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JANUARY

10¢ DIME

DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

A COLONEL KASPIR
STORY BY
C.P. DONNEL, JR.

THE AFFAIR
OF THE
PHARMACIST'S
FUDGE

A NOVELETTE OF THE DEAN
by MERLE CONSTINER

FRANCIS K. ALLAN
DALE CLARK



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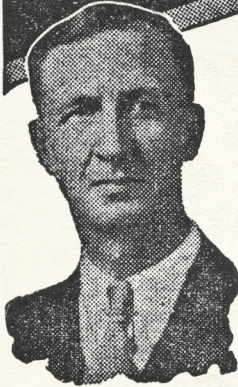
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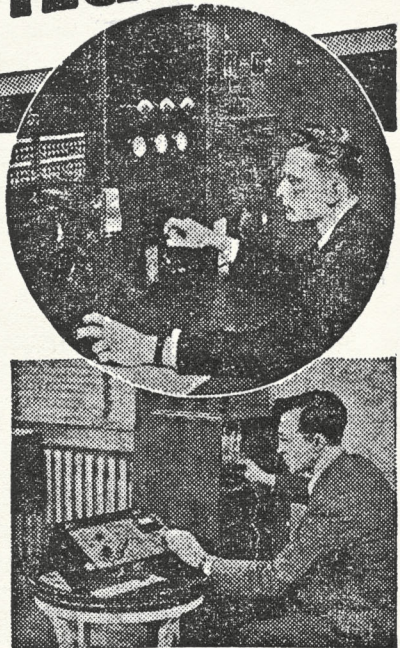
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TRAINING MEN FOR VITAL RADIO JOBS



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

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NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE, Washington 9, D. C.

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10¢ DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE



EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 44 CONTENTS FOR JANUARY, 1944 No. 2

2—SUSPENSE-FILLED SERIES-CHARACTER NOVELETTES—2

A sure cure for your sweet tooth is

The Affair of the Pharmacist's Fudge.....Merle Constiner 8
 With the Dean plowing a straight furrow through the thanatography of Big Charlie, Oldham's *acne rosacea* and Saarhard Eric, to wind up Faggot House where they used to burn witches on the front lawn—and may still do so!

Turn on some soft music as you

Sing for Your Shroud.....Dale Clark 46
 While Plates O'Rion and his glamor-gal Sal tackle the strange affair of the death of Ronny Dane, zoot-suited swing idol, his forged suicide note and the M.D.'s chagrin upon discovering that the corpse was really dead.

A COMPLETE MIDNIGHT MURDER MYSTERY

Don't ever be taken in by

Death in Fool's Disguise.....Francis K. Allan 70
 'Cause what looked like a two-bit alarm clock racket worked up to a bunch of old letters in a worn brown envelope and something that Archie Roman would commit murder for—and did!

2—EXCITING SERIES-CHARACTER DETECTIVE SHORTS—2

Hop in for a horror-ride in

The Flyin' Icebox.....C. P. Donnel, Jr. 35
 And join Kaspir in a chat with Elisa Helmi, the seance-happy wife of the inventor of EX7 and her dear-departed parents. You may say "include me out," however, when the blimp-like boss of Section Five takes himself a dunk in a mill pond—in January!

An unfailing remedy for your frazzled nerves is

The Doctor's Treatment.....Richard Dermody 62
 With Doc Pierce diagnosing the case of Goldberg O'Toole, inventor of the Horseman's Handy Helper. Of course when the Doc hears that this appleknocker owns 6,000 acres of cotton land, it throws a different light on the matter—a \$10,000 light!

AND—

We want to know if you are

Ready for the Rackets.....A Department 6
 In this revealing series giving the lowdown on currently popular swindle-schemes. Here's a chance to test your ability as a reporter and win \$5.00 at the same time.

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

Cover—"Maude and I worked the torch on Helmi's old safe."

From *The Flyin' Icebox*.

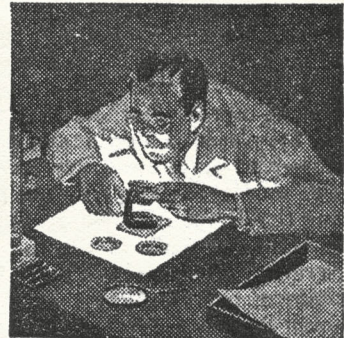
The February Issue will be out January 7th

Published once a month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices 205 East Forty-second Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary; Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter June 29, 1935, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyrighted 1943 by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under the Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. \$1.20. Foreign postage 75c additional. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, 17, N. Y. All manuscripts should be sent to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd St., New York, 17, N. Y., accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return if unusable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, though all care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

Who Killed Him?

Could you have solved THIS MYSTERY?

Wealthy Henry Jason lived in his big home alone except for a maid, a gardener, a chauffeur and a housekeeper. Noted for his philanthropies, he had no known enemies. The maid reported stumbling over Jason's body when she started into the library to do some dusting. She told the police Jason had had three callers during the morning, his lawyer, a nephew, and a stranger. An autopsy showed poisoning as the cause of death. Who was the poisoner?



There was a single clue... a finger print on a glass

One of these finger prints identifies slayer!

Who Was Guilty?

- 1. Nephew
- 2. Attorney
- 3. Gardener
- 4. Maid
- 5. Housekeeper
- 6. Chauffeur
- 7. Stranger
- 8. The Slayer



CAN YOU POINT OUT THE KILLER?

The police found the stranger to be a philanthropic associate of the murdered man who had no objection to being finger printed. Finger prints of other suspects were obtained without the necessity of making routine prints. The Bureau of Identification at police headquarters ordered the arrest of the slayer immediately after checking the several index finger prints with that on the drinking glass. Study and compare prints above. You should be able to point out the murderer. Can you?

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Who Was Guilty?
Put cross in square above

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There's a thrill in Scientific Crime Detection, and there's good money in it, too. The demand for I.A.S. trained finger print experts is increasing each year. This fine profession can be learned at home in spare time. Send today for FREE book and list of all the Identification Bureaus employing I.A.S. students and graduates. Use the coupon. If you wish to do so, indicate identity of the poisoner of Henry Jason by making cross in square provided.

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THE FEBRUARY THRILL DOCKET

IN THE first place, Allhoff had a cold—one of those nasty, sniffly jobs, with a spectacular sore throat to boot—and his coffee, no matter how strong he brewed it or how many gallons he swilled down, tasted like so much rancid pap. That, as you may imagine, gets the legless misanthrope of Centre Street off to a bright-and-shining start when Officer Battersly brings to his attention the case of the demised midget. Alive, the corpse stood only half as high as the amputated inspector himself but dead the little cadaver loomed to giant proportions and for a minute there, almost dwarfed the brain guy across the street from Headquarters.

D. L. CHAMPION does it again on *The Day Nobody Died*—as neatly plotted a bit of murder machination as ever rolled off the platen of a crime fictioneer's noiseless—and gives us a new version of the old murdered-body-in-the-locked-room gag that'll put Allhoff as well as the killer in the front rank of the corpse caravan. Sergeant Simmonds, that clay-pigeon-in-uniform par excellence, stands by to recount the slay sequence and take the inevitable rap, of course. It's the best novelette yet in this perennially popular series.

Remember Edward Asa Scott—the painter-plus-sleuth of *Portrait of a Corpse* back in the August issue? LAWRENCE TREAT brings him back again—brushes, canvasses, palette and all—to turn musician for a night and improvise the missing notes to *Death's Old Sweet Song*. The best artist who ever sneered at having his work hung in the Met felt a bit out of his orbit when fiddles and Gypsy folk music intruded among the paint-smudged purloins of his studio, but the murder they brought soon made him feel at home again when he began to realize that crimson can show up on a sheet of music as well as an eased canvas.

Plus gripping shorts and novelettes by ALAN FARLEY, JULIUS LONG and others.

Watch for this great FEBRUARY issue—on sale JANUARY 7th.

Ready for the Rackets A Department

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a foreknowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in, telling us your own personal experiences with chiselers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your names, if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Racket Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 E. 42nd St., N. Y. 17.

“**A** MAN'S home is his castle,” but not when his own letter-box is no longer safe from grasping hands. Here's one for home-owners to watch out for.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Dear Sir:

One of the cleverest easy-money schemes is the letter-box forgery racket, which taps the moderate finances of thrifty citizens right in their own banks.

The gang of letter-box key experts and long-hand artists arrives together, but takes rooms at separate hotels. First they systematically filch the mail from certain likely looking front door letter-boxes which are particularly accessible. Of course all money, valuables, and cashable checks are appropriated outright. But the rest of the mail is replaced in its box.

The main racket is based on intercepted bank statements revealing sizable balances, plus original signatures on canceled checks returned by the bank to their maker. Armed with these pincers of information, the operators start small accounts at the banks of their chosen victims, and otherwise build up an impressive “front”.

On one certain pay-off day, checks are presented for cashing simultaneously at the various banks by the several operators, all bearing forged signatures. But the passer has an account there in his own “name” and the apparent maker of the check also has a big enough balance to cover the check, so the paying teller pushes out the cash for it. Then the operators withdraw their own money, or most of it, and they all speed to another city. The crime is discovered by the depositor when he receives his next bank statement and batch of canceled checks and finds his balance \$1,000 to \$5,000 short.

The cased letter-box and bank build-up make this a comparatively safe and highly profitable racket. Mail may easily be the equivalent of actual cash. Prospective victims can best protect themselves by using only inaccessible letter-boxes.

Herbert Peter Jones,
Philadelphia, Penna.

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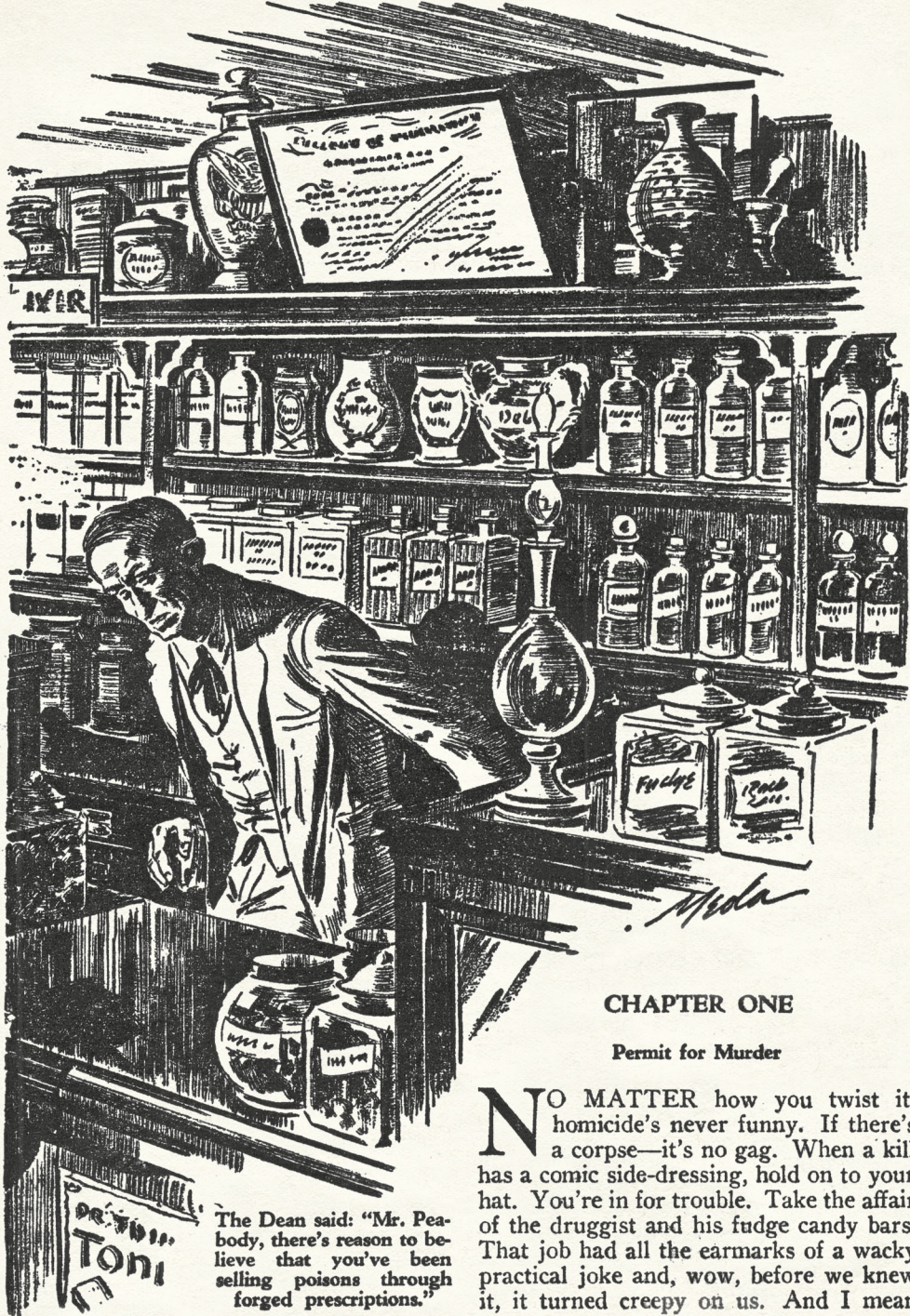
THE AFFAIR OF THE PHARMACIST'S FUDGE

By **MERLE CONSTINER**

Author of "Parade of the Empty Shoes," etc.



A Novelette of the Dean



CHAPTER ONE

Permit for Murder

NO MATTER how you twist it, homicide's never funny. If there's a corpse—it's no gag. When a kill has a comic side-dressing, hold on to your hat. You're in for trouble. Take the affair of the druggist and his fudge candy bars. That job had all the earmarks of a wacky practical joke and, wow, before we knew it, it turned creepy on us. And I mean creepy.

When we took the case we'd never heard of the handyman with a sweet-tooth.

The Dean said: "Mr. Peabody, there's reason to believe that you've been selling poisons through forged prescriptions."

Dr. Peabody's
Toni

We'd never heard of Mr. Eric Saarhard, the gentleman from the University of the Third Heaven, who couldn't even write his own name properly. Or of the sweet little chorus gal who'd married a nose because it was flaming red. We hadn't heard of any of these persons.

The Dean was at his workbench in our office-bedroom pumicing down an ivory-and-rosewood flute. We'd been run ragged with work for two months, day and night. Suddenly, at breakfast that morning, he'd looked quizzical and asked: "What was that loud, twanging snap?" Then he'd reeled dramatically, exclaimed: "Gad! It was my brain! I'm overworked. Everything's blank. We'll take the day off."

Hooey. The greater the stress, the better he functioned. He'd been itching to get at that flute for weeks.

I put on that cursed apron he makes me wear, took the feather-duster and began tidying up the reception room.

I'd just given the mantelpiece the once-over-lightly when I had visitors.

They were both humans—but that was the only similarity between them. They were sexed, as humans frequently are when they come in pairs: one each, male and female. The dame was a pretty little blonde, in her early twenties, with a figure to write home about. She had dreamy hazel eyes, a rose-petal skin, and here and there on her person, from the slave chain on her ankle to the delicate gold-and-ruby clip in her hair, she was wearing enough jewelry to charge an old-fashioned muzzle-loading cannon. The sum total of her short skirt and little blouse, I might add, wouldn't have wadded a cap pistol. She looked at me like all I needed was a little whipped cream and I'd make wonderful eating.

Her escort was middle-aged. One look and you knew who had the bank account. He was slimy customer, dressed in bargain basement tweeds and two-toned shoes. His clothes weren't much, but a gander at the flat, toadish face with its cold, slotted eyes and the flabby jaws beneath them, and you knew you were in the presence of brains. I couldn't keep my eyes off his beazer. The gun had a tiny button nose and it, was as fiery red as though it had been stung by a bee. He said in a frosty, rasping voice: "Get me

Wardlow Rock. And while you're gone, take off that apron. Tsk, tsk!"

I answered warningly: "O.K. If you say so. But his mind is a blank—he told me so at breakfast! Who shall I tell him is calling?"

"I'll handle that end. Bring him out."

BUT the Dean had been eavesdropping. He came through the bedroom door in his tattered dressing robe, the rosewood flute in one hand, a black Cuban cigar snipe in the other. In towering rage, he laid the flute on the mantel, screwed the stogy into the corner of his mouth. "'Get him out,' the fellow remarks. He refers to me as though I were a blooded bullock at a county fair. Well, here I am, sir. What is the judges' decision?"

They gaped. The toadish man said placatingly: "Don't get your dander up, friend. I'm a self-made man and maybe a little rough in my speech sometimes. I mean well. This is my wife."

The Dean looked bored. "And who are you?"

"I'm J. Enright Oldham, in person. But it's the wife that wants to talk to you. Eh, Babe?"

She nodded, opened her pretty mouth. "That's right. I—"

"All day she's been nagging me to bring her down to chat with you." Oldham chuckled. "She's scared stiff!" He shrugged. "There's nothing to it, but she's been harping on it so long that darned if she hasn't got me interested! Eh, Babe?"

She nodded. "Yes. I am frightened. Your brothers. . ."

Then I placed them. Then I got the name—Oldham.

"She claims you ought to know about it, Rock, because you're involved." The toadish man did it again, rode in on his wife, eased the petite blonde out of the discussion. "This Saarhard's a phony. There's no limit he won't go to, to squeeze a stinking dollar. Gentlemen, my wife, here, as pleasing as she is to the eye and all that, is essentially a simpleton. It pains me to put it so boldly, but it's so, isn't it, Babe?" This time she didn't nod. He went on: "Two months ago, when I married her, she was a pony, a chorus kid. She loved me, I had a sockful of kale, so

what the hell. We're happy." He cupped his cheeks, waited expectantly.

The Dean said gravely: "I'm very anxious to know what you people have in mind, but I can't seem to make heads or tails of the interview. How's this for a suggestion—you folks go out, choose a third party, whisper your mission to him, and send him back. Maybe with such an agent I can—"

Oldham's gelid eyes narrowed. "What say?"

"I say we're not getting anywhere." The Dean was genial. "I don't care for your method. You want me to pump you. Nothing doing. You pretend to wander in your conversation but you've thrown out three tempting morsels of bait to me. I'm supposed to get all hotted up and pry the story from you. No soap. I'm a busy man."

The Dean was disgusted. "I don't handle that sort of case. Why did you ever take him home with you in the first place?"

"He don't look to be no screwball. His clothes are good, he acts like a professional man, a doctor maybe, or a lawyer. He didn't let on till later what his racket was. I even visited him at his apartment at the Blanchard. Everything classy and dignified." Oldham spoke pointedly. "Everything quite proper. And then, three days ago, Gilda gets the letter. First comes the letter, and today the card." He turned, ordered: "O.K., Babe, open up the old purse and fork over."

SHE took two envelopes from her brocade pocketbook, handed them to the Dean. She said quickly, before she could be interrupted: "I don't think Mr. Saar-

"Take the shaving brush," said the Dean. "Or the thanatography of Big Charlie, or Oldham's acne rosacea, or Saarhard Eric." So I take 'em and what do I get? A little slip of paper marked BLACK FEATHER, one of the dirtiest knock-outs in my career, and a jaunt out to Faggot House, where they used to burn witches on the front lawn. And can still do so—for my money!

The toadish man looked bewildered. The Dean explained: "First the observation of Mrs. Oldham's. About your brothers. You're the Oldham that,"—the boss paused brutally—"that can't seem to keep the undertaker away from his home. I believe you lost two brothers. . ."

Oldham showed no emotion whatever. "So I read in the paper. It seems they were murdered. Aren't you interested in this Saarhard? You should be. Any detective should be."

"I'm interested solely in what brings you here to see me."

"That's it." The little blonde made urgent throaty noises of objection. He waved her down, said: "The man's name is Eric Saarhard. He's a graduate of some occult college called the University of the Third Heaven. I picked him up at a bar and brought him around to the house. I suspicion that he's working on Gilda, here. I can't shake him."

hard's a fake. I think he's just misguided. And I don't think he is the one that sent these crazy—"

"We're not detectives, hon," Oldham barreled in on her again. "Let Rock decide that, hey?"

The envelopes were exactly alike. Homemade jobs cut and pasted from brown paper. The chief examined the postmarks, opened the earlier one. It contained a letter. I looked over his shoulder as he read it.

dear fellow-perishables:

i want to thank you for the delightful evening i spent at your place last thursday. i enjoyed so much the chess game with en-right and the tap dance by gilda.

very truly yours,
eric saarhard

"It's quite a document," the Dean declared. "The Oldhams must have lively soirees. Tap dancing and chess on the

same menu! If this person is a graduate of a university, why doesn't he write a more literate hand. Did he never learn his capitals?"

"He's highly educated," Oldham insisted. "He's just a nut. He does everything that way—checks, letters, everything. He says it's graphology. Capital letters clash with his astral vibrations."

"Horse-feathers. It's not graphology." The Dean was petulant. "I believe you said I was somehow involved. Will you elucidate?"

Oldham grinned. "Take a peek in the other envelope, the one that came today."

The other held a card. I recognized it as soon as I laid eyes on it, and so did the boss. His cheeks stiffened. He got out his glasses, clipped them on the bridge of his nose. There was nothing wrong with his eyesight—he had the eyes of an eagle—but he always carried them for effect.

It was a big glazed yellow card with rounded corners. And the collar-drawer of our dresser was chockful of them. An old business card of the chief's. Years ago, before I joined up with him, when he first came to town and opened shop, he'd had a batch of them printed as throw-aways. He'd flooded the city with them. Only the card he held in his hand now had been altered a bit. In bold, black type the regulation legend said:

DIVINATION—FORTUNES TOLD
Learn the Secrets of Love, Hate, Riches
Special Consultations in:
Libanomancy Catoptromancy
Rhadomancy Aleuromancy
This Card Entitles Bearer to
ONE FREE READING
WARDLOW ROCK

Like I said, there'd just been one alteration. The word "reading" had been crossed out with pen strokes. Above it had been printed in block letters: **CORPSE**.

"Hm-m-m!" The Dean rubbed his jaw. "This card entitles bearer to one free corpse—by the generosity of Wardlow Rock."

Oldham said hoarsely: "Note the addresses on the envelopes. Both the same handwriting. No capitals. Saarhard sent us that!"

The Dean pondered. "I guess I'll take the case. I charge big fees, sir!"

Oldham ushered his blond chick to the door. "We'll talk money later. I want to see some results before I pay. I want to see this Saarhard nailed to the old barn. He's got Babe, here, a nervous wreck!"

The Dean bowed them out.

AS soon as they had left, I cut loose. "Never a dull moment! Yow! What do you make of it?"

His eyes glinted. "Beautiful! Marvelous! A museum piece, Ben. It hypnotized me, I couldn't think. It was like a crystal ball! So glowing, so—"

I began to smell a rat. "I'm talking about that free corpse. What are you—"

"Oh, that." He fluffed it off. "A curiosity, yes. But Oldham's nose! So flaming red. *Acne rosacea*, Benton, my boy, and quite a violent case. A skin disease, you know. I don't know when I've gazed at such dilated venules. My, my." He started for the bedroom. "I'm getting dressed. You call Lieutenant Malloy. Ask him to hustle over. Say we've turned up something new on those killings out at Faggot House. What time is it? Three hours to supper, eh? Good. I'd like to get this over by midnight."

Supper? We wouldn't see any supper tonight—and I well knew it. We were off on another manhunt. I phoned headquarters, left a message with the desk sergeant.

The chief's a tough man to get along with. He likes to pose as an amiable crackpot and as well as I know him, he insists on staging this crank routine, even with me. To tell you the truth, sometimes I get so balled up I couldn't swear he wasn't a bit balmy. Actually, of course, I know different. He runs this private investigating agency that front as a fortune-telling layout. We function under some sort of secret sponsorship by the police commissioner.

The Dean has a well-earned reputation for getting quick results. He goes around with a foggy look on his face and a Magnum .357 in his shoulder holster. And both of them are mighty bad medicine to law-breakers. He has a dozen interests, ranging from toxicophobia to medieval glassware, but his dominant obsession is the study of ancient magic and the lore of divination. Me, I used to be a trouble-

shooter for a small safe company. He ran into me when I was down and out and gave me a bunk and a meal ticket. He makes out like I'm on a salary but we share everything fifty-fifty. I'm no long-hair myself. All I savvy is guns and locks.

The bedroom was as silent as a tomb. I got to wondering if the Dean had pulled a fast one on me, if he'd dressed and slipped out the kitchen door. I went back to investigate. He was there, all right. Still in his robe. He had his carpet slippers tucked up on a footstool and was calmly reading a large, battered leather-bound book. I said pleasantly: "Just whiling away the tedium? If we just had something to do. Something to occupy our minds. We're stagnating."

He closed the volume, placed it on the shelf. I noticed the title, *Ancient Gaelic Tribal Customs*. "Gaelic customs?" I pretended to catch on. "I get it now. You're preparing your mind for Irish Bill Malloy!"

"I'm preparing my mind for the apprehension of a vicious killer," he answered tolerantly. "I've just solved the significance of Brother Oldham's tap-dance letter. Which is no mean feat in itself." He got up, took off his robe, selected a clean shirt from the bureau. "It's strange, isn't it, that we should be in on that Faggot House Mystery? I knew it was murder, of course, all along. But frankly, when the thing broke it had all the signs of the legendary perfect crime." He knotted his fore-in-hand in front of the mirror. "Now it's beginning to buckle—and we've grandstand seats!"

I said: "I always figured this Oldham killed his brothers. And now that I've talked with him, I'm sure of it. That guy's spooky!"

"It's a spooky crime, Ben. Take my word for it."

CHAPTER TWO

The Faggot House Mysteries

I KNEW he was right. Until this afternoon I hadn't met any of the principals—it had been six months since I'd read about it in the newspapers—yet every detail and every personality stood out in my memory as vividly as one of

those terrible waking nightmares. People I didn't know anything about, doing things in a house I'd never seen . . . yet the simple story gave me goose pimples.

Take the house itself. A dismal, rambling structure hidden in a wooded hollow at the edge of town. No one knew how old the building was. It got its goofy name back in the Colonial days when a court order had ordered three witches to be burned on its front lawn. For the last fifty years the place had been vacant and more or less abandoned. Then, out of nowhere, the Oldham brothers had bought it, remodeled, and moved in. They told the neighbors they liked its charm. They told the postman they liked its solitude. They cut the weeds, pruned the deadwood out of the trees, and rebuilt the outhouses. But still, according to my notion, if the photo in the paper was right, the setup was plenty macabre. It should have been given back to the witches.

There were three of these brothers and after the eldest passed away, two facts emerged in the subsequent publicity. There was no excess of fraternal love at Faggot House and its denizens were persons of wealth. Jesse Oldham went first—and his death hardly caused a ripple of interest. The archaic mansion, like a lot of those old-timers, had a sort of built-in cistern under the kitchen floor. This reservoir, fed by rain-water from the roof gutters, had long ago fallen into disuse. In fact an upper layer of tongue-and-groove flooring had been laid over the trap-door. The way the police report had it was this: Enright had learned of the cistern's existence one evening in conversation with a neighboring farmer. He worried over the situation. A pitful of scummy water under the house must be unhealthy.

Enright had torn up the flooring and raised the trap and investigated. The cistern was there but there was no water in it. The gutters had rotted on the roof. Well, somehow that very night, while Enright and his brother Joel were in town, Jesse had stumbled down that hole and fractured his skull.

Jesse knew all about the cistern. He had in fact helped tear up the flooring. No one could explain it.

There was much flashing of heavy dough by Joel and Enright, much hulla-

baloo. But brother Jesse was given a cut-rate funeral in the country churchyard.

Then, before the earth was dry on the sexton's spade in the cemetery tool-house, Joel was killed. This time, it seemed that Enright and his surviving kinsman were spending a brotherly evening listening to the radio. Joel thought he heard a commotion in the stables. Enright listened, couldn't hear anything. Joel, however, went out to check up. They had valuable mounts.

An hour passed and Joel didn't return. Enright found him in the stall with a skittish walking-horse. He'd been kicked mortally about the head and shoulders. Another fractured skull.

This was too much of a good thing for Homicide. The police grilled Enright to no effect. There was no apparent motive—coincidences do happen. Opportunity was there but there was no evidence whatever, circumstantial or otherwise. They had to file it and pray for future developments. They poked around and discovered some interesting, but non-incriminating, facts. These Oldhams were borderline swindlers. They'd laid up a tidy fortune twenty years ago in the Florida boom by using bucket-shop methods. They were "undesirables" but had no official record.

The grisly angle in the death-picture was the hyoscine.

At Joel's death, the police turned the house inside-out. They found a partially empty bottle of hyoscine in the bathroom medicine cabinet. Enright swore he'd never seen it before. Hyoscine itself has a mighty bad police record—Crippen, for one, used it in the famous case in which he killed his wife. The police examined Joel's body for traces of the poison. No good. They asked permission from Enright, and got it smilingly, to exhume Jesse. This panned out like the other. Jesse's post-mortem, too, was negative.

And right there the case froze.

I SAID: "It's a problem, isn't it? How did Brer Enright knock off his relatives? How can you kill with hyoscine without leaving any traces? Would an atomizer do it?"

The chief was brushing off his coat sleeves. He looked startled. "How's that again?"

"I mean couldn't he convert it into a kind of gas and shoot this vapor—"

The Dean was disgusted. "The hyoscine poses us no problem. Rather, it comes under the head of an answer. It explains, for one thing, the glamorous little blonde, Gilda."

"But she wasn't even in the picture then," I argued. "Oldham said they'd only been married two months. It's been at least six months since this Faggot House business. How could—"

There was a disturbance from the reception room. The door banged open and we heard the unmistakable thumping of excited police shoes barging in on us. We went out to meet the law.

Our visitors were Lieutenant Bill Malloy and Captain Kunkle. They were as bland as a pair of fan-tan players but Malloy was pale behind the ears and that was a sure indication that he was under pressure. The Dean beamed, said: "My, you're prompt. I declare, gentlemen, Ben has hardly hung up the receiver. Did you come by rocket-ship?"

They didn't smile.

Malloy said woodenly: "You summoned us—here we are. You said you had some dope for us. All right, give. We want no monkeyshines, no run-around. We're not in the mood for it. What's this about Faggot House? You say you have something new?"

The Dean and the lieutenant harmonized like a couple of off-tone cow-bells. They clashed every time they got within shouting distance of each other. Malloy resented the Dean's reputation. He attributed the chief's ability to bring in quick results to his tie-up with the commissioner. The Dean, on the other hand, recognized the Irishman for what he was—a top-notch cop. It griped him to realize that Malloy had at his fingertips all the facilities of a great metropolitan police system. In words of one syllable, they were as jealous of each other as a couple of spinsterish bridesmaids wrestling for the bride's bouquet. Captain Kunkle, unlike his subordinate, could be prevailed upon to cooperate. He'd swap lowdown with you any time—if you'd throw in your liver and lights to boot.

"Let's get these frowns off our faces, eh?" The Dean put on an act of heavy

joviality. "We're jolly gentlemen all, aren't we? Of course we are! Scowling and muttering in the beard goes out the window, eh? Let's tackle this in a bond of implicit trust and goodwill!"

They listened sourly.

"I asked you to come here," the Dean said amiably, "to post you up to the present on the Faggot House case. That I intend to do." He paused. "This is no trade, you understand. What I am about to say is absolutely true—and I'm offering it gratis. Out of sheer friendship."

To my surprise, he told them everything. All about J. Enright Oldham and his wife. He told them about the card for one free corpse and the nutty letter with no capitals. The only thing he omitted, and I didn't catch it at the time, was this Eric Saarhard's address at the Blanchard Apartments. He even told them about Oldham's red nose.

When he'd finished, he said gallantly: "There you are. It must mean something. I hope you can use it. Good day, gentlemen."

They faltered. Malloy showed his sus-

picion, said: "What's come over you? Usually we get chiseled when we drop in. You generally have a big ax to grind. Is all this on the level?"

"That's right. I'm always delighted to be of service to the department."

"And you expect nothing in return? No special bit of information?"

"Nothing at all. Good day."

THEY started reluctantly for the door. Captain Kunkle took three steps and halted. He drew up to a ponderous stop, wheeled pompously about, placed his polished shoes carefully at right angles. "You're a canny fellow, Mr. Rock," he said decisively. "On occasions, I'll have to admit, you've outfoxed us. But this time, I think, I've got you pigeon-holed. Somehow you've heard about the shaving brush?"

"No," the Dean said hurriedly. "I haven't. I don't want you to say anything you'll regret later."

They grinned. Kunkle said: "Well, then, I'll tell you about it."

The Dean rubbed his palms, said

**You spend less dough—look slick besides—
Through toughest whiskers this blade glides!
And Thin Gillette lasts long—shaves clean,
You save on time—your face feels keen!**

Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

servilely: "Small donations gratefully received."

"I'd like your opinion on it anyhow." The captain had made up his mind to go whole-hog. "To be perfectly frank, we've had it kicking around headquarters for six months—and can't make anything out of it."

Malloy cleared his throat warningly.

Kunkle ignored him. "We know as well as you do that those Oldham brothers were murdered. Frankly it was no loss to the community but it disturbs us to realize there's a killer at large. The day after Joel, the last one, was done in we made an eerie discovery. While Enright was down at headquarters being questioned, two of our best men were out at the house going through it with a fine-toothed comb."

"And you found the hyoscine."

"We found that, of course. But we also found something else. Something which we've kept—ahem—away from the general public." The captain pressed his lips together, arched his eyebrows. "We found a horrible clue! Out in the barn, up in the loft under a pile of hay. A shaving brush in an oilskin tobacco pouch. *A shaving brush which had been dipped in blood.*"

The Dean was bleak. "Is that so?" Abruptly, he relaxed. "It's quite a tangle, isn't it? Blood and poison as evidence, and two corpses that died of good old-fashioned fractured skulls."

Kunkle asked cautiously: "Is it a decoy of some sort? Was it left deliberately by the killer to confuse us?"

"Not this killer." The Dean smiled grimly. "This killer doesn't leave any clues, false or otherwise, if he can help it. I've a hunch he had quite a shock when he returned and found it missing! Now please don't ask me how I interpret it. I have an opinion, of course, but opinions are not permissible evidence. This I do promise—if I learn anything, and I intend to, I'll contact you."

Malloy sighed. "It's the old thimble-rig again, Captain. Let's be getting on."

DARKNESS was just falling when we hit the street. Give me any kind of a night but an autumn night. All day the sky had been slate gray and now, with the

coming of evening, the rain started. It wasn't exactly rain, it was more of a beady, clammy haze. Sensible folks were off the pavements. Here and there, we passed a bedraggled citizen, a guy with his collar turned up or a gal clicking her way through the fog with her dripping sack of supper groceries. There was a wavering chill to the dampness, as though the drizzle were trying to turn into snow but couldn't quite make it.

"I don't like this case, chief," I said. "It's not the sort of thing we usually go for. Take these three Oldham brothers. They're swindlers, just inside the law—if that. They get to quarreling amongst themselves and two of them get taken dead. Who cares?"

"I care." The Dean was terse. "If the Oldhams had shot it out on Main Street with horse pistols, that would be a different story. Believe me, Ben—this is bad stuff. And it's going to get worse. This isn't just harum-scarum murder, this is genuinely sinister. There's a cloud of evil about us that I can't quite clarify. *But* it's there. Something diabolical!"

"Oh, that, eh? Diabolical? You mean this occult Saarhard and his University of the Third Heaven? Then count me out. I don't go for this supernatural stuff."

"This isn't supernatural." His voice was so low I could hardly hear him. "This is murder for money, the same old routine. But I—" Abruptly, he shut up like a clam.

I tried to prod him into further conversation, but it was no use.

THE Blanchard Apartments was a modest stone-and-brick establishment in a sedate, middle-class neighborhood. It fairly vibrated respectability. We passed through the small foyer, our coat sleeves furry with moisture, ascended the cork stair treads to the second floor. Guys like this Saarhard don't go much for ground floor apartments. It's a funny thing, shady characters are a lot like wild animals—give them a big building and they invariably select a room back in an upstairs corner. They feel safer—holed up, like they're in a cave.

We started down the corridor. The walls were clean, the woodwork quiet in

dignified black walnut. I could understand how the place had impressed Oldham with its obvious easy-going prestige. The Dean drew up at a random door, knocked loudly on the panel.

Almost instantly the rap was answered. A little fat man with a newspaper in one hand and a calabash pipe in the other stared at us hostilely across his threshold. The Dean cocked his eye at me, made a mighty lucky fellow, sir. Finally the great Albertus Magnus has come to assist you in your temporal affairs. Give me the date of your birth, sir. Let me see your hand." He grabbed the fat man's mitt. "Ah, notice where the life-line crosses the bread-line here in your palm. That's bad." The fat man wrenched his fingers free. The Dean said arrogantly: "Fetch me some tea leaves!"

