. That wouldn't do him any good. On the other hand, were the corporal to face him with direct evidence of his visit to Hackford's tent, his story might dovetail with Beth McMillan's.

So he began. "Leonard Finlay: During my investigations, I found a thumbprint on a photograph-frame in Cyril

Hackford's tent. I had already photographed the thumbprint before you arrived in Heron Lake." He waited, and Finlay's hands, hanging at his sides, clenched tightly. "Later, I lent you my cigarette-lighter in the Hudson's Bay store, and I found that the prints you left on the lighter were identical with those on the photograph-frame. Now—how does it happen that your thumbprints were on the photograph-frame when you had not yet arrived in the village?"

Len Finlay swallowed hard, and sweat broke out on his forehead. Twice he tried to speak. Then: "You got me," he said, thickly. "I lied. I was in the tent the night before. Couple of times, as a matter of fact. The first time Hackford wasn't around. The second time he was dead."

"And when did you touch the photo?"

Again Finlay swallowed. A curl of black hair fell over his brow and he nervously pushed it away. "The first time. I thought it was a photograph of . . . I mean, a picture of someone I knew."

"And you put it back on the table?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea at what time these calls were made?" Brennan asked.

Finlay suggested that the first call had been made around eleven, the second, possibly eleven-fifteen.

"All right," said Brennan. "Sit down."

"It's all a matter of time," the corporal said to Coroner Benton, and then called on Jeff Fawcett again.

Questioned, the bookkeeper insisted that Hackford had left the company's house at eleven o'clock and that he had heard the dead man typing his manuscript when he had come out to cut the morning's kindling a few minutes later.

"Are you sure you heard him?" pressed Brennan. "If I remember correctly, there was a stiff wind blowing that night."

Fawcett had heard the typewriter in operation. He was very sure of it.

"And the first intimation you had that anything was wrong was the next day when you called him for breakfast?"

"Yes."

"You say you didn't enter the tent. That you just put your head in, looked at the 'mess', and ran for Mr. Harkness."

Fawcett nodded. "That's right."

Brennan gave a queer little smile. "I

suggest your imagination is running away with you. Either that, or you are being swayed by what you saw afterwards. You spoke about the 'mess'. By which I infer you mean Hackford's shattered skull. How could you possibly have seen this 'mess' with his head hanging down almost out of sight on the far side of the cot."

Fawcett blinked. "I'm a tall man."

"You mean you'd get a sort of bird's-eye view. Yes," agreed Brennan. "You are. But so am I, and I couldn't begin to see it." He suddenly asked: "How old are you?"

"Forty-one."

"Forty-one. You're very gray."

Something flashed in Fawcett's eyes. "I've had a lot of worry."

"American?" Brennan continued.

Fawcett seemed to tense. "No. Canadian."

SOMETHING had crept into the atmosphere of the room. All felt it. The place was very still.

"Do you know," Brennan asked the bookkeeper, "how many rolls of films Hackford used?"

Fawcett shook his head.

"But the last ones he used were those with which he took pictures for this cannibal story he was doing."

Fawcett couldn't say.

"But we'll assume they were, won't we?" continued Brennan. "You told me that Hackford was in a hurry to get the story off to this American detective magazine and had taken the necessary pictures. What I want to know is *where is that roll of films?*"

A subtle change had come over Fawcett. He seemed less the bookkeeper, more the man. His eyes were narrowing, and his lips tight. Brennan went ahead with his questioning.

"Hackford, I understand, took a picture of old Weensk. You happened to be caught in it. It was going to be published in an American detective magazine. Did you want it to be?" He waited the barest moment, went on. "I suggest, for reasons of your own, you had to gain possession of that roll of films. That when you came out, ostensibly to cut kindling, you followed Hackford to his tent and made him hand it over.

"But of course, that wouldn't help if Hackford told the tale. So with the films safely in your pocket, you smashed him over the head, turned, knocked a certain photograph to the floor and ran back to the house. Now, am I right?"

Brennan saw the next move coming. His fist shot out, caught the man on the jaw as he wheeled, dragging at his pocket. And as he went sprawling, the corporal dove for him. When he came up, one hand had Fawcett by the shirt-collar, the other clutched an automatic pistol.

"Gat, eh?" grunted Brennan. "Just in case things went wrong."

None too gently he slammed Fawcett into a chair, and holding him down, told the rest of the story.

"You didn't want me to convict Len. You liked him, and he was a countryman of yours. But Art Johnson or Joe Roberts would do all right. Art, with his hard manner, Joe Roberts with his nose for hooch. And it was that eleven o'clock stuff that started me to wondering. Art Johnson and the boys at Charley Russett's all swear that Art was playing poker at eleven P.M. You and Sam Harkness say that Hackford left the house at about eleven. Len says Hackford wasn't in his tent at eleven but that he was dead at eleven-fifteen, and this latter statement is corroborated by another witness whom there is no need to call.

"So what?" asked Brennan. "You all tell the same sort of story, and you didn't get together on it. Which points to one of two things—you're either a swell bunch of coincidental liars, or you're all telling the truth. And I think it's the truth.

"So what next?" he continued. "I'm looking for someone who was around Hackford's tent between eleven and eleven-fifteen. And who do I think of right away? Why, you—out cutting your kindling!

"Then I think some more, of the way you acted, of the story you told. And I realize you've overshot the drama. You saw too much for a man who only stuck his head in the tent, and I go on from there. Where do you enter the scene, how are you connected with it? I remember you were reported as being a pretty good friend of Hackford's when he was here before, so I wonder if anything had transpired on this second trip in of his. The

only time your name cropped up was when Hackford took a snap of old Weenusk and yourself, and I tell myself that a man doesn't murder a guy for that. And then I said: 'Or does he?' So I made quick developments of all the films he had, and when you didn't show on any of 'em, I certainly wondered why.

"You may not know it, but you've been photographed before. Miss McMillan took a snapshot of you and a bunch of Indians loading canoes in front of the post a few weeks ago, and it came in handy. That picture, together with your fingerprints taken from the cigarette case I passed around at table the other day completed the picture. The New York Police Department did the rest—John Hoffman, one-time bank-clerk, wanted for participation in the murder of two other bank-employees while acting as inside-man for a gang of mugs in nineteen-twenty-two. And I guess," predicted the corporal, "that John Hoffman will pay."

IT DIDN'T take long to make the transfer. Len Finlay was out, and Jeff Fawcett was in. All the other witnesses of the drama had gone, save Fred Benton, Len Finlay and Beth McMillan.

"So that's all there's to it," observed Len Finlay.

"That's all," answered the corporal. "And you can thank a certain lady for getting you clear."

Finlay looked glancingly at Beth McMillan. "Yeah," he remarked, "things seem to point that way."

The corporal began to grin, and it was a big, red, broad-faced grin.

"One thing about it, Joe Roberts is apt to stay home nights after this instead of hunting hooch. And Art Johnson won't make cracks at 'getting even' with the Mounted Police. And a couple of foolish people of my acquaintance will sort of realize they're wasting a whole lot of time."

Phil Brennan suddenly asked the girl: "Ever see Len's place up at the far end of the lake—the cute little cabin—the flower-garden?"

Beth McMillan's gray eyes blinked quickly. "I haven't."

"You must," said the corporal. "You'll love it!"

CHARITY BEGINS

By **NORBERT DAVIS**

Author of "Too Many Have Died," etc.

As the two men plunged through the shattered glass, he saw Maxine Lufor lying on the floor with an ugly wound in her back.



A hyphen had only been a mark to separate "brandy" from "glass" to Max Latin until the guy called Carter-Heason, strictly from Kipling, stepped into Latin's headquarters chez Guterrez with a strange tale to tell of the latest goings-on of the "charity" racket.

AT HOMICIDE

A Max Latin
Novelette



CHAPTER ONE

Charity Begins at Channel Island

GUITERREZ was waiting. He was not waiting patiently, but then he never did anything very patiently. He was walking up and down on the sidewalk in front of his restaurant with his tall chef's hat pushed down over one eye, his hands clasped behind him and his long, slightly soiled apron swishing snakily around his ankles. In the dimmed lights that came through the restaurant windows he looked like a shadowy Satan with the stomach-ache.

"Hello," said Max Latin.

Guterrez jumped a foot. "You!" he

yelled. "Haven't you got any regard for my health? Do you want to scare me to death? Would you like to see me drop dead here in the gutter?"

"It's not a bad idea," said Latin. "Why don't you?"

"Just to please you?" Guterrez sneered. "Hah! I can see myself. Listen, you crook. I've been waiting for you. I want to ask you a question—and no lies. Did you get to England while you were in the Army?"

Latin was wearing a tailored blue topcoat and a dark blue rolled brim hat, and he blended into the shadows as though he belonged to them. He was thin and a little above medium height, and he had a blandly confidential smile that didn't mean any

more than the ones they paint on kewpie dolls. His eyes were greenish and tipped a little at the corners, and they never smiled at all.

"No," he answered. "I told you I never got further than the basic training camp. They found out there I was as color blind as Grant's Tomb and shipped me home."

"Were you ever in England before you got in the Army, then?"

"No."

"Latin, did you commit any crimes in New Zealand or Australia or South Africa?"

"No," said Latin, "but I recall a little matter of some jewels smuggled across from Canada if that will help you any."

Guterrez slapped himself on the forehead. "Oh-oh!"

"It was all a mistake," Latin soothed. "The customs authorities made an error."

"Well, the error has caught up with you."

"So?" said Latin. "How do you figure?"

Guterrez tapped him on the chest impressively. "Sherlock Holmes' younger brother is sitting in your booth right this minute. I didn't like the looks of this baby when he came in, and when he asked for you, both Dick and I tried to give him the brush-off. Latin, you couldn't brush this number off with an anti-tank gun. He just sits. I think you better take a powder."

"Let's see what he wants first."

"Latin," said Guterrez, "I don't think you're gonna like English jails. They're damp, and you catch cold easy."

"I'll take a chance. Come on."

HE OPENED the door, and the noise rolled out like the overflow from a jam session in a boiler factory. Guterrez' place was never noted for its air of quiet refinement. The customers were hardy souls who took what came and thrived on it as long as it included substantial portions of Guterrez' cooking, which was really almost as good as he thought it was.

Latin and Guterrez worked their way expertly through the uproar and the writhing, close-packed tables to the last of the row of booths that ran along the sidewall.

"Well, I found him for you," said Guterrez. "The service you get in this dump is amazing. Even crooks we serve for supper."

"I'm Max Latin. Did you want to see me?" Latin said.

The man in the booth was so typically upper-class British that he looked faintly unreal. He had a long bony face burned brick-red by the sun and a close-clipped gray, military-style mustache and gray shaggy eyebrows. His eyes were a light blue, and he looked pained when he smiled.

"Ah, yes," he said. He got up, awkward and bony in the narrow booth, and extended his hand. "Carter-Heason, here. Will you sit down?"

Latin slid into the seat across the table. A small and wizened waiter in an apron so big that it could have, and apparently had, been used for a tent, skidded to a stop beside the booth and said: "You want to give him the good brandy, Latin?"

"Certainly," said Latin.

The waiter produced a bottle from under his apron.

Latin looked at Guterrez. "Is there anything keeping you here?"

"I just wanted one last look at you before you got that prison pallor," Guterrez told him. "Good-by, Latin, you louse. It was nice knowing you." He slammed through the swing door into the steamy bedlam of the kitchen.

CARTER-HEASON raised his shaggy eyebrows at Latin. "Were you planning on going somewhere?"

"Guterrez thinks you're going to arrest me."

"Arrest you?" Carter-Heason said blankly. "But why?"

Latin shrugged. "Lots of people do."

Carter-Heason looked vague. "Oh, I see. No, I assure you the thought hadn't entered my mind. I came here to do business with you. I was told that this was your office. That was some of your American humor, I imagine."

"No. It is my office."

Carter-Heason made a little flustered gesture. "I meant no offense, really. Entirely your affair where you conduct your business, of course. But this establishment is rather—ah—confusing . . ."

"Sometimes that helps in my business," Latin said. "Now what can I do for you?"

"Oh, yes. Now I've heard that you have a reputation for engaging in certain—ah—sharp practices. Please don't be offended, old chap. My information might be entirely wrong."

"It's not wrong," Latin said.

"I see. And I've heard, on very good authority, that you have been remarkably successful at engaging in these practices."

"Yes," said Latin.

"I've been told that although you've been arrested innumerable times, you've never been convicted."

"That's right."

"Well," said Carter-Heason. He sipped his brandy, smiled weakly. "Well . . ."

Latin chuckled. "Come right out with it. Do you want to hire me?"

"Ah!" said Carter-Heason, relieved. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. You see, it's not exactly . . ."

"Honest," Latin finished.

"Well . . ."

"Is it, or isn't it?" Latin asked. "After all, you should know."

"That's just the trouble, old chap. I don't."

"I'll soon tell you," Latin said. "Just tell me all about it."

"**T**HAT would be best, wouldn't it? Right. Have you ever heard of the Channel Islands?"

"Channel Islands," Latin repeated. "They're small islands in the English Channel, aren't they? Close to the French coast?"

"Right. They were occupied by the Germans in the early part of the war."

"What about them?"

"There's a chap by the name of Fortwyn going about here and there in America collecting funds for the relief and rehabilitation and re-establishment of the interned residents of these islands after the war. Very good thing. Very admirable. The people of the islands have a cultural background that is their own and unique and well worth preserving, and there's no doubt but what they've been battered about considerably by the German occupying forces."

"What's the beef, then?"

"Eh? Oh, I see. Fortwyn is a British

citizen." Carter-Heason added as an afterthought: "So am I, you know."

"Never would have guessed it," Latin said. "I gather you don't like this Fortwyn character."

"No," said Carter-Heason judiciously. "I don't. In fact, I don't completely trust him."

"Ah," said Latin. "Now we're coming to pay-dirt."

"Yes. As you say. Now the funds that Fortwyn is collecting are to be administered after the war."

"Maybe," Latin suggested.

"That's the crux of the matter," Carter-Heason admitted. "He has a small group of his own. He is not connected with any other organized charity or war relief society. That does not, of course, mean that his methods or motives are in any way questionable."

"Does he keep books?" Latin asked.

"Yes. Very excellent ones. I've inspected them. Several times."

"Did he squawk?"

"Eh? Object, you mean? Well, in a way. I mean, the first time he seemed cordial enough, but he grew distinctly cooler when I came back."

Latin nodded. "Yeah. Did the books seem to be on the square?"

"Oh, yes. Administrative expenses were very small—investments excellent. The idea is that the funds are to be kept in trust for use on the islands after the conclusion of the war."

"In whose trust?" Latin asked.

Carter-Heason sighed. "An incorporated trust company, of which Fortwyn is the president of the board of directors. There are two other directors. One is his secretary, the other is the accompanist of his singer—a piano player."

"Oh-oh," said Latin.

"That was my impression," Carter-Heason said ruefully. "There's nothing obviously wrong with the arrangement. Fortwyn makes no effort to conceal it. It has the advantage of keeping down administrative expenses."

"It also has the advantage," Latin observed, "of allowing Fortwyn to vote to do any damned thing he pleases with those funds any time he pleases. His two stooges would naturally back him up. He could walk off with the treasury the day

peace was declared or any day before that he happened to think was convenient. And then you could have fun chasing him."

"Right," said Carter-Heason.

"How about the F.B.I.?"

Carter-Heason shook his head gently. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with Fortwyn. He is not committing any crime. On the contrary, he is engaged in a very praiseworthy task. He is a valid British citizen, and he has no record whatsoever of any business chicanery. There can be no question here of any governmental interference. There are no grounds for official action."

"So you came to me."

"Right," said Carter-Heason.

"Here I am."

CHAPTER TWO

Top Hat, White Tie and—Fraud

CARTER-HEASON grunted uncomfortably. "Well, I'd like you to—ah—chisel at him. Is that the correct word?"

"Close enough," Latin said absently. "You mean you want me to put the bite on Fortwyn in a heavy way. If he pays off rather than risk a beef with me and the authorities in opposite corners, then you'll know there's something smelly about his charity deal. Is that it?"

"Yes. I think that covers the ground very succinctly."

Latin frowned down at his brandy. "This could be a little dangerous. You picked me because I've got a reputation that Fortwyn could check on easily. The cops and people like that keep an eye on me for the same reason, you know."

Carter-Heason nodded. "Frankly, old chap, I think it's damned dangerous. I don't see how you're going to avoid being jailed for one reason or another. I wouldn't have asked you to do it if I could have thought of any other plan. Of course, I can offer you a considerable financial remuneration."

Latin looked up. "Who's paying?"

"I am."

"I can easily find out."

"I know it. You are welcome to make any inquiries you wish. I really am paying."

"Why?" Latin asked.

Carter-Heason looked embarrassed. "Well, you see they won't accept me for service—not any service anywhere. Had a little trouble with fever years ago. Bad heart and that sort of silly stuff. So I've been doing my best to promote friendly feeling between this country and Britain. Not connected with any official organization or any of that. Just bungle around in my clumsy fashion and try to act amiable."

"I see," said Latin.

"This chap Fortwyn may be all right, but if he's not it's a very nasty thing he's doing. Cheating Americans who are generous enough to give to his charity is bad enough in itself, but if he should turn out to be a crook it would certainly not make the Americans involved feel very friendly toward the British in general. Sort of biting the hand that feeds you and all that."

"I see," Latin repeated. "How heavy can you go with the cash?"

"I have two hundred pounds on hand. That surely will do for a retainer, won't it? I don't mean that to be all, of course, but it will take me a little time to raise the remainder, whatever that is."

"How will you raise it?"

"I was going to mortgage my pension."

"Pension?" Latin said.

"Yes. For Colonial Service."

"Skip it," said Latin. "I'll handle it. Maybe I can pick up a penny or two as I go along, and anyway I'm not very busy at this point."

"Well, old chap, I can't really—"

"You can send me cigarettes while I'm in jail. Tell me more about Fortwyn. How does he operate?"

"Very cleverly. I mean that whether he's honest or not he's quite efficient. He has this small group which travels with him from one city to the next. It consists of the secretary I spoke of—Isabel Grey—and the accompanist who is her fellow director, named Perwinkle, and Maxine Lufor, who is a singer. Fortwyn's idea is to contact some top-drawer social clique in each city and make them the more-or-less exclusive sponsors of his island charity."

Latin nodded. "You have to have a top hat and tails before you can contribute, eh?"

"Well, yes. In a manner of speaking. Fortwyn doesn't solicit gifts from the general public. In fact, he hardly solicits at all in the general understanding of the word. Things are so arranged that people are very glad to contribute for the social prestige as well as for the future of the Channel Islanders. He puts on a dinner at the home of some socially prominent person. The socially prominent person invites the guests he—or usually she—selects. They make such contributions as they wish. The expenses of the dinner and what-not are deducted, and the charity gets what remains."

"Sounds good," Latin commented.

IT IS. Fortwyn does the thing up well. Aside from the dinner, he furnishes entertainment. Maxine Lufor sings folk songs indigent to the islands and some early English folk songs. She's very good. Perwinkle plays their folk dances and, of course, accompanies Maxine Lufor. Isabel Grey exhibits handiwork and other goods produced on the islands. She is a native of the islands and can answer any questions as to how the inhabitants live and work. Fortwyn gives a little lecture illustrated with some first-rate lantern slides."

"Where have they landed in this town?"

"With a Mr. and Mrs. Jeffers Hayes. I understand that his is an old and rich banking family, and that they are very prominent socially among the older and more conservative people. The dinner and entertainment is scheduled for their Manxton Park estate tomorrow night. I'm really sorry not to give you more warning than that, but I hesitated a long time before I could nerve myself up to come at all."

"I'll make out," said Latin. "Is the Fortwyn party staying out at Manxton Park?"

"No. At the Hanford-Plaza Hotel. I'm staying there too, incidentally."

"Are you haunting them?" Latin inquired.

Carter-Heason chuckled. "As a matter of fact, I imagine that is their impression. I'm even going to the entertainment at the Hayes' tomorrow night. They didn't wish to invite me, or rather, Fortwyn didn't wish to have them. But I have—ah—social connections myself."

"I'll see you there."

Carter-Heason looked surprised. "You mean . . . I mean . . . Well, is that all?"

"For now. Unless you want another brandy."

"No, thanks, really. I do wish I could offer you something for your time and trouble, not to mention the risk. After all, you don't even know that I'm telling you the truth about all his."

"I'll find out," said Latin. "Won't I?"

"Well, yes. I imagine so." Carter-Heason stood up. "This has really been most interesting. I had no idea—"

Dick, the waiter, popped up beside the booth. "You want something, chum?"

"Eh?" said Carter-Heason, startled.

"Oh, no, thanks. I was just leaving . . ."

"Cheer-o," said Dick. "Toodle-oo."

"Yes," said Carter-Heason. "Good night, all."

VERY stiff, very straight, withdrawn into his own dignity and ignoring all the uproar, he made his way to the front door and went out.

Guterrez came through the swing door and leaned over the back of the booth, wiping the sweat off his face with the end of a towel he had wrapped muffler-style around his neck.

"Well?" he demanded. "What kind of a down-payment did you shake him for?"

"Nothing," said Latin.

"A fine businessman you are," said Guterrez. "If he didn't come to pinch you, he must have come to hire you. There sure as hell ain't anybody silly enough to pay social calls on a sharp like you. So why'd you let him waltz out of here just on a promise to pay?"

"I didn't. He didn't promise."

"I don't like the sound of that," Guterrez stated.

"Me, neither," Dick seconded. "Hold it up and let us see it, Latin."

"This is a charity job."

"Charity!" Guterrez shouted. "Charity begins at home, don't you know that? What about us? Look at poor Dick, here. He's hungry, he's sick, and he ain't got no soles on his shoes!"

Latin nodded at Dick. "Run over on your bare feet and get me the telephone." He nodded at Guterrez. "You go out and get me something to eat."

"I wonder why I put up with this," said Guterrez, slamming back into the kitchen.

Dick came back with the portable telephone, and Latin plugged it in at the concealed switch behind the drapes against the back wall of the booth.

