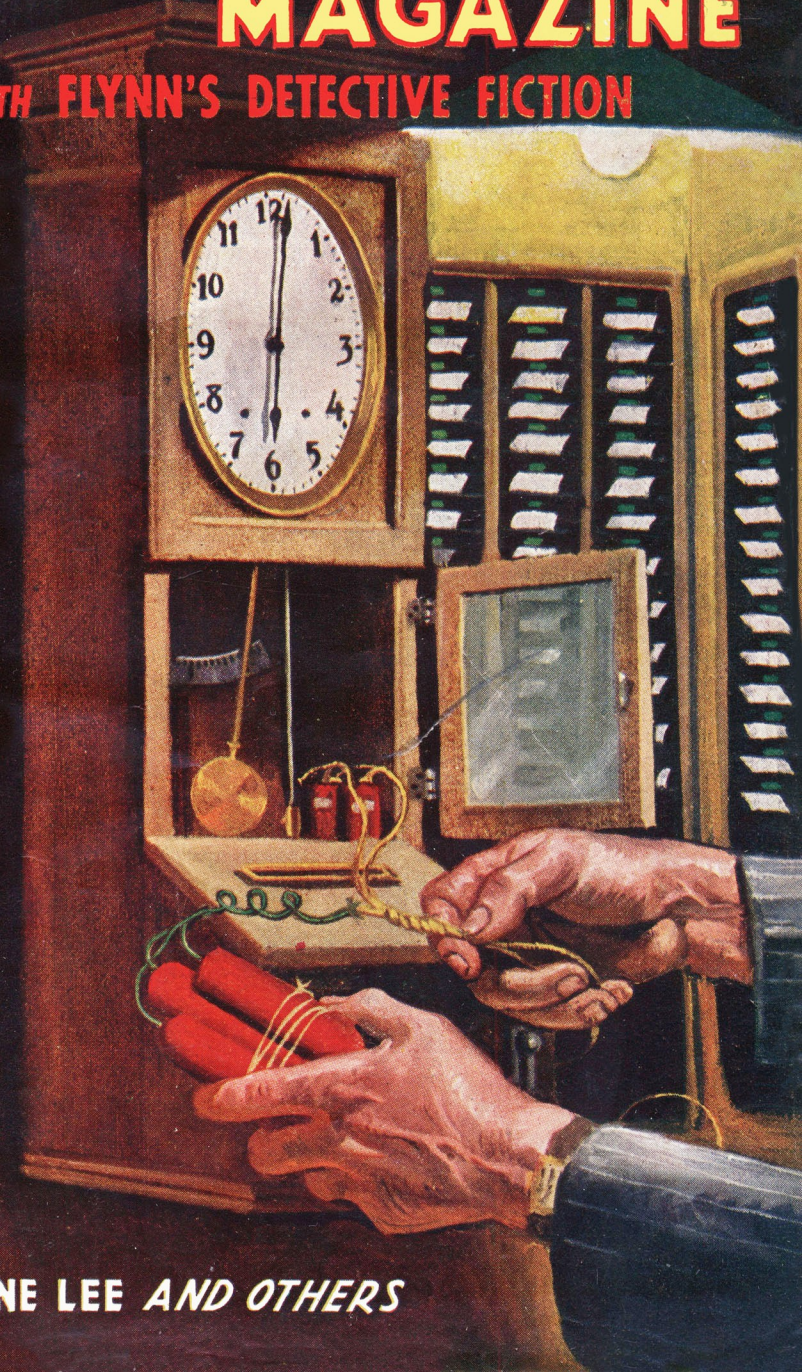


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MARCH

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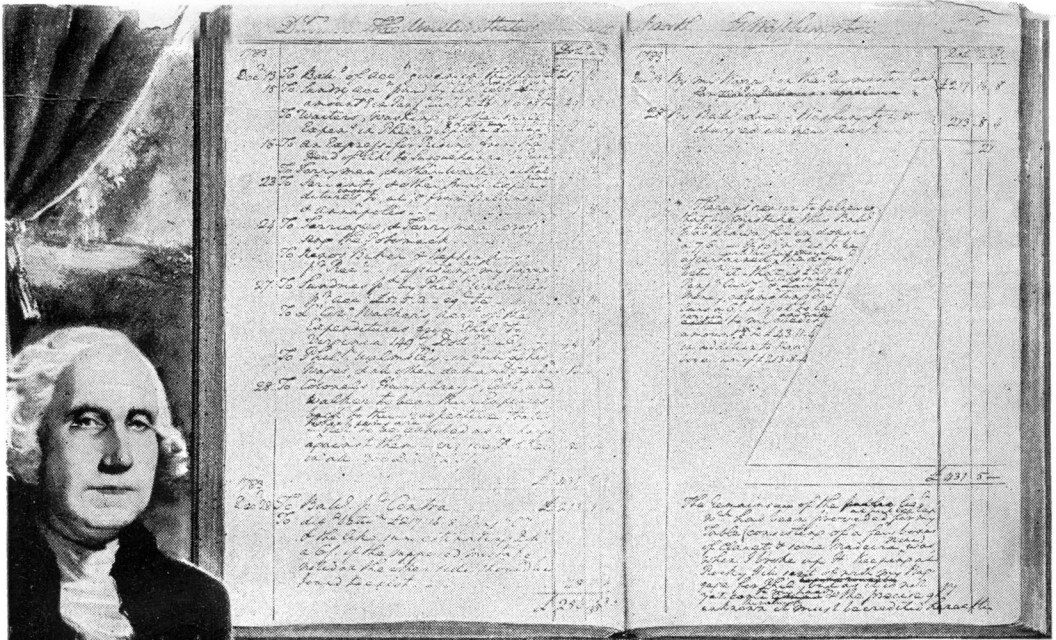


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PARADE**

A "HIGH" PRICE STORY
by **DALE CLARK**

SLAY BINGE
by **H.H. STINSON**

ROBERT MARTIN • THORNE LEE AND OTHERS



Geo. Washington slept here . . .

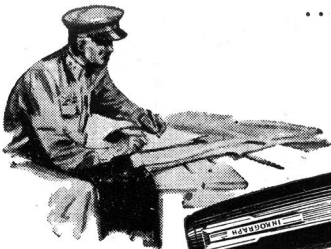
Named Commander-in-Chief two days before Bunker Hill, without staff or means, Washington had to find, feed, clothe, arm and train an army. And in addition, pay his own expenses, to be later reimbursed.

From 1775 to 1783, he kept in his own hand his set of books in double entry. Each colony issued its own currency, whose value varied with localities, had to be changed into "lawful" money. He travelled, often lacked headquarters, spent days in saddle, nights in the field.

Yet so meticulously did the General keep his expense accounts for eight years that Treasury auditors found in his books a discrepancy of only 99 cents . . . and that owing to G.W.!

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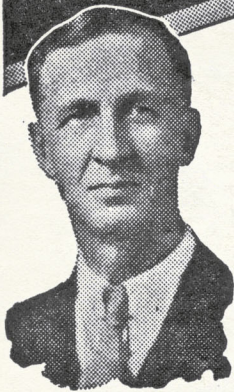
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INK-O-GRAPH[®] 2

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Established 28 Years

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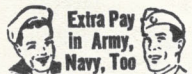


Lieutenant in Signal Corps
"I cannot divulge any information as to my type of work, but I can say that N.R.I. training is certainly coming in mighty handy these days." (Name and address omitted for military reasons.)



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Make \$30, \$40, \$50 a Week**

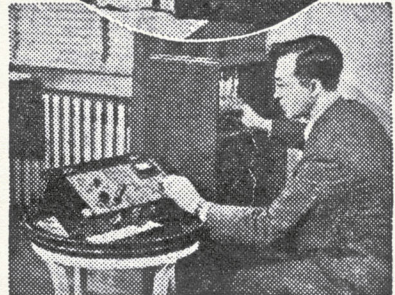
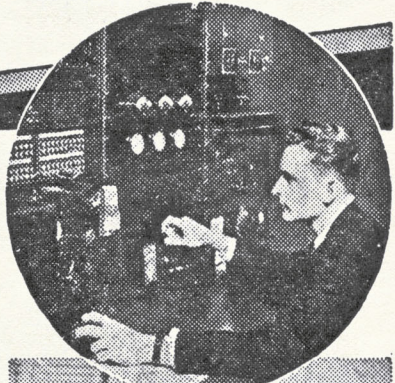
Right now, in nearly every neighborhood, there's room for more spare and full time Radio Technicians. Many Radio Technicians are stepping into FULL time Radio jobs, or are starting their own shops, and making \$30, \$40, \$50 a week!

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Vol. 47

CONTENTS FOR MARCH, 1945

No. 4

2—EXCITING FULL-LENGTH MIDNIGHT MURDER MYSTERIES—2

Come along on a

Slay Binge.....H. H. Stinson 10
With Pete Rousseau, head of Plant Security at Air Parts, Inc., currently saddled with a triple-threat assignment: find the boss, sober him up from a three-day binge and clear him of a murder rap.

It's no reflection on your patriotism to beware of a

GI Doublecross.....Robert Martin 40
The Boss had said: "Get to that girl and keep after her. Find out about her brother!" But Jake Allen was dead, so the papers said, and still "accidents" were occurring which wrecked and killed and effectively crippled the country's airplane production.

A SMASHING COMPLETE SERIES-CHARACTER NOVELETTE

Help "High" Price count the

Corpses on Parade.....Dale Clark 68
As that sharpshooting shakedown artist clears up one phase of the Ponsett Beach Tragedy and the mystery of the extra corpse.

3—THRILLING SHORT DETECTIVE STORIES—3

Watch out for that guardian angel in wolf's clothing,

The Whisperer.....Thorne Lee 31
Who acted as Paul Cornwall's Pied Piper of doom the night of the hotel fire.

Be sure your timepiece doesn't turn out to be a

Death Watch.....Ralph Eldred 65
Like Little Roy's, Tupper County had feud killings, liquor killings and killings over women, but no murders—except. . . .

Just sit back and brace yourself, for

This May Hurt a Little.....Ken Lewis 81
Life had passed Horace B. Potts by—until an infected molar, the Jaxon kids and murder entered his drab little world at the Harvey Street bus stop.

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 April Thrill Docket.....6
Some of the sure-fire hits scheduled for production in the next issue.

Cover: "Dynamite would be attached to the war plant's time clock. . . ."

From: *GI Doublecross.*

The April Issue will be out March 7th

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THE APRIL THRILL DOCKET



WE'VE heard of one-armed burglars, asthmatic confidence men, crippled forgers and deaf murderers—all of whom seemed to be able to engage in their nefarious occupations despite their sundry indispositions and physical handicaps. But until we'd read MERLE CONSTINER'S new novelette—*The Affair of the Bedridden Pickpocket*—we had never encountered a female dip so decrepit she couldn't hoist herself out from under the counterpane of her sick-bed, yet still managed to ply her pilferous shenanigans with eminent success.

You'll meet the ancient Lucinda Pellman in our next who will revise your ideas—even as she did our own—regarding the qualifications necessary to become an adept purse-snatcher. She couldn't leave her bed, she could barely move her emaciated arms, she just lay there and smiled bravely at the world—and practically stole the world's eye teeth as she suffered.

"Lay off the case or you'll get your scalp parted," the Dean was warned. But that, of course, was like telling W. C. Fields to go on a milk diet. He promptly mixed in, Magnum and all, to cool off the riddle that hung on an old lady's warm earlobe.



Plus another gripping Mr. Maddox novelette by T. T. FLYNN and several additional short and long thrill treats by a fine roster of your favorite crime-fictioneers.

This great APRIL issue—no foolin'—will be out on March 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 name, 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.

WE DON'T urge that you view all refugees trying to make a living in a new country with suspicion—but watch out for "Mary and her daughter" and their kind!

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Gentlemen:

We Philadelphians were warned recently by our police in their usual cryptic police-bulletin lingo to beware of a pair of female flim-flam artists, "Mary and her daughter," whose racket is selling five-and-dime lace as expensive imported stuff they called Irish lace, smuggled in from Ireland via Canada.

This is a pair of dyed-in-the-wool female wolves in shawls and kerchiefs masquerading mostly as Irish refugees, but otherwise as Czechoslovakians or other quaint European folk—stranded here in the so great United States, yearning to return to their beloved family in dear old Erin or bonnie Scotland or some other wee bit of a country in central Europe or the Balkans, where some women are known to have become expert at making exquisite hand-made lace.

The trouble with Mary and her daughter is they're broke and half-starved (according to their fine line of blarney) so they must sell their treasured lace though it almost breaks their hearts to part with the fine old Irish stuff. Their very heart-strings are tangled in it, apparently (also their purse-strings).

So if you want to be a big-hearted sap you can pay Mary and her daughter many times the ten cents-a-yard value for this lace and throw in an extra fifty per cent for sweet charity's sake if you wish, bless your heart. The warm-hearted, charity-loving Irish themselves are especially likely to fall for this filigreed, embroidered line.

"Mary and her daughter" are forty-five and thirty, and they operated this same fine old Irish lace racket back in 1931 and 1932 right here in Philly. It's hard to tell how many U.S. cities they have bilked or what place will take a lacing from them next.

Herbert Peter Jones
Philadelphia, Pa.

(Continued on page 8)

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| —China Cabinet | Using Garage as Workshop |
| —Modern Sideboard | Choice and Care of Tools |
| —Burglar-proof Hinges | Wax Polishing, Fuming, etc. |
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MAIL FREE EXAMINATION COUPON TODAY!

(Continued from page 6)

“ONE of the greatest sales possibilities in history”—another name for the old confidence game!

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Gentlemen:

Recently I thought I had been shown the proposition that would put me and my family on easy street—a wonderful feeling for a man nearing sixty.

My enthusiasm was prompted by the most exciting proposition that, during forty years of selling, had ever come my way. I had bumped into an old acquaintance by chance, a man I had known years ago in another part of the country. I'll call him Mr. A. It was lunchtime, neither of us had eaten, so we decided to lunch together and talk over old times. I hadn't known Mr. A very well, but as we talked, he mentioned many people I knew in the old days and before long I was beginning to feel he and I had many mutual friends and a good deal in common.

He encouraged me to tell him what I had been doing since we had known one another, and I soon found myself confiding that I hadn't set the world on fire, but had made an average income, had my home paid for and some funds in bonds and in the bank.

Mr. A. revealed he was tremendously enthused over the discovery of an old friend of his, a secret formula that would present one of the greatest sales possibilities in history. His friend—Mr. B., I'll call him—had discovered a chemical formula to make, at amazingly low cost, luminous house numbers.

“Just think,” enthused Mr. A., “a discovery that will have a sure market with every house and apartment in the whole U.S.A.!” Mr. B., he confided, was no salesman, no manager, only good at chemicals. “I want you to meet him,” Mr. A. continued. “He's badly in need of a sales manager and I'm convinced you're the man.”

“But how about you?” I asked.

“Oh, I'm to be the general manager,” he explained. Then he went into details. What a wonderful sales talk the idea would make! Who wouldn't want attractive, easily-read house numbers? Best of all, it used no lights, no electricity, no expense after the initial moderate cost. The chemicals cost very little and the profit would be over seventy-five per cent. I was frankly interested.

Mr. A. arranged an interview for me with Mr. B., who seemed interested only in the chemical aspects. The more they told me of the luminous house number proposition, the more convinced I became that here was a sales idea with universal appeal. Everyone should have it; a sales scoop all over the U.S.!

When Mr. B. had accepted me as the sales manager, and I was certain this would be a sales sensation, Mr. A. said it was time for a legal contract to be drawn up. Mr. B., in

his unbusinesslike manner, said he hesitated to tell us, but he would have no money for a lawyer's fee. He said his funds had been almost exhausted by the cost of experiments, living expenses, chemicals, application for patent, etc. Mr. A. took this hard, but finally he suggested he and I go in together and put up a small amount for the lawyer's fee, and for the shipment of chemicals Mr. B. said he had ordered—enough to start us on our campaign in that city.

Mr. A. did some figuring and finally proposed that he and I each put up a hundred-dollar check and, in exchange, Mr. B. would give us a sealed copy of the formula as security.

We were agreeable, disbanded for the time being, and met later in the afternoon to make the exchange. Mr. A. said he had arranged with the lawyer for us to meet next day in his office and draw up the contract. He and I would each put up an additional amount to start the company going and bind the deal—say two hundred dollars each, a small sum for so large a project. In exchange for furnishing the capital, we would share equally with Mr. B. in company profits. Mr. B. was somewhat reluctant to this last idea, but finally agreed to the terms.

Mr. A. and I each gave Mr. B. a check for one hundred dollars, received our sealed envelopes containing the secret formula, and arranged to meet the next day at ten in the morning.

That night, for some reason, I became suspicious. I decided to open the envelope. Though I knew little of chemicals I could see if the formula sounded logical, perhaps look up a few of the ingredients, then reseal the envelope. I steamed it open, unfolded the pages. There were four blank pieces of paper in the envelope! My security for one hundred dollars!

The next morning I went to the designated meeting place for a showdown. Mr. A. and Mr. B. did not appear. I went to their hotel and was told they had checked out the night before. I called the lawyer they said they had engaged. He had never heard of either of them. I never saw Mr. A. or Mr. B. again. My sure way to gold-paved easy street had turned into a slug behind the back in a dark alley.

C. D.
Stanwood, Wash.

THE magazine-subscription swindle is still going strong! Here's another version of the racket that cheats the public out of thousands of dollars every year:

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Gentlemen:

I taught in a small town in South Dakota where the Superintendent of Schools had a very rigid rule about allowing solicitors or

(Continued on page 94)

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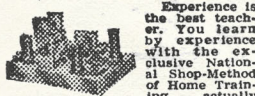


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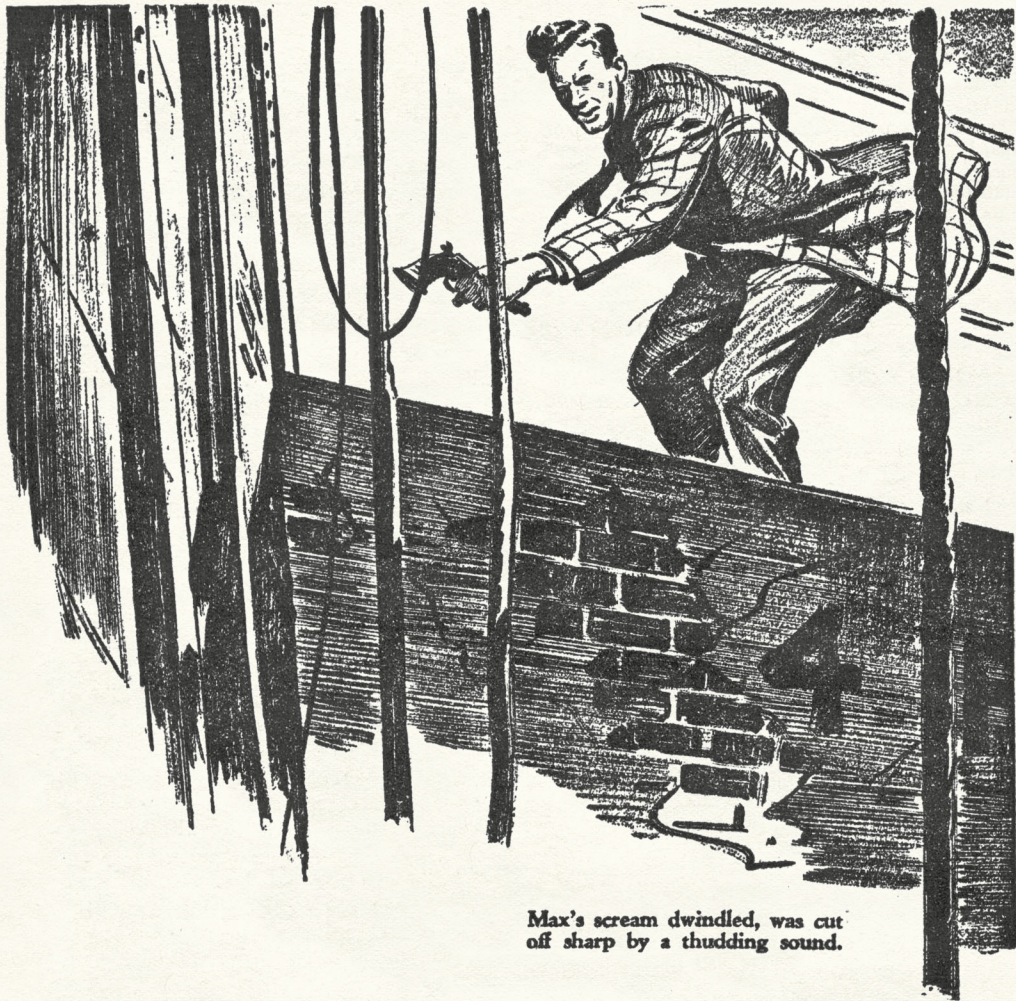


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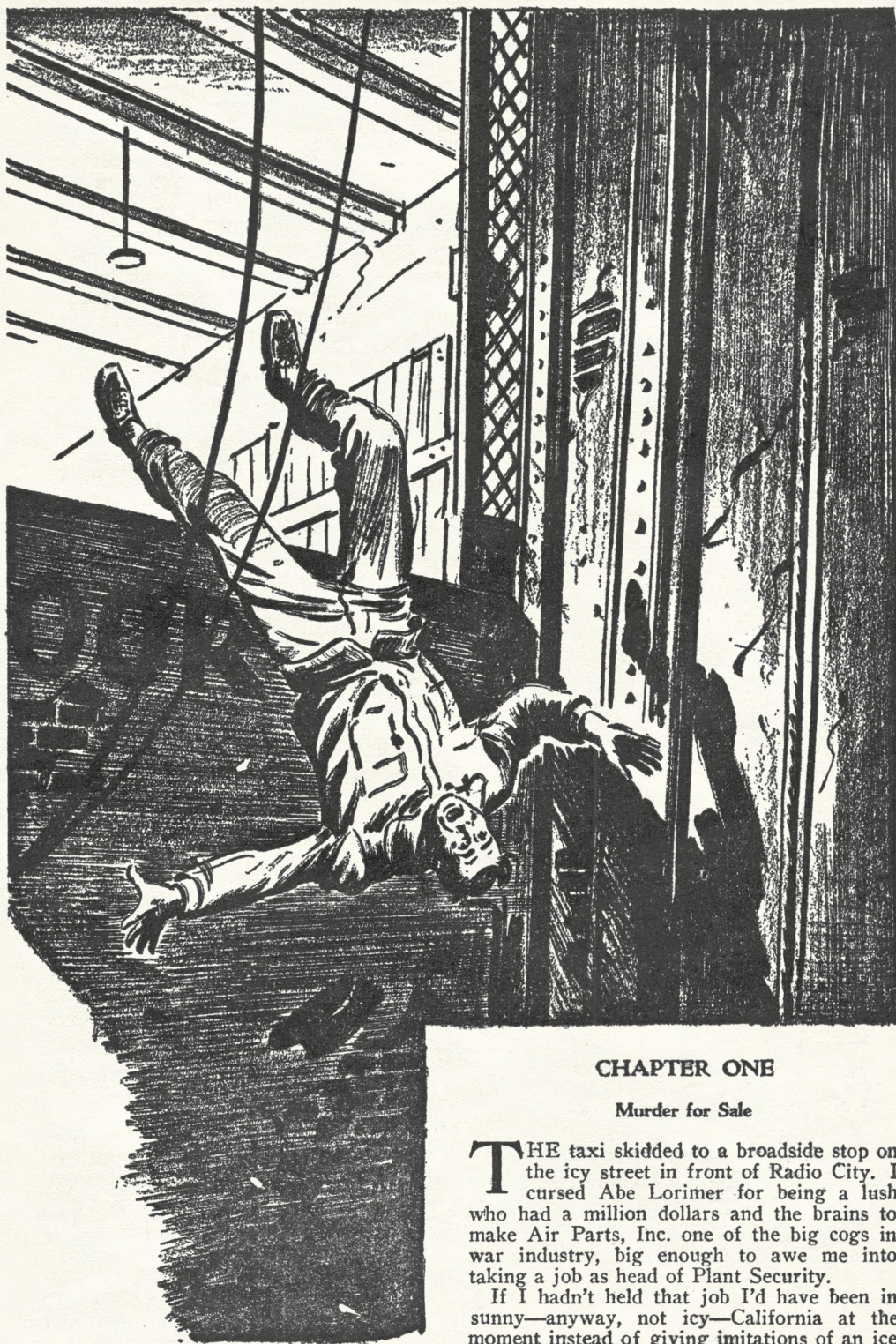
Max's scream dwindled, was cut off sharp by a thudding sound.

SLAY BINGE

By **H. H. STINSON**

Author of "Keep 'Em Dying," etc.

Pete Rousseau, head of Plant Security at Air Parts, Inc.—that's me—currently saddled with a triple-threat assignment: find my boss, Abe Lorimer, sober him up from a three-day binge and clear him of a murder rap. Big drinker and big liver is the boss, yet liquor never makes him ugly; he just gets mellow. But there sure as hell was a body—with half its face blasted away—and Abe's prints on the murder gun!



CHAPTER ONE

Murder for Sale

THE taxi skidded to a broadside stop on the icy street in front of Radio City. I cursed Abe Lorimer for being a lush who had a million dollars and the brains to make Air Parts, Inc. one of the big cogs in war industry, big enough to awe me into taking a job as head of Plant Security.

If I hadn't held that job I'd have been in sunny—anyway, not icy—California at the moment instead of giving imitations of an ice

revue on taxicab wheels in New York City. I'd hopped in on the four-thirty flight to La Guardia Field because twenty-four hours before the secretary to the vice-president at Air Parts had got this wire:

LORIMER NOT YET CONTACTED ME. UNDERSTAND HE IS ON BIGGEST BINGE OF HIS CAREER. IF AIR PARTS NO MORE SERIOUS ABOUT OUR DEAL THAN THAT CAN MAKE OTHER ARRANGEMENTS. WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?

The wire was signed, *Marshall Dexter*.

Until the wire came in, I'd never heard of Marshall Dexter. If Nat Kirk, vice-president of Air Parts, had been in town, I probably wouldn't have heard of Dexter then. It was very hush-hush stuff for post-war production, I'd been given to understand—something about a process that made plastics as hard as steel and just about impervious to heat. It promised Air Parts big business when reconversion cut airplane production to the bone and it was so important that it had been handled only by Abe Lorimer, president, and Nat Kirk, vice-president.

But Abe was on a binge in New York and Kirk was somewhere between Chicago and the Coast on a snow-slowed Streamliner. So Pete Rousseau—that's me—had been nominated to bail Abe out of his binge and get him back to earth. I'd done it before, in Washington, in New York, in Wichita. I could do it again.

Don't get Abe Lorimer wrong. He was terrific. He'd been a 1918 fighter pilot, a barnstormer, a test pilot and finally a guy with an idea he had built into Air Parts, Inc. with an eighty-million-dollar volume in the last year. He was a big bear of a man who worked like hell when he worked and once in a while decided to play like hell. But this was the first time I'd ever known him to get playful when the chips were down.