"Oh. So that's it." The fat man's jowls quivered angrily. "A fortune-teller, eh?"

"An explorer of mystic secrets, sir. A graduate of the University of the Third Heaven!"

"Like the squirrel-head down in Room 12, hey?" The fat man scowled. "I swear I'm gonna move. The place is lousy with lunatics. Saarhard seems a nice enough chap, but now this!" He shut the door.

"There you are," the Dean remarked when we were alone. "It's Room 12."

Room 12 was down at the end of the corridor. We knocked, rattled the knob, knocked again. There was no response. The Dean cocked his eye at me, made a twisting motion with his thumb and forefinger. He was giving me the pantomime to pick the lock. It wasn't too tough—I had the bolt back in a couple of minutes.

Inside, with the door shut behind us, I said: "Locks are put on doors to keep people out. In case you haven't heard, they're protected by law. What we're doing now is called breaking and entering." He ignored me completely as he gazed about in keen attention.

As Oldham had said, they were the quarters of a fairly prosperous small business man. No crystal balls, no zodiacal signs painted on the ceiling. The pleasant blue rug on the floor went comfortably with the modest antique maple furniture. The bed was built-in behind the mirror. There were a couple of chairs, a table, a sofa with plaid upholstery, a chest of

drawers. Left, off an alcove at the rear, was the bathroom. To the right was a midget kitchen.

Everything seemed ordinary, run-of-the-mill—until you began to poke around. Gradually, it grew on you. There were cooking utensils in the kitchen, down to the last egg beater and spatula, but there wasn't a crumb of food. The same way in the living room. There were ashtrays with no ashes, not a stitch of clothes—not even a loose sock—in the chest of drawers.

"No personal property of any kind," the Dean said thoughtfully. "How do you figure it?"

You could only add it up one way. I said: "He's lammed. He sent that free corpse card this morning and then high-tailed. He knew if it ever got out, you'd be around to see him."

The chief was evasive. "Well, one thing is certainly apparent. He's not here. I wonder how long he's been gone. Let's fan the bathroom."

BATHROOMS are generally caches of personal flotsam and jetsam—and this one was no exception. To our surprise, everywhere were evidences of occupation, personal, unmistakable signs of use. The towel in the rack had been used, there was a sticky bar of soap in the soap dish. The Dean glanced at it, passed it by. "That's no help," he declared. "A little water in the dish and the soap would stay wet for days. H-m-m. The medicine cabinet."

The top shelf of the cabinet was crammed with bottles, big ones and little ones, all sorts. On the bottom shelf were three blank prescription pads—each bearing a different physician's name—and a red cloth-covered book. The title of the book was *Human Disease, Its Symptoms and Cures*. "Dear me." The Dean frowned mildly. "What a nest of illegality. With the book he made his own diagnosis, with the pads—stolen no doubt from reputable physicians—he forged his own prescriptions!"

He took the volume from its resting place, perused its table of contents. When you bend back the covers of some books there's a little slot that opens up in the binding, between the backbone and the pages. The way he was holding the vol-

ume, I could see a slip of yellow paper stuck into this pocket. I said excitedly: "Look, chief—" and tried to take it from his hands.

He was so intent on his reading, it startled him. He flushed, closed the covers with a snap, replaced the book on the shelf. "Always grabbing things," he muttered. "Just like an orangutan. It's only a medical book. No help at all." He examined the row of bottles.

He was under a tension, I knew, and he had these touchy spells, but his school-teacher manner got under my hide. Against my better judgment, I held silent.

The label of each bottle bore the name of the same drug store: *Jno. Peabody—1407 Western Avenue*. The Dean laid a pencil point against an ingredient on the typed inscription of a small vial: *Aconitini nitrici 0.4*.

He shut the cabinet door. "It seems Mr. Saarhard is a man of many maladies. And that he doctors himself. I guess that's about all here. I'd like a few words with Mr. Peabody."

"Sure." I nodded. As we left, I dropped my hat surreptitiously on the radiator.

Back in the living room, I said: "Ooops! Pardon me. My sombrero!"

I ambled to the bathroom, took the paper from the back of the medical book. Two words were printed on it—in the same block letters that were on Oldham's envelopes: **BLACK FEATHER**.

That was all. It somehow struck a chord in my memory, but I couldn't quite clarify it. I stuck the yellow slip in my breast pocket and rejoined the boss. I was still sore at the way he'd rebuffed me.

CHAPTER THREE

The Handyman With the Sweet Tooth

WESTERN Avenue is a crosstown thoroughfare and the fourteen hundred block turned out to be a little island of shops—cleaners, a movie, a poolroom, a grocery—smack in the center of one of the coziest residential sections I ever ran into. There were trees in the front yards and every third cottage had a kiddie car or a tricycle parked by the porch steps for the night. Behind weatherstripped doors the

good citizens, impervious to the swirling fog, were busy stowing away hot, succulent suppers. I hated to think of it.

The chief slowed down. "Here we are."

Number 1407 was at the end of the short row of shops, next to a postage-stamp playground. The soft golden light from the drug store's show window laid itself mellow and inviting across the gleaming wet sidewalk. We scuffed our way through a drift of dead leaves and entered.

The joint was strictly vintage of nineteen ten. The counters were heavy and over-varnished, lined with big-mouthed jars of sassafras and slippery elm and asafetida. Behind the battered marble soda fountain were old-time bottles of simple sirups and fruit juices. The place was lighted by a feeble gas ceiling globe. The walls were saturated with the mixed smells of antiseptic and perfume and ether. It was a genuine pharmacy and not a penny arcade.

The proprietor came forward to meet us. He was a skinny guy in a white medical jacket. He matched his establishment. He looked studious, out of this world, with his thin red hair combed over a shiny bald spot, with his pedantic bulbous forehead and tired, withered eyelids. The Dean wasted no time. He said: "Mr. Peabody? We're detectives. There's reason to believe that you've been selling poisons through forged prescriptions. Don't look so alarmed. You're not the first pharmacist to be so duped. Would you care to discuss the situation with us?"

The druggist's scholarly face showed alarm. Then it hardened in anger. He lifted a flap in the counter, said softly: "Just step back in the prescription room. I'd most certainly be glad to discuss the situation with you."

We followed him to the rear, found ourselves in a little cubbyhole. If out front smelled like a drugstore, this backroom smelled like a combination opium den and undertaker's! There was a little desk, a sink with a mixing board and mortar and pestle, several chairs. We sat down. Peabody placed his fingertips together, waited.

The Dean said pleasantly: The poison in question is aconitine nitrate. Would you be good enough to check your register?"

Wordlessly, the druggist produced a large ledger, leafed through its pages. "Yes. Here we are. On the order of Dr. Thies. The prescription went to a Mr. Thomas Johnson."

Everything was going all askew. The Dean closed his eyes a moment, opened them. "Could you describe this Mr. Johnson?"

"That I can." The pharmacist was emphatic. He's been a steady customer of mine for some time. If there's an error somewhere along the line, I think we'll find Mr. Johnson entirely guiltless. Let's see. How should I describe him. Here's his address—"

"If we can't trust the name, the address, too, must be false."

"Well, he's a conservative dresser. Tweeds and two-toned shoes. He has a rather flat face and an inflamed nose." J. Enright Oldham!

The Dean pinned him down. "How tall?"

"Quite tall. About as tall as I am."

That wouldn't work. Oldham was under-sized, not much more than five foot four. The Dean frowned. "You're not mistaken about the height?"

"Oh, no."

"And you say this man's name is supposed to be Johnson." The Dean was frankly puzzled. "To you, Johnson. To other persons he's known as Saarhard."

Mr. Peabody smiled. "I'm afraid someone's been confusing you. Eric and Mr. Johnson are different people."

"You know Eric Saarhard?" It was turning into a goulash.

"Of course I know Eric. He's my handyman." The druggist looked nettled. "Or was—until he quit me yesterday."

I said: "Excuse me, folks. I'm getting a little dizzy. I think I'll disperse and get some nice pneumonia night-air."

The Dean glared, said: "What's this about Saarhard being—"

"Eric is no one to get excited over, I assure you." Peabody pulled down the corners of his lips. "He isn't exactly stupid, but he isn't any too bright. He came to me wanting to apprentice himself, saying he wished to learn the pharmacist's trade by actual practice. I explained they didn't do that any more, that he'd have to go to school. The idea didn't appeal to

him. He stayed on, however, as handyman."

"How long was he with you?"

"Not very long. About three days. He just came for an hour in the evening and cleaned up. I hated to lose him. He was a good worker."

The Dean was completely floored. He held a straight face—but I knew the signs. He was thunderstruck. He asked: "Why did he quit. Did he give any trouble at all?"

"So you've heard about that? It was really nothing at all." Mr. Peabody looked annoyed. "You detectives do get around, don't you?" He paused, said: "If you should see Eric, tell him I'm willing for bygones to be bygones. I want him back."

The Dean pressed him. "What was this trouble?"

"No real trouble. Just a little friction. I had the feeling that Eric had been filching my confections. I questioned him and he sulked. The next day he didn't show up—"

"Did you notify the police?"

Peabody shook his head. "It wasn't worth while. I guess he just had a sweet-tooth. The total loot wasn't more than a half-dozen bars of fudge from the candy case."

The Dean arose, picked up his gloves. "I wouldn't hire any more handymen, sir, until I consulted the law. The indications are that you've been the victim of a most bizarre and sinister shuttle. I'm not sure just what all this means. *But don't take any more strangers into your employ!*"

OUT again on the pavement, a wind was rising. The drizzle had turned to a light fierce rain. I tucked my chin into the hollow of my shoulder, said: "Frankly, I think this Peabody's looked too long upon the mercurochrome when it was red. Look how he's got our suspects all mixed up for us. Oldham, with his tell-tale nose, has grown almost a foot—"

"Don't place too much importance on that tell-tale nose. Grease paint, or even lipstick, carefully applied could simulate *acne rosacea*. He said the man's name was Johnson—maybe it is." He was laughing at me and I knew it.

"O.K." I flared up. "Have your joke, whatever it is. Are you implying that our

interview with Peabody made any sense?"

"It was a nightmare—until he came to the fudge."

"Until he came to the fudge?" I loaded my voice with sarcasm. "That cleared everything all up, eh?"

He chuckled. "Yes. Well, not everything, but a great deal." He went suddenly serious. His voice came to me, tense and low, from the mist at my side. "Medicine, medicine, medicine! Do you see the theme? I knew that this was a foul setup, but it's developing even worse than I dared imagine." He slowed up on a street corner, came to a stop. "I'm going to have to leave you for a while, Ben. Go back to the apartment and wait for me. I'll not be too long. I'm going to take a little promenade—you know, tone up my muscles. Be careful. Keep your gun handy. I think we're in peril."

Before I could answer, he had vanished in the layered haze.

Give us a big-time case, get it to rolling, and he invariably walked out on me. He never failed. Every time when things began to get too hot to handle, he'd bid me adieu, and stroll off on a solitary pilgrimage. Of course I knew what he was up to—but even then I couldn't get accustomed to it.

He was running his private tapline. He had dozens of friends in town that he kept to himself—bartenders, busboys, elevator operators. Day after day, he'd put out little personal charities. And then when he needed some crucial information, he'd make the grand tour. He always returned with some vital morsel of information. I never asked him where he'd been or whom he'd talked to. When the boss picked up some confidential lowdown, he kept it that way. Wild horses couldn't force him to betray a friend.

Like I say, though he did it every time, I never got used to it. I always felt sorry for myself.

I was in this self-pitying, griping mood when I happened to remember the yellow paper I'd found in the book in Saarhard's bathroom.

I thought at first that I'd entirely forgotten it—and then I realized it had been in the back of my mind all along, kicking around, annoying me. *Black Feather*, it had said. *Black Feather* meant something

to me—I couldn't quite recall just what. Another thought had been preying on me, too. The Dean had explained it when he'd said: "Medicine, medicine, medicine!" This fellow Saarhard certainly had an affinity for curatives and medicaments.

I ticked off the count on my fingers. First there was that bathroom cabinet loaded with drugs. Second there was Peabody's drugstore. And third—

I suddenly remembered. And third there was *Black Feather*!

I hadn't heard of *Black Feather* for years and I was surprised that he was still active.

Black Feather was a pow-wow man. He claimed to be a full-blooded Alaskan Indian and he lived in a rundown frame house under the old Plum Street bridge. The cops had been after him for a long time, and so had the medical fraternity, but he always outfoxed them. A lot of folks never heard of pow-wow, and a lot of others swear by it. Mostly, pow-wow "doctors" get stray incurables from reputable physicians, cancer cases and the like, who keep thinking maybe someone else can do them some good.

Black Feather, I'd heard, used all the standard hocus. Indian herbs and magic capsules and cupping. Cupping passed out of the accredited medical scene a half century ago. But it still goes big in pow-wow. The Dean has explained cupping to me. It's a variation of old-fashioned "bleeding". It was done a lot of ways—sometimes a kind of hot cup was placed over the skin which created a vacuum and brought the blood to the surface, this was called dry cupping. *Black Feather* had a small wooden plank with sharp nails driven through it. He'd press that between your shoulder blades. This is called wet cupping. Yow! He didn't charge fees, of course, but like all the pow-wow boys he had a wash basin by the front door should you want to toss in a sawbuck as you left.

The Dean had said that Saarhard was a man of many maladies. And if he'd palmed himself off on druggist Peabody as a handyman, then he was a crackpot to boot. And the combination was a natural for *Black Feather*. The Dean had an ironclad rule that I was never to do any free lance investigating but the temptation

was too great. It looked like a good chance to put over a quickie.

I turned in my tracks and headed for the old Plum Street bridge.

THE only illumination was the row of street lights above me, pale and distant and milky in the opalescent mist. The little two-room house was dark. It sat up on the weedy hillside on a sort of shelf—back under the crotch of the gaunt, sepulchral viaduct. As I made my way up the winding path, I decided it wasn't a pretty picture. High above, the row of feeble bridge lights, below them the vast black arches of the supports, and tucked back in the velvet shadows, the pow-wow shack.

It was a crude, boxlike shanty with neither a front nor rear porch. A crooked, makeshift stovepipe chimney, strung by wires, stuck up through its tarpaper roof. I pushed my way through the rank, waist-high golden-rod and knocked on the door. There was no answer.

I passed my hand before the keyhole, caught a slender beam of weak light. There was someone inside, all right. I knocked again, this time softly, urgently. That did it—I heard footsteps. The door opened.

I'd never seen the guy in the doorway before, but I'm Tenderloin born and raised and get around quite a bit. I'd heard a lot about him. He was about six feet tall, a perfect specimen of man—deep chest, straight back, flat narrow hips. He was dressed like a country preacher, in shiny blue serge. He wore his long black hair medicine-show style, brushed back of his ears and falling almost to his collar. His lean face was swarthy and his hooded eyes were cold and venomous. I said: "Hi, Louey. Aren't you going to ask me in?"

For a moment he didn't answer. Finally he grunted. "Me Black Feather. Who you? What you want?"

I laughed. "One thing sure, I don't want any of that popskull cure-all you put out." I lowered my voice. "If you're Louey Bulgare, I got business—if you're Black Feather, I'm wasting my time."

He stepped back. "Come in."

I entered. He closed the door. A partition divided the shack into two rooms. This front room was Louey's clinic. It was bare but for a couple of pieces of rus-

tic furniture—you know, chairs with bark on them—and a low flat table. This table was covered with a rubber tarpaulin. The bleeding-bench. I'd heard that there was nothing incriminating in the shack itself, that he kept his drugs and remedies out in a hiding place on the hillside.

Bulgare fastened his unblinking eyes on me, repeated his question: "Who are you and what the hell you want?"

I tried to stare him out of countenance. "You don't know, eh?" I made my voice nasty, said: "Oldham." It didn't make any sense to me, but there was no harm in taking a flyer. Bulgare thought it over—it bothered him. Keeping his beady eyes glued on mine, he called softly: "O.K., Wilfred. Deal yourself in on this."

A MAN eased out from behind the partition. He was carrying a .45 automatic and he held it close in, and low, like an expert. His cheap clothes, from his hat to his shoes, were all new. He was enjoying a splurge of prosperity. He had a blank, stupid face but it didn't fool me—I know a topnotch gunman when I see one. He said: "Just take it easy, friend."

Black Feather ran his hands over my body, located my gun behind my belt buckle. He broke it, removed the cartridges, and returned it to me. They weren't especially hostile—just careful. The pow-wow man said: "Now let's have that again. Who's Oldham?"

I looked mad. "Make up a cot for me in the back room. I'm here to stay, until I'm needed. Don't ask me why I've been sent here. I don't know any more about it than you do."

Wilfred asked: "Are you hot?"

I shook my head. "No. Anybody got a pinochle deck? We might as well—"

Bulgare began to gravel. "Who do they think I am? This joint isn't any hotel! Wilfred and me have been doing all right, ain't we? Why'd they shove in a ringer on us? We're all set for the blow-off—and now you!"

"You boys are good." I made my voice patronizing. "But not quite good enough. This business needs a new manager. The big boss says you're making mistakes."

Louey Bulgare's little eyes glowed. "Who's making mistakes? Who done that Rosegate job? Not Wilfred and me!"

"Not me and Louey." The gunman in the new clothes put in his oar. "And futhuh-more, you know what I think? I don't think you was sent here to help us. I think you was sent here to get us! You look and ack mighty like a feller I knowed back in Toledo. He'd knock a guy off just to try out his trigger-spring. I think now that the showdown's coming up, you been sent around to cut us out of the payoff!"

Never once, since he'd come in on us, had he lowered his forty-five. I said: "Listen, boys. I see you got me wrong. If that's the way you feel, I'll leave."

They both looked relieved. Wilfred tried to patch it up. "Don't go away mad. You get our angle, pal. So long."

My better judgment told me I should scam while I was ahead. But one thing had been eating me ever since Oldham had flashed that printed letter on us at our apartment. What did this lad Saarhard look like? How would we know him when we saw him? Oldham had seen him, and so had his wife Gilda. He'd worked for Peabody, the druggist, as handyman. Yet so far we didn't have a single piece of information as to his personal appearance.

I knew I was on mighty thin ice. I tried to phrase it so it would leave me an out. I said: "Black Feather, you know this Eric Saarhard?"

Bulgare nodded almost imperceptibly.

"We understand he doctors with you." I took the plunge. "What's he look like?"

"I don't know." Bulgare grinned. "I ain't never seen him. He writes me printed letters whenever he gets sick. I stash my medicine up on the bridge for him, by a lamppost. He leaves the dough. That's the way he wants it—and that suits me."

That was that.

I started for the door and he hit me.

He got me at the quarter-turn, when I was off balance, and laid a roundhouse on the flat of my jaw. It was a pile-driver of a blow and I nearly went out. It happened just that quick.

One minute they were smiling at me and I thought everything was hunky-dory. The next minute, I was half-conscious and taking the beating of my life. Bulgare's Indian face was everywhere before my eyes, snarling, writhing in bestial fury. I don't know who hit me and how many times. I finally got all set for a hay-

maker of my own and Wilfred slapped me behind the ear with his gunsight. I went down.

I held it a moment there on the floor, on my hands and knees, until my brain cleared. Then I got up. They were standing rigid, looking at me as though they'd never seen me before. Bulgare grunted, said: "You leave now, huh? We no want you here. You go now, huh?"

It was a good idea—I went. My hand on the knob, I noticed the wash basin just inside the door. I dug in my pocket, dropped a quarter into it. "Ben Matthews pays his way," I said. "When I get a doctor's services, I pay for it."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Thanatography of Big Charlie

THE Dean had returned to the apartment before I arrived. His gusty, jovial voice was booming from the reception room as I passed through the foyer. We had guests. I proceeded softly down the hall, to the rear, entered the kitchen and made my way to the bathroom. I washed a little of the surplus blood off my neck, daubed iodine on the gunsight cut behind my ear. I put on a clean shirt, felt a little more presentable, and joined the party.

It was Gilda Oldham, the blond chorus kid, and the chief was entertaining her. And I mean entertaining. He was doing everything but headstands and parlor tricks. The Dean could really turn on the charm if the mood struck him—and nothing brought on this mood like the scent of a good fee. Show him the corner of a bank-note and he could make you think you were royalty. When I entered, he was giving her a recipe for homemade hand lotion used by the ancient Egyptian queens. She was listening, hypnotized.

She was sitting on the edge of her chair, dainty and pert, and I couldn't help but wonder how she'd ever come to hitch herself to a grimy toad like J. Enright, the ex-swindler.

She gave me a rapturous, inviting smile—like now we're all here—and moved over so I could sit beside her on the couch. I selected a chair as far away as possible, in the corner of the room. The Dean

frowned, said: "What are you carrying in your pocket, Benton? A fermented peach? Oh, it's iodine! Oh. You've been brawling?"

"I haven't been doing calisthenics!" He was showing off before the gal and I didn't want any of it.

The Dean got out his cigar snipe, clenched it between his strong teeth, got it going. "Now let's run through this once more, Mrs. Oldham, for the benefit of my assistant, here. It's not generally known but he's the brains behind our agency. As I understand it, you're afraid you're going to inherit a pretty sizable lump of money and you don't want it. Is that right?"

Her lustrous eyes went sombre. "I don't know whether I want it or not. And that's the merciful truth. The money was ill-gotten! I have a feeling that Enright and his brothers weren't any too scrupulous as business men. You see—"

"This money, as I get it, is the sum total of the Oldham pilferings. The brothers had sort of partnership wills. The surviving brother, your husband, has the responsibility of the entire fortune?"

"Yes. That's the way it was. You see—" She tried to explain.

The Dean asked blandly: "You think your husband's going to die and you're alarmed at the prospect of assuming his estate? What about your spouse—aren't you concerned about him? According to the majority of opinions, death is no picnic."

She pouted. "I don't mean that, and you know it. He's not going to die right away. But he's much older than I. I'm thinking in the future, twenty or thirty years from now."

"I see." The Dean picked a wet tobacco flake from his lip. "How did you come to marry the man, anyway? Don't tell me it was love at first sight!"

She got down to earth. She said seriously: "There was not much love involved. It was mainly a bread and butter deal and I'm not sure that I didn't get short-weighted. I was having a tough time getting by. Enright proposed and I accepted. In the beginning he was considerate. That's all changed now."

"Are you infatuated with this Eric Saarhard?"

"Saarhard? Who is— Oh, him!" Her face showed disgust. "Lord, no." She meant it, there was no doubt about that.

"But this afternoon you were defending Saarhard. How do you explain those grisly letters?"

She flushed. "I wasn't defending this Saarhard. I just know my husband—he jumps at conclusions." Suddenly she looked sly, said: "No one can ever prove definitely who sent those envelopes. Everything was all printed out. Even detectives can't trace printing!"

She got to her feet. "If you should find out anything, I wish you'd tell me about it first, so I can get my nerves settled. It's got me jumpy." She gave us that warm smile. "Good-bye. I'm due home and I have to stop at the store and pick up my husband's confections before—"

The Dean pounced. "Confections? Did you say confections?"

Her face revealed that she'd made a blunder. She tried to cover up. "That's right. He's an avid candy-eater."

The chief arched his eyebrows. "Fudge?"

The girl laughed. "He won't touch fudge. It has to be crunchy. He goes for peanut brittle."

The Dean saw her to the door.

SHE'D hardly gone when I launched into an account of my adventure at the pow-wow house. I'd disobeyed orders and anticipated a tongue-lashing. To my surprise, he congratulated me heartily. I went through the entire story from start to finish, leaving out no detail. Neither of us had ever heard of any place called Rosegate. We looked it up in the phone book and found it was a church out at the edge of town. After I'd given him my report, he had me go once more through the part where Black Feather had clipped me off guard. Then he asked for the incident again. He gave me his deepest attention.

At his request, I repeated the point five times before I realized he was kidding me.

"O.K.," I said. "Have your fun. I made a mistake and I paid for it. That seems to be the sermon you're trying to teach me. You've been out yourself—did you learn as much as I did?"

"I had no fisticuffs with strangers, if that's what you mean." He glanced at his huge, old fashioned silver watch. "What's holding up Malloy? He's five minutes late." He paused, added vaguely: "Yes, I did catch up a few tag-ends."

"Such as?"

"Well, I went to the library and read some old newspapers. I found out that a man named Burchalter, on Ridgewood Drive, was trying to peddle a Belgian hare to the public last August. He had ads in all the classified—"

"He's probably sold it by now, thank goodness! I refuse to live with rabbits." I got to thinking about a remark that the little blonde had made. "Handwriting experts can trace printed letters, of course, as well as script. Now, if we'd just take those two envelopes of Oldham's and druggist Peabody's poison register—"

He raised his voice, talked me down. "The science of handwriting is very interesting. When Saarhard signed Peabody's book, no matter whose name he faked, he left a record of himself in ink. There are two ways of breaking down its secret. First from the angle of pllassopheny, which is the science of detecting altered or imitated records, and second from the angle of grammapheny, which is the study of individual pen-stroke characteristics. The best way to bring this thing to a boil, it occurs to me, is to compare the druggist's register with Oldham's mysterious envelopes."

"Hah! You admit it. I beat you to it, didn't I? Those were my very words!"

He reared stiffly. "Truths are universal, my boy. No man can claim a truth as his exclusive property. It happens our conclusions are merely coincidental." He stared at me coldly, sunk into an offended silence.

I was glad when Bill Malloy dropped in.

THE lieutenant was wary. And when Malloy had his Irish caution in action he was really hard to handle. He came through the door with a gleam in his eye that said be careful. I was afraid that the Dean was set for his special obnoxious brand of unilateral cross-examination, but to my astonishment he came out into the open.

"Lieutenant," he said, "it looks as though we're winding this up. I promised you you'd be in on the finale and I meant it. Be at Faggot House at eleven thirty sharp and I'll have your killer for you."

Malloy scoffed. "Are you telling me—"

"I'm not telling you anything just at this moment. I happen to be in the embarrassing position of having a beautiful foolproof theory without a single fact to bolster it." He hesitated. "Now don't go straight up in the air! It's not as bad as it sounds. This has been a most peculiar case. Rarely have I encountered an affair with so many earmarks of crime without being able to segregate a single isolated bit of evidence. We're up against an extremely shrewd intellect. *The killer doesn't care how much you suspect as long as you can't prove it.* In fact, our slayer has brazenly left a hodge-podge of trails. None of these trails is false, but they've all been carefully obliterated just before they lead us to our prey. So—"

Malloy snorted. "So I turn around and go right back to my swivel chair at headquarters. Good night, all."

"Whoa! Hold on." The Dean flagged him down. "As I say, it's been like peering hopelessly through a semi-opaque veil, watching a monstrous half-visible spectacle. Being alarmed at the atmosphere of evil, but being unable to do anything about it. Now, abruptly, within the last hour or so, all that's been changed. The curtain is dissipating, the crime and its perpetrator are no longer phantom but real." He cleared his throat. "Ahem. That's all. I'll see you at eleven thirty."

He didn't fool me. When he began talking fast and eloquent, that was when he was foxing.

Malloy blinked. The Dean said casually, as an afterthought: "I wonder if Gilda and J. Enright are really husband and wife. The idea just dawned on me. They couldn't be brother and sister? Ridiculous. Of course not! It wouldn't make any difference anyhow, would it? Well, adios, Lieutenant, we'll be seeing you at Faggot House." He paused, added: "Where do you expect to be in the meantime?"

"Where would I be? Perchance at the station."

"Fine. Excellent. I'll have an impor-

tant phone call for you in an hour or so." Malloy started to answer, changed his mind, and left.

A pocket map of the city showed us a surprising thing. Rosegate, the place mentioned by Louey Bulgare, was a small triangular plot of land containing a church and a tiny rural cemetery, just on the fringe of the town's outskirts. One side of this triangle was Ridgewood Drive, where lived the man with the Belgian hare. The other two sides were wild, rolling woodlands. Directly across the apex of the triangle from Ridgewood Drive was Oldham's reconstructed mansion—Faggot House.

They were all together in the same neck of the woods—and I mean woods.

The Dean nodded. "Now we're getting somewhere." He rubbed his chin vaguely for a second and then, without a word, put on his hat and walked out of the room. It took me a couple of minutes to catch on. Then I got it. This was the beginning of the end. He was so preoccupied that he'd forgotten that I existed. I hurried after him, caught up with him outside on the pavement.

RIDGEWOOD DRIVE was a street in name only. We didn't pass more than a half dozen houses in the last four blocks. The district was dismal, lonely—it was in sort of a brushy hollow surrounded by a crescent of uplands. We passed row after row of weedy vacant lots, the street lights were few and far between and a thick albuminous miasma hugged the ground about us. The cheap sidewalk was split with turf and washed with gravel. Burchalter's residence was at the end of the pavement.

The cottage was midget Cape Cod and attractive enough but for the melancholy background. It shimmered neat and white, like a mislaid porcelain tooth, in the shadow of a grove of spreading cedars. A cheerful light shone from the parlor window and we heard a muffled radio giving out with hymns. We stepped up on the little cement shelf that served as a porch. The Dean thumbed the buzzer. The radio clicked off, there was the sound of shuffling footsteps and the door opened. The chief bowed formally, said: "Mr. Pete Burchalter?"

He was a sinewy little fellow, stoop-shouldered, with the fanatic face of an unhappy vulture. He was wearing clean denim overalls and held a sock and a needle-and-thread in his scrawny hands. He'd been engaged in a little homework. He glowered at us, said slowly: "Yep, I'm Pete Burchalter. And if you're from the board of trustees, see me in the daytime. I tend your church and I dig your graves, but darn iff'n I don't want my time off like any other honest laborer—"

"You're affiliated with Rosegate?"

"I'm the sexton, if that's what you mean."

"Is that so?" I could tell from the chief's voice that he was trying to work it into the pattern—without success. "Don't tell me, sacristan, that you're the gentleman who buried the two Oldham brothers? It's a small world, isn't it. Well, we didn't rout you away from your darning to discuss obsequies. And we're not from the board of trustees. We're here for a purely social purpose. I was reading in the paper the other day that you had a rabbit for sale?"

"The other day?" The sexton boggled. "Man, that paper musta been six months old! You're referin' to Big Charlie, o' course. I'm sorry, friend, but Big Charlie ain't here no more. He up and took out on me last August."

"Big Charlie?" The Dean beamed. "So that was the rabbit's name?"

"His name was Ebony Heyst-op-den-Berg Anvers the Second, that was the way he was registered. He was a champion big black Belgian and he wasn't no rabbit, darn it, he was a hare. I called him Big Charlie to be friends with him. But he wouldn't have none of me."

"Is that so?" The Dean was sympathetic.

"Yep. Now folks thinks that hares are spineless critters that loves everybody. Mebbe most is, I dunno, but this I can tell you—Big Charlie was hell on wheels. He hated my guts. When I'd feed him he'd cut loose with them oversize back feet o' his'n and try to bust my arm. I put up with it for a while and then I advertised to sell him. Then dinged iff'n he didn't take out on me. He kicked the hutch door open one night and runned away. It was the eleventh of August and

I was glad to get shet of that critter!"

The Dean said conversationally: "You've got a good memory, sacristan. That happened six months ago and you remember it to a day."

"You keep gettin' my name wrong, friend. It's Burchalter." The sexton warmed up to his subject. "No, it ain't my memory. I jest had so much grief that day. We buried Old Lady Harlow and the earth was harder'n granite. Then while I was eatin' supper this feller come around from the department of sanitation sayin' he heard I kept livestock within the city limits. I showed him I didn't own nothin' but one hare and tole him Rosegate was just outside the corporation line anyways and he pulled his freight. What a day! That very night—"

"That night Big Charlie ran away." The Dean nodded.

"And the next day, that was the twelfth, and on a Tuesday, I cleaned up the toolhouse. All that paint!"

The Dean opened his wallet, extracted a ten dollar bill. "I've always wanted to see the inside of a cemetery toolhouse. This banknote is yours, sir, if you afford us the opportunity. Would you be good enough to escort us?"

The sexton pocketed the money, said dazedly: "Why you want to see—"

"I might have a graveyard of my own some time. What tools will I need? Just what sort of a bulldozer—"

Burchalter was horrified. "Friend, you don't dig graves with a bulldozer! You do it with a shovel, by hand. You come with me, I'll show you."

HE LED us around the house, through the backyard, illuminating the path as we advanced with spasmodic beams from his flashlight. We passed the abandoned rabbit hutch, proceeded through a gate into the churchyard. Off to the front we could make out the black bulk of the little vineclad church. We turned to the left, took a path through the burying ground. The toolshed was a small ornamental building, octagonal in shape, back in a far corner of the premises.

The sexton unlocked a dimstore padlock and we entered.

Burchalter switched on an overhead ceiling bulb, said: "See! This-here's what

a cemetery toolhouse looks like. You do it with shovels."

Four spades leaned against the wall. There was a workbench with a vise, an assortment of rakes and pruning implements. In the center of the plank flooring, there was a ragged white splotch.

The sexton pointed to it. "There's where they spilled the paint. I was mixing up some white lead for the bell-tower and left 'er overnight. The next morning here's what I found. The whole drum had been dumped over."

The Dean asked quietly: "You've no idea who may have done it?"

"Kids!" Burchalter was bitter. "It's an old story to all us sextons. Kids is allus messin' around cemeteries and doing damage. There's something about a graveyard that makes kids like to prank. They upset tombstones—stuff like that. The newspapers call 'em vandals, but we sextons know better. It's just mean kids."

We returned to the little cottage, paused a moment with the sexton on his doorstep. "We'll be leaving now," the Dean said graciously. "Good night, sir. It was certainly worth ten dollars."

Burchalter said curiously: "You're a nice feller—but funny. What was worth ten dollars?"

The Dean started down the sidewalk, stopped, said amiably over his shoulder: "I was alluding to the thanatography of Big Charlie."

CHAPTER FIVE

Mr. Eric and Mr. Saarhard

THE rain had started up again in a chill, steaming drizzle. We'd passed a small delicatessen on our way out and now the Dean, his great chin tucked in the cup of his shoulder, his black hatbrim shadowing his face, set out in quest of a telephone. I plodded along at his side. I had a lot of questions to ask, but I knew that this wasn't the time, that I'd get no answers.

The grocery was one of those family outfits, half residence, half store. The old man behind the counter was glad for some one to talk to. I bought a couple packages of cigarettes and listened to his life story while the chief made his calls.

First it was druggist Peabody. The

Dean asked him to drop around to Faggot House at eleven thirty and bring his register. It was still in his possession? Was he certain? Oh, it was there on the desk in plain sight. Fine.

Next it was police headquarters. The boss asked for Malloy, said: "This you, Lieutenant? Wardlow Rock talking. Yes, this is that important phone call I promised you. About Gilda, the blonde, and Oldham being brother and sister—" I could hear the vibrant buzz of Malloy's indignant baritone. The Dean declared silkily: "So you looked up the marriage license and I'm all wrong. What did the license say? I didn't claim they weren't wedded, you remember, I just wondered. And the girl's from a little village upstate? That's more like it. I wish you'd send a brief wire to her home town, immediately, over your official signature." He lowered his voice, whispered into the mouth piece. He knew I was eavesdropping and was trying to torment me. "Swell. Thanks. Bring the answer around with you when . . . that's it. Good-by."

He thumbed down the receiver, joined me grinning like a cat eating paste.

Out in the night again, I asked: "Where to now?"

"Faggot House, Ben. We've got our killer!"

He seemed relaxed, a little more inclined to talk. I seized the opportunity to get a few worries off my mind. "Chief," I said, "what's a thanatography?"

He looked surprised. "Where did you ever acquire such a polysyllabic word?"

"You used it, don't you remember?" He knew darn well what it was all about. He was just having himself a good time. "You used it to the sexton."

"I don't recall. I might have. Thanatography means story of a death—just as biography means a story of a life."

"You said you paid ten dollars for the thanatography of Big Charlie." It was galling work, but that was the only way you could get anything out of him. "Do you mean by that that the rabbit died?"

"The Belgian hare was murdered. Just as the Oldham brothers were murdered. Ebony Heyst-op-den-Berg Anvers the Second, familiarly known to his owner as Big Charlie, was stolen from his hutch in the dead of night, taken to the tool-

house in the cemetery, and slain. The paint on the floor, of course, was to conceal the blood marks."

"Someone stole the champion rabbit and ate him?"

"Hardly that. My guess is that the hare was killed and his carcass buried in the fresh grave of Old Lady Harlow, whoever she was, may she rest in peace. Remember the sexton said she'd been inhumed that afternoon. The loose dirt afforded a splendid hiding place."

All at once, I realized I was scared. I said hoarsely: "It's satanic! Why would anybody do a think like that? It's perfectly senseless!"

"There I must differ with you." He was grim. "Satanic, yes. But not senseless. A devilishly cunning conception—but it misfired. It was the boner at Rosegate to which Louey Bulgare referred."