"Want anything else?" Dick asked.

"Yes. I want to be alone."

"Swish," said Dick. "That was the noise I made disappearing."

Latin thought for a moment and then lifted the hand-set and dialed a number. The telephone at the other end didn't have time to complete its first ring before there was a snap on the line, and a voice said breathlessly: "Yes? Yes? Yes?"

Latin said: "Is Toots Carr there?"

"Oh, yes! Hold the wire, he's right here. Toots—Toots! It's for you . . . This is it! Hurry!"

Latin looked mildly surprised. Through the receiver he could hear a faint banging and then the crash of some furniture overturning and then the hurried stamp of footsteps. A hoarse masculine voice said eagerly: "Yes, sir! Yes, your honor! This is him—I mean, me. I mean, this is Toots Carr."

"THIS is Latin, Toots. What's all the business?"

"Who—Latin? Oh! Get off the wire, Latin. I'm expecting a vital call. Quick! Good-by."

"Hold it," said Latin. "Who's going to call you?"

"The President of the United States, that's who! Now go away, Latin. This is serious!"

"Why is the President going to call you?"

"Because I sent him a telegram and asked him to. Now, Latin, please. He might be tryin' to get me this very minute. Hang up!"

"Why did you send him a telegram, Toots?"

"Because I'm gonna have him burn the ears off of my damned draft board, that's why! I'll show them guys! I got no time to talk, Latin. Good-by."

"Wait now, Toots. Be reasonable. It's after one o'clock in Washington. Do you think the President works all night as well as all day?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. That's right. I guess he'll call me up first thing in the morning, then."

"No doubt," said Latin. "What's the matter with your draft board?"

"Why, them guys is criminals, that's what. They're a set of fifth columnists! You know me. You know who I am. I am positively the best safe-puffer in the business, that's who. I can take a vault door off and lay it down as gentle as a baby in a cradle. You know that yourself, Latin. Am I right?"

"Sure," said Latin.

"O. K., O. K. So that's what I tell them dim bulbs on the draft board. I tell them I see some of these Nazi tanks in the newsreel. You think if I can open up a Class A bank vault I can't top off them tin cans? I say to these dopes: 'Let me in, and I will strew the insides of them zinc tubs from here to Calcutta.' That's what I say."

"What did they say?" Latin asked.

"Them criminals! They say I am 4F, and that I can't get in."

"You look pretty healthy," Latin observed. "Why the 4F—are you sick?"

"I ain't no sicker than Superman! They got that on me, them rats, because they claim I am morally unfit for duty. How do you like that? So maybe the cops do claim I done a few tricks here and there. So maybe I was in Leavenworth and Alcatraz and a couple other boffs. So what? How about that guy they're fightin', huh? How about Hitler? I suppose he was never in jail!"

"You've got something there," Latin admitted.

"Wait until I tell the President what them guys is doin' to me! He'll fix them babies. Oh, just wait! I'd like to see their faces when he gets through."

"Sure," said Latin. "In the meantime, can you tell me where Tatsy Stevens is?"

"He's stashed away in some cow country tank for fifty years or more."

"Where's Bill Lutz?"

"He got himself hung, the dope."

"How about Clarence Carlson?"

"Aw now there's a sad case, Latin. You know how he used to worry about the Feds always steppin' around behind him and givin' him dirty looks if they even caught him at a dime store jewelry coun-

ter? I say to him: 'Clarence, you should out to turn honest like me and get yourself right with all them laws.' But, no. Clarence just when on worryin' until he caught himself stomach ulcers and croaked. Why are you asking about these characters, Latin?"

"Well, Toots," said Latin, "this is confidential."

"Oh, sure. Absolute. You know me, Latin."

"Yes. Well, there's some big stuff being buzzed off lately. Jewelry mostly. All strictly hush-hush. The guy doesn't fence it. He goes around behind and sells it back for a percentage. He's smarter than fire. I've got a tip he's on the loose and close. I want to put out a wire to let me negotiate for him, but I don't know who he is."

"Gee," said Toots.

"It would be money in the bank. He's a fancy man at his business. I checked all the high-flyers, and it's not one of them if your dope on Tatsy and Bill Lutz and Clarence is straight."

"It sure is, Latin. Gee. I wonder who it is?"

"The only one I can think of is Maurice Peters."

"Who was that, Latin?"

"Maurice Peters. You've heard of him. He's from across."

"Oh," said Toots vaguely. "Yeah."

"He's been doing damned well in London. You know, when there were a lot of bombs dropping sometimes there'd be an extra bang—only that one wouldn't be a bomb. It would be Maurice knocking a safe around."

"Gee!" said Toots. "Yeah, I remember him now. Sure! He's something. You think he's over here now, Latin? Do you really?"

"Must be, I guess. Listen around, will you?"

"Sure. You bet!"

"And don't cough any of this. It's strictly under the bed. That Maurice Peters is quick and nasty. I don't want a guy like him thinking I'm trying to smear him."

"I won't breathe it, Latin. No, sir! Anything I hear, I'll give you a ring."

"Good night," said Latin. "Give my regards to the President."

CHAPTER THREE

S.O.S. From 18R

HE HUNG up and poured himself another brandy. He looked just slightly amused.

Dick stopped beside the booth. "You ready to eat yet, or do you figure on drinkin' yourself into a stupor first?"

"Get me the telephone directory."

Dick went out into the kitchen and came back with the directory.

Latin looked up a number and dialed it. The telephone at the other end rang several times, and then a nasal, insolently superior voice said: "This is the Jeffers Hayes' residence."

Latin said: "Let me speak to Mr. Hayes, please."

"Who's calling?"

"This is Max Latin."

"One moment."

Latin waited. After awhile the superior voice came back and said: "Mr. Hayes doesn't know any Max Latin. May I ask what your business is with Mr. Hayes?"

"Tell him it's a matter of some stolen jewelry and that he'd better come to the phone because I'm much easier to talk to than the police."

"Stolen jewelry?" the superior voice said, startled. "Police? One moment, please."

Latin waited some more, and then a wheezily impatient voice said suddenly: "What? What, what? What's this?"

"This is Max Latin. Have you ever heard of me?"

"No!"

"You should read the crime news. I specialize in—ah—recovering stolen jewelry for people. For a suitable reward, of course."

"What nonsense! I haven't had any jewelry stolen."

"No," Latin agreed. "Not yet."

"Eh? What, what? What do you mean, sir?"

"You're having a party tomorrow night," Latin said. "There'll be quite a lot of important people there, wearing important jewelry. If their jewelry was stolen at your home, you'd feel pretty mortified, wouldn't you? You'd want to

do everything you could to insure its return, isn't that right?"

"Stolen . . . My home . . . What? No one would dare! Just what are you talking about?"

"I'm putting in my bid ahead of time," Latin explained. "After the jewelry is stolen, just give me a buzz, and I'll see what I can do."

"After . . ." the wheezy voice said, stunned. "After the jewelry is stolen . . . Here! The insolence! Why, I'll have you arrested. I'll have you put in jail. Calling me up and telling me . . . Why, why, this is fantastic! I'm going to inform the police at once. I'll have you prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."

"You do that," Latin said. "I'll be looking forward to it."

He broke the connection before the wheezy voice could work up another head of steam.

GUITERREZ opened the kitchen door. "Are you gonna eat this stuff, or am I gonna throw it away?"

"Bring it on," said Latin.

Dick appeared with an armful of napkins, silverware, plates, coffee, salad and soup and dumped them all helter-skelter on the table-top. Latin arranged them in the proper sequence and started eating.

The telephone buzzed softly, and Latin picked it up and said: "Yes?"

The voice was a faint, broken murmur. "Is this—is this Max Latin?"

"Yes," said Latin.

"Did you talk to a man named Carter-Heason?"

"Yes. Can you speak a little louder? I can't hear."

"No. I'm afraid. If they heard . . . Oh, you've got to help me! Please, please!"

"Sure," said Latin. "Who are you, and where are you?"

"Isabel Grey. At the Hanford-Plaza."

"I remember. You're Fortwyn's secretary. What's the matter?"

"I spoke—I spoke about the funds . . . The money we're collecting . . . I didn't know—didn't realize . . . Oh, I'm so afraid! Oh, please come! I can't talk any more."

There was a click, and the line went dead. Latin listened for a moment more

and then put the telephone back on its stand slowly. Absently he pushed away the remains of his soup and salad and picked up his glass of brandy. He looked at it thoughtfully and then put it down untouched and picked up the cup of coffee instead.

"Trouble?" Guitierrez asked.

"I wouldn't be at all surprised," said Latin. He finished the coffee and stood up. "Keep the home fires burning."

IN ITS brief but bawdy history the Hanford-Plaza Hotel had seen some spectacular goings-on. It had been in receivership since the day it opened, and it had never failed to default on its bonds. But this present crisis was something no one could possibly have foreseen. The place was making money.

The lobby was stacked three-deep with people who had rooms and people who didn't have rooms but wanted them and people who didn't have rooms but had given up hope and gone to sleep any handy place. The clerk huddled behind his desk and watched it all with awed and helpless dismay.

"Hey," said Latin. "Have you a party by the name of Fortwyn staying here?"

"I don't know," said the clerk.

"How's for looking it up?"

"Oh, yes," said the clerk numbly. "Yes. I could do that, couldn't I?" He consulted the file of registry cards. "There's a Reginald Fortwyn and party in Suite 18R. That's on the eighteenth floor."

"O. K. How about a party named Carter-Heason?"

The clerk looked again. "In 1751. That's the seventeenth floor. You—you don't live here, do you?"

"No."

"Oh, you're lucky! You can't imagine."

Latin left him and went over to the elevator bank. He eased himself inside, and the cage ground wearily upward.

"Eighteen," he said, when the operator looked at him out of bleary red-rimmed eyes.

"I'll take you up," said the operator, "but you may have to walk down. I'm gonna quit any minute now."

"Having trouble?" Latin asked.

"Hah!" said the operator. "I don't mind 'em swearin' at me and stickin' their

elbows in my back and their fingers in my eyes, but I'm gettin' damned sick of having to run this thing with people sittin' in my lap. Here's your floor."

"Happy landings," said Latin.

HE WALKED along on silent deep blue carpeting until he came to the door numbered 18R. Latin rapped a small bronze knocker sharply. There was no answer. He rapped again and then tried the knob. It turned easily and smoothly under his hand, and the door opened quietly in front of him.

Latin stepped through it into a small, formal foyer. He went on through an arched doorway into a combination reception and living room. The Fortwyn party evidently did themselves well. The lights were on, and everything was bright and clean and glistening, but the room was empty.

There were closed doors to Latin's right and to his left. He picked the left and walked over and opened that door.

"Oh," he said. "Pardon me."

It was a small room, hardly larger than a hall closet, and it had been fixed up as a temporary office with a tall steel filing case and a small desk-table with a typewriter on it. There was a woman sitting behind the desk. Her head was down, resting on her folded arms beside the typewriter. She was a small woman, dressed in a black tailored suit, and her gray hair had been clipped short.

"Pardon me," said Latin, more loudly.

The woman's body sagged dejectedly, and her shoulders slumped as though she were crying. In spite of the gray hair she looked remarkably like a school girl who had just been scolded by teacher. She didn't move or raise her head.

Latin took a silent step closer and touched her gently on the shoulder. He stood rigidly still then, looking down, for about five seconds. After that he let out his breath in a long sigh and slid his hand under the woman's chin and lifted her head. Her eyes were gray and glassily dilated. She wasn't breathing, and the blood had soaked through and made a glossy purplish sheen on the front of her dress.

Latin let her head fall back on her arms again. He glanced carefully around the

little office and then stepped quietly backward out into the reception room and closed the door. He took out his handkerchief and polished the knob carefully. Just as carefully and quietly he went back across the reception room, through the foyer, and out into the hall.

He considered for a moment. The door had an automatic night-latch on it. Latin snapped that into the lock position and then closed the door, staying outside. Then he hammered loudly with the knocker.

"Fortwyn!" he shouted.

He waited for a moment and then pounded on the door panels with both fists and threw in a couple of kicks for good measure and then waited again. The door opened suddenly and violently.

"What's the meaning of this?"

"Well," said Latin mildly. "Goodness me. Hello."

CHAPTER FOUR

Life—and Death at the Hanford-Plaza

SHE was sultry and sensational. She was wearing a greenish padded housecoat that matched her eyes, and golden strap slippers that matched her hair. She was just about the right height, and there was nothing wrong with the rest of her proportions. She couldn't have been more than twenty-two or -three at the best, and her best was something.

"What's the idea of making all the noise?" she demanded.

"I wanted to get in," said Latin.

"Well, where's Miss Grey? She's supposed to answer the door. Miss Grey!"

"Never mind," said Latin. "I'd rather talk to you, anyway. I bet you're Maxine Lufor, aren't you?"

"How did you know? Who are you?"

"I guessed," said Latin, "and I'm Max Latin. Let's you and I call each other Maxie, shall we?"

"No! What do you want, anyway?"

"Just business," Latin said. "But it's not important at all. It can wait if you'd like to invite me in to have a dish of tea or something."

"I wouldn't invite you to have a dish of dog food. Go away!" She tried to slam the door. "Take your foot out of that door. Go away!"

"Maxine!" another voice said. "Maxine, dear! What on earth is the matter?"

The door opened wider, and a man looked out over Maxine Lufor's shoulder. He had a face as round and flat as a pie tin and a rosy red complexion and popped eyes that were blue and wide and blood-shot. He was dressed in a tuxedo, and his chest ballooned out pouter-pigeon style under a glistening expanse of starched white shirt-front. His voice boomed and raised modulated oratorical echoes.

"Eh! What is this?"

"He was beating on the door," Maxine Lufor explained. "So I came to see what he wanted."

"Well, what does he want?"

"To get funny," said Maxine Lufor.

"Now, fellow," said the fat man. "I'm Reginald Fortwyn. Who are you, eh?"

"I'm Max Latin."

"Well, what is it that you want?"

"I want to see you."

"Why?"

"Business," said Latin.

"Oh," said Fortwyn. "Well, you'll have to make an appointment with my secretary. Where is she? Miss Grey! Oh, Miss Grey!"

"Maybe she went to the little girl's room," Maxine Lufor suggested.

Fortwyn said: "Miss Grey never . . . I mean, I told her specifically to stay here and see that I wasn't disturbed. I'm sorry, my man, but I'm frightfully busy now and—"

"It won't take long," Latin said. "I hear there's going to be a robbery at the Hayes' place tomorrow night."

"You hear . . . *What?*"

Latin nodded. "Robbery. Jewel robbery. You know, that'd be bad. I mean, people might not think it was just a coincidence. You know how people are when they get robbed. Unreasonable. Since the party is being given for your benefit, they might dream up some sort of connection between you and the robbery."

Fortwyn stared with his mouth open. "Do I understand you to say . . . Are you from the police?"

"On the contrary," said Latin.

"Well, how do you know there's going to be a robbery?"

"I don't," said Latin. "I've just got a hunch, but my hunches are generally

pretty accurate. I'd count on this one if I were you."

FORTWYN goggled at him incredulously. "I believe you are insinuating that you have some secret information. If you know anything about a proposed robbery and don't inform the police, you are an accessory!"

"Oh, sure," said Latin. "Being an accessory is one of my hobbies, but I don't think you'd enjoy it."

"Eh?"

"I'm trying to explain that if a robbery took place the rumor might get around that you were an accessory. That would have a bad effect on your reputation—and your receipts the next time you put on a shindig."

"What—what are you suggesting I do?" Fortwyn asked groggily.

"Pay me," said Latin.

"Pay you?"

"Sure. For a reasonable fee I will guarantee that there won't be a robbery."

"Won't be . . . ? See here! Why, that's nothing more than blackmail!"

"No," Latin denied. "Insurance."

"Oh, no!" Fortwyn shouted. "Oh, no, indeed! You are threatening to arrange a robbery and implicate me in it unless I pay you money not to. Why, I've never heard of such monstrous insolence: I'll have you arrested. Maxine! You heard his proposal. Look at him closely so you can identify him. I want another witness. Find Miss Grey! Hurry up. Look for her!"

Maxine Lufor stepped back inside the suite. "I'll see if she left a note in the office."

Fortwyn pointed a pudgy finger at Latin. "Don't you try to get away, fellow! I'm going to see that you answer to the authorities—"

Maxine Lufor screamed horribly.

Fortwyn swung around, the rosy red of his complexion fading suddenly. "What is it? Maxine! What—"

She screamed again.

"Good-by, now," Latin said pleasantly.

Fortwyn ignored him. He lumbered back inside the suite, calling anxiously: "Maxine! What is it? What did you see?"

Latin turned a corner in the corridor

and walked on along to the stairs and went down them to the seventeenth floor. He was whistling softly and thoughtfully to himself. He went along the hall on the seventeenth floor until he came to the room numbered 1751. He rapped with the bronze knocker.

THE door opened at once, and Carter-Heason said: "Well, old chap. This is a surprise. Come right in."

The room was small and narrow, and it had none of the shiny luxury of the Fortwyn suite. There was a man sitting in the chair that was crowded in between the bed and the one window. He was a thin man with narrow shoulders and hair that looked startlingly black in contrast to the smooth pallor of his face. He wore thick horn-rimmed glasses and a blue suit that was shiny at the seams.

"This is Mr. Perwinkle," Carter-Heason said. "He is employed by Fortwyn. If you'll remember, I spoke to you about him. This is Max Latin, Perwinkle. He is helping me investigate Fortwyn."

"You're the accompanist," Latin said.

Perwinkle looked up gloomily. "Piano player," he corrected. "General all-around stodge and patsy."

Mr. Perwinkle is — ah — dissatisfied with his job and his employer," Carter-Heason explained. "He shares my suspicions of Fortwyn's honesty."

"The guy is a crook," said Perwinkle. "He is also a rat, if that matters."

"Can you prove it?" Latin asked.

"No."

"We were having a conference on that matter," Carter-Heason said. "Mr. Perwinkle indicated that he would cooperate with me in investigating Fortwyn, but we are in a quandary as to just where to start."

"That old blow-belly is as smooth as they come," Perwinkle stated. "I know he's crooked, but he never makes a misstep, and he carries more oil than a tanker. He can explain anything."

"I was just up talking to him," Latin said. "We didn't get anywhere. That's quite a nifty number he has singing for him."

"You should try to play the piano for her," Perwinkle said. "The last time she got off the beat she crowned me with

a vase and claimed it was my fault. Of course, the old boy took her part."

"Is he that way about her?"

"Yeah, man. She snaps her fingers, and he hops. It's the only thing he is silly about, but if I were she I'd take it pretty easy. I bet the old guy would really blow his top if he thought she was taking him for a ride, and believe me he can be rough and tough when he gets a mad on."

"Do you think he's a crook because you don't like him," Latin asked, "or have you got any good reasons?"

Perwinkle moved his narrow shoulders disconsolately. "I just know. He's not doin' this for fun. He's taken in plenty. It's all nicely invested now, but I'm damned sure it isn't going to stay there. I could quit, but if I do, I automatically get myself fired from the board of directors of that phony trust company of his, and then I never would find out what goes on."

"How about Isabel Grey? Is she in it with Fortwyn?"

"Aw, no. Izzy's straight. She's got all kinds of relatives hanging out in those islands, and besides that she's a nice old gal. She's smoothed old Fortwyn down lots of times when he's been on my tail. She's kind of dumb, though. She thinks Fortwyn is the greatest man alive—on account of him claiming to collect all this money to help her relatives and friends and all. I've tried to talk to her about this and that, but she won't hear a word against him. She just looks shocked that I could even think—"

THE door in back of Latin opened suddenly, bumping him forward.

"Here, now!" said Carter-Heason indignantly. "This is a private room! What do you mean, breaking in this way? Who are you?"

"I'm Detective Inspector Walters," said the man in the doorway. "Homicide. And if you keep people like Latin in your room, you've got to expect people like me to come in after them."

"Hello, Walters," said Latin. "You're not looking very well these days."

"I'm not feeling well, either," said Walters. He was a tall, thin, gauntly bitter man with the sourly disillusioned air of a person who has been disappointed

in human nature so regularly that he has become insulated. "So just tell me what you know about that murder on the eighteenth floor and don't waste my time trying to act innocent."

"Murder?" Latin repeated. "On the eighteenth floor? This is very surprising, Walters. Are you absolutely sure of your facts?"

"I can generally tell a corpse when I see one. Start talking, Latin."

"Who was murdered?" Latin asked.

"A dame named Isabel Grey, as if you didn't know."

"What?" Perwinkle gasped. "Did you say Isabel Grey? Izzy?"

Walters looked at him. "Yes. Who are you?"

"Perwinkle," he said numbly. "I play the piano. . . Izzy—dead? Murdered? Who—who would do a thing like that?"

"If you'll shut up," Walters told him, "I'll go ahead trying to find out. What did the dame want when she called you on the telephone, Latin?"

"Called me?" Latin said blandly.

Walters eyes narrowed dangerously. "Are you denying that she did?"

"Oh, no," Latin answered. "Come to think of it, she did. It slipped my mind. She just asked me to drop around and see her sometime."

"Why?"

"Oh, I expect she wanted me to make a slight contribution to the Channel Island charity."

"And you were so anxious to do it that you whipped right up there in the middle of the night?"

Latin nodded. "I'm hell-bent on charity."

"Ha-ha," Walters said sourly. "Now, look here. That wasn't any ordinary call she made to you. How do I know? Because she didn't want to take a chance on making it from the suite upstairs. Instead, she went down to the lobby and called from one of the booths. The clerk noticed it. Now what did she have to say that was so important?"

"That's all," said Latin. "Just asked me to drop around."

"You liar. You were right outside the door when her body was discovered."

"Yes," Latin agreed, and repeated with emphasis: "Outside."

WALTERS pounced. "How did you know when the body was discovered?"

"Deduction," Latin said. "Maxine Lufor let loose with a loud halloo while I was standing in the hall talking to Fortwyn. I mean, people scream for no end of reasons, but when you mentioned a murder, I sort of tied it up with that. But just remember I was outside in the hall the whole time I was there, and incidentally the door was locked."