Nat Kirk wasn't off quite the same shelf as Abe but he was a valuable guy around Air Parts. He'd been first an Army flyer and then a test pilot and when Abe started the company, he'd come in as an engineer. Now he was vice-president, a production genius and hard to get along with, probably because he was always driving, always trying to squeeze more out of every man and move than there was in them. Even so, he was undoubtedly the man responsible for winning Air Parts its "E" for production sixty per cent above schedule.

Hard to get along with or not, I wished Kirk was with me.

The cab skidded three times more before it pulled up in front of the Commodore where

Abe stayed in New York. I gave the driver a four-bit tip and my St. Christopher medal, figuring he'd need that if he were to continue driving the rest of the evening.

I should have hung onto the medal. Five minutes later I was in another cab, skating toward Fifth Avenue and the Pall Mall Apartment Hotel. Abe had checked out of the Commodore four days before, saying his daughter was coming down from finishing school at River Hill and he needed an apartment.

At the Pall Mall, which was a super-elegant dump in the Eighties, I got on the house phone under the suspicious eye of an assistant manager and asked for Mr. Lorimer's apartment. A woman's voice answered. I'd expected either Abe's voice or that of a girl.

The voice said: "Mr. Lorimer isn't in. Who's calling, please?"

"Pete Rousseau. Am I speaking to Miss Lorimer?"

"Yes, this is Joan Lorimer. Who did you say was calling?"

I said: "Miss Lorimer, we've never met but your dad may have mentioned me to you. I'm Pete Rousseau, head of Plant Security for Air Parts, and I'd like to see you for a few minutes. It's important."

The voice said hesitantly: "Well . . ." Then: "All right, Mr. Rousseau. Will you come up in five minutes?"

FIVE minutes later to the dot I was ringing a doorbell on the fifteenth floor. The door was opened by a very pleasing eyeful. Joan Lorimer was tall, slender and very much on the smooth and sultry side. She had brown eyes and black hair and looked to be about twenty, a sophisticated twenty. She wore a pink-and-silver negligee and here and there I could catch glimpses of frilly orchid underthings that must have set Abe back plenty.

Both the girl and the outfit had a stagy flavor that didn't go with my ideas of finishing schools—but, I concluded, what did I know about finishing schools?

The girl shut the door and we went from the foyer into a huge high-ceilinged living room. A great window at the end of the room framed the lights and snowy expanses of Central Park like a Christmas card. I wondered why Abe Lorimer couldn't stay home nights and enjoy this view instead of causing a tired detective a lot of work. The girl snapped me out of it.

She said: "What was it you wished to see me about, Mr.—"

"Rousseau," I said. I got out my Air Parts ID card with picture and prints on it, showed it to her. "I've flown on to talk to your dad. I've got to make it fast. Can you tell me where to find him?"

The girl studied me for a moment with dark, opaque eyes. Then she apparently made up her mind. She said: "I don't know where Dad is. I haven't seen him since I got to New York. I've been worried—I don't know what to think."

I knew what to think—that even for Abe this was the binge of binges. I said: "When did you get in?"

"Three days ago."

"Have you heard from him? Phone calls? Wires? Anything?"

"Not a word." Her rouged lips began to tremble and suddenly she looked still twenty but not sophisticated. "I haven't known what to do. I was afraid if I got people alarmed and Dad was working on something he wanted kept quiet—well, I . . ."

"O.K.," I told her. "Don't worry. I'll locate him. Nothing's happened to him."

Her lips stopped quivering and her dark eyes were keen. She said: "Has he been drinking again?"

Well, as long as the little Lorimer gal knew about Abe's benders, there wasn't any reason for me to hold out.

"Could be."

"Then how can you find him? He might be anywhere, passed out in some cheap hotel or arrested or hurt."

I said: "You don't know your dad as well as you think, Miss Lorimer. He's got the endurance and capacity of three guys and he doesn't pass out. He just keeps going until he gets tired of it. And even when he's plastered, he doesn't like cheap hotels and he doesn't get pinched because liquor never puts him in a fighting mood. It makes him everybody's pal. So don't worry. Either he'll turn up by himself or I'll find him."

A phone rang in a bedroom off the big living room. The girl turned, her face lighting up. She said, almost under her breath: "Maybe that's Dad now"

She went into the bedroom almost on the run and I heard her lift the phone. She was nervous because I heard the instrument clank against the cradle as she picked it up, dropped it, picked it up again.

I heard her say: "Yes, this is Miss Lorimer."

There wasn't anything else then for about ten seconds. The silence ended with, "No—no" from her, words that were like little moans.

More silence and then: "But I—I don't know what to say. Wait—please wait . . ."

Almost instantly she was in the bedroom doorway. She was holding the back of one hand tight against her red mouth as though to keep her lips from shaking themselves to shreds. Her eyes were big and round with shock and horror. She stumbled a little coming toward me.

I grabbed her by an elbow, steadied her.

"What is it?"

A bare whisper came around her hand. "A man—on the phone. He says Dad has—has . . ."

"Has what?"

"That Dad has murdered someone! Talk to him—please!"

On my way to the bedroom door, I steered her to a chair. In the bedroom I scooped up the phone, said: "Hello."

A voice at the other end didn't sound startled when I came on. The voice was smooth, a little on the tenor side. It said: "Who are you?"

I didn't see any reason or secrets. I told the voice who and what I was.

"O.K., pal," said the voice. "Maybe you're just the guy we want to talk to, seeing Lorimer is your boss."

"What's it all about?"

"Didn't the Lorimer gal tell you what I said?"

I told the guy that Miss Lorimer hadn't. She hadn't, in fact, told me much. And, anyway, whatever there was to hear, I wanted to hear it first-hand.

The voice said: "Certainly, my friend. It seems that we've been hoisting plenty with Abe Lorimer and finally he is but full of schnapps—"

"Who is 'we'?" I wanted to know.

"Myself and a couple of guys. So Lorimer is getting pretty nasty. He has a boom-boom we can't get away from him and there's one of our pals he gets really sore at. Finally he makes with the boom-boom and a certain party is cold meat. You get me?"

I said I got him. "Where's Lorimer now?"

"He has departed for anonymous parts. Now here's an idea, my friend. If we had, say, about fifty grand, my pal and I would be so busy spending it, we couldn't even remember Lorimer. Why don't you come over and talk about it?"

"Where?"

He gave me an address in the upper West Fifties and added in his tenor voice: "Be smart and don't bring along any boys in blue. We're in the clear but it would sure mess up your boss."

THE address was a dingy, narrow brownstone of five stories with a Rumanian restaurant on the ground floor, an umbrella repair shop on the second and what looked like two vacant floors above that. There were lights in the top floor where the tenor had said he'd wait for me.

I was alone. Joan Lorimer had been crying into a wet ball of handkerchief when I left her but she'd said she would be all right.

Snow was beginning to fall, most of it

seemingly down the back of my neck. I went into a faintly-lit vestibule to one side of the restaurant entrance, rang a bell that I figured was for the top floor. Presently an electrically operated latch jiggled on the door in front of me. I opened the door and began climbing toward a patch of light four flights up.

The man in the patch of light, when I got there, was about thirty. He didn't look tough. He had on tweeds that had been made by a good tailor. His hair was curly and blond and he had a face that was good-looking and just on the point of going jowly.

He said, "Rousseau?" in a smooth tenor and when I admitted that, he stepped aside. "Come on in."

I motioned him in ahead of me and he laughed.

"Quit worrying. This is no trap. So you can also take your fist off the rod in your pocket."

I followed him in and shut the door. There was another lad there, slouched in a big chair. He was younger than Curly. He was dressed well, also, but with a Broadway snappiness. His face had that wise, pinched look you find a lot around Times Square. He had shoe-button black eyes that watched me through a haze of smoke from his cigarette. Whether his voice was a tenor like Curly's I never found out. Through the whole conference he didn't speak a word.

The room was medium-sized with an old-fashioned marble mantel and nondescript furniture of the living room type. A hallway led, apparently, to a bath and a bedroom, the place occupying the whole floor. There was a half-emptied quart of rye whiskey on a table and Curly poured himself a drink, squirted seltzer and leaned against the mantel.

He asked if I'd have one and when I shook my head, he said: "O.K. So what do you think of our little proposition?"

"On the surface," I said, "it stinks. Just because you say something took place, should I believe you?"

He said, "Come on," and walked into the hallway. I trailed him and we went into a bedroom. There was a man curled up on the floor. I couldn't tell what he looked like because one side of his face was partly gone and the rest of it was covered with blood. He'd been dead for hours. I could tell.

Curly swallowed some of his drink and told me: "There's our late pal. There's one slug in the wall, the one that went through his noggin, and there's another somewhere in his chest. We've got the gun tucked away and it has Lorimer's prints on it. Now how about it? Is it worth fifty grand to Air Parts to have us hand you the gun and we forget the whole thing?"

"You're still asking me to buy a pig in a sack."

Curly got a little impatient. He said: "Look, stupid, if you want to keep your boss out of trouble, you're in no spot to bargain. We've been drinking with Lorimer for three days and we've all been seen together in a dozen spots. One place we even got thrown out because Lorimer tried to rumba on top of the bar with Lennie—"

"Who?"

"Never mind," said Curly. "That was a slip. But it ought to prove to you that I'm leveling."

"O.K.," I said. "Let's concede that Lorimer polished this lad off. Why was he sore at him?"

"For no reason. He was riding all of us. Out of a blue sky, he shoots our pal."

"Why not all of you?"

"Why does a drunk do or not do anything? Anyway, I slugged him with a book-end before he could do much else. He dropped the rod and took a powder." Curly finished his drink. "Now make up your mind. Do we get fifty grand or do we jam Lorimer up?"

"I'm only the head cop at Air Parts," I told him. "I don't carry that kind of scratch around. I'll have to long-distance somebody who can say yes or no."

"How long will that take?"

"Thirty minutes," I said. "I'll be back here in thirty minutes."

I went out and down the stairs. The curly-headed man's story was as full of holes as a Navy target but, if Abe's prints were on a gun that matched a bullet in a guy's body, it still added up to trouble. Fifty grand, I knew, wouldn't square the trouble but I still wanted a decision from somebody higher up than me. I hoped Nat Kirk had finally landed in Los Angeles.

After getting ten bucks in change at an Eighth Avenue bar, I found a phone booth. It took fifteen minutes and the use of an Air Parts phone priority to discover that Kirk had reached the Coast and to locate him. He was playing handball at the Sunset Athletic Club. Because I knew there were two or three operators on the relay to Los Angeles, I double-talked him.

"I hear from certain guys," I said, "that a friend of ours is jammed for hunting out of season with a loaded gun."

The sound of Kirk's sharply-indrawn breath came three thousand miles to me. But he was quick on the uptake. He said: "What kind of game was he shooting?"

"It looks like a skunk to me. Anyway, the skunk is washed up."

"Keep going."

I said: "It's hearsay to me. But certain amateur game wardens say they saw it and

can forget it for fifty—and I mean that's grand. What do we do?"

Kirk swore at me, at Abe, but without naming him, and at certain other parties. He said: "To hell with a shakedown! Where's our friend?"

"Still on the loose somewhere."

"Then still everything until I get these. Can you?"

I said I didn't know.

"What's your idea?" Kirk snarled. "To pay off?"

I said: "Pay-off's never lead anywhere except to more pay-offs. If that had been what you told me to do, I was going to turn in my ID badge."

"To hell with your ethics!" he snapped at me. "If I'd said to pay off, you'd have paid off. I'll get the first plane out of here and you keep things in the air until I arrive. I want to handle this myself. And find our friend meanwhile."

Outside it was really beginning to snow. I should have had skis but finally I got back to the brownstone front. Inside the vestibule I rang the fifth-floor bell. The catch jiggled and I went inside and climbed. I didn't know just how I was going to stall Curly and his pal, but I had to do it. I had to find out who they were, who the dead guy had been. I had

to find Abe Lorimer and get his story, if any. I figured I was going to be a very busy guy for a while.

WHEN I got to the fifth floor the door swung back and I walked in. A man in a blue Guard's overcoat and a very snappy gray felt covered me with a stubby .38. There was no sign of Curly or his pal.

I said: "Hello, Joe."

Joe McGann, who is probably the most famous cop that ever covered the Broadway beat, didn't lower his gun for at least thirty seconds. He was a slim, youngish fellow with a neat Irish face. He still looked, as he had for fifteen years, like a polo-playing stockbroker. But I don't have to tell most people about McGann, the cop who has Broadway in his vest pocket, the guy who never smokes, never drinks, never gambles and knows more people and has more friends along the stem than any five other guys put together. I'd only met him twice and years before but I hadn't forgotten him.

Finally the gun muzzle drooped a little. He said: "Wait a minute—don't tell me. It's Rousseau, Pete Rousseau."

I said: "We both have good memories."

He didn't put the gun away. "The last time I saw you, Pete, you were Los Angeles branch-

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agency boss for Consolidated Detectives."

"Patriotism got me," I said "I took a Plant Security job out there with Air Parts, Inc."

"Sort of out of your territory, aren't you?"

I shrugged. "Let's quit kidding around, Joe. You've been in the bedroom?"

"That's right."

"O.K. And who was here when you got here?"

"Only the guy in the bedroom."

"How did you happen to show up?" I was curious.

"I was having a ginger ale at Shor's. A call came in for me. Some guy, I didn't recognize the voice, said I might find something interesting here. Now suppose you quit asking questions and tell me some answers, Pete. What are you doing here?"

I'd been doing plenty of thinking as fast as I could. McGann was one of the smartest cops in New York. With me as a starting point, he was sure to find out about Abe Lorimer and Curly and his pals. If I gave him the runaround now, what he'd give me and Abe later would be the lumps and worse. I had to come clean with McGann, chancing it that he'd work with me, not against me. I came clean, holding out only the Marshall Dexter business which I figured was a company matter.

McGann listened. Finally he put the gun away. He said: "Come on in the bedroom, Pete."

We went to the bedroom. It was the same as before, except that an Army automatic, a .45, now lay on the floor halfway between the door and the body.

I said: "Who's the guy?"

"There's no wallet, no papers, no nothing on him," McGann told me. "I don't recognize what's left of his face."

That meant the dead man had never been around the Stem much, if at all. McGann knew everybody. I gave him a description of the curly-headed man and his silent friend. They, too, didn't seem to ring any bells in the detective's mental gallery.

McGann said: "This setup I don't get. If they were waiting for you to give them an answer on the fifty grand, why did they powder before you got back? Why did they leave the gun here, if that's it, when it meant giving up a chance for a shakedown?"

"You riddle those riddles for me," I said, "and I'll know why someone, probably one of the two guys, tipped you off."

There was a phone in the room. McGann reached for it, saying: "We'll get answers when I get some help over here. I'll find out who's been renting this apartment and—"

"Before you do," I cut in, "there's one thing I want, Joe. Keep Abe Lorimer's name out of it for twenty-four hours."

"Why should I?"

"War effort. Air Parts has over seven thousand employees. If their big boss is named as a killer suspect, it'll shoot morale at the plant for days, maybe weeks."

"What happens at the end of twenty-four hours?"

"If I haven't whitewashed Abe completely by then, use your own judgment." When he finally nodded an O.K., I said: "Thanks, Joe. Now I'll go out and throw my weight around."

McGann said mildly: "Stick here a while."

I stuck around. Presently the apartment was full of cops and detectives. After fifteen minutes of watching them, I cornered McGann. This time he said I could be on my way.

"I'm letting you roam on one condition, Pete," he added. "You're to look for Lorimer and let me know the minute you locate him."

I said that I'd do just that and went out and down the stairs. I knew why McGann had had me stick around. He wanted to put a guy on to tail me.

CHAPTER TWO

Lennie the Wild Woman

I'D expected that and I didn't mind. Before I'd gone two blocks in the falling snow toward Fifty-second Street, I'd made the guy. He was a big beefy lad in a woolly gray overcoat and a gray Homburg. I didn't make any attempt to lose him and I hoped he liked pub-crawling. I meant to do a lot of it.

There were two things I had in mind. First and most important, was to locate Abe Lorimer, find out his side of the story and then get him tucked away before he got into any more elambakes. The second thing, if I couldn't find Abe, was to come across the track of the dead man, Curly and their reticent pal.

Curly, I knew, had been lying six ways from dead center. He might have been with Abe Lorimer for three days but he hadn't been drinking with him for that length of time—Curly had been in much too good condition for that. And, as I'd told Joan Lorimer, the boss never went ugly when he was drinking. He just got more and more mellow until he began giving his shirt away. So, if he had pulled the trigger on a guy, it had not been in a senseless, drunken rage.

I had to locate those two guys and prove Curly had been lying. The only leads I had were that the last time I'd been in New York with Abe he had done most of his drinking in the bistros of the Fifties between Sixth and Fifth and that there was a girl named Lennie who had done a rumba with him on a bar-top somewhere. Lennie, as a girl's name, was unusual. Somebody might remember her, give me a lead to her.

The first spot I hit was Moe and Mike's on Fifty-second Street. With my Homburg-hatted shadow at one end of the long bar and me at the other, I had a short beer. After a while I asked the white-haired, pink-faced head bartender if my pal, Abe Lorimer, had been in this evening. He said he didn't recall knowing Abe Lorimer.

I said: "He had a date with a gal named Lennie. You know, the one who gets up on the bar and does rhumbas."

"I don't know the lady," said the barkeep. "But tell her to stay out of here. We serve everything on our bar but rhumbas."

It was more or less like that up and down Fifty-second Street, and Fifty-third. Some of the bartenders knew Abe Lorimer but hadn't seen him in some time. None of them knew a girl named Lennie. All the while I stayed with short beers. The tail in the Homburg finally quit on his sixth beer and just came in places to wait for me.

By actual count the El Sinbad on Fifty-third was the fifteenth place I hit and with the same result.

By then I was awash with beer. Down in the men's room I was getting brushed off by a colored boy when the door opened. A little man came in. He wore a plaid overcoat, a yellow shirt, a red tie and a green hat and he winked at me.

He said: "Fancy running into you here, pal. Don't rush off. I want to talk to you."

We left the washroom and stood at the end of the bar.

The rainbow man said: "I heard you ask about a gal named Lennie at three spots, a gal who does rhumbas on the bar. The way you ask, you don't know her. For a century I'll tell you who she is."

I laughed. "No."

He finally got down to twenty-five and I nodded. I passed out some Air Parts' expense currency.

The rainbow man said: "A wild gal named Lennie sings down at the Chez Clancy on Bank Street. She's up this way once in a while."

I figured he could be handing me one of those yarns or maybe not. It was worth the chance, especially since Air Parts was paying the twenty-five. I headed for the street and had a time for myself watching my Homburg-hatted tail going nuts trying to decide whether to stick with me or pick up the rainbow man. He finally chose me and we rode down to Christopher Street on the same subway train.

The Chez Clancy was somewhat of a drum, tucked away in a basement on Bank not far from Bleecker. There was a wan blue neon at the entrance, showing through the falling flakes, and the door was down two steps into an areaway. I went in, followed in a minute

by Homburg-hat. Inside, at the front, there was a round bar and beyond that a fairly big room with tables surrounding a dance floor. The tables weren't too crowded.

A floor show was going on in the clear space at the moment, with a male dancer in gold paint throwing around a girl in G-string and bra. A placard said, *Greco and Greta*.

At the bar I ordered an Old-Fashioned. I was tired of beer. My shadow just stood, acting weary. While I was waiting, I looked around. The bar was jammed. There were servicemen, guys from uptown, guys you knew didn't come from uptown. There were wenches with hair hennaed and bleached and black. There were three lads I knew—at least I knew about them.

ONE of them was a citizen named Sam Knight. He was a tall, lean and wiry specimen with a very handsome pan, spoiled only by a scar and a wisp of blond mustache. He'd been an Army flyer back in the early 'Thirties, a test pilot for Continental Aircraft, an ATS flier and he hadn't lasted at any of the jobs. I knew because he had applied for a job at Air Parts eighteen months before and I'd made the security check on him. Nobody had said anything concrete against him—they had just refused to commit themselves as to whether he was O.K. for an Air Parts job. So Air Parts had skipped Sam Knight. I knew him. He didn't know me.

The other two men I'd never met except through newspaper photos at a time when the Brooklyn D.A.'s office had gone after them, but without success. They were known as Georgie One and Georgie Two and between them they were supposed to control a good many of the capers that went on in the big city.

Once there had been a Georgie Three but he had been liquidated through an unfortunate misunderstanding with a crapshooter up at Saratoga Springs. Oddly enough, the crapshooter had also been liquidated shortly afterward by parties unknown.

Georgie One and Georgie Two could have been twins in assorted sizes. Georgie One was six-feet-five and Georgie Two was five-feet-six. But each wore beautiful clothes by the same tailor, each had a face that looked as though it had been hollow-ground and each had the same surface geniality about one-thousandth of an inch deep. They were talking to Sam Knight and Sam Knight was drinking it in.

It was all very interesting but I lost interest just then because the dancers went off to minor applause and there was a fanfare. A waiter changed the placard to read, *Lennie—The Wild Woman*. There was a lot of applause.

A girl with a mop of red hair, dressed in very little of a green dress, came from a doorway at the left onto the floor. She did, and with plenty of talent, a ditty about a gal on a bus. It wasn't for children.

While she was getting a big hand, I went out among the tables and picked an empty one on the aisle near the door. A waiter with a Bull Montana pan eyed me but didn't say anything. Lennie, the Wild Woman, did another song about *The Old Jerkie From Albuquerque*. That was good, too—good and blue. She did two more blue songs and, to much applause, headed for the doorway.

I'd picked a table she had to pass and when she got six feet away, I leaned over as though I were hunting something in the aisle in front of her. She had to stop.

I said: "Pardon me, Lennie. But I'm hunting for something. It's fifty grand that Abe Lorimer, your dancing partner, is giving away to people. Why don't you help me hunt for it?"

I straightened and looked at her where she had stopped. She had a pretty face, hard like plastic. Every patch of makeup on her face was outlined by the pallor of the skin around it. She didn't say anything, just walked around me and out the exit.

Another act came on, a guy who was supposedly a comedian. After a little of it, I got up and headed for the doorway where Lennie, the Wild Woman, had disappeared. I knew from her reaction that she was the right gal. I didn't quite make the doorway. A Latin boy in a snug tuxedo came out of the doorway. He highsigned to a boy with a receding forehead and outstanding muscles and the latter came across the floor. They did a pincers on me.

Latin Boy manhandled me down an aisle of tables toward the bar. I stuck a foot between his ankles and helped him do a nip-up over a table, upsetting drinks and people. The boy with the sloping dome let me have it behind the ear. Latin Boy got up and between them they hustled me past the bar. My shadow in the Homburg hat made a very amused audience. Sam Knight and the two Georgies were mildly interested.

Latin Boy and Receding Forehead got me to the door. Somebody opened it. Receding Forehead slugged me in the stomach, Latin Boy gave me the heave-ho and I went out into the snow, slid up the two steps to the sidewalk and sat down. I got up and leaned against a lamppost two doors down. Homburg Hat bounced out quickly, stood looking around for me. I said: "Here I am, chum."

He came through six inches of white stuff to me and I said: "What the hell—didn't Joe McGann tell you to stay with me? So you let them sock me around!"

The shadow had a fat face, dewlaps, two teeth that stuck out like those of a rabbit. He laughed at me. "Joe told me to tail you, not to bail you out!"

I felt like slugging any one of his chins but I've found it's bad policy to slug coppers, even the dumber ones. So I walked away from him to the Christopher Street subway station. We rode up to Thirty-fourth Street and I walked over to Penn Station. As usual, there was a terrific crowd jammed in there and Homburg-Hat couldn't take a chance of getting separated from me. He stood right next to me in the Concourse train. I waited until a matron weighing at least a hundred and eighty was standing by his side.

Then I reached over behind him and pinched the matron down south. She jumped two feet, turned in midair and slapped Homburg-Hat across the jowls. Then she gripped his lapels and started screaming. Three guys grabbed him. He was getting slugged while I was walking away. I felt better.

HIKING back to Sixth Avenue, I found a drugstore and a phone booth. I meant to contact Joe McGann and have him pick up Lennie, the Wild Woman. First, however, I decided to check the Pall Mall and see if, perhaps, Abe Lorimer had finally showed up there.

The girl at the Pall Mall switchboard told me, yes, she thought she had seen Mr. Lorimer come in a short time ago. But she couldn't put me through to his apartment just then because the phone was busy. Would I wait? I said, no, I wouldn't wait. I forgot about Joe McGann and headed for the street and a taxi. I wanted to get to the Pall Mall before Abe got notions to go somewhere else.

It was twenty minutes later when I rang the bell at the fifteenth-floor apartment. I had to ring twice before the door opened. Joan Lorimer, still in the pink-and-silver negligee, looked plenty startled when she saw me.

I said: "Is your dad still here?"

She didn't open the door right away. She said: "But how did you know he was here?"

"I find things out." She still wasn't opening the door but I took care of that diplomatically by walking at it as though I expected it to open. It did.

"Where is he?" I asked her.

She nodded toward the big living room and I went on in ahead of her. Abe Lorimer was sitting in a big chair under a floor lamp. He looked reasonably but not entirely sober and he showed plenty of evidence that he'd had a rugged three days. His square jaw needed a shave badly, his eyes were bloodshot, and his thick mop of gray hair was a shambles. He had a ragged cut over one ear, crusted with

blood. His bearlike shoulders were hunched a little as he stared at me.

He said flatly: "Hello, Pete."

"Hello, Abe."

Joan Lorimer was crossing the room to him. She stood behind his chair, stroked his cheek tenderly. She said: "Dad, you've got to go to bed now. Please!"

Abe's shaggy head nodded. He said absently: "O.K., honey."

I said: "That may be a good idea, Abe. But a better one is to talk to me for a little while first."

The girl said firmly: "Dad's going to get some rest before he talks to anybody. Can't you see, Mr. Rousseau, that he's about half dead? Dad, please do what I ask."

"Yeah." To me he said: "I'll see you later, Pete."

I got a little sore. "Look, Abe, we haven't got hours and days to kick around. In case you don't realize it, I'll tell you that you're in one hell of a jam."

Abe's grin was lopsided, grim. "You don't know the half of it, Pete."

"Then you'd better tell me the half I don't know."

"Dad," said Joan Lorimer, "my advice is to turn in."

"All right, all right, Joan," said Abe. "Tell you what, Pete, I'll get my duds off while you go down to a drugstore and get me some iodine and tape. We'll talk when you come back."

There was nothing I could say to that. Going down in the elevator, I crossed a suspicion off my list. From the moment I'd seen Joan Lorimer, I'd felt there was something phony about her. Her manner, her clothes had seemed wrong for the daughter of Abe Lorimer and the product of a super-duper finishing school. And it had seemed to me that she was doing some acting, and pretty good acting, when that phone call came in about Abe having killed somebody. In the back of my mind I'd nursed a notion that maybe she wasn't Joan Lorimer.

But Abe should know his own daughter better than I did.

I had to walk two blocks to a drugstore, two blocks back. When I got to the fifteenth floor again, I was more than a little surprised to find the apartment door ajar by a good two inches. I cursed Abe. Probably he'd taken wings again after getting me out of there on an errand he could have sent a bellboy to handle.