"Now we know it, what good does it do us?"

"What good does it do us?" He exploded. "It shows us definitely that Joel Oldham, the brother found in the stable, was beaten to death. It's a photograph of the killer's mind, a revelation of his plan of procedure!"

FAGGOT HOUSE was back from the road a hundred yards or so, in a clump of ancient, gnarled oaks. In my book, it was a mighty eerie layout—the rambling, bulky old residence with its three or four level roofs and quaint peaked ogee windows. It had seen a good many generations of folks, like the Dean and myself, come and go, and fifty years from now, when the Oldham brothers had ceased to be memories, some new owner would be remodeling it because of its staunch antiquity. You couldn't have paid me to live in it. Maybe I'm borderline, but I swear as I stood with the Dean in the lee of the great box hedge and looked across the misty lawn, I could almost see the pain-racked wraiths of the legendary witches burning in the filaments of drifting fog.

Squire Oldham and his wife didn't economize in electricity, and that I could understand. The windows of the entire lower floor were blazing with light.

We left our position just inside the grounds and I started up the drive for the house. The chief touched me on the

arm, whispered: "We'll pay our respects later. First I'd like to take a look around. Let's try the stable."

We kept to the edge of the premises out of the arc of windows, which wasn't much of a trick since the blaze absorbed the lighted house like a sponge, and made our way to the rear. Back of the mansion was an oblong gravelstone court—there was a small stone barn at one corner and a clapboard "office" at the other. You run into these offices now and then. They were built back in the last century by landed gentlemen who wanted a private place to while away the time in transacting their domestic affairs. The Dean said: "Stand right where you are—I'll be with you in a second." He disappeared into the stable.

He was back almost instantly. I said: "What did you find?"

"Nothing. It was just curiosity. I wanted to see the stall where Joel Oldham was found." He gestured toward the office. "If there's anything lying around—it's over there!"

"You know it for a fact, eh? You're wonderful!"

"I said if there's anything lying around. It's only reasonable. Say you're a killer and have something you wish to hide—*out of the house*. You certainly wouldn't conceal it in the barn. The barn is about to become suspect." He amplified, got me more mixed up. "When I say 'is about to become,' I am, of course, speaking in terms of the dramatic past."

I thought I had him. I said: "No one would hide anything in that old stable, hey? What about that bloody shaving brush in the tobacco pouch?"

"The shaving brush wasn't hidden—it was simply abandoned. Don't argue with me. Come on."

The little gray clapboard building was tightly shuttered against the night. We tried the latch, found it unlocked, entered and closed the door behind us. The Dean groped for the wall switch, clicked on the light.

The place was a decided shock to both of us. I think the boss, as well as myself, had anticipated a typical run-down outbuilding, a storage shed for broken furniture and the usual deadwood that collects about a country home. We were wrong. The office had been fixed up, and recently,

into a kind of one-man clubroom. There was a good rug on the floor, a comfortable lounge chair and a smoking stand, a magazine rack loaded with boxing and race horse journals. I asked: "Why the exclusive sitting room? Isn't he allowed in the house?"

The Dean said queerly: "J. Enright's a man that likes his solitude." He quartered the room with his keen glance. "We'll pass up the cushions of the chair. If there's anything hidden here, you can be sure there's been a good job done. H-m-m-m! What are those faint scratches on the smoking stand?" He bent over and inspected them. "Heel marks. Nothing else. Some old, some new. Many of them!" Without looking up, he declared: "There must be a trap door in the ceiling."

There it was—right over our heads.

THE Dean set the stand directly beneath the panel, climbed up and threw back the flap. Without further comment, he drew himself up, over, and into the shallow attic. It was like he'd gone out of this world. I waited, heard no sound, called softly: "Are you there? What's it like?"

His muffled whisper came down to me. "It's blacker than the inside of Lucifer's watch pocket! Now, I've got my flash on. Well, I do declare! I've never seen anything like this! I wouldn't have believed one man could. . . ." Speechless, his voice dwindled off. I could hear him moving about, could catch a tinkling sound.

Then he reappeared in the opening, dropped to the floor beside me. "What did you find?" I blurted. "Tell me what—"

"Bottles." He was appalled. "Whiskey bottles. Empties. I counted over three dozen and gave it up!"

"So J. Enright is a lush."

He looked grave. "That's putting it mildly. And it's no joking matter." Then he produced the gloves. "I found these back under the joists."

They were big black capeskin gloves, fur-lined. All balled up and stiff—like they'd been daubed in shellac. "These are murder gloves," the Dean said quietly. "They're crusted with the life blood of Jesse Oldham, the first brother to go. Jesse who was bludgeoned and dropped

into the kitchen cistern!" He prodded them gently, said tensely: "What's this?"

A wad of crumpled paper was stuffed into one of the fingers. He extricated it, straightened it out. It was a page ripped from a book on mechanics. There was a diagram of some kind of engine and beneath it the printing said: *Electric Pump—Theory of Operation.*

"Now it gives mechanics!" I exclaimed. "Don't tell me Brother Jesse was killed with an electric pump!"

"He must have been." The chief was completely dumbfounded. "Don't ask me how. I haven't the slightest idea. Let me tell you—"

"Tell me!" A voice spoke behind our backs. "Tell me, friend. I'd like to hear." Wilfred, the dapper gunman, was standing in the doorway. Flanking him, and just to his rear, we could make out the cruel, swarthy face of Louey Bulgare. They were carrying guns and they weren't fooling.

"Either come in, or stay out," the Dean ordered irritably. "You're letting in the fog. Who are you anyway and what do you want?"

I EXPLAINED affably. "These are the two tapeworms I had my bad luck with, boss. The snakey lug is Black Feather, the golden elixir man. His pal is just a—"

Bulgare slithered in, kicked the door shut with his heel. He stared at me with those lidless unwavering eyes, said: "I should have given you a dose of that golden elixir, chum, when I had you alone in the shack. But maybe it ain't too late. Just how do you monkeys tie in on this?"

"We're detectives," the Dean said confidentially. "We're trying to solve the mystery of some drug store fudge."

"Baloney!" Bulgare spat on the floor. "I got it after your pal left us this evening. You're nosing your way into the Oldham business. Them two brothers died natural—even the cops has to admit that."

The Dean agreed. "Then there's nothing to worry about, is there?"

"We ain't worried," Wilfred blustered. "Who's worried?"

"Take the shaving brush," the Dean suggested. "Take the blunder at Rose-

gate. Take Oldham's red nose. Take Saarhard Eric."

Wilfred's feet shifted nervously. "Louey, what's this guy gettin' at?"

Bulgare's cheeks were rigid. "You got the gentleman's name mixed up. It's Eric Saarhard."

"It's just a matter of personal choice, isn't it?" The Dean chuckled. "Ben, here, prefers it this way—Mr. Eric and Mr. Saarhard." He changed the subject. "Can you keep a secret?"

Wilfred's eyes were out on stems. He almost threw his neck out of joint nodding in the affirmative.

The Dean said earnestly: "I hope I'm not giving away the prosecution's case, but they've already got you boys wired for illumination. Lieutenant Malloy, of Homicide, was speculating just this afternoon on what kind of cigars he'd have to buy to go with that last big chicken dinner. I know as well as you do that Jesse and Joel Oldham were actually slain by another party but you're deeply involved in the plot, accessories, and the law refuses to make a distinction of guilt. You might have a chance if it weren't for Public Document 1339, Archive 66, Exhibit 17-B."

Bulgare was smart. He realized that the chief was half kidding him, but the Dean was larding his banter with a scattering of dangerous facts and the swarthy man couldn't afford to let him stop talking.

Bulgare asked softly: "What is this public document business?"

"An anonymous six-page report received by the police. Hand printed, no capital letters." The Dean beamed. "It charges you and Wilfred, but particularly you, with a long roster of misdemeanors and felonies—ranging from practicing medicine without a license to premeditated murder."

"Yeah?" Louey Bulgare's little inflamed eyes glowed wickedly. "Like how?"

"Let's confine ourselves to the homicide aspect." The Dean shrugged. "I know it's false, but what's my opinion against the police! The paper says flatly that the Oldham brothers were killed in a grudge slaying. That the Oldhams were swindlers and that years ago in Florida you were fleeced at their hands. The paper

says that when they came to town you recognized them. That you imported this gunman, Wilfred, and began the orderly elimination. It pleads that the law step in before J. Enright, too, goes the way of all flesh. Absurd, isn't it? Or is it?"

The dapper gunman was aghast. "Ain't that awful, Louey! You hear what he says? And he don't know the half of it. We're fall guys. We're really hog-tied! What we gonna do? I'm gettin' out o' town and now."

Bulgare flattened his lips against his teeth. "Don't let this high-pitch talker get you down, son. He knows his number's up and he's giving us the old double-bluff."

The Dean said tranquilly: "You made your mistake, too, Black Feather. You made your mistake when you slugged my assistant here. Remember what brought it on? Ben pretended to be in with you. He had you fooled until he mentioned Saarhard. He asked you what he looked like. That tipped him as an imposter. Shall I give you a description of this—"

That did it. He was deliberately goading them, and that produced results. We'd been slated for the morgue from the moment of their entry. Only one thing had held it off, and that was the chief's glib tongue. Now that he'd had his say, he flushed them into action.

Things happened—and fast.

Bulgare jerked his gun into line and cut loose. I'd have said that he was by far the deadliest of the pair but events proved differently. He went berserk with excitement. He laid two shots at me and one at the Dean and they all went so wide of their mark that we couldn't have caught them with a butterfly net. The small room churned with confusion. There seemed to me no connection between my eyesight and my hand. My vision seemed frozen in a sort of after-image. Wilfred, as calm as a surgeon putting in a suture, studied the situation, decided to clean up Bulgare's errors. He raised the muzzle of his automatic.

I had my bulldog out from behind my belt when the Dean touched off his big Magnum. He threw his body sidewise as his gun cleared his lapel, fired from the flat of his chest. It's thunderous, bull-throated detonations blanked out every-

thing else. The scene before my eyes somehow seemed separated from the sound, as though the little office with its thrashing figures was a faint memory of something entirely different. Wilfred went backwards over the lounge chair as though he'd been hammered by an invisible sledge.

Bulgare's oily face, seething in insensate rage, was suddenly arrested in a violent grimace—a bubble of blood appeared above his eye. He stumbled oafishly forward, fell to his knees, collapsed.

THE Dean slipped his .357 back into its shoulder holster. "Hail and farewell to Black Feather. It's my guess a lot of sick folks around town will get well now." He averted his gaze pointedly from my unfired pistol. "I'm sorry you weren't here to witness it, it was quite a fish-fry."

Whenever I was a little slow on the draw, he always rubbed it in. But he didn't deceive me—he was just trying to teach me to take care of myself. His tongue got pretty salty at times but there wasn't a bit of malice in his heart. I let it go by, said: "Listen, boss. I don't believe I ever went through a day like this one. Things keep happening which don't make any sense and you keep nodding your head and saying: 'Fine—that's just what I wanted to know!' When it comes to explanations, you're tighter than a pair of dime-store shorts. I won't budge from here until you clear up this Saarhard guy. Just who is he—and why, like you said, would I call him Mr. Eric and Mr. Saarhard?" I suddenly got an idea. "Is there any such man?"

"As a person, he's quite real. The druggist has seen him, and so has Oldham and his wife, Gilda." The Dean was sombre. "The name, of course, is a phony."

"Why did he pick such a crazy moniker? Most aliases are stuff like Brown and Smith and Jones."

"I know. But in this case any name wouldn't do. It had to be what it is—and it had to be written in small letters." He paused. "The two words have a great significance. I solved their riddle almost as soon as I heard them. I'd come across them a long time ago, in my reading. They mean *blood money!*"

"Blood money?" I was stunned.

"That's right. There's a student behind this mess." He looked moody. "In early times, if a man killed a kinsman of yours, you were permitted—in fact, obligated—to eliminate a member of the offending family. The eye for an eye business. Well, primitive society progressed somewhat and blood money was introduced. Now, when a kinsman of yours was slain, you could obtain recompense in good hard cash. Prices finally reached a fixed scale. A slave, for instance, was worth about eighty cents, a farmer twenty dollars. Murder, you see, was considered a crime against a family unit, not against society as a whole." He waited. I said nothing.

He continued: "This principle of financial remuneration for harm inflicted was universally accepted among the ancients. The Irish Celts called it *eric*, the British Celts referred to it as *saarhard*. How do you like it?"

"I don't. Do you mean that the Oldham brothers swindled someone and now—"

He was smug. "It'll all come out in the wash."

I tried to corner him. "Don't you know?"

"Of course I know. Now let's drop in on Mr. Oldham." He took out his watch. "We're about fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. That'll give us a few moments to chit-chat with the host of Faggot House."

It was a wonder to me someone in the house hadn't heard our shots and come on the run.

CHAPTER SIX

No Free Corpses

THE fog was clearing. Above the gnarled oaks, the clouds were breaking across the sky, painting the lawn in filtered moonlight. We circled the house, climbed the board steps to the high, railed porch. The Dean pulled the T-shaped lever of the old-fashioned doorbell. Inside, back in the vitals of the rambling mansion, we heard the tinkling gong. There was no response. We rang again, waited.

"It's strange," I whispered. "All the lights on—and nobody home."

"We'd better get inside," the chief decided. "This doesn't look any too good."

He twisted the knob quickly and entered.

The place gave me the creeps. There was just one word for it—spooky. I never saw so much glossy black walnut woodwork. The walls were wainscoted to the twelve foot ceiling and over the doors were dusty, decorative fans of gingerbread spindles. We found ourselves in a large hallway carpeted to the baseboards with garish turkey-red broadloom. Directly ahead of us, to our left, the massive risers of the stairs bent up and around, disappearing into the gloom of the second story. "We'll see what's up," the Dean murmured. "I'm not sure I particularly enjoy all this silence." He strode down the corridor. I followed him.

The big parlor with its marble statuettes and multi-colored, mosaic-glass table lamp was deserted. Next came the library with its morbid maroon plaster and heavy portiers—empty, too.

There was no one in the kitchen, either. The Dean inspected the layout with keen interest. In a small alcove behind the antique sink, we found the engine—an archaic electric pump. "Here we are." I indicated it. "What is it for?"

"It draws water from an outside reservoir," he answered absently. "Old houses like this have a rural type of water system. That's nice new linoleum on the floor, isn't it?"

Then it came back to me. This was where the first brother, Jesse, had been knocked off. There was supposed to be a dry cistern under us. He'd fallen in while the thing was being opened. I said: "Maybe we'd better roll back the covering and see if there's new planking—"

"No need. That part's true enough. The police verified it at the time." He knotted his cheek muscles in deep thought. "Upstairs. We must go upstairs."

WE FOUND J. Enright in his bedroom—and he was in a bad way.

And as tragic as the thing was, I declare I couldn't center my whole attention on the sick man. The boudoir itself almost knocked my eyes out. It literally stank of luxury. The rug was lemon yellow and the walls were delicate rose, the tall, narrow windows that looked out on the lawn were arched in gilt molding. Oldham lay curled up in a knot, like a sleep-

ing puppy, on the bed, muttering and mumbling. And what a bed! It was about nine feet square, four feet from the floor, and covered by a low-hanging canopy of orchid velvet.

The Dean stepped quickly to the bedside. He spoke to the sick man. There was no answer. He peeled back his eyelids with a gentle pressure of the thumb, gazed into his pupils.

The door opened and a man walked in. He was hatless and he carried a glass of water in his hand. He was a chubby sort of fellow, in his middle fifties, dressed in seedy tweeds. He stared at the sick man on the bed, said: "Ah! He is asleep. That is good. We'll let him rest." With a careless motion, the chubby man poured the tumbler of water into a flower bowl. "Just a sedative. I don't like to give a sedative unless it's absolutely necessary!"

The Dean said mildly: "Whom do I have the pleasure—ahem—of addressing? And where did you materialize from, sir?"

The chubby man gave us a friendly smile. "I am Dr. Thies. I've been back in the bathroom, fixing up a bromide. You're friends of his? Well, well. I don't seem to place you." He apologized. "I heard you ring, but I couldn't leave my patient, of course."

Downstairs, the gong chimed *gling-glang-gling!*

"That must be Mrs. Oldham. No, she'd have a key, wouldn't she?" Dr. Thies cocked his roly-poly head. "There's nothing more here for me to do. I'll be leaving. I'll just scurry down the back stairs and out through the kitchen. I've a long list of calls to make before I retire and, as you've no doubt observed, I've a tendency to be over-sociable. Good night, gentlemen."

The Dean bowed. The chubby little man ambled through the door.

I spoke from the corner of my mouth. "Has Oldham been poisoned?"

"No," the Dean said carefully, "he hasn't been poisoned. He's suffering from chronic alcoholism. He has a light touch of what is known medically as 'wet brain.' It can be pretty bad but, while I'm no physician, I'll prophesy he'll be up tomorrow. A little wobbly on his feet, but up and around—"

There was the sound of plodding mas-

culine shoe soles on the padded stairway.

They filed through the doorway—all three of them. Lieutenant Malloy, Mr. Peabody, with his brown paper parcel under his arm, and Dr. Thies. Malloy said: "We're in luck, Rock. Look who I ran into down in the hall!" He patted the roly-poly man on the shoulder. "He says there's sickness in the house and I asked him to hang around. We can use him."

The Dean said smoothly: "So you know him, eh?"

"Know him?" Malloy was enthusiastic. "Dr. Thies is one of our leading physicians. And he's given many a dollar to police charities!"

IT WAS a weird and unearthly picture. Mr. Peabody perched on the edge of a brocade chair, his poison register on his knee—Lieutenant Malloy strolling restlessly about the deep carpet—Dr. Thies, his chubby face lit with happy expectancy, watching our every move.

Suddenly the autumn night went into a squall. Outside, the wind whistled through the tin eaves and driving rain lashed against the tall windows with the rattle of dull, over-ripe grapes. The queer boudoir with its gilt and velvet and shadowy elegance seemed almost a cave, a subterranean chamber completely cut off from the world of man.

And our host, curled in his stupor on the great bed, like a manikin of sawdust, passed entirely from our minds as the Dean's voice called us to attention.

"This is an interesting case, Lieutenant," he said crisply. "And like many complicated crimes, we find its solution is essentially brief and extremely simple. Did you get an answer to our telegram?" Malloy nodded. The chief paused, continued: "Our first responsibility, of course, is to prove that murders were actually committed. That, I intend to do. Jesse and Joel Oldham were struck down, brutally and deliberately, with malice aforethought."

Mr. Peabody looked owlsh. Dr. Thies said: "By golly, wait until I tell Bertha about this. Me sitting in on a murder—"

Malloy was less optimistic. "Well, let's have a few facts."

"I have the facts, don't fear on that point, sir." Down below, the front door

opened. A moment later Gilda Oldham walked in on us. She seemed hardly interested in the assembly. She took off her hat and coat, laid them on a chair, strolled over and inspected her half-conscious husband. She studied him with the tender love and affection of a philatelist examining a newly acquired stamp for blemishes or forgery. She'd obviously seen him that way before.

The Dean ignored her. He said: "Just for convenience in reconstruction, let's take the case of the second brother, Joel, as our beginning. Jesse had been killed successfully, by a combination of luck and cunning. Joel was next on the slate. The plan was to bludgeon him to death in the barn, to drag his body into a stall with a horse. This slaying was to come on the heels of Jesse's, so, as suspicion accumulates, it had to be cagey. The killer laid a shrewd scheme but somehow, perhaps because of buck fever, it misfired."

Dr. Thies said: "I read all about it in the paper! What was this shrewd scheme?"

"You, as a doctor, will find it intriguing. It was built upon the close structural similarity of rabbit's blood and human blood. The killer stole a rabbit, bled it. He saturated a shaving brush in this blood, placed it in an oilskin tobacco pouch and brought it with him to the scene of the crime. It was his intention to touch up the horse's hooves after he'd placed Joel's body in the stall. He didn't know horses. He might have gotten away with it before he dragged the body in—but the smell of Joel's corpse drove the mare into hysterics. The killer was forced to abandon this part of his plan. He left the brush and pouch in the loft. Any questions?"

Dr. Thies announced sagely: "A very clever plan. And a most clever solution. How about Jesse? I've been the Oldhams' physician ever since they moved to town. The case fascinates me!"

"Jesse was first," the Dean repeated quietly. "And when I said his murder was accompanied by an element of luck, I was referring to the cistern so handily open in the kitchen. If there'd been no cistern, he'd have died just as certainly. He was on the list."

Gilda Oldham arranged her lovely blond hair, said casually: "If you're narrowing

it down to my husband, you're wrong. He's a sick man, he couldn't hurt anyone if he wanted—"

The Dean addressed Malloy. "Can you tell me how Jesse was garbed when his body was discovered?"

Malloy was astounded. He pondered a moment, said: "He had on an old dressing robe. Why?"

"That's all I want to know." The Dean showed deep satisfaction. "That does it. Here's the method of the first crime. Jesse was taking his nightly bath. The killer slipped in the kitchen door. His problem was to get Jesse down to him without arousing his alarm. The slayer merely stopped the electric pump, cut off the flow of water upstairs. Jesse came down to investigate, walked into his death. Do you see the profound significance in all this? It means that had one of the Oldham brothers themselves done the thing, the pump business would be unnecessary. They simply would have called the brother down and slain him. This means the slayer was an outsider. Therefore it must have been druggist Peabody, over there. John Peabody, I charge you with murder. Malloy, snap on the handcuffs!"

THEY all looked disappointed. Dr. Thies said sourly: "Your logic seems to be running amuck, sir. Your premise that it was an outsider seems sound—but your conclusion that this man, because he's an outsider, is guilty, strikes me as positively lunatic. Haven't you ever heard of evidence, sir?"

Peabody said good-naturedly: "He's just joshing. Let him have his fun."

"Like you've had yours, eh?" The Dean was chipper. "What did the marriage license and the telegram say, Lieutenant?"

Malloy grunted. "The license said that Mrs. Oldham was Gilda Peabody before her wedding. The telegram to her home town said that she had a brother John."

"Now that makes sense, doesn't it?" The Dean grinned cheerfully. "He worked out a clever little plot to make himself a fortune. He eliminated the first two brothers so that their wealth would pyramid in Enright's lap. Then he set his sister, a pretty chorus girl, to inveigle the survivor into nuptials. Enright was selected from the three for a particular reason—"

for his terribly symptomatic nose, for his virulent *acne rosacea*."

Malloy said: "Then the gal's guilty, too."

"No. She was a dupe. Peabody, with a smattering of medicine, told her truthfully that Enright was a chronic alcoholic and on his last legs. That, by the way, was what the hyoscine was doing in the medicine cabinet. You remember those post-mortems, Lieutenant? The hyoscine was a soporific—it belonged to Enright. Many dipsomaniacs suffer from aggravated insomnia. Am I right, Doctor?"

"In every detail," Dr. Thies agreed emphatically. "He's been at it too long. He's in a mighty bad condition."

"He's in a bad condition, yes." The Dean continued. "But not bad enough for druggist Peabody. Peabody intended to feed him a little aconitine nitrate and collapse his circulatory system. The sister could be handled. He worked up this Eric Saarhard business to hasten the end by a little terror. He actually came out to the house here, knowing that his sister—who even now doesn't quite know what it's all about—wouldn't expose him. He repeated his stunt tonight. He no doubt phoned Gilda, learned that the husband was taken with another attack. Otherwise he wouldn't be here now. He'd have some excuse for us in the morning."

Dr. Thies was shocked. "It can't be so! I know Mr. Peabody—he is a reputable pharmacist!"

"Ha! Anything but that! He falsifies his own registers, obtains drugs illegally by fake prescription blanks. Until tonight, he had a direct tie-up with a renegade quack known as Black Feather. Supplied him with restricted medicaments. An examination of that very record he holds on his knee will bear me out."

Peabody turned malevolent on us. He snarled, said: "You're talking through your hat!"

"We've a wagonload of proof, sir. You may take one of my business cards and alter it to your heart's desire—but let me assure you that in this case there are no free corpses. A sexton named Burchalter, from whom you stole the Belgian hare, can identify you as a spurious sanitation inspector who visited him the afternoon of the murder. The superintendent of the

Blanchard Apartments can identify you as the man that retained quarters under the name of Saarhard. And so on."

I said with honest amazement: "How did you ever work this one out, boss? How did you ever connect Gilda and this guy as brother and sister?"

"That, of course, was the master key. It came in stages. First Peabody showed himself to be a liar and—"

Peabody said: "A liar? How? What do you mean?"

"I refer to my fantastic interview with you in your store. You said the mythical Saarhard had been filching your confections. You're an old-time pharmacist and your training conditions your speech. Now the word confection, properly used, means a pharmaceutical compound, a prescription. That's what you meant until I asked you if the police had been called in. That scared you. Your whole story was rigmarole—you didn't want any police around. You changed confection to fudge. If anyone's interested, I might add that the low Latin word for pharmacist is *confectionarius*. Gilda, here, made the same slip. She, too, fell into her brother's technical lingo. She, too, attempted to divert me—this time it was peanut brittle. Gilda's obvious confusion connected the two of them in my mind. If I was right, Peabody had a sound motive. How nice to have a wealthy sister *and* a drug store! The girl herself was at the head of the death list. Well, from then on in, it was duck soup."

We got to our feet and prepared to leave. The little blonde came over, stood in front of the Dean, said: "I didn't know what I was getting into! I'm so thankful. How much do I owe you?"

"Owe me?" The Dean looked embarrassed. "Gracious sakes, child, there's no charge. I was glad to do it!"

She pressed him. "I should say not. We hired you. I insist upon paying you. How much?" The Dean smiled sweetly, leaned forward and murmured something in her ear. "Three thousand dollars!" she blurted angrily. "You're out of your head. For one day's work!"

"I saved your life," the Dean declared serenely. "I base my fee on that. Fortunately for you, you have a very low-grade life. I've had them run into five figures!"



"Bein' slightly wrought up at the time, I peeled off and went in to see," said Kaspir. "That mill pond 'ud freeze a brass monkey."

THE FLYIN' ICEBOX

A Colonel Kaspir Story

By

C. P. DONNEL, Jr.

Author of "Beef to the Heels," etc.

We do odd jobs in Section Five—very odd! Like chatting politely with Elisa Helmi, the seance-happy wife of the inventor of EX7, and her dear-departed parents—keeping a nine-hour watch over the formula boy himself till he comes out of his alcoholic coma—and Colonel Kaspir himself taking a dunk in a mill pond in January!

COLONEL STEPHEN Kaspir, in a voluminous black overcoat reaching nearly to his heels, brooded over the crater in the road like some bulky bird of prey.

Under the pine tree that looked as though it had been seared by lightning, beside the tangle of scrap metal that had

lately been a truck, Major General Altemus Tancred of G-2 talked with the lieutenant of the guard.

The lieutenant, who had recently supervised the cleaning up of the mess, needed a drink and a sedative. His chalky face was eloquent of this need. Eloquent also was the care he took to keep his eyes from

the long, narrow wicker basket with the tarpaulin cover.

Behind Kaspir palely loitered Maude and I, trying to shut from our minds the recollection of that moment when the lieutenant had lifted a corner of the tarpaulin.

The dead-basket had been made for a single corpse. Now it contained the mortal remains of three men. With room to spare.

The diamond-bright Virginia sunshine, shot through with a frigid January wind sweeping down from the Blue Ridges, laid harsh and unnecessary emphasis on the utter finality of the whole affair.

The dead-basket and its tragic freight were bad enough. But even more depressing was the picture of irreparable loss, of thought and effort and material gone for nothing, represented by that two-foot heap of tortured metal which General Tancred kept nudging with his foot as he talked.

Even Colonel Kaspir, who often affects a strong-stomached and irritating jauntiness in the presence of disaster, was subdued.

I heard General Tancred, a gray-faced gnome that morning, say thoughtfully: "You're perfectly sure Mr. Helmi isn't . . ." He nodded his high-domed head at the wicker basket.

"Oh, no. I've seen him," answered the lieutenant, whose name I never learned. "Up at his house. He was sick this morning—said he had been intending to join Cyril Johns at the test ground later."

The lieutenant shook his head. "No, sir, the identification is certain." He, too, indicated the basket, but without looking at it. "It was just Sergeant Trower and Private Land and Mr. Johns. He's—was—Mr. Helmi's assistant, you know. We searched most carefully. It—they—the remains added up to three men only, sir. There was a whole wrist with Mr. Johns identification bracelet still on it, and some—er—other stuff. Besides, they were the three who left the house in the truck not five minutes before the thing happened."

THE lieutenant was trying valiantly to steady his voice. I noted that he had been shaken out of the crabbed military argot into which reports are customarily forced, also that General Tancred, the most prickly of sticklers for form, was overlooking the lapses.

General Tancred kicked what might once have been a fender, or a side panel or a slab of the top—and began vaguely: "Well, I . . ."

"Only one explosion, hey?" This from under the slouch hat pulled low over Kaspir's forehead.

"Only one big one, sir." The lieutenant frowned. "Corporal Graff—he was at the nearest gate (that's about half a mile, sir)—said he *thought* he heard a couple of little ones just before the big one. But he's not positive. You see, sir, we hear so many explosions from the proving grounds every day that I guess we don't pay close attention."

"Hummmph," said Colonel Kaspir, and jammed his hands a little deeper into his pockets. His chins—he fattens up disgustingly in the winter—were sunk into his coat collar and from my angle his moon face was in its third quarter.

"No trace of the model or transmitting gear that was in the truck?" suggested General Tancred, trying to sound purposeful.

"A piece or two," said the lieutenant. "Some of the wiring, sir."

"Mr. Helmi been down to look at it?"

The lieutenant shook his head, and some color seeped into his cheeks. "I asked him to, sir. He said"—resentfully—"that if the thing had really gone off, there wasn't any use of him coming down. Said it wasn't TNT in that model, but EX7. Said he was sick and tired of the whole thing anyhow, and he wasn't being given enough money to work with, and I could jolly well get the—the hell out of the house. He was drinking, sir." General Tancred snorted. "But I think," added the lieutenant cautiously, "you might like to talk to his wife. She met me outside and told me—well, some pretty wild things. . ."

"Mrs. Helmi's insane," said Tancred shortly. "I thought you knew that, Lieutenant."

"Maybe so, sir." The lieutenant looked dogged. "But I still think you might like to talk to her, sir."

"I'll talk to him and her too," promised General Tancred, smelling battle. He had been swelling throughout the description of Helmi's reaction to the accident. "Let's go." Our jeep was waiting a dozen yards up the hard-frozen clay road.

"Go ahead," said Colonel Kaspir. "I'll walk up later." He was working himself into one of his stubborn, cantankerous moods—for what reason I could not imagine—and I knew that in another few minutes he and General Tancred would be snapping at each other out of sheer acrimony of spirit. So did General Tancred, who has learned a great deal about Kaspir during the past three years.

General Tancred stamped off, followed by Maude and the lieutenant, who carelessly adjusted his pace so that it would keep him beside Maude, and me.

Colonel Kaspir booted some dirt into the crater and continued his brooding.

WHEN we next saw him it was two hours later. His hair was wet and he had acquired a case of sniffles. By that time, General Tancred and a fairly drunk Gotha Helmi had gone four or five verbal rounds and General Tancred had ordered Helmi arrested on charges ranging from treason to the destruction of government property. To which Gotha Helmi, glass in hand, had replied contemptuously: "Pooh!" had rolled over on the couch and gone to sleep.

It was a mad interview—rendered more unreasonable by the occasional presence of Elisa Helmi, a blond wraith with flowing garments and great, wide gray eyes. Mrs. Helmi, who might have been anywhere from twenty-five to forty-seven, kept looking for people. Chiefly her father and mother, who, I happened to know, had been dead for some years. And once she asked if we had seen Andrew, and again if Cyril Johns had come through the living room in the last few minutes.

Maude and I went out to talk to the cook, a stout Negress who seemed to have learned to take her employers as a matter of course. She seemed neither downcast nor excited over the tragedy. Andrew, she said, was a mechanic who helped Mr. Helmi and Mr. Johns, and he was probably around one of the workshops.

Maude and I went to look for Andrew, but couldn't find him. We returned to the kitchen to get warm and the cook informed us that "she" had just "done found 'em again." On our way to the living room we passed a sort of library-study and discovered what the cook meant. Elisa Helmi

was sitting in a deep chair smoking a cigarette and she was talking animatedly with her parents, occasionally listening for an answer.

Maude shivered and grasped my arm. We hurried on to the living room, and it was then that General Tancred delivered his ultimatum to Gotha Helmi. Helmi passed out and Colonel Kaspir stalked in with his hair glistening wet and his nose nearly in the same state.

General Tancred looked at Kaspir with an indescribable expression and then jerked his thumb at Gotha Helmi, who, gaunt, gray and bony, suggested a minor prophet gone astray as he snored liquorishly on the couch. Kaspir let go with a full-bodied oath and inquired where "the gal" was. Maude and I ushered him down the hall to where Elisa Helmi's animated tones were rising and falling, leaving General Tancred sunk in a giant armchair, glaring at the inventor from under half-shut lids.

I felt as though I were skirting the lunatic fringe of an asylum, but two things prevented me from enjoying the funny side of the affair. The first was that that explosion down the road had destroyed the working model of what Tancred, and the select handful of other men who knew of its existence, believed to be potentially the most destructive weapon yet devised in this war.

The second was the absence of Andrew. That worried me. Andrew should have been around.

I had deliberately refrained from mentioning Andrew to General Tancred because I was not at all sure that Kaspir had mentioned to Tancred that we had planted a man on the place. That would have annoyed Tancred immeasurably. He had once tried to force Gotha Helmi into allowing G-2 guards to take up residence in the house, and Helmi had refused sulphurously. Helmi had got his way—as he had got it a dozen times before—by threatening to toss his models and transmitter and everything else connected with EX7 into the old mill pond on his place.

Helmi would have done it, too. The man seemed to have no patriotism, no sense of situation, no regard for anything but money and his own whims. The worst of it was, he was sitting in the driver's

seat and knew it. And he was driving with a feeling of bitterness that no official oil or honey could seem to allay. Helmi had come starving out of some one-horse whistlestop in the mid-West at the outset of the war and had joined the crackpots who besiege the N.I.C. and Army Ordnance with miraculous inventions.

That Helmi was even screwier than most did not help his case. His claims were so extravagant, his manner so loftily arrogant that he invited rebuffs. And got them. Helmi had a refrigerated bomb. He admitted he had heard the Germans were working on them and had stolen the idea. But Helmi insisted he had improved the thing beyond all imagination, and had discovered a new principle during the process. When asked what that principle was, he would shy off and begin to talk money—big money—which made things worse.

IT WAS General Tancred who, through some chain of circumstances I have forgotten, finally got Helmi his chance to demonstrate. Colonel Kaspir was invited out to Aberdeen for the show and returned slightly stunned, both mentally and physically.

Kaspir told Maude and me it had been simple.

"Old tank," he said. "Middle o' big field. This Helmi has a gadget made out of an old thermos bottle. We stand around grinnin'. Helmi unscrews his thermos bottle, which was full o' dry ice, takes out a steel capsule no bigger'n my two thumbs and rolls it under the tank.

"Better run," he says, and begins leggin' it across the field, not even lookin' to see if we run too." Kaspir grinned ruefully. "Somethin' strangely convincin' about this Helmi. It would ha' done your hearts good to see me and the gold-braid boys high-tailin' it for cover. Never knew Tancred and that pot-bellied old Degenson could sprint so fast. About three hundred yards later there was a reg'lar bejesus of a bang and we all sat down. Lucky we were all wearin' tin hats. For about three minutes it rained little hunks o' tank. Then we went back. No tank. Only a hole you could ha' hid a bungalow in. Then this Helmi mentions casually that he's about finished an aerial baby-carriage—radio operated—for this brain-child o' his. Seems

the stuff's too tricky to be flown around in ordinary planes. Next thing you know, the gold-braid boys are wishin' vast sums on Helmi and generally offerin' him half their kingdom. I think they thought Helmi'd go down on his knees and weep for gratitude. Not that lad. He sneered sort of nasty and said it wasn't enough."

The upshot had been a vast estate for Gotha Helmi west of Alexandria, surrounded by high barbed wire, with guard posts at each of the several entrances. In the great manor house Helmi had settled down with his wild-eyed spiritualist-maniac wife, the Negro cook, and a young English technician named Cyril Johns, whom he had picked up while he was kicking around Washington in the lean days. He refused all other technical assistance. Refused, as I have said, to permit on-premise guards, and communicated with Tancred only to demand, and get, large sums of money and quantities of certain hard-to-come-by materials.

Helmi took on only one other man. That was Andrew. Andrew wrote Helmi a letter which read simply:

I am a bum. I drink. But I am a hot man with tools. I been kicked out of three arsenals for being drunk. Give me a job and I will do good for you. I will drink plenty, but I will work good, too.