"I don't think it was incidentally," said Walters. "I think it was on purpose—your purpose."

"Oh, now, Walters," Latin said. "You're just being silly. You know you couldn't prove a thing like that."

Walters leaned forward. "You were inside that suite!"

"Shame," said Latin. "Do you think I'm the sort of person who would enter people's rooms uninvited?"

"I know damned well you are!"

"Let's not bicker," said Latin. "You'll get all excited and give yourself indigestion. Let's talk about something pleasant for a change."

"Blaah!" said Walters explosively. "Who is this skinny bird here?"

"This is Carter-Heason. He's British."

"What are you doing in his room?"

"He's a stranger to the city, and I just thought I'd drop in with a word of welcome. Make him feel at home and all that."

"Is that true?" Walters demanded.

"Certainly," said Carter-Heason. "Look here, old chap. I don't know a great about your legal procedure in this country, but I think you're going a little too far when you barge into my room in this impolite manner and treat my guests as though they were some sort of criminals."

"Criminals!" Walters echoed. "Some sort! Latin is *all* sorts of a criminal! If there's any crime in the books that he hasn't committed its just because he's been too busy to get around to it. Hey, wait a minute. You with the cheaters. What'd you say your name was?"

"Perwinkle."

"You belong to the outfit upstairs, don't you? Aren't you the guy that plays the piano for the dame with the streamlines?"

"Yes," Perwinkle admitted.

"What are you doing here?"

"Just visiting Carter-Heason."

"What for?"

"We were just talking about music."

Walters looked at Carter-Heason. "What do you play?"

"I don't. I'm a student of the Art."

"Nuts," said Walters. He turned back to Perwinkle. "Where were you for the last hour?"

"Right here," said Perwinkle. His eyes bulged suddenly behind the glasses. "You don't think I—I . . ."

"I don't know," Walters answered grimly, "but don't think I won't find out. Now, Latin. Get a grip on this and remember it. I just got on this case. Not five minutes after I arrive, I hear your name. So I checked up with the desk clerk and came here to find you. I don't know what it's all about yet, but if you're in it, it's bound to be sour. You stick around where I can find you." He pointed a finger at Carter-Heason. "As for you, you're in bad company. People that play with Latin end up behind the eight ball if not in a coffin. Four-Eyes, you trot along with me."

"Me?" Perwinkle wailed. "But I don't know anything about . . . I haven't seen Izzy since dinner! I went to the picture show and came right up here and stayed here. I can prove—"

"Less noise," Walters ordered. "Out. Get going back upstairs. We've got lots to talk about."

He grabbed Perwinkle's skinny arm and shoved him through the door. He turned back to nod grimly at Latin and Carter-Heason.

"I'll see both of you—later."

He slammed the door.

"Extraordinarily unpleasant character," Carter-Heason commented. "I don't believe I approve of the American police."

"They get in my hair, too," said Latin.

Carter-Heason frowned in a worried way. "I'm confused. In America, violence happens so—so violently. This murder, so unexpected. . . I fear I might have some responsibility. You see, I've spoken several times to Miss Grey as well as Perwinkle. She couldn't help but know that I was suspicious of Fortwyn and have been for some time. She wouldn't, as

Perwinkle said, hear a word against Fortwyn, but do you suppose she found out something or said something to him?"

"Maybe," said Latin. "I've got to run along."

"Where are you going?"

"Home," said Latin. "To get some sleep. I have an idea we'll have a big night tomorrow. I'll see you then."

CHAPTER FIVE

Murder Goes High Class

YOU don't see the really big limousines very much any more—the Cunningham and the Rolls and the Mercedes-Benz—all glitter and weight, with an insatiable thirst for gas. Their owners save them for special occasions. But this was one, and here they were, parked in a sleek gleaming line up the curve of the long drive. Latin walked along, admiring them, until a man stepped suddenly out of the shadow and said: "That's far enough."

"Hello, Walters," Latin said. "How's murder?"

"Looking up," said Walters, "now that you've arrived. What are you doing here?"

"I'm expected at the party."

"Let me see your invitation."

"I didn't say I was invited," Latin told him. "Just expected. What have you found out about Isabel Grey's death?"

"Plenty. Where is Maurice Peters?"

"Who?" Latin asked.

"Don't act dumb," Walters ordered. "I want to know where Maurice Peters is."

"Don't know him," said Latin.

Walters breathed deeply. "Look, smarty. You're not the only one who gets around. I know all about Maurice Peters. He's a hot-shot from London, and you've got a tip that he's going to pick off some jewelry at this party. This Carter-Heason with his dopey suspicions of Fortwyn gave you just the chance you needed to poke your nose in. You put the bell on Jeffers Hayes so that if Maurice Peters walks off with something you'd get the chance to negotiate to get it back. Then you turned right around and put the shake on Fortwyn, so if Maurice Peters should change his mind then you'd take

credit for preventing a robbery and get some dough on that angle. Both ends against the middle. That's you all over, Latin."

"I never heard such nonsense in all my life," said Latin. "I don't believe there is any such person as Maurice Peters."

"Well, I believe there is. And what's more, I believe you're going to point him out to me. Because if you don't, you know what's going to happen."

"What?" Latin inquired.

"I'm going to personally escort you to jail. And you won't slide out with any accessory charge this time. You laid yourself wide open. If any jewelry is missing from this party tonight, you're going to be charged with stealing it. You're a principal, and I can prove it by the testimony of Hayes and Fortwyn."

"In that case," said Latin, "I'd be only too glad to help you in any way I can, but I don't really think I can point out Maurice Peters to you."

"I really think you'd better," Walters said, taking a firm grip on his arm. "Come on."

THE house was white and austere and imposing, spread majestically across the top of its private knoll. The curtains were drawn tight across its many windows, and only a few stray gleams of light escaped, but the place was alive with the shadowy, busy bustle of people. As Latin and Walters came up the drive and up the wide front steps to the veranda, they could hear the faintly nasal whine of a string orchestra and the muffled *bumble-bumble-bumble* of many mixed conversations. There were about eighteen resentful-looking chauffeurs standing in a row beside the front door in the custody of an even more resentful-looking uniformed policeman. Walters marched Latin up and down in front of the row.

"Well?" he said inquiringly.

"Well, what?" Latin asked.

Walters gave his arm a jerk. "I told you to drop that stupid act! Is any of these birds Maurice Peters or any relation to him?"

"Not that I know of," said Latin.

"Come on inside, then."

Walters opened the front door and hauled Latin into a big, spectacularly

shiny hall. A tall, darkly sinister butler bowed to them in icy greeting.

"How about this number?" Walters demanded. "Is he Maurice Peters?"

"Nope," said Latin.

"The name," said the butler, "is Hog-gins, in case the information remotely concerns you. May I have your invitations, if you please?"

"No," said Walters. "We'll blow our own horn."

He pulled Latin on down the hall and through a wide, curtained archway. The drawing room and dining room and reception room extended before them like a luxurious movie set in triplicate crowded with fat women under full sail in evening dresses and fat men in tails and with well-bred hauteur clustered around so thickly you could spread it with a putty knife.

"Just take your time," Walters ordered.

Latin looked. "That bloated bird in the corner is a crook if I ever saw one."

"I know it," said Walters. "But his name is not Maurice Peters, and he's not here to steal jewelry. He's the president of the Chamber of Commerce. Look again."

"There's a bar over there—"

"I know that, too, but you're not going to get any closer to it. Quit stalling."

A tall, lath-like man with a sun-red-dened bald head and fishy gray eyes moved out of the crowd and said: "Ah, Inspector. Glad to see you paying such close attention to your duties. Anything I can do for you?"

"No, thanks," Walters said. "Mr. Jeffers Hayes, I'd like you to meet Max Latin."

Hayes said absently: "Pleasure, I'm sure—" His voice deepened to a croak. "What? What, what? Who?"

"Max Latin," said Latin. "Hi."

Hayes recoiled. "You—here! In my house. . . Inspector Walters! What do you mean by bringing this—this person here? What, what? Explain yourself, sir!"

"He's looking over the people," Walters said. "He's going to point out Maurice Peters to me. Peters is the thief we expect is here."

Hayes swallowed hard. "Looking over . . . Expect . . . What? Thief! Inspector,

these people are my guests. My guests! Do you think I'd invite a thief to my home? What utter nonsense! Take this man away from the premises."

Carter-Heason came up to them and said: "What-o? Having trouble?"

"No!" Hayes snarled. He glared haughtily at Carter-Heason and then spun on his heel and stalked rigidly away.

CARTER-HEASON smiled pleasantly. "Sour sort of a chap, isn't he? Very resentful that he had to issue me an invitation to this affair. Boring, isn't it?"

"Why did he have to issue you an invitation?" Walters asked suspiciously.

Carter-Heason shrugged. "Oh, I imagine the British Consul put in a word for me. Charming fellow, Rodney. Known him for years. Have a spot to drink?"

"Yes," said Latin.

"No," said Walters. "And I'm keeping an eye on you, Carter-Heason. Ever hear of a man named Maurice Peters?"

"Don't believe so," said Carter-Heason. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"No!"

"I see. Aren't you a homicide detective, by the way? Expecting a murder?"

"It could happen," Walters answered grimly. "Come on, Latin."

They went back into the hall and down the length of it and through another door into the gleaming, narrow butler's pantry and the restaurant-size kitchen beyond. There was a policeman sitting and eating an apple in front of the kitchen door.

"Stand here," Walters said. "Just watch them as they go back and forth. Everybody here, Kelly?"

"Yup," said Kelly, eating more apple.

"I don't see any familiar faces," Latin said.

"O.K.," said Walters. "Upstairs, next."

They went back through the butler's pantry and up the servants' stairs to the second floor. There was a wide hall that branched back both ways from the main

stairway, and Walters chose one of the doors along it and knocked.

"This is the ladies' dressing room."

A cute, pert blond maid looked out at them. "You can't come in here!"

"I don't want to," said Walters. "I just want Latin to look at you."

"And am I glad to," said Latin. "My name is Latin, and if you should drop into Guitierrez' restaurant some night—"

"Come on!" Walters snarled. "I've got better things to do than clown around with you. This is the gent's dressing room. Take a look at the valet and—"

There was a shrill, throbbing scream.

"I know that voice," Latin said. "It belongs to Maxine Lufor."

"Stay here!" Walters snapped.

HE POUNDED on down the hall, and Latin ran right after him. They turned a corner, and the hall ended ahead of them in a glass-paneled door that gave out on to a sun deck with a high white plaster wall. There was a second door to the right of the glass door, and it snapped open now, and two struggling figures caromed out of it and bounced against the wall opposite.

"Here!" Walters yelled. "Stop that! What's going on here?"

The larger of the two figures swung two awkwardly chopping blows at the smaller and knocked him back across the hall. This one was Perwinkle, and he tripped and went down in a sprawl.

"Get him!" the larger man shouted. "He murdered Maxine! I saw him! I saw him!" He pointed a rigid, shaking finger. "He murdered her—stabbed her!"

"Here you!" Walters barked. "Fortwyn! Hold it, now! What's all this?"

Fortwyn's round face was reddishly bloated. He made choking sounds in his throat and then ripped away the starched collar of his dress shirt. His eyes bulged.

"Look at him!" Perwinkle shrieked. "Look! Her blood is on his shirt!"

IF YOUR COPY OF THIS MAGAZINE IS LATE—

We regret that, due to the difficulties of wartime transportation, your magazine may sometimes be a little late in reaching you. If this should happen, your patience will be 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.*

There was a dark smear across the white front of Fortwyn's shirt. He looked down at it, still making those animal choking sounds in his throat, and then kicked savagely at Perwinkle. Perwinkle got him by the leg, and the two of them slammed back into the glass door and knocked it open with a thunderous clatter of broken glass.

"Fortwyn!" Walters bawled. "Stop that! Put up your hands!"

The two men rolled out on the porch floor over the crunching glass, and Walters dove through the shattered door after them.

Latin stopped to peer through the door in which they had first appeared. Beyond it was a dressing room, evidently half of a bedroom suite. There was a small piano in the corner, and the chair in front of it had been tipped over on its back. Maxine Lufor was lying face down half-way between the piano and the door. Her hands, with their long predatory-red nails, were reached out ahead of her clutching the carpet like agonized claws. Her face was hidden in the sleekly tumbled gold of her hair, but nothing could conceal the deep and ugly wounds between her smooth, bare shoulder-blades. Blood was smeared wet and thick in the silk of her evening gown and more of it clotted the blade of the slim hunting knife lying on the rug by her feet.

CHAPTER SIX

Charity Remains at Home

THERE was a rumbling thump from the sun deck and the rattle and slap of a chair going over. Latin ducked back into the hall and through the glass door in time to stumble over Walters.

"Knocked me down!" Walters panted thickly. "Smacked me. Why, the guy's nuttier than a fruit-cake! Get him, Latin. Down those stairs!"

Latin ran the length of the sun deck. Stairs went down steeply here into the pattered formality of a small, closed garden. Fortwyn was running headlong across it toward the thick, iron-studded door in the wall at the far side. Perwinkle was right behind him.

Latin was half way down the stairs when Fortwyn reached the big door. He

grabbed the wrought iron catch and wrenched at it, but the door didn't open. Fortwyn swung around, his face shiny and twisted with desperation, and Perwinkle tried to tackle him.

Fortwyn picked him up and threw him a good ten feet into a close-trimmed privet hedge and then followed it up, trying to kick him. Perwinkle rolled frantically to get out of the way and came up to his knees grasping one of the border stones in both his hands. It was a smooth, white-painted boulder half the size of a man's head. Perwinkle swung it up at full arm's length, squarely into the middle of Fortwyn's face.

It made an ugly chucking sound like the blade of an axe cutting into hard wood. Fortwyn bounced back and hit the wooden door with the length of his body. He bounced forward again and went down flat on the rolled white gravel of the path. He squirmed a little there and then was still.

Perwinkle had lost his balance when he swung with the boulder. He hitched frantically backward now, half-sitting, half on his knees.

"Look out!" he panted. "He—he's crazy as a mad dog! He'll get up and—and . . ."

"He won't get up," said Latin.

Perwinkle began to shake all over. "I didn't—I didn't mean . . . I rolled on that stone, and when he came for me, I just—just—"

"You just gave him what he ought to have had," said Walters grimly, coming up to them. "Now just what the hell started him off, anyway? What's this about a murder?"

Perwinkle fought for control. "We—Maxine and I—were practicing a new number. They put a piano in that room up there for us. He, Fortwyn, came in all of a sudden. He looked funny, but I didn't pay a lot of attention. He was always griping about something. He said he wanted to talk to Maxine alone, so they went into the bedroom that's attached to the room where the piano is. I could hear them yelling at each other in there."

"Yelling about what?" Walters asked.

"Same thing as usual. Money. Some things she had charged to Fortwyn's account. I didn't get all they were saying, because I wasn't paying much attention.

I just figured it was another of their rows. They kept shouting louder and louder, and then all of a sudden she yelled for me. I jumped up, and then she ran out of the bedroom with him right after her."

"Well?" Walters said sharply.

Perwinkle gulped. "It was like a—a nightmare. He had a knife in his hand, and he stabbed—and stabbed . . ." Perwinkle's face was greenish, and he shook his head mutely, unable to finish.

"Why would he kill her for charging stuff to his account?" Walters inquired.

"You should ask me," Latin told him.

"I should," Walters agreed dangerously, "and I am. Why?"

IT'S simple," said Latin. "Carter-Heason thought Fortwyn was a crook. Carter-Heason was right. He doesn't know how to investigate things like that, and all he could do was poke around, but that was plenty to make Fortwyn nervous. He didn't know when Carter-Heason might accidentally stumble across something. Fortwyn was doing his dirty work with some fancy double bookkeeping. He had sold Isabel Grey on the idea that what he was doing was the right thing to do. I don't know what line he gave her, but from all accounts she was a sort of believing soul and he was a smooth talker.

"That was O.K. until Carter-Heason let them know that he was hiring me. Isabel Grey thought that the thing to do was to explain to me just why the double bookkeeping was necessary. I'd understand, since I had nothing against Fortwyn personally, and everything would be smooth. When Fortwyn found out she meant to do that he went into one of his tantrums and stabbed her."

"Fine," said Walters. "But what about Maxine Lufor, or have you forgotten that?"

"No. Carter-Heason had scared Fortwyn. Fortwyn didn't dare take a chance on stealing a penny of that charity fund while Carter-Heason was watching him. He didn't have any money to give Maxine Lufor. They fought about it, and finally she got mad and up and charged stuff that he couldn't pay for without dipping into the charity fund. That really set him off. I imagine she added to it tonight by re-

fusing to return the stuff she had charged."

"Yes," said Perwinkle. "Yes. She did say she wouldn't take anything back. I didn't know what she was talking about then."

"O.K.," said Walters. "Just one more thing. Let's hear you talk your way around this. Where is Maurice Peters?"

"In your imagination."

"Huh?" said Walters blankly.

Latin said: "I know Toots Carr is not only stir-crazy but punch-drunk from having too many safes drop on his head. I also know he's a stool-pigeon. I knew that if I called him up and talked about Maurice Peters, the terrific safe artist from London, Toots would talk himself into believing there actually was such a person and that Toots knew him. Then he would run around and tell you."

Walters made a strangling sound. "Why, you—you— What in hell did you do that for?"

"I wanted to have some sort of a proposition to talk to Hayes and Fortwyn about. I wanted to get in here tonight. I did. And thanks a lot for your personally conducted tour of the premises. I'll make out alone from now on. I know where the bar is."

IT WAS nine o'clock the next night when Latin threaded his way through the close-packed tables in the restaurant and stopped beside his personal booth.

"Sorry if I'm late," he said. He slid into the seat next to Carter-Heason. "How do you feel now?" he asked Perwinkle.

"Oh, all right," Perwinkle answered glumly. "I was just bruised a little. But I can't get the whole damned dirty business out of my head."

"No wonder," Carter-Heason told him. "Ghastly affair. Fortwyn never recovered consciousness. Died on the way to the hospital. Good thing."

Perwinkle shivered. "Not for me to think about."

"Don't let it worry you," Carter-Heason said. "Only thing you could possibly have done. Good job."

"What have you decided to do about Fortwyn's Channel Island charity?" Latin asked.

Carter-Heason said: "I can settle it up with Perwinkle's help. We'll turn the funds over to some British or United Nations charity and let them administer the thing."

"I don't know what I'm going to do after that," Perwinkle said.

Latin said pleasantly: "I think you'll hang."

THE noise in the restaurant seemed to ebb and flow around the sudden silence in the booth.

"What was that?" Carter-Heason said slowly.

"Perwinkle killed Isabel Grey and Maxine Lufor as well as Fortwyn," Latin said. "Perwinkle saw a good thing, and he edged in on the party. Hasn't it occurred to you that he was a director of Fortwyn's trust company—the only one left? When you and he added up the funds, you'd have found about ninety per cent of them missing. You'd have blamed that on Fortwyn. Actually Perwinkle would have had the dough in his pocket. That's exactly what he meant to do the whole time."

"You're a damned liar," said Perwinkle evenly.

"Not this time," said Latin. "Fortwyn was just what he appeared to be—a big fat blow-hard. You played him like you play your piano. Maybe he meant to run out with those funds and maybe he didn't. Anyway, you got there first. Isabel Grey suspected you. She was afraid of you, too. It was you she meant to tell me about, not Fortwyn. You were in the lobby when Isabel Grey made her call to me. She saw you. That's why she was afraid to say any more. She beat it back upstairs, but you got there ahead of her. You stabbed her and ran down to see Carter-Heason."

"You make me laugh," said Perwinkle contemptuously.

"O.K. Go ahead. You stabbed Maxine Lufor because you knew you'd never get away with a dime without giving her a big part of it. Then you called in that poor boob of a Fortwyn and accused him of doing it. You even wiped some blood from the knife blade on his shirt front. You had evidence that he and Maxine had quarreled violently. Naturally the shock

and the accusation and the evidence against him scared Fortwyn green. All he could think of was to shut you up and run. You saw that he didn't run far. I think you had a gun on you all the time. I think you'd have shot him if you hadn't been able to nail him with that rock."

"I had a gun on me all the time," Perwinkle said. "I have one now. It's under the table. If either one of you makes a move, I'll kill you. You can't prove any of this stuff, but you could get me held for investigation. I wouldn't like that because those funds have already been transferred to a place when I can get hold of them. All I need is the time to do that. You're going to give me that."

Latin shrugged indifferently. "I pass."

"Well, you can't do this, you know," said Carter-Heason.

"I thought I might have trouble with you," said Perwinkle. "I have a small bottle of a private preparation of my own in my pocket. I think you're going to drink it and become violently ill and go to the hospital. That would be a good reason for you not attending to settling up the charity funds. I'll do it for you. I'll take care of Latin in some other manner."

"Do you want that poison served with a glass of water?" Guterrez asked, leaning over the back of Perwinkle's seat.

Perwinkle's breath hissed through his teeth. He jerked his head back, looking up and over his shoulder. In the same split-second Dick stepped around the end of the booth and swung expertly with the bottle he was holding by the neck.

The bottle hit Perwinkle on the temple and shattered in a wet, glittering spray. Perwinkle's thin body uncoiled slowly, and he rolled out of his seat and collapsed full-length on the floor.

Latin nodded at Carter-Heason. "There's a dictaphone behind the drape at the end of the booth. They could hear everything he said in the kitchen. Get the telephone, Dick. I'll call up Walters and give him a thrill."

"Oh, no!" Guterrez snarled. "Just wait a minute, now. Dick, you search this bird on the floor first. He ain't gonna get out of this dive without payin' for the battle of brandy you smashed over his dome. Latin can take jobs for charity, but I'm a businessman!"



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BEEF TO THE HEELS

By

C. P. DONNEL, Jr.

Author of "Tomorrow Is Friday," etc.

A
**A Colonel Kaspir
Story**



The gray glove contained a man's hand freshly-severed at the wrist.