I walked in, closed the door, crossed the foyer. I took one step into the big living room and Joan Lorimer, standing in the center of the room in bra and panties only, began to scream. She looked as though she had just jumped off her knees beside Abe Lorimer's body. She was a very pretty ex-

pense of pink and white curves. The bra and panties didn't amount to much and most of what I could see of them was occupied by a big embroidered monogram that said *V V*.

The big fellow was sprawled on the floor, face up, and one temple was a welter of blood. The skin of his forehead and cheek was pock-marked with powder burns.

The girl pointed a long finger, crimson at the end with nail polish, at me and left off screaming long enough to choke out: "You did it! You shot him!" Then she began to yell again.

I grabbed her in nothing flat, shook her into silence. I said: "What happened? Make it fast!"

"J-just after you left the room, somebody fired a shot from the foyer."

I started shoving her toward the open door of the bedroom.

She struggled and snarled: "What the hell are you doing?"

I didn't tell her. I hoisted her into the bedroom, noticing that someone had been packing a bag there, and shut the door. I locked it, put the key in my pocket and got over to Abe Lorimer in a hurry. He was breathing but each breath was slow, shallow. I got on the phone for the house physician and inside of four minutes he was upstairs, working on the big fellow.

HE WAS cleaning the wound when the apartment buzzer rang. At the door, when I opened up, was Joe McGann. He was sore.

He ripped out: "I gave you a break and what do I get back? A runaround!"

"Cool off," I told him.

"Cool off, hell! Where's Lorimer? I know you've got him here."

"That's right," I said. "Come on in. I'll introduce you."

We went into the living room. The doc, who was a gaunt, methodical man with glasses, had the wound pretty well tidied up by then. He looked up. "The bullet grazed Mr. Lorimer's temple."

"How bad is it?" I wanted to know.

"That's hard to tell. There might be a fracture, perhaps only a concussion. Shock is present, of course. We'll have to get him to a hospital where we can take X-rays. I'll phone for an ambulance."

While the doc was on the phone, Joe McGann cocked an eye at me. He said: "Start talking. Who did this? How did it happen?"

"I can't tell you who did it. I think I can tell you how it happened. There's been a girl here in the apartment posing as Joan Lorimer. I had my suspicions of her but when I showed up half an hour ago and found Abe here, he spoke to her as he would to his daughter. That threw me off the track."

McGann looked puzzled. "If she wasn't his daughter, why would he help the frame-up?"

"I can figure only one answer to that—he couldn't help himself. The way I dope it is that when Abe arrived here, there was a guy in addition to the girl. The guy put a gun on Abe. Then I rang. They told Abe that he'd better play along if he wanted to live and the gungsel went into the darkened bedroom where he could see but not be seen, ready to blast both Abe and me if Abe said a word out of line. Abe tried to save my neck by getting me away on a phony errand—that would be like him. Then he probably saw a chance to make a break and got creased for his pains. The guy though he'd killed Abe and scrambled so fast he didn't even slam the apartment door. But the girl had to get her duds and pretties together and I walked in on her."

"When did you wake up to the fact that it was a frame?"

"The minute I came back. Abe was on the rug and the girl was here in her bra and panties. On each she had the monogram, *V V*, and that doesn't stand for Joan Lorimer in my alphabet. Then she told a bum story about Abe having been shot by someone standing in the foyer. There were powder burns on Abe's forehead and cheek. He'd been shot from less than six feet away."

"Where's the girl now?"

I pointed toward the bedroom door, took the key out of my pocket. McGann unlocked the door. There wasn't any girl there. We went on from the bedroom into a bath with two doors. The farther door opened onto a hall and the hall led to a breakfast room and the kitchen. The service door of the kitchen was open. McGann told me he thought I was a dumb louse and barged out through the service door.

Five minutes later he was back in the living room, just behind two stretcher bearers from a Mt. Olivet Hospital ambulance. They carried Abe out carefully. McGann looked frustrated, sour.

In response to my lifted eyebrows, he said: "She got away, thanks to your thick skull. Now don't give me an alibi—about you wanted to see if Lorimer was O.K. I'd have done the same thing."

A reaction like that was what made folks like McGann.

He went on: "Twenty minutes ago a thin guy with a pimply face went down in an elevator from the fourteenth floor. The operator said he'd gone to fifteen an hour ago. That was your gungsel."

I said: "Well, I suppose you want to know what I've been doing."

"I already know," said McGann. "We picked up Lennie, the Wild Woman, just as

she was about to scam. She says she doesn't know a thing except that one night she did go out with Lorimer and three guys she knew only as Harry, Paul and Willie, and a gal named Vera Vivian."

"That would be *V V*," I said. "You work smoothly, Joe."

He growled but he wasn't displeased. "You don't think I put on just one guy to tail you, do you? The second guy picked up the little whosis that tipped you off to Lennie. We got your twenty-five back but I've already donated it to the Police Pension Fund. So then we picked up Lennie. We heard how you'd been tossed out."

"Why," I said, "if Lennie didn't know anything, should she have been so panicked when I mentioned Abe Lorimer? Panicked enough to have me bounced out?"

"Well, she said one thing. She'd heard Harry or Paul or Willie say something about Abe being worth more money to them if he was stiff. She said it sounded like a killing to her and she was frightened."

I asked McGann how he'd happened to show up at the Pall Mall.

"I had a guy staked here with Lorimer's description. Lorimer showed up alone in a cab and my man got a message to me. I've a damn good mind to run you in for holding out on me about Lorimer turning up and about the Lennie girl. What became of that guy I put on your tail?"

"The fat guy? He enjoyed seeing me get bounced around at the Chez Clancy. Then he ran into some tough luck up at Penn Station. Somebody pinched a woman on the southern exposure and she thought it was your fat boy. The last time I saw him he was in the middle of a clambake."

McGann swore at me but in an absent-minded fashion. He took a turn up and down the big rug. "What do you make of this caper, Pete?"

I said I was damned if I knew. "It could be a slight case of blackmail. I think it's complicated with a kidnaping."

"What do you mean?"

"Lorimer's daughter. She was supposedly coming down from school at River Hill to be with Abe. She hasn't been around—the other girl has. We'd better call the school."

I put the call through to River Hill and got a woman who said she was the assistant dean. I had to alarm her a little to get what I wanted. She finally told me that Abe Lorimer had wired from California to arrange a school furlough for his daughter and that Joan Lorimer had left River Hill three days before. I got a description which didn't at all fit the girl who had posed as Joan Lorimer.

With the description to go on, McGann got Missing Persons quietly busy but I was not

particularly optimistic about what could be accomplished that way. One girl arriving in a city of seven millions along with thousands of other travelers could disappear like a drop of water in the Atlantic. If we could locate Curly and his pal or Vera Vivian, we'd get a lot quicker action and, now that McGann had a fairly complete picture, the cops could do the locating better than I could. Otherwise we'd simply have to wait until Abe could talk, if ever.

I checked with the hospital and learned that Abe had been taken immediately upon arrival to the X-ray room and they didn't know anything yet.

McGann began to prow! the apartment, going through luggage, dressers, closets and not finding anything interesting. It had been forty hours or so since I'd seen a bed and there were a lot of unused bedrooms in the apartment. I chose one, said good night to McGann and turned in.

CHAPTER THREE

The Two Georgies

NEXT morning, early, I did some phoning. I got the usual old line from the hospital, that Abe was doing as well as could be expected. Missing Persons still had no lead on Joan Lorimer. And I couldn't locate Joe McGann anywhere. After breakfast I plodded through slush to the subway and went downtown to William Street where Marshall Dexter, the inventor, had his office.

Dexter probably wouldn't know anything about the shenanigans of the past three days,

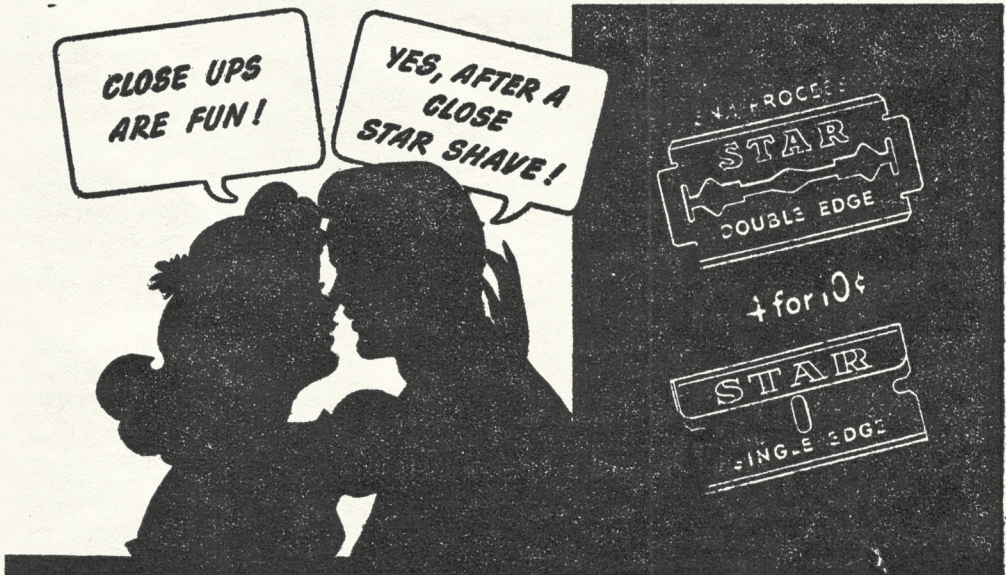
inasmuch as he had already complained that Abe Lorimer hadn't contacted him. But I thought I ought to look the guy up and stroke his back a little until either Abe or Kirk could take over. And I also wondered, although not too intensely, how Dexter had known Abe was on the biggest binge of his career.

A myopic, faded blond girl in Dexter's outer office asked me to wait, Mr. Dexter now being in conference. I cooled my heels on a bench for fifteen minutes before Dexter's office door opened and Sam Knight came out. About that I was both glad and sorry.

I was glad because the presence of Sam Knight in Dexter's office suddenly tied together quite a few loose ends. But I was sorry that he had to see me. The look in his eyes when he found me there, a look that was at first startled and then carefully blank, said that he remembered me as the guy who had talked to Lennie, the Wild Woman, and had subsequently been thrown out on my ear.

Knight shook hands with a dumpy little man with gray hair and spectacles and went out without another glance at me. The myopic blonde highballed me and I followed the dumpy man, who was Marshall Dexter, into his office. Dexter had spots on his vest, his suit needed pressing and his tie rode casually askew as though he habitually wore it that way. His blue eyes were sharp, alert. He was no dummy. I introduced myself.

He said: "It's about time somebody from Air Parts showed up. I made a verbal agreement with Abe Lorimer some time ago that when I was ready I'd deal with him. But if he'd rather drink than do business, I'll have to make other arrangements."



"Things will get straightened out very soon now," I told him.

"It had better be quick. I've strained my finances perfecting this process and I have to get money coming in. Other people besides Air Parts have the money ready."

"Sam Knight, for instance?"

He gave me a penetrating look from under his eyebrows. "Do you know Knight?"

"I know a lot about him. How much, off-hand, will it take to put your process in production?"

"A quarter of a million perhaps, plus an advance royalty to me. What's that got to do with it?"

"Just that it makes me wonder where Sam Knight fits in. Sam has never seen that kind of money."

The dumpy man got out a black, crooked cigar that sold at two-for-five and lit it before he answered. Then he said thoughtfully, through a cloud of acrid smoke: "There's no reason why Air Parts shouldn't know they have competition. I have a verbal agreement with Abe Lorimer and I know that the courts uphold verbal agreements. But the way Lorimer has been stalling around, I don't think they'd uphold this one. You can take this message to Lorimer—he has twenty-four hours to sign up and give me a check for the advance royalty. Otherwise I deal elsewhere."

I said I'd take the message to Lorimer. "But," I told him, "I'm stilly curious about where Knight gets such big money."

"Don't worry about that. And I'm willing to tell you this—he's offering me a hundred and fifty thousand advance and a higher royalty. But I'll still deal with Lorimer if he gets down to business within twenty-four hours."

There wasn't any use of my arguing the point. I said: "How did you learn Lorimer was on a binge? Did Knight tell you?" He nodded, and I went on: "Also how did Knight get wind of your process if you've been dealing only with Air Parts?"

"I employ half a dozen assistants at my laboratory. I suppose one of them talked. It doesn't matter a great deal since I'm the only one who knows the entire process."

I said good-by and thanks and headed for uptown and the hospital.

At Mt. Olivet I found a plainclothesman sitting outside Abe Lorimer's door. Nat Kirk was prowling up and down the linoleum of the corridor like a caged wildcat. That, in fact, was what he always reminded me of, being small, compact, sandy-haired and with a rugged, pugnacious face. He never seemed to be able to get places as fast as he wanted to and, although he often made plenty of people sore at him, he had the knack of forcing them along at the high speed he liked. That's why,

I suppose, he had become Air Parts' production genius.

He caught sight of me, spun and whipped down the corridor at me. He said: "You're a hell of a swell cop to let a thing like this happen to Abel! And what happened? I can't get anything out of this flatfoot at the door."

I didn't let him stir me up. I had known that this jackpot of trouble for Abe and the company would put him on the fight, even more than usual. I said: "How is Abe?"

"I don't know. They won't let me in to see him."

Just then Abe's door opened and a house doctor and a nurse came out. Kirk's chunky body swiveled on them as though he were going to hit someone.

The nurse looked scared but the house doctor stood his ground. He said: "Mr. Lorimer's still unconscious. We're going to take more X-rays."

Kirk snapped: "Is there any reason we can't see him?"

The house doctor said he didn't think it would mean anything but we could go into the room for two minutes. Kirk barged around him and into the room before the cop at the door could do anything about it. I followed Kirk and the cop followed me.

ABE was a mountain of bed-clothing with only a bandaged head and part of his face showing above the covers. His skin was gray and he breathed slowly and stertorously. Kirk stood looking down at Abe for a while, his face scowling and grim, and, oddly, also a little tender. He'd been with Abe and close to him for a long time.

Then he said, more to himself than anyone else in the room: "Some time I'll catch up with the rats that did this. God help 'em when I do!"

Knowing Nat Kirk, I was sure the guys would need some help from above.

We walked out. When we were in the corridor again, Kirk put his grip on my arm. I'm not delicate but his fingers bit into my muscles. He said: "What have you learned, Pete? Who did it?"

I said I didn't exactly know who had blown Abe down and was about to go into details when Joe McGann came down the corridor. I introduced Kirk and McGann. McGann seemed flattered by the meeting.

He said: "I was in Buffalo one day ten years back when you were testing a ship, Mr. Kirk. The plane caught fire but you lifted it away from the city and out over the lake by your bootstraps before you left it. Brother, that was flying!"

"Thanks," Kirk said and dismissed it. "What about Abe?"

We went down the corridor to a sitting-room, containing potted palms and the odor of germicides. There I brought Kirk up to date with the developments of the night before. When I came to Joan Lorimer being missing, his face was murderous but he let me finish without interruption. McGann said Missing Persons still had turned up nothing on the girl.

"We haven't got time to wait for Missing Persons," I said. "What would happen if you picked up a couple of jockos named Georgie One and Georgie Two and put the pressure on them?"

McGann lifted eyebrows when I mentioned the Georgies. He said: "It would have to be open and shut. Otherwise they'd be in and out before you could say habeas corpus. Now tell me what you're talking about?"

I told them about Sam Knight and the two Georgies at the Chez Clancy. I wound up with my meeting Knight at Dexter's office and added my conversation with Dexter.

"The picture is coming clearer," I said. "Knight learned about Dexter's plastic process somehow. He didn't have dough so he went to the Georgies, who wouldn't be averse to making a few millions even if they had to do it legitimately. Now Abe was in New York to close with Dexter, so he had to be kept away from him until Dexter got sore and accepted Knight's offer. The Georgies put on three guys and a couple of gals to get Abe plastered and keep him that way but Abe was too much for them so they decided to keep him prisoner in that apartment. He shot one of the guys and got away but the Georgies had a man to tail him and caught up with him at the Pall Mall. Meanwhile Joan Lorimer had been picked up and tucked away somewhere so that the other girl could be installed in the Pall Mall to watch developments. Does that all make sense?"

McGann admitted that maybe it did. "But where does the fifty grand blackmail attempt fit in? And, anyway, Lorimer is still in trouble. His prints were on the gun that did the killing."

"Hell with that!" said Kirk. "We'll prove self-defense."

I said: "Joe, if you'll just put your grabbers on the two guys I saw at the apartment, you ought to be able to get enough out of them to clear Abe."

"I've got those guys," McGann said. "Sonny Wolcott and Stan Feigenstein. I recognized them from your description last night."

I was burned up. I yelled: "You cuss me for holding out—and I nearly get my head knocked off trying to find out something you already know!"

McGann grinned. "I figured if you started

from scratch, you'd work harder and learn more for me. And how about you holding out the Dexter deal from me last night?"

"That was company business and none of yours."

McGann started to get a little sore. He said: "Anything involved in a killing in my district is my business."

Kirk said irritably: "Will you two gumshoes get back to the subject? What'd these two fellows have to say?"

"Nothing," McGann said. "A cop found them over on Tenth Avenue in a vacant lot. Each one had a slug through his skull."

THE plainclothesman who had been sitting at Abe Lorimer's door stuck his head into the sitting room.

He said: "Lieutenant, Homicide says for you to go over to a spot on East End Avenue. Somebody is dead—a woman—and they think it ties in with your case."

McGann grumbled. "What is this, a butcher's picnic?"

McGann went out. I said to Kirk: "I'm glad you're here. I was afraid you wouldn't make it until the afternoon and—"

"I hitched a ride on an A-26 being ferried from the Coast."

"Which is swell. Because Dexter apparently means what he says about that twenty-four-hour deadline on the deal and now you can settle that, anyway, and get it off our minds."

Kirk swore glumly at Dexter. "I talked to the guy on the phone from here ten minutes before you showed up. He says his deal is with Lorimer personally and he won't accept any other signature. You'd better go with McGann and see what's been turned up. I'll stick here with Abe and if he regains consciousness I'll get Dexter up here to sign if I have to carry him."

I caught up with McGann just as he was about to pull away from the curb. He rocketed his car across town to East End Avenue. The address was a brownstone between two huge apartment buildings. There was a cop in front. He told McGann that the affair was on the third floor. On the third floor another cop let us into a small apartment where we found two Homicide men and a variety of other cops.

The dead woman was sprawled on her back on a white rug, much discolored now with blood that was thick and sirupy. She had been shot once through the right breast and once through the throat. There was no weapon in sight. She had on a green kimono with no monogram on it but she was the girl who had posed as Joan Lorimer.

McGann squinted at me. "Recognize her?" "It's V V," I told him. "Vera Vivian."

One of the Homicide men nodded, saying the girl had been living there under that name. He went on to tell McGann that some forty-five minutes before, the superintendent had seen a man key his way into the girl's apartment and then, two minutes later, leave in such a big hurry that he didn't even close the door. He'd gone down the stairs two at a time.

The superintendent, who had been working on a radiator on the fourth-floor landing, had been curious. He took a look into the apartment and what he saw sent him scooting, three steps at a time, to the telephone on the first floor.

Brought in for McGann, the superintendent, now a far-from-phlegmatic Swede, told his story over again. He described the man who had fled the apartment. He was, said the superintendent, a very tall man, who wore a camel's hair overcoat, a green hat, had a handsome face with a scar and a blond mustache. McGann looked at me.

I nodded and said: "Sounds like Sam Knight."

"We'll pick him up," McGann promised and went into a session with the Homicide men.

While they compared notes, I roamed around. I found one of those little red telephone books. The last number, entered in pencil, was an Eldorado number. I found the same number on the wall by the phone and repeated a third time on an envelope tucked into a drawer of the desk. By that time McGann had traded information with the Homicide men and I called him over, showed him the collection of the Eldorado number.

I said: "It apparently was a pretty important number."

McGann got on the wire with the office of the phone company's special agent.

After a little he hung up. He said: "It's a penthouse on top of a commercial building over on West Forty-ninth. The subscriber is a Henry Harmon. The name doesn't sound familiar but we'll check the place after a bit."

He started to talk with the Homicide boys again but after a minute or so he suddenly swung around to me. "Pete," he said, "maybe we've run across something. That West Forty-ninth address seemed a little on the familiar side. I've got it now. Georgie Three used to live there before he got polished off. I wouldn't be surprised if the other Georgies had hung onto it."

"Would it be a good place to tuck somebody—say, Joan Lorimer—away for a while?"

McGann nodded. His eyes were intent. "None better. All the rest of the building is lofts and offices." He got on the phone again, this time to the West Fifty-fourth Street station.

Some ten minutes later we picked up two plainclothesmen outside the station. One of them was a lieutenant by the name of Cleve Dasher. He had small, bright, sullen eyes and a scowl. When McGann introduced me, I rated only a grunt from him. The other guy was a detective, first grade, a blond kid and friendly. His name was Wally Mahoney.

On the way over to the Forty-ninth Street spot, Dasher sat in front with McGann and talked so I couldn't hear. The blond kid had been in California once and liked it so we got pally. He was telling me that some time he'd like to own an orange grove because he had always been crazy about orange marmalade on toast for breakfast, when we pulled up in front of the address. It was a brick building, a dozen stories tall. I started to get out with the others.

McGann said: "Pete, you take it easy down here."

"What the hell?" I said.

The lieutenant and the blond kid went on into the building entrance. McGann looked embarrassed. He said: "Dasher doesn't like private cops of any description. He says you're no more than a private citizen here in New York and he doesn't want citizens underfoot if any shooting starts. He outranks me so what can I do? And just to be on the safe side, in case he gets curious, you'd better let me have your gun unless you have a New York license to carry it."

I didn't have a New York license so I gave him the gun. I was sore, of course. I'd been kicked around and pushed around and now that I had the chance to do a little shoving in return, I was sent to the sidelines. After all, who'd started this little case? But McGann was a good guy and cooperative normally and I didn't want to make trouble for him by beefing. So I sat back in the car sulkily and watched him follow the other two into the building.

After five minutes I got restless. There was a cigar store opposite the building and I got out, crossed and went in. I didn't have any luck finding cigarettes but I had enough luck of another kind to make up for it.

WHILE I was trying to decide whether to take Bull Durham and cigarette papers or nothing, I saw two men emerge from the building across the way. First to come out, a very tall fellow, was Georgie One. He wore a black, fly-front, form-fitting coat and a smart gray snapbrim, which he adjusted carefully while his dark, narrow gaze went up and down the street. I could tell he wasn't missing a thing, including McGann's car at the curb. It looked too much like a police car to be anything else and I was glad I wasn't sitting in it to be spotted by him.

Georgie Two, the short one, came out and stood beside Georgie One. He had on the same combination of neat, black coat and gray hat. They talked back and forth for maybe a minute and then struck out on foot, not fast and not slow, toward Eighth Avenue, taking care to avoid slush puddles that might have spoiled their shoeshines.

When they reached Eighth Avenue and turned north I left the cigar store and plodded along my side of the street, hat pulled down and collar up against the cold, wet wind.

I didn't want to get too close for two reasons. One was that the Georgies were smart boys and had probably been tailed a thousand times. They'd be hard to fool. The second reason was even stronger from my point of view. With my gun hanging heavy in McGann's pocket, I wouldn't enjoy having those two boys work me into a corner.

The first place they went was a bar on Eighth near Fiftieth. I went into a bar across the street and got warmed up inside and out. Fifteen minutes later the Georgies came out, went two doors north and into a delicatessen. After a little they came out of the delicatessen, Georgie Two laden with a big paper bag of what was probably delicatessen fodder. I felt more than a little encouraged.

Obviously in this sort of weather the Georgies weren't going on a picnic in Central Park. I was sure they did all their own eating in restaurants. They were, therefore, taking victuals and things to someone who couldn't get out to restaurants at the moment. I drew a conclusion and hoped it was the right one.

THEY crossed Eighth and went west on Fiftieth. I gave them a good lead—at least I meant to—before I turned the corner. I hadn't waited long enough.

Georgie One and Georgie Two were only fifty feet or so down from the intersection, leaning against a wall and watching the corner. Not looking at them, I stopped at the newsstand beside the subway entrance and bought a paper, then went down the steps to the subway. I didn't know whether I had fooled them any but at least a guy could hope. I crossed under Fiftieth Street to the north stairway and came up the steps slowly.

When I got my eyes to sidewalk level, Georgie Two was vanishing into a doorway halfway down the block. Georgie One had apparently gone in ahead because he wasn't in sight. I congratulated myself. Undoubtedly they hadn't recognized me from the night before at the Chez Clancy and they hadn't tumbled to the fact that I was tailing them.

All I had to do now was find out the number of the building, get Joe McGann and descend on the place. Maybe Joan Lorimer would be there, maybe she wouldn't. But the

evidence of the bag of groceries made me think she would be.

I came up out of the subway and half-ploughed, half-skidded through the slush toward the doorway where I'd last seen Georgie Two. An unlucky devil of a cab driver was on his knees in the slush, getting ready to do something to a tire. At that moment I wouldn't have traded jobs with him.

I had just got even with him when a voice from inside the cab said: "Hey, Pete!"

My head swung around and Georgie One was beckoning to me with one slowly moving finger of his left hand. The black, round snout of an automatic was visible just above the lowered glass of the cab window. There was six feet between me and the nearest cover and that was only a shallow areaway. The beckoning finger drew me over to the cab.

Behind me the cab driver picked up his fire tools and tossed them in beside the front seat. The rear door opened for me and Georgie One slid over to the far side of the seat, holding the gun on me all the while. There wasn't anything else to do so I climbed in and sat down.

Georgie One smiled dryly and said: "Hi, sucker."

The cab got under way but went only a hundred feet west on Fiftieth. Then it swung in a semi-circle and into a wide doorway over which was a sign, *De Luxe Garage*. I saw that the cab was on an elevator and that Georgie Two was waiting for us there. He manipulated controls and the elevator went slowly up to the fourth floor. The cab driver drove off onto the floor which was an expanse of vacancy except for one car, a dark, blue coupe. Two big bulbs in the ceiling, plus half a dozen in wall fixtures, made the place light enough in spite of boarded windows at either end of the building.

"Get out, Pete," said Georgie One.

I got out and found myself covered not only by Georgie One but by the cab driver, who was a pimply, thin boy in his twenties. Georgie Two put down his bag and frisked me. Naturally he didn't find the gun I didn't have on me.

All three of them stood there and looked at me for a full minute. It seemed like ten.

Finally I said: "Well?"

Georgie Two said politely: "We're just wondering—a little—what to do with you, Pete."

"Why do anything?" I said. "What's it all about?"

The long, dark face of Georgie One smiled at me. "Who's kidding who?" he said. "We've learned about you, Pete, through the Vivian girl. And you tailed us so close to our drop here that we had to grab you before you got the word around. You know too much."