Colonel Kaspir's estimate of Helmi's psychology had been accurate. Kaspir and Andrew had concocted the letter between them, with Maude and me looking on. Helmi, over Tancred's plaintive protests, hired Andrew. Andrew moved in and "worked good." Helmi did not know that Andrew was no less a personage than Tilton G. Andrews of M.I.T. Neither did General Tancred, and Kaspir, for obscure reasons of his own, did not bother to tell him.

There was no real reason to, at that. Andrew reported at intervals to Kaspir that things were going swimmingly on what Kaspir referred to as "The Nut Farm." Life there, Andrew reported, had fallen into a sound routine. They would work most of the night, Helmi on EX7, the explosive, and Andrew and Cyril Johns on the radio-controlled plane device for ferrying the refrigerated explosive to its destination. Each morning at eight

they would load the plane model and explosive into a small Ford truck, into which had been built a transmitter for remote control of the plane, and drive across the estate to the test grounds, stopping en route to let Helmi take a swim in an old mill pond in the center of the estate. At the test grounds they would, as Andrew phrased it, "blow up things awhile and then go home to supper."

Andrew's most recent report, received by me at the headquarters of Section Five while Kaspir was out of town, had been to the effect that the plane device was about complete. Two more weeks would do it. Helmi had rendered EX7 more stable—and deadly—than ever. Cyril Johns was an excellent man, single-minded, expert, tireless. There was no hint of any trouble from the outside.

Andrew had added that his major personal difficulties were hangovers, since Helmi had taken a fancy to him as a drinking companion, and Mrs. Helmi. This last was no reflection on the lady's virtue. Mrs. Helmi, he said, spent her days and nights alternately looking for her dead parents and then finding them and holding long, rapturous talks with them. Mrs. Helmi liked Andrew and Johns to participate in these talks, and they had worked out a loose system of taking turns, which partly eased the strain. Andrew said he didn't mind this too much, except when he had a hangover.

Altogether, you might say, a rosy picture.

THEN came this fateful morning. It started off badly, with Kaspir going into a fit of sulks over an anonymous note in the morning's mail.

Colonel Kaspir is chief of Section Five, the least official and perhaps the most active of counter-espionage agencies in Washington today. We do odd jobs. Very odd, some of them. On this particular morning we were going over some reports from the West Coast when Joe, the house-boy, brought up the mail.

Maude was opening it. Kaspir despises letters and reads them only when Maude bullies him into it. This morning's batch was going into the wastebasket one by one, when Kaspir, for no apparent reason, glanced up from his reports and bayed:

"What was that one you just threw away?"

"Anonymous note Number 8,962,473," said Maude calmly. "Relating to the whereabouts of one, Z. J. Rilke. Of whom I have never heard."

She was about to tackle the remainder of the mail when Colonel Kaspir—he said later it was unerring instinct, but Maude put it down to indigestion and ill-temper—snarled: "Gimme it!" and proceeded to give Maude a lecture on the enormity of throwing away mail without letting him see it.

Maude bristled and said: "Really, Steve!" She fished out the single sheet and handed it over. Kaspir snatched it rudely and affected to study it. He pursed his lips. He wrinkled his forehead. He became oblivious to outside influences.

Maude was annoyed. She said: "Would you mind running through that scene again, Steve? I'd like to get it in technicolor."

Kaspir did not answer. I stepped around and looked over his shoulder. The note was block capitals on cheap paper. It read: Z. J. RILKE IS NOW IN NEW ORLEANS. SUGGEST YOU INVESTIGATE.

Maude came around and looked too. She said: "I hear Dick Tracy's between cases now. Shall I get him on our secret radio?"

Kaspir rolled back in his swivel chair and put his feet on the desk. He ignored her. He said: "Rilke . . ." and bit his lip. Then he began to gnaw a thumbnail and it dawned on me that he wasn't acting.

Maude caught it too. She said: "Who is Rilke, Steve?"

"A very hot guy," said Kaspir seriously. He folded his hands over his belly and stared at the ceiling. "Who's pulled some very hot stuff. He was head o' Himmler's Buenos Aires branch when the bomb went off in the British Legation. When last heard of, he was supposed to be skulkin' up-country somewhere in the Argentine, waitin' for things to blow over a little." Kaspir smacked his lips reflectively. "A very hot guy," he repeated softly.

There was reluctant respect in Kaspir's tone. It is an occasion when he will credit any German with brains. I began to take an interest in Z. J. Rilke. So did Maude,

much against her vanity. We dug out the envelope. The communication had been mailed in Washington the night before. The envelope was 5-and-10 stationery.

It was at this point that a haggard General Tancred blew in like a miniature tornado and broke the news of the explosion at Helmi's place.

"MAY I introduce myself, Mrs. Helmi? I am Colonel Stephen Kaspir." Colonel Kaspir bowed. He exudes a certain stylish-stout charm when he wishes.

Elisa Helmi inclined her blond head and her gray eyes were gracious.

"And this," continued Colonel Kaspir, "is Miss Maude. And this handsome young man is Captain Michael Kettle. They are both of my staff." He made no explanation of our presence in the house. Apparently none was needed, for Elisa Helmi rose, her garments flowing about her slender figure.

"It is a great pleasure," she said, in a faint, shy voice. Her pale hand made a gesture toward a corner of the room. "My mother and father, who frequently visit me."

Her sincerity was disarming. I had a prickly feeling up the back of my neck. In that instant I could almost see two shadowy figures smiling at us from the corner by the bookcase.

Maude moved closer to me. Her shoulder touched mine and she maintained the contact. I heard her breathing quicken.

"I was just saying to mother," said Mrs. Helmi, "that we have so little company this time of the year. Of course, Cyril and Andrew do come in and sit with us in the evenings . . . I wonder where Cyril can be . . ." She frowned a little and started to leave the room, but Colonel Kaspir touched her arm.

"He will be along later," said Kaspir gently. "He is busy now."

I had a flash of that narrow wicker basket and its contents, and felt a little sick. Maude glared at Kaspir. I had the impression that Kaspir was walking some psychological tightrope with Mrs. Helmi.

"Yes," said Mrs. Helmi. "He is so often busy. Yet he and Andrew have been most kind."

There was a silence. Kaspir's moon-

face was as bland as ever, but I knew from little signs that he was somehow frustrated. I wondered what he was driving at.

Finally he said: "It is lonely here, I suppose."

"Yes," said Mrs. Helmi, and sighed. Then she inclined her head toward the bookcase and seemed to be listening. She nodded. "That is true, mother."

Maude said something under her breath and Mrs. Helmi looked around. Kaspir flung Maude an ugly glance.

"I beg your pardon," he said. He spoke to the bookcase. "I did not quite catch that." He looked inquiringly at Mrs. Helmi.

"Mother was saying," said Mrs. Helmi a little sadly, "that it is a pity Gotha cannot be with us more often. Yet we know how busy he is. And then at night, just when we might all sit together, those men drop in, and Gotha must drink and talk business with them. But of course," she added hastily, in her wispy voice, "Gotha has his business to attend to. He is working on something very wonderful, you know."

Colonel Kaspir leaned forward. "He has had, I understand, some quite marvelous offers for—for that thing he is working on?"

Elisa Helmi clasped her hands, tilted her head proudly. "Quite wonderful," she said.

A feeling of intense pressure was building up inside me. Kaspir's voice had trembled when he put the question.

He spoke very quietly now, as though the slightest error in tone might jar some delicate telepathic communion between his mind and that of Elisa Helmi.

"I, too, wish to make your husband an offer for his device," he said. "I would appreciate your influence on my behalf, Mrs. Helmi."

"It would be a pleasure, Colonel." She spoke positively, with some little feeling. "Frankly, I do not care too much for those men who come to see Gotha. I have warned him several times not to be taken in."

"You have seen them, then?" Kaspir seemed mildly surprised. But his eyes, ordinarily an innocuous baby-blue, had turned hard and excited.

"Oh, no," she replied. His face fell.

"But I have heard them. Cyril and I listened several times when they were bargaining. Cyril did not like it at all. He told me I should speak to Gotha and I did. But Gotha seldom pays attention to me. After all, I am a woman."

COLONEL KASPIR had a hungry look. I found I was holding my breath, and exhaled stealthily, for fear I would break the spell. Something ugly was coming up in this room. You could feel it.

"I think you are wise," said Colonel Kaspir, in a controlled voice touched with respectful sympathy. Then, with elaborate unconcern: "But perhaps your husband has seen through these men who wish to buy his work. Perhaps he does not trust them either. Germans are never to be trusted."

The last six words hung quivering in the still air of the room. Then Mrs. Helmi said gravely: "That is what I told him. I said: 'Why not wait for other offers?'" She turned to the bookcase. "Did I not, mother? Did I not say: 'Gotha, how do you know you can trust this man Rilke?'"

"Oh," said Colonel Kaspir. "Rilke? I did not know Rilke had been here."

"Yes," said Mrs. Helmi calmly. "Two or three times. Men come with him. I have never seen them. But once or twice Cyril and I tiptoed down the hall and listened. They talked German, which I do not understand, nor does Cyril. But I heard the name Rilke."

Kaspir's moon-face was placid as a baby's, but I could see a pulse thumping away in his left temple. So great was the excitement beating away at my brain that I could hardly remain seated. I thought of those pitiful fragments of men in that basket—that grim little heap of metal under the pine tree. The picture was emerging from the gloom now. And when I thought of Gotha Helmi my hands curved. . .

No doubt about Kaspir's next question.

"I suppose," he said, "that Cyril also spoke to your husband about the possible dangers of dealing with this man Rilke?"

"I believe he did once or twice," she said casually. She was losing interest in the topic now. Her gaze kept veering

toward the ghostly couple by the bookcase, and she was answering Kaspir more out of politeness than anything else.

Colonel Kaspir got up. So did Maude and I. Maude was very pale. Her violet eyes were wide and her shoulder, still touching mine, was trembling.

"It has been a great pleasure," said Colonel Kaspir. "Perhaps later we may be allowed to return and chat some more with your charming parents." He bowed to the bookcase. "Good day," he said.

We turned to go. General Tancred was in the doorway. I had not heard him come down the hall. I could see in his face that he had heard—the last part at least.

Colonel Kaspir closed the door softly behind us. We went back to the living room.

Gotha Helmi snored on the couch.

"So Helmi's been having visitors," said Tancred gently, and there was undiluted venom in his tone. "Shall we go to work on him now?" I knew just how he felt.

"Hmmm," said Colonel Kaspir. "Try this on your guitar, General. Johns gets the drift of what's going on between Helmi and Rilke. He tackles Helmi on the subject. Helmi confesses he has been entertaining offers from the opposition. Perhaps he tries to fob Johns off by maintaining that he is leading Rilke and his merry men into a trap. Anyhow, John is quieted temporarily. It is obvious to Helmi that Johns, for the safety of all concerned, must be put out of the way. So today he fakes a tummy-ache and send Johns off to the testing grounds alone. He also finagles the capsule of explosive to go off on the way. That means—"

"Spare me the rest," said General Tancred, rudely. Then, with sudden excitement: "That means—!" He eyes Kaspir wildly.

"The model's somewhere on the premises," said Kaspir carelessly. "Helmi put an old one in the truck. He'll turn the real one over to Rilke. At his convenience—when things die down a little." Kaspir sniffled, blew his nose resoundingly. Helmi stirred uneasily on the couch, turned over on his side, resumed his stertorous slumbers.

"May I ask what you propose to do, Kaspir?" inquired General Tancred with unexpected formality.

"Wait'll Helmi sobers up of his own accord," said Colonel Kaspir grimly. Allow me to insert parenthetically the fact that Kaspir's title derives from the governor of Kentucky. Section Five is in no way connected with Army Intelligence, nor is Kaspir a subordinate of General Tancred. Hence Tancred's attitude.

TANCRED, I could see, was cooling slightly on the unspoken proposition that Helmi be subjected to something extra in the way of a third degree. I guessed the reason, and the answer brought home to me, more than anything else, some idea of the tremendous value Tancred and the ordnance experts were placing on Helmi's device. Madman or traitor, drunkard or killer, Tancred hesitated to deal officially with Gotha Helmi, which might very well mean death for that peculiar man, while there was still a chance of obtaining EX7 and its carrier device.

The thought revolted me until I brought myself around to the larger view that war, too, is revolting. I looked less unkindly upon Tancred.

"Then what?" pursued Tancred shortly.

"We'll chat with him," said Kaspir, still grimly. "But let him come out of it first. No wet towels. Nothin' hasty. It won't hurt us to wait. Suppose you folks keep an eye on him while I ramble 'round a bit. I'm feelin' restless. . . ." He sniffled again and went out. I wondered where he had picked up that cold.

Tancred didn't like it. I could see that in his eye. He wanted action. So did Maude. So did I. But behind the casual attitude there was a mulish look about Kaspir that we knew well. There are times when Kaspir will not be hurried, and at such times you can no more budge him than you can budge a terrified elephant.

General Tancred said with a very bad grace that we might as well wait then.

Tancred's temper did not sweeten any during the hours that followed. You may scarcely credit me when I tell you that we sat in that blasted living room and watched Gotha Helmi sleep for nearly nine hours. How Kaspir kept us there—particularly Tancred—I shall never know, but he has

his own special ways of doing those things.

Around two o'clock the fat cook came in with sandwiches and coffee. She said the "great big round man" had sent her.

General Tancred asked her thinly what the "great big round man" was doing.

"Rootin' aroun'," she said, and left us to our food.

Kaspir appeared from time to time. He was wearing his poker face, but there was a glint in his eye. When Tancred asked if anything had turned up, Kaspir was as vague and elusive as Elisa Helmi at her worst.

Once—it must have been around four—we heard Kaspir using the telephone down the hall. He seemed to be calling automobile dealers. It went on quite some time. General Tancred and Maude cat-napped.

Another time when Kaspir drifted through the living room on his way to the front door I asked him if he had found any trace of the missing Andrew. He said curtly that he had, and offered nothing further.

Tancred said: "I left orders at the gates to pick him up if he tries to get out."

Kaspir ignored him and went out again.

About seven o'clock General Tancred got up and turned on the lights. Gotha Helmi woke up.

HELMI came to his senses with the speed of the practiced drinker. You might have expected a long interlude of grunting and mumbling. Instead he rolled over, rubbed his eyes once or twice, and sat up. He eyed General Tancred intelligently—and malevolently.

From the hall doorway Colonel Kaspir, who might have been standing there for an hour, for we had not heard him arrive, said: "Helmi, what's in that old safe under the rubbish heap in the workroom cellar?"

Helmi transferred his malevolence to Colonel Kaspir. He said: "What safe?" Then: "None of your business."

Kaspir waited. There was something dangerous and compelling about him. It got home to Helmi. He said: "Rusted shut. I've never used it. It was here when I came. I've got a safe in the office."

"You bought another Ford truck recently—like the one that blew to pieces today?" demanded Kaspir.

Helmi shook his untidy gray head,

licked his dry lips. I thought I saw genuine surprise in his eyes.

Kaspir reached into the hall behind him and produced a small leather bag and a foot-high metal cylinder with a tube attached.

Helmi said: "That's my special acetylene equipment. Put it down."

To my surprise, Kaspir crooked his finger at me. I went over and, opening the bag, he showed me a small pistol-like and very compact acetylene torch and a pair of masks.

"Think you can work this gadget, Mike?" he said. But he was not looking at me. He was looking at Helmi, very intently, noting and weighing whatever was going on in Helmi's face.

I said I thought I could. The thing seemed to be the acme of simplicity. It looked as though it had cost a great deal of money.

"Then burgle that safe for me," said Kaspir calmly. "I got a passionate desire to see what's in it." I said I'd do my best. Kaspir said: "Run along with him, Maude."

Maude said: "Sure you wouldn't rather I'd step into the dining room and pinch the spoons?" But it didn't go over. Kaspir's eyes were still fixed on Helmi. I thought I saw him reach a decision about Helmi—a rather amazing one, too—for he said to Helmi, in the friendliest way possible: "How's for a slug outa your bottle?"

"Let me out of here," said Maude faintly. From his armchair Tancred made an unpleasant noise.

We went back through the house and along a covered walk to the largest of the several outbuildings, a great, barn-like structure. The cellar, apparently dug after the barn was built, was a smallish, dank room, cluttered with the left-behinds of the previous tenants, ranging from busted bicycles to equipment for home-brewing beer. The safe we found half-hidden under broken packing cases and the shards of what had once been a set of Grand Rapids furniture. By the light of the single naked bulb hanging from the ceiling I cleared away this dusty junk and squatted before the safe. It was, as Helmi had said, rusted shut—or so I thought until I found a smear of oil on my finger.

I showed the smear to Maude, and tried to hide the tension that was beginning to shake my hands a little. Maude didn't say anything, but her eyes were excited. She put on the spare mask while I hooked up the equipment, and when I was ready to start she squatted beside me before the safe.

That torch of Helmi's was a honey. It bit deep, and quickly. I had feared a two- or three-hour job. This began to look like thirty minutes. I marked a circle around the rusty combination and settled down to work.

The electric light went out. Maude jumped. I said: "Let it go, we've enough light here," and went on burning. The bulb had looked about played out when we first turned it on.

The next thing I knew there was something hard and cold around my throat and I was strangling.

I STRUGGLED to my feet. The torch fell away and left the room doubly dark after that blinding white light.

I hooked a finger between my throat and the noose. It was wire. The man behind me must have had his knee in my back. I wanted desperately to lash at him, but self-preservation kept both hands at my throat. Maude screamed again, and I felt her thrashing about. My attacker grunted something. Then there was a thunder of heavy feet, and sounds of a blow. A light came on and I was sitting on the floor gasping for breath, my fingers cramped into a death grip on that deadly wire collar.

I began to see things. The first was Colonel Kaspir. His great hand was clasped lovingly around the throat of a slender young man with blond hair and rimless eyeglasses. He squeezed the throat until the fellow's eyes bulged.

More footsteps. General Tancred and Helmi came galloping down those steep stairs.

Helmi stopped dead when he saw the man Kaspir was clutching. Helmi's face, even after his exertions, went mud-color in less than three seconds.

"Well," said Colonel Kaspir jovially. He gave a final squeeze, then let go. The blond young man reeled, swallowed. "Seein' ghosts, Helmi?" asked Kaspir.

Helmi said quickly: "Cyril. . ." Then he sat down heavily on the bottom step.

"Yep," said Colonel Kaspir. "But his real name's Z. J. Rilke." To Cyril Johns he said: "How's for opening that safe for us, Johann? Save us a little trouble."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," said Cyril Johns—or Rilke, if you like. He massaged his throat and looked from Helmi to General Tancred to Kaspir. A film seemed to come over his eyes. They were small eyes, and very shiny, like a snake's. I had an urge to lay a fist against one of them—for my own throat was still aching badly from the wire—but restrained myself.

"Have it your way," said Kaspir airily. "Time, we got plenty. Mike, you feel good enough to play with that torch a little more? We'll interview our young friend here after the safe's open."

I said I thought I could go through with it, so I found the mask and brought the torch to bear once more. The sparks could not have been showering more than a minute at most when there was a high, womanish scream that stopped all action in the room.

I looked around. Rilke had tried to bolt. He was struggling and plunging in Kaspir's grasp. Kaspir looked puzzled, badly puzzled. Rilke was in a mad panic. Kaspir held him by both arms. "Go on, Mike," he said.

"For the love of God!" shrieked Rilke, in that high, grating voice.

"S'matter, boy?" said Colonel Kaspir coldly. "Nerves all shot?"

"There's EX7 in there," screamed Rilke.

My finger was on the torch trigger. I shot one final flame against the combination. Then I dropped the torch and stood up, shaking violently all over.

I have seen Colonel Kaspir upset from time to time during my association with him, but I have never seen his normally ruddy face sheet-white before.

"Great, jumpin' tomcats," said Colonel Kaspir. "I never thought o' that. I thought. . ."

"The stuff—if that heat's gotten through the container. . ." Rilke was still pulling for the stairs.

"Open that safe," said Colonel Kaspir shakily. "You other folks go upstairs."

Rilke paled. Kaspir shook him. "We're gonna hang you anyhow," he said roughly. "What the hell do you care where you die? Open that safe. Get that flyin' ice-box outa there double-damn quick!"

We didn't go upstairs. We waited. Rilke opened the safe. He had to try two or three times. When the door swung open, he fell aside in a dead faint.

Helmi jumped forward. First he brought out a small cylinder, about the size of a thermos bottle. He unscrewed the top. "It's all right," he said hoarsely. He laid it carefully aside, first replacing the top. Then he began removing the carefully packed sections of what looked like a fairly intricate model plane. He laid these on the floor and passed his hand lovingly over them. "I shall get to work at once," he said. "It is almost done." He looked up at General Tancred, and there was no malevolence in his eyes now. "I have played around too much," he said apologetically. "I feel better now. You will have no more trouble with me."

The lieutenant of the guard took Rilke away, not too gently. The last thing Kaspir said to Rilke, in that house, was: "Why'd you send me that note about you bein' in New Orleans?"

Rilke did not answer. "O.K.," said Kaspir, nodding to the lieutenant. When they were gone, Kaspir said thoughtfully: "I guess he was just tryin' to muddy the waters a little more." He grinned at Gotha Helmi. Helmi had both hands around a giant highball. So did Maude. So did I. So did Kaspir. It was Kaspir's third.

"He pretty near muddied you right into a hangman's noose, Helmi," said Colonel Kaspir. "Plantin' that phony stuff in your wife's mind about hearin' you and a bunch o' spies holdin' midnight conferences. I thought you were in it."

Gotha Helmi smiled feebly.

Tancred said: "Whose wrist was that with Cyril John's bracelet on it?"

Kaspir's face darkened. "Andrew's," he said.

"IT WORKED this way," said Colonel Kaspir. The pallor from that blinding moment of revelation in the cellar had not entirely left him. He was forty per cent less bumptious than I have ever

known him to be after the successful conclusion of a case.

"Rilke was nosin' around lookin' for the latest dope when he ran across you, Helmi. He figured you had somethin' hot. You did. He stuck to you.

"The thing developed almost naturally. It must have given Rilke a sardonic kick to be workin' on a gadget that the U. S. Government was backin'—eventually for the benefit of the Reich. So he worked extra hard in a good cause. He got the EX7 formula set in his mind. But the plane device was more intricate. Moreover, if he could actually steal the workin' model, instead of just takin' plans of it, he'd set back the whole project by a year or so until you could build another.

"So what does he do as the zero hour approaches? First he walks outa the gate one afternoon a week or so ago. Then later, after the guard is changed, he drives back in in a Ford truck like the one you been usin' to take the stuff to the test grounds every day. They're used to that truck at the gate.

"Rilke parked the duplicate truck in the woods near that hollow. Last night he got pretty busy. First he went to Andrew's room, shot him and put his identification tag on Andrew. Then he carried the body down through the woods and put it into the duplicate truck.

"It must have been a blow to Rilke when he found you were sick this morning, Helmi. But he couldn't wait, because Andrew was dead and there would be questions asked when Andrew didn't show up. So he says he'll go along to the test ground with the two soldiers, as usual. He gets in the back of the truck—the real truck, o' course—with the transmitting apparatus and the model and the EX7.

"In the hollow Rilke outs with his gun and shoots the soldiers neatly through the back of the head—from behind—German style. Then he runs the real truck into the woods and transfers the bodies to

the duplicate. He runs the duplicate truck back on the road, unscrews the top of that canister thing of EX7, and highballs it off in the real truck with the plane model. About the time he gets over near the mill pond he hears the EX7 do its stuff, and figures he's safe.

"So he removes the plane model and then runs the truck into the mill pond and watches it go down outa sight. Then he sneaks back through the woods, and caches the plane model in the old safe, which he'd oiled up for that purpose."

"How was he figuring on getting away from this place?" demanded Tancred.

"That's where I didn't think far enough," said Colonel Kaspir, avoiding Maude's eye and mine. "I should ha' known he'd have put aside a hunk of EX7. Then one night he'd sneak down to one of the guard gates, plant that EX7—and when the gate wasn't there any more, and the men weren't either, he'd stroll out."

"I think I know where you caught cold," I said thoughtfully.

"That mill pond 'ud freeze a brass monkey," said Kaspir feelingly. "You see, Mike, the idea I had was so screwy that I was sort of ashamed to let it out this mornin'. I had Rilke on my mind. And I had a number o' large, formless suspicions. And not much else. So after you left I rambled around. Down in the woods I found out what looked like truck tracks, but I wasn't sure. Finally I got to the mill pond. Bein' slightly wrought up at the time, I peeled off and went in to see. And I found the truck—the real truck, not the duplicate, o' course."

"I see it all but one thing," said Maude. "What in the name of Tophet made you connect Rilke with this business?"

"Well, you see," said Colonel Kaspir thoughtfully, "Rilke's name is Zyrillus Johann Rilke. Zyrillus Johann means 'Cyril John'. And puttin' two and two together. . ."

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.

SING

Ronny Dane clung to the mike—
then plunged in agony, face only
inches away from the footlights.



A Plates O'Rion Novelette

It didn't make sense when the pint-sized pix-maker's gal Sal stood out in the rain with a lot of hep-cat hellions for a glimpse of Ronny Dane, their zoot-suited swing idol. But then neither did Ronny's sudden death from heart failure, his suicide note which later proved to be a forgery, and the M.D.'s chagrin upon discovering that the corpse was really dead!

FOR YOUR SHROUD

By DALE CLARK

Author of "Dames Are Like That," etc.

CHAPTER ONE

Sour Note

THE dimmed-out night was sooty dark, wet with drizzling rain that misted into faces and formed puddles in hat brims. The shape of the old Opera House looked more like a prison than a place of gaiety and amusement. In the alley behind it, the rain-wetted crowd stood like densely herded cattle.

A funny thing—the crowd was all feminine. There were just the two men on the edge of it.

"It's worse around in front," fat Ben Heeley wheezed. "They're cuckoo, Plates! Ten million fighting men in uniform, and these daffy dames make a zoot-suited

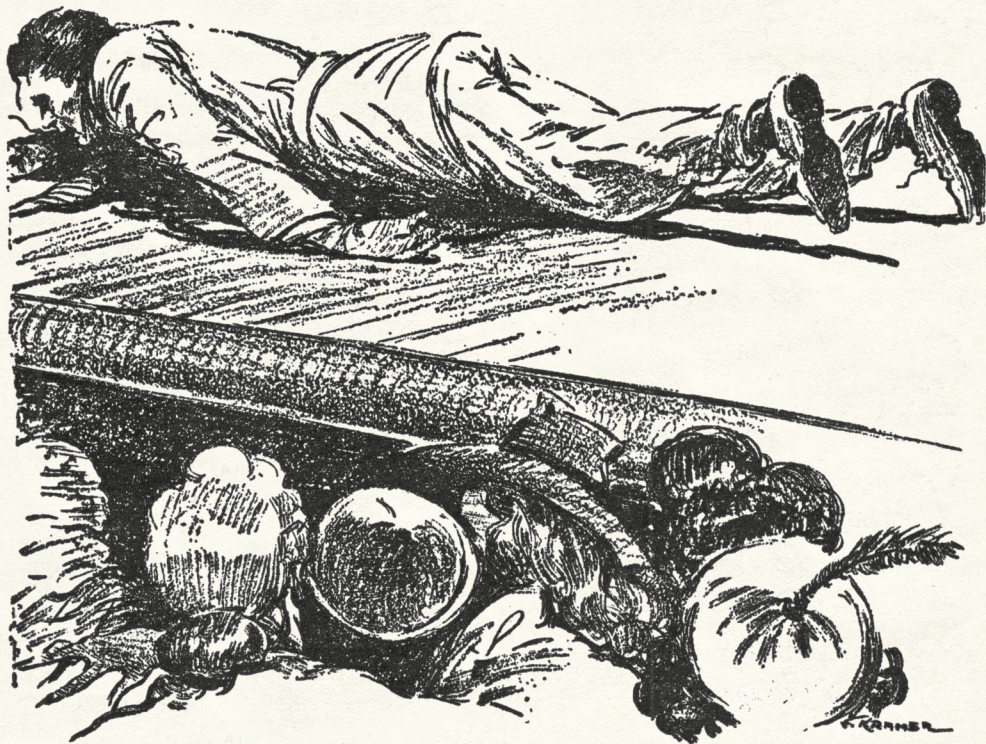
ukelele lizard their Public Hero Number One!"

Plates O'Rion, ex-newspaper cameraman turned specialist in legal photography, raised his pint-sized figure on tiptoe and peered down the alley. His goal was the stage door, lit by the one, mist-haloed red bulb. The problem was how to reach it.

Every brick in the alley seemed to have one of Ronny Dane's feminine admirers standing on it—though it would be a shivering, rain-drenched hour before their idol emerged from the stage door.

"I guess we're both too old-fashioned to appreciate Dane's brand of jive music," mumbled the photographer.

Heeley glowered out of his small, porcine eyes. "Music? You call it music to make like a radio with a busted tube?"



Plates didn't answer. Studying the situation, he noted that the rain dripping off the old Opera House eaves was clearing a foot-wide path of extra-special wetness. Twisting and squirming, he followed the line of least resistance and greatest discomfort. Heeley's rotund form tagged along, taking advantage of the route cleared by the other. Fat, cold drops of water bursting on his neck and shoulders nettled him to fresh resentment.

"Look at 'em, Plates! Mostly high school brats that oughta be home studying their algebra! I dunno what ails parents, letting their kids grow up into such hep-cat hellions!"

Plates used corkscrew tactics, dived through the solid mass of autograph seekers around the roped-off doorway. "Hold it, you birds!" The policeman's face was red with cold and peremptory wrath under his rubberized headgear. "Where do you think you're going?"

"We're from the insurance company, officer." Ben Heeley waved credentials. "Big Bill Garms sent for us—there's been a little accident inside."

The cop grunted, jerked his thumb toward the girl who'd ducked under the ropes behind Plates and Heeley.

"Yeah? Is *she* with you guys, too?"

Little Plates O'Rion glanced around, and got a heart-punch—a wallop that shook him all the way down to his toes.

THE girl was slim, blond, wearing her hair in a swirling coiffure that was falling apart now, despite the bulky handbag she held up in lieu of hat and umbrella. Waterproof lipstick painted a crimson, sophisticated slash across her face. Her sweater and tweed skirt unfortunately weren't waterproof. Soaked by the drizzling rain, the garments clung to the eighteen-year-old's sleek, young curves.

Gulping sound welled in the little photo's throat. "Sal—!"

There was irony in the set-up, if the cop had known it. Moments ago, Ben Heeley had been lambasting this mob of giddy, jive-crazed hep-cats, and the parents who raised them that way—and here Plates O'Rion's own kid popped up in the very front row of Ronny Dane's admirers.

But the cop didn't know it, he merely heard Plates mutter the name, heard the girl's confident, "It's all right, I'm Mr. O'Rion's assistant," as she sped to the stage door.

The photographer swallowed lamely and followed—into a backstage world of inky gloom, mysterious dangling ropes, vaguely visible stacks of ancient stage scenery.

Heartsick, he snatched at Sally O'Rion's damp, sweated arm.

"Sal! Dammit, you told Mom and me you were going to the Red Cross and make bandages tonight!"

There was Irish anger in his tone—and deep, puzzled hurt. . . . It wasn't that he'd caught her playing hookey in the alley, that she'd probably catch her death of cold from the stunt. The trouble was, she'd *lied* to him—and his mind, utterly shrewd and skeptical where anybody else was concerned, couldn't believe itself now.

There must be some explanation. He wanted to believe there was one. But the eighteen-year-old didn't offer any, tried to pass it off lightly. "I forgot, Wednesday is the Red Cross night."

"Look here, Sal—!"

"Sh-h-h!" She gestured toward the stage, ahead and to the right. "Listen to that man's solid sending!"

Little Plates O'Rion wasn't interested in the glimpse of blue spotlight funneling onto the curly-haired Ronny Dane. The performer's costume of nearly knee-length vanilla ice cream coat and billowing, chocolate-hued trousers narrowing to preposterously narrow cuffs left Plates completely cold.

Dane was writhing strangely inside these weird garments, strumming his ukelele, chanting vocal gibberish into the stage mike. It remained a total mystery to Plates O'Rion how Ronny Dane, his zoot-suit, and his ukelele had suddenly leaped from nowhere to nation-wide celebrity. He neither knew nor cared how Dane had acquired fame and popularity rivaling that of a Bing Crosby or a Frank Sinatra. To his perplexed brain, the burning mystery was the riddle of Sally O'Rion.

Scorching, anguished questions formed on his lips, and had to be swallowed un-

said, as a gargantuan figure suddenly materialized out of the backstage gloom.

"O'Rion?" Big Bill Garms' voice challenged. "Who the hell invited you in?"

"I did," from Heeley. "He's with me."

THE gloom wasn't dense enough to hide the vicious gleam in Garms' eyes. The hatred he bore toward Plates O'Rion originated in the fact that Big Bill used his heavily mortgaged Opera House for the second-rate wrestling shows and boxing matches he promoted. Part of the profits came from the ticket sales, part from the fixing of fights on which Garms placed bets through a crooked betting commissioner. One of the last acts of Plates' newspaper career had been to conceal himself in the building and snap a picture of two pugilists practicing the routine of a "dive." The picture, published side-by-side with a ringside photo of the "knockout" had cost Big Bill a six-month suspension of his promoter's license.

Garms' elephantine memory had never forgotten the injury. The muscles of his brawny, six-foot frame flexed with yearning to take Plates by the throat, and hurl the beaten-to-a-pulp pint-size photog into the alley. That he didn't act on the impulse was due entirely to the spot he was in now.

By a stroke of financial luck, Garms had been able to book Ronny Dane in the Opera House, and for the first time in years, had dusted off the *Standing Room Only* signs. In the rush, however, a woman had been trampled and her ankle fractured. The resulting lawsuit might cost Big Bill more than his evening's profit, unless the Mutual Indemnity policy he carried took care of the damages. Garms dared not cross Ben Heeley, the Mutual claim adjuster, or object to having the victim photographed.

Gritting his teeth on the savage resentment inspired by Plates' unwelcome presence, the burly promoter swung on his heel.

"The dame's in a dressing room. There's a sawbones looking at her now."

Plates whipped out his camera, readied it for business. The equipment case he thrust into Sally's hands. "You got in here by claiming to be my assistant," he grumbled. "O.K., you can help me."

Garms led the way past the stage wings, swung left at a flight of steps leading to the dressing rooms. Heeley didn't follow. His fat shape waddled another few steps to a small door that opened out under the circle of box seats.

"Plates! Get a load of this on your film!"

The little photographer craned to peer over Heeley's fleshy shoulder. Under the blue beam of the spotlight, the main floor contained rivers of blurred, bobbing faces. Carried away by Ronny Dane's solid sending, his fans were dancing in the aisles.

That is, if you could call it dancing. To Plates' old-fashioned eyes, the spectacle suggested a combination of mass delirium tremens.

"Shoot it!" Heeley begged.

THE little lensman's trained eye made a swift estimate of the candlepower needed to illuminate the huge, bowl-like building. "Sal," he requested, "hand me one of those super-duper giant flash-bulbs." He stretched out his hand.

Nothing happened.

Plates glanced around.

Big Bill Garms loomed behind him. Raging, red-faced, he blurted: "What the hell you trying to pull?"

"Look at those damn jitterbugs!" wheezed Ben Heeley. "Why should Mutual take the rap because one of them busted her ankle? We insured a theatrical performance, not a public riot."

It wasn't courage which impelled Heeley to face the bigger Garms, but the driving lust of his ambition. The claim adjuster had his eye on a rich-paying executive's job. He strove to win his company's approval by paring every claim down to the last nickel.

Therefore, with cornered rat daring, the adjuster tongue-lashed the already dangerously aroused Garms. Plates knew it was so, but at the moment the dog-eat-dog angle didn't interest him. His practical brain didn't see the sense of arguing about snapping a pix of the jitterbugs until he had a flash-bulb to take it with—and he'd just now spotted Sally O'Rion standing in the stage wing. She was focusing the two hundred-dollar lens of a Leica camera on Ronny Dane.

The little photog dodged past the cursing Garms, feverish language burning on his tongue. He hadn't brought any Leica with him tonight. Sally must have had it in her handbag.

His hand shot out, trapped the minicam in angry fingers. "Fine thing!" he raged. "I suppose you're going to tell me you needed this to make Red Cross bandages!"

Plates got the shock of his life. The eighteen-year-old didn't even notice him! Her fascinated blue eyes were glued on the zoot-suited Ronny Dane to the exclusion of all else.

"Look!" Sally O'Rion breathed. "He isn't . . . see that? He stumbled! And missed a couple of notes, too!"