"The Gateway to the East" might mean the Burma Road—or the way to smuggle a Nazi prisoner out of America. Sleepy little Medfordville didn't look like a gauleiter's stamping ground, but one of Colonel Kaspir's boys had left there—horizontal—and the blimp-like boss of Section Five didn't like that nohow!

NOT all war correspondents are in foxholes or on the lecture circuit. Take McCarty Smith. That's what Col. Stephen Kaspir did. Colonel Kaspir is my chief in the counter-espionage bureau known as Section Five. He caught Mac in a Washington hospital convalescing from covering the Sicilian landing for Union Press and lured him into Section Five with cunning promises of poor pay, murderous hours, and constant danger.

Mac, having just spurned a lecture tour

at \$400 per spiel, jumped at it. I was present at the interview. I'd known Mac on the Baltimore *Sun* just before the *Sun* sent him to Berlin in '36. Maude was there, too, in white sharkskin suit and golden-brown bare legs, and Mac's one good eye constantly kept straying in her direction.

Mac listened to Kaspir, then complained: "But don't I get a rank or some bars, like Mike Kettle? If Mike's a captain, I want to be a captain, too." He grinned at Maude. "I suppose Kaspir uses you for bait."

Maude flushed. Kaspir, fiddling with the elevator crank on Mac's hospital bed, made a vulgar noise through tightly pursed lips.

I said hastily: "I'm still technically in Intelligence, Mac. Kaspir 'borrowed' me in '40. I'm still on loan. And I warn you. . ."

"Mike was daisy-pickin'," said Kaspir ill-naturedly. "I took him out o' charity." It was August and Kaspir had lost some weight, being down around 240. His white linen suit hung on him like a circus tent on an elephant, and the lower sweep of his full-moon face had shed a chin or two. We'd had a wearing summer.

"Suppose I do join your troupe," said Mac cautiously.

Kaspir's fidgety irritability vanished instantly. "Did you ever know Walther Ruch in Berlin?"

Mac's lone eye narrowed. "Oberst Ruch? The great and only Colonel-Pilot Ruch. Sure. A nasty little fat man. But with brains. The best air staff man they've got. Full of bright ideas. Wrote a monograph," said Mac grimly, "on the most effective method of strafing civilian refugees. Got in a jam in '39—knifed an Italian officer who caught him with his wife." Mac drew breath. "Why?"

Kaspir's little blue eyes were bright. "It ain't generally known," he said soberly, "but Ruch's been in prison camp in Canada for the past two months. He'd been shot down over Pantelleria. Five days ago he got hold of a knife. Result: Two guards dead, one dying, Ruch is *aus*."

This was news to me and Maude. We'd been trailing a Latin attaché and hadn't been near Kaspir's office for a week.

"I hear," said Mac in a small voice, "that the Detroit underground still functions—despite the Max Stephan case."

"Ha!" Kaspir's teeth clicked together. He eyed Mac almost affectionately. "That's just it. They been runnin' them through from Canada to Detroit to New Orleans to Mexico. The F.B.I.'s caught a lot—more'n you know. But . . ."

"*Der Torweg nach Osten?*" suggested Mac softly and vaguely.

"Hey!" Kaspir blew out his cheeks and glowered. It lacerates his vanity to be taken unawares. "Where'd you get on to that?" he fulminated.

"Tunis," answered McCarty Smith promptly, pleased. "Intelligence was questioning a Luftwaffe colonel who'd crashed behind our lines. He'd been captured once before, outside London in '40. Intelligence asked him how he'd escaped from Canada that time. He laughed and said: '*Der Torweg nach Osten*,' (The Gateway to the East). Then he shut up."

KASPIR took one of my cigarettes. "Detroit's just a clearin' house now." He tamped it on his wrist. "Only the unimportant escapees are sent on the New Orleans route. The big pigs—the really valuable gents like Ruch and your Luftwaffe colonel friend—get special transportation East. The F.B.I. thinks they're picked up by subs somewhere above Boston. So do I. But we don't know. This *Torweg nach Osten* stunt is something extra special with nuts and cherries. We do know this: Once the big shots reach Detroit, they're taken over by an entirely different organization from the one that handles the little fellers bound for New Orleans. Some of the men who shove the little guys on to New Orleans never even heard of the Eastern route. And the hell of it is, we'd rather catch one of the big guys they send East than fifty of the small fry we pick up headin' for New Orleans and Mexico."

"No leads on the Eastern route yet?" Mac nibbled a fingernail.

Kaspir shrugged his big shoulders. "We got a man nosin' about in the industrial towns above Boston," he said. "Name o' Jeffers. . ."

"You remember Bill Jeffers, Mac?" I interrupted. "About my age—light hair,

skinny—he was in the State Department in '36. . .”

“I roomed with him two years at New Haven,” said McCarty Smith shortly, sitting up in bed. To Kaspir: “What did Bill turn up?”

We were all looking at Kaspir now. There was something in his eyes.

“He called me night before last from Medfordville, Mass., while you two were out gallivantin’ around. . .” He glanced at Maude and me.

Maude snorted and began to pat her foot. Kaspir’s implication was not only ungrateful but gratuitously insulting. We’d spent most of the night trailing the Latin attaché and his mistress, and Kaspir knew it.

“Go on,” I said grimly. Kaspir was stalling. I was anxious to find out why.

“. . . and said he had somethin’, but he didn’t know how good it was. He was settin’ off on a trip through the seacoast towns to check on it. He was to call me from Beach Haven last night. I didn’t get a call until this morning. And then it was the F.B.I. . .” Kaspir hesitated, and his eyes seemed to retreat into their sockets. “It seemed,” he said, “Jeffers had an accident. He was found on a road two miles east of Medfordville. Apparently hit-and-run. Dead. Smell of whiskey on him. It wasn’t until the F.B.I. found the bullet in him that they called me, knowin’ he was my man. They said,” Kaspir was looking out of the window, “that he’d been shot first, and then run over while he was still alive.”

McCarty Smith was white around the lips. He pushed the bell for the nurses, waited five seconds before he exploded, “Nurse!” He bawled it at the top of his lungs. “Nurse!”

A small, sallow probationer scuttled in, looking frightened.

“Get me my pants!” roared Mac, swinging his knobby knees over the side of the bed. His one good eye was blood-shot.

I glanced at Maude. Her hands were clasped, her lips quivering, her violet eyes were even deeper than usual.

The probationer drew herself up. “But Mr. Smith. . .”

“Dammit, woman,” bayed Mac, “get me my clothes!”

There was confusion before McCarty Smith, clothed and once again in his right mind, was released from the hospital. We went at once to Kaspir’s eyrie in the old brownstone ex-boarding house in Southwest Washington which has been home to Section Five since Kaspir founded the bureau in '39. There Kaspir and Mac conferred at length. Maude and I had a date with the Latin attaché—although the Latin attaché did not know it—so we were unable to see Mac off on the Boston plane that night.

TWO evenings later, in Kaspir’s office, it happened that I was the one who answered the phone. Kaspir and Maude were playing cribbage and I had been watching idly, more interested in Maude than the game.

It was long distance from Medfordville, and my pulse increased. At my tone I saw Kaspir lay down his cards.

“This is Mike,” I said. “Mike Kettle. Go ahead, Mac.”

“Guess who I just saw?” said McCarty Smith’s dry, middle-western voice. I didn’t dare ask. “Wait,” I said, and gave the phone to Kaspir.

Kaspir snatched at it. “Yeah? Yeah?”

There was a flat silence against the tinny crackle of Mac’s voice.

“Still there, huh?” grunted Kaspir finally. His forehead was be-diamonded with tiny drops of perspiration. Then, menacingly: “Don’t move from where you are—unless he leaves, of course—or I’ll tear your head off way down between the shoulders. We’ll be there in three hours.” He glanced at his watch. “Three and a half.” He hung up violently, dialed a number. “That you, Joe? Steve Kaspir. I gotta have a plane. I tell you I gotta. Yep, Yep, Yep.”

With that he went to a closet and fished out his coat and the battered Panama which Maude says he stole from a junk-dealer’s horse. “Come on,” he rumbled, and plunged down the stairs like an avalanche.

We caught our breath in the cab on the way to the Army airport.

Kaspir kept leaning forward, like a coxswain urging on his crew. Usually in moments of stress he lounges and fidgets and yawns.

Maude was openly annoyed. She hates to run, and Kaspir had stepped on her feet getting into the cab. Massaging her instep, she said thinly: "Tell me, Dick Tracy, has Prune-face kidnapped Frizzle-top again?"

Kaspir stared vacantly at her, a look of disgust on his face.

"In other words, where the hell are we going?" She slid off a shoe, inspected her toes for bruises.

For once, Kaspir answered without trimmings. "Medfordville," he said. "Old brown house. For rent. Smith saw a real estate feller showin' another feller into the place this noon. Then the feller came out. . ."

"Which one?" This from me.

"The real estate guy. Pay attention. The client hasn't come out yet. The house is all boarded up. So the feller in the blue suit and gray gloves—the client—is still in there. Smith got a good look at the blue-suit feller when they went in. Now Smith's waitin' across the street in a Greek joint, watchin'."

"Who's the man in gray gloves?" said Maude simply.

"Walther Ruch," said Kaspir, also simply. "So Smith says," he added. His big feet shuffled restlessly on the cab floor.

To tell the truth, I was not elated. It was too incredible that McCarty Smith, two days out of Washington, should blunder on Ruch. Yet Mac's one eye was a sharp one. But gray gloves. . .

There are times when Colonel Kaspir is psychic, and this was one of them. He remarked, in a low voice and to no one in particular: "Ruch was brought down in flames, y'know. His hands were badly burned."

I tingled. Against my shoulder I felt Maude stiffen.

The humid August dusk was draping itself like a warm, wet blanket over Medfordville when Maude and I, in accordance with Kaspir's explicit instructions, ambled arm-in-arm and lover-like down a quiet, dusty suburban street and turned in at a small corner store under a sign reading: SPIROS CONFECTIONERY, *Cigars and Ice Cream*. Maude was clutching my arm rather tightly. Neither of us dared indulge in more than a side glance at

the "old brown house for rent," which lay diagonally across the slumbering intersection from the Greek's. It had been red brick once, with smart green woodwork. Now the bricks were brown, the woodwork a scrofulous gray. Streaky pine boards were nailed haphazardly across the windows, and the FOR RENT sign poking its head above the weeds in the front yard was somehow as hopelessly dispirited as the house itself.

The Spiros "Confectionery" was inhabited chiefly by a large, Hellenic individual dozing behind the imitation marble soda counter, a legion of flies circling endlessly in the syrupy air, a pay telephone booth, and McCarty Smith. McCarty Smith jumped up from a tin table and bore down on us, noisy with welcome. The Greek woke up and inspected us sleepily with large, liquid eyes.

"Told you they'd be here," boomed Mac at the Greek. "Folks, meet Constantine. Constantine, meet my brother and his wife. Where's Uncle Steve?"

He caught me off guard. I managed to stammer: "Stopped to get a shoeshine. He'll be along in a minute."

"Three beers, Constantine," boomed Mac, ushering us back to his table. He offered Maude a cigarette murmuring: "The guy's still in there."

I looked out through the rusty screen door. Mac had chosen his observation post well. The old house was flanked and backed by a large, bare lot bounded by a tall, drunken fence. The gent in gray gloves—I still dared not believe it could be Ruch—would hardly call attention to himself by scaling this fence. And if he left by the front door, we could not possibly miss him.

Constantine shuffled over with beer and three glasses which looked as though they might contain flourishing germ cultures. "Pleased t' meetcha," he grunted, and turned away. I told Maude without conviction that the beer would sterilize the glass. She put her red lips inside her glass and drank shrinkingly. McCarty Smith made a great ceremony of pouring his own beer. The edifice of *bonhomie* which Mac had erected for our arrival collapsed under its own weight. I saw the Greek watching disinterestedly. My gaze kept straying out the door. The summer

night was moving in fast and the outlines of the house were blurring. I had a sudden, nervous desire for the sight of Kaspir's towering bulk. I recalled his words . . . "shot first—run over while he was still alive . . ." and under my breastbone experienced a small, hard, cold feeling in no wise due to the beer. Then a figure in white blotted the house from my sight and Mac announced, with strained surprise: "Here's Uncle Steve. Gee, Unk, you get lost?"

I saw the Greek glance at Kaspir's shoes, and bitterly regretted my hasty fiction about the shoeshine. Kaspir was wearing dirty white canvas yachting shoes. The Greek looked once at me, then dozed off.

The small metal chair at my left buckled under Kaspir's weight, then rallied gamely and supported him. Mac handed Kaspir a bottle of beer. I looked out the door again and my heart began to thump. The old brown house was virtually smothered in darkness now.

A small girl like a grimy angel pattered in and engaged the Greek in acrimonious debate over whether she could get four flavors of ice cream in a dime cone. Mac seized instantly upon the diversion. I heard him say quickly to Kaspir: "The real estate man's named Weylin. The Greek thinks he's German extraction. But he's lived here a long while. A solid citizen. Outside of this joint we're in, there's not much in this neighborhood but an old thread mill—it's closed—and a block and a half over there's a meat-packing plant run by a fellow named Bensinger. The Greek tried to rent the brown house once. Weylin wanted too much money. Weylin and Bensinger don't like each other. Local gossip."

KASPIR'S small eyes slanted past Mac at something—not the Greek—behind the soda counter. He poured the whole bottleful of beer down his throat without swallowing once and got up and headed for the counter. I was up quickly and right behind him, knees and wrists tremulous at the prospect of action.

Spiros' eyes widened as we ranged ourselves beside Kaspir. I think the man feared a hold-up. Then I saw what held Kaspir's attention—a small service flag

with one star, hanging beside a beer calendar. It was the only fresh, clean thing in the place. Flanking it was a tin alarm clock which said nine-fifteen.

Kaspir pointed to the service flag and elevated his bushy brows. The Greek's blue-jowled face lost its nervous look.

"My boy," he said, chin up and eyes glowing now. "He's in Sicily—I hope. First loo-tenant." There was a bugle note in his pride, and something tightened in my throat.

Kaspir held up a big paw and Spiros stared at the gold badge, which we seldom show, cupped in it. "Government," said Kaspir. "All of us. We think there's a German" . . . he nodded . . . "hiding over there."

Spiros looked eager. "How about I come along?" He gestured toward the cash register. "I got a gun in the drawer."

"Nope." Spiros' face fell. "Thanks anyhow. Stay here. Don't peep. If there's a hell of a racket over there, don't hear it. Got that?"

"You bet." Spiros hesitated. "Have a beer? On me."

"Later." Kaspir led us out and across the intersection. We could see the house again now, squat and ugly, brooding in the darkness. Kaspir looked us over like a general summing up his forces. "I'll take the back," he said. "Maude, stay on the sidewalk in front. You got that toy o' yours along, I hope." Maude patted her yellow linen handbag. "Mike, you and Smith go in and roust the b——— out. You got lights?"

McCarty Smith unshipped a small pocket torch. I said I didn't have one. Kaspir swore and gave me his. "O.K.," he said, and strode off through the weeds.

THE front porch was warped and treacherous to the feet. I tried the door. It was rickety, but it was locked.

"Give me room," I said, and hoped Mac would miss the tremor in my voice. Mac stepped back. He had been breathing down my neck. I balanced crane-like on one shaky leg and drove my heel against the lock-plate just below the knob. The recoil hurled me back into Mac's arms, and we reeled together. The indignity of the thing made me furious. I tried again.

Dry wood splintered as the door gave, but even as it swung open I noted automatically that the hinges did not squeal. That meant they had been oiled. That meant . . . I think it was here that I believed, for the first time, in the probable presence of Walther Ruch in Medfordville.

Our initial rush carried us into a musty hall. We halted uncertainly at a newel post standing guard over the stairs march-up into the midnight blackness of the second floor. Around us there collected the utter stillness of stale air and cobwebs.

I knew Mac was deferring to me. Also, my self-respect had suffered disproportionately over the incident of the flashlight. The desire to appear unafraid and confident tipped over my better judgment. I said hoarsely: "You take this floor and the cellar. I'll take the second floor and attic."

Mac nodded and faded away into the living room. The beam of his light began to dart and probe. I tiptoed upstairs. There were no footprints in the dust. But maybe there were back stairs. My cautious footfalls filled my ears with sound and my hands grew cramped on the gun-butt and flashlight. "Walter Ruch—short and stout—blue suit and gray gloves—uses a knife". . . This ragged refrain followed me from bare bedroom to bare bedroom. There was no furniture. I began to wish Mac and I had stuck together, because every few seconds I could imagine a cat-footed rush and the burn of steel between my shoulders.

The second floor was as innocent of Ruch as of furniture. I began to get anxious. Through a crack in the boards over a front window I had seen the slender white figure that was Maude standing on the sidewalk. A rear window had revealed the substantial ghost of Kaspir, planted firmly in the back yard.

In the stifling attic there was a stampepe of heavy-footed rats, and only a major feat of self-control kept me from emptying the thunder of my automatic then and there. I took root and thought hard. I remembered the oiled hinges, and Mac's positive statement that Ruch had not left the house. A big, blinding fact appeared. Ruch was in the house. He was not on the second floor or in the attic.

Therefore—I hurried to the stairs—he was on the ground floor or in the cellar. . .

I have no recollection of going downstairs. The next thing I remember is standing rigid and shivering in the rear hall and listening. There was a single sound, from somewhere under my feet. A thump or thud. Then a silence worse than a tortured shriek. Then a voice—my own. "Mac! Mac!"

No answer. I raced through the ground floor rooms, banging against doorways. No sign of Mac. A pantry off the kitchen contained the door to the cellar steps. I holed into that cellar like a rabbit into a burrow. It was not a big cellar. It had dungeon-type walls of slab rock and concrete. Five or six barrels were piled against the rear wall. They were empty. Against a side wall yawned a lidless, empty toolbox. That was all. Except . . .

Lying in the lee of one of the barrels, it winked like burnished silver when my light touched it. Mac's flashlight!

"Shot first—run over while he was still alive . . ."

But that sound had not been a shot. It had been more like—like the slamming of a door. I tore down that stack of barrels. They were piled too innocently, too carelessly.

The door, or rather, trapdoor, was set low in the wall—a small affair, hardly more than three feet by three and a half. But solid. The frame of two-by-fours was anchored for all time in the concrete. The door itself, also of two-by-fours, was hardly less solid than the wall.

I numbed my toes against that door before I would admit to myself that it was locked on the inside—probably by a bar set in slots—and that nothing less than a blasting charge would open it in less than half an hour. In the meanwhile, McCarty Smith was somewhere behind it, and his flashlight was eloquent testimony that he had not passed through of his own accord.

I raced upstairs, calling, "Kaspir! Kaspir!"

"ANY place around here stay open nights?" demanded Colonel Kaspir. Constantine Spiros bit his lip, frowned in thought.

"Only the packer's," he said at length.

"The packer's?" Kaspir massaged his shoulder, which was lame. Even his bulk and terrific drive had made no impression on that little door.

"Bensinger's," explained Spiros. "The meat-packin' place. Block and a half down the street. He keeps a few men on some nights. Got a truck runs down to Beach Haven and . . ."

Kaspir was away to the telephone booth, Maude and I at his heels. The booth was a tight fit, but he made it. He could not, however, get the door shut. First his head popped out like a turtle's and he yelled to Spiros: "What's number Chief Police?"

Spiros frowned again. Kaspir groaned impatiently. Maude's nails gripped my arm and I smiled palely at her.

"Five-two-seven," said Spiros. Kaspir dialed and settled down to what seemed an interminable wait. Finally—"Chief Police? This is Colonel Stephen Kaspir, Section Five, Washington." He was spacing his words with the palsied clarity of a man who does not want to have to repeat himself. "Please get every available man over to the Bensinger packing plant. With these instructions: We want a short, stout man, not over five feet six, wearing a blue suit and gray gloves. His hands are scarred. Got that? Scarred from burns. Post your men outside. I'll attend to the inside. Got that? And . . ."

The phone began to answer back, loudly and crossly.

"Get this, my friend," said Colonel Kaspir with strained sweetness. "I'm not joking. You go back to bed, and there'll be a man knocking at your door tomorrow to tell you you're not chief any more." This empty threat apparently took effect. Kaspir added: "Now, who's your town engineer?" A pause. Kaspir's voice and manner cracked simultaneously. "Town engineer, I said! Town engineer, god-damit!" Then: "What'sisnumber?"

He hung up, dialed again. To his next victim he talked more calmly. I won't repeat the conversation, for it was a mass of detail about sewers, especially abandoned sewers. Maude and I finally got aboard his train of thought. I tried hard not to think about McCarty Smith, for I suffer from mild claustrophobia. I looked

at my watch and was amazed at the passage of time. It was actually after ten. More than forty minutes since I had heard that sinister thump in the cellar. Then I recalled the many minutes Kaspir had spent futilely battering at the trapdoor.

Kaspir emerged from the phone booth, face dripping. His white linen suit, grimy before, was now patched with great, sopping rosettes of perspiration. He thought a moment. "To hell with Weylin," he announced.

Once more we were forced to decline Spiros' bid to beer on the house. We set off immediately for the Bensinger Packing Co. plant, and as we hurried along the dimly-lit street we heard sirens.

AUGUST BENSINGER, owner of the Bensinger Packing Co., was a large, pulpy-looking blond fellow about forty. His round cheeks had the pale beefiness of the professional butcher. The only things hard about him were his hands, which were incongruously knobby and furred with red hair, and his china-blue eyes, set like granite chips behind rimless spectacles. His manner was mild, but he was politely firm in his insistence that the whole thing was a terrible mistake. And, although in the light of events this assertion was absurd to everyone but Bensinger himself, Kaspir was stumped.

I say, in the light of events. We had spent a busy hour in the small, clean plant of August Bensinger—an hour joyfully complicated by the finding of McCarty Smith. We discovered Mac tucked away behind a stack of meat sacks in a cellar storeroom. Mac was badly battered about the head but still breathing. It was plain, however, that he would do no talking for a while. The police chief, Huggins by name, had taken Mac to a hospital and returned with an encouraging report on his general condition.