CHAPTER FOUR

Take-Off for Death

I WAS beginning to sweat. The two Georgies were so calm, so mild, so polite about things. I'd have been a lot less scared if they had slugged me around. This way it seemed all cut and dried. I tried stalling, not that I thought it would do me much good.

I said: "Just what is it you think I know?"

"A few things," said Georgie Two, "and you probably suspect a lot more. The Hackensack meadows for Pete, Georgie?"

"I think so, Georgie," said Georgie One. "We'll turn him over to Max."

The boy with the full set of pimples raised his gun. The sweat was beginning to make a racetrack of my spine. There didn't seem to be much I could do about anything except keep them talking. That would mean a little delay.

I said: "What are you guys so sensitive about? Have you got Joan Lorimer stashed here?"

Georgie One said: "You don't expect us to tell you that even now, do you?"

"I can guess," I told him. "In fact, I can guess a lot of things. Like to hear them?"

Georgie Two looked at a very expensive wristwatch. "We have a little time. It might be interesting. Go ahead, Pete."

"Sam Knight got wind of Dexter's plastic process. He didn't have the dough himself so he came to you. Then Abe Lorimer arrived from the Coast to sew up the deal for Air Parts and you had to keep him away from Dexter. So you put some guys and gals on him to keep him plastered but Abe wouldn't stay plastered so you had to salt him down in that apartment. Abe got a gun away from his guard, shot him and scrambled. Right?"

"You guess pretty good," Georgie One told me admiringly.

"Then you liquidated the curly-haired guy and his partner because they knew too much."

Georgie Two shook his head. He said: "Let's put it this way. Suppose some guys had been at you for months for a chance at something, anything. So you get soft-hearted when the opportunity shows up to help them and you put them on a job. Then they not only muff the job but they get ideas of their own—a shakedown for peanuts that might mess up a couple of million bucks for you. Wouldn't you get rid of guys like that in a hurry?"

He said it very righteously. I'd have laughed if I hadn't been so scared. I said: "Yeah, it was justifiable homicide, I suppose. If I'm not too curious, how did you find out about the shakedown?"

"We have a pretty reliable check on our

drops at all times," said Georgie One with some pride.

The pimply boy grinned in a self-satisfied fashion and I said: "I get it—Max. He dropped in at the apartment and discovered the shakedown, took care of the two guys and tipped McGann. Then he went over to the Pall Mall to wait for Abe Lorimer. Max must have been pretty worried when I stuck my oar in."

"Not much," said Max. "Not much."

Georgie One looked at his wristwatch, a duplicate of the dilly worn by Georgie Two. He said: "We'll have to be going, Pete. We'll miss you, old pal, old pal."

If I could, I wanted to keep this dialogue going. I said: "Here's something I can't figure. Why didn't you have Vera Vivian knocked off last night? She was in on the shakedown, too."

Georgie Two shrugged. "Ah, we don't like to get tough on dames. We told Max just to scare the hell out of her."

"Then why did you knock her off this morning?"

The Georgies exchanged looks of complete surprise and then both of them looked at Max.

Max said hastily: "Not me. I didn't do it."

Georgie Two looked at Georgie One. He said: "Sam Knight!"

Georgie One said: "Where did it happen, Pete?" I told him and he said to the other Georgie: "This we'll have to look into. Let's go."

He started toward the blue coupe. Georgie Two started toward the elevator. Over his shoulder he said: "Max, you know where to take Mr. Rousseau. Just keep him in status quo and we'll be back this evening to go riding with him."

I could have kissed Georgie Two. I had at least until evening and who knows what a day brings forth? Georgie One backed the blue coupe onto the elevator. Georgie Two started the elevator down. The top of the blue coupe sank out of sight.

MAX said in his thin, flat voice: "Get going, chum. Toward the back to your left."

I got going along the west wall of the building. On a stand next to the wall there was a red-painted fire bucket, filled in accordance with air-raid regulations. The Georgies observed at least that much of the law. As I passed the red bucket, I let my hand dangle, brush across the surface.

I went one more step and flung what was in my hand up and backward. With the same motion I went to my knees. Grains of sand still clung to my palm but most of it was elsewhere, principally, I hoped, in Max's eyes. Max's gun roared but I didn't feel a thing.

A kick backward got Max's ankles. He cried out very loudly and fell on top of me, the gun in his hand chopping for my head. I got his wrist on the first downward swing, twisted the gun out of his mitt. He yelped again and rolled away. I was scrambling to my feet when Max screamed. The scream dwindled, was cut off instantly by a thudding sound. When I spun around, Max wasn't there. But the lip of the elevator shaft yawned widely.

Floors below I heard Georgie Two yell: "He got Max!"

The elevator ground to a stop and a car door slammed. O. K., I had one gun. The Georgies had two. The lights blazed on the fourth floor and, aside from Max's cab, there was no cover. It was like a shooting gallery with me as the duck.

The elevator began to grind again but upward this time. I screwed a wall bulb out fast, grabbed one of the tire tools Max had been using and shoved its end into the socket. A hundred and ten volts went up my shoulder and down my back. But every light went out as the fuse blew.

I edged to the elevator shaft and fired one shot at the top of the blue coupe as it ascended. The elevator stopped, a car door slammed.

One floor below Georgie One said: "This California cop thinks he's good, Georgie. We'll have to take him."

"Then how about taking him?" said Georgie Two.

I was sorry to have to disappoint the Georgies. I had four shots left in Max's gun. Georgie One apparently didn't realize that he was too tall to sneak up a flight of stairs. From behind the cab I could see his hat and his head as a darker spot in the gloom. I squeezed carefully and Georgie One rolled back down the stairs, moaning. It made Georgie Two practically hysterical. He apparently wasn't used to having anyone do that to Georgie One. So he came charging up the stairs with his gun going before he even got on a level with me.

I shot at the flash of his gun. Georgie Two said, "Aaaaah," and fell backward. I waited five minutes before I took one of my shoes off and made a tentative sound of footsteps at the top of the stairs. Nothing happened so I took a chance and went down the steps. The elevator was at that floor and I got to the blue coupe, switched on the lights.

Max was draped over the hood of the coupe with his neck in a position he could only have achieved by breaking it.

Reflected light from the back wall showed me Georgie One on his back not far from the stairway, his eyes opened incredulously. Georgie Two was sitting against a side wall.

He was dead if I ever saw a dead guy. Georgie One was still moving a little. I came around the car and off the elevator to him. He recognized me.

He said: "Damn you, Pete, why didn't you stay in California?"

His life came out with his next breath and a gush of blood.

I ran the elevator back to the fourth floor. Max had been marching me toward the back wall and the lights of the blue coupe showed nothing but blankness there. But there had to be some reason why Max had headed me that way. Presently, when I remembered Max had told me to go "toward the back to your left," I found out the reason.

A tool cabinet, six feet high and a couple wide, stood against the far end of that side wall. The back of the cabinet was hung with greasy wrenches, tire irons and other tools. When I felt around inside, the back moved a fraction of an inch. The cabinet didn't move. I worked the rest of that problem with a tire iron, there was a splintering sound and the back swung away from me like a door. In fact, that was what it was.

On the far side of the door was darkness. I lit a match, saw three steps downward and took them. The dying match showed me I was in a narrow hallway. It also showed a light switch. When I got lights on I could see I was in one of those long, narrow apartments with rooms opening all on the same side of a single hallway.

I FOUND a girl on the bed in the second bedroom I checked. She was a slim kid with black hair and cornflower blue eyes. I couldn't see much else of her face because of the gag made from a couple of dirty handkerchiefs. She wore a mussed but quietly-expensive traveling suit of some dark stuff and her dress was hiked up above her rounded knees, pulled there by the position of her hands which were tied securely to a rung of the bed near her head. A length of dirty clothesline had been lashed around her ankles, the ends tied to the bedsprings. They hadn't taken any chances of her walking away.

When the lights went on the girl blinked for a moment in the glare and then found me.

I said: "You're Joan Lorimer?"

The girl's head nodded. Her eyes were scared but they were defiant. She was only a kid and probably didn't weigh a hundred pounds dripping wet but she had the same kind of courage big Abe Lorimer had.

"Don't worry," I said. I was busy on the gag. "I work for your dad—the name is Pete Rousseau—and everything is O.K. now."

The gag came off. The girl worked her lips stiffly and the first thing she said was: "Is Dad all right?"

"He's all right," I told her.

When I got her hands and ankles loose she sat up with a little help from me and smoothed her dress down quickly. Then she tried to stand. Her knees were like rubber and I sat her back on the bed.

I said: "Wait until you get some horse-power back."

She smiled up at me and said, "I'll be all right in a minute," and I thought that if I ever had a daughter I'd want one like this kid.

"We've got plenty of time," I assured her. "Maybe meantime you can tell me what, who, how and why."

She was trying to rub life into her knees. "I don't know very much about any of those questions. Dad had made arrangements before he left the Coast for me to come down from school and spend three or four weeks with him in New York. We haven't seen much of each other since my mother died a few years ago. Because I hadn't been in New York since I was about ten, he was to meet me at Grand Central at eight-thirty Thursday evening when the Boston train got in. Instead, a man who said his name was William Mason met me and said Dad had had to keep a business appointment and had sent him to take me to the hotel—"

"What'd this Mason fellow look like? Can you describe him?"

"He was tall and rather good-looking with a blond mustache. Why?"

"Because his name is really Sam Knight," I said. "Go ahead."

"He took me out to the street where he had a sedan parked. About a dozen blocks from the station he stopped on a side street that was rather dark. The man with the mustache clamped his hand over my mouth and held me, while another man climbed in."

"What did the second man look like?"

"I couldn't tell. It was dark."

"Did he say anything?" I asked.

"Just one thing—he asked the man who'd met me if he was sure I was Joan Lorimer. The man said I was the girl who had been pointed out to him. Then one of them pushed a cloth over my face and the next thing I remember I was tied here on the bed. After that a repulsive man with pimples on his face came in once a day with food and untied me for a little while."

She tried standing again but was still wobbly. I told her to take it easy for another few minutes and went out and scouted the rest of the apartment. I found what I was looking for, a phone, in a meagerly-furnished front room. I got through to the Mt. Olivet Hospital and located Nat Kirk.

I said: "This is Pete."

"Where the hell have you been?" Kirk ex-

ploded. "I've been going nuts trying to locate you. Abe is beginning to snap out of it and I want you here."

"I'll be there pretty quick," I told him. "Meanwhile it would be a swell idea to reserve a private room. I've got Joan Lorimer."

"What?" Kirk snapped an eardrum for me. "You've got her? Is the kid hurt?"

"She's all in one piece but she could stand a couple of days of hospital care and rest."

"Wonderful, Pete," Kirk told me. "That's wonderful work."

Coming from Nat Kirk, that was like getting a citation with three stars.

He said: "Where did you find her?" When I told him, he said: "Did you get any of the guys responsible?"

"Three," I said. "They're dead. The fourth was Sam Knight who picked her up at Grand Central after somebody pointed her out to him. Incidentally, did Marshall Dexter know she was coming into New York to meet Abe? Had he ever seen her or a picture of her?"

Kirk was puzzled. "I don't know to both questions, Pete. Why?"

"Dexter was promised a lot more money by Knight but he needed good grounds for canceling his agreement with Abe. It's just a thought. We'll dig into it when I pick up Knight."

Kirk said slowly and coldly: "That boy is my meat. I'm going to get him personally for what he's done to Abe."

"Be careful. He's a rat but even a rat is nasty to tangle with when you back him into a corner."

"I'm a nasty guy to tangle with, too," Kirk reminded me. "Get Joan over here in a hurry, Pete. There'll be a room ready."

THERE was a room ready for the girl when we reached Mt. Olivet but she wouldn't have any of it until she had seen Abe and made sure with her own eyes that he was O.K. Outside of a headache, he was fine. They hugged and kissed and the girl finally cried a little bit. Abe swore at her mildly and then a nurse took her in charge and herded her away.

Abe scowled at me. He was embarrassed. He rumbled: "How do I say thanks, Pete?"

"Why should you thank me? After all, I get a salary for doing little things like this." I grinned at him, sort of embarrassed, too.

He said: "Don't be so damn casual about my daughter. I've fired guys for less than that. What I mean is—thanks, Pete."

We had to finish with that subject some time, so I said: "Where's Kirk?"

Abe Lorimer swore admiringly but in a somewhat worried tone. "That wild man! He told me what you said about Sam Knight being the one behind the whole business. Now Nat's gone out to kick the b'so-and-so out of him

for me before turning him over to the cops. What a guy!"

"Where's he gone?"

"Nat said he'd found out through the Prop and Wing Club that Knight spends most of his time at a CAP field near Freeport on Long Island. Where are you going?"

I was settling my hat on my head. "If Kirk is trying to take care of Knight, I'd better be out trying to take care of Kirk. Meanwhile it might be a good idea if you got Marshall Dexter to come up here to the hospital."

"Dexter? Why?"

"For one thing you've got a deal to close with him, Abe. For another, I might want to talk to Dexter after I've talked to Knight."

I let it go at that and went downstairs where I picked out the best-conditioned cab I could find. I found two twenties in my wallet and let the driver see the corners. I said: "Has this crate got a governor?"

The cabbie, a barrel-chested Irishman, said: "Sure. But it could be fixed not to work."

We made the ride to the Freeport field in twenty-nine minutes in spite of snowy roads. I hated, in a way, to see the field come in sight because I didn't like what I expected was ahead of me. Maybe it's just a hangover from the hero worship of a kid but I've always sort of felt that flyers are a race set apart, a bunch of guys who have a little more guts and skill and spirit than the rest of us. I had a sneaking admiration for Sam Knight, rat that he was. But even the best rats have to be hunted down.

The cabbie slowed for the turn into the field, came to a nice stop in front of the airport office in a wing of one of the two hangars. A mechanic in greasy overalls stood in front of the office. His face had a puzzled, undecided look. He was squinting at an Aronca cabin job just beginning to gather speed on the one cleared runway.

I was starting to climb out of the cab when Joe McGann's police sedan with Joe at the wheel swooped into the turn at the entrance

and slid to a stop, nudging the taxicab. Joe kicked a door open and hit the snow. He got his gun out as he trotted toward me.

"Where's Knight?" he barked.

The greaseball pointed at the Aronca, which was thundering past us now, tail up in flying position. He said: "Knight's in that crate taking off." Then he muttered, more to himself than to us: "It's damn funny."

"What's funny?" I said.

"A chunky, sandy-haired guy showed up in a cab while I was warming up Knight's ship—"

"That would be Kirk," McGann said, putting his gun away. "Lorimer told me he was out here looking for Knight. Where's Kirk now?"

"That's what's funny," the mechanic said. "Knight was here in front of the hangar while I was warming up the Aronca on the runway. I saw this other guy get out of his cab and walk over to Knight and Knight pulled a gun on him. Then they went into the hangar and five minutes later they came out all friendly-like. So they both climb in the ship and take off."

McGann said: "Did they walk out side by side?"

"Well, no. The chunky guy walked out ahead."

McGann looked at me, his eyes narrowed. "Knight had that gun on Kirk. The guy has pulled another one and I'd hate to be in Kirk's brogans right now."

The Aronca was in the air now, climbing fast.

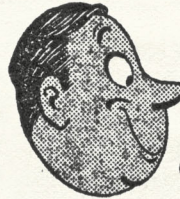
"Knight can't get away with this forever," McGann growled. "How do you get in touch with some Coast Guard airbase around here?"

The greaseball started to tell him but I said: "Uh-oh—they're in trouble."

AT AROUND five hundred feet the Aronca had suddenly begun to climb steeper than it should. The nose went up and up and up, straining for altitude. The ship went into a

Scratch your head*
and if you find ...

You've got dandruff
on your mind ...



GET **WILDROOT**
CREAM-OIL

GROOMS THE HAIR - RELIEVES DRYNESS
REMOVES LOOSE DANDRUFF

*THE FAMOUS
FINGER-NAIL
(F-N) TEST

power stall, fell off on one wing, began a slow, flat spin. The nose dropped farther and the gyration became a power spin. Even at a distance of a mile we could hear the shriek of the motor at full throttle.

It doesn't take many seconds for a ship to spin in from that altitude, but it seemed like ten years. There was a billow of flame from the open field where it hit. That was that. You don't walk away from a crack-up of that kind.

ON THE way back to town McGann was depressed. He said: "Two good pilots like those guys wouldn't have gone into a spin accidentally. Kirk must have been fighting for the controls."

I said I figured the same thing.

"It's hell," McGann growled. "I'll never forget how Kirk saved a dozen, maybe a hundred, lives by taking his burning plane out over the lake at Buffalo. And a great guy like that has to be killed by a rat."

I was pretty low about Kirk, myself. I said: "Joe, maybe some of this will have to come out, especially after they find Georgie One and Two and Max, the pimply boy."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

I told him about the two Georgies and the pimply boy and all the rest of it—that is, most of it. I said: "But don't break it to the papers before I can break it to Abe. He's going to take it hard."

McGann said that would be easy. "But, Pete, there's one thing still bothering me. Who killed Vera Vivian?"

"Sam Knight?"

McGann shook his head. "We both know better than that. The way the blood had coagulated on the rug showed she had been shot a couple of hours before the body was discovered. Knight came and went an hour and a half later. If he had pulled the job earlier, he wouldn't have come back. Or if he'd forgotten something and returned for it, he wouldn't have been so panicked that he'd leave the apartment door open."

I said: "Then it must have been Georgie One or Georgie Two or Max. In fact, at the garage they sort of hinted they'd done it."

I had my own ideas about who'd done it, but I didn't know yet just how I could make sure, so I didn't mind a little lying if it kept McGann happy. We shot through the Queens Midtown Tunnel and I asked if he'd drop me at the Pall Mall. I felt I needed a few minutes to calm down and maybe about three drinks before I went up to the hospital.

McGann dropped me and I went upstairs to the fifteenth-floor suite. A bellhop landed there one minute after I did. I traded two bits for a special-delivery letter, addressed to me in Nat Kirk's impatient handwriting. I was surprised to get it, not very much surprised at what was in it. It read:

Dear Pete:

Thanks for tipping me off and letting me work it out in my own way. When you told me that Joan said she had been "pointed out" at Grand Central by someone, I knew you were wise; that I was in all probability the only man in New York that day who knew the train she was coming in on and could have pointed her out. You'd have got to Sam Knight eventually and found your way to me. I prefer not to wait so I'm going to persuade Sam to take me along on his getaway. We won't get far.

Don't figure me for too much of a heel. I've been the tail to Abe's kite for quite a while. Sure, I got a good salary as vice-president but I saw a chance of busting into the millions on my own if I could control Dexter's plastic process. I tried to work it through Sam Knight.

Getting back to the heel stuff, all I ever figured was that Abe would be kept plastered and that the girl wouldn't be harmed any. When I saw what it was building into and that they'd tried to kill Abe, I knew the whole deal was washed up and me with it. But there was one thing I could still do. I could take all the rats with me and maybe the complete story would never come out to hurt Abe and Air Parts. I attended to the Vivian girl when I got to New York this morning. You saved me the trouble of winding up the Georgies and their stooge. I'll take care of Knight and that will be that.

Use your own judgment, Pete, about disclosing this. But I know you'll keep in mind the best interests of Air Parts and Abe Lorimer.

The letter was signed, Nat Kirk. After my second drink I burned the letter in the metal wastebasket and crushed the ashes. Then I went to the hospital.

Abe, as I knew he would, took the news about Kirk very hard. They'd worked together a long time and, I suppose, had been pretty close in spite of Kirk's curdled disposition. Abe was silent for a while.

Then he said: "That was a tough little guy, Pete. But he was a great guy."

"Yeah," I said. "That's what he was."

When I left the hospital it was snowing again. I was tired. I wished I was back in California.



THE WHISPERER

By THORNE LEE



I teetered on the window sill while the fire flung long tentacles of smoke around us, as if to draw us bodily back into hell.

There was so little I remembered about that night, other than being drunk and meeting the whispering stranger. As soon as they'd let me leave the hospital I would have to find him and repay him for his kindness to me—that Pied Piper of doom with the voice of a rescuing angel.

THE voice spoke to me on the night of April 5th. I remember that date because April 1st was the day that my wife, Gertrude, died—suddenly, half reclining in her chair, an odd quirk of a smile on her face, as if she were playing the traditional Fool's joke on me. On April 3rd even the smiling look of her was gone. The night of April 5th I was two hundred miles away, lost in a strange city, perched on a curb, with hours of solid drinking already behind me.

I have had long reason to recall that night. I was drunk through the whole experience,

plenty drunk, and yet a part of my mind must have performed normally, because certain facts are indelibly recorded in my memory. Others are lost to me. Those things that do come back are shady fragments, a patchwork of dark and light. . .

My silver cigarette case, gleaming in my hand. Numb fingers spilling the unlighted cigarettes into the gutter at my feet. . . A street light that seemed to hang far, far above me, halfway between earth and heaven, like a great lamp suspended from the sky. . . . Grief slowly dying in my heart and sleepiness taking over. The thought of a bed, a hotel bed, waiting for me and I hadn't the faintest idea where. . . A crazy struggle to get my wallet out of its pocket, to see if the hotel address was inside. . . The wallet hanging upside-down from my hand. The tinkling sound of money falling on pavement. The oozy feel of a fat wad of bills floating away from my fingertips. . . A thousand voices, memory voices, chattering at me like so many vultures, but out of them emerging at last a voice that spoke sense. . .

Most of all I remember that final voice, that strange warmth of words pouring into my ear: "Let me help you there!" A gentle, soothing whisper of sound.

Finally it came to me that the hands fumbling around my ankles could not possibly be the same hands that now cupped my chin.

"Who are you? What are you doing?" I babbled.

"There you are, all back in one piece," the voice whispered, and I felt a human hand pulling at my lapel and another hand cramming my wallet back into its place, wadding bills into my pockets. "Man! You're really blotto, aren't you?"

The humanness of those last words was like a friendly clap on the shoulder. After that I seemed to think better, and hear better.

I was beginning to see, too. I could make out the thin blackness of the whisperer. He was all shadow except for a narrow smudge of white above the upturned collar of his long black coat. I blinked. The white seemed to be streaked with other shadows that might be eyes and a mustache.

He backed deeper into space, looking down on me. "Going any place?" he asked. His voice still seemed to be a hoarse whisper—the speech of a man with laryngitis.

Perhaps it was my hearing that ailed and not his voice, because my own answer came out in the same sort of whisper. My words were a blur, but he seemed to understand.

"I know most of the hotels around here. I might be able to help you," he said. He began naming a few of them: "The South Central? The Mason House? The Park-view. . . ."

He must have named a dozen. I only shrugged them aside and sagged limply against the lamppost. For the first time I could feel the hard bulk of the post gouging my back.

"Don' remember," I muttered. "Don' remember 'tall. . . Gotta bed somewhere. Gotta get to bed."

He worked on me with his hands, slapped my face a little. He even got me standing up, leaning against the post, but he couldn't arouse me completely from my drunken dream. I couldn't tell him anything about the hotel.

"You shouldn't be out like this with all that cash on your person. Somebody might tackle you," he said.

"Tackle me? Two huner'-ten pounds?" I snorted. I gave him a little push and he went flying into darkness and smacked up against a wall. I stumbled after him. "'Scuse. Didn't mean. . . Always pushin' people aroun'— Push ever'body aroun'."

He stood looking at me for a long time from out of his shadow, and finally seemed to make up his mind. "Come along with me, then. I'll get you a room at my hotel."

I HAVE no idea of the distance we walked that night. His body was so thin and frail under my big arm that I don't see how he kept me going.

The only thing I remember of that walk was a skyrocket of fantastic, looping lights that suddenly pierced the blackness overhead. My head rolled over against his shoulder, staring upward. "Whass that?" I gasped.

"Just a bridge," he said.

"Bridge? Whass those lights?"

"Automobiles."

"Oh." The bridge kept me mumbling to myself for the rest of an indefinite period. I had no conception of time or space.

I remember being pushed into a revolving door with my guide behind me, only to end up abruptly face-to-face with him. He started me again and this time I headed straight into a big room of some sort. There was one dim light over some kind of a counter. I thought for a minute it was a bar and staggered toward it. A hand caught my arm, pulled me to one side, and propped me up against a wall.

A man appeared under the little light. I can recall nothing about his face. It came to me that this was a hotel and he was a night clerk.

I heard my guide's voice saying in that uncanny whisper: "This man's lost his hotel. Can you put him up with a room?"

The normal voice of the clerk struck on my ear like a thunderclap. "We have some vacancies."

If that was a voice, then the hoarse whisper

of my guide really was a whisper! The man must have a cold, laryngitis.

The clerk was reluctant. He studied me for some time. "He has no bag. He'll have to pay in advance," he said.

"Of course," my guide whispered. He came over to me in the dark lobby and stood holding out his hand, palm up, until I understood and fumbled two bills out of my pocket.

There was a brief discussion of rooms. I had to go over and scribble my name on a card. I was seeing a little better. I found the right line by myself.

The clerk had to run us up in the elevator. I stumbled at the entrance. A hand behind me jacked me up by the elbow, twisted me around. The door whisked shut.

The pit of my stomach seemed to give way. I sagged against my guide and then the door was opening again.

We got out into a hall that was like a black tunnel with little pots of light at either end. My guide stayed with me and led me down to the extreme end, the last door. He stopped but I kept going and almost went through an oblong opening with a red light over it. I hesitated and he dragged me back by the arm.

A key rattled in a lock. A door creaked away from me. A light switch clicked.

A hand pressed the key into my palm. "This is it. Room 111. Can you make it?"

My head weaved on my neck, uncertainly. He pushed me through the door.

My eyes tried to focus, settled on the wonderful sight of a long, narrow bed. I stumbled forward and fell face down on it, digging my hands into its softness.

I felt my feet being lifted, straightened. I felt hands tugging at the shoulders of my coat. I heard a voice and something about "... room next door to yours." Then the lights went out.

THE dream of sleep was a total blank, but the dream of life came back to me suddenly, horribly.

The first nightmarish sensation was of strangling to death, not outwardly but inwardly. I could breathe, but the stuff that I gulped into my lungs was not clean air. It was a foul, poisonous substance that burned the lungs and retched the throat.

I struggled a long time with this mystery before I overcame the alcoholic lethargy that bound me and came awake. Even then I was not really awake, alert to my surroundings. It was a sort of subconscious willpower that functioned for me.

My eyes blinked open, only to be pierced

by stinging darts. Tears spurted from my lids. I had to shut them tightly, which seemed to close the only door of escape from this dungeon of torment.

The terror of it was the total absence of recognition. Nothing that my senses were able to perceive "belonged" to me.

In between long, racking breaths the muscles of my head, shoulders, and hips became aware of the likeness of a bed beneath me. My fingers tightened at my sides, but the feel of coarse cloth was strange to them. No memory of mine contained a bed like this!

To fight this suffocating pall at the same time that I struggled to stay awake, and finally to orient myself to these surroundings required a superhuman effort of mind. I seemed to split into three beings—a body that lunged and heaved with coughs, a head that swam in sickening mists, and a brain that sat down in the midst of chaos and fitted together little fragments of memory: Curbstone . . . lamp hanging from the sky . . . whispering shadow . . . bridge of lights . . . revolving door . . . elevator . . . red light . . . bed of beckoning softness. . .