"How can you tell? Hell, sounds to me like he hasn't hit anything but sour notes ever since we—"

He checked it, his pint-sized figure freezing in sudden, bird-dog attention. No doubt about it, Ronny Dane *had* stumbled this time. He had to grab at the stage mike to save himself.

As he did so, the ukelele squirted out of the performer's convulsed hands. It struck the floor, bounced, and smashed a footlight bulb with a pistol shot report.

Ronny Dane swayed, the microphone rocking with the movement. His mouth gaped open in fish-out-of-water fashion. Strangling, panting sounds sobbed from his distorted lips to be carried by the mike to the farthest corner of the old Opera House.

"Is—is there—doctor in the house?"

CHAPTER TWO

"I Can't Face the Music"

FOR a horrible, aeons-long instant the swaying, buckling figure clung to the mike—and then plunged in twisted agony, face only inches away from the glaring footlights.

Sally O'Rion whirled away, a panicky moan on her lips. Plates hardly noticed. With incredible haste he measured the light output from the footlights, set the diaphragm of the Speed Graphic, cocked the mechanism, whipped the big box up, and triggered. It all happened by sheer instinct, with the fluid speed of a West-

ern gunfighter making a lightning draw.

Maybe the picture wasn't worth taking. He didn't stop to give the matter conscious thought. He'd covered enough World Series, Bowl games, and championship fights to know that the photographer who stops to ask himself such a question has nothing left to shoot at when he makes up his mind.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Big Bill Garms lunging out of the wings, yelling to an unseen somebody: "Ring down the damn curtain!"

His wiry fingers fairly blurring in rapid succession movement, Plates reversed the filmholder, yanked the black slide, recocked the shutter, and snapped a second shot before the curtain swished between the footlights and Dane's upturned face.

The curtain blotted all but eerie half-lights on the stage. Big Bill Garms' crouching shape took on the aspect of a fury-racked ape. "Come on! Get up off the floor, ya bum!" he screamed, as if to some of his pugilistic talent. "Ya can't quit on me now!"

"He's drunk." Ben Heeley trotted with short, quick, Donald Duck steps across the stage. "You can't blame this on Mutual—"

Garms raised a sweating, tense face. "The hell you say! If he can't finish the performance—if I gotta give that crowd back their money, your outfit's stuck, sure as little green apples give the bellyache!"

"You're crazy!"

"I'm insured against tough breaks, ain't I? You'd pay off if lightning struck the building, wouldn't you?"

"That's different. Act of nature. . ." the claim adjuster struggled.

"So's the bum keeling over like this. He didn't do it on purpose, did he?"

The argument was settled as a dapper, Tuxedo-suited personage brushed past Plates O'Rion. "I'm Dr. James Ravenoe. Fortunately, I happened to be seated in the front row," the newcomer announced.

He thrust his narrow, neat self between Garms and the unmoving Ronny Dane. Deftly, his supple fingers sought for a pulse beat, pressed back lids to peer into eye-pupils. . .

Finally he straightened, unhooked his gold-framed glasses, shook his head soberly. "The man is dead."

PLATES O'RION turned away, found a coin phone on the wall under the stairway leading to the dressing rooms. He dialed the *Tribune*, snapped, "City desk."

True, the little photog had quit the *Trib's* payroll several years ago, but once a newspaperman, always a newspaperman. "Kauffman? Ronny Dane just dropped dead on the stage of the Opera House."

"You got pix?" the city editor snapped back. "O.K.! Hustle 'em here!"

"Take me half an hour," he hedged. "I've got to do a little job for Mutual Indemnity first." The news pix were worth more in cold cash than the comparatively small fee Heeley would pay—but, honestly, Heeley did have first call on his services.

Plates started to hang up the receiver but it shot out of his hand, bounced at the end of its cord.

To the little photog, it felt as if his skull had filled with red hot flame. Stabs of fire seemed to leap from his bulging eyeballs, then burst into Fourth of July fireworks. After that came the sound of a drum being violently beaten in his ears.

Thick, slow heartbeats of time ticked away before he realized the bass drum sound effect came from the phone receiver swaying and bumping against the wall over his head. He was down on the floor, huddled over his camera.

"Slugged, for hell's sake!" he whispered.

Wiry figure twisting, he rose in a half-crouch with arms high to ward off a second attack. It took him a moment of eye-slitted peering into the backstage jungle of dangling ropes and unused scenery to realize the attacker had vanished.

Grimly apprehensive, he snatched up his Speed Graphic. Warm relief tingled through him, since neither the camera nor the Leica he'd pushed into his coat pocket seemingly had been tampered with.

But then—why. . . ?

Shakily—the after-effect of the punch half robbed him of using his legs—he tottered to the stage door and twisted its knob. Cool, wet breeze from the alley fanned his smarting head as he questioned the cop.

He got a flat denial. "Un-unh. I didn't see anybody coming or going."

Probably he'd been half punch-drunk to even ask the question. No assailant could have entered or left by that door without being in full view of the jam-packed alleyful of Dane fans. Therefore, he hadn't been slugged so that somebody could escape unseen from the stage.

Maybe it had been to stop the phone call? But that wouldn't add up, either. First, because anyone sneaking up close enough to slug Plates would have known the phone call was finished. Secondly—"Damn it," he mused, "nobody can keep the newspapers from finding out Dane died with three or four thousand people out front!"

IRKED by the sheer senseless mystery of the thing, Plates headed back toward the stage in search of Sally and his equipment case. It was the growled wrath of Big Bill Garms that brought him to a halt in the wings.

It occurred to him that maybe Garms had trailed him to the phone and sapped him—just for old time's sake.

Apparently, though, the promoter's thoughts were on other matters.

"Key-ripes, Carter! You can't collect one thin, steel penny from me!"

Plates eased closer—eyes intent on the man called Carter. Draped in fastidious flannels, iron-gray hair trimmed and brushed to micrometer perfection, every detail of him resplendent down to the rich glow of saddle-leather shoes—the photographer recognized Carter's type immediately.

The man was Broadway, flashy as a diamond and just as hard.

"What are you kicking about? You're only out one night's take." Carter's shrug was disdainful. "I'm his manager. I've got to cancel a year's big-time radio contract."

"That ain't all you gotta cancel. Dane didn't give a complete performance tonight, so I'm not under obligation to give you a nickel for his services," Garms argued.

Plates' brain brooded busily . . . Garms had to return the crowd's money, but he'd force Mutual Indemnity to make good the loss. At the same time, he meant to wriggle out of paying Dane's manager anything. Add up both ends and the an-

swer was cold, cash profit from Dane's death.

He hurried on to the stage, found Ben Heeley quizzing the Tuxedo-garbed Dr. Ravenoe.

"It was heart failure," Ravenoe diagnosed positively.

The claim adjuster turned away, perspiring. Frantic with worry, he gestured Plates O'Rion aside.

"You gotta help me! Big Bill's right, damn him. His policy pays off if any *natural* cause prevents the performance. Mutual's stuck unless we can prove Dane's death was no accident!" Heeley's fat lips were pumping out words like an artery gushing blood. "You're in this with me! You can't let me down now! I'll pay you big money!"

"For what?"

The adjuster's eyes were hot, eager. "I know about some of those murders you cleared up—that black market mob, the birthday candle kill. . . . Everybody says you'd be the best shamus in town if you wanted to trade in your camera for a badge—"

"Are you nuts? You just heard the doc say it was a heart attack. How the hell do you make murder out of it?"

Heeley blushed. He couldn't admit he made murder out of it to save Mutual Indemnity some money, could he?

"I dunno," he stammered. "It's just—well, it's damn funny the way he died, ain't it?" Suddenly his head shot forward, eyes staring. "Hey! Did a heart attack hang that lump on *your* noggin?"

The photographer hesitated. It was true, he couldn't fit the slugging into any theory of natural death. But then, neither could he fit it into any logical theory of murder. He spoke with chilled indifference. "You're wasting your breath, Heeley. I don't want any part in your chiseling racket. Frankly, I just don't give a damn whether you cut Garms' financial throat, or he cuts yours. The only detective work I'm interested in," he glanced around, "is finding that kid of mine."

"Sally? She ran up into one of those dressing rooms when it first happened."

PLATES hustled up the steps, found the first dressing room door open, and came to a startled stop on the doorsill.

It was Ronny Dane's dressing room. A theatrical trunk labeled with his name advertised the fact. So did the floral decorations supplied by his feminine admirers. Little Plates O'Rion hadn't seen so many bouquets, garlands, and flower baskets since they buried the last of the big-shot gangsters.

In the middle of this lavish hothouse display lay a silent, crumpled Sally O'Rion.

Plates' breath rocketed from his lungs in a yell. "Doc! Doc, shake out the lead and scam up here!"

Half-crazed with parental alarm, he flung his pint-sized self beside the girl, was kneeling beside the eighteen-year-old babbling incoherently when a man strode in.

The newcomer was a white-haired, sixtyish oldster who started in like an air raid warden practicing first aid.

"Lay off! Keep your mitts off her!" the photographer gritted. "The doctor'll be here in a minute."

The white-haired man made a bee-stung gesture. "Are you insane? I am the doctor."

"You—huh? What the. . . ?"

Heeley had come waddling up the steps in time to overhear the exchange. "It's O.K., Plates," the adjuster panted. "He's Doc Lessinger, the one who was taking care of that ankle case."

Lessinger's blue-veined hands groped for Sally O'Rion's wrist. He exclaimed sharply. A wad of note paper lay crumpled in the girl's fingers. The doctor smoothed it out.

"Good heavens! A suicide note!" he shrieked.

Plates rocked back, every feature in his face twisted askew. "She—a *suicide*? Holy—! Gimme that!" Lips jerking, he read aloud the scrawled message. "*I can't face the music. I'm taking my last bow tonight. . .*" and his breath whooshed out. "But it's signed, *Ronny Dane!*"

Carter's flannel-clad form thrust in past the bulging-eyed Heeley. "Excuse me. I'd like to see that."

Even in this moment, the hard Broadway glaze didn't crack. Carter's face stayed as smoothly drawn as his exquisitely combed hair. He literally didn't turn a hair, or flicker an eyelash.

"The thing's a phony," Dane's manager pronounced coldly. "It's an out-and-out forgery."

CHAPTER THREE

Meet the Corpse

FIVE anxious minutes later, they had Sally O'Rion propped on a divan. "I—I don't know what happened." The eighteen-year-old's blue eyes were shock-fogged. "Dane asked for a doctor. I remembered there was a doctor up here somewhere. I opened the door and—that's all."

Carter's smile was an unconvinced leer. "Everything went black, eh? Just like in the best murder alibis."

Plates O'Rion boiled with rage at the Broadwayite. "What's wrong with that?"

"Practically everything. Dane didn't commit suicide. He had a beautiful wife, two grand kids, a brilliant career, more moolah than he knew how to spend—every reason to stay alive," the manager insisted. "This girl's story doesn't make sense . . . waking up with that note in her fist."

"Her story doesn't make sense? I love that! In the name of hell, what does make sense? Dane died of heart failure, only first he wrote a farewell note, except you claim it's a forgery. Somebody saps Sal, somebody saps me, Big Bill Garms welches on paying you, and Heeley wants to welch on him. Why pick on Sally because she hasn't got a nice, logical solution to cover the whole screwy merry-go-round?"

The photog aimed an angry forefinger at the deep purple bruise on his daughter's forehead.

"Or maybe you've got a better explanation for that, wise-guy?"

Carter waved a disdainful, carefully manicured hand. "I think I have, yes."

"Take it outside, then." The white-haired Dr. Lessinger shooed them toward the door. "The young lady's been injured. She needs quiet, rest, a chance to pull herself together."

Plates swallowed, nodded. "O.K., Doc. But look after her. Just remember—there'll be personal hell to pay if anything more happens to that kid."

He followed Carter and Heeley out onto the landing, said to Carter: "Now. What's your gorgeous idea?"

"I don't deny the bump on her head. I suppose she came racing up here in wild excitement, tripped, and fell." The manager shrugged. "She returned to the stage, overheard enough to know Dane was dead. So she came up here, scribbled that suicide note, and threw a faked faint."

The cool gall of it made Plates gulp, gasp: "Why would she . . . ?"

Half-tolerant, half-scornful, the manager smiled. "She's young. Stage-struck. And Dane-dizzy. Look at her, man! She's wet to the skin, drenched from standing in the rain waiting for a glimpse of Dane. Think what all this means to a kid her age—her name in the newspapers, all her friends ga-ga over her—because of her connection with this." He fanned out his fingers. "You can't understand it. But be honest. Can you understand her waiting in the rain outside this Opera House tonight?"

The verbal punch made Plates wince. "That's not the point," he scowled. "How could she imitate his handwriting, forge a signature she'd never even seen in her life?"

"Hadn't she? Dane handed out hundreds of autographs every day in his life. Are you sure she hasn't got one of them tucked away in a drawer, that she doesn't know his signature by heart? Maybe she's forged it dozens of times before. Youngsters collect autographs to swap with one another, and sometimes they keep the original, trade off a facsimile."

UGLY misgivings shook little Plates O'Rion. He didn't believe Carter's glib theory for a minute, but what if the cops did? What if they didn't—but hauled Sally to headquarters, anyway, just on the half-chance it might be true?

"You're wrong, Carter." He tried to keep the fury out of his voice. "I know her. Sal wouldn't lie to me—"

"What about that Red Cross lie she told you?" Heeley snapped.

The lensman's driving glance almost knocked the words back into Heeley's mouth. Heeley was red-faced, furtive eyes dropping from Plates' reproach.

"What the hell ails you? It wasn't ten

minutes ago you were almost down on your knees begging me to help you—”

“That’s all off. You said no, you turned me down. So O.K., don’t send me a bill. I won’t pay it.”

The cameraman’s jaw clenched. His racing wits didn’t need a half-second to run down the claim adjuster’s reasoning. “So that’s it! You figure Sal’s in a jam. To get her out in the clear, I’ll have to play detective for free. You won’t have to pay me because you know damn well I won’t let her be pushed around!”

Heeley had started down the stairs, a guilty smirk on his fat face. For a wild moment, the suspicion crossed Plate’s mind that the fat man had forged that note to achieve exactly this result. But Heeley couldn’t have slugged Sally. He had rushed onto the stage almost as soon as Ronny Dane fell.

The pint-sized photographer wet his lips, urging himself to hard, fast thought.

“You don’t deny the girl did lie to you?” Carter taunted levelly.

Plates shoved past the manager, went to the dressing room door beyond Dane’s. He threw it open just in time to catch the red-haired woman taking two swift steps to the divan against the wall.

He slammed the door shut, jarred out at her: “That busted ankle got better fast, huh?”

She was pretty—if you didn’t mind hard depths in a pair of green eyes, a hard fix to the lusciously formed lips.

“My ankle isn’t broken. Just sprained, the doctor said.”

“Lessinger? Was *he* here all the time with you—until I hollered for help?”

The red-head nodded, asked: “What’s it all about? I heard loud voices. . .”

“So you went to the door, tried peeking through the keyhole?”

“No. I was merely testing my ankle, seeing whether I could walk on it.”

Plates grunted. He knew too much about the fake accident racket to take the sprained ankle story on faith. It was suspicious, yet the red-haired girl couldn’t be involved in the rest of this mess unless Lessinger was involved with her.

HIS under lip flicked against his teeth. Maybe it wasn’t so smart to leave Sally in Lessinger’s care, merely because

the white-haired oldster looked so eminently respectable.

The smart thing to do, Plates decided, was to have another physician make sure about Sally. He turned and hastened on the errand. At the foot of the stairs, Heeley’s corpulent figure shrank from his approach—and then shrank in yet more active alarm as Big Bill Garms crunched out of the off-stage shadows.

Plates didn’t wait to hear the argument. He sped through the wings toward the Tuxedo-clad Ravenoe. “Say, Doc, I wish you’d look at my daughter. She—” he broke off, stared confusedly around the stage. “Huh? Where’s the body gone?”

“Where do bodies usually go? To a mortuary, of course.”

“Fast work, wasn’t it?”

“I’m proud to say it was.” Ravenoe whisked off his gold-framed glasses, blew on the lenses, started polishing them briskly with his handkerchief. “Mob psychology, you know. Women fought to touch Mr. Dane’s hand, stood for hours to get his autograph, literally cut the buttons off his garments for souvenirs. I congratulate myself on having the body removed through a side exit before any disgraceful riot could result here.”

“Yeah? Maybe the cops won’t congratulate you, though.”

“The police? What can it matter to them?”

“That suicide note,” Plates explained, “is a hand engraved invitation to the homicide squad, whether it’s real or phony.”

“Suicide note?” The medico stared. “What are you talking about? Dane couldn’t have left a suicide note. He didn’t know he was going to die. Heart attacks of that nature give no warning.”

Plates O’Rion brooded gloomily. “Doc, I don’t like to question your professional judgment. I don’t know the score, and you do. Only—isn’t it possible maybe Dane swallowed some poison that’d act like a heart attack?”

“He wasn’t poisoned, you poor fool. He isn’t even—”

Ravenoe checked it, sucked in his breath. His fist tightened spasmodically, shattered the eyeglass pane. Slivers of optical glass flashed and winked on the floor.

"Poison! Oh, my God! Maybe—"

He slued around, bumped into the stage mike, knocked it over with a furious sweep of his arm.

"Doc!" Plates exploded.

The medico flung a white-faced look over his shoulder, then ran. Blindly, his bolting form slashed through the wing draperies. Ahead, a red bulb marked a side exit labeled *Emergency Only*.

They ran almost a dead heat to the door. Ravenoe's fingers were clawing at the knob when Plates caught the man's sleeve.

"Doc, damn it, listen to me!"

"Let go!" the other shrieked. His hands flailed at the photographer with the fury of a man trying to beat out fire on his clothes with his naked palms. "Don't try to stop me—matter life and death—!"

"Relax!" Plates gritted. "Spill it, Doc. Dane isn't even *what?*"

Ravenoe dropped his hands, sobered himself, swallowed before he replied. "Take your paws off me, then. I intensely dislike being manhandled! I—" In the middle of the speech, he jammed his Tuc-clad shoulder against the door. It opened. Twirling, his slender figure eeled out over the sill into darkness.

Plates oathed furiously: "Why, you slippery son of ——" as he hurled himself in pursuit.

A GENERAL SHERMAN tank loomed up to smack head on into the little man. At least, it felt like that. . . . It took him a reeling, dizzy instant to realize that the door opened onto a solid brick wall. There was a mere yard-wide walk, just a rat-run passageway, between the Opera House and its neighboring building. Racing out, he'd socked full force into that wall.

Plates O'Rion braced himself on wobbling legs. The fleeing shadow far down the dark, brick-walled tunnel was the fugitive physician. The steely dirge ringing in Plates' ears was the wail of a police car siren.

That settled it. He wasn't going to face the homicide squad without a load of verbal dynamite to blow up Carter's cock-eyed accusation of Sally. The lensman staggered in pursuit of Ravenoe.

The Tuxedo-suited man was slowed

down, had to writhe his way through the crowd under the Opera House marquee. The quicker, more mob-wise Plates gained ground enough to be within earshot as Ravenoe reached the waiting line of cabs.

"Kammond's mortuary—on Fifteenth Street."

Plates snagged the second taxi in the line, repeated the same direction. "Don't tail that guy ahead—beat him there!"

Eyes impatiently scanning the side-streets flicking past, the cameraman tried to read the riddle of the physician's frantic flight. From his years of newspaper experience, he knew Dane's death was an ink-filled bombshell. From Maine to California, the weird mystery would share the headlines with the latest war news. If it turned out to be suicide, after all, then Ravenoe's off-hand diagnosis of heart failure wouldn't look so good. The error might ruin him, professionally.

Was that what ailed Ravenoe? Or was there something else—not yet to be guessed?

The taxi turned into Fifteenth Street—into a left-over from the horse-and-buggy days. Plates waved a banknote into the driver's fingers. "Pull around the next corner and wait for me there!"

He loped across the pavement toward the discreet neon sign advertising *Kammond's Funeral Home*. His sprinting steps diagonaled across a strip of lawn, up the steps of the brownstone building which must have started its existence as a private home. The hallway he entered was lined with tubbed palms and rubber trees. Beyond it lay a reception room, thickly carpeted, with fat chairs, a Gothic carved table, an open catalog of caskets on the table. He rushed on into another room—this one a reception chamber for the dead.

Harsh ceiling light glared down, reflected off the antiseptically white, tiled walls. The photographer's feet husked across the bare floor to the white sheet-covered form on the mortician's slab. He yanked the sheet back, gasped in dumb-founded amazement.

The corpse lay as he had never before seen one arranged—face down on the slab. He couldn't figure it out, until he leaned close, fascinated by the barely visible puncture in Dane's neck. In the

normal position, he couldn't have noticed it at all.

Harsh, hacked-out sound pounded into his eardrums.

"Hands up!" the voice commanded. "Who sent you here? Who the hell are you?"

Plates spun around. The man in the doorway was gaunt, bald, wearing incongruous spats under the rubberized smock draped onto his gangling build. He pointed the black barrel of a pistol straight at Plates' belly.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pix Frame

"KAMMOND?" the photog questioned.

"Never mind who I am! I'm asking where you fit in this. Come clean with it, or by—!"

He didn't finish. At the tinkle of a hidden bell, his bony face hardened. A savage gun gesture warned Plates to the wall. The gaunt man posted himself just inside the doorway, waiting.

Dr. Ravenoe came racing in from the reception room. Behind him came the red-haired young woman Plates had last seen in the Opera House dressing room.

Ravenoe reached the slab first. A wail of horror tore from the medico's lips. "Great God, Della! He's dead!"

The harsh voice of the undertaker struck like a whipcrack. "What'd you expect him to be?"

Ravenoe and the red-haired girl crashed shoulders as they swung around, the impact jarring her off balance. The doctor didn't notice.

"Hell afire, Kammond, you ask that? You know damned well—" He caught a glimpse of Plates, and his voice changed, fawned as it picked up again. "You know it was just a practical joke. A—a publicity gag! Dane didn't commit suicide. He didn't intend to die at all. He *wasn't* dead when I examined him on the stage tonight. It was all an act."

The eyes in little Plates O'Rion's face were as round as camera lenses. His lips twisted.

"Tell it to the Marines, Doc. That'd raise a good belly laugh in any USO."

"It's the truth. I swear it's the truth. You can ask Mrs. Dane here . . ." he jerked his head at the red-haired young woman.

"You're Ronny Dane's wife?" Plates asked the young woman. "And was that 'sprained ankle' part of the publicity gag, too?"

She wouldn't—maybe couldn't—answer. Her green eyes wore a hard, glittering glaze Plates couldn't read. Her silence might have been stunned, or it might have been wary.

Ravenoe pivoted, appealed to the gaunt man. "Kammond will back me up in that. Won't you, Kammond?"

The undertaker's long features had the cold, rigid look of a fish embalmed on ice.

"Speak up, man!" The medico had his gold-framed glasses out, fingers playing a St. Vitus jig over the broken spectacles. "Tell him. It was just a gag—wasn't it?"

"I don't know what you're blabbing about. You told me to pick up a stiff at the Opera House side door tonight. More than that," Kammond shook his bald head, "I can't say."

RAVENOE went all to pieces, his professional dignity forgotten as he spluttered, windmilled his arms. "You—you crook! You filthy double-crossing liar! You know Dane left the stage a *live* man. You know he was here this afternoon, he paid you five hundred dollars—"

The gaunt man interrupted. "That's crazy talk! I'm a respectable business man, performing a legitimate community service. I don't know what you're trying to cover up, brother, but you picked the wrong funeral parlor to try and bury it in."

Their clashing stares failed to notice Della Dane's silent, stricken exit from the room. Probably if she'd tried to sneak out, they'd have noticed, all right—but moving in a blind, sleepwalker's trance, it seemed as though she herself didn't know what she was doing.

Neither did they notice Plates' arm stretching toward the light switch on the wall.

Ravenoe had raised his fist, then caught the warning movement of Kammond's gun, so he changed the gesture—used it to draw the back of his fist against his

perspiring forehead. "You crook—you cowardly crook. . . ."

The lights went out. The two were still intent on each other—while Plates' jack-rabbit leap landed him outside, hauling the door shut after him. He sprinted across the reception chamber, down the hall.

"Mrs. Dane—cab—waiting on the corner!"

He urged her to a full run, though for all he knew Kammond and Ravenoe were still playing cat-and-rat in the dark death-room. He told the hackie his downtown office address, waited for the hum of the motor to cover up the sound of his voice as he leaned close to the red-head.

"It stinks. Mothballs."

"What? I don't know what you're talking about."

"That 'publicity gag.' It's got white whiskers on it a foot long," the lensman jeered. "Anyway, it wouldn't work. Every newspaper in the country would be off Ronny Dane for keeps. He'd make the front pages, yeah—this once. But they'd never forget it, never forgive him for chiseling a million bucks worth of free space. He'd never get another line of publicity printed as long as he lived."

"Maybe that's what he wanted."

"Huh?"

Softly: "Don't you think my husband might have grown tired of being public pin-up man number one—that he might have wanted to quit, and join the Army?"

Plates tugged at his necktie. "What are you trying to give me? If he wanted to enlist, why didn't he? There's no law against it."

"He couldn't call his life his own. He was like a boxer—his manager owned half of him."

"Carter?"

Della Dane nodded, said: "Ronny was tied to an iron-clad contract. Carter cleverly arranged it so that all the money passed through his hands, and Ronny would have to take a terrible financial licking to quit."

PLATES thought it over.

"He could wait and be drafted, couldn't he? Jive isn't so essential to the war effort that his draft board wouldn't call him sooner or later."

"That's what he was afraid of," she said miserably.

"Afraid? What the—? You just said he *wanted* to join up."

Dane's wife sighed. "But can't you see? My husband is—was something special. His fans were . . . well, *men* didn't go for him. If he enlisted, if he got drafted in the usual way, he'd be behind the eight-ball from the start. It isn't just that all the men in his outfit would be prejudiced against him at the start. Every mail call he'd be swamped with fan letters. Do you think his buddies would like that?"

"Don't you see? He wanted to break his contract with Carter, wanted to slip off quietly and enlist under his own name, which doesn't happen to be 'Ronny Dane' at all."

"And so he pulled this stunt—dropping 'dead' on the stage?" Plates considered it. "Yeah. It *was* a way out. . . Crazy, so crazy nobody ever would dream the truth, I guess! But why couldn't he drop dead in a hotel room?"

"Hotels have their staff physicians on call. In a theater, though, you can ask if there's a doctor in the house and anybody can step up."

"Ravenoe isn't a doctor at all?"

"He's a friend. An old friend. We were troupers together. The three of us used to play the night clubs, in our nickel and dime days."

"And this ankle of yours—?"

"I've got a trick ankle. You see, we had to find out if there was a real doctor in the house. Because if a real one ever got on that stage, he'd know right away Ronny was faking. I threw my ankle out of joint, pretended to faint in the aisle, and then when this Dr. Lessinger appeared, it was my job to keep him safely off the stage."

Dane's wife bit her lip. "Kammond was the weak link. The 'body' had to be taken somewhere, somebody had to pretend it had been 'cremated.' Kammond took Ronny's money—and then double-crossed us."

"Uh-uh, the double-cross comes closer home. Kammond is after blackmail, I think, but he didn't get that idea until he found he had a real corpse on his slab."

She shuddered.

Little Plates O'Rion sat silent, fists

knuckled on his knees, forehead furrowed in thought.

Finally he muttered: "Are you sure Carter didn't know anything about all this ahead of time?"

Her half-laugh was bitter. "Do you think he'd stand by and let us tear up his meal-ticket?"

"No, but—he surely recognized *you*."

"He didn't even see me. Carter spends his time in the box-office checking up on the ticket sales because Ronny works on a five thousand-dollar guarantee, plus percentage."

"And you're positive he didn't recognize your old friend, Ravenoe."

"He doesn't know Jim Ravenoe from Adam." She looked out, surprised as the cab braked. "What's this? Where are we?"

"We're going to give this story of yours the acid test—the acid fix test."

HE HURRIED Dane's wife across the rain-wetted sidewalk, into the building foyer and elevator. Upstairs, at the end of a hushed and deserted corridor, Plates found his office door unlocked. Scowling, he punched it open, and found Sally O'Rion and Carter inside.

Carter spun around, began: "Mrs. Dane! Where've you been? I tried to call the hotel. . . What are you doing here?"

Plates growled. "What are you?"

"Sally brought me. She seems to have lost her keys, but the door was open, luckily." He tailored up a smile. "Mr. O'Rion, I guess I owe you an apology. You were right, I was wrong. Your daughter isn't the foolish, flighty type who'd tell lies to get her name in the papers."

"So you came here with her. May I ask why?"

"Because," Sally volunteered innocently, "we thought it would be a swell idea to develop that Leica shot of Ronny Dane I took just when he started acting so queerly on the stage."

"What in—what could your pix have to do with it?"

"It seems he took vitamins—carotene capsules," the eighteen-year-old enlightened. "Dr. Lessinger found the bottle in the dressing room, opened one of the cap-

sules. It contained strychnine instead of carotene."

"And it's no pleasant way to die," contributed Carter. "If that's what killed Dane, his facial expression should have distorted with awful agony at the last."

Plates glared at the manager. "You seventh son of a crawling cockroach! At first you were willing to make bait out of the kid. Then this poison angle popped up, and you thought you could grab the inside track, use her to find out from me what was really on that minicam film. Or did you realize the really important evidence wasn't in her camera, but mine?"

He tramped across the office, thrust through the light-trap doors into his darkroom, hurried into the blacked-out routine of whisking film from his Graphic's holder, flanging it onto developing hangers, feeding the hangers into the bakelite tank on the tilt-table of an electric agitator. In total darkness, he did it all as naturally, and almost as fast, as a man taking off his hat and topcoat on entering home.

He'd promised the *Tribune* a hurry-up on the pix, so he reached up to the shelf over the sink for the bottle of fast, five-minute developer. His thumb slid over the notched cork, identifying it by touch. He'd gradually fallen into the practice of doing without light at all—just as a skilled typist doesn't have to look at the keyboard she pounds.

The lights came on as a surprise.

Plates slung around, Irish-blue eyes wrinkled into enraged, blinking slits. He recognized Big Bill Garms' bull voice before he could quite focus on the big man. "You nosey little shrimp! Hand over them fillums!"

"The—hand over. . ."

"Don't stall, half-pint. I saw you and your brat grabbing pictures when Dane went into his dive!"

The sound Plates made was half a laugh, half a dismayed croak. "So you want them? You damned ignorant ape—you've fogged them! You think you can switch on lights in a darkroom and not fog my film to hell and gone, you're crazy!"

"Now, ain't that too bad? All the same, fogged or not, you give!"

"It's a pleasure," Plates muttered, slinging the fat, brown bottle at the other's head.

GARMS ducked, turtled his head into his beefy shoulders, to dodge the flying missile. What he couldn't dodge was the spraying glass and fluid as the bottle shattered on the door frame. He cursed, shook his wetted head in wrath as he lunged at the pint-sized photographer.

Plates' voice had the vibrant scream of a buzzsaw biting into knotted wood. "Shut your eyes! That stuff'll burn the eyeballs outa you!"

Actually, the developer was dangerous like dishwasher. But Garms couldn't be sure of it, even if he'd suspected the ruse. Probably he suspected nothing, for he pulled up short, eyelids batted down, and used both coat sleeves to mop the fluid from his features.

Plates snatched an 11x14 enameled steel tray off the work bench. He whipped the impromptu weapon high, brought it down with every atom of power in his enraged being.

There was a bass drum boom, a groan—and silence.

A moment later, Sally O'Rion dashed through the light trap. "P-Plates!" she sobbed hysterically, and then stopped, swallowed, stared unbelievably at the fallen, knocked-out Garms.

Plates jumped to a cupboard, grabbed a roll of Scotch tape, hastily lashed the big man's wrists behind him.

"Call Ben Heeley, Sal! Tell him to come and pick up the goods C.O.D.—confession on delivery!" Frisking through Big Bill's pockets, he'd come on a letterhead, a legal notification from the City Building Inspection Board.

Sally O'Rion fled back to the outer office.

Plates heard Carter's sharp, querying: "What—what . . . ?"

He heard Sally reply: "Garms. He was hiding in there. He must have heard us talking about the pictures at the Opera House. So he stole my keys and holed-up, waiting."

And Carter: "I thought so! I thought he was trying to make murder pay off both ways!"

Plates O'Rion walked over to the shelf of chemicals. He selected another bottle of developer, poured it into the mouth of the developing tank. He jabbed the electric agitator into action.

Glaring down at the profanely muttering Garms, he said: "That film wasn't fogged. You understand? If it had been, you'd be taking the long one-way ride. So whatever I say about those pix, *you keep your mouth shut and don't let on different.*"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Little Man Who Wasn't There

HE PACED the floor, hardly able to keep his eyes off the luminous-dialed darkroom clock. The thing was hot right now. He didn't want to let it cool off—give any of these people a chance to second-think.

Already Garms was brooding: "Wait a minute! I was on the stage at the time your kid claims she got kayoed. You can't hang nothing on me there. And I was talking to Carter at the time you claim *you* got slugged. . ."

The lensman poured the developing solution from his tank, poured in the acid fix bath—and still time dragged on. He was hardly better than a nervous wreck when he heard the footfalls, the fresh murmur of voices outside. He hurried from the darkroom then, and felt a fresh twinge of exasperation at sight of Ravenoe and the saturnine-faced Kammond.

"Who invited you? Damn it, anyway—"

Della Dane interrupted: "I'm sorry, Mr. O'Rion, but I phoned the mortuary and asked Jim to come. When you caught Garms red-handed, and then sent for Heeley instead of calling the police, it struck me perhaps you weren't so disinterested, after all!"

Carter giped: "You notice, though, she didn't send for the cops herself!"

But now, at long last, Heeley's fat form came waddling through the doorway. "What's this?" His porcine eyes showed quick suspicion of the gathering. "What kind of a trick is this? I was told Garms—"

Little Plates O'Rion felt like an amateur animal trainer about to walk into a lion cage with only a chair—in his case, a couple of pix—between himself and disaster. He hadn't wanted to play it quite this way. He'd wanted Heeley first, and

then the others. But here it was, and he had to make good. He couldn't draw Heeley off into a corner and whisper in his ear. He was licked if he let on by a single gesture, by the tiniest false move, that he didn't have the whole thing tied up in a nice, neat bundle.

With a confidence he was far from feeling, he waved his hand. "If you'll all step into the darkroom, please."

Ravenoe was the last to enter, the first to speak. Staring at the trussed and helpless Garms, he blurted: "Holy Judas! *He* killed Ronny? Why?"

Plates shrugged. "The Opera House is going to be condemned by the city building inspectors. It's been in bad repair for years. Garms received final notice to do a lot of expensive remodeling or get out. The question was, where could a two-bit promoter like him raise the moolah?"

"By booking Ronny Dane into the old rat-trap!" Carter snapped. "And then poisoning him, so he wouldn't have to pay the five thousand dollars Dane charged for a personal appearance."

"It's a theory, but it's no good, that far. True, he wouldn't have to pay Dane for an incomplete performance, but at the same time, he'd have to refund the audience's money, too. He couldn't even show a normal profit, unless he could wring it out of Mutual Indemnity. Which, in turn, he couldn't do unless Dane's death was a natural one."

Ravenoe had his eyeglasses out, toying with them. "And he believed your pictures might prove otherwise?"

"I kind of thought so myself."

UNDER fire, Garms couldn't take it. He'd been warned to, but he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"You're nuts, O'Rion! Your fillums are ruined! You can't prove nothing at all!"

Plates chuckled, said: "That's what *you* think. Only it happens photography is out of the red light and open tray era when it comes to developing films. Nowadays we use daylight type, light proof tanks."

"You mean," Heeley spluttered, "you got the evidence—?"

The lensman nodded, stepped to the

developing tank, lifted out a dripping negative. "I have, but I got a price on it, too."

"I—oh, sure. You can just send the bill to Mutual's claim office. Anything in reason. . ."

Plates' tone was chopped, deadly.

"I don't mean a money price, Heeley. I mean just what I said—confession on delivery."

"Confess—*me* confess? You're crazy!"

The photog nodded. "Confess that you followed me to the phone and slugged me tonight."

Heeley wetted his lips. His cheeks were chalky. He breathed hard without saying a word.

"I know you did, you fat Shylock. You'd seen Dane collapse on the stage, apparently from heart failure. You realized Mutual was stuck if that was true, and there went your famous record for saving the company more dough than any other adjuster in the field. You figured you could kayo me and I'd get fighting mad. I'd wade into the thing with wild Irish abandon, and you'd get an investigation which wouldn't cost you a nickel. Only when I didn't respond as you'd expected, did you offer me cold cash to do just that."

Heeley half-moaned: "All right, I admit it. Somebody had left a beer bottle in the wings. I—I didn't hit you very hard. . . . Now, what's on the negative?"