Also, we had found, not five feet from Mac's head, a trapdoor similar to the one in the old brown house. An immediate investigation had revealed (1) that Kaspir's guess about the abandoned sewer connecting Bensinger's and the house had been correct and (2) that Walther Ruch was not in the sewer. A subsequent finetooth-comb search of the packing plant revealed that Walter Ruch was not on the

premises. In other words, he had apparently de-materialized.

Kaspir stuck his button nose into the remotest corners of the plant, like a retriever hunting a wounded bird in tall grass. Once I came upon him in a tiled, odorous room, gazing pensively at a sanguinary heap of discarded bones, hooves, and fragments of hide. Later, when he was leaving this room, I noticed him wrapping some choice morsel in newspaper and stuffing it into his coat pocket, and I wondered. I wondered the more because he wore the green look he gets when he is airsick. He did not acknowledge my presence when I joined him. We went up to the office where Maude and Chief Huggins sat with Bensinger.

Huggins said: "Colonel, one of the truckmen come up and ast if—"

Bensinger cut in: "My express truck is ready to leave. Would you mind" . . . his lip curled . . . "making sure this mysterious Nazi is not aboard, so that the men can get the meat to the hotels?"

To my amazement, Kaspir said mildly and absently: "Sure. Mike, check that truck. Chief, will you step down with him and identify the men on it?"

Huggins rose with alacrity, glad, I suspect, to be free of the atmosphere in the office. We went down together to the loading platform where the truck waited. The driver, a large man with a hooked nose, and his helper, a beetle-browed youth, loafed on the running board. Huggins nodded to them, shrugged his shoulders at me. He knew them. At my request he got down and played his light under the chassis. I opened the rear door, and the rush of frigid air was grateful to my hot face. One long glance was enough. The enameled interior was pregnant with meat hung from ceiling hooks. Near me dangled sides of fresh-killed beef, red-and-white and rich looking. Beyond I saw the pink and white of pork and veal. I squinted along the floor, then chinned myself and squinted along under the ceiling. There was no blue suit in that truck. I slammed the door and bobbed my head at the truckmen. The driver was saying to Huggins: "What in hell's this all about, Chief?"

Huggins answered vaguely. The driver and his helper got aboard. Huggins and

I watched them pull out of the yard and turn east toward the ocean.

"Kind of a funny business all around," said Huggins, and I agreed that it was. We went back upstairs. All eyes swung to me as we entered. I shook my head at Kaspir. Bensinger smiled.

Out of a clear sky, Kaspir addressed Bensinger: "Suppose you explain how I happened to find Ruch's glove downstairs."

Bensinger's smile vanished. He laid down his cigar and watched, hypnotized, as Kaspir, with the deceptive deliberation of a stage magician, produced and unwrapped the packet I had seen him pocketing as he left the offal room. He tossed a single gray glove on the desk before Bensinger, and I caught my breath as it landed with a peculiarly solid sound.

I got up and walked stiff-legged over to the desk. From her corner Maude contributed a small, frightened sound. Huggins joined me at the desk, shaking.

"Well?" said Colonel Kaspir gently to Bensinger.

But it was no use. Kaspir had underestimated his effect. Bensinger's pink cheeks turned the color of a flounder's belly. He drew a long breath and slid out of the chair in a dead faint.

"Hell," said Kaspir, thoughtfully and without heat. The glove contained a hand, freshly-severed at the wrist.

To Huggins, now pitiable with nerves, Kaspir said: "We'll need a car."

Huggins took a trembling hand from his mouth. "Sergeant Thompson's outside. He'll drive you." He was beyond curiosity regarding anyone's actions but his own. "What do I do?" he mumbled helplessly.

"Stick with Bensinger. We'll be back." Kaspir collected Maude and me with his eyes. Maude circled wide of the desk, averting her eyes.

Huggins' native curiosity won a brief inning. "Where you goin'?"

"To shut *Der Torweg nach Osten*," replied Colonel Kaspir cryptically.

HALF a mile ahead—we were now well clear of Medfordville—danced the twin yellow beams of the Bensinger truck. It was traveling fast, and we gained slowly because, at Kaspir's order, Sergeant

Thompson was driving without lights. The road was straight and very dark.

Maude, huddled nervously against me in the rear seat, audibly thanked her stars that there was no other traffic. The words were barely out before Thompson grunted and trod harder on the accelerator. Kaspir, beside Thompson, muttered something. He sounded puzzled and annoyed. I leaned forward, peered between them. A second truck had appeared out of nowhere and was nose down on the tail of the first. As I watched, the lights of the new truck swung wide as though it was passing Bensinger's, then angled in suddenly. An accident was in the making, or so it seemed. For a moment the four beams were intermingled. Then all four appeared to run off the road and stop.

Kaspir said something to Thompson and we slowed down and stopped, too. We were less than a quarter-mile behind them now. We got out. Ahead, the headlights were dimmed now, but there was a new light, a rectangular one. It dawned on me that someone had opened the rear door of the meat truck. We saw dark figures moving against this light.

"Hi-jackers, by God," said Sergeant Thompson, and I heard his holster flap.

"Hmmm." Kaspir shaded his eyes with his hand. "You stay here, Sergeant. No uniforms." He cut off Thompson's protest brusquely. "Come along, Mike," he said. I found myself hurrying beside him toward the trucks. I also discovered Maude trotting behind me. I told her to go back, but she ignored me. Kaspir paid no attention to either of us.

We got nearer, and I saw that Thompson had guessed right. Black, quickly-moving figures were taking on sides of beef and staggering away with them to the other truck, which had stopped just ahead. When we were less than fifty yards away I looked for Kaspir to draw his gun, but he did not. I motioned Maude to drop behind. Again she ignored me. I thought: "Kaspir's crazy and Maude's crazy, or else I'll wake up in a minute." There was a nightmarish quality to the scene that did not diminish a bit when Kaspir strode whitely into the outer rim of light—Maude and I trailing along like sheep to a slaughter-pen—and said, "Hey!"

THE flat gall of it was staggering. For a moment or two the black figures were paralyzed. Kaspir moved closer, hands dangling at his side. Maude and I moved in, not two feet behind him. I have often wondered why we had not, yards back, dived intelligently into the underbrush. But there is a compelling fascination about Kaspir even in his most outlandish moments.

Details of the scene became clearer to me. The one that sticks most stubbornly in my mind is the inscription I read on the side of the hijackers' truck: *Flowers and Seeds, Wholesale*. This was the final maniac touch. I nearly giggled.

The black figures became individuals—hard-looking men. Three of them ran toward us, guns in hand. A fourth held his post on the running board of the Bensinger truck, and the glint of his gun told me why the Bensinger driver and his helper were still in their seats.

One man told us to put our hands up, and we did. Another said, "O.P.A.?"

"Counter-espionage," said Kaspir. This puzzled them. From their expressions I judged they decided to pass it off.

They knew their business, did those hijackers. The nearest one took Maude's arm. "We don't want to have to hurt you, lady," he said, "but we'd better take you along a little ways when we go." Then, to Kaspir: "We'll be shovin' off shortly. Don't follow. We'll drop the dame off up the road a piece. But if you follow . . ." He left it there, and hustled Maude to the rear of the "Seeds and Flowers" truck and made her climb in.

"Keep an eye on these tramps," called the first man to the fellow on the running board of the Bensinger truck. Kaspir and I stood where we were. The transfer of the load went on.

"There's murder in this," said Kaspir very clearly. The man nearest us paused, bending under a side of beef. "Those two men in that cab of that truck killed a government agent night before last."

The man looked sharply at Kaspir. The others were listening. Kaspir kept his hands up. The man hesitated, then said harshly: "I don't give a damn if they shot Lincoln. We got to load this beef. Pipe down, Fatty." He dumped his load at the foot of the man in the "Seeds"

truck—behind that one's shoulder I glimpsed Maude's blond head—and returned to the Bensinger truck. He called: "That's nearly all the cow. You want the pig, too, Joe?"

Maude's custodian thought a moment.

"Better take it all," said Colonel Kaspir loudly.

With this simple remark—it must have been something in his tone—the whole atmosphere of the incident changed. So did the others.

"Listen here, Fatty," began the nearest man, then stopped. I heard the scrabble of his feet as he climbed aboard the Bensinger truck, then the tramp of footfalls as he made his way forward inside it.

Then we all heard him scream. It was a shrill scream, like a woman's.

Everything stopped, then burst into confused action. The man at the tailboard of the "Seeds" truck shifted his load of beef and drew his gun rather uncertainly. Kaspir's arm dropped swiftly. I saw Maude break from behind her captor, saw the man grapple with her and clamp a hand over her mouth.

I was still wool-gathering when the gun that had suddenly appeared in Kaspir's hand went off in my ear like the crack of doom. The man at the tailboard went down under his side of beef. I found myself, to my intense surprise, shooting wildly at the fellow on the running board of the meat truck. Then he was no longer there. I bethought myself of the driver and his helper and ran forward, tripping over my victim as I ran. I made the running board and saw that the two had not moved. I wondered why until I noticed, at the opposite window of the cab, the pale face of Sergeant Thompson and the barrel of his gun. He had, as he put it later, "done a creep act so's not to miss anything."

Some minutes later when we packed them, the dead and the living, into the "Seeds and Flowers" truck, with a very grim and efficient Sergeant Thompson standing guard, Kaspir said: "Come here, Mike." I followed him to the rear of the Bensinger truck. Maude was coming, too, but Kaspir said sharply: "Stay back." This time she stayed.

We got in and shouldered our way forward among the meat. Kaspir pulled

aside two veal carcasses to reveal a third cluster of meat. . .

"Meet Walther Ruch," he said.

"I HEAR Weylin makes frequent trips to Suffolkton," said Colonel Kaspir. "That must be the up-station where he picks 'em up. Then he delivers 'em to the brown house the day Bensinger's delivery is scheduled for Beach Haven, etc. They skitter through the tunnel. That was a key maneuver, for it established the connection between Weylin and Bensinger. Then they catch a ride in the truck—not like Ruch rode, however—and are passed along to the sub at the seashore. We'll find out where. That driver'll talk—before he hangs."

We, including Sergeant Thompson, were having beer in Kaspir's room at the Medfordville Inn. Friend Spiros had delivered the beer personally and waved our money away. Kaspir had turned the whole blooming catch over to an exulting and exalted Chief Huggins, saying he'd "sort 'em out in the morning." Kaspir had said this jauntily enough, but his face was gray. My own stomach was still queasy from the sight of the expertly butchered, quick-frozen carcass of Walther Ruch blending so neatly with its companion carcasses of veal.

"Bill Jeffers, of course, must have stopped the truck on the road the other night. They let him have it, then tried to fake it as a hit-and-run. Ruch's big mistake was laying for McCarty Smith in the cellar when you fellers hit the house, instead of lamming through the sewer right away. And dragging Mac through the sewer after he slugged him in the cellar. Bensinger—he's head man of course. Quite an executive, Bensinger . . . decided Ruch was too hot to handle. Might endanger the whole *Torveg nach Osten* set-up. So he put Ruch away. The gloved hands wouldn't fit the scene in the truck, so Bensinger lopped 'em off and buried 'em in the scrap pile. But I wonder . . .?" Kaspir sipped his beer moodily. "Oh, well," he said finally, "we'll find out in the morning."

"You wonder what?" I said.

"What Bensinger did with the head."

Maude rose. "Good night," she said shakily, and left the room.

THERE'S ONE IN EVERY GRAVEYARD

By
G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Author of "Sleep No More My Lovely," etc.



Teed pelted the book-end at Cousin Bert who ducked, shot from a crouch . . .

CHAPTER ONE

River of Death

WILLIAM TEED frequently wondered why it was called White River. There was nothing white about it except the sun-bleached stones that showed up in its bed around August when the stream itself was reduced to a narrow sluggish trickle, definitely green and smelling of things that wriggled and crawled.

So in August it was a green river. Now, in May, it was brown, as treacherous as a brown shirt pompously swollen with conquest, and in a foaming hurry to get on with its vandalism. But it was never white.

William Teed thought up a better name that morning while he shaved. He winked at what he always considered his sleek-

There's something about a nagging wife with a whine in her voice that makes her a sure-fire candidate for a grass widow or a corpse and this little shrew hit the jackpot with two murderers eager to try their skill—one by poison, one by electrocution.

facéd self (he was actually pudgy) and rechristened the roaring flood water "River of Death." It was quite appropriate.

William and Velma Teed lived on Riverview Drive. There was another misnomer that irked Mr. Teed—that "riverview" business. Because of the levee, just where along the Drive could you view the river without a periscope? But it was an impressive address that Mrs. Teed enjoyed mouthing to sales persons. There were many beautifully wooded lots along its winding course—lots that were expensively landscaped and replete with lawn furniture no one ever sat in, with backyard fireplaces that had never grilled a hamburger. The small but costly homes ran an architectural gamut from concrete-and-glass-brick *moderne* to the Teed's typical English cottage with oil burner, three baths, rumpus room and bar.

There was nothing wrong with living along Riverview Drive and facing the levee except that after thirteen days of rain there was much too much running water. And even that, in Mr. Teed's scheme of things, had certain advantages.

William Teed stepped into the master bedroom with his bottle of pre-shave lotion and his electric razor in hand. A glance at Velma's bed showed him a mound of flabby shoulder and Velma's pinkish hair caught in metal curlers and a net. Velma was snoring, and William tiptoed.

"Can't you have a little consideration for me, William Teed? I haven't slept a wink all night!"

Mr. Teed hadn't made a sound putting his pre-shave lotion in the drawer of the 18th Century highboy. He did not reply and he did not turn around. Velma's bed-springs complained.

"Listen to that thing. *Chock-chock-chock-chock.*" That was Velma giving a remarkably accurate imitation of the gasoline pump that the Blevins next door had rented to empty their basement of water. "All night! How long is that going to keep up, do you think?"

"Until the rain stops," he said, surprised at his own impudence. "Blevin's sewer is backing up."

He stole a look at Velma in the glass. She was lying on her back, eyes stabbing him—if anything that dull and puffy could stab. She had slept soundly. She probably

would have slept right through a break in the levee. But Teed did not argue. He had known her to become fiercely adamant if her claim to insomnia was challenged.

He put on his tie.

"Be sure and feed Muffin his breakfast," she ordered crossly. "And when you get to the office ask Cousin Bert how Aunt Janice is feeling."

Velma and her Aunt Janice hadn't been on speaking terms for years. Cousin Bert was the diplomatic go-between. Nevertheless, Velma's interest in Aunt Janice's health was genuine, if unsympathetic. Aunt Janice was dying of cancer. Velma was always interested in other people's symptoms. Name them and she'd had them, or would shortly develop them.

William Teed pressed and shaped the knot of his tie carefully, then turned to Velma. "How are you feeling this morning?"

She rocked her head back and forth on the pillow and made a bitter mouth. "Terrible. How you could sleep, William, with all that racket from that machine next door . . . Isn't there a law against disturbing the peace?"

"All laws fail in wet weather," he said. There was more truth than poetry in that!

"I've a splitting headache. Throb-throb-throb, just like that miserable engine." She turned over furiously and caught sight of the bottle on the nightstand. It contained something called Alka-Ves for the relief of practically anything, and its stopper was factory sealed. The word SAMPLE was rubber-stamped diagonally across the green label. George Paulson, William Teed's boss, had handed it to Teed on the day before, knowing of Velma's many real or fancied ills.

"Did Mr. Paulson say this was any good?" she asked.

Teed laughed. "Paulson? He's a chest-beating Tarzan of a man. He thought it was a personal insult that the Alka-Ves people sent him a sample."

He stooped over the bed to give his wife's cheek a dutiful peck. She didn't look around. Her eyes were still on the bottle in fascinated speculation.

"I wonder if it fizzes?" she murmured. "I'll have to try it when I get up."

Which wasn't apt to be before noon, Teed thought as he left the room.

DOWN in the kitchen a big golden cat named Muffin got out of a be-ribboned wicker basket and yowled for its breakfast. Teed stared into the cat's yellow eyes and said, "Humph!" Then he stepped to the stove, turned on the gas under the glass coffee maker to send up fresh water over last night's grounds. Velma preferred her coffee with the evening meal, which left Teed the grounds for breakfast.

Teed knelt on the inlaid linoleum and put out enticing fingers to Muffin. "Kitty-kitty-kitty. . . . Nice Muffin. Nice, *nice* kitty!" The sarcastic inflection of this final "nice kitty" was entirely lost on Muffin. Teed picked Muffin up and took quick strides to the door leading into the basement. Muffin was afraid of the basement, not without reason, and clawed his way to Teed's shoulder. Teed caught Muffin by the ruff and hung on while he switched on the basement light and descended the stairs.

The Teed basement was dry. During the past several days that White River had been above flood stage, William Teed had got a great deal of secret satisfaction out of the fact that while other basements in the neighborhood were inundated the Teed basement was dry. This, of course, was due entirely to Teed foresight in installing a plumbers' test plug in the basement drain so that the sewer couldn't back up.

Teed crossed the furnace room with the struggling cat, pulled open the door of the rumpus room. Holding Muffin by the back of the neck, he yanked the cat away from his shoulder and flung it into the rumpus room. Muffin landed beautifully, streaked for the door. Teed landed a broadside kick that lifted Muffin a good four feet and set him down roughly on the other side of the rumpus room. Teed got the door shut in time to prevent the cat's escape. The door didn't latch, but the damp-swollen edge of it stuck tightly to the frame. It was cat proof.

Teed said: "'Be sure and feed Muffin his breakfast.' Ya-a-ah!" He dusted his hand, and as he turned around his eyes toured the furnace room, moving from the furnace to the water softener to the dangling brass socket of the light, and down to the steel pipe handle of the plumbers'

test plug that jugged out of the drain. His smile showed the fillings in his molars, but it was not pleasant.

Against the wall near the water softener were three one-hundred-pound cloth bags of salt. A mouse had gnawed a hole in the corner of one of them and a snowy pile of crystals had run out on the floor.

"'Be sure and order a big supply of salt for the softener in case there's a shortage of that next. You know what hard water does to my skin, William,'" he quoted. Well, well, well. . . . He ambled over to the salt with his hands in his pocket and gave one of the bags a good hard kick. He stood a moment, listening to Muffin's wailing from the rumpus room. It would be audible on the first floor but not upstairs in the bedroom. Previous experience made Teed sure of that detail.

He walked a couple of steps back to the sewer drain, stooped, grasped the big wing nut that regulated the expansive rubber gasket of the plumbers' test plug. He gave it several counter-clockwise turns, stepped back, eyed the plug. Then he reached above his head and cautiously unscrewed the light bulb a little way in its socket—probably an unnecessary precaution. Through darkness he went upstairs.

In the kitchen he drank a scalding cup of slightly used coffee, put his raincoat on out on the back porch, leaving the house by the back door as usual.

A LAWN of dark green, thickly grown Chewings Australian fescue sloped away from the steps to an artistically irregular row of blue spruce at the back. Mr. Teed paused for a moment to contemplate this pleasant scene with pride and beheld an appalling thing. Ugly brown sewer backwash was flowing from the Blevins' lot next door all over Mr. Teed's Chewings Australian fescue. Mr. Teed thunder-scowled in the direction of the Blevin house.

Blevin had built a crude wood flume to conduct the output of the gasoline pump away from his basement window. Since the Blevin grade line was a good two feet higher than that of the Teeds' the brown water was flowing into the Teed yard. The Blevin kid, a girl of five, jumped up and down in water that gushed from the end of the flume.

"Oh, Mr. Teed, yah can't guess what I got! Can yah, huh? I got water in my basement and I can wade!"

Mr. Teed was looking for Blevin. He moved out onto the lawn, got around the trunk of a beech tree, and sighted Blevin up near the house dividing his anxious attention between the laboring pump that might stop any moment and a lowering sky that looked as though it might start any moment. Blevin was young and tall, though a trifle stooped. He was young enough to be in the army. And damn it all, Teed had thought, if Washington didn't stop being sentimental and start drafting fathers there was a chance that the army would boost the age limit by a couple of years and induct Mr. Teed.

He started for Blevin fully prepared to tell Blevin that unless he could invent some way to make water run up hill he'd have to turn off his damn pump . . . "and besides my wife has a splitting headache." But Blevin managed to beat Mr. Teed to the draw.

"Good morning, Mr. Teed. Say, would you mind telling me what sort of a plug that is you've got in your basement drain that keeps the sewer from backing up? Twitch plug, did you say?"

Mr. Teed's temperature dropped swiftly. He liked to be consulted. "No, no. Plumbers' test plug. Plumbers sometimes put them in all outlets, apply compressed air through the pipes in the handle of one of the plugs. To test for leaks. If the pressure drops, there's a leak. I conceived the idea of putting such a plug in my basement drain. Of course, if you get too much back pressure, the plug will blow out," he added as an afterthought.

Blevin nodded. "If I ever get this basement empty, I'll get one for my drain. . . . You think the flood wall is safe for a time?"

"It's not a flood wall," Teed contradicted. "It's a mud levee. But I think we're safe unless the dam goes out up at Noblesville."

A hopeful smile brightened Blevin's lean face. "The levee is seeping pretty bad up near College Avenue, but they're rushing sandbags to the leak." He wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his shirt, threw out a lank arm to indicate the brown water that was crowding over onto Teed's lawn.

"Say, I'm awfully sorry the way so much of this seems to be running over on your beautiful lawn, Mr. Teed."

Teed's grin was a trifle sheepish. "That's all right. You can't hurt Chewings fescue. Grows under any conditions. Trouble with you Hoosiers, when you plant a lawn you can't see any farther than blue grass."

Blevin's laugh admitted that William Teed was a smart man. And, of course, he was. He knew about test plugs for backing sewers, and Chewings fescue for shaded lawns, and that other thing that was smart and which he couldn't tell anybody about. That was the one disadvantage to murder the way William Teed planned it—nobody would ever know just how smart William Teed was. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Deluge

THE first person William Teed noticed that morning when he got to work was Miss Eunice Phillips, a stenographer in the executive offices, fifth floor of the L. H. Dyer & Son Co., Inc., Retail Merchants and Manufacturers, Est. 1856. He had seen other persons in the great department store, including a PBX switchboard girl who was not bad looking, either, and a fifty-five year old office boy named Durke whom Teed considered uncouth but unavoidable, what with the manpower shortage. But he really noticed Eunice Phillips.