A bed. This was the bed! I was in a room—a hotel room.

My hands came up, pawing at the prickly substance around my eyelids. Then my nose sniffled, sneezed, and pronounced an answer.

Smoke!

The hotel was on fire!

The thought might have been a bucket of water dashed in my face. Somehow I flung myself off the bed and fell flat on the floor.

The smoke was not quite so overpowering along the carpet. There was a tiny layer of air, and my lips and nostrils sucked at it. I thought, strangely, of a man drowning beneath an ice crust who finds the thin vein of air between ice and water.

Strength came back to me but with it horror increased. My eyes were open and still they could not see. I had no idea of the shape of this room that imprisoned me. There was no relation of bed, doors, and windows that a man can sense automatically in his own room.

If only a single tongue of the flames that I knew must be slaving away at the very walls of the room would find its way inside and bring me light!

I propped myself up on hands and knees, but this brought me up into the smoke and a tremendous cough quaked through my body, flattening me again. For all my two hundred pounds of strength I was a helpless, imprisoned thing, trapped in an inch-thick slit of space between smoke and floor.

Keep your eye on the Infantry

... the doughboy does it!

I think my feeble desire to live might have given up against the forces of sleep, alcohol and smoke if a door had not opened with a wail of hinges. Long reddish streaks stabbed into the room. The door slammed shut.

Another human being must have opened that door! A human being was life, and I knew then that I wanted life, at any effort, any cost.

I heard a cough that did not come from my own throat. That voice, that whispering voice sought for me, and I clutched at it as a drowning man grasps at a saviour hand, though the hoarse sound of it was more like a rasp of death.

"Fire! Fire!" it wheezed. "Where are you?"

"On the floor!" I gasped. "Can't see! For God's sake, help me!"

I heard a thudding sound, as of a man dropping to his knees. Then came painful, endless moments while he groped for me. Somehow I wanted desperately to laugh. It was like two grown men hunting for a lost button.

Instead of a laugh my throat coughed up a groan. He heard it and instantly his hand closed on my ankle. He pulled himself up along my body, to the knees, the waist, the shoulders. Something touched my neck and it was the sharp jut of his chin. His lips moistened my ear.

"... almost down the stairs when remembered you," he panted. "... hardly made it back—whole inside of place afire... haven't a chance—that way! Where's the window?"

"Don't know!" I sniffed. "Don't know! Can't see! Can't think!"

"Pull yourself—together, man!" he choked. "Window... this way. Grab my leg."

I felt him moving away and I clutched wildly at him, more in fear of being left alone than in fear of death. We moved along like a human caterpillar, humping up and down with little wriggling currents of muscular propulsion. Every upward lunge into the smoke quickly flattened us out, and our lungs protested violently with great snorts and wheezes.

WHAT must have been a passage of mere seconds seemed like hours of that crawling torture. Sweat popped out on my flesh. I was beginning to feel the awful heat that pressed around us—the heart of flame that was sending these veins of smoke through the walls. My flesh recoiled from the carpet as from the hot lid of a stove. When it seemed that I could stand this pace no longer, that I must leap to my feet and fling my weight through window or wall or whatever surface contained us in this smoky tomb, my guide

put my own thought into action. The flexing muscles of his leg told me that he was on his feet.

Immediately he broke into a terrific spasm of coughing. "Stay down!" he hissed.

The command flattened me like a foot on my head. There were fumbling, rattling, creaking sounds. I wanted to cry: "Hurry, damn you, hurry!" But I only sobbed into the carpet.

He was insufferably slow. In a moment he might collapse from the smoke, and leave me alone again!

"Break it!" I exploded. "Kick out—glass!"

The answer was a wonderful, cooling flood of air. I flung myself over on my back and gulped it in. I seemed to lie in hot desert sands and a cloud had burst over me with a resurrecting cascade.

"Get up!" he hissed, tugging at my collar.

I staggered up beside him and we both leaned out, sniffing, swallowing and mopping our faces.

The air calmed us, but I was still in a half-panic, half-daze. My fingers clung to his sleeve with a kind of childlike trust that he could do something for us.

He was poised, half out the window, as though listening. Opposite us seemed to be a blank wall and below a dark pit.

"I think I hear a siren," he whispered, "but they'll never make it. Too far away. Too far!"

I pawed at him. "What'll we do?"

He seemed to point down. "Look! Whole bottom floor's afire—"

I smeared fingers into my eyes, tried to wipe away the blinding smart. When I opened them I could vaguely see him crawling through the window, perching himself to jump!

"Wait!" I gasped.

"I'm jumping!" he said. "We'll have to! Only one story—fifteen feet at most..."

"Wait!" I caught his arm and flung him bodily back into the room. He swam out of the smoke again, puffing and blowing. "Help me, damn you!" I sagged down to my knees. "I—I can't do it alone... afraid..."

He seemed long in answering. Finally: "I'll help you... Got you this far."

His arms around my waist were reassuring. "Sit—in window," he whispered.

I got one leg over the sill and teetered there, trying to draw up the other. He balanced me by the shoulders. The fire flung long tentacles of smoke around us, as if to draw us bodily back into hell. We both coughed, and I almost slipped from his grasp.

I was crying like a child. I got both legs out, hung there, palms on sill, on the stilts of my arms.

Words, fragments of speech spurted from him. Strange as they sounded, they calmed and restored my nerves that wanted to burst into frenzy and had no power to do so. I felt his breath moist on my neck. Lips pressed my ear. His instructions were hot, hissing breaths: "Alley—may be pavement. Take shock—legs. Relax. Go limp. Crumple. Protect—head with arms."

His hands gave my shoulders a little push. The gentleness of them, the soothing authority of his voice performed a great wonder in my dazed brain. Fear was gone. I was like a child who has touched death and found that it is only human.

"Quick now!" he breathed. "Right behind you. . . Relax. Don't be afraid. . . Don't be—afraid. . ."

It was my own impulse finally and not the pressure of his hands that eased my body from the sill.

Strangely a great peace and confidence came over me in the moment of fall. His voice followed me like a chant from the infinite. My body obeyed his orders automatically. My arms flung themselves up, encircled my head. I struck, doubled, spilled sideways into the pavement.

In spite of the ease of that passage, I was stunned completely by the impact. At first there was no feeling at all, then a far-away warmth that began in my nose and flowed back into the depths of my throat. My breath came through it in bubbles.

I must be on my back, though my nerveless body sensed no pressure front or back. I was adrift. The hotel fire seemed utterly remote in time and space. My feet might have been burning and I would not have known.

One sense, hearing, was alive enough to hear the tramp of feet around me. Friendly arms looped under my shoulders and I gave myself up to them, peacefully.

There was one moment only of awareness after that. I seemed to lie in a vast hall under a magnificent chandelier. Brilliant jewels of light floated miraculously across the dark ceiling.

Then the chandelier became only a bridge with autos shooting like sparks across it, and then the dream ended, totally.

THE hospital bed was so soft and good that I reveled in it, sleeping and waking. Nurses and doctors came and went, mostly shadows but sometimes bits of substance — hands, thermometers, tubes that slid between my lips, long needles that tickled like feathers, wet cloths, cold surfaces. Always there was a thin veil between sense and reality as though a kind of comfortable insulation had grown between myself and life.

My first real feelings were pain, then irritation, then shame. Some vague stubbornness in my mind decided that it was foolish of me to be in a hospital and I resolved to admit nothing of this to my family, to seek no aid from them.

When I was able to talk a big friendly doctor came to see me. "You know, we don't have a bit of information about you," he said, smiling. "Naturally we've made inquiries, but we just can't locate you anywhere. Nobody wants you."

It was painful to think, more painful to talk. "Wasn't there any—anything in my pockets?"

"Just a roll of bills. If you will give us

"Let Me Warn You, Sir,

this is an unfriendly town and beastly things may be happening here," Dr. Rudd cautioned Luther McGavock. As if the Memphis shamus had to be told! His first evening in Hetherton and already two deaths had occurred—with an elusive undertaker's apprentice on the loose embalming the victims as fast as the killer could dispose of them! The latest in this perennially popular series by MERLE CONSTINER,

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some names, we'll be glad to contact any relatives or—"

"No!" I raised myself feebly. "Don't want that! Silly business—keep it to myself."

He pushed me back gently. "I think I understand. But we want you to know it's running into quite a sum to keep you here. This is a charity hospital, but over a considerable time, as I explained to you before—"

"Have money . . . lots money. Rolling in money!"

"I can believe that! You carried an unusual lot—"

"I'll take care—anything. Just get me—out of bed."

He patted my shoulder. "We'll do the best we can. And we'll talk about the expense later, Mr. . . . Well, fact is we don't even know your full name. You spoke of Paul, and Henry, and Randall—"

"Paul. Just Paul. Is that—enough?"

"For now."

I squinted. "Funny—should end up here. How bad—hurt?"

"Shock, mostly, and concussion. You're a remarkable man, Paul. Remarkable!"

After his visit I drifted into another strange limbo between dream and fact. Sometimes I wondered about things. Why had there been no means of identification in my pocket? Perhaps my cards had fallen out when I spilled my wallet in that gutter. . . . And what did the doctor mean, "as I explained to you before"? I remembered no previous explanations. Had that concussion he spoke of jarred my memory? And one word of the doctor's drummed often in my mind: Remarkable. Remarkable! Why was I remarkable?

Then, before I quite realized it, I was sitting up, eating with my own hands, and feeling wonderful, and my doctor friend was back again.

"I'll soon be bringing in some papers for your signature," he said, "and we'll get you straightened out with our office. Do you want to contact anybody now?"

"No," I said from a tight, sore throat. "I'll go back to them on my own two feet."

"Well, I see no reason to argue that."

"Shouldn't have run away, Doctor. I've learned."

"I'm glad you've learned," he said.

"You're damn right! No more drugging myself with that stuff! I was drunk at the time, you know."

He nodded.

"Lying here has cured me of a blight, Doctor. Indifference to life—that's what it was with me. My wife died, you see . . . I'm cured now!"

He grinned at that and acted a little proud of himself.

After a few more long days, I got restless. I asked the prettiest nurse to bring my things. She smiled. "I'm sorry, but you're not ready yet."

"Oh, come on," I urged. "I want to get out of here. I'm fit as a fiddle."

She held my shoulders gently. "There's plenty of time," she insisted.

I didn't think so. I knew I was ready to go. Those doctors always drag it out.

I have a way of acting on impulse, without thinking too much of others. One day I just slipped out of bed, found my clothes hanging in a closet, dressed, and slipped out into the milling traffic of a hallway. I was incredibly weak. The clothes flapped on my skinny frame. But the spirit was strong.

Out on a city street, life flooded back into me in all its wonder. I knew I would never hold it cheap again.

I found some loose bills in my pocket, enough for train fare home. The hospital needn't worry about my debt. I'd take care of them—plenty!

I was halfway back to Cornwall before I remembered the man who was responsible for my existence at this moment, the man who had saved my life at the risk of his own. In all that time at the hospital the fire had been so remote that I had scarcely thought of it.

The whisperer! What had happened to him? Did he take the jump better than I? Why didn't I think to ask them at the hospital? . . . That would be a matter for investigation as soon as I was settled again. I owed everything to that man. He had brought me out of despair to a kind of self-triumph. He had stepped into my life like a guardian angel.

First, though, I wanted to get home. Home! I had thought, with my wife's going, that it would never be home again.

CORNWALL was really too much of an estate to be a home. It was like an institution which I had inherited against my own wishes, but that spring afternoon the great iron gate framed in high brick walls looked to me like a lovely latticed cottage gate.

Burton, the butler, came down to answer my ring. His thin, watery eyes rounded. His hunched shoulders straightened as though I had cracked a whip at him. "Very good to see you again, sir," he greeted stiffly. "You certainly made quite a trip of it, sir!"

"Great to be back!" I expanded, inhaling the smell of spring blossoms as we strolled up the drive. "Don't suppose they've missed me much, eh, Burton?"

He shrugged. "Well, sir, you left so suddenly, you know. Mr. Henry went to look for you, but he gave up after a few days. . .

Thought you'd taken off for the end of the world, sir. Nobody could blame you, sir."

"How is old Henry? How's he taking my absence?"

"Very well, sir. He's handled things more or less, of course."

"Oh, of course." I grinned. "Henry would like that. He's always wanted to run the business. Suppose he's been calling upon his righteous gods to punish me for the condition I left the books in. . . How did he come out with the Army?"

"They wouldn't have him, sir. Bad heart, you know. Very bad, if you ask me, sir. I don't think he should work so hard."

"Yeah. Henry always does things to an extreme. . . I'll try to relieve him of the pressure."

"Of course you will, sir." He was not smiling. "But you look mighty poorly yourself, sir. Almost like a ghost, if I may say so!"

I laughed. "I am a ghost, Burton."

The big old house had lightened somehow in my absence. The dusty veil of age seemed to have been cast off. Even the shroud of vines was bright green instead of fungus gray.

"Family's at luncheon, sir," Burton warned me, ushering me in and peeling off my topcoat.

I strode airily through the long front hallway and emerged into the big dining room. The table candles stirred with the breath of my entrance. Six faces turned.

Surprise was mixed. Uncle Will and Aunt Lucy blinked at me out of aged sockets. Cousin Freddie squealed in his high tenor: "It's Paul!"

Half-sister Lucy's husband, Randall, was the first to recover. His black head snapped up. He was out of his chair, hand extended. "I'd hardly have known you, Paul!"

But I didn't touch the hand. Over his shoulder I saw my half-brother, Henry. I saw a thin, drawn face. I saw Henry rise in his chair and then tip forward at the waist and ooze across the table, smearing his face through a mess of food and tableware.

I started forward, laughing. "Henry! It can't be as bad—"

They had all risen. We stood in tableau watching Henry's flimp body sag slowly down between chair and table, dragging the mess down after it.

Randall recoiled, sprang for the table. He shoved the table and chair away from Henry. We crowded around while he straightened the strangely loose form.

"It's that blasted heart!" Randall growled. "Better call his doctor, Freddie."

Lucy was on her knees mopping away the smear of food from Henry's face and chest.

Randall's hand closed around the thin white wrist. We waited.

Randall's face came up, eyes thin and dark. "Henry's dead!" he whispered.

WITH Henry's death, Cornwall changed again from home to funeral parlor. I slipped out of town at once, with scarcely a word to the others. I would let Randall settle Henry's affairs. I did not want any more grief. I wanted to have a friend and share with him the triumph that had taken place inside of me, but my relatives were not friends. I had seen that in my homecoming—the coldness of their faces. I felt strangely deserted at a crisis of my life.

The only real friend that came to mind was the man who had saved me from that hotel fire. I ought to do something about him. I ought to go back there and find him and let him know what he had done for me. . . . At least the search would be pleasanter than a burial.

With my mind impulsively set on a new purpose, I borrowed some cash from Randall and bought a ticket for the next train. Several hours later, after a hot, invigorating dinner on the train, I was back in the city of my weird adventure.

My strength was holding up extremely well, considering my long stretch in bed. That shows, I thought, how wrong those doctors can be about a man with stamina.

There were not many facts to go on. I didn't know the name of the hotel, didn't even know in what part of the city it might be. I would not go back to the hospital yet—they might try to put me back in bed. My only clues were a hotel fire and an automobile bridge.

First step was to charter a taxi.

"Don't remember any fires," the taxi driver told me. He was a genial, bent, nondescript little man. "But then I'm sort of new around this burg."

"How new?" I snapped.

"Six months."

"Oh, this would be more recent."

"Can't help you, brother."

"Well, there was a bridge," I said. "Do you know anything about bridges?"

"Sure. All about 'em."

I described the bridge to him, the way it arched high over another street, and the way the lights crossed it like shooting sparks.

"Yeah, I know that one. East High Street."

"Get me there, quick!" I was excited.

We came on the bridge suddenly at the top of a steep, winding grade. I recognized it even from a different perspective. It overhung a tremendous gulch and seemed higher from this view. Lights whisked along a dark street beneath us. "Can't stop here," the driver said. "Where to?"

"Know any hotels around here?"

The machine idled along. The grinding gears might have been the sound of his thoughts. "No hotel within a mile," he said abruptly.

A mile!

"Stop!" I said.

The cab slid up to a curb. He looked back at me, his face a wrinkled question mark.

I frowned. A mile would be too far. They wouldn't have dragged me that far from the fire. . . Then that second vision of the bridge must have been only a dream after all.

This made it more difficult. I had hoped the hotel would be close to the bridge, but it might not be. I had no idea of the distance my whispering friend and I had walked that night.

"Find me some hotels," I directed. "Nearest ones first."

He cut down from the bridge in a long loop, burrowing into the skyscraper depths of the city.

There might not be a hotel at all, I thought. It might be a shell, burned to the ground. But that wasn't likely. Hotels have a way of rebuilding themselves.

The first one he selected was a severe, towering structure.

"That's not it! That has no revolving door."

"Hey!" He swung in his seat. "You want a revolving door?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you say so? That's probably the Evansdale. I used to stand there once in a while."

THE Evansdale. I recognized the door immediately. That door would never escape me. . . The hotel seemed to be a residential type on a quiet back street, a hundred feet wide and about eight stories high.

I got out, asked the driver to wait, stiffened my shoulders, and walked through the door—this time without being pushed.

The big, gloomy lobby and the dim light over the desk were familiar. The pale, bony, youthful face of the clerk was not.

The face I might not remember. I had taken small note of faces that night.

I walked up to him. "Have you ever seen me before?" I asked.

His thin lips curled up at the edges. "I see lots of people, an awful lot. You might have been one of them."

"I came in late at night. I was drunk. A man helped me. I was wearing this topcoat—"

"Late at night would be the night clerk. I'm the swing shift."

His grin only half-registered. I was star-

ing down the long black length of my coat into a dark, mysterious pit. A hot knife shot up my spine.

Topcoat! Topcoat! *Why did I have my topcoat?*

Didn't I leave my coat, this coat, behind me in that hotel room? Didn't those friendly hands tug the coat away from my shoulders as I lay drunk on that bed? Wasn't the coat burned in that fire?

My voice sank deep into my throat and stayed there. "Listen, son! Do you remember any fire in this hotel?"

"No fire in my time, but I've only worked here two months."

I licked my lips. "Two months. . . It might have been before that. . . Listen, do you keep any back record of registrations? My name is Paul Cornwall—"

"Oh, sure, Mr. Cornwall. If you ever registered here, we'd have your card on file. But you'd have to give me the date. They're filed by dates."

I felt dizzy. My mind swam through a whirl of facts and fantasies. "Let's see, April 1st was when Gertrude. . . April 3rd was the funeral. . . April 4th the train—April 5th it was! The night of April 5th."

"Before or after midnight?"

"Oh, after midnight."

"That would be April 6th." He disappeared into a cubicle behind velvet curtains.

"I was on the first floor!" I called after him. "Look up the room next to mine, too, if you will. That was my friend's room."

I stood, tapping my feet nervously, mopping the back of my neck.

He was back in two minutes. "No Cornwall on any floor for April 5th or 6th," he told me.

I stumbled back, rocked on my heels, surveying the lobby. "This must be the place. I could swear I was in this room, stood against that wall. . . Let me see the elevator, will you?"

He pointed a long finger at an open door across the lobby. I walked toward it, trying to imagine my drunken course of that distant night.

I stood in front of the door, looking into the opened elevator. I stepped into it, turned, sagged against the wall.

I came out quickly. "That's the elevator. I'm sure I remember it."

He snorted. "You must have been plenty drunk, sir, if you don't remember. April 6th was only last week."

He caught me in mid-stride. My right foot stopped, jerked, and came down stiffly beside the left. My teeth bit sharply together. I stared at him. "Are you trying to kid me, boy?"

He blushed. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Corn-

wall. I didn't mean to be funny. But it was only last week."

"That's impossible!" I exploded. "I was in the hospital more than a week!"

"April 6th was only a week ago," he insisted. His hand shot around a corner and came out with a small folding calendar. "Look—April 13th."

The April was only a blur in my eyes. I was focusing them on the four members at the bottom of the sheet. I snatched the pad out of his hand.

"What's wrong with this calendar?" I demanded. "It says 1944."

His eyes narrowed, lost their smile. "But, sir, it is 1944."

"No!"

The calendar fell out of my fingers, spilled on the desk. My knees gave, but my elbows caught the edge. "Oh, God, no! Not a year! Not a whole year!"

I WAS drunk again, staggering across the lobby, collapsing into a chair. My hands worked the flesh of my cheeks, smeared it up into my eyes.

A year! A year of my life gone, unlive! What had happened to my mind that night to blot out a whole year?

I sat there for terrifying minutes trying to reason, but there was no reason to it. The clerk's yelp finally rocketed into my confused thoughts.

"Hey, Mr. Cornwall! I've found you all right. Paul Cornwall. It was April 6th, 1943. Funny, your getting mixed up in the year that way." He laughed, but his manner was uneasy.

I dragged myself out of the chair, afraid now to go any further.

It was my name all right, my signature on the card—scribbled, blurred by the mist in my eyes, but it was my signature. I had written nothing on the line marked: *Address*.

Something else was sliding across the desk past the card—a cigarette case. A big mono-

gram PC showed in the corner. My silver case!

The clerk explained: "There was a notation on the card to check 'Lost and Found,' Mr. Cornwall. I looked it up and found this case tagged with your name. We don't always hold things so long, but I guess the boss thought this was a special matter."

Taped to the case was a sheet of stationery. I noted the heading in the corner: *Office of Manager*.

"What's that?" I said.

"Memo from the boss. I guess you better read it yourself, Mr. Cornwall."

I wiped my palm across my eyes and read:

If owner claims this cigarette case or registers, please inform him that it is against the law to burn anything in a hotel room—even in a steel wastebasket. Lucky for him there were no complaints of smoke from other guests, not even from the gentleman in the next room. . .

The sheet slipped from my fingers, scooted out of sight behind the desk. I wanted to turn and run. My feet were planted. For a moment I felt the lobby reeling and quaking around me.

The whole picture of that memorable night was changing, reshaping itself monstrously. The halo was gone from the image of the whisperer, and emerging from the shadows was a death's head.

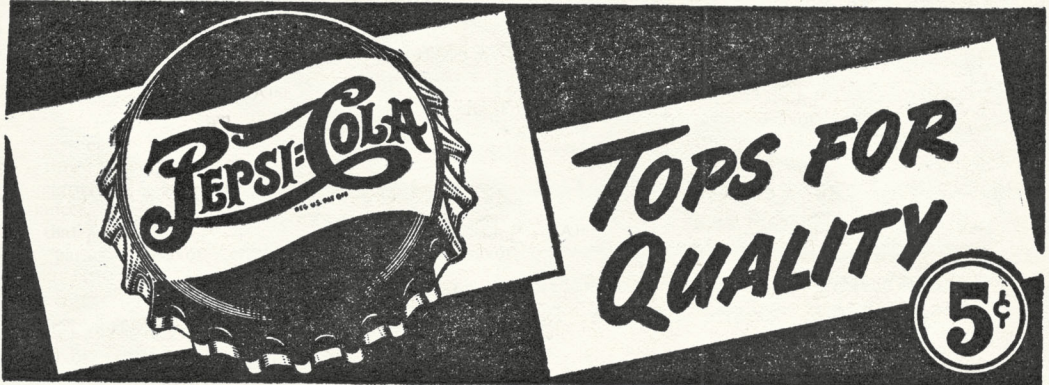
Murder! Subtle, formless murder!

Paul Cornwall would be a hard man to murder in cold blood. Stubborn, giant-framed Paul Cornwall. Nobody could push me around! But this was colder than cold-bloodedness. This was the Pied Piper of doom with the voice of a rescuing angel!

Questions leaped at me and the answers were at hand.

What purpose was it that led the whisperer to me as I sat, drunk and stupid, on that curbstone? What was he doing so far from

(Continued on page 97)





CHAPTER ONE

Start the Pall Rolling

IT WAS about five o'clock in the afternoon when I got out of the taxi in front of the Club Americana. I paid the driver and stood on the sidewalk, looking the place over.

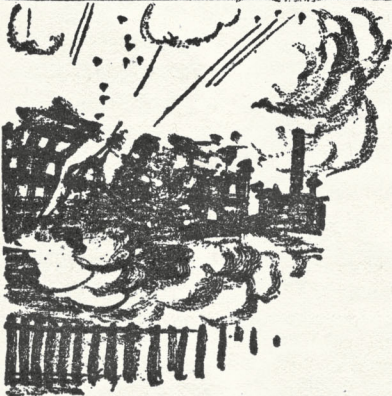
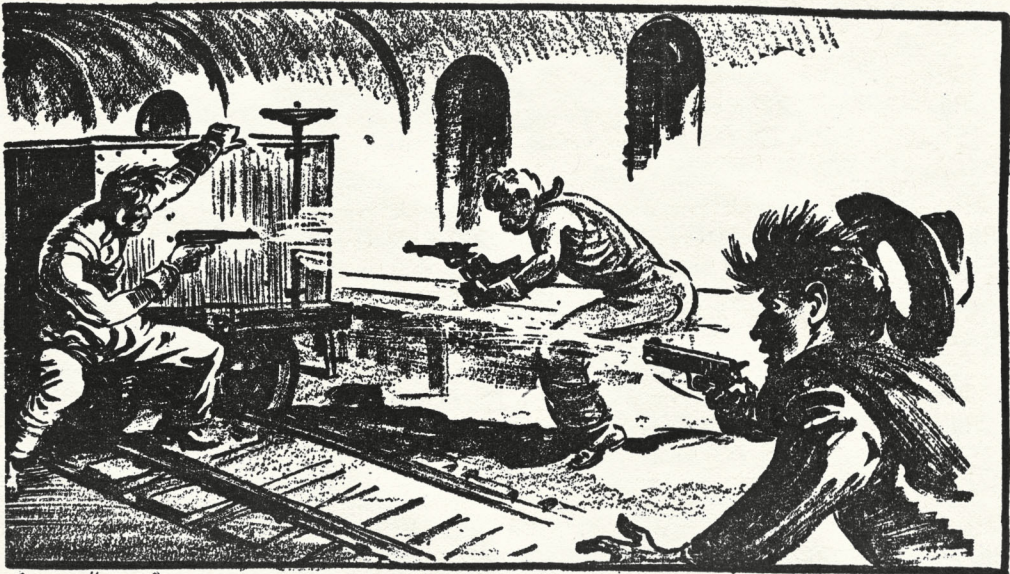
It was just another club, maybe a little better than most, with the usual big, colored photographs of the current band leader and the floor show attractions. The girl's picture was there, too—blond, brown eyes, a nice smile. Beneath her picture were the words: *Judy Allen, Mistress of Song*. She looked O. K., but not what I had expected. The boss hadn't told me much about her, except that she was singing at the Americana. I had expected her to appear glittery, hard-looking. But she looked nice.

I went inside, checked my hat and coat, and a waiter led me to a table along a wall. I said: "Thanks, I'll sit at the bar."