Plates swiftly wiped the film with a sponge. He stepped to his horizontal enlarger, tugged out its slide, sandwiched the damp negative into the glass. "Sally, turn out the lights."

She hesitated. "You think . . . is it safe to—?"

"It's necessary. I want to blow this up, so everybody can see what's on it."

The eighteen-year-old obeyed, reluctantly. Plates snapped the enlarger switch. The image leaped against an easel board. To most of those present, it couldn't have meant much—just a blown-up negative. The lensman interpreted for them: "Notice the face. . . The sharply defined lines. . . Clearcut highlights and shadows. It's sharp, as if you'd etched it with a knife. This picture was snapped when Dane fell, apparently dead, on the stage. Now, I'll show you the other."

He traded negatives in the glass sandwich. "This is later—you can see the stage curtain closing. Notice the face again. . . It's blurred, shaky, looks like it'd been drawn in butter with a soft straw. *Dane was alive* when this picture was taken."

Ravenoe's voice rang out. "That proves just what I said. He was alive when I examined him. The poison didn't take effect until later—"

"It proves a lot more than that. He was shamming death, playing possum, which no man gripped by the convulsions of strychnine could do. But before we turn up the lights, there's one thing more. Heeley asked me to take a picture of those jitterbugs dancing in the aisles, a flashlight shot. I'd like to show you—like to show you not just a negative of that, but a print so you can all recognize—*aaih! Damn you to hell, you killer!*"

IN THE dark, Plates had his arms wrapped around a struggling form.

"Lights! Sal!"

Della Dane gasped, "Jim Ravenoe!"

Ravenoe stood stock still, his face set, breathing through his teeth. "I didn't do anything! I swear to Heaven—"

Plates drew back, wiry fingers wrapped around the eyeglasses he'd captured in the struggle. "You didn't do anything? You—the good old trouper—the pal who hated Dane's guts because he'd gone ahead and got the fame and success and money you never had! The good old friend, who loved Dane's wife, and figured you'd marry her and live happily ever after on the annuity he left her.

"Who else could it be? Dane wasn't killed by poison at all. I'll bet good American dollars against Nazi marks, you're the guy who thought up that dizzy stunt tonight. *You* sold him the idea he'd be razed to death if he joined the Army under his own name—all of that! You got him to lay down and play dead, and then you stabbed him."

The little photographer wrenched hard at the gold-framed eyeglasses, and held up one of the ear hooks.

"Steel!" he pronounced savagely. "Washed with gold—but hard, tool-steel, sharpened to a needle's point. You jabbed it into his neck—the good old spinal punc-

ture—on the theory that the tiny mark would never be noticed after the cops found strychnine and a suicide note in the guy's dressing room. But Kammond didn't know about those angles. He found himself with an unexpectedly real corpse on his hands—a perfect blackmail set-up.

"I thought it was curious, the way you kept dragging your specs out, twiddling with them every time anyone crowded you a bit, even after they were broken and apparently useless," said Plates. "You were in Dane's dressing room tonight after he went on the stage. You had to leave the capsules and the suicide note there as late as possible, so Carter wouldn't blunder onto them too early. Sal ran up there looking for a doctor, and you slugged her. You couldn't be found in that dressing room. Stuffing the suicide note into her hand came as a sheer inspiration. It couldn't be pinned on you, even if the forgery was proved, because you'd supposedly been out in the front row all that time.

"But if you had been out front, as you said, you'd have known I didn't snap any flashlight pix tonight. You wouldn't have blown your top, let yourself be trapped by the picture that nobody took! You went kill-crazy here because the picture—if there was one—would have showed you weren't where you claimed to be."

Half an hour later, the cops had come, the office had been cleared, and Sally O'Rion had a chance to babble her enthusiasm. "You were wonderful, Plates! The way you saw through everything—"

He shook his head tiredly, said: "Part of it's still a mystery to me."

"What part?"

"You! Lying to me about a Red Cross meeting, and standing in the rain for hours to take a picture of a guy. You could cut his picture out of any fan mag!"

She smiled, said: "Didn't anyone ever tell you? Christmas is coming."

"Huh? What's that got to do with it?"

"Plenty! I was going to snap some candid pix of Ronny Dane, sell them to a lot of other girls and use the money to buy you a dozen new ties for Christmas."

The little photog stared, blinked, and blazed up in hot resentment. "Sal! Will you ever grow up and learn no man wants any dame to pick out his neckties?"

THE DOCTOR'S TREATMENT

By

RICHARD DERMODY

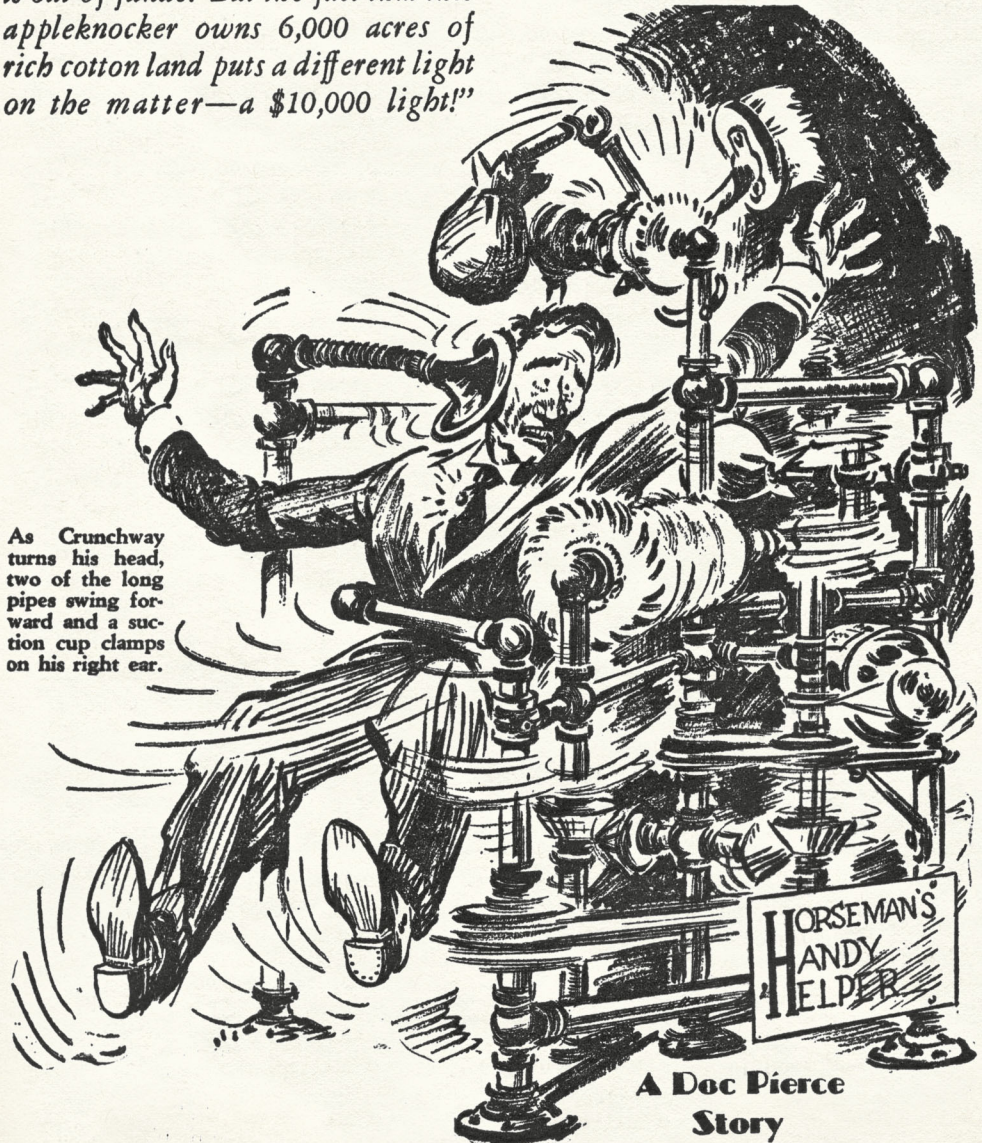
Author of "Painless Operation," etc.

"The Doc almost loses interest in Goldberg O'Toole when he hears he is out of funds. But the fact that this appleknocker owns 6,000 acres of rich cotton land puts a different light on the matter—a \$10,000 light!"

WE ARE standing on the deck of this tub watching the roustabouts hustle the freight aboard. I am not feeling too good. The ponies give us a bad time the last couple days of the meeting and this is the only transportation we can afford. I am trying to decide which smells worse, the river or this old tub, when the Doc pokes me.

"I see we are to have company on this delightful voyage," he says.

As Crunchway turns his head, two of the long pipes swing forward and a suction cup clamps on his right ear.



A Doc Pierce
Story

A little guy with a wrinkled white suit and no hat on is trotting up the gangway. He has a round pink face with big blue eyes and a shock of curly blond hair sticking up off his head. A big guy is pushing a wheelbarrow along behind him and when I realize what is on this wheelbarrow I have to laugh. Before I can say anything to the Doc the little guy is beside us.

"Why, Mr. Allan," he says. "What are you doing here?"

"Well," I tell him, "if this scow holds together, we are taking a ride up the river."

I wink at the Doc. "This is Goldberg O'Toole, Doctor Pierce. Goldberg is a great inventor."

The Doc parts his swayback coat so his white vest shows and sticks out his big mitt. "I am delighted to meet a fellow scientist, Mr. O'Toole," he says. "In my youth I was much interested in mechanical contrivances."

Of course I know very well that the nearest the Doc ever gets to a mechanical contrivance in his youth is when he runs a shell game behind the merry-go-round at the County Fair but the kid swallows it right down.

"My correct name is Robert Emmett O'Toole," he tells the Doc. "The boys around the racetrack refer to me as Goldberg because my invention reminds them of the creations of Rube Goldberg, the comic cartoonist." He points at the bunch of gears and pulleys on the wheelbarrow and smiles. "You may notice a slight resemblance."

I have seen Goldberg's gadget many times in the past month but as the Doc never hangs around the stable area it is his first peek at the Horseman's Handy Helper. He takes out his cheaters with the black ribbon on them and takes a good gander at it.

"A most interesting mechanism," he says.

THIS Horseman's Helper is about a yard long and two yards high. Besides these gears and pulleys it has about a dozen long flexible pipes sticking up with brushes and suction cups on the ends. Goldberg claims this gadget will cuff off a horse, soap a saddle, wash a

blanket and do many other stable chores in jig-time if it is handled properly.

The trouble is nobody ever handles it right, not even Goldberg. In fact the first time he tries to groom a horse with it, the Horseman's Helper acts like it wants to wash a blanket and scares the pony and the guy that owns him half to death.

Goldberg shakes his head at the Doc. "Very few people have displayed interest in my invention," he says. "I must admit defeat. I am completely out of funds and there is nothing to do but go home."

Of course when the Doc hears this he loses interest in Goldberg. The Doc does not hang around people who are out of funds. He wanders up to the front end of the boat and a couple of minutes later I see him talking with the captain.

Goldberg lets out a big sigh. "I suppose I am foolish to take that silly invention home with me," he says. "I should drop it in the river and forget it." He gives me a little smile. "At least I furnished amusement for the boys around the stables."

For some reason I do not feel like laughing at Goldberg O'Toole right now. "You just made a bad start," I tell him. "From what I hear even this guy Edison gets left flat-footed at the post his first couple of times out."

"I shall never be another Thomas Edison," Goldberg says.

I can't give him an argument on this. "How do you happen to build this gadget?" I ask him. "Do your folks own horses?"

"We used to keep a few saddlers," he says, "but now all we have is mules. I live on a cotton plantation and my original intention was to build a mechanical cotton-picker."

"A gadget that picks cotton should do all right in these parts," I tell him.

"The Rust brothers have produced a machine that is far superior to mine," he says. "As a desperate gamble I converted my cotton picker into the Horseman's Helper."

"Maybe you can teach it to pitch hay or pull stumps," I tell him. "The way I figure it these appleknockers can always use one more gadget."

Goldberg just sighs again and shakes his head. I figure we will both bust out

crying in a minute so I walk away fast.

It is time to unhitch the boat and start up the river. The captain stops talking to the Doc and begins running up and down the deck, yelling at the hands. The Doc comes over to me.

"This captain is a most interesting personality," he says.

"I am surprised to hear this," I tell him. "In my book he is just another fat Cajun with greasy whiskers and a garlic breath. He could also use a bath."

The Doc grins. "I admit that he is lacking in certain social graces," he says. "But our captain is sound at the core. He is most unhappy on the river and is saving up his wages so he can buy a cozy little farm."

"This is indeed interesting," I tell him. "I trust he keeps these savings in a handy place."

"That is what I intend to find out," the Doc says. He lowers his voice. "I shall depend on you to keep this O'Toole character out from underfoot."

"O. K.," I tell him. "I will listen to Goldberg's sad tale while you put the shake on the captain."

IT IS a slow trip. We are bucking the current and this tub also stops about every ten miles to throw hunks of cargo to the yokels that live along the bank. The Doc spends most of his time up in the wheelhouse with the captain but from what I hear he is not moving any faster than the boat. I drop into his cabin the second evening and he is reading some hayshaker magazine the captain lends him. He grins at me.

"I shall be an authority on agricultural subjects by the time this voyage is over," he says.

"Well," I tell him, "I hope you plow up this captain's bankroll pretty quick. I am getting bored with this old scow."

I am also getting bored with Goldberg O'Toole. He is a nice little guy but he figures he is the only party in the world who ever has a tough break.

The next morning he starts a sad tale right after breakfast. I pull him up short. "Look," I tell him, "I am a few years older than you are and I am short of shekels most of my life but I do not talk about it unless I am making a touch. You

are not the only party around here who is flat broke and you have a home and a family to back up on."

Goldberg shakes his head. "The only family I have is my young sister, Sharon," he says. "Sharon is a lovely girl. She is just twenty-one and I am worried about her future. In less than three months the bank will foreclose the mortgage on our plantation and we will have no home."

"Well," I tell him, "if your sister is a good looking dame you should get her out under the bright lights where she can nudge up against a few parties with dollars in their wallets. There is no percentage in this backwoods set-up."

Goldberg nods. "We would like nothing better," he says. "Neither of us is fond of farming, but it is hard to give up six thousand acres of the finest land along the river to a man like Jeff Crunchway."

"Where does this Crunchway cut in?" I ask him.

"He is president of the local bank and he also owns most of the stock," Goldberg tells me. "Jeff persuaded my father to mortgage the land and invest the proceeds in worthless oil stock. The shock of this loss brought on my father's death. The cotton market has been bad for years and we have not been able to pay off a single dollar." He puts his hand on my shoulder. "I am sorry to have burdened you with my troubles, Mr. Allan," he says. "But it's a long time since I have had a sympathetic listener."

"Well," I tell him, "you are healthy and you have a good line of gab. All you need is to find a racket. You can even go to work, although personally, I will never consider taking such a step."

Goldberg smiles. "Yes, I suppose we will not starve." He thinks for a minute. "Why don't you and Doctor Pierce stop over for a few days? My sister would be delighted to meet you."

"I would be delighted to meet your sister," I tell him. "But Doctor Pierce is engaged in a little problem of research that requires his presence on this boat. I do not think he will consider interrupting his studies at this point."

THAT evening the Doc is off his feed. He sits at the table with a blank look on his red face and pays little attention to

the rations. I mope into his cabin after dinner and he is sitting on his bunk looking sad.

"The old man has lost his touch, pony boy," he says. "He is ready for the boneyard."

I reach into his suitcase for the bourbon and pour a big dose. He gulps it down but he still looks sad.

"This captain," he says. "I judge him to be a solid citizen. One of nature's noblemen. Now I learn that he is nothing but a common prevaricator. He is also a drunkard." The Doc takes another helping of bourbon and picks up one of these hayshaker magazines the captain lends him off the table. "And to think I spent hours reading this rural rubbish so I could ingratiate myself with that rascal."

I catch on. "The captain has no savings?"

The Doc snorts. "He confessed to me this afternoon that he spends every penny he gets in low grog-shops along the waterfront. That drivel about buying a farm is the vaporings of an alcoholic." He shakes his head. "We must leave this boat at the first opportunity. I cannot bear the sight of that whiskered wastrel."

"Well," I tell him, "Goldberg tells me we arrive at his home town, Riverbend, tomorrow morning. He wishes us to be his guests for a few days at the family plantation."

"Plantation?" the Doc says. He brightens up. "Then this O'Toole family is wealthy?"

"They are flat broke," I tell him. "Also they are getting heaved out of the homestead in a couple of months." I give him a quick run-down on the O'Toole family set-up.

The Doc jumps up and starts walking the stall. "Six thousand acres," he says. "Why, this is an outrage. Those innocent children. Evicted from their home by a heartless, money-grubbing banker."

"Save the spiel for the suckers," I tell him. "What do you have in mind?"

The Doc grins. "Just the vague beginnings of a little plan," he says. He is still holding this hayshaker magazine in his hand. He glances down at it and his eyes open wide. He chuckles. "I think I have it."

I grab the magazine and take a gander at the cover. All I can see is a picture of some big dam the government is putting up out west so the appleknockers in the vicinity will not dry up and blow away. It doesn't make sense but I know better than to ask the Doc any questions. The Doc figures I function better in a caper if I don't know too much about it.

"Get O'Toole in here," the Doc says, very snappy.

I sit around for the next couple of hours while the Doc pumps Goldberg. About all he gets that I have not heard before is that the mortgage is for two hundred thousand and that good cotton land sells for from forty to a hundred dollars an acre.

The Doc figures for a minute. "Why," he says, "you have an equity in this land that must be worth at least fifty thousand dollars."

Goldberg shakes his head. "We would be glad to take half of that," he says. "But there are no buyers for cotton land. And Jefferson Crunchway is a powerful man. He is smart and unscrupulous. He would find some way to block any sale we tried to make."

"I am pleased to hear this," the Doc says. "I like to deal with people of intelligence, especially if they have a streak of larceny in their makeup." He smiles at Goldberg. "I have a plan in mind, a little treatment for Mr. Crunchway. In case we are successful, Mr. Allan and I will expect a portion of the profits—say ten per cent. Is that agreeable?"

Goldberg's pink face is solemn. "I trust your judgment, Doctor Pierce," he says. "I am sure my sister will cooperate."

"Excellent," the Doc says. "I will have a few simple instructions for you in the morning."

SHARON O'TOOLE is waiting at the dock. I am peeking out of the port-hole of my cabin as the Doc does not wish the citizens of Riverbend to know we are teamed up with Goldberg. Sharon is a slim blonde with the kind of complexion you can eat with a spoon. She is wearing a blue shirt and a pair of jodhpur riding breeches but I have no trouble deciding she is a dame.

She is standing beside a pair of mules hooked up to a rickety old wagon and when she spots Goldberg she takes a big hug at him. I can see she is very fond of Goldberg. A couple of roustabouts load the Horseman's Helper into the wagon and Sharon and Goldberg rattle off down the road. The Doc is standing behind me.

"Well," I tell him, "I will gladly take a small share in that blonde as my percentage in this deal."

The Doc shakes his head. "We have a busy day before us. We must keep our eyes on the ball." He is wearing his best striped pants and a fresh white vest and he has dusted off his black skimmer and his swayback coat so I figure we will go into action right away. He picks up his suitcase. "We must register at the hotel for the sake of appearances," he tells me.

This Riverbend is by no means a lively burg. Most of the buildings are about a hundred years old and lean up against each other like a bunch of drunks. It is ten o'clock in the morning but nobody is on the main stem but a couple of hound dogs and maybe a dozen pickaninnies.

The hotel proprietor is a dried-up job about ten years older than the town and when the Doc asks him a couple of questions he acts like we are Yankee spies. The Doc always carries a flask of bourbon on his hip for these emergencies and after the proprietor gets a couple of doses down he turns out to be quite a gabby old guy.

He gives the Doc a quick run-down on the location of various plantations in the neighborhood and I notice the Doc copies it all down in his black notebook. The Doc slaps the proprietor on the back and snags the flask when it jars loose.

"Many thanks, friend," he says. He starts the flask toward his hip but the proprietor takes a bob at it like he is ducking for an apple in a washtub, so the Doc slips him one more gurgle. "By the way," he says, "when does the next boat stop in Riverbend?"

The proprietor wipes his chin. "Eight o'clock this evening," he says. "The *Golden Belle*. Fastest boat on the river."

The Doc grins at me. "The breaks are with us, pony boy."

THE first look I get at this banker, Jefferson Crunchway, I figure he is no soft touch. He is about the same age as the Doc, maybe fifty, and he has a square chin and a pair of pale blue eyes that can double for ice cubes. He sits behind his shiny desk and stares at the gold-edged card the Doc slips him.

"I see you are connected with our national government, Doctor Pierce," he says.

The Doc reaches over and clips the card out of Crunchway's mitt. "How stupid of me," he says. "That is one of my old cards." He tears the pasteboard into little pieces and drops them into the wastebasket. He nods at me. "Until a few weeks ago, Doctor Allan and I were employed as research scientists by the Department of Agriculture. We resigned our positions for a certain reason." He leans forward and drops his voice. "That reason, Mr. Crunchway, brings us to Riverbend."

I sit up straight and try to look like I am a research scientist. I am not surprised when the Doc flashes this card. The Doc has a collection of business cards to fit every occasion.

Crunchway raises a pair of eyebrows that look like they were clipped off a crow. "And this reason?"

The Doc smooths out his face. "We resigned our positions because we saw an opportunity to make a large sum of money. We need this money to equip a laboratory for certain studies we have in mind that will be of great benefit to mankind." He shakes his head. "Unfortunately we are but simple scientists. It did not occur to us that others might see this same opportunity." He lowers his voice. "Those others, Mr. Crunchway, are passengers aboard the *Golden Belle*. They will be in Riverbend at eight o'clock tonight."

Crunchway does not even feel the hook. His voice is excited. "This opportunity is here? In Riverbend?"

The Doc sighs. "We had hoped to handle this ourselves," he says, "but we lack the business experience, and, to put it bluntly, the funds to consummate this enterprise in the short time remaining." He pulls out his black notebook and fixes his cheaters on his nose. "You have a

reputation as a man of keen sagacity in business affairs. You are also in a peculiarly favorable position so far as this enterprise is concerned."

Crunchway likes it. He leans back in his chair. "And just what is my position?"

The Doc reads from his notebook. "This bank, which you control, holds a mortgage in the amount of two hundred thousand dollars against six thousand acres of land in the possession of Robert Emmett O'Toole and his sister, Sharon Carroll O'Toole. Is that correct?"

Crunchway nods. "That is correct."

The Doc closes the notebook. "The O'Toole mortgage becomes due and payable in exactly eighty-three days." He leans over the desk. "Mr. Crunchway, we must obtain clear title to the O'Toole plantation before the *Golden Belle* docks tonight."

Crunchway looks puzzled. "But that is cotton land. The market is low. The land is worth little more than the amount of the mortgage."

The Doc leans a little closer. "The Department of Agriculture is undertaking an immense project, the nature of which I cannot reveal at this time. Six hundred thousand dollars has been appropriated for the purchase of the O'Toole plantation. It is the only land on the river that will serve this particular purpose."

Crunchway narrows his eyes and I can almost hear the wheels go round. "And these people arriving on the *Golden Belle* also have this information?"

The Doc nods. "They are unscrupulous financiers," he says. "Money-grubbers of the worst type. They are prepared to pay the O'Tooles one hundred thousand dollars for their equity. Then they intend to pay off the mortgage and reap a profit of three hundred thousand dollars."

Crunchway gulps the bait. "We must forestall these villains," he says. He pulls down these eyebrows again. "I suppose you gentlemen have a figure in mind for your share in the proceeds?"

The Doc smiles. "Doctor Allan and I will leave that up to your sense of fair play," he says. "After all, you will probably have to pay the O'Tooles a large sum for their equity."

Crunchway rubs his hands together.

"I will have title to the O'Toole plantation before the sun sets," he says. He holds out his mitt. "A gentlemen's agreement. We will share equally in the profits, after all necessary expenditures have been deducted."

The Doc pumps his mitt up and down. He passes it over to me. "A gentlemen's agreement," he says.

WE MAKE it to the hotel in ten seconds flat. The Doc rents the proprietor's flivver and asks him which way is the O'Toole plantation. I am nervous and the fact that this flivver will not do over twelve miles an hour makes me feel no better. When we turn up the driveway I am hand-riding this jalopy like it is in the stretch at Churchill Downs.

The Doc is feeling the pressure, too. Goldberg and Sharon are standing on the porch when we rattle up but the Doc is not polite. "Get this monstrosity out of sight," he says. He hops out. "Come in the house through the back door. That money-grubber will be here any minute."

I drive the flivver into a shed behind the house. I have to grin when I see the Horseman's Helper is also parked in this shed.

It is at least two furlongs from the kitchen door of the O'Toole mansion to the big room in front where the Doc is slipping the low-down to Goldberg and his sister. Sharon is even tastier at close range and for a couple of minutes I even forget Crunchway.

Goldberg is standing beside the window. All of a sudden he lets out a yelp. "He is coming up the drive!"

Sharon turns very pale and the Doc pats her on the shoulder. "Your troubles will soon be over." He smiles at Goldberg. "Be firm, my boy."

Goldberg is pale too. But his eyes are bright and steady. "I will make that scoundrel crawl," he says.

CRUNCHWAY starts out with a long spiel about how he has known these kids all their lives and he wishes to help them out before his wicked board of directors makes him foreclose. He has a pocketful of documents and Goldberg lets him spread them all over the table.

The Doc and I are standing behind a set

of curtains across a doorway and when Goldberg speaks up with his first, "No!" the Doc pokes me in the ribs and grins. When Crunchway gets up to fifty thousand I begin to relax.

Goldberg slaps the table. "We will sell our land, Jeff Crunchway," he says, "but we must have one hundred thousand dollars in cash. We do not trust your checks."

Ten minutes later we are doing a war dance around the room and I get a couple of sample hugs from Sharon that almost make me forget the heap of cabbage on the table.

She takes Goldberg by the arm and her voice is shaky. "I am so proud of you," she says. "You were splendid." She turns to us. "You are all splendid."

The Doc grins at her. "We are not in the clear yet. Although I do not think Crunchway will check up until morning. He will spend the evening figuring how he can wiggle out of this gentlemen's agreement he spoke about this afternoon." He thinks for a minute. "We shall remain here until dark. Then we will return the proprietor's vehicle to the hotel, pick up our luggage, and we will all board the *Golden Belle*."

Goldberg points at the pile of cabbage on the table. "You gentlemen must take half of it," he says. "Without your assistance we would have nothing."

For the first time since I know him the Doc backs away from dough. "No," he says. "We will take our ten per cent." He glances at me and I nod at him. Ten grand will put us into action.

We spend the rest of the afternoon helping Goldberg and Sharon pack a few odds and ends and listening to the squawks that go up from the hired help when they learn Crunchway is their new boss. About seven o'clock I figure we better get moving. This flivver may throw a spavin and we may have to walk to town.

We have stowed the O'Toole luggage in the flivver and I am just helping Sharon into the seat when a loud rough voice sounds off behind me.

"A fine pack of thieves," this somebody says. "Don't move or you will regret it."

My hands are above my head and I am taller than I ever am in my life. I take

a quick peek around. What I see ain't good.

JEFFERSON CRUNCHWAY is standing in the door of the shed. He is holding a cannon with a hole in the muzzle about the size of a subway tunnel.

Sharon lets out a squeal and I can hear the Doc draw in his breath. The Doc is no hand for gunplay. I don't have a quick answer to this either. A long time ago I find out I am not bullet-proof.

Crunchway steps forward. "Line up," he says, "and do not move your hands."

Goldberg is standing near the wall and as he steps forward he stumbles and his left foot slides sideways. I realize that Crunchway is standing square in front of the Horseman's Helper. I throw a cold sweat when I see Goldberg's foot hit a switch handle sticking out from the side of the machine.

The sudden noise of the motor on the Horseman's Helper startles Crunchway. As he turns his head two of the long pipes swing forward and a suction cup clamps on his right ear. Another pipe with a brush on the end fetches him a swipe across the face. It is a dandy brush and the bristles are stiff and hard. Two more of the pipes swing out and take a grip around Crunchway's middle.

Crunchway lets out a screech and drops the cannon. A few more pipes go into action and by the time I step in and jolt Crunchway on the chin with a right hook he is in no shape for a comeback. In fact I have to duck fast or the Horseman's Helper will give me the business also.

Goldberg kicks the switch again and picks up Crunchway's cannon. The Horseman's Helper slows down and the pipes swing back. The Doc is holding his haybelly and cackling like he will bust. It is a couple of minutes before I realize it is funny.

Crunchy is out cold. I turn to Goldberg. "Maybe you own a nice deep well?"

The Doc shakes his head. "He will cause us no more trouble," he says. "Crunchway realizes he is beaten or he would not have resorted to such desperate measures. This whole transaction has been strictly legitimate." He opens his suitcase. "Here is our last quart of bourbon, pony boy. Load Crunchway into his

car and drive him into town. I think one more treatment will result in a complete cure. We will meet you aboard the boat."

WE ARE lined up along the rail of the *Golden Belle*. Sharon O'Toole is standing close beside me and I am pleased to notice the boat is rolling a little. She looks up at the Doc.

"However did Jeff Crunchway find out that you were working in our interest?"

"That was a stupid blunder on my part," the Doc tells her. "I asked the hotel proprietor the way to your plantation. Crunchway called at the hotel after he had secured title to your land and the proprietor told him where we had gone. Crunchway added it up and got the correct answer." He shakes his head. "Crunchway is not only smart, he is thoroughly unscrupulous. In fact I believe he intended to use that gun."

I stare at him. "You think he was going to bump us off?"

The Doc's big red face is sober. "Look at it from Crunchway's angle," he says. "He saw the luggage in the car. He knew the O'Tooles were leaving town with us. He could eliminate all four of us, hide the er—remains in a secluded spot and no one would ask any questions. He would have the money, the plantation, and vengeance." He looks at me. "I trust you gave Crunchway the full treatment?"

"Well," I tell him. "I am not sure I give him all that is coming to him. I dump most of that bottle of whiskey down his gullet and pour the rest of it on his clothes. Then I park his car at the back door of the county jail and tap his chin a couple of times to make sure he is fully relaxed."

Sharon shivers. "You are very strong, Mr. Allan," she says. "I am glad you did not injure him, though he deserves it."

I lean closer to her and harden the muscles in my arm, although I am speaking to Goldberg. "Tell me something," I say to him. "What does the Horseman's Handy Helper think it is doing when it goes to work on Crunchway?"

Goldberg shrugs. "I haven't the faintest idea," he says. He smiles. "I am just as pleased that we left the Horseman's Helper behind. I suspect that machine has more intelligence than its inventor."

The Doc chuckles. "I shall venerate the memory of the Horseman's Helper to the end of my days," he says. He glances at me and takes Goldberg by the arm. "Let us have a chat with the captain of this boat," he says. "I understand he is tired of life on the river and is saving up to buy a farm. We must warn him of the hazards of an agricultural existence."

A breeze has come up and the boat is rolling quite a lot. I have to put my arm around Sharon to steady her.

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DEATH



By
FRANCIS K. ALLAN

CHAPTER ONE

Freddie—A Man of Letters

TIM HALL blinked suspiciously at his secretary. "What do you mean, a creepy feeling?"

"I mean a creepy feeling. He doesn't look right. His office doesn't feel right. There must be two hundred alarm clocks there, and not one of them is fixed. I can't find yours anywhere. And the man, Sammy Bush, can't or won't tell where it is."

"I remember when you used to be efficient, Nonnie." He sighed. "Give me the receipt. What's his address?"

"455 Mutual Building." She laid a small cardboard slip on the desk. She watched him rise, put on his hat, and tuck the receipt into his pocket. This time she sighed. "Sometimes you're so decisive and wonderful. . . ." He slammed the door behind him.

It was ten after four when he left the elevator and moved down the cool wide hall of the Mutual Building. He searched the doors—Aztec Investment Company,



The gun roared as it passed over the top of the desk. Freddie's weapon shattered.

IN FOOL'S DISGUISE



"It starts with what looks like a two-bit alarm clock racket and a dumb little guy named Sammy Bush. From there it works up to a bunch of old letters in a worn brown envelope and something that Archie Roman would commit murder for—and did!"



Inc.; Harper, Cox, Moore, and Moore, Attorneys-at-Law; E. N. Nerman, Admittance by Appointment Only. . . . The last door at the end of the hall bore only the number, 455. He knocked and walked in. A pale anxious-faced young man glanced up from his desk. He was cleaning his nails with a silver letter-knife.

"My name is Hall," Tim announced crisply. "Five days ago my secretary brought an alarm clock here to be repaired. It was to be ready in forty-eight hours." He paused. "I want that clock."

"Yes, I know, I. . . ." The man's eyes fled over the countless clocks that were on the table, on shelves, on the floor. "None of them are ready yet, but maybe tomorrow they—"

"You said that two days ago. I want my clock now."

The little man began to sweat. "But I. . . . It's not here, see? I don't know where it is right now. These—they just came in later." He mopped his chin and looked at Tim agonizingly. "I don't know what to tell you, mister!" he exclaimed harshly. "I don't know what to tell anybody! Everybody's been coming in wanting their clocks and getting sore and— and saying I'm stealing 'em, even! A lady

yesterday even took my name!" He mopped his face again. "Said she was going to report me to the cops!"

"Why don't you know where the clocks are?" Tim demanded. "Why don't you get to work and fix these? What's the matter with you?"

"I don't know how to fix 'em!" he cried. "I just take 'em in and give receipts and a truck takes 'em to the repair-loft in Brooklyn. This is just a—a kind of sub-station, see? There's lots of offices like this."

"Then call the repair-loft and see what's the matter."

"Yeah, I—I did." The haggard eyes met Tim's. "I can't find it."

"You what?" Tim exploded. "Why can't you find it?"

"It ain't there! It ain't in the telephone book, either! I looked, see? I—I'm getting nervous, mister. I don't know nothing about this, see? I'm new. I only got this job last Monday."

Slowly Tim pushed back his hat and frowned. "Let me get this—last Monday you got this job to sit here and take in broken clocks. Some of the clocks were taken away in a truck. You don't know where they went or when they're coming back. Right?"

The man nodded slowly. He swallowed. Abruptly Tim leaned over the desk. "I don't believe you. This is a racket! You get a haul of clocks, cart them away, then clear out. The clocks are fixed and sold for black-market prices. But not my clock," he added softly. "Tomorrow morning I'll be back. You'll have my clock, or the cops will have you." Tim turned toward the door.

AS HE stepped into the hall he ran into a swiftly moving figure. There was a quick gasp as the figure stumbled. Something clattered to the floor. Tim caught the shoulder.

"I—Sorry, I wasn't looking. I . . ." He looked into a girl's tan face, into her startled black eyes. Then, quickly, she knelt down, picked up a pair of dark-rimmed smoked glasses and put them on.

"It's all right. Quite all right." She glanced at her purse reassuringly, then walked away. Tim watched her—watched the even swing of her slender body, the swaying rhythm of her black hair. Her

heels were clicking, she was almost running when she turned the L of the hall.

"Cute," he told himself. He picked up his hat, saw the thick brown envelope lying on the floor. He lifted it and hurried down the hall. As he made the turn he saw her again, entering an elevator.

"Wait! Just a moment! I—" he called. She glanced back, then darted into the elevator. "Wait there! You dropped. . ."

"Please— Please, take me down now," he heard her beg the operator. The door slid shut. Tim stared at the blank door, slowly rubbing his bony face.

He caught the next elevator down. When he reached the modernistic lobby, she was out of sight. He hurried through the revolving doors to the sidewalk and glanced up and down the street. He saw her face, framed in the rear window of a departing cab. He shouted and waved. The face vanished. The cab blended into the traffic.

Tim shrugged. He turned the brown envelope—it bore no name or address. A tiny metal clasp locked its flap. He pushed the envelope into his pocket and hailed the next cab.

"Damn that little—little clock-thief!" he snapped sourly.

Nonnie was closing her typewriter when he walked in. She looked at his empty hands, then her brows arched. "No clock?" she purred.

He ignored the question. "Open this and see if you can find whose it is. Mail it to them." He handed her the brown envelope and disappeared beyond the door marked Timothy Hall, Private. He pulled off his tie and coat, plugged in his electric-razor, angled his blunt chin at the desk-mirror, and began to shave. He was on the chorus of *Chloe* when Nonnie walked in. "Huh?" he grunted.

"You're sure you want that envelope returned?" she wondered.

"Why not? It's not mine. Belongs to some girl. Cute, too."

"Interesting, anyway. Very interesting." She looked at him another puzzled moment. "You haven't read this?" she supplied.