Eunice was twenty-five, combining the fresh beauty of youth with the full loveliness of maturity. She was svelt, supple, vibrantly alive. Black hair and brown eyes blended with the ivory tone of her skin and the warm red of her eager mouth. At the sound of Teed's footsteps close upon her, she raised sooty eyelashes briefly, smiled scarcely at all.

"Good morning, Mr. Teed."

"Good morning, Miss Phillips." All the other girls in the office Teed called by their first names. But, with a purpose, it was always "Miss Phillips"—a fact that hadn't escaped the gray-templed office boy named Durke.

Following Mr. Teed with cold gray eyes, Durke leaned over the PBX switchboard and spoke out the corner of his

mouth to the operator. "I wonder who those two think they're kidding?"

The blank expression on the face of the switchboard girl demonstrated that Mr. Teed and Miss Phillips had successfully kidded at least one.

"Huh?"

Durke snorted and twitched his thin nose. "You know where Phillips lives?"

Open-mouthed, the girl shook her head. "Huh-uh. Where?"

"The Windsor."

"She does? How does she?"

Durke's nose twitched again, and his cold eyes took on a sardonic gleam. "Who knows? Maybe it's lend-lease."

Teed's dynamic stride—it was really a pigeon-toed prance—carried him along the row of glass partitioned cubicles to enter the door marked W. P. TEED, ADVERTISING MGR. He was slightly perturbed to see the sandy haired, lionlike head of George Paulson, the Dyer & Son vice-president and general manager moving back and forth within his, Teed's, office. Paulson heard Teed's footsteps, swung around Teed's desk and to the door. He vigorously shook a copy of the morning *Star* under Teed's nose.

"Look," Paulson roared. "Just take a look at that."

"Something wrong with the layout?"

Teed asked in a small voice, looking upside-down at the Dyer ad for misses suits.

"Layout, hell! It's the copy, Teed. Read it. Probably the first time you've laid eyes on it." Paulson flung the paper at Teed, turned on his heel, walked to the window to look out and down on Washington Street. Paulson's thumbs were hooked in the side pockets of his pants and his huge bronzed fingers drummed silently against his thighs. Teed looked from Paulson's broad back to the paper. He read:

"Very Special!
Thousands of These
Cunning Casuals
Pretty and Practical
To See YOU Thru
Spring, Next Fall
And the Duration!"

"Well?"

"Too much alliteration?" Teed suggested.

Alliteration, hell!" Paulson took a step,

snatched the paper from Teed's hand, flattened it on the desk. He picked up a pencil and underscored "Thousands" in the ad copy with such fierce energy that he ripped through to the editorial page.

"Thousands!" Paulson said acidly. "There were one thousand, nine hundred and forty-five suits in that lot."

Teed's grin quivered. "That's practically—"

"Teed, in case you don't know it, the motto of this store is 'No seconds, no substandards. Quality merchandise, truthfully advertised.' That word 'thousands' implies anything from five thousand to a million."

Teed swallowed. "I didn't write the ad. Crory wrote it."

"Get Crory!" When Teed reached out for the inter-office communicator, Paulson took a side step and banged on the partitioning glass with his fist. Bert Crory, Velma's Cousin Bert, was in the cubicle next door and there were more ways than one of summoning him.

COUSIN BERT, small and sharp-featured with shrewd blue eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses, came almost soundlessly into the office. He glanced at the paper Paulson had just mutilated, swiftly took in the situation, and promptly threw himself on the mercy of the court.

"Have I made some ghastly mistake in my ad, Mr. Paulson?"

"You certainly have, Crory," Mr. Teed scolded. "Thousands of These Cunning Casuals' indeed! We are questioning the 'thousands'. We must strive for accuracy in such details."

"Well," growled Paulson, leaning against the partition with his arms folded and his head lowered, "it's not your fault entirely, Crory. Teed's the department head. You shouldn't have let that get by, Teed. You know damned well you shouldn't."

"Yes sir," Teed said meekly. "I'll admit I've not been quite on my toes. Mrs. Teed hasn't been at all well."

"I know." Paulson nodded. "Watch it after this. How is Mrs. Teed this morning? She didn't take any of that patent medicine that came to me in the mail yesterday, did she? I got to thinking last night that was a foolish thing for me to do. Suppose the stuff is harmful?"

Teed shook his head and smiled to his molars. "On the contrary, it was very thoughtful of you. Mrs. Teed will enjoy it. It probably fizzes. Our doctor confided in me that those fizzy alkalizers couldn't hurt her and they make her mouth feel clean and awake."

Then Paulson shook his head, bewilderedly. "It's beyond me. I should have sent that medicine back to the maker. Packed in a piano box, air express collect. Well . . ."

Cousin Bert stepped aside to let Paulson through the door. Then he turned to Teed and gave with his contagious smile. "Thanks for taking the heat for me, old man."

"Eh?" Until right now, Teed wasn't aware that he had taken the heat for Cousin Bert on the mistake in the ad. He got behind his desk and sat down heavily in the chair. "That's all right." He coughed. "Velma wanted me to ask how Aunt Janice is."

The shrewd eyes of Cousin Bert became dreary. "A week at the most. You and Velma ought to try and see her before the—the end. I don't think Aunt Janice could hold a grudge this late in the game, do you?"

William Teed's eyes narrowed slightly with envy as he regarded his wife's cousin. Bert Crory got the breaks. It wasn't solely a matter of his always getting someone else to "take the heat" as he aptly put it. It was the fact that Cousin Bert was about to become something approaching a millionaire without any effort on his part. Aunt Janice had a great deal of money and a large block of stock in Dyer and Son Company. Teed wondered why the hell some of Velma's imaginary symptoms couldn't have turned out to be something lethal like cancer.

Cousin Bert said: "I never did get it straight what Velma's and Aunt Janice's quarrel was about anyway. Something tactless Velma must have said, I suppose?"

Teed didn't answer. Out of the sky, out of the lowering clouds came a clap of thunder. It jerked Mr. Teed around in his chair opened mouthed to stare at the pelting rain.

"What's the matter?" Cousin Bert asked. "You're jumpy."

"I—er, yes. I—I didn't get a wink of sleep last night. . . ." Teed paused, blinked. Who'd put those words into his mouth? It was almost as though *she* were here in the office with him. He gave Cousin Bert a sickly grin. "Last night there were gas pumps working all around us. Emptying basements."

"I thought for a moment you were developing an allergy to lightning," Cousin Bert said as he left the office.

That was it—the lightning. It was the one possibility Teed had not thought of. With a single clap of thunder, Jupiter Pluvius could upset the delicate balance of things to come. Velma was terrified of lightning. She had a notion that you were much safer in the house in an electric storm if you pulled the main switch of the house current. She put no faith in lightning arrestors.

"What makes you think lightning follows a vacuum, William Teed? What's a vacuum? It's nothing, that's what it is. You can't tell me electricity follows nothing. It follows wires. And lightning is electricity, isn't it?"

He remembered the argument. But vividly. And if Velma pulled the main switch, located on the back porch, what then of the water that now would be in the basement? What then of the salt in the water and the insulation worn from the oil burner cable? Why, it wouldn't work! The whole damned plan would fall through. There wouldn't be any freedom from nagging, from endless complaints about this or that fancied pain. There wouldn't be any ten thousand dollars in life insurance and a full title to the fifteen thousand dollar house. And there wouldn't be any long, lingering trip to California with Eunice. . . .

WILLIAM TEED sat there, his eyes in a mood and sweat on his brow, listening to the thunder crash and the hammering rain. He could have wept.

He made one ray of hope for himself at noon by telephoning his home and not getting any answer. Did that mean that—that things had worked out all right?

In the afternoon, he made some show of working, arranging and re-arranging the art for a prospective layout. And at three o'clock he got a phone call.

"Mr. Teed, this is Blevin," said a tired voice.

"Who? Oh, Blevin, my neighbor. Didn't recognize your voice." Mr. Teed's pulse quickened. They'd found Velma, the Blevins had. Possibly the kid had been attracted by Muffin's cries from the basement—

"I don't suppose there's any way to break this to you gently," Blevin said.

"Break what?" Too eager. Much too eager. "My God, man, what's happened?"

"There's been a pretty bad break in the levee right out in front," Blevin told him. "It happened around noon, I think, but this is the first breather I've had in which to call you. You were right, Mr. Teed, it sure's no flood wall. The water seeped right through. The street is flooded and so are the lawns all along our block. And it's running in your basement windows."

Mr. Teed groaned. Why didn't the young fool get to the point?

"They'll get it stopped," Blevin went on. "They got soldiers from Fort Harrison and amphibian jeeps carrying sandbags to the leak."

"Oh, they're bound to get it stopped," Teed said.

"Sure. And I'm sorry I didn't call you earlier, but I couldn't make it." And Blevin hung up.

Teed slammed down the phone and came rocking to his feet. He'd have to get home fast. He'd have to find out for himself about Velma. Surely Blevin would have told him if they had found Velma dead. She just wasn't dead. She'd turned off the electricity at the first crack of thunder. And after that she would have gone down into the basement to rescue Muffin.

Teed pranced out of his office, turned into Cousin Bert's door. "That layout, Bert. On my desk. You—you'll have to attend to it. I've got a flood on my hands. The levee broke. I've got to go." He flung out of Bert's cubicle and then down to George Paulson's office. "Is it all right if I go, Mr. Paulson? I've got a flood on my hands. One of the neighbors just called, and for all I know it's up to my ridge pole. . . ."

But the only thing that was really worrying Teed was Velma. Was she dead or wasn't she? He didn't think she could be.

She was dead, all right, all right. Thirty minutes later, a taxi carrying Mr. Teed rolled as far along Riverview Drive as a white-helmeted Auxiliary Police would permit. Coming out of the side street was a long parade of yellow Street Department trucks laden with sandbags, each with its corps of Negro workmen stoically dangling their legs from the tailboard. Teed hurried along the sidewalk, crossed the intersection between two trucks, went as far along the Drive as Old Man River would permit. There was no rushing torrent here, only a muddy brown lake with shade trees arching above and lawn furniture floating on the surface. There were yellow trucks of sandbags standing with their hubs in the water, workmen standing helplessly, spectators from all over the city, restless yet hushed.

Mr. Teed glimpsed a red City Hospital ambulance on the other side of a yellow truck. He climbed up a sodden terrace for a better view, and a lot of other people had the same idea. There were women in slacks and sweaters, smoking cigarettes, and excited children with nursemaids in attendance.

A woman said: "Here comes the jeep," quietly. Children heard her and cheered, took up the cry: "Here comes the jeep! Lookit her come!" The kids drew reproachful glances, and mothers said, "Shsh . . ." But the kids didn't get it. This was Uncle Sam to the rescue, wasn't it?

The jeep came churning up the street, kicking up brown froth. There was a soldier at the wheel, his fatigue hat worn rakishly. In back was a hospital intern and an A. P. man in a white air-raid helmet. The A. P. man was holding a big golden angora cat, and between him and the intern was a shapeless something covered with tarpaulin.

Teed seized a ragged blue shirt sleeve of a Negro workman who stood beside him, pointed with a trembling forefinger at the approaching jeep. The Negro rolled his eyes.

"A woman they fetch' f'om a basement up theah a way. She drown-ded. They heered a cat a-wowlin', went to fetch it, an' foun' a woman."

Mr. Teed wondered if it was possible to faint from the sheer relief. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Home, Sweet Homicide

HIS name was Voss and he came from a whole line of cops. On his record and merit law examinations he had boosted himself to detective-lieutenant, which was a lot farther than any Voss had ever gone before. He was tall, raw-boned, with an overhanging shock of black hair, and there were some people who called him "Li'l Abner."

He just happened to be in the morgue on a routine identification when they brought Velma Teed's body in. Voss was casually interested. He noticed the "washer-woman" skin on the tips of the dead fingers, remarked about the advance of lividity. He thumbed and saw the pinpoint constriction of the pupil—something which had not been characteristic of any "floater" he had ever previously encountered.

He asked: "Where was this?"

"Riverview Drive," somebody told him. "Her cat was shut up in the rumpus room of the basement. She went to the rescue, but didn't make it. Her cat was safe enough, clinging to the wood of the window frame in the rumpus room."

Voss took a match from his shirt pocket and stuck it in his mouth. "In how much water?" he wanted to know.

Which proved to be the sixty-four dollar question. Water in the Teed basement had been up to within two feet of the first floor when Mrs. Teed's body had been removed. But, as Voss immediately pointed out, Mrs. Teed had been dead a good three or four hours, and the levee leak hadn't got out of hand until shortly after noon. The water certainly wouldn't have been over Mrs. Teed's head at say twelve-thirty to one o'clock.

Voss looked up from the body and far away. "Anybody cut the electric current before going in after the body? Or was the main switch down in the basement somewhere?"

Nobody could tell him about that, and Voss sauntered away with the fingers of both hands tucked into the tight slots of his hip pockets—a loose-jointed, slovenly figure of a man with dark, sober eyes. At the front desk of the hospital, Voss en-

countered two men who were inquiring about Mrs. Teed from the lady in white. One was plump, harried-eyed, and indignant, the other small, shrewd, and placating.

"Teed, Teed. T-e-e-d. How many times do I have to tell you?" sputtered the plump man. "My wife's here somewhere. I don't know whether she's alive or dead. What kind of a system is this you have here, anyway?"

"Easy," said the smaller of the two. "You're sure this is the right hospital, old man?"

Teed mopped at a convoluted brow. "Bert, I tell you I saw them put her into a City Hospital ambulance!"

The lady in white picked up a telephone. "Just a minute," she said pleasantly to Mr. Teed.

Voss stood quietly at one side, chewing his match into a fibrous brush. He gave Mr. Teed the same casual attention he had given the body of Mrs. Teed. He decided that the Teeds belonged to the well-fed solid citizenry. When Voss had served on Traffic Detail, he guessed he'd arrested half a hundred Mr. Teeds—not all of them pudgy. They had all sputtered and argued, had tried to buy their way out of a summons, had eventually paid their fines under protest, and usually ended up by writing letters to the newspapers complaining of the discourtesy and inefficiency of the Police Department.

He had arrested not a few like this little man called Bert, too. The Berts had said: "I admit it, officer. I just didn't see the red light, and you got me cold." Sometimes Voss had torn up a ticket for this type of individual.

Voss finally took his match out of his mouth and stepped over to introduce himself to Teed. He offered a word of condolence, didn't try to ask questions. Instead, he made a simple statement which immediately threw Mr. Teed in a sort of dither.

Voss said: "We're going to have to make sure about this."

"Sure about it? *Sure* about it? Good lord, man, you don't think Mrs. Teed was—was—"

"Murdered?" Voss questioned mildly. "Why, whatever put that idea into your head, Mr. Teed?"

THAT evening, a uniformed cop in a flatboat poled Lieutenant Voss along the watery and deserted street that comprised the two flooded blocks along Riverview Drive. Seepage from the levee had been greatly reduced by sandbagging, and the chances of a major break were small if the river crested that night as was expected. Beyond the levee the water rushed on its way, and Voss sat moodily amidships, listening to the roar that was an ugly promise of great disaster in the southern part of Indiana.

Voss let himself into the Teed house with a pass key he employed on the skeleton lock of the back door. He prowled the back porch with a flashlight to augment the dim afterglow through the windows, found that the main electrical switch was standing wide open. In the kitchen, the electric clock on the stove came in for some attention. It had stopped at a few minutes before eleven.

For some time he stood at the top of the basement stairwell, shining his light down into the brown, fetid water, spitting match stick fibers from his lips.

"Smells," he said to his man.

Then he went upstairs and eventually into the master bedroom with its mahogany twin beds deserted and unmade. On the night stand he found the bottle of Alka-Ves with the word SAMPLE diagonally rubber-stamped on the label. The cellulose seal had been removed and also the metal cap, and it appeared that two of the flat white tablets, the recommended dose, had been taken, dissolved in a glass of water. Voss picked up the now empty glass and sniffed at it without detecting anything. But when he left the Teed house, he took both bottle and glass with him.

The following day, the over-burdened storm sewers lowered the water several feet in Riverview Drive. Three pumps and a Department of Sanitation crew were sent to empty the Teed basement. When that was done, Lieutenant Voss made a return trip. . . .

"I'VE got a theory that there's one in every graveyard," Voss reported to Chief of Detectives Beechman that evening. "One victim of a never-to-be-discovered murder. Show me a family and

I'll show you a murder motive. Show me any room in any home and I'll show you a murder weapon. All you have to have is the inclination. Now, you take the Teed basement, for instance. The execution chamber at Michigan City prison couldn't be more deadly."

"Most basements," said Beechman, who had a basement of his own, "are like that. That's why we have an Accident Prevention Week."

"This was something special," Voss reported. "I've talked with Teed's neighbor, a man named Blevin. Teed had been bragging to Blevin about not having water in his basement. Gloating over it. Teed had a test plug in his basement drain. Yet there *was* water in the basement when Mrs. Teed went down there to rescue her cat, and that was at least an hour before the break in the levee could have started water pouring in through the basement windows."

"Test plugs," commented Beechman, "sometimes blow out."

"A fact which Teed was careful to bring to Blevin's attention that morning," Voss said dryly. "Especially, they blow out if somebody takes the trouble to loosen the wing nut on the plug a little. When a tight plug blows, you can see a distinct line of adhesion around the rubber gasket. I didn't see any such line on the gasket of the plug on Teed's basement floor."

"Now, we have Teed's cat shut up in the rumpus room. The door on that room swings *out* into the furnace room, and Teed suggests that maybe the current from the backing sewer forced the door shut on the cat. But I think pressure from a backing sewer drain is apt to be straight up, and any current there is would be 'round and 'round."

"You think Teed deliberately shut the cat in the rumpus room, Lieutenant?"

Voss nodded. "Then, when Mrs. Teed came downstairs, she would hear the howls of her cat and go to the rescue. She'd walk right into the death trap that was set for her in the basement. By that time, there would be water in the basement from the backing drain—salt water, because there was some several hundred pounds of water softener salt in the basement. Salt water is a far better conductor of electricity than fresh water.

"Mrs. Teed might have got a fatal jolt from a couple of sources. One was an insulation break in the oil burner cable, which would have fed right into the water. The other was an old-fashioned brass light socket dangling overhead, the bulb loosened in the socket so that Mrs. Teed would have to reach up there if she wanted any light."

Beechman frowned. "A brass socket in a basement in a comparatively modern house like that?"

"I mentioned that to Teed. He said the plastic socket had broken, and because of the war he couldn't find a replacement. He had rigged up this brass socket from an old extension cord light. It was a man-killer for anybody whose body happened to be grounded in water. A woman killer, I might say. One touch from a groping finger, and Mrs. Teed would have gone off."

"But that isn't what happened," Beechman said.

Voss nodded morosely. "It isn't. I've talked to people who knew Mrs. Teed. She was afraid of electrical storms such as we had that day. At about eleven o'clock that morning, she came downstairs and pulled open the main switch on the back porch. There wasn't an ampere of current in the house when she went down into the basement to rescue her cat. I found the flashlight she took with her on the basement floor.

"No, Mrs. Teed wasn't electrocuted." Voss stirred in his chair, hooked an ankle over a lumpy knee. "But she was murdered just the same. And from here on out, things really begin to get complicated."

BEECHEMAN chuckled. "Deep water, huh?"

"Deep water. Speaking figuratively, sir. Actually, I don't suppose there could have been more than two feet of water in the Teed basement when Mrs. Teed went down there. I figured that from volume of water per minute that drain could have poured in there, against the time interval between Teed's leaving for work and about eleven when Mrs. Teed must have come downstairs to turn off the house current."

"If there's anything that got me when

I was in school," Beechman recalled, "it was problems like, 'If a tank is so-by-so-by-so how long will it take to fill it with a pipe the diameter of which is such-and-such.'"

"Me, too," Voss admitted. "Only sometimes there was another pipe of smaller diameter emptying the tank at the same time. . . . But back to Mrs. Teed. When I looked at the body in the morgue, I noticed constriction of the pupils, and I knew she was full of dope—an opiate of some sort. I couldn't find any dope in the Teed house that evening, but it did look as though Mrs. Teed had taken a dose of some patent medicine called Alka-Ves that morning. I found a freshly opened bottle of the stuff with the word SAMPLE rubber-stamped on the label. I took the medicine and the glass down to Medical Center for an analysis.

"What remained of the contents of the Alka-Ves bottle measured up to the manufacturer's formula—salts of calcium, sodium, and magnesium. But in the glass she'd used were traces of the calcium, magnesium, and sodium, plus morphine sulphate and corn starch. That set me thinking.

"The Alka-Ves tablets are nearly a quarter of an inch thick, as big around as a two-bit piece, and tightly compressed. They are packed in cylindrical bottles so that the tablets are stacked like poker chips. Similarly packed, though of course on a much, much smaller scale are these one-grain tablets of morphine sulphate. It would be possible to drill three or four holes in the backs of the big Alka-Ves tablets and insert a full one-grain pill of morphine in each hole. If that was done to the two top tablets in the Alka-Ves bottle, the person taking a dose of Alka-Ves would get better than a lethal dose of morphine along with it.

"The morphine is white and so is the Alka-Ves. But to hide the tampering he'd done, the poisoner might have dusted the backs of these tablets in some white powder like corn starch. That would have hidden the dirty work from an unsuspecting eye."

Beechman nodded. "That's nice reconstruction."

"That's all it is," Voss said. "Further, we might point out that both the morphine

and the various salts in Alka-Ves are basic in chemical reaction. They'd have got along well together—much better than Mr. and Mrs. Teed. The post-mortem examination showed the presence of the Alka-Ves plus the lethal dose of morphine in Mrs. Teed's system. My next move was to find out where the sample had come from.