GI DOUBLECROSS

By **ROBERT MARTIN**

It was getting to be a habit. Twice in twelve hours I had taken the count, and all because the boss had said: "Get to that girl and keep after her. Find out about her brother!" But Jake Allen was dead—killed in a plane crash, so the papers said, and still "accidents" were occurring in key war plants—"accidents" which disabled and killed hundreds of innocent workers and effectively crippled the country's airplane production.



I sat on a stool and ordered a double Manhattan. "I'll have at least two," I told the pretty girl tending bar. "You may as well make them both at once."

She smiled, began pouring vermouth into a stirring glass. I watched her add the whiskey and bitters, and then I looked around the room. The cocktail crowd was gathering fast, and the place was humming with conversation and filled with the pleasant smell of liquor and lemons. There were a lot of men in uniform, both Army and Navy. I was a little envious of them, and suddenly very conscious of my civilian tweeds.

I turned back to the bar. An oversized cocktail glass sat in front of me, with two cher-

ries reposing in its clear amber depths. I tasted the drink. "Very good," I told the girl behind the bar. "Just the right amount of bitters."

She smiled, said, "Thank you," and began to measure gin into a shaker. I asked her when the band began playing, and she said: "Five-thirty."

I looked at my watch. Five-twenty. So I sipped my drink and watched the crowd. Pretty soon the musicians came out and took their places on the raised platform at the end of the long, narrow room. At precisely five-thirty they began to play. The music was good, soft and low. The small dance floor was soon jammed. I watched and waited.

At the end of the second number she came out, looking, under the lights, even prettier than her picture. She came out smiling and stood in front of the microphone. Everyone clapped. I set down my glass and clapped, too. They turned a blue spot on her and she began to sing. She was O. K. She had a low, pleasing voice, and while she was singing no one talked. Everyone listened.

I thought: Well, there she is. Time to get to work.

I finished my drink, laid some money on the bar, and asked a passing waiter if he could get me a table. He led me over next to the wall and put me down at a small table for two jammed between larger tables. It was still too early to eat, so I ordered another Manhattan. When the waiter brought it, I slipped a buck into his ready hand. "Look," I said, "could I speak to Miss Allen?"

The waiter was an old guy with white hair. He smiled, said, "I'll see, sir," and went away.

When she finished singing I saw him go up and speak to her, and he looked toward my table. She looked, too, and I smiled at her. She did not smile at me. She merely shook her head at the waiter, sat down in a chair beside the second sax player, folded her hands in her lap, and looked primly out across the dance floor.

The waiter came back. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. He really looked sorry.

I said: "That's all right. Thanks."

The waiter went away, and I took another swallow of my drink and tried to figure out another approach. I had to talk to her, but I also had to be careful.

A voice behind me said: "Tough luck."

I TURNED around in my chair. At a small table behind me sat a lone soldier. On his sleeve were a sergeant's chevrons. Above his left breast pocket were Army Air Force wings and a service ribbon. He was drinking a bottle of beer, and he grinned at me.

"Sergeant," I said, "you have sharp ears. Will you have a drink?"

He said, "Sure," picked up his beer and his glass and moved over to my table. "I don't blame you for trying," he said. "She's all right."

"Do you know her?" I asked.

"No," he replied, "but I'd like to. Want me to try?"

"Sure," I said. "Go ahead."

He turned in his chair to motion to the waiter, but at that moment the band began to play. The girl stood up in front of the microphone to sing again. The sergeant turned back to the table. "Too late now," he said. "Have to wait until she finishes."

I ordered beer for him, and another Manhattan for myself. "South Pacific, I see," I said, motioning to his service ribbon.

He said: "Yeah. First leave in a year. Gotta go back next week."

He told me a little about himself. He said his name was Dan Malloy, and that he was a waist-gunner on a B-17. His folks were dead. All by himself on furlough, and no place to go. Said he had some relatives in Cleveland, Ohio, but that it was too far from San Francisco, and he guessed he would just hang around until time to go back.

He didn't ask me any questions, and I didn't tell him much. I get tired of making up stories to tell people, and I like people who don't ask questions. I did tell him that my name was Jim Bennett, that I was from New York, which was true, and that I was out on the coast on business, which was also true. I didn't tell him what kind of business.

Pretty soon the girl finished her song, and Sergeant Malloy asked the waiter if he could speak to Miss Allen. The waiter glanced at me and smiled faintly. "I'll see, sir," he said again, and went away.

We both watched him. When he spoke to the girl, she looked again at our table. The sergeant raised his hand, and grinned at her. She didn't look at me, but she smiled at him a little uncertainly. The waiter said something to her, she nodded and gathered the skirt of her long black dress in her hand. Then she stepped down from the platform, walked around the edge of the dance floor, and came up to our table. The sergeant winked at me, and we both stood up.

The sergeant held a chair for her. "Thanks for coming, Miss Allen," he said, very politely. "My name is Dan Malloy. This gentleman is Mr. Bennett, of New York."

Her cool gaze flicked over me, and back of Malloy. She sat down in the chair he was holding for her, said: "Thank you, Sergeant."

I said: "Miss Allen, would you care for a drink?"

She glanced at me briefly, said, "No, thanks," and turned to the sergeant.

He said: "I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your singing."

"Thank you," she said. "I'm glad you liked it."

It was just small talk, conventional talk. Maybe she figured it was part of her job to be nice to the boys in uniform. But I had a job to do. I liked the sergeant, and I was grateful for his help in getting her to the table. It was the first step in a tough job, and I didn't want any slips. The boss had been very blunt about it, as usual. "Get to the girl," he had said. "Find out about her brother. We know that Jake Allen was involved in the blasting of tunnel kilns in war plants making grinding wheels for the aircraft industry—and without grinding wheels not an airplane could be built, nor a ship, nor a tank, nor a gun, for that matter. Find out where Jake Allen is, and what he's doing now. Get the goods on him. Prove it. Stop him!"

"It must be the uniform," I said to Judy Allen.

She stopped her conversation with the sergeant long enough to notice me. "It must be," she said.

I was certainly getting off to a fine friendly start.

WHILE she was talking to the sergeant, I ran over in my mind the things the boss had told me about Jake Allen. It wasn't too much, but we were pretty certain that he had been responsible for the almost total loss of a plant in Ohio, and another in New York State. Then we got a tip that he was moving west. His game was always the same. He would get work in grinding wheel factories under various names. Considering the manpower shortage it wasn't hard for him to get a job. Employers were too hard up for men, especially men with a 4-F draft classification, to bother to check them too carefully.

As near as we could find out, Jake Allen claimed to have had experience in the operation of kilns, and got work in the kiln departments. A two hundred foot tunnel kiln loaded with vital abrasive wheels destined to grind the precision parts of bomber motors was his meat. On his last job he had apparently placed a time bomb on one of the cars moving slowly through the tunnel kiln. The bomb had been set to explode at the very center of the kiln, the spot where the gas—or oil—generated heat was the most intense. The explosion had not only wrecked the kiln and thousands of dollars' worth of precious grinding wheels nearing completion, but a good portion of the plant as well. Also, it had killed six men, and injured a number of others. Meanwhile, the plant's production was

very effectively stopped, and one bomber plant was shut down until other grinding wheels could be rushed to it.

That was the kind of thing happening all over the country. Sometimes it would be a time clock or stick of dynamite attached to a time clock which would explode when an employee punched his card. Outwardly, they were just unfortunate accidents, just those inevitable things which are always occurring in times of boom production. Sometimes they were, but not always. Pretty often they were not accidents. To too many people the word "sabotage" is just another bad radio joke, but men in my work know better. A couple of the boys had come up with some dope on Jake Allen, and it looked bad. After his last job he had dropped out of sight. Then they found out some more—that he done a stretch in the pen, which accounted for the 4-F, and that he had a sister in San Francisco. I had just come off a west coast shipyard job, and the boss put me on Allen's trail. And here I was sitting at a table with Jake Allen's sister and twiddling my thumbs while she talked to Sergeant Malloy.

They were having quite a conversation—all about his experiences in the Pacific. "Excuse me," I said, "would you like a drink?"

The sergeant said: "Sure. Another beer."

I looked at the girl, and her gaze flicked coolly over me. "Nothing, thank you," she said. "I go on again in a few minutes."

"That's all right," said the sergeant. "We'll save it for you."

She smiled at him. "No, really," she said, and got to her feet.

Malloy and I both stood up. I was thinking fast. "Miss Allen," I said, "I really did want to speak with you."

"Yes?" she said.

Suddenly there was a man standing behind her. He was in uniform, too, and I saw the gleam of the two silver bars on his shoulder. Malloy saluted smartly, and the newcomer returned it casually. He was looking at the girl. "Judy," he said, "how are you?"

She turned. "Why, Captain Smythe."

Smythe, I thought. Captain John Smythe, I presume? And how is Pocahontas?

The captain took her hand. She turned to the sergeant, said: "Captain Smythe, this is Sergeant Dan Malloy."

The captain nodded, and looked at me. "And Mr. Bennett," she said.

I held out my hand. He hesitated for a second, then took it in a limp grasp. "Pleased, Captain Smith," I said.

A slight frown crossed his handsome features. "Smythe," he said—"y' like in 'eye.'"

"Sorry," I said. "Won't you sit down?"

We all sat down, and I thought that it was getting to be quite a party. But I

didn't care—at least it kept the girl at the table for a little longer. But it didn't do me much good. She talked to the captain and the sergeant and seldom looked at me. After a while the captain began talking about dinner, and that was all right with me. I was beginning to get hungry. So the waiter came, and we all ordered. Judy Allen left the table several times to sing, but she always came back. I figured I had the captain to thank for that. During one of the times when she was gone, he said: "Mr. Bennett, what is your business?"

"Grinding wheels," I said.

"Oh," he replied. "You mean emery stones?"

I had been reading up on abrasives since the boss had put me on Allen's trail. "No," I said. "I mean grinding wheels."

"What's the difference?"

"Plenty," I said. "Emery stone is an obsolete expression used fifty years ago, like we used to say horseless carriage for automobile. Modern grinding wheels are not stones. They are a highly scientific product composed of bauxite, silicon carbide and other agents, very delicately fused and blended, and burned in ovens, round or tunnel-type kilns at a temperature of—"

"Really?" the captain broke in. "Very interesting." He turned to the sergeant. "Sergeant, how is your fish?"

"Very good, sir," said Malloy. Since the captain had joined our gay little group Sergeant Malloy had become visibly subdued.

Judy Allen came back to the table. I beat the captain by a split second and held her chair for her. We all sat down again, and I said: "Captain, in what branch of the service are you?"

Before he could answer, Judy Allen said: "Captain Smythe is a producer and writer of plays for the soldiers. He travels all over the country putting on educational shows for them. Don't you, Captain?"

"That's about it," he said. "Put on a show in Texas last week. Don't know where they'll send me next. Taking a little furlough now. I need it."

"I'll bet," I said. "It must be very strenuous. You and Sergeant Malloy have a lot in common."

I was immediately sorry I had said it. I really had nothing against him, and I knew well enough that every branch of the Service was important. Every man to his own job, where he can do the most good, myself included. But something about Captain Smythe irritated me. Maybe it was the way he spelled his name. Anyhow, I was sorry. Sergeant Malloy choked on a hunk of fish, and Judy Allen looked at me with an expression of distaste. The captain put down his knife and

fork and touched a napkin to his lips. There was a silence for a few seconds. It was very awkward.

Judy Allen spoke. She said: "I've been wondering all evening. It's a rather personal question, I know, but what do you do, Mr. Bennett?" Her voice was as cold as ice.

The three of them were watching me, and there was no friendliness in their eyes. Even Sergeant Malloy looked reproachful. I said: "As I told the captain a while ago, my business is grinding wheels. Grinding wheels, you know, are extremely important to the war effort. Not a ship, or a plane, or a tank could be built without them." I reeled it off just the way I had read it.

"I see," said Captain Smythe. "On deferment?"

"No," I said. "Not exactly. Occupational classification in an essential industry."

The captain and sergeant said nothing. Judy Allen said: "Oh."

"You see, Miss Allen," I said, throwing out my first hook, "your brother and I have something in common. I understand that he is an abrasive worker, too."

Judy Allen said: "My brother is dead."

CHAPTER TWO

Brown Shoe

THAT stopped me. All this build-up, and the guy I was looking for was dead! If Jake Allen had been blasting war factories, he apparently wasn't going to blast any more. It looked as though the boss's tip had certainly been cold.

"I'm very sorry," I said.

She was looking at her plate, and I thought I saw her lips tremble. And I suddenly thought how clean and bright her blond hair looked. Captain Smythe had taken her hand, and now he glared across the table at me. "You ought to be sorry," he said.

"Look," I said, "how did I know? I said I was sorry."

Besides being sorry, I wanted to know how and when, and all about it, but it wasn't the time or the place to question Judy Allen. I decided to stick around as long as I could. But the captain had other ideas.

"Mr. Bennett," he said, "I believe that Miss Allen would like to be alone. Do you mind?"

I minded, all right, and I wasn't going to be shooed away. After all, it was my table, and so far I was paying the bill. I looked at Sergeant Malloy, who hadn't said a word since Judy Allen's announcement of her brother's death. He looked embarrassed. "Sergeant," I asked, "have you finished your dinner?"

The sergeant looked down at his still half-

filled plate. But he did not hesitate. The captain's silver bars carried a lot of weight with him. He got to his feet. "All finished," he said, and looked expectantly at me.

I sat still. "Finish your dinner," I said. "I'm sure Miss Allen won't mind."

He hesitated, watching the captain. Judy Allen raised her head and smiled. It was a nice smile, sort of a through-the-tears smile. "Surely not, Sergeant," she said. "Please don't leave. Besides, it's time for me to go on again." She fished a tiny bit of lace from her bag and dabbed at her eyes. I was afraid her mascara would run, but it didn't. She got to her feet, and I beat the captain again by standing up first. But he took her arm and guided her through the crowd to the platform. She did not look back. Sergeant Malloy and I sat down.

"Too bad about her brother," he remarked.

"Yeah," I said. "The captain acts like an old friend. Is he?"

Malloy shrugged. "I don't know. He was with her last night."

"Here?" I asked.

"No. At a place uptown. In the bar of the Golden Gate Hotel."

"Oh," I said. "No wonder she came over to our table. You've met her."

He laughed. He had even white teeth. "No, not at all. I saw her, but she didn't notice me. I found out that she sang here, so here I am."

"To hear her sing?"

He grinned at me. "Sure," he said.

"I don't blame you," I said. "Like some more beer?"

"Sure," he said. Suddenly he got to his feet. I looked up. Captain Smythe was standing at our table.

"Sit down, Captain," I said. "Your fish is getting cold."

He sat, and so did the sergeant. But the captain didn't start to eat. He looked at me. His face was red. Behind us the orchestra began to play. The captain started to say something, but I couldn't hear him because of the music. I leaned toward him. I was close enough to smell the fancy shaving lotion on his handsome face.

"Bennett, you were pretty rude to Miss Allen."

The music grew softer just before Judy Allen began to sing. I leaned back in my chair, fished in my pocket for a cigarette. "How?" I asked.

"By arguing with me after she told you about her brother. She is naturally quite broken up over it. It happened only a week ago."

"You seem to know Miss Allen pretty well."

"Yes. Pretty well."

I didn't like the way he said it, but I thought, What the hell! Why shouldn't I

like it? I said: "What happened to her brother?"

She had begun to sing, and the room had quieted down. The captain turned to look at her. "Airplane crash," he said, over his shoulder.

"When?" I asked. "Where?"

Slowly the captain turned in his chair. He looked at me for a long second. "Why?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Just curious."

"A week ago yesterday," he said. "Twenty miles out of Albuquerque. Great Western Airlines. At two-thirty-seven in the morning."

"Thanks," I said. "You seem to know all about it."

"Yes," he said.

I had read about the crash, but I didn't remember the name of Jake Allen on the list of victims. But then, when I had read about it, I hadn't been looking for Jake Allen. It could be.

"Bodies identified?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "Plane burned. Occupants identified by passenger list."

Sergeant Malloy sat listening to us. He hadn't said a word—just sat and listened and drank his beer. He looked bored. Judy Allen stopped singing, and the crowd applauded. The captain stood up and clapped his hands. She smiled across the room at him, but she did not return to our table. She sat down in her chair on the platform, and the captain left us and moved through the crowd toward her.

"Excuse me, Sergeant," I said. "I'll be back in a couple of minutes. Order me some coffee, will you?"

"Sure, Mr. Bennett," he said.

"Call me Jim."

"O.K., Jim." He grinned up at me.

I WENT out to the checkroom, found a phone booth, and called a private number in Los Angeles. As I slid quarters into the slot I thought that after being so nasty the captain had been pretty free with his information on the plane crash. In a couple of minutes I got my connection. George Baker answered. I could tell it was George by his cold-in-the-head voice.

"Listen, George," I said. "This is Bennett. Down in Frisco. Check that Great Western plane crash out of Albuquerque last week for me, will you? Passenger list, especially. Anything else you can get. Call me back. I'll wait." I gave him the number on the dial and hung up.

I stood in the doorway of the booth and smoked a cigarette. The dinner hour was about over, and people were leaving the Club Americana. Through the doorway I could see waiters already clearing tables for the

evening trade. The music of the orchestra drifted out to me, but I could no longer hear the voice of Judy Allen. And then suddenly I saw her.

She came out of the doorway leading into the bar, and stood a moment looking about her. She looked scared. She had on a beaver coat over her evening dress. I figured I could hear the phone if I left the door open, so I walked over to her.

"Leaving, Miss Allen?" I asked, trying to smile in the approved play boy fashion.

It didn't go over. She didn't answer me, but kept looking around. She pulled her coat closer about her, and as she did so a small sequin bag dropped from her hand. I stooped to pick it up. It was heavy, and had a familiar feel. An automatic—about a .32, I guessed—is a big gun for such a little girl to carry. As I handed the bag to her, I thought: My, my, just like in the spy books—beautiful girl, gun in handbag, and everything. And then I heard Captain Smythe's voice.

"Judy, wait," he said.

I turned around. When the captain saw me, his eyes narrowed, and there was an unpleasant look about his mouth. He jerked me by the arm. "Get out of the way, Bennett," he said.

I had a notion to take a swing at him, uniform or no uniform. But the phone began ringing in the booth, and it kept ringing. I turned my back on them, and went into the booth. The captain and Judy Allen hurried to the street door, went outside, and stood on the sidewalk looking for a taxi. I could see them through the glass doors. She was standing very straight, and he held her by the arm. I took down the receiver, said, "Yeah," and George Baker's nasal, complaining voice came over the wire.

"Jim? Here's the dope. Great Western Airlines passenger plane crashed and burned on mountainside in heavy fog twenty-six miles north of Albuquerque at two-thirty-seven on the morning of the twenty-fourth. Cause of crash unknown. Experienced pilot, plane checked O.K. at Seattle before taking off. Pilot, co-pilot, twelve passengers burned beyond identification. Passenger list—you got it, Jim?"

"Yeah," I said. "Go ahead."

"Passenger list contained names of Albert Bernstein, Russell C. Whitticker and wife, David L. Rockingham, Andrew Kelley, Jacob K. Allen—"

"Hold it, George," I said. "That's all. Thanks."

As I left the booth I saw that the captain and Judy Allen were gone. I stood for a minute, trying to decide what to do next. I remembered Sergeant Malloy, and I went back to the table. But the sergeant was gone, too.

Sergeant Malloy hadn't forgotten about my coffee. It was there on the table, but it was cold. I drank it anyway, and as I set the cup down, the white-haired waiter came up. I asked him for the check, and he said: "The soldier paid the bill, sir. He asked me to tell you that he was sorry he had to leave."

"O.K.," I said. "By the way, can you tell me where Miss Allen lives?"

"No, sir," he said, "I'm sorry."

I laid a five-spot on the table. He picked it up and put it in his pocket. As he leaned down to take my cup, he said: "Thank you, sir. Number 2614 Roycroft. Apartment 3-B."

"Thank you," I said, and went to get my hat and coat. The checkroom girl was pretty, and she smiled at me. I tossed a quarter in the dish with the rest of the decoy quarters, said, "Thanks," and went out.

It was dark outside, and the lights in front of the Club Americana were lit. They shone on the picture of Judy Allen, and something printed on the card attracted my attention. The words beneath her picture read: *Singing nightly—5:30 until 8:00; 10:00 until closing.*

I looked at my watch. Seven-twenty-five. She was leaving early. And I figured that if she had to be back at ten, she must not live very far away. Why go home at all? Surely, the Club Americana provided retiring rooms for its entertainers?

A taxi pulled up in front. I climbed in and gave the driver the address the waiter had given me. It wasn't far—eight blocks. Five straight north, and three east. We stopped in front of a medium-sized apartment building. I paid the taxi driver and went up the steps.

There was a lot of traffic in the street, and I didn't hear the shot. Maybe there was a silencer on the gun. Anyhow, as I pushed on the glass doors there was a sudden splintering sound beside my head and a jagged hole appeared in the glass of the door. Thin cracks, like the threads of a spiderweb, ran away from it. And I saw the quick puff of plaster dust from the wall inside.

I SLAMMED the door open, jumped inside, and flattened myself against the wall. I couldn't see anything outside but the traffic and the lights. Across the street there was a dark office building, and I figured that whoever had taken a crack at me could have hidden in the doorway. But he would have had to pick the right instant to clear the passing cars.

I waited a minute, but nothing else happened. I could see the names on the mail boxes on the other wall, and one of them contained a card which read: *Judy Allen, Apt. 3-B.* There was an elevator down the hall, but I waited another minute and then went up the stairs, two steps at a time. I got to the third

floor and found apartment 3-B. I looked around for a place to duck, just in case, but there wasn't any. So I just stood in front of the door and listened.

It was quiet on this floor, and the traffic from down in the street was a low murmur. At first, I couldn't hear anything from inside the apartment. And then I heard voices, but I couldn't make out the words. I thought of the fire escape, walked down to the far end of the hall, and turned left. Sure, enough, there was a door at the end of the corridor. I opened it, and the cool night air struck my face. I went out onto the fire escape and looked along the wall of the building to about where I thought the windows of apartment 3-B would be. There was no way to get out there, but down past the windows ran a fire escape from two floors above. So I hot-footed it back inside, down the hall to the stairway and up to the fifth floor. I found the outside door and started down the fire escape. I got to a small landing at the third floor and did a little reconnaissance work. There was no ledge leading to the windows, but right behind me was a door. I tried it, and almost laughed out loud at my good luck. It was unlocked.

I pushed the door open carefully, and entered a dark room. As my eyes became accustomed to the gloom I saw that I was in a small kitchen, and there was a light shining under the far door. I tiptoed across to the door and opened it about a quarter of an inch. I could see Judy Allen, all right, but no one else. She was sitting in a chair by a window. She still had on the dress which she had worn at the club, and appeared to be alone—at least she wasn't talking or looking at anyone. I wondered what had become of Captain Smythe. I stood there maybe two or three minutes, just looking and listening.

The sudden jangling of the telephone almost made me jump. Judy Allen got up to answer it, and I hoped that her telephone was not in the kitchen. It wasn't, and I could hear her talking from somewhere out of my line of vision.

It was, naturally, a one-sided conversation for me. I heard her say: "Yes . . . Captain Smythe? . . . No I don't know—What? . . . Yes, yes, of course. Right away . . . yes, yes yes."

I heard her replace the receiver, and for an instant she flitted across my line of vision. She was carrying her beaver coat, and she was almost running. The lights went off, and I heard a door slam. I waited a minute, and then I pushed open the kitchen door and entered the room.

The faint perfume of her presence was still there, and even in the dim light I could see that it was a nice room, furnished in good taste. I decided to risk turning on the lights,

and found the wall switch. When the lights came on, I stood still for a minute, looking around.

There was a door at the far end, which I guessed entered into her bedroom, several chairs, a writing desk, a book case—lots of books in it, too—drapes at the windows, a thick rug the color of coffee with cream in it. On the desk were several photographs, and I moved over and looked at them. One was of a good-looking, black-haired, black-browed man in an open-necked sports shirt. Written across the bottom in heavy, inked letters were the words: *To Sis, with much love. Jake.*

There was another picture of two elderly, pleasant-faced people, apparently her parents, and one of a handsome boy with a black mustache and wavy black hair. On this picture was written: *To Judy, with all my love—Jeff.*

I looked at the picture of Jake Allen more closely. This was the guy who was suspected of blowing up two war plants, the guy I was trying to catch in the act. Well, he was dead, or supposed to be, and I was up a blind alley.

Something made me turn around. I don't know what caused me to turn—there was no sound. Maybe it was that back-of-the-neck feeling you have when someone is staring at you. The kitchen door was opening slowly. I grabbed for my .38, and in the same instant a hand came through the opening of the door. In the hand was a gun. The gun had an oversized barrel, which I knew to be a silencer—a scarce item these days.

I ducked down, and as my gun came out I heard a sharp spitting sound, a small stifled explosion. Even as I squeezed the trigger of my .38 and saw my slug strike splinters from the kitchen door I felt a sledge hammer blow on my head, and a searing, momentary pain. I went to my knees, and heard the choking explosion again. A small dark hole appeared in the rug beside my hand. I tried to raise my gun again, but I couldn't make it. I fell forward and saw the rug fly up to meet my face. The room swam in blackness, and I went out, cold.

But I remembered one thing before I passed out. On the wrist of the hand which held the gun behind the kitchen door there showed an inch of coat sleeve. The color of the coat sleeve was olive drab.

I WAS out maybe twenty minutes. Not really out, because I knew I was lying on the thick rug, and that my head was hurting—bad. But I couldn't get up. The lights were still on in the room, and I just laid there on my face and the events of the last few hours crawled across my brain in a slow, mixed-up way, over and over again.

After what seemed like a long time I heard

a key in the door, and voices, but I couldn't move even then. Things were coming into a little sharper focus, but I didn't have enough strength to move a finger. And it didn't particularly bother me, except for the terrific pain in my head. I was perfectly content to stay where I was and let the world drift by. It was very strange.

A man's voice said: "Judy! What the hell—"

I opened my eyes and saw a big pair of brown shoes beside my face. One of the shoes lifted up and pushed my head sideways, not very gently. As my head twisted around I saw a pair of man's trousers. They were a dark gray color, and they were very neatly pressed. Beyond the pants and the brown shoes I saw the bottom of a floor-length black skirt and the toe of one small silver slipper.

Brown Shoe lifted his foot and my head rolled back again, as if it were on a rubber band. I closed my eyes again, but not before I had noticed the wet red smear on the rug beneath my face. My face was wet and sticky, and I knew it was blood, my own blood, but I didn't care. Nothing worried me. I just wanted the pain in my head to stop.

I heard the girl ask: "Is he dead?"

Another voice from above me—Brown Shoe's, I suppose—said: "I don't think so. Who is he? How did he get in here? Judy, what about it?"

She answered something, but I didn't get it. I was beginning to feel a little better. Things were starting to focus, and I knew I was in a spot. I thought about trying to get to my feet, and I moved my legs. Brown Shoe kicked me in the side, not easy. I was far enough back to normal to get mad at that. I moved my legs again. They seemed to work O.K. I began to gather the muscles in my arms, was on the point of pushing myself upward, when Brown Shoe kicked me again. It hurt. I lay still for a minute, and in that minute I worked up a healthy hate for Brown Shoe, whoever he was.