"Nope." He turned the other side of his chin to the mirror. "Why?"

She unfolded a sheet of paper and began to read:

"Dearest Linda,

I've done the best I can, but it's no good. One man, a Joe Dolley, saw you. He has your number, etc. He was only slightly hurt. I got to him at the hospital before he talked to the police. He knows you killed them, darling. I'm afraid he's going to make it damned hard. Not with the police—he has his own price. Ten thousand dollars, and he won't tell that you killed them. There is nothing to do but pay it. I have given him four hundred in cash, all I had with me. The rest must be paid by next Friday. I am coming to see you tomorrow. We must make some plans about this.

Devotedly,
Freddie"

Nonnie looked at Tim curiously. He was holding the razor an inch from his chin. Both brows were V-shaped above his brown eyes. "Bring me that stuff," he said softly. He snapped off the razor. Nonnie returned with four sheets of paper.

"That was the oldest letter," she said. "This comes next."

TIM took the sheets and spread them across his desk. He noted that the second letter had been written on January 4, 1943, while the first was dated December 2, 1942. He read:

Linda,

I can do nothing with him—nothing at all! He demands another ten thousand dollars within a week, or he will tell everything to the police. He has done some private checking, and he knows who you are. That's bad! I am making the payment. We can do nothing else. I think you should leave the country for a while. Perhaps Bermuda.

Love,
Freddie

Tim's eyes were gleaming narrowly as he lifted the third sheet—dated two months after the second. It said:

Linda darling,

This man is a criminal of the most brutal and cold type. I have just come from a meeting with him in which I tried to face him down. I told him we could pay no more. I told him you'd rather take your slim chances in court than live a life of blackmail. I told him you were going to confess. He laughed in my face! He knows you can't. He doesn't care what dirt he gets into. He made what he calls a "final proposition." He wants twenty thousand dollars in ten days. He swears this will be the last. No one can trust him. I don't

know what to do. I am flying to Bermuda to see you this week-end. We will decide then.

Love,
Freddie

Tim picked up the last letter. It was recent, only two weeks old. It said:

Dear Linda,

Dolley came to my apartment last night. He wants thirty thousand dollars. I told him we didn't have it. I was desperate. I tried to bluff. It was no good. And the worst thing of all has happened, dear. He has learned of the Ventura! He won't tell how or where he found out, but he knows. . . I must see you. I am coming when I can borrow the money to make the trip. It may be tomorrow.

Love,
Freddie

"Is this all that was in there?" Tim demanded. "No name? No address? Nothing to tell who these people are?"

Nonnie shook her head. She leaned over his shoulder and touched one letter. "That name—the Ventura. What does that mean?"

"How would I know?" he asked blankly. He turned the letters backward and forward, searching for some full name or address.

"Freddie's the girl's brother, maybe. Or husband," Nonnie mused.

"Maybe, maybe," Tim agreed absently. He was staring at the most recent letter. "Two weeks ago. . . They were tapped for thirty grand. Freddie didn't have the money." He snapped his fingers. "Two-bits to nothing that's why she's in New York—raising the pay-off money!"

"But what makes you think . . ."

Tim looked at her and smiled fleetingly. "I ran into her at the Mutual Building. Knocked her dark glasses off. And what did she think of first? Putting those dark glasses right back on. Then she ran away because I'd seen her face."

"Oh, oh," Nonnie repeated. "You think she's doing something that—something she doesn't want anybody. . ."

"Yeah." He frowned into space. "So the little girl's a killer, and she's digging up thirty grand." He raised a speculative brow toward Nonnie. "Know what I'm thinking, my sweet?"

"You're thinking thirty grand is a lot of money."

"Particularly if somebody else gets it." He rose, frowning all the while. He carried the four letters to the safe and locked them in. He turned slowly, blinked, as though surprised to see Nonnie still waiting. "That's all. I. . . Call Warner as you leave. Tell him I got detained. Tell him I won't be able to have dinner with him this evening."

CHAPTER TWO

Too Late

TIM sat in his office after Nonnie was gone and watched the sun sink beyond New Jersey. He smoked and scratched his short wiry hair.

"Not a single damn quiet way to trace her," he muttered. He lifted the telephone and dialed. "Identification Bureau? Hello, is Cantwell there? . . . Cantwell? . . . Tim Hall. Can you tell me anything about a man named Joe Dolley? That's all I know—just the name. . . Yeah, I'll wait." He tapped the edge of the desk. Five minutes passed. "Huh? Nothing. . . Well. . . No, thanks."

He hung up, then made two other inquiries. No one knew anything about Joe Dolley. At last he sighed and dialed again. "Classified desk," he requested. "This is Timothy Hall. I want to run a blocked-ad tomorrow morning. This is it: 'Linda. I have the letters. Will surrender them to you in person. Call for appointment.' Sign that 'Tim' and give this number: BA 7-4439. Thanks."

It was after eight when Tim left the darkened lobby of the building and turned toward Verdi's Broadway Cafe. A vague sense of irritation gnawed within him. He wished that he had followed the girl. He toyed with the name, Ventura—it meant nothing to him.

"And not one killing," he mused. "She killed 'them'. That puts her in the professional class." He remembered the hurrying rhythm of her slender body. "Oh, hell!" he snapped. He stopped at a newsstand. As he bent down to lift the paper, his eyes roamed back along the dark block he had passed. Nothing was moving. He touched the paper. His fingers stilled, his eyes locked on a doorway a hundred feet away. Still nothing was moving in that

darkness. There was only the faint reddish glow of an unmoving cigarette, the almost invisible shadows of a man—waiting.

Tim dropped his pennies, lifted the paper, and turned. He walked slowly, one block; two. . . He turned a corner and glanced back. One hundred feet behind him a thin figure was walking.

He didn't break step. He looked again at the next corner. Silently, with a shuffling weary gait, the man still followed. Tim felt a coolness fill his stomach. He forced himself to move slowly. Ahead he saw the entrance of Verdi's. He turned in. Quickly he moved to the cashier's desk.

"I'm going out the back way, Pop," he said swiftly. "If something's gone, I'll bring it back tomorrow." He was gone toward the back before the round-faced little manager could speak. He vanished beyond the door leading to the rest-rooms. There he glanced back through the crack toward the front door. A few moments later he saw the thin figure appear outside the front door. The narrow face flattened itself against the glass. The eyes roamed sharply about.

"I wonder what Archie could be wanting," Tim mused ironically. He hurried toward the service door, pausing at a closet to leave his hat and pick up a battered black felt and a limp, long trenchcoat. He pulled it on, rolled up the collar, pulled down the hat-brim, and fitted a pair of dark glasses over his eyes. He left the cafe by the service alley, quickly circled the block, and reappeared at a corner diagonally opposite the entrance.

Across the street and in a vacant doorway he could still see the thin figure of Archie Roman.

FORTY-FIVE slow minutes passed. Half a dozen times Roman left the doorway to peer through the glass of Verdi's entrance. Each time someone left, Roman watched him. It was nine-thirty by Tim's watch when Roman arched a cigarette-stub into the street, hunched his lean shoulders, and shuffled away. Tim gave him two hundred feet, then began to follow.

The trail led downtown to Greenwich Village where Archie Roman installed

himself in an alley to watch an apartment building. Tim grinned faintly to himself. "Nope, Archie. I don't think you'll see me coming home tonight."

At eleven o'clock Roman left Tim's apartment building, caught a cab, and drove uptown to West 74th Street. There he entered a shabby five-story building called the Empress Hotel. Tim was thinking it over and watching the dark windows of the building when Roman reappeared. With him was a small, rotund man. He lit a cigar as he reached the walk, revealing a heavy-featured face, thick throat, and gleaming gold teeth.

Tim flattened himself in a doorway as the two men approached. The soft sound of their voices grew nearer. Their shoes whispered on the pavement.

"... left the Mutual about five-thirty and drank beer in a bar," a husky voice was saying softly. "When he got to his room, he stayed. But he's getting nervous. We better get it done quick."

"We will," a listless voice replied. The men passed within three feet of Tim. Archie Roman was speaking: "Everything's O.K."

"Maybe," the rotund man countered. "I don't know why we're waiting. Or what's the angle at that Pagan place. I don't think you're telling me everything, Archie. I—"

"You'll get told. Bush is your job. I..." The words faded. The steps died away. Slowly Tim left the doorway. The two men were crossing Broadway and heading toward Riverside Drive.

Tim followed. They crossed the Drive and entered the park.

"Don't see why..." A snatch of the rotund man's words floated back. The voice was angry now. The two figures vanished in the darkness beyond the curving path that skirted the thick hedge. Tim followed silently. The park was deserted and dark save for the faint gray balls of light that were the dimmed-out lamps. A quarter-moon was just fringing the tall building to the east, and its misty silver dusted the black shadows of the thick bushes. Uptown at 125th a ferry-boat moaned lonesomely.

"Don't! Don't! Oh, God... Don't!" The harsh cry faded in a thick sob. Somewhere in the darkness ahead a man

coughed. There was a long sigh, then the crashing of hedge-brush.

Tim stood, frozen, listening, waiting. At last he heard footsteps hurrying away in the darkness. He jerked forward, rounded the curved path. Now even the fleeing steps were gone. Then a labored breath moaned from the darkness to his right. Quickly he dropped to his knees and crawled into the thick hedge. His fingers searched, touched a leg. He struck a match.

In the sudden bright flame he saw the rotund little man, crumpled up on his side. His hands were knotted in his stomach. His face was sweat-stained and corded with agonized lines. And as Tim stared, the face seemed to loosen and relax. A tremor passed through the body, then faded. The hands dropped away from the stomach, revealing the erect handle of a knife. The match went out.

"Damn... damn!" Tim was whispering thinly. He struck another, bent closer. The knife-handle was serpent-shaped and silver. His mind flashed back to the moment in Sam Bush's office, to Bush's damp nervous fingers straying over a serpent-shaped silver letter-opener of the desk set.

THE second match went out. On hands and knees above the dead man, Tim thought furiously. He listened to the silence and his own rapid breathing. The moonlight sifted through the hedge and painted the dead face with gray.

Tim moved. Carefully his fingers went into the man's pockets. He found the billfold—he found keys, cigars, matches, a crumpled envelope and some change. He left the change, crammed the rest into his own pocket, then moved quickly away.

In the dim booth of a tavern three blocks away, he spread the contents of the pockets on the table. In the billfold was sixty dollars. The identification card read: John Lukey. Age, 47. Address, 634 Porter St., Brooklyn, N. Y. In an inner pocket Tim found half a dozen pawn-tickets issued on rings, watches, and a typewriter. No two names on the tickets were alike, and none was John Lukey... The cigars were twelve-cent Carvents, the matches advertised beer. He opened the crumpled envelope. Out fell a crudely typed note.

Lukey,

Everything is getting close to ready and we had better move fast, because the girl has been coming to his office often the last three days and it looks like they are getting set to start the job.

About the split, I don't know where you got any idea I was trying to take more than you are going to get. You know damn well you can always trust me fifty-fifty.

When you find this it will be plenty of time to meet me to get straight on the last move. I will be waiting in Riverside Park where the path turns down from 74th Street. Make it about midnight.

Sam

Tim read the note again carefully, then picked up the key—a single Yale with a hotel-plate attached: Room 359—Empress Hotel. Please leave at the Desk.

He turned the crumpled envelope and read the address: Mr. J. Lukey, Room 359—Private. The envelope had never been postmarked.

"Huh? . . . Oh, yeah. A beer." He became aware of the waiter's question. He studied the pawn-tickets again. "Lukey was a tin-horn thief," he mused. "Sammy Bush is in this, and I don't think the alarm clock racket is worth murder. Furthermore, Archie Roman doesn't work for peanuts. But he's working hard to frame Sammy for murder. That letter-opener will be traced to the maker—this letter would have nailed Sammy. . . ." He tapped the table nervously. His mind retraced the events of the last two hours. He tried to recapture the words he had heard. "Pagan" . . . Lukey was asking Roman about some angle at the Pagan. He looked at the hotel-key again. Abruptly he rose and walked out, striding rapidly through the dark streets.

THE Empress Hotel lobby was merely a wide hall that led from the front door to the stairs. The only light was a dim bluish globe burning at the first landing. Tim climbed silently to the third floor corridor. There another blue globe cast a dirty light upon the worn carpet and over the closed doors. He found number 359. He listened. There was no sound save the regular snoring of someone across the hall. Carefully he fitted the key. The door whined open into darkness. Across the space the moonlit rectangle of a window glowed. He closed the door behind

him, tiptoed to lower the shade, then found the light-switch.

It was a small room, dirty and barren. The bed was sagging and unmade. An overflowing ashtray rested on a table. On the window sill sat a pair of cheap binoculars and four empty beer bottles.

"Cute little nest," Tim breathed. "Just what a thief—" Then he saw the scrap of paper on the dresser, saw the pencil-scrawled name and number—Bush, DU 9-3353. "The last little clue, all waiting for the cops!" he realized. He pushed the paper into his pocket and turned toward the door. Then he heard it—the groan of the stairs. The sound stilled as the person froze, then the loose board was released slowly. The gentle tread of the steps came on.

Tim's eyes raked the room once. He flipped the switch and backed across the darkness. As he moved his fingers closed about the neck of a beer bottle. He fumbled open the closet door and slipped in. He heard the knob of the hall door turning. He heard someone breathe. . . .

At least a minute passed after the door was closed, then the whisper came: "Luk-ey. . . ." The light snapped on.

Through the door-crack Tim saw the taut, poised man. His hair was blond and wavy, his features were handsome and damp with perspiration. He wore slacks and the pulse of his throat throbbed heavily at the opened collar. His blue eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses raked the room sharply.

"Damn! He said one o'clock. . . . It's past one," the man worried. He passed from Tim's slice of vision and his steps roamed about the room. His tense breathing was faintly audible.

Tim wiped his damp palms against his pants. He shifted himself. He froze as his shoulder touched a clothes-hanger. A tiny *ting* sounded. The pacing feet halted. A long moment of silence filled the room. Then the door began to open. Tim saw the muscular wrist of the man, the small blunt automatic. Then the light spread full upon him. Their eyes met.

"Hello," Tim greeted drily. "Didn't mean to disturb you. . . ."

"Get out of there," came the steely order. The man moved back. Slowly Tim obeyed. He watched the level gun, then

looked back to the steely eyes. "Sit down and put your hands on that table."

Tim smiled exasperatedly. He sank down. The man started forward.

"WHAT'RE you doing in here? In that closet?"

"Waiting," Tim said gently. "Just waiting."

The man's fair face flushed angrily. "Where's Lukey?"

Tim wet his lips. He watched the eyes intently as he answered: "He was murdered an hour ago in Riverside Park."

The flush vanished. The lips parted. "He— How come? Who killed him? Did. . . . You killed him, huh!" he exploded swiftly.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Tim shrugged slowly. "Who cares?"

"Who are you? What're you trying to get?"

"My name's Tim Hall. The phone book says I'm a private detective. Who are you?"

The blue eyes iced. "So now we're getting private dicks in, too. Who's paying you, Hall?"

"Well, to be quite frank, I'm looking for a client. Want to make me an offer?" Tim grinned as the man frowned narrowly.

"Quit stalling! Who pulled you into this?"

"Nobody. The profit motive got me in. By sheer accident I came into possession of some material that implied blackmail and murder. Experience has shown me that such a combination frequently involves money. Money makes me uncomfortable—when I'm not making it." He smiled faintly again. "I'm afraid I'm sor-did."

"I think you're a damned liar." An impatient nerve twitched in the throat. "What do you know? What was this—this material you're talking about?"

"Oh, but even a sordid person must have some principles," Tim said quickly. "Only my client will know that. Now, if you care to make me an offer. . . ." He spread his hands invitingly.

"Cut out that damned smart stuff and talk! If you know anything worth money, tip your hand and show me. If I'm curious, I'll let you know."

Tim tapped the table top absently, his eyes studying the face before him. "O.K.," he decided abruptly. He leaned forward. "Does the name Linda mean anything to you?"

Instantly the face was alert. "It might," he said softly. "Go on. What about it? What else?"

Tim wet his lips again. His breath was tight in his throat. "What—what about the word Ventura?"

"Yeah," the man whispered slowly. "Go on."

Tim kept probing. "How much is it worth to you? Do you want it?"

"Have you got it?" The question was raw with intensity.

"Haven't I tipped my hand enough?" he countered quietly. "Do you feel interested?"

SLOWLY the man put down the gun. He watched Tim as he lit a cigarette and pulled up a chair to the table. "Maybe a hundred dollars," he mused. "Would you tell—"

"For a hundred dollars," Tim said bluntly, "I'd tell you to go to hell. I'll go somewhere else with what I know. At least they—"

The face did not change a muscle. "If we make any deal, I've got to know some answers. Who else knows what you know?"

"No one."

"Do you *know* where the Ventura is?" he demanded.

Tim nodded steadily. "But don't think I'm going to say—"

"What are they doing with it?"

Tim almost frowned. For a long moment he did not speak. "It's not what they're doing now. It's what they're going to do."

"Who?" came the sudden question.

Tim smiled with faint apology. "Sorry. . . ."

The man leaned forward. "O.K., you know something I'll make you an offer—get me the Ventura, and you'll get twenty-five grand. Tell me where I can get it, and you'll get five grand. Take your choice." He removed his glasses and polished them slowly.

Tim smiled. "I always take the twenty-five."

"When do I get it?" the man asked bluntly.

Tim looked at his watch. "It's one thirty. Call me at my office tomorrow at eleven." He rose and straightened his hat. "By the way, I still don't know your name or where I can reach you."

"You don't need to. I'll do the contacting." He rolled the cigarette up and down between his fingertips, watching Tim through the smoke. "I'm not sure about you," he decided slowly. "Who did you say killed Lukey?"

"I didn't say." He leaned over and touched the pocket of the sports-shirt. He added softly, experimentally: "Freddie. . . ."

The eyes jerked down to the monogrammed letter, F. P., then snapped back to Tim. "Who've you been talking to?" he asked harshly. "Where are you getting all these little—"

Tim laughed. "I've just been talking to you." Then he nodded toward the door. "You better be getting out. They're going to be finding Lukey's body soon. Get yourself a good alibi for where you were at twelve tonight. They're going to need a killer for that corpse."

"Yeah. Yeah," Freddie said again. "You wouldn't be planning any double-angle, would you?"

"I wouldn't think of it." He nodded again to the door. Slowly Freddie lifted his gun and pushed it into his pocket. He turned the knob. As he stepped into the hall, he eyed Tim sharply with the same haunting suspicion and latent fury. Softly the door closed.

Tim exhaled a long breath. He mopped his sweating face and lit a cigarette. "Damn. I hate thin ice," he whispered.

He looked the room over, waited another minute, then snapped out the light. When he reached the street, it was deserted. He caught a taxi at Broadway and rode to Times Square. There he entered a cigar store telephone-booth. He dialed the number he had found in Lukey's room.

"Janney's Residence Hotel," a voice informed him.

"Mr. Bush's room, please."

There was a long pause before the voice returned. "I'm sorry. Mr. Bush doesn't answer."

Slowly Tim hung up. His lips formed the silent words: "Too late."

CHAPTER THREE

The Pagan Phone Call

A FEW taxis wandered through Times Square. The walks were dark. Tim realized he was tired. He tried to think. The events of the last eight hours fogged in his brain. Behind it all a sharp uneasiness hovered. At last he sighed and hailed a cab.

Archie Roman was not in sight when he entered the building and walked to the fourth floor. He locked his apartment door and snapped on the light. He dialed the telephone.

"Huh—uh? Hello? . . ." a sleepy voice finally answered.

"Nonnie, it's Tim. I'm sorry, but I don't have a clock. Set yours for six and call me in the morning. Then call Lonnie Warner and tell him to meet me here at seven."

"Damn," she said quite plainly.

"Sorry, honey," he said again. He hung up. He was halfway across the room when the telephone rang sharply. He turned back. "Hello. Tim Hall speaking."

"Mr. Hall? Mr. Hall, I've been trying to reach you since this afternoon," a man's deep voice said anxiously. "This is Earl Nerman. It—I feel there is something you may know that—"

"Nerman? I don't—Oh, you have an office in the Mutual Building," Tim remembered. "What's it all about?"

"Can you see me now? I know it's late, but—but the matter may be most urgent. I can come to your place at once."

"What is this matter?"

"I—I'm not sure. I'm afraid it may involve the Ventura diamond. If you can possibly see me, I—"

"I can see you. Come on," Tim said abruptly.

"Thirty minutes," the man said with relief. He hung up. Tim walked back to his kitchen and started a pot of coffee.

At three o'clock the door-bell rang. Tim drained the cup of coffee and unlocked the door. The man hurried in. Instantly his eyes fixed themselves on Tim. The eyes

were peculiar—the left was small and half-obscured by a drooping lid, the right was large and unusually round, and its stare was piercing.

"Mr. Hall, private detective, I understand." The voice was husky and swift.

"Sit down," Tim invited. He looked at the man openly. The figure was not deformed, but strangely mal-proportioned. Above the narrow waist the chest was huge and deep, tapering into sloping shoulders. The arms were long and heavy, yet the hands were small and thin-fingered. The face was large and fleshy. Below the waist he was small, and his legs were spindly. He laid his derby hat aside ruffled his baby-down hair, and tilted his head intently.

"You were on the fourth floor of the Mutual Building today," he said sharply. "In 455, to be exact. That is next to my office. May I ask what you were doing there?"

"Trying to get my alarm clock."

Nerman blinked. "That was the only reason? You had no other—other motive in coming to that office?" he probed.

"At that time, no. Next time I go, maybe yes. Why?"

Nerman wet his lower lip. His large round eye stared at Tim unwaveringly. "Then I am to understand that you had no knowledge or share in that—that clock business at five o'clock this afternoon?" Tim nodded. Nerman lowered his voice. "And what interest have you now?"

"None. You can start talking. You said you were in a hurry."

NERMAN seemed to make up his mind. "I'll explain why I came. At the time you were in 455, a Mr. Roy Jones was in my office. Mr. Jones had called on me before. I had become suspicious of his alleged reasons. You see, I am a diamond-cutter, Mr. Hall. Mr. Jones said that he wished to discuss the cutting of a stone he owns. However, as I talked to him, I began to feel that it was merely an excuse to gain entrance to my office, to question me slyly about the work I am now doing. I don't think the man's name is Jones."

"Describe him."

"He's a tall man with a receding chin and a long neck. His face is narrow and—well, sharp. He. . . ."

"That's Archie Roman. He's a big-time thief and a killer."

"I see," Nerman absorbed slowly. "I had feared. . . . But to continue: This Roman was in my office when you visited 455. He ceased talking abruptly and listened. Your voice was barely audible. You gave your name—Tim Hall. Instantly I noted a sharp reaction, almost fury in Roman. He ordered me to shut up. He moved to the wall and listened intently to what you said. When you left 455, he moved to my window that commands a view of the street and building-entrance. He watched you leave. Immediately he left himself. He said one thing—something about, 'That devil could kick hell out of. . . .' That's all—it was a whisper. I watched him leave the building, and I have reason to assume he was following you."

"He was. He did. But you mentioned a Ventura diamond. What about that, Nerman?"

The man stroked his drooping eyelid gently. "The information I am about to give you is in absolute violation of a promise I made to a client. However, I have done some checking on you since five. You seem to enjoy a sound professional standing. So. . . ." His voice turned very soft. "Ten days ago a client presented herself at my office. To my amazement she had with her the Ventura diamond, the third largest diamond in the world. She told me she had to have it cut. She seemed in haste. And she asked for an estimate of its value. I appraised it at two hundred and ten thousand dollars. Then she made a most peculiar request. She begged me to write her a letter. In this letter I was to value the diamond at one hundred thousand dollars.

"I refused. She became frantic and—well, to be frank, desperate. I checked on her identification. I assured myself beyond any doubt that she was the legal owner of the Ventura. I liked her. She is obviously in some very real distress. At last I wrote the letter. She left the Ventura with me. I have been studying it, planning the manner in which I shall cut it—such a job is most delicate, Mr. Hall. One mistake and parts of the stone are rendered almost worthless."

"You haven't started the job yet?"

"I am to begin tomorrow afternoon." He gestured. "But there are some very strange details. This afternoon, for instance. Just before you left 455, my client appeared at my office. She opened the door and started in. Then she saw Jones . . . Roman. Her face turned stark-white. She choked. The girl was frightened! Instantly she turned and slammed the door behind her. I'm sure she recognized Roman. In what way, I don't know."

"And the other strange things?" Tim prompted quickly.

"That little man, Sam Bush, who moved into 455. One day she saw him as she came to my office. She questioned me about him in an uneasy, apprehensive way. She did not explain. . . . Third: My client comes of a respectable and wealthy family, yet she is living now in a very nondescript hotel, a place called the Pagan Arms. She is registered under an assumed name, and all my contacts with her are under this assumed name—all but that first letter with the incorrect appraisal of the Ventura. Furthermore, I am sure she is in financial distress. My work is to be paid for by the sale of certain of the diamonds from the large stone. Constantly I have the feeling, when with her, that she is living under a terrific strain, a fear that borders close to actual terror. And then last—this afternoon after she left my office. . . ."

"Yeah. Then?" Tim said softly.

"Half an hour after she fled from my office she telephoned me. She was—I believe she was crying. She wanted to know if she had dropped an envelope in my office. Then she wanted to know what Roman had been doing there. Suddenly she seemed almost suspicious of me. She wanted to know if the Ventura was all right. She asked me to look in the hall for her envelope. When I failed to find it, she was more disturbed. Her words became almost incoherent. She was saying something about, 'If anything happens, just—just don't call the police. . . .' She hung up. When I tried to contact her again, there was no answer from her room."

"And why did you come to me?" Tim asked quietly.

"First, because Roman was suspicious of you and I am suspicious of Roman. Second, I know that something most peculiar

has been going on in 455. I wondered if you might know what. And. . . ." He paused.

"Yes—and what?"

Nerman's large eye remained set on Tim's. "I know you have the girl's envelope. I saw you leave the entrance with it. You waved at her. I am right, am I not?"

"That's good enough," Tim said. "Get up. We're going to your office. Hurry."

NERMAN blinked. "What do you intend—"

"Come on. Talk on the way," Tim snapped impatiently. He paused at the desk and slipped a German Luger into his pocket. Nerman's eye widened. He followed Tim down the hall.

"The Ventura's in your safe, I assume," Tim said. Nerman nodded. Tim frowned. "When Roman visited your office, did he notice that safe?"

"Frankly, that was one of the things that aroused my suspicion. He asked to inspect it the first visit. He wanted to assure himself that his stone would be safe in my keeping, he said."

Tim cursed quietly. They caught a cab.

Nerman used his pass-key to the building. They climbed the dark stairs to the fourth floor. He unlocked his office and snapped on the light.

"Here is my safe—" He stopped. His face blanched. "Great God!" he choked. "It's been opened!"

Tim caught him. "Don't use your fingers!" He used his handkerchief to widen the open cylindrical door. "Take a look." His eyes played over the room. The window was open. In the glass above the lock a round neat hole had been cut. Outside was the steel skeleton of the fire-escape. Otherwise the office was undisturbed.

"Gone! Gone from—" Nerman choked. "It must be recovered immediately! At once! If the thief can get it cut, we'll never be able to positively identify. . . ."

"What name is the girl using at the Pagan?" Tim cut in.

"Simmons. She—" Nerman hushed. He stared at Tim. "She made me promise not to tell. What're you going to do? And her letters! You have them! I—Maybe I shouldn't have told you," he panted. His face was damp with sweat.

His drooping lid twitched. "How do I know. . ."

"You don't. But I can tell you this—you've just shown me why Archie Roman pulled a murder tonight. And maybe you've given me enough to pull him in."

"Murder!" Nerman blinked. "That man—killed someone?"

Tim nodded. "And I begin to see the reasons. Now, you remember that the girl begged you not to call the police if anything happened. Take her word that she knew what she was doing. Go home. You'll get a call from me by nine in the morning." Tim hurried out and down the stairs. He found a cab and gave the name of the Pagan.

A sleepy clerk was alone in the cheaply-modernistic lobby. He opened the register and handed Tim a pen. As Tim scrawled a signature, his eyes roamed over the open pages. He found the name: Mary Simmons—618. Then his eyes froze on another name: Roy Jones—620. He followed the clerk to the elevator and thence to room 812. When the man left, he waited one minute, took out his gun, and moved to the door.

Silently he tip-toed down the stairs and along the sixth floor corridor. At room 620 he listened. There was no sound, no light. He moved around the L of the hall to the corridor window. There was the fire-escape, with the long steel landing running back to serve the windows of that wing. Slowly Tim slipped out.

He hugged the wall as he crept toward the fifth window. The first smudge of a gray dawn was lighting the sky in the east. Far away a subway rumbled and died. At the window he stopped, then peered into the blackness of the room. He took out his gun, slowly eased himself into the dark room. Cautiously he felt his way into the blackness. He waited for his eyes to adjust, for the gray-dawn to grow. . . .

Abruptly, shrilly the telephone blasted the silence. Every nerve and muscle in Tim leaped. And from a dark corner came a grunt and the creak of bed-springs. A dark figure fumbled across the room. Tim jerked silently backward, his fingers poised on the gun. The telephone shrilled again, then stopped in mid-ring.

"Huh. . . Hello?" spoke the voice of Archie Roman in the dark. "Yeah, what

do you—what!" The sleep vanished from the words. "How the hell do you know?"

There was a pause, then Roman cursed with a soft and measured whisper. "Yeah. Now wait—let me take that address. I'll come over and—" The light snapped on. Tim did not move. His breath stilled in his throat. He was watching Roman's back as the man reached toward the dresser for a pencil. "O.K., 596 East 3—" The words vanished. In the mirror of the dresser Roman's eyes met Tim's.

For one endless, fragile instant each man stared. Tim saw the thin face congeal, saw the eyes turn metallic and dull. He heard the voice sputter from the telephone. Then Roman began to turn, very slowly and deliberately. Tim moved.

His fingers shifted. His arm went up. His left hand darted out, catching the narrow shoulder and driving Roman off balance. An instant later his right arm swung down. The gun-butt slammed into the thin, bony temple. Soundlessly Roman melted to the floor.

TIM dragged in a tight breath, mopped his sweating face as he pushed away his gun. Quickly he turned, starting on the dresser-drawers first. He moved to the closet. From the closet he went to the table. He searched every crack and possible hiding place. He probed the padding of the chair. He tried the bathroom. At last he started on Roman's clothes.

In the shirt was nothing but cigarettes and matches. In the coat pocket he found a thirty-two automatic. In the pants was a thick roll of bills, a page from a New York Central time-table, three single keys, and the stub of a New York Central ticket. Tim pocketed it all and moved to the bed. He tried the pillow, the mattress. He found no diamond—no glass cutter.

He fingered a cigarette as he stared at the man on the floor. Abruptly he put away the cigarette. On a scrap of paper he printed in pencil:

Roman

I cleaned up the murder frame on Bush.
I can fix the Lukey job on you, or we can
make a trade. My deadline is noon today.

Hall

He propped the note on the dresser, glanced a last time at the room, then

snapped out the light. He entered the hall and tip-toed next door to 618. Quietly he knocked, then again. At last he heard the bed-springs whine. Padding feet approached.

"Who is it?" a girl's uneasy voice whispered.

"Mr. Neriman. It's about the letters. Let me in."

There was a rustle before the lock turned. Tim planted a foot in the crack, pushed inward, then closed the door behind him.

"Keep still," he snapped bluntly.

The girl's dark eyes widened swiftly. She retreated, her fingers closing toward her throat, her tan fading into paleness.

"You! Who are. . . . What—" she breathed.

"My name is Hall, and we're both in a hurry. Get dressed. You're leaving here in three minutes whether you like it or not."

"But I—I'm not! I'm not going. . . ." The whisper reached toward a cry. Her slender body stiffened.

"Baby," said Tim gently, "if you scream, I'll kill you." He showed her the gun. "Now, get dressed fast."

She began to tremble. Her terrified eyes fled about the room. Tim jerked a finger toward the bathroom. "And don't try to get out the window," he added. He threw her a dress from the closet. Mutely she obeyed.

Three minutes later Tim took her arm in a hard grip and ushered her into the hall. "Walk slow, don't make any noise, and don't speak to anybody. Let's go—" They used the stairs, reached the street, and walked to Broadway. Tim pushed her into a cab. He gave Nonnie's address. Then he turned to the girl.

"Sorry. It's not what you think, maybe. Get ready to talk when we leave this cab."

CHAPTER FOUR

Do As the Romans Do

A SLEEPY and furious Nonnie opened the door. "This makes twice tonight—" she started. Tim stopped her with one look.

"Start some coffee," he said. "Call Lonnie Warner and get him over here

now." He snapped on the radio and lowered the volume to a faint hum, then gestured the girl into a chair.

"My name is Tim Hall. I'm a private detective. I have the letters you lost this afternoon. Furthermore, I've had a talk with Earl Neriman. I know about the Ventura. I'm not lying now, and I'm not going to. Maybe I can help you, if you'll help me. Are you ready to talk?"

"But what—what do you want me to say?"

"I want to know all about Freddie and the story of those letters."

Her dark eyes strayed over his face and her fingers twisted the pleats of her skirt. "Why should I believe you? You're only like the others. You'll want money and make promises and—"

"I didn't say I'd promise a damn thing, and unless you take a chance on me you won't have money anyway. Because," he added flatly, "the Ventura was stolen last night."

"The—it was—stolen. . . ." she gasped, then quietly crumpled to the floor.

"God damn! Nonnie!" he shouted. "Come here and fix this!" Nonnie swung open the kitchen door and glanced in. Tim gestured furiously. "Fainted! Do something! I want to talk to her and—"

"It looks like you've already talked," Nonnie said quietly. She vanished and returned with water and a towel. Tim chewed his lip impatiently.

Abruptly the radio crackled. "Good morning, and welcome to the Sunrise News and Music Hour," the announcer greeted cheerily. "First, WLWX brings you the latest news from the war fronts. Russia. . . ." The voice raced along. Tim smoked and listened. Washington news passed, the local news came on.

". . . and now, from Police Headquarters: The body of a man, murdered last night in Riverside Park near the 72nd Street Exit, has been identified as that of John Joe Lukey, small-time thief and gambler and one-time bootlegger. During the late '20's Luckey's garage in upstate Rarawan was the scene of one of prohibition's greatest liquor seizures. Lukey was convicted and served six years of a ten-year term. This morning he was found dead, a dagger-like letter opener buried in his stomach. . . ."

"And last, an item of irony: Police this morning were seeking to learn just what robbery a Mr. Sammy Bush did not commit. It seems that Sammy plunged into the Morgan Street police station about one o'clock last night wildly denying all connection with any robbery. From that point Sammy's tale dipped into fantasy. He screamed of a black-masked gunman who threatened him with death unless he confessed, of a death-walk through Riverside Park from which he narrowly escaped. He sobbed that he hadn't taken any diamond. The irony lies in the fact that police have no report of a diamond theft and have, as yet, been unable to locate the robbery that Sammy says he did not commit. Bush was removed to Marston Hospital where he was found to be suffering from a minor concussion of the brain. He is under observation. . . ."

THE voice faded. Music came in. Slowly Tim cut it off.

"I didn't think Archie was that smart . . ." he whispered.

"This girl's sick, Tim," Nonnie worried. "She's not acting right. I can tell by her pulse that something's—"

"Get her around enough to talk, for God's sake! If you—" He stared at the utterly still white face. "Maybe you want a doctor," he said suddenly.

"Maybe I do," Nonnie said tersely. Tim picked up the telephone and dialed.

"Crawford's coming over," he reported a minute later. There was a knock on the door, then the sad-faced figure of Lonnie Warner lumbered in.

"Damned early," he announced bitterly. "Must be something—"

"There is. Get in this room," Tim ordered. Lonnie looked at the unconscious girl, arched a brow at Nonnie, then followed Tim. In the kitchen Tim emptied his pockets. "It starts with what looks like a two-bit alarm clock racket and a dumb little guy named Sammy Bush. From there it works up to something Archie Roman would pull a murder for. I'll tell you what's happened. . . ." He spoke in crisp, soft words. "Now the Ventura's missing," he finished. "If it stays gone long, the thief can get it cut and we can whistle. The girl in there could tell us something about that Freddie, but

she's shot to pieces. The blackmailer's had pressure on her for almost a year. The Ventura was the end of her rope. When I told her it was gone, she fell apart."

"I have a feeling that a little rough treatment on Archie would tell us what—"

"Not now," Tim said bluntly. "First, I don't think he's in possession of the diamond. If we kick him now, we might lose the cat. Second, we can't prove anything on him. And third, he's bound to have the dope on the girl. He could throw the girl in the fire."

"So?" Lonnie wondered curiously.