"I phoned the Alka-Ves concern only to learn that they sent out no free samples except to members of the medical profession. Such samples carry the words, *Professional Sample* printed—not stamped—across the label. Showing my hand as little as possible, I asked Mr. Teed where his wife had got the Alka-Ves. Teed said it had come to him from his boss, George Paulson, manager of Dyer's Department Store."

Beechman whistled. "Now you're getting up where money talks fifteen different languages."

"Paulson, it seems, received the so-called sample through the mail. He never takes any kind of medicine himself, but he knew that Mrs. Teed did. So he gave the Alka-Ves to Teed to give to Mrs. Teed."

"What about the mailing carton in which the sample came? How about the address label on the carton? Did you check on that? Maybe the Postal Inspector can give us a hand. . . ."

Voss was shaking his head. "The carton is gone. I've searched all the waste paper in the baler in Dyer's basement. I've been through all the waste baskets. No carton. All I can get is a description from George Paulson. The carton itself was ordinary in the extreme, had metal dog-ear clips that pierced the top and held it in place. Paulson doesn't remember much about the label except that it seemed standard, and the address was typewritten. He paid particular attention to the address, because when he learned the contents he couldn't understand why the stuff should be sent to him, a man who has never known what a headache is. And he did recall that the left side of cross-bar of the letter 'T' in 'George T. Paulson' was badly worn—so much so that he thought maybe the stuff was intended for some 'George I. Paulson.'"

"That's something," Beechman said.

"But not enough. Now, on May fifth, William Teed bought a portable typewriter second-hand."

"The hell he did!"

"Yes. I did some snooping around his office today when he was feeling too badly about the loss of his wife to be at work. I found a clipping from a want-ad section, advertising a portable typewriter for sale. I checked up, learned that the buyer answered Teed's description. But the original owner and user of the typewriter is in Uncle Sam's Navy with the Pacific Fleet. The lad's mother sold the typewriter and she doesn't know whether the upper-case 'T' was worn or not."

"But, good Lord, if Teed has the typewriter—"

"He hasn't got it. He says he bought it for his wife. She didn't like it, sold it, and she didn't tell him to whom she sold it. So it's another dead end. The only thing is, Teed's lying. There's nothing in the Teed house to indicate it had ever contained a typewriter. No typewriter paper, ribbon, eraser, nor anything else. It's an angle that will bear some working on, but it's no sure lead. Up to now, the only sure thing is that the bottle of Alka-Ves was definitely tampered with. Look here, sir."

Voss took the Alka-Ves bottle from his pocket, picked at the top of the label with his fingernail, turned down a small flap in the paper which he had previously cut with a razor blade. This revealed a cemented seam in the glass, parallel with the top and circumscribing the bottle.

"When Mrs. Teed got hold of this supposed sample bottle," he explained, "the top was factory sealed with cellulose—one of those machine 'for your protection' jobs. But you can see that the label has been removed, the bottle cut, opened, cemented together again, and the label replaced to hide the dirty work. It's quite a trick to cut a bottle without tapping it along the cutter score line from the inside. But it can be done. Some of our bootleggers of the prohibition era knew how to do it and frequently did to cut good whiskey with turpentine."

Beechman asked: "Is Teed the only possible suspect?"

"He's got motive. There's a tidy sum in insurance, the house on Riverview held jointly. Then I think he's had another lady on his string. As for anybody else, Mrs. Teed had no relatives except an invalid aunt, name of Janice Brewer who is wealthy in her own right, and a cousin by the name of Bert Crory. Neither the aunt nor the cousin could possibly benefit from anything Mrs. Teed had."

"Then you prove that Teed tampered with the bottle and the D.A. will do the rest."

Voss shook his head gloomily. "I'm afraid not. The coroner has released Mrs. Teed's body to the funeral director and we're putting off the inquest. Because the inquest will bring to light curious medical testimony. Mrs. Teed was not electrocuted. Neither did she die of morphine poisoning. She was drowned in salt water—in the salt water that flooded the Teed basement."

"Huh?"

"A fact. We can't get around it. The morphine had hold of her when she heard the cries of the cat. She struggled against the drug, managed to get down into the basement. Before she could reach her beloved cat, the coma hit her. She fell in the water, lapsed into unconsciousness. But she was still able to breathe enough water into her lungs so that she actually drowned."

"Any smart defense attorney is going to point out that the lethal action of morphine is a paralysis of the respiratory organs. Therefore, the fact that Mrs. Teed drowned is in direct contradiction to the idea that she was deliberately poisoned by morphine. Any first degree murder charge we can bring against Teed—or anyone else—is shot to hell even before we decide to make an arrest."

Beechman was thoughtfully silent a moment. "It's like the man in Chicago who was mortally wounded by a gun shot, yet managed to run out in the street in time to get killed by a passing truck. The county prosecutor couldn't do much with that one either."

"Exactly," Voss said. "Only our little problem is just a bit less obvious than that one."

"I like that 'just a bit'!" Beechman snorted in disgust.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Noose of String

BY MUTUAL agreement, it was not "good morning, Mr. Teed," and "good morning, Miss Phillips," the day after Mrs. Teed's funeral. Teed came into the Dyer offices with a mourning band around his arm and his head at half mast. Eunice Phillips looked up from her typewriter, her full red lips forming a silent and sympathetic "poor"—or an equally effective "prunes." Teed's glance at her was furtive and ducking. Then he stumbled on his way to his cubicle to drop into his chair.

"Broken in spirit," he thought. "Crushed utterly. Shocked by the horror of it all . . ." It was surprising just how much self-pity he could work up that way.

He looked up when Durke, the fifty-five year old office boy, came in with a piece of mail. Durke said if there was anything he could do, why just buzz. Then he backed away, twirking his nose, rubbing his palms on the seat of his pants. A decidedly inferior person, this Durke.

"Thank you, Durke," Teed said sadly. "You and the rest of the office force have been too kind. The flowers were lovely."

Then he turned to his mail. It was a squarish blue envelope with a dime store look about it. He noticed absently that it bore a local postmark but no return address. He opened the flap, put a thumb and forefinger inside to grasp exactly nothing. He pinched the envelope into a wide mouth, squinted at the interior, turned it upside down, and shook out a piece of string. It was just cotton cord, formed into a loop or circlet slightly greater in diameter than a twenty-five cent piece. The string was black, charred by fire though at no point burned through.

He again examined the envelope, inside and out without deriving any explanation. The handwriting of the address was unfamiliar to him. Finally, he wadded the envelope and flung it into the wastebasket. But the loop of string remained on his desk, a worrisome, inexplicable thing to be stared at, that stared right back as accusingly as a conscience.

When George Paulson of the lionlike head came striding into the office with

Cousin Bert Crory following quietly in his wake, Teed made a fuddling effort to hide the piece of string with a paper, but the black loop got away from him and fell to the taupe carpet on the floor.

"Good to see you back on the job, Teed!" Paulson clapped a bluff hand on Teed's shoulder and shook him a little.

"Good to see you, old man," Cousin Bert echoed. "We've missed you."

"Nothing like time and hard work to heal life's wounds, don't you agree?"

Teed always agreed with Mr. Paulson. So did Cousin Bert. Teed thanked them both for flowers and sympathy, choked up a little which wasn't a bit hard to do with that loop of string on the floor directly between Paulson and Cousin Bert. In fact, he could picture himself becoming a mumbling idiot over a piece of string like the old Frenchman in de Maupassant's story. Paulson, always on the move, stepped on the string once, noticed it in passing a second time, stooped, picked it up.

"Something of yours, Teed?" He put it down on the desk.

"No," Teed mumbled. "That is—" He looked at Cousin Bert who was perched on the corner of the desk like a shrewd but somewhat shriveled owl. Cousin Bert's spectacled eyes rested momentarily on the loop of string.

"Bert, how's Aunt Janice?" Teed asked. Anything for a quick change of subject.

Bert stiffened slightly, jerked a glance across Teed's face, shook his head. "She may live out the week. I haven't told her about Velma. There's no use adding that to her suffering."

Paulson clucked sympathetically, came striding back from the window. "Life can be full of tragedy, if we let it. It can be hell. Work is the panacea. Thank God for work, gentlemen. Incidentally, Teed, Crory has brought to my attention a new kind of advertising especially for our men's store. Excellent idea!"

Cousin Bert nodded his small head. "It's not entirely my idea," he said with the modesty that put him across with Paulson. "I believe you mentioned it to me originally, William, though you haven't had much time in the last few days to develop it."

THE door of the cubicle was opened by Durke who stage-whispered, "Hey!" Paulson and Crory turned. Teed could see between the two of them to Durke who had a hand up to the side of his mouth quite as though Dyer & Co. Inc., Est. 1856, ran a baseball pool on the side.

"That Lieutenant Voss is here again," Durke whispered.

Teed opened the top drawer of his desk and hastily brushed the loop of string into it. He closed the drawer, then drummed nervously on the edge of the desk with fat fingers while his eyes examined the broad back of George Paulson and the narrow back of Cousin Bert. They hadn't seen the move. Why he had bothered to conceal the string, he didn't know—it still had no significance for him.

Voss came ambling along, his hat on the back of his head, a black forelock hanging over one eye. His coat was open and he wore no vest. His tie was dangling. He stopped at the doorway, not as though he really intended to come in. He put out a hand that dropped easily on Durke's shoulder just as the graying office boy would have departed. It looked like a friendly gesture to Teed, but he did note that Durke froze in his tracks and shrank somewhat inside his clothes. Durke gave Voss a sort of smile and twirled his nose. Voss took a match out of his mouth, nodded to Teed, Paulson, and Crory. It sounded silly the way they all chorused: "Good morning, Lieutenant," like kids in school greeting the teacher.

Teed thought: "Nobody could be as dumb as Voss looks." And that was something else to worry about.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Voss said finally, and to Durke, "How're you?"

"Fine," Durke said. "I'm fine."

"You didn't dig up that little shipping carton we were looking for—the one so-by-so with the dog-ear metal clips and Mr. Paulson's name typed on the label?"

Durke shook his head.

"You mean," Paulson asked, "the box that sample of Alka-Ves came in? Is it really significant, Lieutenant?"

"Yes," Voss said slowly, uncertainly. "Believe it is. The tablets in that bottle, some of them, were poisoned. The Alka-Ves people didn't do it. Teed, you and Mr. Crory will both realize that wouldn't

be the best sort of advertising for the Alka-Ves people."

"You—you mean Mrs. Teed was poisoned?" Teed gasped.

Voss nodded, chewed on his match. "It doesn't seem possible anybody could have got into that bottle to do a trick like that but somebody did."

"But who?" Cousin Bert gasped. "Good Lord, that's murder."

"Who would have wanted to kill my wife?" Teed asked. "Who could have had a motive?"

"That—those are questions," Voss said. He looked for a moment as though he might leave it at that, then paused, looked squarely at Teed. "About that typewriter you bought for your wife. Did you notice whether the upper-case 'T' had a worn cross-bar?"

"I never used the typewriter," Teed insisted. "I can't type."

"Could your wife type?" Voss asked.

Teed hesitated. Velma had never done anything as useful as typing. So he decided to frame it this way: "No, she couldn't, but I was in hope that she would learn. If something were to happen to me, if I were to be taken into the army, I thought it would be a good thing if Velma knew how to do something."

"And you haven't the slightest idea what became of that typewriter?"

Teed shook his head. "My wife sold it."

"She didn't sell it to her cousin, Mr. Crory here?"

Cousin Bert jumped. "To me? I can't type. What would I do with it?"

Voss shrugged. "I don't know. No harm asking." He put his match in his mouth and went away.

"Now," George Paulson said, looking from Cousin Bert to Teed, "what the hell was that for?"

Nobody answered. Possibly nobody knew. . . .

"NO, darling," Eunice Phillips said to Teed that evening in her apartment, "I don't think I want to marry you. Neither after a decent interval, as you put it, nor ever." She was leaning against a chair back, white bare arms bracing herself. The hostess gown she wore was clinging flame, complimenting her own

vivid coloring. Her eyelids were lowered, faintly blue and with something of the sheen of satin about them.

Teed sat on the edge of a chair opposite her. His feet were tucked way under, toes of his oxfords creased. An inch or so farther forward and he would have groveled on fat knees before her. He swallowed. His smile trembled.

"Now, don't tease, sugar plum," said he. "Why, we've had an understanding. Remember the trip to California? Remember how we'd planned it?"

"No." Her "O" sounds looked beautiful upon her lips. "No, darling. I'm not teasing." She let him see large, somber brown eyes. "Do I have to explain a little more? It's like this. I'm twenty-five, slim, not ugly. But then when you married Mrs. Teed, she was slim, too, and not ugly. Add five or ten years to me, darling, see what you get. I'd probably be quite plump, quite uninteresting—"

Teed laughed. "Now I know you're joking."

"But I'm not."

"Why, you couldn't look like her if you lived to be a hundred."

"I think I might," Eunice said. "Besides, just this evening I somehow can't bear the idea of being Mrs. Teed. There's too high a fatality record among Mrs. Teeds. They become stout and tiresome, but they don't live very long."

Teed stared at her open mouthed. The sweat came out cold on his forehead. "Good Lord, Eunice, you don't think—you can't think I—I *poisoned* Velma?"

She lifted her lovely shoulders a little way and became interested in an invisible spot on the beige carpet. "I don't know. I'm sure I don't want to find out you're a murderer the way Mrs. Teed may have found out. I'm really not interested in this particular mystery."

"Listen, Eunice, I swear to you—" And then Teed slid forward that extra inch and was groveling on fat knees, pawing, pleading. The sweat on his brow and palms was no longer chill. She kept shaking her head, not in a provocative manner at all, and saying: "I'm not interested. Not interested at all, *Mister* Teed."

Teed stood up, breathing heavily. "This is the sack then?"

"That's a quaint way of putting it." She pointed, palm upward, toward the door.

Teed pulled his tattered dignity about him and pranced toward the door. There he turned to fling back in a childish treble: "You'll live to regret this."

Eunice, her back toward him, looked over her shoulder. "Thank you, darling. That gives me a decided advantage over Mrs. Teed."

HE went out. Only it was more as though he fled. Once down on Delaware Street he was in a panting hurry to get to the bus stop, saw but failed to recognize the gaunt figure of a man who slid out of the apartment building door behind him and followed his steps.

"Mr. Teed . . . Hey!"

Teed crossed diagonally at the intersection, and the gaunt man followed, caught up with him as Teed reached the stop for the south-bound bus.

"What's your hurry, Teed? No bus downtown for fifteen minutes."

Teed turned, looked upon that absolutely inferior person named Durke. The graying office boy got hold of Teed's coat lapel. Durke's nose twitched.

"We got time to talk," he said out the corner of his mouth. "Teed, I used to be in the alky racket. Some of us in the business used to cut prohibition whiskey one way and some another."

Teed tried to brush Durke's hand down. "You're drunk. Go 'way."

"No, you listen. Some of us used to drill holes in the bottom of legitimate stuff, pour out some of the liquor, cut the rest with turps, then plug up the hole in the bottle. That way the seal on the cap was never broken. Others of us did it with a piece of string."

"Piece of string?" Teed gulped.

"That's it. Dip the string in gasoline and tie it around the neck of the bottle. Touch off the gasoline, let it burn until the string starts to char. The glass would get hot, see, right around that part of the neck. Run ice water over it sudden like, and you'd get a clean break. Then you cut your liquor, cement the neck back on, gum a label around the seam. You know, Teed—like you did with that bottle of medicine after you'd poisoned

the contents. Then you mailed the medicine to Paulson, knowing Paulson would hand it over to you for Mrs. Teed. What with the worry about the flood and all the noise the pumps in your neighborhood were making emptying basements, you knew Mrs. Teed would have a headache . . ."

Teed found his tongue. "You're crazy! I didn't poison my wife. I—" He found himself on the verge of telling Durke that he'd planned to electrocute Velma. "I didn't!"

Durke twirled his nose and snickered. "Sure, you didn't. But it'll cost you money so I'll keep on believing it. It'll cost you money so I'll forget I saw you dump a piece of charred string into your desk drawer when Lieutenant Voss put in his appearance at the office."

"Why—why you damned, low creature. You—you gutter snipe!"

Durke said: "Now Mr. Teed!" He stepped down off the curb. "I'll be seein' you, pal. And you think about what I said."

CHAPTER FIVE

"A" for Effort

INSTEAD of going to the hotel where he had stayed every night since the flood, Teed went to Dyer & Son. In the alley back of the store a truck of merchandise was being unloaded. Teed entered through the stockroom door and found a night watchman who permitted him to go up to his office. There he went to the desk and opened the top drawer. The piece of string had significance for him now. Somebody had used it to open the bottle of Alka-Ves without breaking the top seal. Somebody was now attempting to frame Teed for the poisoning of Mrs. Teed when he, Teed, was as innocent as a new-born babe. . . . Well, practically. Teed certainly wouldn't have stooped to anything as low as poison. It was outrageous, that's what it was. And it was frightening.

Frightening, because he didn't understand it. Nobody could possibly benefit by Mrs. Teed's death except Mr. Teed. He was certain of that. Further, he felt that Voss was certain of it, too, which

made the frame fit all the neater on Mr. Teed who was generally hard to fit with anything.

Sweating, trembling fingers unlocked and opened the top drawer of the desk. He dug like a terrier, turned over papers, paper clips, a cardboard box, spotted the charred loop of string but did not immediately pick it up. Instead, he stood there staring at the cardboard box. It was just right to contain a bottle of Alka-Ves. It had dog-ear metal clips that pierced the top and were bent down to hold the top on. It had a label on which was typed: George T. Paulson, c/o Dyer & Son Co. Inc., Indianapolis. Teed picked the box up, turned it over slowly, dropped it as though it was hot. Which of course it was. The police had been looking for it for some time. Voss had been looking for it.

He picked up the box, and again looked at the label. The "T" in "George T. Paulson" had a faint cross-bar, as though the type had been worn. He recalled instantly Voss' question of that morning concerning the "T" on the portable typewriter Teed had bought. Teed honestly hadn't remembered about the "T", but he could and did remember where the typewriter was now. He hadn't bought it for Mrs. Teed at all. Mrs. Teed couldn't type. He'd bought it for Eunice Phillips, but of course he hadn't been able to tell Voss or anyone else about that.

The box and loop of string in his pocket, he plunged out of the office and down the five flights of stairs to the stock room. Fear had given place to fury now. Eunice had poisoned Velma—no, damn it, that didn't make sense, what with Eunice giving Teed the sack. Somebody else who had access to Eunice's portable typewriter. Some other man. Teed mentally tore the other man into little pieces as he trotted from the alley and then turned toward Monument Circle.

But why kill Mrs. Teed? That didn't make sense either. Mrs. Teed had stood between Eunice and Mr. Teed, but not between "the other man" and Eunice. It was insane. The trick of a madman. A maniac. The police ought to do something about it instead of dogging an innocent person like Teed.

"You—taxi!" Teed shouted, springing

from the curb at the Circle almost in front of a Red Cab cruising for a fare. He fumbled open the cab door, plopped down in the cushions gasping for breath. "The Windsor," he panted.

THE automatic elevator was waiting in the lobby. Teed bounced into it and thumbed the proper button. He popped out as soon as the safety gate would let him, pranced along the carpeted hall to the door of Eunice Phillips' apartment. He knocked.

Eunice, apparently, was waiting. But for "the other man." The expectant gleam died in her eyes as she beheld Teed's fat figure.

"I thought I made it clear to you, *Mister Teed* . . ." The rest of her sentence was lost in the slam of the door as Teed entered and kicked the door shut behind him.

"Where's that typewriter I bought you?"

A puzzled frown troubled her perfect brow for a moment. Then she turned to the closet near the door, opened it, took out the portable in its case. Teed snatched it from her, dropped into a chair, fumbled off the cover, dropped it to the carpet. He didn't so much as look at Eunice. He fed an envelope he had taken from his pocket into the machine, depressed the shift key with a wide thumb, pounded out a whole row of "T"s with one finger, ripped out the envelope.

"See?" he shrilled. "You see?" He stood up, the typewriter thumping to the floor. He tumbled toward Eunice, waving the envelope. "This is it. This is the machine he used. The 'T' cross-bar, see?"

Somebody knocked at the door. Teed stopped talking, glanced dully from Eunice to the door. Then an expression of craft moved into his small eyes. "Open the door," he said. "Go on, open it."

She opened the door. Small, neatly combed, adequately creased, Cousin Bert Crory stood outside the door. Head on one side, he sent a shrewd, spectacled glance from Eunice to Teed.

"Come in, Cousin Bert."

Eunice started to say: "You'd better—" but Bert was already in and the door was closed. He grinned faintly.

"You look here!" Teed said. He point-

ed at the typewriter. He took from his pocket the small shipping carton, "See?" he said. "See the 'T'? You did it. You killed Velma. You've been beating my time with Eunice. You used Eunice's typewriter to address the poison. And you framed me."

Bert looked round eyed at the shipping carton, blinked, "That's impossible. I destroyed—" He checked himself.

Teed laughed. "See? You betrayed yourself. You—you *murderer*."

Teed forgot that he bruised easily. He dropped the shipping carton, swept up a heavy brass bookend from a table, went for Cousin Bert with it. He was not aware that Cousin Bert had pulled a small revolver with which to threaten him off. He hauled back with the bookend, pelted it at Cousin Bert who ducked, shot from a crouch . . .

Afterwards, it was apparent that Cousin Bert hadn't meant to shoot largely because a human body isn't anything you can shrug off or hand over to the Salvation Army like grandpa's old patent rocker. Cousin Bert stood for seconds while his gun arm sagged and stared down at Mr. Teed. Mr. Teed was a body—no question about that, what with the bullet hole that centered his forehead. Further, Mr. Teed was a big body.

Eunice Phillips took a handkerchief she'd been chewing out of her mouth and pointed with her eyes. "You—you killed him. You—you get him out of here, Bert. D'you hear? Get him out of my apartment!"

Bert said: "Get him out?"

Cousin Bert got down on his knees. He picked up Teed's hat and shoved it onto Teed's head.

"Get him out," Eunice sobbed. "Take him away from my apartment." Then she opened the door—and screamed.