Then I heard a swish of skirts, and the girl's voice saying: "Don't." Then the black skirt and the little silver slippers were right beside my face. I felt cold water on my head and face. It felt swell. I smelled the faint perfume which meant Judy Allen to me. She bathed my head and face, very gently, and I felt better by the second. I rolled over on my side and looked up into her face.

"Thanks," I said, surprised at the sound of my voice. It sounded far away, and very faint. I tried it again. "Thanks," I said, louder.

She said nothing. Behind her stood a big, black-haired man. He needed a shave, but otherwise he looked very neat and well-dressed in a dark gray double-breasted suit.

Judy Allen continued to bathe my head. Her lips were pressed together in a tight straight line. Over her shoulder she said to Brown Shoe: "Call the police."

Brown Shoe didn't move. She turned back to me. "What are you doing here? What happened?"

I pushed myself to a sitting position, and for a couple of dizzy seconds I thought I would have to flop back again. But I made it. I saw my gun lying on the floor beside me. I reached for it, but Brown Shoe stepped up and kicked it out from under my fingers.

I looked at Judy Allen. "I'm sorry about your rug."

Without answering me, she looked up at Brown Shoe. "Call the police," she repeated. "No hurry," he said. "What about this guy?"

"I told you. I met him at the club tonight. He mentioned knowing my brother."

Brown Shoe said: "Yeah. You told me that. But who is he?"

Judy Allen didn't answer. She got up and crossed to the telephone. I heard her ask for the police department, and then I heard her giving her address. I answered Brown Shoe's question. "Jim Bennett," I said.

"Shut up," he barked.

I felt mean. I said: "Who the hell are you?"

He started toward me, but from across the room the girl said: "No."

He stopped and looked down at me. He was a big guy. There was an ugly expression on his face. He stared at me a minute. Then he turned to the girl, said: "I'll be back." He picked up his hat and went out.

Judy Allen leaned down and picked up my gun from the floor. She held it by the muzzle, as if it were a croquet mallet. "How do you feel?" she asked.

"Terrible," I said.

"Are you going to tell me what happened, and why you came here?"

"No," I said. "Not now." I tried to smile at her, but my head was really pounding.

There was the buzz of her doorbell, and a pounding on the door. She walked across the room, opened the door, and two cops walked in. She waved the butt of my gun at me. "This is the man," she said.

The cops moved over to me. One of them grabbed me by the arm and pulled me to my feet. I stood still and the room swam around in a big slow circles. I heard Judy Allen say: "I came home a little while ago, and there he was, on the floor. I don't know how he got in—from the fire escape, I guess. He's been shot."

One of the cops said: "Yeah, yeah. Is that his gun?"

She handed him my .38. The cop put the gun in his pocket, took out a pad and a pencil,

and began to write while she gave him the story. Pretty soon he put the pad back in his pocket, said to the cop holding me by the arm: "O.K. Let's go."

They pushed me toward the door. I still felt pretty foggy, but as we went out my eyes fell on the writing desk. Something about it didn't seem right. I tried to think what it was. As they shoved me out the door, I suddenly knew. The picture of brother Jake was gone. And then I had the answer to something which had been worrying me ever since my first look at Brown Shoe. Jake Allen was not dead. Brown Shoe was Jake Allen.

CHAPTER THREE

The Wire Snatching Sergeant

THE two cops took me to a hospital first. My head hurt bad, but luckily the slug had left just a short groove in my scalp above my left ear. A young interne cleaned it out, stuck some tape on it, and gave me some pills to take. Then they hauled me to the precinct hoosegow and booked me on charges of breaking and entering, carrying concealed weapons, and on general suspicion. I didn't want to tell them a thing about myself, unless they got really tough.

The boss operated a private detective agency doing special work for the government, and I was a sworn member of the U. S. Army. It never seemed very real to me, because I was doing the same kind of work I had been doing before Pearl Harbor, and I would forget for weeks on end that in Washington I was down in the books as a first lieutenant. Not that it did me any good—I couldn't even mail my letters free.

The cops worked on me a little, but I didn't tell them anything. I didn't like to phone the boss and tell him of the jam I was in. I knew he would give me hell for getting mixed up with the law—he was very touchy about that. Even in peacetime he never liked to let the cops in on a job until it was all sewed up. He always said that his methods were different, and that the police wouldn't understand them. I agreed with him on that.

They finally got tired of asking me questions and threw me into a cell by myself, I suppose because my clothes were clean and I had shaved within the last twenty-four hours. I flopped on the hard bunk and tried to figure things out. Now that I knew Jake Allen was alive the next thing I had to do was to catch him in action. I didn't get very far thinking about that, and after a while I fell asleep.

I dreamed that Captain Smythe had tied Judy Allen to a railroad track in front of an oncoming locomotive, and that I was running down the tracks after the locomotive

yelling to the engineer to stop. The engineer looked out of his cab at me running down the tracks behind him and thumbed his nose at me. The engineer was Jake Allen, and in my dream I shouted: "You dirty fiend! That's your poor sister up ahead!"

I woke up in a cold sweat. The turnkey was yelling at me through the bars. "Hey! Somebody to see you."

I sat up on the bunk and looked at my wrist-watch. It was one-thirty in the morning. My head felt twice as big as normal, and hurt more than ever. I yawned, ran my fingers through my hair, and looked up straight into the clear brown eyes of Judy Allen.

She was standing outside my cell door, and she still had on the same long black dress and beaver coat she had worn earlier in the evening. I said: "Hello."

She was pale, and her eyes looked tired, and a little red—as though she had been crying. She said: "Mr. Bennett, or whatever your name is, I've got to know. Why did you come to my apartment tonight?"

"Miss Allen," I said, "believe it or not, I was trying to find your brother. And I'm still sorry about your rug."

She bit her lip, and I thought she was going to start crying, but she didn't. She said: "Then you knew it, too?"

"Knew what?"

"That my brother was not dead?"

"No," I said. But I wanted to find out."

She grabbed hold of the bars, as if she wanted to shake them. "Tell me," she said. "What's going on? What has my brother been doing? Why do you want to find him?"

I WAS thinking as fast as my banged-up head would let me, but nothing seemed to click. I was sure of only one thing—Jake Allen was not dead. I could have been mistaken about the picture, but his sister had just admitted that he was alive.

"Listen," I said, "there's plenty going on. Where was your brother about seven-forty-five tonight?"

"Why?" she asked. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because somebody took a shot at me as I was going into your place."

I thought that her face went a shade paler, and she gripped the cell bars tighter. "He was with me."

"Not at seven-forty-five, he wasn't. And what happened to Captain Smythe?"

The turnkey came up and said: "Sorry, miss. You'll have to leave now."

She said: "Mr. Bennett, if I get you out of here—now—will you tell me all you know about my brother?"

"Sure," I said. "But it isn't much." Anything, I thought, to get out of calling the boss.

She turned to the waiting turnkey. "I want to see the sergeant."

She followed the turnkey down the corridor. I straightened my necktie and waited. Three drunks who had been herded into the cell opposite me were lying on the floor and snoring loudly. The rest of the small cell-block was quiet. In a little while she came back. "I'm sorry," she said. "They won't let you out. I withdrew the breaking and entering charges, but your gun—"

"O.K.," I said. "Thanks for trying. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I can't come here tomorrow."

"I know. How about your apartment about one?"

She looked at me thoughtfully. You seem very sure that you'll be out tomorrow."

"Sure," I said, and I grinned at her. "The mayor's my brother-in-law. I didn't want to get him out of bed tonight."

I thought I saw the ghost of a smile cross her lips, but I wasn't sure. "All right—about one."

"Will your brother be there?"

"No," she said. "You needn't be afraid. Good night, Mr. Bennett."

"Good night," I called after her.

A hoarse voice from down at the end of the row of cells cried: "Pipe down! Pipe down!"

I flopped back on the hard bunk, but I didn't sleep much. My mind was going around in circles. The first grayness of dawn was coming through the bars of the small window high over my head when I finally dozed off.

In the morning they let me out long enough to call the boss in New York. He gave me hell. But after he calmed down a little, he talked to the chief. There wasn't much trouble after that. They gave me back my gun, and I walked out into the early morning sunshine a free man.

I bought some tape, gauze and antiseptic at a drugstore, and went to my hotel. When I got my key at the desk, the clerk handed me a folded piece of hotel stationery. Across it was written in pencil: *Sorry I had to leave last night. Hope to see you again before my leave is up. Sgt. Malloy.*

I asked the clerk when the message was left.

"It was in your box this morning when I came on duty."

"What time was that?"

"Eight o'clock."

I put the note in my pocket, caught an up elevator. It was going on nine o'clock, and I was looking forward to a hot shower, a big breakfast, and maybe a couple of hours' sleep before my one o'clock date with Judy Allen.

I got out of the elevator at my floor, walked down the hall to my room, unlocked the door and went in. I was still thinking about the hot shower and the food. Suddenly I forgot

all about such trivial things as breakfast.

Captain Smythe stood facing me. The morning sunlight slanting through the windows behind him glittered on the silver bars on his shoulders. He was holding a big Army .45 in his hand. Its unwavering muzzle was pointed straight at the fourth button of my vest.

CAPTAIN SMYTHE said: "Pardon the gun, Bennett. Come on in and sit down." He motioned with the gun toward a chair. "Thanks," I said. "I'll stand. What's the play?"

"First," he said, "I want to know why you are looking for Jake Allen."

"Jake Allen?" I said. "Haven't you heard? He's dead. Killed in a plane crash at thirty-seven minutes past two."

"All right," he said, "I told you that. But we both know he's alive. What do you want with him?"

I was looking around the room. He had really gone through my stuff. Dresser drawers were standing open, my bag was open, with the contents scattered about. He had even thrown the blankets and sheets off my bed. I was glad that I never carried any identification papers—it was one of the boss' many rules.

"Find anything?" I asked. I didn't feel like answering his questions. Him and his "y" like in "eye!" I could feel the slight bulge of my .38 beneath my left arm. I began to wonder if he would shoot if I made a dive for him. I took an experimental step forward.

He stepped back and pulled the gun in close to his belly. He wasn't taking any chances. "Stand still, Bennett. For the third time—what do you want with Jake Allen?"

"Why?" I asked. I was feeling meaner by the second. I had taken enough of a beating within the last twelve hours. I began to measure the distance between us.

I could see his mouth set in a grim line, and his fingers tighten on the gun. "I'm not fooling, Bennett."

"Look, Captain," I said, "do you have to point a rod at me to ask a simple question? Put it away, and let's sit down and talk this over. I've got nothing against you—maybe we can get together."

For a minute he hesitated. I could almost see his mind working. An officer and a gentleman. The sporting thing to do, and all that. And yet I knew that he was deadly serious, that this business was very important to him. Well, it was important to me, too.

"Very well, Bennett," he said, and he tossed the gun onto the bed.

It was what I was waiting for. Maybe he felt a little foolish about pulling a gun on me in the first place, but I wasn't taking any

chances. Before the gun hit the bed I stepped in and slugged him. Two swift steps took me to him, and my right found his jaw. He went down, but he wasn't out. He landed on his hands and knees, and for a few seconds he stayed that way, sort of swaying, like an old blind dog which has lived beyond its time. I picked up his gun from the bed and stood watching him, waiting for him to get up.

He didn't get up all the way. All of a sudden he lunged for me, half-crouching. It was a foolish thing for him to do. I didn't even have to lift my foot very far. I just held it up, and he ran straight into it. The heel of my shoe caught him square on the chin. He grunted and went down again, rolled over on his back. I sat down on the bed and lit a cigarette.

He lay still for a minute, his eyes open and kind of glassy. Pretty soon he got to a sitting position. There was a small cut on his chin, and I don't imagine his jaw felt any too good. He focused his eyes on me, and I wagged the gun at him.

"You play rough," he said.

"Sorry," I said. "I hate to hit a soldier, but I don't like people pointing rods at me."

He rubbed his jaw, took out a handkerchief and dabbed at his chin. He didn't attempt to get to his feet. "Very foolish of me trusting you like that," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "Very." I still felt mean. I had pulled a kind of a dirty trick on him, but in my business you have to do things like that once in a while.

The captain didn't say anything more. He just sat there dabbing at his bleeding chin. I heard a slight sound behind me. I started to turn around, but I was too late. I got a glimpse of Jake Allen leaping out of the bathroom door, which was just beyond the foot of the bed. He had a big blue steel automatic in his hand, and when I saw it he had already swung it until it was within a foot of my head.

I tried to duck but it was no use. The flat side of the gun smashed against the side of my head, and I saw a million bursting lights. My poor head, I thought. And then the room went around in whirling darkness, and for the second time in twelve hours I took the count.

WHEN I opened my eyes again, the first thing I saw was the ceiling of my hotel room. I was lying on the bed. My coat was off, and my shirt collar had been loosened. There was a damp towel around my head, and I felt terrible. I turned my head on the pillow and looked straight at Sergeant Dan Malloy.

He was sitting on a chair beside the bed, smoking a cigarette. He was staring out of the window, and he looked very trim and very

neat in his uniform, with the service bar and wings pinned above his left breast pocket.

I said, "Hey, Sergeant," and he turned his head quickly and smiled. He put out his cigarette in an ashtray on a stand beside his chair.

"Hello," he said. "How do you feel?"

"Lousy. How did you get here?"

"The clerk down at the desk told me you were in, and so I came on up. Wanted to ask you to go to lunch with me. I knocked, and when you didn't answer I walked in and found you on the bed. What happened?"

I shut my eyes. My head seemed to feel better that way. "Just a little argument," I said, "with some friends."

"Some argument!" he said. "I see you carry a gun."

I opened my eyes and felt for my .38. It was still in its holster beneath my arm. "Yeah," I said. "G-Man. Want to see my badge?"

He laughed, said: "Want me to call a doctor to look at your head?"

"No, thanks. I'll be O.K. Was there anyone here when you came in?"

"No," he said.

I looked at my wristwatch. Five minutes of twelve. I had been out quite a while. I thought of my date with Judy Allen, and tried to get up. It didn't go so well. The room began to whirl around, and I flopped back on the pillow.

"Sergeant," I said, "I'm a tired old man. Will you do me a favor?"

"Sure," he said, getting to his feet.

"In my bag I think you'll find a bottle of bourbon and a box of aspirin tablets. Bring me the bottle and a couple of the tablets."

When he handed them to me I took a stiff drink of the whiskey, and two of the tablets. In a little while I felt slightly better, but not much. I took another stiff drink of the bourbon. I handed the bottle to the sergeant, got myself to a sitting position and put my feet on the floor. It was tough going, but I managed to remain that way. I took a deep breath, got to my feet, stood dizzily for a minute, and headed for the bathroom.

The cold water on my head felt swell. I yelled to the sergeant to help himself to the bourbon, and then I got my clothes off and stood under a cold shower. After that I felt fairly decent, but my head still hurt a lot.

While I was dressing, I took a couple slugs of the bourbon, and the sergeant ordered a pot of coffee and some ham and eggs. After the food and three cups of hot black coffee I began to feel almost human again.

The phone rang, and the sergeant answered it. He turned to me, said: "There's a telegram for you."

"Tell them to send it up."

In a couple of minutes the bellhop brought

it in. I tossed him a quarter and ripped open the yellow envelope. It was from the Los Angeles office, and signed by George Baker. It was in code, and after I had figured it out, it read like this:

IN FURTHER REFERENCE TO TELEPHONE CONVERSATION LAST NIGHT WISH TO ADVISE GREAT WESTERN AIRLINE CRASH RESULT OF JAMMED ALTIMETER. AIRLINE CLERK ROBERT E. WAGNER MECHANIC EARL W. SMITH UNDER ARREST. HAVE CONFESSED BEING IN PAY OF GERMAN GOVERNMENT. ALL PASSENGERS IDENTIFIED. NAME OF JAKE K. ALLEN FORGED ON PASSENGER LIST AND NOT ON PLANE.

I laid the telegram on the table beside the telephone and went on with my dressing. They had certainly gone to a lot of trouble to establish the death of Jake Allen. They had even convinced his sister that he was dead, and then had suddenly decided to let her know that he was living. I couldn't figure that out, unless they wanted to use her for something. And suddenly I didn't like the idea of Judy Allen as Nazi bait. My watch said twelve-thirty. Time for me to go.

I turned to the sergeant. He was standing by the window looking down into the street. "Sergeant," I said, "I'm sorry that I can't have lunch with you. I seem to have had mine. I'll buy you a drink later. How about the Americana about six?"

He turned from the window, picked up his cap. "Fine," he said. "See you then." He walked to the door.

I went into the bathroom to knot my tie in front of the mirror there and called out to him. "Thanks for nursing me. How about stretching that drink into dinner?"

"Swell," I heard him say. "See you at six." There was the sound of my door opening and clicking shut.

In a minute I went out into the room, picked up my hat and coat, and headed for the door. With my hand on the knob I stopped and stared at the telephone stand.

The telegram from Los Angeles was gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Joins the Payroll

I LOOKED under the telephone directory, and in the wastepaper basket. I felt in all my pockets, and even looked in the bathroom, but I couldn't find it. I locked the door and went down the hall to the elevator.

Down at the desk I sent a short telegram to the police department of the city of Cleveland,

Ohio. Then I went out to the street, snagged a taxi, and told the driver to take me to the apartment building in which Judy Allen lived. I didn't bother to ring her buzzer, but went straight up to her room and knocked. She opened the door almost immediately.

She looked swell. She was wearing pale blue pajamas under a dark blue robe. Her yellow hair was tied back of her ears with a blue ribbon. She looked about sixteen years old. When she saw me she smiled, and said: "Come in. You're right on time."

I stepped inside and she took my hat and coat, hung them in a closet, turned to me and said: "Sit down, Mr. Bennett."

I lowered my hundred and ninety pounds onto a beige-colored divan, and she sat down at the far end with one leg curled under her. In front of the divan was a low table upon which was a pair of bronze bookends holding several bright-jacketed volumes. There were also tinted glass ashtrays, a bottle of Scotch, three-quarters full, a small silver pail of ice, glasses, and a soda syphon.

She said: "Will you have a drink, Mr. Bennett?"

"Sure," I said. "But call me Jim. After all, you've known me for seventeen hours."

She laughed. "All right, Jim. Help yourself." She seemed friendly, and the strained look had gone from her eyes.

I poured Scotch into two glasses, added ice and soda, handed her one of the glasses. She said, "Thank you," and sat watching me.

I took a swallow of my drink. It was good whiskey, and I felt as though I needed it. My head was still thumping pretty badly, and I didn't feel any too good. I finished the drink in about three swallows, and made myself another. She was only sipping at hers. I set my second drink on the table, lit a cigarette, and said: "That's good whiskey, Miss Allen. You must have been hoarding it."

"No," she said. "A friend of mine left it here."

I nodded at the picture of the handsome boy on the desk. "Would his name be Jeff?"

She laughed. "You're very observing. Yes, his name is Jeff."

"What happened to the other picture?" I asked. "The one of your brother?"

The smile left her face, and in its place was the expression which I had noticed when she had visited me in the clink the night before. She took a cigarette from the box on the table, lit it, and looked at me with troubled eyes. She said: "When he saw you lying on the floor last night, he took it down and put it away."

"Why?" I wanted to know.

"I don't know," she said. "I wish I did."

"Are you worried about your brother?"

"Yes. Very much."

"Where is he now?"

"He's— I wonder why I tell you this?"

I grinned at her. "It's my open honest face and understanding nature. Go on."

"No," she said. "Really. Who are you? Why are you interested in my brother? And how did you get out of jail so easily?"

Ignoring her last question, I said: "Miss Allen, your brother is in trouble. I think you know that. It's my job to keep him from getting into more trouble."

"That's a nice way to put it," she said. "Are you going to arrest him? Are you a policeman?"

I said: "A policeman wouldn't spend a night in jail—*behind* the bars."

"I don't believe you," she said, "but I seem to trust you. Are you going to arrest my brother?"

I shrugged, drained my glass, began to mix another drink. I was pretty sure that she had a good idea of the set-up, but she was being careful. "What for?" I asked.

"For whatever you think he is up to."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe not." I was running out of answers.

Suddenly she got to her feet, walked to one of the windows, and stood looking down into the street. I sat still and watched her. She turned around and faced me. She started to talk, and she really let loose. It must have been eating at her for a long time.

"**A**LL right, Mr. Bennett," she said, "or whatever your name is. I'll tell you. I've got to tell someone, and it may as well be you. My brother is in trouble—bad trouble. I don't know what. A week ago I thought he was dead, killed in an airplane crash. I saw it in the papers, and the airline company notified me. I knew that he had been working in a war plant somewhere along the coast. The war plant blew up, or at least, a lot of it blew up, and the next thing I knew about Jake was that he was dead.

"He and I are all alone. The rest of our family is dead. Captain Smythe called me a week ago, wanted to know if I was related to Jake Allen. I told him I was his sister, and he said he wanted to talk to me about him. He met me at the club. He didn't tell me much, but he appeared to have been a friend of Jake's. I've seen a lot of the captain during this past week. He—he made love to me. He asked me more about Jake. I told him some, but not all. I didn't tell him that Jake had been in prison—for blackmail. Just before the war he became mixed up in a queer crowd. He drank a lot. I was worried about him, tried to help him. We quarreled. He went away. I didn't hear from him for over a year. My money ran out, so I went to work. Singing is the only thing I know. So I got a job singing. It's a

good job, and I like it. If it weren't for Jake, I guess I would be happy."

She paused, and turned back to the window. I had taken it all in. But she hadn't told me enough. Not near enough. I said: "How did you find out that he wasn't dead?"

She answered without turning around. "Last night Captain Smythe took me home from the club. You saw us leave. He took me straight home, and then he left. I don't know where he went. I had been here a few minutes when Jake telephoned me. He wanted to know if Captain Smythe were here. He must have followed us, or had us followed. I told him that the captain had left. Then he wanted to meet me at a little bar around the corner. I met him. He told me that it was all a mistake about his being a passenger on the plane which crashed. Said he needed some money to tide him over until he got another job. I wanted to talk to him, so I brought him back here. When we came in, you were lying on the floor."

"O.K.," I said. "How about the gun you were carrying in your purse when you left the club last night?"

"Captain Smythe gave it to me four days ago. He said, rather jokingly, that a girl living by herself should have one. I kept it in my dressing room at the club. After I got the phone call from Jake I was scared. I didn't know what was going on. I thought that Jake was dead, and I knew he had been mixed up with this crowd. So I took the gun."

"You just said that you got the call here," I reminded her.

"The second one," she said, quickly. "He called me at the club first, just before I saw you by the telephone booth. I was pretty upset. I couldn't believe it was Jake, but his voice sounded like Jake's. He didn't say much, except that the plane crash story was a mistake, and that he would meet me here. He called again after I got here to make sure I was alone."

"All right," I said. "One thing more. What do you know about Captain Smythe?"

"Not too much. He told me that he had been an actor before entering the Army. Said he was now on special duty putting on entertainments at various army camps. He says he's on a thirty-day furlough, and that his home is in Trenton, New Jersey."

"Married?" I asked.

She flushed. "I don't know. He said not."

I stood up. "Thanks very much, Miss Allen. You've been very helpful. I appreciate your telling me all this, and I hope you won't be sorry. Can I ask one more question?"

She said: "Yes. Why not?"

"What do you know about Sergeant Malloy?"

"Not much. He seems all right. I've seen

him around the club during the past week—always alone, until I met him with you last night.”

I felt as though I ought to tell her something, after all the dope she had given me. I said: “Look, Miss Allen, I’m not a crook, and I’d like to help you. I want you to know that all this is for a good reason. I’m afraid I’ll have to leave now.”

She got my hat and coat and handed them to me. I held out my hand. “Good-by, and thanks again.”

She took my hand, stood looking at me. I sure liked her looks. I don’t have much chance to be with girls—nice girls—and Judy Allen had everything I like in a girl. I don’t believe in mixing business with pleasure, and I don’t know what came over me—I’m not much on the love stuff. But I pulled her towards me and I leaned down and kissed her. Her lips were soft and cool. She didn’t stop me. I kissed her, and then let her go. I hadn’t meant to do anything like that, but I couldn’t help it.

She stood smiling at me, and I knew that my face was red. “Good-by,” she said. “And stop calling me Miss Allen.”

I went blindly out of the door and put on my hat and coat as I walked down the hall. Even when I got to the street, I could still feel my face burning.

When I got back to my hotel, there was an answer from my wire to Cleveland.

I TOOK the telegram up to my room. If anyone had passed me in the hall they probably would have thought I was nuts, or else playing cops and robbers. I unlocked my door but before I went in I unlimbered my .38 and kicked the door wide open before I entered. I didn’t think that I would walk into the business end of a .45 twice in the same day, but I wasn’t taking any chances. Nothing happened, so I went on in. I looked in the bathroom, in the closet, and even under the bed, like any hopeful old maid, but this time I seemed to have my room to myself.

I took off my hat and coat, poured a slug of bourbon into a water glass, sat down by the desk and opened the telegram. It was signed the Cleveland Chief of Police.

SERGEANT DANIEL MALLOY REPORTED AWOL SINCE TWENTY-SIXTH. FAMILY DEAD BUT RELATIVES LIVING HERE. CHARACTER MALLOY OK. NO POLICE RECORD PREVIOUS. ARMY RECORD EXCELLENT.

I put a match to the yellow paper and watched it burn in an ashtray on the desk. Then I wrote out another telegram to the police in Trenton, New Jersey, and called a

bellhop. When he came I told him to have it sent right away. I also asked him to bring me a bottle of soda water and some ice. Pretty soon he came back with the stuff, I tipped him, made myself a drink, and called the Chamber of Commerce.

They told me what I wanted to know. The nearest grinding wheel factory was The California Abrasive Products Company near a little town called Westville about forty miles northeast of San Francisco. They told me that this plant was operating under a high-priority rating and turning out valve grinding wheels by the thousands for a west-coast aircraft motor factory. I also found out that The California Abrasive Products was a branch of a big eastern outfit and had been built since Pearl Harbor in order to give quick service to the vast west-coast aircraft industry.

I called the desk to see if they could get me a car. What with gas rationing and all, they didn’t know. But I carried a special “C” book, and after I told them that I had the coupons they finally rented me a 1939 Ford sedan. I told them to have it out in front in half an hour.

I shaved, took another shower, put on a clean shirt and my other suit, and went down to the lobby. At the desk I left word for Sergeant Dan Malloy, if he called, that I had been called out of town on business. When I got out in front, the car was waiting for me. It seemed to be in pretty fair shape, except that the tires looked like recapped recaps. But I figured they would hold together for forty miles, and I started out. What with the traffic and the speed laws it took me an hour and a half to get to Westville.

The California Abrasive Products had quite a layout. I counted the stacks of fourteen round kilns, and figured they must have at least one tunnel kiln. Since starting on this job I had read a lot about artificial abrasive products, and I knew what to look for. This plant was small in comparison to the big outfits, but I also knew they were specializing, and a lot of big wheels can be burned in fourteen kilns with a tunnel kiln for the big stuff. The plant covered an acre or so, and the whole works was enclosed by a high steel fence.