"I called you to get you to start tailing Archie and see where he goes and whom he sees. Now I want you to drift over to the Pagan and start watching. I doubt if he's pulled out by now. You can find—" Tim stopped abruptly. Slowly he leaned over the kitchen table where he had emptied the contents of his pockets. He lifted the New York Central ticket-stub. There was the name, Rarawan!

"I— Damn!" he whispered suddenly. He spread out the time-table. Down the list of towns he found the name again—Rarawan. His mind flicked back to the radio broadcast: ". . . Lukey's garage in upstate Rarawan. . . ." Slowly he picked up the three keys he had taken from Roman. His eyes were sparkling and sharp when he looked at Lonnie. "Get over to the Pagan. Tail Roman. If you get anything, leave a message with Nonnie, here or at the office. I'll see you later." He left the kitchen, stopped beside Nonnie in the living room and looked down at the girl.

"Nothing doing, huh?" he said softly.

"No. It's shock. Not just a faint. I looked in her purse. It's full of knock-out sleeping pills, and she doesn't have a whole dollar on her. I don't like—"

"I'm going. Keep her here if Crawford will let you. Stay with her. Lock the doors. Say no to everything if anybody calls." He hurried out.

Thirty-five minutes later he boarded an upstate local for Rarawan.

IT WAS a small town of one main street. Small houses clustered loosely along unpaved roads. The early morning sun shone brittle and sharp on the roof-tops. Tim walked down the main street, looked

over the business shops, and selected the Star Grocery and Market. He found a fat, pipe-smoking man behind the cash register. There were no customers.

"Cigarettes," Tim ordered. He gazed through the window at the street. "Know anything about a garage that a fellow named Lukey used to own around here?"

"Lukey? The whiskey fellow," the man supplied. He poked a finger in an easterly direction. "Square cement building on the highway corner," he grunted. "Closed last few years."

"Maybe I'll open it," Tim mused.

"Lose your shirt," the man announced flatly. "No gas. No tires, now. Bad place, anyway."

Tim shrugged. "Might as well look, anyway." He nodded and left.

He was sweating by the time he reached the highway corner. He mopped his face and regarded the squat, square building. Its pumps and front equipment had been long removed, leaving only a cement driveway, now cracked and grass-grown. The walls were of gray concrete blocks. Two small, high windows on Tim's side were heavily boarded. Behind the building, scraps of fenders and a cracked motor-block were half covered with weeds. Slowly he crossed the street and tested the back door. It was heavy and solidly locked from within.

He wandered to the front door. That, too, was locked from within. He moved to the last side. There was a wide steel door under which ran a cement driveway. A heavy lock and chain secured the door to the concrete wall. He took Roman's keys from his pocket. On the first fitting, the lock opened. He edged open the steel door, slipped into the darkness of the building, and closed the door.

About him were the old work-benches, the worthless parts of cars. Oil drums ranged along one wall. A heavy block-and-tackle loomed at the rear. Then Tim saw the car—a heavy late-model Packard coupe, dust-covered and sagging down at the front.

He struck another match and moved close. One tire was flat at the left-front. The headlight was smashed, the fender dented.

"Gr—Great God. . . ." Tim breathed. He bent down. There, caught in the crum-

pled fold of the fender, was a human finger. A ring still remained on the parchment of long-dry flesh. Then Tim saw the rest. . . .

Over the windshield was dry blood. Over the radiator the blood was thicker. On the crushed bumper were other scraps of flesh, scraps of cloth, a bit of silk. The match went out. Tim stared at the darkness. Suddenly he pulled open the door. By the light of another match he saw a driver's registration clasped about the steering wheel. He read the name: Linda Cromwell—33 Hilldale Road, Boston.

"This—this car is it!" he exploded. "This is what she killed them with! Then Archie and Lukey got the car! They've kept it hidden with all the death evidence! They. . . ." He jerked open the dashboard compartment. Within was part of a bottle of scotch, some stale cigarettes, a girl's handkerchief initialed L. C. Something just at the edge of the seat caught the light of the match. Tim bent down.

He lifted a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. The frame was bent, as though it had been stepped on as it lay on the floor. And on the outer lens were half a dozen tiny flecks of old blood. All of the flecks but one were on the left lens.

Tim's match went out. Just as the darkness closed in, the long angle of a slice of light crossed the wall quickly, then narrowed into darkness. There was a faint metallic sound. Tim did not move for one long instant.

He knew that someone had just entered the steel door.

HE SLID down, pushed the glasses into his pocket, and dropped on all fours to the grease-covered floor. As he crawled around the car, his fingers drew out his gun. He heard a footstep, slow and soft, in the darkness. He stopped, crouching at the rear bumper. No more steps came.

Tim felt into his pocket and found a coin. He tossed it in the direction of the footsteps. It clinked and rolled on the concrete. He heard a short breath, a twisting foot. Silence again. . . . He drew out another coin, while his eyes strained at the darkness.

He stretched out flat on the floor and peered toward the long, thin margin of daylight that showed beneath the steel

door. The margin was broken in four places by darkness. Tim flipped the second coin. And then he saw two of the dark interruptions move slightly—the feet of someone. . . .

Slowly, sweating with every tense move, he edged himself along the greasy floor, drawing nearer to those two slats of darkness. At last he seemed to feel the warmth of a body standing above him. Now he was within two feet of the dark slats.

He measured the distance by instinct. He slipped his gun away. Like a tense spring he raised himself until he was stooping before the unseen figure. His right arm drew back, shot out with a wild looping haymaker! There was a crunching sound, a gasp, a choked cry of pain—then the thundering roar of a gun, the smack of a slug digging into concrete. Tim's left fist pounded in, finding soft stomach. An explosion of breath came out. The unseen man crashed against an oil-drum. Tim followed the sound down. He beat away a flailing arm. His fingers dug into a throat, while his other hand traced down an arm and froze the gun.

"Drop it! Drop it . . ." he panted. His fingers grated deeper into the throat. He felt the muscles cord. The body bucked and kicked. He held on, bringing up his heel to crunch down on the fingers about the gun. The throat sobbed a scream. The gun rattled loose. Tim kicked it away. He held the throat a moment longer, until the body heaved and relaxed beneath him. Then his fingers loosened. He dragged in a breath, spit blood from a split lip, and fumbled for a match. The flame broke the darkness.

Tim was looking down at the stained, contorted face of Archie Roman. Blood slipped from the corner of the open lips. Grease stained the narrow cheeks.

Nothing of emotion or expression softened Tim's face. His eyes were flat and baby-round as he reached down, lifted the bony figure, and balanced it before him. He timed the blow to the chin expertly. The teeth chattered. The head jerked back. Tim let Roman fall. He walked across the garage, opened the door, and walked to the edge of the highway.

For the first time a hint of normal expression and color returned to his fea-

tures. Now he was pale. His face was wet with sweat. He noticed that he was trembling.

He hailed a truck. "I need a ride to New York." He took out an identification card and ten dollars. "If it's against your rules, I can fix that."

The driver looked at the name. He looked at the bill. He grinned. "Generally I make my own rules, friend."

"Wait here a minute." Tim returned to the garage, hoisted Roman's inert body over his shoulder, locked the door behind him, and returned to the truck. He loaded Roman in.

"Damn," the driver breathed. "Guy looks like he gonna die!"

"He is," Tim agreed quietly. "Later. Let's go."

The driver swallowed abruptly. The truck started with a jerk.

CHAPTER FIVE

This Time It's Murder

"**A**ROUND the left to the side-entrance," Tim ordered when the driver reached Nonnie's apartment building. He got out, balanced Roman on his shoulder again, and grinned. "Thanks." He moved toward the door. The driver kept staring. He scratched his head.

"Unusual. Unusual," he said vacantly.

Tim climbed the narrow service stairs to Nonnie's third-floor apartment and knocked. "Me. Tim," he responded to her whisper. The door opened. "The girl—is she conscious?" he snapped bluntly.

"She was for a minute. She— For Pete's sake! Have you got to bring everybody here?" she wailed.

"Has Lonnie called?"

"Half an hour ago. He said he lost Roman. He's waiting for further instructions at Alec's Grill."

"This happens to be Roman. Call Lonnie. Tell him to come over." He carried Roman into the bathroom, dumped him in the tub, and found a roll of picture wire in the kitchen. He bound the arms and legs, gagged the mouth with a towel, and locked the bathroom door. He moved to the bedroom and edged the door slightly. The girl on the bed turned her head slightly. Her dark eyes met Tim's. He

entered and closed the door behind him.

"I'm Hall, you remember," he said quietly. "I'm sorry about the—that . . . Can you answer some questions?" he wondered.

"What difference does it make?" she answered listlessly.

"I'll be the judge of that." He picked up her purse and snapped it open. "I don't find any glasses," he said after a few moments. "You don't wear them?"

She shook her head. Her eyes were dull, haggard. They closed and she seemed to be drifting back into half-consciousness.

"I've found your car," he said strongly. The eyes opened. She blinked. For the first time a light of interest kindled.

"You—found it," she whispered. "But—the police. . ."

"I haven't told them, yet. I want you to tell me about the man named Freddie. Who is he?"

"Freddie Paragon. We had planned to be married. That was last year. We . . ."

"How long have you known him? How did you meet him?"

"Not long. I met him at a party, I think. He—I didn't know him well. He was just—different. Not like other people I knew."

Tim grunted. "You were going to be married. Then?"

"One night—we'd been to a night-club in New Jersey. I—I guess I drank more . . ." She stopped and closed her eyes. Her fingers dug into the sheet.

"You got drunk," Tim supplied quietly. "What else?"

"We started home. In my car. I—I don't remember anything . . . Then we were home. Freddie was trying to wake me, tell me . . . I had hit—" She swallowed. "I'd hit two people in a little town. I killed them, Freddie found out later. He went back after he left me. He wasn't like—wasn't drunk," she said stonily. "They'd been killed instantly. Another man, a Joe Dolley had been slightly hurt. He saw my car, got the number. He saw me. After that . . ."

"After that it was blackmail," Tim mused. "Go on."

I WAS terrified. I didn't know what . . . Freddie hid the car. He made an arrangement with Dolley not to tell.

I—Oh, I know it was insane, but I couldn't think! I'd killed them! I'd been drunk and hadn't stopped! If the police ever found out. . ."

"Freddie handled all the contact and payments with Dolley?"

She nodded. "There was no one else. My father died three years ago. My mother's dead. And Freddie was with me that night. He was as worried as I was. He's paid all the money he could get, but—"

"But Dolley keeps up the pressure. I remember the most recent letter. He wants thirty thousand dollars now, right?"

She nodded. "Somehow he found where Freddie had hidden the car. He took it himself. And he knows about the diamond—a diamond that father bought years ago. It's all I've got left." The girl closed her eyes and trembled. "He sent . . . a lawyer came to me in Bermuda last week. He—Oh, God, it was insane. I told him I'd paid and paid, that I hadn't another penny. Then he showed me a picture of my car like it is now. There's blood and . . . even some—some flesh of those dead. . ." She stopped.

"I know. And he said he'd tell the cops where it was unless you paid his client, Dolley, the thirty grand," Tim supplied. "He probably pointed out that you were also guilty of blackmail participation. So. . . What did this lawyer look like? What was his name?"

"A tall, narrow-faced man. His name was Roy Jones. He told me he knew everything about a Ventura diamond that I owned. He made a proposition—if I paid the last thirty thousand dollars, it would be all. If I didn't, he would turn the car in and tell everything that Freddie and I had done. He didn't even care about his own client! He said Dolley was a fake! There never had been any Joe Dolley! He was Joe Dolley, he said! He'd deceived Freddie! And he said we'd never get him in court, if we tried."

"You're talking about a man named Archie Roman. Go on."

"He explained what I'd do— We'd come to New York together. I'd take the diamond to be cut and later sold. He'd take a hotel room next to mine. I'd contact no one, see nobody except people I had to see about the diamond."

"You took the offer?" Tim prompted.

"I—what else could I do? I took the diamond from a vault here in New York. I took it to a diamond-cutter. I refused to tell this Jones which cutter. I asked him—his name is Nerman—to write me a letter estimating the diamond at less than its value. I was afraid Jones would keep on blackmailing. I didn't want him to know how much I'd have. But then, yesterday, when I started into Nerman's office, Jones was there! He'd managed to follow me somehow!"

"What about Freddie all this time?"

"He came to Bermuda. That's how Jones found me—he followed Freddie. He made me swear I wouldn't tell Freddie about coming to New York. The night we left, Freddie came to my room. Jones let him enter, then hit him with a gun. We left Freddie unconscious. Jones made me swear not to contact him until he'd got his money and had pulled out."

Tim tilted his head as he heard a door open. He heard Lonnie's weary voice speaking. He rose. "Why were you carrying the letters?"

"I was trying to get up nerve to go to a lawyer. But I just couldn't. It would get Freddie into trouble with me. And I—I was frightened. I kept hoping every payment would be the last and after that—"

"You could forget you'd killed two people," Tim finished quietly. His eyes held a faint dancing light as he looked down at her. "Sometimes Nonnie tells me I'm losing the human touch, whatever the hell that is," he said slowly. "It's just the business I'm in—people like you, with a little dough and nothing but yellow inside. Just two for two, I'll take a little Bowery tramp every time."

The girl's eyes flashed, yet the anger faded instantly into fear. "You. What're you going to do?" she whispered harshly.

"Oh, you're going to get a break," he said ironically. "But you're going to get one hell of a bill from me." He walked out.

"Thanks for tailing Roman," he snapped at Lonnie. "He's in the bathroom. Keep him there and keep the girl in the bedroom. You come with me, Nonnie."

In a taxi, Tim gave the address of his office. He stared vacantly at the mid-morning traffic.

"I feel awfully sorry for that girl," Nonnie mused.

Tim grunted wordlessly. He sprawled deeper onto his spine.

"Did she do it, Tim? Kill those people, I mean?"

"I don't think so. It doesn't make much difference. They're all rotten eggs," he said wearily. "Sometimes—sometimes I think I'm almost turning honest, I hate 'em so much."

She looked at him strangely. A light grew in her eyes. "You know, Tim, you can always go back to practicing law. . ."

"Yeah, I—Oh, for God's sake! What are we mushing about!"

Slowly her face turned. She watched the streets passing by. "Nothing. Nothing," she said quietly.

TIM paced his office feverishly. Cigarette after cigarette he lit and threw away. Every five minutes he dialed the telephone, then hung up when there was no answer. Suddenly it rang.

"Hello? Hello, Tim Hall speaking," he said quickly.

"This is Earl Nerman," came an excited voice. "I came by your office at the time you—"

"Sorry. I've been trying to get you. I want to see you."

"And the diamond? Have you found it?"

"No."

"And the girl—she cannot be reached at the Pagan! I went there and no one could tell—"

"I've got the girl and I've got Archie Roman. If Roman's still got the diamond, I'll get that, too. But I don't think he has. I'm waiting for a call. When it comes, I'll be ready. Are you at your office?"

"Yes. But the police have been next door constantly since eight o'clock. I feel very strongly that we should tell them what—"

"I'll talk when we're ready. You stay there and keep still." He hung up and lit another cigarette. It was ten-forty by his watch. At eleven the phone rang again. Tim jerked up the receiver.

"Yes? Tim Hall speaking."

"Freddie," came a soft voice. "Have you got it?"

"In my office," Tim answered. "Are you coming?"

"I think I will," the voice decided. The line clicked. Tim took the gun from his pocket and planted it beneath the waste paper in the basket. From the bottom drawer of his desk he got an old-style revolver and dropped it in his pocket. He crossed the office to the waiting room. "O.K., Nonnie," he said. "Go on. I'll call you at the drug store." He handed her a single key, then returned to his desk.

Not ten minutes had passed when he heard the outer door open and close. He did not move. He watched the door of his office open. Into the room came the blond, fair-faced man. He moved as if on tip-toe, and his gray-blue eyes roamed restlessly over the room. One hand stayed in his pocket.

"No, I'm alone," Tim said quietly.

Freddie Paragon smiled unpleasantly as he locked the door behind him and advanced to the desk. "But you've got the Ventura?"

"No." He watched the eyes freeze behind the glasses.

"No? . . . What's the gag?" The words were suddenly cool and slow.

"I'm going to make you a better offer, Freddie."

"Like what?"

"You're going to give *me* the Ventura, Freddie."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"Just what I said. You give me the Ventura, and I give you the car that killed those people. Furthermore I'll tell you where Linda Cromwell is right now. And maybe, just for good measure, I'll tell you where you can find Roy Jones, alias. The real name is Archie Roman." Tim paused a moment. "Do you want it?"

"Yeah. Yeah . . ." he repeated softly. "But I'll have to take it my way." Effortlessly the hand slid from the pocket, the gun leveled on Tim. "Since I don't have the Ventura, I don't have anything to trade. Keep still. Keep your hands on that blotter."

He moved around the desk. From Tim's pocket he took the revolver and dropped

it into his own coat. "Now, where is the car?"

Tim made his fingers tremble as he lit a cigarette. He tossed the match, still burning, into the basket. "And if I don't talk?"

"I know little ways to make you."

"Lots of experience along this line, huh?" Tim mused.

"Enough. Where—" He stopped, frowning at the smoking basket.

"Damn!" Tim exploded. He reached down and knocked the basket over, spilling its contents behind the desk. His fingers closed on his gun. "Damned match," he grunted as he straightened.

THE gun roared as it passed over the top of the desk. Freddie's weapon shattered. He clutched his bleeding fingers and cursed.

"Just wanted to know about your experience," Tim said quietly. He kept his gun on the panting man as he dialed the phone. "Miss Nonnie Carr is in your drug store, Red," he said. "Tell her it's all right now. Tell her to try that key." He hung up, looked up a number, and dialed again. "Mr. Adams, I believe you're the manager of the Craig Apartment? . . . This is Tim Hall. Fine, thanks . . . I want you to go immediately to Miss Nonnie Carr's apartment. Mr. Warner is there. I'll give him instructions. I want you to keep a young lady in your own apartment for about an hour. . . Thanks." Again Tim hung up. Again he dialed.

"Lonnie—listen. . ." He gave a message, blunt and fast, then hung up, looked up another number, and dialed. "Nerman? . . . It's ready now. The address is 317 Parson Street, apartment 3L. I'll meet you in a few minutes." He hung up and dialed a last number.

"Headquarters? . . . Inspector Jacobin, please." He waited.

"Listen, Hall," Freddie started savagely. "Listen. We talked about twenty-five grand. If you'll forget, I might raise that ante—"

"If I could forget, I'd have been rich five years ago. I—Jacobin? . . . Tim Hall. I want to see you. It's about the Sammy Bush-John Lukey deal. Yeah, I know. . . Twenty minutes. . . At 317 Parson Street,

apartment 3L. I'll be there. Bring Sammy." He hung up. He threw Freddie a towel from the rack. "Wrap your hand. You're taking a ride."

Freddie cursed. Tenderly he folded the cloth over his mangled fingers. His eyes never left Tim's. "You'll never ring me in on that damned blackmail job," he whispered. "I know where I stand, and it's clean. You're a damned fool not to take the easy way and let—"

"Blackmail's not your dose today, Freddie," Tim interrupted quietly. He nudged him out the door with the gun. "This time it's murder." He grinned. "Surprise, huh?"

The face paled. The eyes narrowed. "You're bluffing. . ."

"Sure." Tim grinned again. "Let's go."

CHAPTER SIX

"They Always Take That Chance"

TIM opened the door to Nonnie's apartment and gestured Freddie in. He closed the door, locked it, and moved to the bathroom. He looked in. There lay the wires that had bound Archie Roman, there lay the towel-gag, faintly smeared with blood. Archie was gone.

Only faintly did Tim frown, yet his eyes were tired and restless. He turned toward the telephone and dialed. "Mr. Adams? . . . Tim Hall. You can bring the young lady back now. Thanks." He hung up, stared at Freddie's bleeding fingers, then walked over and tied his handkerchief about the other's wrist. "You better lie down," he said.

"I . . . Hall, listen," Freddie began weakly. "Listen just a—"

"No. I couldn't if I wanted to," Tim said angrily. "I'm too far in to back—" He looked up as the door opened. Into the room came Linda Cromwell, followed by a fat little man. Her dark eyes widened quickly.

"Freddie! You— How did . . ." Then she saw the bloody towel, saw his eyes and paled face. "Freddie! What is— what's happened?"

He merely stared at her. "Shut up," he said tonelessly.

Her lips parted. She swallowed. Tim nodded to the fat man.

"Thanks for the help, Mr. Adams. That'll be all."

The man smiled and bowed himself out. Linda blinked at Tim.

"But what is the matter with . . . You both look so—"

"Sit down and keep still," Tim advised dryly. Uncertainly the girl obeyed. She smiled at Freddie. He grunted and coughed as a tremor of pain from his hand reached his face.

Five minutes later a knock sounded. "Come in," Tim called.

First the trembling, frail Sammy Bush entered, his frightened eyes darting bird-like about the room. Behind him came the slender, olive-faced Inspector Jacobin. He nodded at Tim, looked at the other occupants, looked again at the bleeding hand, then raised a brow.

"Looks like you've been working," he mused.

"All night. Sit down in that corner, Sammy," Tim ordered. "We're waiting for somebody," he said to Jacobin. "It won't be long."

Ten minutes later Nonnie came in. She moved directly to Tim and handed him a single key. "It fitted," she said quietly. "And this was in the waste basket." She handed him a small disc of glass.

He took it slowly and laid it on a table. "Too bad. . ."

He covered the key and glass with his handkerchief. A few minutes later a panting Earl Nerman hurried in, swept the room with his one large eye, and mopped his face thankfully.

"My dear child," he began at Linda.

NOT now, Nerman," Tim interrupted. "Sit down. We can start." He arched a brow from Jacobin toward the side wall. The Inspector shifted his position and leaned there, watching Tim with mixed curiosity and impatience. Tim sat down behind Nonnie's desk and gestured her toward a back corner. Slowly he lit a cigarette.

"Did Sammy identify John Lukey?" he asked Jacobin.

"He did. It's a very curious tale indeed."

"Furthermore, it's true. Tell us what you've got so far."

"A set-up so clumsy it stinks," Jacobin

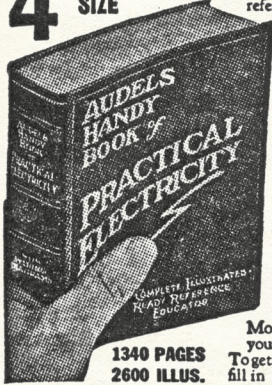
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announced. "About a week ago John Lukey rented office 455 in the Mutual Building. By telephone Sammy Bush ordered the office furniture from—"

"Never! I told you I never—" the little man cried.

"... from the Axtex Supply Company," Jacobin continued calmly. "The front is an alarm clock repair service, but it has more loop-holes than a loan-shark contract. First, the boys don't have any repair loft. Second, Sammy says there are other sub-stations, but there aren't. Third, Lukey rented the office under the assumed name of Frank Smith. Sammy says Lukey hired him, calling himself Frank Smith. But there are loop-holes there, too. First, Sammy's name was used in that office furniture order, given before Sammy says he met Lukey or Smith. Also Sammy's name was used in running an ad in the *Morning Banner*, also before he's supposed to have met Lukey. The whole thing's a phony. It never was alarm clocks."

"Did it ever occur to you that Sammy might be a fall guy?"

"At first, yes, but not now. John Lukey was killed with a letter-opener from Sammy's desk. That opener bears Sammy's prints. Furthermore, Sammy came jabbering into the police station an hour after Lukey's murder. He was stunned, shocked, dazed. He gabbled about not stealing a diamond and not killing a man. He was suffering from a blow on the head."

"And then you found what hit him."

"I did. I found Lukey's gun near Lukey's body in Riverside Park. On the butt of that gun was a little blood and some strands of hair. It's been checked. It's Sammy's hair and blood. In other words, Lukey and Sammy held a meeting about some plan, some diamond theft. They got into an argument. Sammy drew his letter-opener on Lukey. Lukey slugged back with his gun, dazing Sammy. Sammy managed to bury the knife in Lukey's stomach, killing him. In his shocked and dazed condition, he tried to make himself look innocent. He probably didn't realize what a fool he was making of himself when he babbled into the police station. He had a corny tale about a black-masked

Death in Fool's Disguise

man who'd threatened him with a gun and driven him to confess to a murder and theft he hadn't committed. He—"

"That was the truth! And that guy was the guy what hit me, see!"

"I see, Sammy," Tim agreed quietly. He nodded to Jacobin. "And what else?"

"In Sammy's room we found hidden sketches of the office next to 455 at the Mutual. We found an analysis of the safe in that office. And that office belongs to a diamond-cutter named Nerman, we've learned. That clock set-up was a mask to get them close to that office next door, to study it, to pull a theft."

"Perfect," Tim said idly. "Let me introduce Earl Nerman, the diamond-cutter." Jacobin blinked and turned sharply. "Tell him what happened, Nerman," Tim said.

"A very valuable diamond was stolen from my safe some time last night. By instructions I—I did not tell the police who questioned me this morning."

"Those would be your instructions, huh?" Jacobin mused to Tim.

TIM smiled slightly. "Now let's hear my explanation: Sammy was picked as a fall guy before Lukey ever hired him. Look at Sammy and you'll know why. And in a way, Lukey was a fall guy, too. The idea was Roman's. It was staged at 455 with the express intention of looking so phony that Sammy would be tagged as a thief at once. Sammy never saw Roman, never knew his name had been used before the actual hiring had taken place. Lukey did the contacting for Roman, and Roman stayed clean. He planned to receive the stolen diamond and give Sammy the double-rape for murder and theft. Actually Roman killed Lukey to cut all contact, knowing at the time that the theft had been accomplished."

"He knew or had stolen it himself?" Jacobin injected.

"We'll get to that. You can check on what I say. First, I saw Roman take Lukey for the murder walk into the park. I heard Lukey scream. I heard Roman run away. When I reached Lukey's body, there was no gun. Roman took the gun, went away to slug and terrify Sammy, then came back to plant it in those bushes.



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Dime Detective Magazine

My hunch is that a close check on that gun and letter-opener will get a print from Roman. Further checks of Lukey's and Sammy's rooms will probably do the same thing. I've got some letters that also may have Roman's prints. Sammy's just a fool, disguising Roman's crime."

"Then where the hell is Roman if—"
Jacobin started. At that moment the door opened and Lonnie Warner slumped in. He stared at the occupants carefully, then looked at Tim. With a slow gesture he nodded. He placed a small package on the desk. Tim's lips formed the silent question: "He got it?" And Lonnie's lips answered: "Yeah. I couldn't help it. . ."

Tim sighed. He looked at Jacobin. "Roman is dead," he said. Tim's eyes roamed over every face. "He was murdered less than an hour ago."

"AND now," Tim continued quietly, "we'll talk about a wreck that happened nearly a year ago. Miss Cromwell, you and Freddie Paragon had been to a night-club in New Jersey. You got drunk. You remember nothing until you got home and Freddie was trying to bring you to, tell you that you'd hit-and-run. Right?"

At last, with her eyes on the floor, the girl nodded.

"And you, Freddie, you made blackmail payments to a man representing himself as Joe Dolley. This was to protect the girl you loved, Miss Cromwell? In the months of blackmail, you exhausted your money as well as Miss Cromwell's?"

"I don't know a damn thing about it!" the man muttered listlessly.

"But Miss Cromwell knows. Miss Cromwell, you paid blackmail to shield yourself from the two deaths for which you believed yourself responsible?" At last she nodded again. "And when you had no more cash, a man named Roy Jones came to you in Bermuda. He said he had the death car in hiding, complete with proof against you. He revealed that he knew you owned the Ventura diamond, a large uncut stone. Then he forced you to accompany him to New York to have the stone cut. You took the stone to Ner-man. With that stone you intended to pay thirty thousand in blackmail?"

"Yes. Oh, God, yes. . ." she whispered.

Death in Fool's Disguise

"And this Roy Jones is also Archie Roman, who set up the phony alarm clock office next door to Nerman a week ago."

"Hell!" Jacobin exploded. "Do you mean that—"

"Yeah. Now listen." He turned to Freddie. "Paragon is not your real name! Furthermore, you'd known Roman, hadn't you? You met Miss Cromwell with the intention of marrying her for her wealth, didn't you? And didn't you know, on the night of that fatal accident, that she wasn't going to marry you? Didn't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about! I never—"

"Miss Cromwell, when you spoke to me this morning, you said you *had* planned to marry Freddie! You meant that you'd changed your mind, didn't you? And is it not true that, on the night of that accident, Paragon knew you were *not* going to marry him?"

"I . . . Yes, I— A week before I had told him I . . ." she stammered. Her eyes were wide and startled. Freddie choked and shouted.

"That's a lie! Every word's a damn lie! I tried to help—"

"Shut up and listen! You were and are a plain and simple society crook. When your profit-marriage with Miss Cromwell went on the rocks, you made another plan. At that Jersey night-club you slipped her a mickey in her drinks. When she passed out, you loaded her in her car and drove. *You drove!* You picked a spot to hit someone! You deliberately, intentionally murdered two people with her car! Then you told Miss Cromwell that she—"

"I didn't! Damn you, I never did any—" Paragon strangled.

"You did, and I can prove it," Tim said softly. From his pocket he took the blood-spattered glasses. "I found these half under the seat of that death car. Miss Cromwell does not wear glasses. You do! Glasses like these! An oculist can prove—"

"I lost them there, yeah! In the bump! But she was driving."

"I see," Tim said gently. "Then tell me why they happen to have blood on them if you were sitting on the right-hand side? The right-hand window is up! Furthermore, the people were struck on the

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Dime Detective Magazine

left front! And why is most of the blood on the left lens, here? Because you were driving! The driver's window was down! When you hit the people, the blood hit you! And an analysis of the blood will show—Sit down! Paragon! Sit down!"

LINDA CROMWELL screamed. Lonnie leaped. His arms locked about the blond man just as he stumbled toward the open window. There was a brief, noiseless struggle before Lonnie hurled the panting, wild-eyed man back into his chair.

In the room there was no sound save Freddie's heavy sobbing breath. Linda stared at him. Nerman's large eye watched Tim. Jacobin's olive face was strangely alert. Lonnie lit a cigarette.

"And it was you who took Miss Cromwell's blackmail money," Tim finished. "You posed as her aid. You hid the death car to use as a club if you needed it. And that is why you were able to offer me twenty-five grand for the Ventura last night. You had her money."

Freddie Paragon made no answer.

"And now we'll tie things together," Tim said. "Freddie and Roman were known to each other. Roman began to see Freddie with money. Roman wondered where it came from, what new racket he wasn't in on. By careful work he was able to locate the hiding place of the death car. Then he sweated you for the dope on the whole deal."

"He stole the damn thing! He's had it for three months! I haven't had anything to do with what's been going on at—"

"Roman stole the death car and teamed with Lukey to hide it in Lukey's garage in Rarawan. Then he traced Miss Cromwell to Bermuda. There he made his proposition. He was cutting in on Freddie. He forced Miss Cromwell to come to New York with him. He trailed her to Nerman's office, thus learning where the Ventura was. Then he set up the phony clock service next door, using Lukey and Sammy as fronts. He intended getting the whole Ventura for himself! Not merely the thirty grand. And now. . ." He raised his handkerchief from the table and lifted the single key.

Death in Fool's Disguise

"I took this from Roman's pocket last night, or rather, this morning, after the Ventura theft. Tell me about it, Nonnie."

"It opens the office door of 457 in the Mutual Building—Mr. Nerman's office."

"And where did you find this?" He held up the disc of glass.

"In the waste basket of Mr. Nerman's office," she replied.

Tim turned to Lonnie Warner. "Tell me what happened here an hour and fifteen minutes ago."

"I was hiding in that closet yonder, like you said on the telephone. A man slipped in here. He untied Roman and helped him out. I followed them. They went to a basement apartment on East 33rd Street near the river. Twenty minutes later the man came out and locked the place. After he left, I forced my way in."

"And what did you find, Lonnie?"

"I found Roman. He was dead. He had just been shot in the back of the head. And then—then I found that." He pointed to the package on Nonnie's desk.

Slowly Tim opened the wrapping.

"And this," he said softly, "would be the Ventura diamond. Tell me, Lonnie. Who was that man?"

"It was—"

NONNIE screamed sharply. Tim kicked back his chair.

"Watch it, Lonnie!" he shouted. His fingers snapped upward with his gun. He saw Jacobin drawing from his shoulder-case. Tim fired first. An instant later Nerman's gun roared. In the same split instant, the man screamed harshly. His bullet spanged the wall beyond Lonnie's shoulder. Then Jacobin's bullet followed Tim's into the man's chest.

A jarring tremble passed through Nerman's body. A blank expression of baby-like surprise washed his features. His fingers loosened, one by one, and he sagged forward. He did not move again.

Tim dragged in a long breath. "That—that's it," he said. "He got the bug, too. He saw his chance to doublecross Roman, and he saw that he had to do it to save himself. He did."

"He was tied in with Roman on the deal?" Jacobin asked flatly.



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Dime Detective Magazine

"I believe it was this way," Tim said quietly. "Roman set up the dummy at 455. Then he approached Nerman. He probably used threats plus persuasion. He pointed out that the thieves were planted next door, that the diamond could be taken from the safe in absolute safety. Sammy would take the theft and murder rap, but the Ventura would be lost in the scuffle. It would be cut by Nerman and sold by Roman when they were ready."

"How did Nerman get up the nerve to doublecross Archie Roman?" Jacobin shot out.

"It was more desperation than nerve. Nerman got worried when he found that I, a private detective, was in Sammy's office yesterday. He suspected I'd gotten wind of the deal. He came to me last night, trying to check up. Everything went along all right until I mentioned that I had some murder proof on Archie Roman. That started Nerman thinking. He realized that if Roman was nailed for murder, he'd spill the true story of the diamond theft. At once Nerman started trying to get Roman. While I was in Roman's room at the Pagan, Nerman called him and asked him to meet him at some address on the East side.

"That's where Nerman finally killed him," Lonnie put in. "It's a little dive, rented under the name of Jones. I found tools there for diamond-cutting."

Tim nodded. "Anyway, Nerman was striving to shut Roman up before I could crack him open and reveal the phony theft. Roman didn't keep his appointment with Nerman because I slugged him. When he came around, he trailed me to Rarawan. I cooled him off again and left him here. By that time I was getting hot on my hunch with Nerman. I cleared this apartment, tipped Nerman as to Roman's whereabouts, and let him walk into my opening." He gestured to the key and piece of glass. "And those help prove my hunch. The key was in Roman's pocket—it fits Nerman's office. So if Roman was the thief, why did he cut the window instead of using the door? It wasn't Roman. It was Nerman doing some fixing. He had the glass cutter among his tools. And why, if Roman cut from the outside, wasn't the disc of glass broken when it

Death in Fool's Disguise

fell? Because Nerman cut from the inside, and with the precise habits of his trade, dropped the scrap in the basket."

"I see all that now," Jacobin said. "You caught your killer, but he was only a thief. And you caught him by making him a killer. . ."

"What I did, and what I would have liked to do are a couple of different things, Jake," he said quietly. "All I had was my hunch. I had no proof that would stick. I didn't know for sure. Roman might have beaten the murder rap. Nerman, given time, would have cut the diamond, disposed of it, and we'd be stuck. I had to take what I could get."

At last Jacobin nodded. He looked around the room. "Well—some of us can go to headquarters. . ."

TIM was still frowning when they were gone. "Rotten. All of them," he whispered. "Nerman—" He stopped and looked at Nonnie.

She had not moved. She still stood in the corner and her eyes were locked on the rug, on the dark stain that was the blood of Earl Nerman.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing. You wouldn't understand," she said slowly. She kept staring. "I—I bought that rug because I liked it so. This apartment. . . I liked it too, Tim. But now I'll always remember that a man was killed—he was killed right there on the rug I liked. Oh, God, why can't I have just something that doesn't get ugly and dirty with—" She stopped. She was crying deeply, softly.

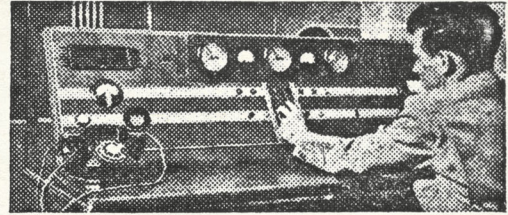
Slowly Tim moved toward her. He lifted her chin. "Why don't you quit, honey?"

"I don't—I. . ." Her eyes locked with his. "Can't you tell me why, Tim?"

"Maybe—maybe even dirt gets in your blood at last." He grinned. "It'll go away. I'll give you a kiss and buy you a big drink," he said.

"Some other time for the kiss, Tim," she said very quietly. "It's a drink I need now."

She did not look at him. She did not look at her rug or the blood. Slowly she walked out and Tim closed the door behind them.



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