Voss was there, hat on the back of his head, coat open, a match dangling from his lips. He didn't seem to have a gun, but the two cops on either side of him did have. He didn't seem at all surprised at the ludicrous tableau of Cousin Bert and the body.

He said: "Take Crory downtown." Then he moved across the room and picked up the shipping carton that Teed had dropped. . .

"CRORY Arrested In Love Nest Killing," Voss quoted from the morning paper. "That's a real nice picture of Miss Phillips they got in there, too, Chief." He tossed the paper aside, made a cradle for one knee from the interlaced fingers of his big hands.

Chief of Detectives Beechman leaned across the desk and studied Voss' angular face. "You got Mrs. Teed's killer, all right. Or should I say killers?"

"Depends on whether or not you want to call a man a killer who just tries to kill," Voss said. "Give Teed 'A' for Effort, anyway. I still think that up until yesterday Teed thought he'd electrocuted Mrs. Teed. We knew she'd been poisoned, but it wasn't until yesterday morning that I felt sure Teed wasn't responsible for the poisoning. You see, I sent him a little loop of charred string and he didn't know what it was. He didn't know until last night when I had Durke meet him on a corner and tell him."

"You had Durke working for you?"

Voss nodded. "The office boy. I felt pretty sure he didn't have any reason for killing Mrs. Teed. Then, as soon as I felt sure Teed hadn't worked the poison trick, I started on another angle. I felt certain Teed had lied about that typewriter business, but if he hadn't done the poisoning there was no reason for him to lie unless he'd given the typewriter to his girl friend. So I went to her apartment that afternoon, and there was the typewriter with the worn upper-case 'T'. I addressed a mailing label on the machine to George T. Paulson at the Dyer store, used the label to fix up a small shipping carton that approached the description of the one in which the supposed sample of Alka-Ves had reached Paulson. I planted the shipping carton in Teed's desk drawer, knowing he'd find it there and start to worry."

"Framing him," Beechman said.

"Making him think the poisoner was framing him," Voss corrected. "I was already pretty sure Crory was our man. Those one-grain morphine tablets do not grow on bushes, but physicians sometimes leave them with patients who are in great pain. And Crory's and Mrs. Teed's aunt, this Janice Brewer, was dying of cancer. They keep cancer patients pretty well

snowed under. Another thing, my stool-pigeon Durke found out for me that Crory and Eunice Phillips were like that. Miss Phillips is no fool. She could figure that Crory was going to inherit a wad of dough from his sick aunt. Janice Brewer died this morning at three A.M., incidentally."

"But you actually had nothing on Crory that would stand in court?"

"Not a whole lot. He was pretty careful. He'd destroyed the shipping carton in which the Alka-Ves was mailed to Paulson. A pretty tangled trail with nothing you could label Exhibit A."

"But why kill Mrs. Teed?" Beechman persisted. "There's no motive."

Voss took his chewed match out of his mouth, looked surprised. "Oh, I guess I didn't tell you. Aunt Janice Brewer had willed her fortune to Mrs. Teed. I didn't get that myself until just a few hours ago. The will made it quite clear that Aunt Janice had discovered the inner man of Bert Crory. Her will pointed out that Bert Crory was just being nice to her for what he thought he could get out of her. The will said she'd rather leave

her money to her niece, Mrs. Teed, because Mrs. Teed was at least sincere."

Beechman nodded. "And with no time for Janice Brewer to make out a new will, the old one wouldn't have stood. Legacy lapses if the legatee dies before the testator. Janice Brewer's time on earth was pretty well measured, and it was simply a matter of killing Mrs. Teed before the will became effective."

"That's it." Voss leaned back, stared moodily out the window at Alabama Street. "Blame it all on the flood. Without the flood Teed wouldn't have thought up that electrical death trap for his wife. Without water in basements, maybe Bert Crory wouldn't have been so sure that Mrs. Teed would develop a headache to the point where she'd take any fool medicine that came her way."

"Well," said Beechman, "it does make it simpler when murderers don't come in pairs."

"Chief, have you got water in your basement?"

"Uh—" Beechman cleared his throat. "A little."



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PAINLESS OPERATION

By RICHARD DERMODY

Author of "The Doctor's Fee," etc.



The Doc smiles like this Pinkerton has asked him to have a mint julep.

"I fail to understand how you classify Mr. Warburton as a thief," the Doc tells me. "He is a prosperous business man." Prosperous is right, I'm thinking. A guy should be when he makes his own lettuce and Warburton didn't get the name of "Warm Wampum Wilbur" from selling apples.

A Doc Pierce Story

time but I never have any truck with him if I can help it.

The Doc happens to turn his head and I am somewhat surprised when he gives me the office not to move in.

For once I don't pay any attention to him. I squeeze in beside Warm Wilbur and give him a poke in the ribs. "How is the hot stuff moving these days?" I ask him.

Wilbur gives me a sour look. "Go away," he says. "I am busy."

"From what I hear," I tell him. "You are always busy."

THE meeting has been on about a week and the bar in the clubhouse is doing all right. The Doc has his back to me but I spot him by his wide black skimmer and swayback coat. I start toward him but I haul up short when I notice he is talking to Warm Wilbur.

Warm Wilbur is a party about my age with a fat face and a carnation in his buttonhole. He has been around for some

Warm Wilbur turns to the Doc. "This guy is named Allan, Doctor Pierce," he says. "He is nothing but a common hustler around the racetracks and I would advise you to give him plenty of room."

The Doc glares at me. He is mad because I disregard his signal. "I have heard tales of such low characters," he says. "The authorities should remove them from circulation."

I get a grin out of the Doc, but I can't let Wilbur get by with this. "Keep a civil tongue in your head," I tell him. "Or somebody will yank it out and slap down your big ears."

Wilbur smiles at me quick. "It was all in fun, chum," he says. "Let me buy you a drink."

"Thanks, sweetheart," I tell him. "I am not thirsty."

THE Doc is still mad when I drop into his room that night. "I expected you a week ago, pony boy," he says, scowling at me. "And in the future I will thank you to keep your hands out of my pitches unless you are invited in."

I just laugh at him. "O.K., Doc," I tell him. "But from what I see this afternoon you are due to finish a bad second in this little parlay."

The Doc cools out quick. "There is a jug of bourbon in my suitcase," he says. "Let us relax while you describe how I am running behind."

I pour a couple of big doses, pull off my shoes and stretch on the bed. "Look, Doc," I tell him. "You are the smartest operator I know in your line, but you should never go near a racetrack unless I am there to steer you around. You have fallen among thieves."

The Doc's big red face is serious. "I suppose you refer to my friend Mr. Warburton," he says. "I fail to understand how you classify him as a thief. He is a prosperous business man on a vacation. We have been whiling away the time wagering against each other on the races."

"Tell me how you and Warm Wilbur while away the time," I ask him.

"As you know, I am a great believer in the power of a percentage," the Doc says. "I encountered Mr. Warburton in the bar on opening day. We had each sus-

tained minor losses on the first race and while we were condoling one another a little plan occurred to me.

"I have observed that about half of the races have an odd number of horses in them, say eleven or fifteen. I suggested to Mr. Warburton that we wager equal sums against each other—one of us to take the odd-numbered horses, the other the even-numbers. Strangely enough I happen to win each time and of course I choose the odd-numbers."

I have to laugh. "I get it. With eleven ponies in a race the odd numbers have six chances at a win, the even only five." I don't have to ask how he always wins the cut. The Doc is no raw hand around a deck of cards.

"Exactly," the Doc says. "At Mr. Warburton's suggestion we appointed one of the bartenders, a gentleman named Kelly, as stakeholder. I always tip Mr. Kelly handsomely when I win and we are firm friends."

THIS is what I have been waiting for. "Take a firm grip on the bourbon, Doc," I tell him. "I am about to relate some unpleasant facts about your profits, Warm Wilbur Warburton, and your firm friend Mr. Kelly."

The Doc is paying close attention. "Shoot," he says.

"To begin with," I tell him, "Your friend Warburton is a business man but he will never get a vacation unless the G-men send him up the country. He is always busy and he makes good money. In fact it takes an expert to tell it from the kind that Uncle Sam puts out. Wilbur is known in certain circles as Warm Wampum Wilbur."

The Doc jumps to his feet and lets out the worst string of bad words I ever listened to. "Warm Wampum," he hollers. "A counterfeiter!"

"That's right," I tell him rubbing it in a little.

The Doc scowls. "But how does he work the switch?"

"This bartender, Kelly," I tell him. "This firm friend of yours, Cough-Drop Kelly. He is the reason I leave this afternoon when Wilbur offers to buy me a drink. I am afraid Cough-Drop will serve me one of his specials. He is called Cough-

Drop because when a party takes a swallow of one of his specials he coughs and then drops flat on the floor."

The Doc waves his hand. "Spare me the horrid details," he says. He thinks for a minute and then pulls out a leather about three inches thick and shakes a bunch of cabbage on the bed. "Can you distinguish Mr. Warburton's merchandise?"

I sort the bills into two piles. They are mostly hundreds and fifties. Only three of the fifties will get by a smart house man. I show him where the background on the pictures is too white and how Wilbur uses a sharp blue instead of green in some spots.

The Doc shakes his head sadly. "My own vanity has contributed to my downfall." He stands looking at the piles of bills on the bed. "It is a clever play," he says. "Kelly puts my good money in one pocket and pays me out of the other. I suppose the sensible thing would be to ditch these sizzling simoleons and write it off the book, but I cannot accept defeat so easily. There must be an answer somewhere."

"Well," I tell him. "I have never liked Wilbur and I thoroughly disapprove of Cough-Drop and his specials. If you can think up a little plan I will be glad to go along."

The Doc snaps his fingers. "I think I have a faint glimmering," he says. "You rustle the town and see what you can learn of Mr. Warburton's private affairs. We must leave no stone unturned."

"O.K.," I tell him. "I will track Wilbur to his lair."

WARM WILBUR is not hard to overtake. He is in the biggest clip joint in the town. Wilbur is a short guy with a dollar and I cannot figure him going for the prices in this place until I see who is with him. He is pushing a dame around the floor by the name of Theodora Dibble. I am not surprised to see Wilbur taking dead aim at Theodora although she packs about thirty pounds in the wrong spots, has a voice that will scare a hog out of its growth, and is legged up like the top section of a quarter-pole.

Theodora is a bargain because she is the only get of an old appleknocker by

the name of J. Harrison Dibble. This J. Harrison owns a bunch of farms up the state and also has a piece of three or four banks. The odds are six, two and even that Theodora will harvest a big bale of folding money when old J. Harrison hangs up his tack.

As it happens old J. Harrison is quite a pal of mine. This comes about right after he crawls down out of the hills and starts to buy racehorses. A couple of gyps are trying to hang a broken-down plater on him and one day I am leaning up against J. Harrison at the rail and he asks me what I think of this plater he is considering buying.

I tell him the track vet plans to put this beetle in a museum when he finally falls over as he has everything wrong with him that can happen to a horse. At the same time I put in a couple of boosts for a three-year-old called Greased Heels which a friend of mine is anxious to unload at this point.

Well, J. Harrison takes my advice and buys Greased Heels and it turns out very well.

In fact it turns out that all Greased Heels needs is a few square meals as he wins a good stake about a month after he lands in J. Harrison Dibble's barn. J. Harrison takes me out that night and buys me a big dinner with a lot of wine and he also tells me that if I ever need a favor to call on him.

I think about this as I sit in the corner and watch Wilbur and Theodora bumping and bouncing around the floor. Suddenly a little guy walks up behind Wilbur and taps him on the shoulder. I recognize this little guy as a jockey named A. Goold who is contract rider for Theodora's old man.

Wilbur seems pleased to see this little guy, which is not very surprising, but it puzzles me a little when I notice that Theodora also seems pleased. This A. Goold is just about the ugliest jock I ever see.

A. Goold puts his arm around Theodora as far as he can and as he is fresh and lively Theodora yanks him around the floor at a good clip. She does a lot of laughing and hollering down at A. Goold. I can see this is going on for some time and I figure I have enough informa-

tion anyhow so I march myself back to the hotel.

THE Doc pays close attention when I describe this scene to him. "What kind of a lad is this jockey, Goold?" he asks me.

"Well," I tell him, "he wins some good races for J. Harrison in the last couple of years, but lately I hear that he learns there are nice sums to be made by strong boys who will hold a horse down at a time when certain parties might not want him to win."

The Doc nods. "I will keep that in mind." He thinks for a minute. "Do you think this Goold is a serious rival for Theodora's affections?"

"I give up figuring those angles years ago," I tell him. "Wilbur is no bargain for type but he is ten lengths better than A. Goold. However, Theodora is in no shape to pick and choose."

"Well," the Doc says. "Perhaps it will fit in somewhere."

The next morning I am moping around the stables when I run into J. Harrison Dibble. He takes me right into his tack-room and breaks out a jug. "This is an occasion," he says. "I shall always be grateful to you for advising me to purchase Greased Heels. He is a fine colt and will win the stake tomorrow."

"How about this New York horse, Rollaway?" I ask him.

"Rollaway is a good horse," he says. "But my colt is at the top of his form. His works have been sensational."

"O.K.," I tell him. "I will send in a few shekels on the front end of the Heels tomorrow."

J. Harrison closes the door and lowers his voice. "You gave me some good advice on one occasion, Mr. Allan," he says. "I have a difficult personal problem and it just occurred to me that you might be able to help."

"Well," I tell him. "I am no Dorothy Dix, but I will do what I can."

"I am sure of that," he says. He gets a funny look on his brown old face, takes a swallow of the drink in his hand. "It concerns my daughter, Theodora," he says. "She has reached the age where she is thinking seriously of love and marriage."

"Perhaps some low character is trying to take advantage of her youth and innocence?"

"That is the situation exactly," he tells me. "But there are two low characters involved."

It is coming pretty fast but I give him another boost. "I see Theodora in a trap last night dancing with Wilbur Warburton and this jockey," I tell him. "Wilbur has a bad reputation, although it has never been proved in court, but I figure A. Goold is an honest workingman. Maybe you do not want Theodora to hook up with an employee?"

J. Harrison shakes his head. "I am not a snob," he says. "But between you and me this A. Goold is a little crook. I am certain he has pulled my horses on many occasions."

I figure it is time to go. "Well," I tell him. "I do not have much experience in such matters but I will think it over. I would hate to see a charming girl like Theodora in the clutches of either of these characters."

J. Harrison smiles and pumps my hand. "Forgive me for burdening you with my domestic difficulties," he says. "Drop in anytime, Mr. Allen. I am always glad to see you."

I go back to town and have lunch with the Doc in his room. He listens carefully while I tell him about my talk with J. Harrison. "That situation is very interesting," he says. "But I think I have a quick solution to Wilbur. I do not wish to arouse his suspicions, so I will play along with him on the first race. Station yourself near us at the bar and when I leave for a moment you move in and keep him in conversation until I get back. I will do the rest."

"O.K.," I tell him. "I will keep Wilbur busy, but if there is a beef, watch out for Cough-Drop Kelly. He is a very rough customer."

The Doc grins. "There will be no beef. The operation will be painless."

THE operation takes very little time. The numbers are hardly on the board from the first race when the Doc tows Wilbur into the bar. He takes a spot a few yards from me and smiles at Wilbur.

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Dime Detective Magazine

Mr. Warburton," he says, "but don't worry—you will probably win the next seven races."

He glances at me and raises his voice a little. "You must excuse me while I make a brief trip to the comfort station," he says.

I have said hardly a dozen words to Wilbur and he is just getting good and mad at me when the Doc returns. I slide away and watch carefully while the Doc straightens up the rose in Wilbur's lapel. His getaway is smooth, too.

"An old digestive ailment is troubling me," he tells Wilbur. "I must hasten into town and contact a reliable pharmacist immediately."

The Doc has to make this phone call on the way out and I wait at the gate for him. He comes up rubbing his hands. "A neat, tidy job," he says, gloatingly. "With no loose ends."

"That dip was a neat job," I tell him. "I see some two-fingered artists in my time but nobody ever lifts a leather with less fuss and bother."

The Doc grins. "It is many years since I snatched a poke," he says. "And of course I would not do such a thing except in a dire emergency. It is against the law. But it is nice to know I have not lost my touch."

"Are we all squared away with Wilbur now?" I ask him.

The Doc frowns. "Unfortunately he was carrying a trifle over five thousand in his wallet. I have about two grand left over as I did not want to over-pay him. He might get suspicious."

"Wilbur was born suspicious," I tell him. "You had better slide the rest of that warm wampum down a sewer." I have to laugh. "I wish we could be there when the Pinkertons put the arm on Wilbur and Cough-Drop. Especially when Wilbur sees his own merchandise staring him in the face."

The Doc chuckles. "That will be a pleasant moment," he says. He shakes his head. "I hate to throw this merchandise away. Maybe we can think of a good use for it."

"Sure," I tell him. "Maybe we can rig a snappy crap game with a couple of blind guys."

Painless Operation

I AM a little nervous when I think this over the next morning as I know Wilbur has a few friends around and I figure maybe he will tumble to this dodge the Doc puts over. I try to get the Doc to leave town suddenly but he just laughs at me.

"I would not miss seeing this stake race for anything," he says. "And I think Wilbur will be busy conferring with the G-men for some time. Furthermore I am anxious to meet your friend, J. Harrison Dibble. He sounds like a handy man to know."

The Doc is very fond of people with a lot of dollars. "O.K.," I tell him. "I will put you away with J. Harrison and we will watch the stake, but let us then leave town. I just remember that Cough-Drop Kelly has some friends in the vicinity, too."

The Doc and J. Harrison take to each other right off and I leave them gabbing away at a good clip while I take a mope around the stables to see what is doing in the stake. I get talking to a bookie by the name of Chicago Charlie and he tells me a strange thing.

"A bunch of fresh dough comes into town this morning," he says, "and they are sending it in on Rollaway. Greased Heels is now three-to-two and getting better fast."

I mention this to the Doc when he comes along and he is interested. "That's fine," he says. "We will take a ride on Greased Heels, just to pass the time, of course."

"You do not understand these things, Doc," I tell him. "When fresh dough shows up like this it is always smart dough. The smart way to bet is along with it."

He shakes his head. "I had a nice chat with Mr. Dibble," he says. "And he introduced me to his jockey, A. Goold. Both of them assured me that Greased Heels will win."

"If J. Harrison is in shape to ride the horse himself, I will believe it," I tell him. "But I will not trust this A. Goold anywhere, especially in a saddle."

The Doc shakes his head. "I have a feeling A. Goold will do his best today," he says.

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Dime Detective Magazine

Well, I know that if A. Goold does his best Greased Heels will run off and hide from Rollaway. I watch the Doc send a couple of grand along on Greased Heels, and finally I shut my eyes and slap in a grand.

The race is a shoo-in. A. Goold and Greased Heels set sail from the gate and they never look back except when Greased Heels turns and gives Rollaway the old horse-cackle as he slides under the finish-wire.

While we are stuffing the cabbage into our wallets at the pay-off booth, the Doc says: "I have a phone call to make and then I think we should hurry out of town."

We go out into the main room of the clubhouse and the Doc has his hand on the telephone when I notice these two big guys coming toward us.

THE clubhouse is crowded and anyhow the Doc is not legged up for a quick start so all we can do is hold still. The biggest guy shows the Doc what he has under his coat and the other one clamps my arm.

"The manager of the track would like to speak to you gentlemen," the big one says.

The Doc smiles like this Pinkerton has asked him to have a mint julep. "Certainly," he says. "We are always glad to cooperate with the law."

It suddenly is a chilly day. By the time we make the manager's office I am throwing a cold sweat.

The track manager is polite. "We have information that a gang of counterfeiters is operating in the vicinity," he says. "Would you object to showing us your money so that we may ascertain if you have been victimized?"

The Doc yanks out his leather and tosses it on the desk. He holds his arms out from his side. "Perhaps you would like to search me?"

Well, I have seen some shakes in my time but by the time these Pinkertons get through with us we have no secrets. When we are back in our clothes the biggest Pinkerton holds out his hand to the Doc. "No hard feelings, I hope," he says, friendly-like.

Painless Operation

The Doc grins at him. "Not at all," he says. "I admire your diligence and devotion to duty."

The minute we are outside the Doc heads for the phone booth again. I grab his arm.

"Listen," I tell him. "Let's forget this telephone and let us get back to the hotel and ditch that hot dough before these Pinkertons think of searching your room. They had more than a dim suspicion."

The Doc nods. "I agree with you," he says. "But that money is not in my room. This phone call will attend to its final disposition."

I am burning up but he won't say a word until we get back to the hotel. "It is time to go and we must move fast," he says. "I will meet you on the train very shortly."

We have about fifty miles behind us when the Doc drops into my seat. "I told you that I had a little private chat with A. Goold," he says. "A. Goold is not very bright and it did not take me long to extract an admission from him that he was to be paid for retarding the progress of Greased Heels in favor of this horse Roll-away. The rascals who corrupted him had agreed to pay him the paltry sum of one thousand dollars for his efforts. When I offered him double that in cash he readily agreed to do the honest thing by Greased Heels."

It takes a minute to sink in. "You bribed A. Goold with Wilbur's two thousand in warm wampum?" I get the rest of it. "And that phone call you just made before was another tip-off to the police?"

The Doc grins. "That will be a touching reunion when A. Goold joins Mr. Warburton and Mr. Kelly in jail."

I have to laugh. "That also fixes up J. Harrison and his domestic problem very nicely."

The Doc chuckles. "I think Mr. Dibble's gratitude may pay off some day." He gets up. "I hear the climate in California is very healthful this time of year. I think I will attend the fall meeting at Bay Meadows."

I grin at him. "Watch your step around the ponies, Doc. And don't take any wooden nickels."

Getting Up Nights Makes Many Feel Old

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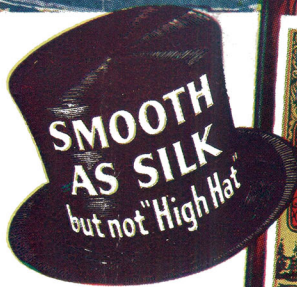
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