I pulled up to the main entranceway, parked the Ford, and walked over to the gate. A uniformed guard stopped me and asked me my business. I told him my name, and said I wanted to see the personnel manager.

“What about?” he asked.

“A job.”

“All right,” he said. “Wait a minute.” He went inside the guardhouse and through the window I could see him telephoning. In a minute he came out and handed me a big badge with a number on it. He told me to pin it on. He gave me a printed piece of paper, said:

CHAPTER FIVE

Bombs Away

THE Club Americana was crowded, but the white-haired waiter spotted me and got me a table close to the orchestra. Sergeant Malloy was nowhere in sight, neither was Judy Allen. I ordered a drink and sat and watched the people and looked for the sergeant. I was on my second drink when I saw him come in. He stood in the doorway and looked around the room. I raised my hand. He saw me, smiled, twisted his way between the tables and sat down beside me.

"Sorry, I'm late," he said. "Met a couple of fellows from my squadron. They just got in, but I'm due back at the base tomorrow."

"Tough luck," I said. "Why didn't you bring them along?"

"Oh, they had a couple of girls lined up. Said they might see me later in the evening."

He ordered a bottle of beer, and looked over toward the orchestra. "Isn't Miss Allen singing tonight?" he asked.

"Don't know," I said. "She hasn't so far."

He began to tell me about his two buddies. One was a radio man, and the other a turret gunner. While he was talking, the waiter came up, leaned down and spoke into my ear. "A lady wants to see you," he said in a low voice. "Out by the front door."

"Thanks," I said, and got to my feet. "Excuse me, Sergeant. Be back in a few minutes."

He smiled, said: "Sure, go ahead." I didn't know whether or not he had heard what the waiter told me.

Judy Allen was waiting for me beside the big glass doors. She was hatless, and was wearing a gray tailored suit beneath a gray tweed topcoat. There was a strained look about her eyes. It was a look which I had come to know within the last two days. I went up to her, and we didn't waste any time on preliminaries.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she said, "but I guess you're in on this, too."

"Sure," I said. "Forget it. What's up?"

"It's the captain. He's at my apartment. He's been there all afternoon. He's—he's drunk, and acting strangely, kind of wild."

"What else?" I snapped.

"No, he hasn't bothered me. Just talks. And he won't leave."

"What does he talk about?"

"A lot of it doesn't make sense. He keeps mentioning a person named Charlie, and sometimes he'll say 'Mac,' and a lot of it is just mumbling."

"What else?"

"Nothing, except that he mentioned your

name twice. He—he called you a dirty swine."

"I see," I said. "Do you want me to go back there with you?"

"Will you?"

"Sure. Just wait a minute."

I went back in to the table and told the sergeant that I had to leave. He got up, said: "I'm awfully sorry. We seem to have a hard time getting together." He held out his hand. "Well, so long. I probably won't be seeing you after tonight."

We shook hands, and I said: "The dinner is still on me. Good hunting."

I had a notion to ask him about the AWOL business, but I decided not to. On the way out I shoved a bill into the waiter's hand and told him to serve dinner to the sergeant. The checkroom girl gave me another nice smile, as she did to all the customers, but I didn't have time to make any stock cracks.

Judy Allen was still standing by the door. I took her arm, and we hit the street. The doorman snagged us a taxi, and in a few minutes we pulled up in front of her apartment building. As we went up the steps I noticed that they had put a new glass in the door which had caught the slug intended for me.

We took the elevator, and walked down the corridor to her room. When we got there we saw that the door was standing slightly ajar. She gave me a quick, puzzled look and went on in. I followed her, but first I loosened the .38 in its holster under my arm. I didn't know how tough the captain was going to get when he saw a dirty swine like me.

But I could have saved myself the worry. The captain wasn't there. The room was gray with stale smoke, and there was an empty Scotch bottle on the floor beside the sofa. Beside the bottle was a glass ashtray overflowing with cigarette stubs. Judy Allen threw her coat over a chair and walked across the room to the kitchen. I stood by the door and watched her.

She looked nice. It was the first time I had ever had a good look at her legs. They were straight and strong. I liked everything about her—the way her long, yellow hair curled over her shoulders, the tilt of her short nose, the curve of her lips. As I watched her I thought about all the years I had worked for the boss, and of all the things I'd missed. It had been just one job after another, with no time for anything but the hunt, the chase, the capture—always following the endless, sordid trail of people on the wrong side of the law.

I sighed, feeling sorry for myself, and my glance fell to the low table beside the sofa. There was a sheet of blue-tinted notepaper lying there, and on it was a message scrawled in pencil. I picked up the paper. Judy Allen's name and address were engraved across the top. The penciled words were large and shaky,

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and they ran all over the paper, but I made out the message: *Judy—very, very sorry . . . will be back later—explain—forgive me. Tony.*

JUDY ALLEN had turned from the kitchen door, and was peering into the bathroom. "Hey," I said. "You can stop looking."

She came slowly across the room and stood in front of me. I handed her the note, and she read it, a slight frown puckering her brow. Looking at her, at her bright hair and dark lashes, I forgot all about the captain, and I was thinking that maybe in a little while, when this thing was over, she wouldn't be able to stand the sight of me. But still there was something I wanted to find out. I put my hands on her shoulders. The top of her head came just below my chin. She looked up at me.

"He won't be back," I said, "but if he does, and you want me, let me know. Keep your door locked."

She smiled. "All right. Thanks for coming up with me."

"That's O.K.," I said. "Aren't you working tonight?"

"No," she said. "I'm taking the night off."

And then I asked her what I wanted to know. "Look," I said, nodding at the good-looking boy's picture on her desk, "what about that guy? Is it serious?"

"Jeff? He's in the Army now. No, it's not serious."

"Good," I said. I took a deep breath, and then I leaned down and kissed her. She didn't back away, but she didn't give me any encouragement, either. It was just a kiss—a nice, friendly kiss. "Want me to stay?" I asked.

She said, "No," gently, and stepped back. "Thanks again for coming up. Good night."

"Good night," I said, feeling like a clumsy fool. I backed up, stumbled against the door, and then I found myself in the corridor. She smiled, closed the door softly, and I heard the lock click. I went down to the elevator.

The cool night air felt swell on my burning face. I decided to walk back to the Club Americana. When I got there I saw no sign of the sergeant, so I had my dinner alone and listened to the music. After a while I paid my bill, and walked the eight or ten blocks to my hotel. In the lobby I bought a late paper and sat down in a chair behind a marble pillar. An item in the middle of page one caught my eye. It was a two column headline: **NAZI AGENTS HELD IN PLANE CRASH. AIRLINE CLERK AND MECHANIC CONFESS.**

The piece ran for two half-columns and enlarged on the information contained in the telegram which George Baker had sent me from Los Angeles the night before. It said

that Robert E. Wagner, Great Western Airlines clerk, had admitted falsifying the passenger list record by adding the name of Jacob K. Allen in order to stop the efforts of government agents to find Allen, who was suspected of taking part in recent sabotage operations. The account said that Allen was still at large. The mechanic, Earl W. Smith, had admitted tampering with the doomed plane's altimeter which caused the pilot, Charles R. McKenner, to misjudge his height on the mountainous Albuquerque run and crash into a hilltop eight miles north of that city killing himself, the co-pilot, and twelve passengers.

Another item in the paper attracted my attention, but it didn't mean anything to me at the time. It was a small piece on page three.

BODY STILL UNIDENTIFIED

The body of a man, about 30, which was found by police in an alley in the dock district three days ago, is still lying unidentified in the county morgue. When found, the body was completely naked. Death was due to a blow on the head.

I stuck the paper in my pocket, went up to my room, got into pajamas, and wrote a letter to the boss in New York. I told him all that happened up until now, and what I intended doing. When I was on a job I always did this, because I never knew what would turn up, or how things were going to turn out for me, and I wanted the boss to know in case anything went wrong. I gave him all the dope—what had happened, what I thought. When I had finished, I stuck an air mail stamp on it, went out in the corridor, dropped the letter down the mail chute, and went to bed.

I SLEPT late the next morning, had a combination breakfast and lunch, read all the papers, slept some more. I got dressed about four in the afternoon, called the desk and told them to bring the Ford around, went down to the street, climbed behind the wheel and started for Westville. I thought some about calling Judy Allen, but decided not to.

I pulled up at the main gate of The California Abrasive Products Company around a quarter of six. There was a different guard on duty, and I had to go through the whole routine again. But Borand was waiting for me. The office didn't work at night, just the plant, and he took me back through the dark corridor to his office.

Borand said: "I don't mind telling you that I checked with the San Francisco police, and I want to help you in any way I can."

I said, "Thanks," and he put out a bottle of whiskey and some glasses. We had a couple of drinks. He called the main gate and told the guard on duty to call him the minute that Louis Bortell reported for work, and then we talked about different things, this and that.

He seemed O.K., just one of the many un-sung men charged with the responsibility of keeping the war plants running—men who work long hours getting the stuff needed to produce the tools of war moving out to the industrial fronts. He said he had intended to work tonight anyhow, and had had a bottle of milk and a sandwich sent in for his dinner.

After a while his telephone rang. It was the guard at the main gate, and I could hear his voice. "Mr. Borand? Louis Bortell just checked in."

Borand said, "Thanks," hung up, and looked at me. "O.K. He's here. I'll take you down and show you the hiding place we've fixed up for you. Do you think he'll try anything tonight?"

I said, "I've got a hunch that tonight's the night. It's getting a little hot for him. The papers broke the story today. He'll probably try to do the job tonight, and get the hell out."

Borand nodded. "I'll take you down."

I followed him out of the office and down a long flight of steps to the plant floor. He opened a big sliding door and we were in a maze of roaring confusion.

"Finishing room," Borand shouted at me.

I saw an acre of machines, with a man or a woman at each machine. They were cutting the rough grinding wheels down to exact size. Borand led me through an aisle between the finishing lathes, and we entered a quieter section of the factory. Here men and women were inspecting the finished wheels for flaws. We walked past the huge testing drums where the wheels are put on spindles and revolved at twice the commercial operating speed to see that they won't break in operation. "When they break," Borand said, "it's like bullets flying. Those metal drums protect the operators doing the speed testing. If they don't break at that speed, they're O.K. to ship."

I nodded, and kept following him. We came out into a vast room filled with big kilns. Some of them showed red fire between the cracks of the fire doors. It was very hot.

"Round kilns," Borand said. "Tunnel kilns over there."

We walked along a cement ramp between the kilns until we came to an open space. Here two white-tiled structures ran back into the darkness, with massive air pipes leading into them at intervals. There were steel tracks along the sides of the kilns and on the tracks were small cars loaded with grinding wheels waiting their turn to be burned.

Borand said: "Those cars carry the green wheels through the kilns at the rate of three feet a minute. When they come out at the other end they are ready to be sent to the finishing room. All of the wheels on the cars on this whole track are to be used in the finishing of aircraft motors."

I looked at my watch. It was a quarter of seven. At the mouth of the kiln two men were busy transferring green soft wheels from tiered wooden racks to the tunnel kiln cars. They removed the small valve grinding wheels from the racks and placed them very carefully in sand-filled containers on the kiln cars.

"How hot does it get inside those kilns?" I asked Borand.

"About twenty-four hundred degrees, Fahrenheit," he said. "Here's where you hide."

He led me to a big round kiln. It was empty, and no fires were burning beneath it. He walked up three stone steps and stooped to enter a small opening. I followed him. The inside of the kiln was circular, and the floor was paved with bricks. Borand pointed out a small hole bored into the brick wall. I looked through the hole and I had a perfect view of the mouth of the tunnel kiln.

Borand said: "That's where Bortell will be working. This kiln won't be fired for a couple of days. Nobody will bother you."

"O.K.," I said. "How long are you going to be around?"

"All night," he said. "If anybody is going to try to blow up a tunnel kiln, I want to be around."

"Fine," I said, "but nobody's going to blow it up while I'm here. All I want to do is to catch him in the act of *trying* to blow it up."

Borand said: "If you want me, there's a phone at the end of this ramp."

"O.K.," I said, "and thanks."

"Look," he said, "shall I send in a couple of guards? Maybe you'll need some help."

"No, thanks," I said. "If I need any help, I'll call you."

"All right," he said. "See you later."

He went away and I settled down to waiting and watching. At seven o'clock a whistle blew, and I saw a man, evidently a foreman, come up with two men and talk to one of the men already working. Apparently the foreman was introducing the two new men to the old worker. In a little while the foreman went away, and I saw the old worker point to the tunnel kiln cars. One of the new men nodded understandingly. I was about fifty feet away, but I recognized this man instantly.

It was Jake Allen.

FROM my peep hole inside the kiln I watched the three men working. Beside Jake Allen there was an old man with white hair and a white mustache. He didn't seem to know much about the job, and the man who had stayed to instruct the two men was talking to him and demonstrating the proper method of placing the wheels in the sand-filled containers on the tunnel kiln cars. Jake Allen went right ahead with the work as if he knew all about it, as he probably did. After a while

the instructor went away and left Allen and the old man by themselves.

The two men loaded six cars and pushed them into the kiln, and started to load the seventh. They worked a little while together, with Allen talking and pointing for the white-haired man's benefit, apparently showing him the fine points of placing grinding wheels on tunnel kiln cars.

I watched and waited. It was dark in the kiln, and hot. By the light coming through the hole in the kiln's wall I looked at my watch. Ten minutes past eight. I looked out of the hole again, and I saw what I had been waiting for.

Allen was pointing across the big kiln building to the far side, apparently telling the old man to go over and perform some duty or other, maybe to get something. Anyway, it appeared to me as though Allen were getting his aged helper out of the way, at least for the time being. I loosened my .38 in its holster and glued my eye to the hole.

The old man began walking away. He was stooped, and he walked with a slow, shuffling gate. When he was about twenty feet away, Allen walked swiftly to his coat, which was lying in a bundle beside some wooden wheel racks. From the coat he took a small square box, hurried back to the car which they had just loaded and which was standing on the track at the mouth of the tunnel kiln. I could hear the roaring of the gas jets inside the kiln, and I saw the white heat showing through the air vents. As I watched, Allen placed the small box beneath the steel bottom of the car. He took some wire from his pocket and began to wire the box in place. That was what I was waiting for. I was on the point of leaving my hiding place, when something happened which caused me to watch a little longer.

The old man who had been walking away from Allen suddenly wheeled around and came running back. I remember being surprised that an old guy could move so quickly. In a

second he was upon Allen, and I saw his fist come around and strike Allen in the face. Allen stumbled back against the kiln car and began jerking at something beneath the front of his overalls. The old man bored in, struck Allen again. I waited no longer.

I ran out of the kiln doorway, down the few steps to the cement ramp, and headed for the two men. Even as I ran, I saw the gleam of metal in Allen's hand. There was a sharp hollow report which reverberated against the walls of the vast kiln room, and I saw the orange stab of flame. But the old man bored right on in. I saw him chop at Allen with both fists, and Allen went down.

I shouted, "Hey!" and for the first time the old man saw me running toward him. He turned, and very deliberately drew a gun from his overalls pocket, leveled it, and fired. A faint sigh breathed past my ear.

I had my .38 in my hand then, and I kept on coming. Out of the corners of my eyes I could see men running from all corners of the plant. The old man fired again, and I dropped to my hands and knees. Up on the cement ramp I made a perfect target. Then I heard a voice, a strangely familiar voice, "Bennett," the old man called. "Stay where you are, or I'll kill you."

I rolled off the ramp and landed on my feet running. A five-foot cement wall now protected me, and I ran, stooping, until I reached the platform beneath the tunnel kiln tracks. I climbed up, my gun in my hand.

At that moment I saw Allen get to his hands and knees, saw him raise his hand, and heard the hammering roar of his gun. The old man swayed on his feet, but he didn't go down. His gun spat flame, and Allen slid slowly forward on his face. In almost the same instant the old man turned his gun on me, and chips of cement struck me in the face. I steadied my .38, squeezed the trigger, and the white-haired man collapsed.

A crowd of workers rushed up as I climbed up on the cement runway. They gathered

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits

poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

around, and as I pushed through them I caught sight of Borand. He made a path for me. While they lifted Jake Allen from the floor, I looked closely at the old man lying by the kiln car. His overalls were bloody, high up on his chest, where my slug had caught him, and there was another wound on his hip. The man looked faintly familiar to me, but I didn't have time to think about it. I leaned down and felt beneath the kiln car. I found the box, and men helped me unwire it.

"Time bomb," I said to Borand. "Get some water."

A man came running with a bucket of water, and I placed the box very gently in it. Borand gave some orders, and the workers cleared out and went back to their machines. A uniformed guard came up.

I motioned to the forms of Allen and the old man. "They look harmless now, but you'd better watch them."

He nodded, and pulled out a businesslike looking rod. To Borand I said: "Better get the plant doctor, if you have one."

"He's on the way. Anything else?"

"Yeah. Call the police. I'll be back." I started away.

"Need any help?" asked Borand.

"Don't know yet. Maybe. I'll holler."

I went through the plant and out to a side gate. I showed my pass to the guard on duty. "What's going on in there?" he asked.

"Not much," I said. "Listen, if you hear any shooting out on the road, come a-running."

Out on the highway I began to move slowly around the plant. It was very dark. I walked on the grass along the edge of the road trying to see ahead of me into the darkness. I had covered two sides of the plant and I could see the lights of the main gate guardhouse up ahead of me. And then I smelled the odor of burnt gasoline, and I stopped for a moment and listened.

From up ahead came the faint sound of a motor running. I walked forward very slowly, my .38 in my hand. Presently I saw the outline of a car at the edge of the road ahead. It was parked well off the road, almost in the shallow ditch, with no lights on, and the sound of the running motor came louder to me. I walked up slowly behind it.

I couldn't tell if anyone was sitting in the car. There was enough light from the main gate of the plant to tell me that no one was behind the wheel. The car was a sedan, and I looked in the rear window. The rumble of the many machines in the plant came very faintly out to me. The sound blended with the soft purr of the car's motor. There was no other sound.

I felt a sudden, hard pressure in the middle of my back. A voice said: "Stand still."

CHAPTER SIX

GI Doublecross

I DIDN'T stand still. I was in this business deep, and I couldn't take any chances. Whoever was waiting out here to take Jake Allen away as soon as he had planted his time bomb in the tunnel kiln was in it deep, too. Too deep to monkey much with a snooping dick like me. I figured I was lucky not to have been shot in the back while I stood looking into the car, and I figured, also, that that was the end of my luck.

A split second after the gun had prodded my backbone I dropped to my knees, turning as I dropped. And as I turned I charged forward, as I used to do when I played left tackle back east ten years before. The guy behind me with the gun went over backwards, and his gun cracked loudly in the silent night. A bright flash burned past my eyes, and then I was on him. I brought my .38 around in a wide arc and slammed it against his head. But he was twisting and squirming under me, and I felt my gun glance off. With my left hand I was trying to grab his gun arm and pin it down, but I couldn't locate it, and both of us squirmed and grunted and fought savagely and silently.

I was still trying to grab his gun arm when there was a muffled explosion. The whole left side of my body suddenly seemed to be on fire. He must have had the muzzle of his rod right in my vest pocket. I could smell the sudden odor of burnt cloth. I found his wrist then, and I pushed backwards and upwards. I kept pushing his arm back and across until I heard a distinct snapping sound. He cried out, and I let loose of the arm then, and slammed my .38 down against the outline of his head. I hit him square this time, and smacked him again for good measure. He lay very still beneath me.

Suddenly I didn't feel so good. I could feel the inside of my vest getting wet, and there was a dull pain all along my side. I fumbled for the wound. It was at the outer edge of my belt line, above my hip. I brought my fingers away, and they were wet. I fished out a handkerchief, held it against my side, and got slowly to my feet.

I could hear men running down the road, and I saw the flare of an electric torch. Two of the plant guards came running up and flashed the light on us. I said, "Here's another one, boys," and felt myself swaying on my feet.

They turned the guy over, and for the first time I saw that he was dressed in the uniform of the United States Army. The light hit his bloody face. It was Sergeant Dan Malloy.

I heard the wail of a siren and saw a police

car wheel into the drive and stop at the main guardhouse. I walked down the road to the gate. The road seemed to be heaving up and down under my feet, but I made it to the entranceway. The guard was opening the gate for the cops.

"Hey!" I yelled.

One of the cops got out of the car and walked toward me. I heaved my arm. "Over in the ditch. Guy in an Army uniform."

"Who are you?" asked the cop.

"Never mind," I said, wearily. "Get that guy. I'll go into the plant with your buddy."

He was a young cop. He looked doubtful. "All right," I said. "You can check with Borand. But I think that guy in the ditch will need a little medical attention."

"How about you?" he asked.

"Me, too," I said, and climbed into the car beside the other cop. "Straight ahead," I said to him.

He didn't ask any questions. We pulled up by the kiln entrance. "Tell Borand I want to see him," I told the cop. The car seat felt nice and soft, and I was afraid that if I got out of the car I would never make it back in again. The cop went in the plant, and I just sat and waited. I could feel the blood soaking through my handkerchief and running over my fingers.

Borand came out in a minute. He looked in the window at me. "Hey," he said, "you're hurt."

"Yeah," I said. "That doctor still in there?"

"He's got both of those fellows over in the first aid room. I think one of them is dead."

"Which one?" I asked. My voice sounded as though it were coming from far out in the darkness of the night.

"The young one," I heard Borand say. "The one called Bortell."

Borand went away then, and in a minute he came back. "Doc will be right out."

"Thanks," I said. "How's the other one doing?"

"Doc says he thinks he'll be all right."

"Good," I said. "That's good."

I heard Borand say, "What?" and it seemed to me that I was floating away, high in the dark sky, and Judy Allen was somewhere ahead of me, floating, too. I heard her laugh. I started to laugh, too, and then I stopped laughing because a red curtain of pain dropped before my eyes, and Judy Allen was gone, and the night was gone, and then there was nothing.

I OPENED my eyes to blinding white light. I blinked, and I heard a voice say: "He's conscious now, Doctor."

I turned my head. I was lying on a narrow bed in a small room and everything around me was white—walls, ceiling, the dazzling

light hanging directly over me. A girl in a white dress and cap was standing beside my bed. She was short and wide and not pretty, but she had a nice smile. At the foot of the bed stood Borand and beside him was a young man I hadn't seen before. The young man had on a white jacket, and he was smoking a cigarette. He wore thick-lensed glasses, and was almost bald.

Borand said: "Well, Bennett."

I started to raise myself up, but the young man with the glasses stepped quickly forward and gently held me down. "You can't do that," he said. "Not for a while. You've lost a lot of blood."

I could hear a faint humming noise from beyond the room. Sometimes it was low and deep, and then it would rise to a shrill metallic scream. "Where am I?" I said, just like in the movies, but I really wanted to know.

"At the plant," said Borand, "First aid room."

"That noise," I said. "Finishing room?"

Borand grinned, said: "Yep. You're learning fast."

Things were beginning to come back to me, and suddenly I wanted to know a lot of things. "Hey—" I began.

Borand said: "Not now. You're going to the hospital."

The nurse leaned down with a glass of water, and a big white pill. "Here," she said, "take this."

I took it obediently, and closed my eyes. I didn't go to sleep, and I didn't pass out, but I just didn't feel like bothering much about anything. I know they carried me out, and I had the sensation of movement, and after a while there was another white room and another white-clad nurse.

I was in a long room, and there was a lot of talking going on. I looked up at the ceiling, and felt as though I just wanted to lie there in that nice soft bed for the rest of my life. Borand came up beside me and stood looking down. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"O.K. Kinda tired." I turned my head and looked around the room. There were six beds besides my own, and two of them were occupied. A nurse and the bald-headed doctor were fussing around the bed next to mine. Borand saw me looking. He said: "Your pals."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. Jabloski, and the guy you ran into out by the fence."

"Oh," I said. I was beginning to feel better, but I still didn't feel like doing a lot of talking. The doctor came up and leaned over me.

"How you doing?" he asked.

"All right. My side hurts some."

"It's nasty," he said. "Better have an-

other tetanus shot." His voice faded away. The nurse stepped up, and the doctor worked quickly and expertly. I closed my eyes.

When I opened them the doctor and the nurse were gone, but Borand was still standing there. Beside him stood a big, red-faced man, chewing on a cigar. Borand said: "Chief Dawson, Westville Police."

I said: "Hi, Chief."

The red-faced man nodded sourly, chewed on his cigar, said: "Heard of you, Bennett. Met your boss once."

I heard a peculiar sound beside me. It was a rasping, strangling sound, and I turned my head. My eyes were focusing a little better, and I saw that Sergeant Malloy was lying in the bed next to mine. His head was bandaged, and there was a sheet pulled up to his chin. He was staring straight at the white-painted ceiling with bright, feverish eyes. His mouth was open, and the sound of his heavy breathing filled the room. I couldn't see much of the person in the next bed.

Borand moved around to my side, leaned down, and said in a low voice: "Next to him is Jabloski, the old guy. Only he isn't old at all. A young fellow, with a false mustache, powdered hair and stage makeup—did you know that?"

"No," I said, "but I wondered. How about Allen, the guy you called Bortell?"

"Dead," said Borand. "Jabloski's bullet got him smack in the heart. It's a queer setup. I hired Bortell for kiln work, and right after that Jabloski came in and asked for kiln work, so I hired him, too. After the shooting last night we carried both of them to the first aid room, but Bortell—or Allen, as you call him—was already dead. Jabloski was hit twice—in the hip by Allen, and the chest by you, but not bad. Doc thinks he'll be all right. This fellow next to you, the one you had the fight with outside, is not doing so good. He made a break, and the cops shot him. You feel like hearing more?"

I nodded my head.

"Well, this Bortell, or Allen, was pretty smart. He knew that the heat of the kiln would explode his time bomb before it reached the center of the kiln, and so he wired it *beneath* the steel bottom of the car, so that the heat wouldn't affect it. This is the damndest thing that ever happened in a plant where I worked, but I suppose it could happen any place."

"Yeah," I said. "It could. And does. Where are we, in the hospital?"

"Yes," said Borand. "In Westville. Accident ward."

"What about him—Malloy?" I motioned with my head toward the bed next to me.

"We don't know yet. He apparently was waiting outside to help Bortell, or Allen, make a getaway."

The doctor stepped up. He spoke in a low voice to Borand and the Chief. "You'll have to hurry. He can talk now, but I won't guarantee for how long."

The Chief nodded, clamped his teeth down on his cigar, and moved over beside Malloy's bed. Borand followed him. The doctor stood by. The room was suddenly very quiet. The only sound was Malloy's heavy, irregular breathing. He'd take a couple of deep, gasping breaths, then a short one, and for a couple of seconds you'd think he had stopped. Then there would be a deep, strangling inhalation, and it would start all over again. It wasn't nice to listen to.

A YOUNG cop wearing glasses stepped up to the other side of Malloy's bed. He had a notebook and a pencil in his hand. He held the pencil poised, and there was a bright, expectant look on his chubby face. The Chief bent over Malloy and said: "Can you hear me?"

I saw Malloy nod slightly, his feverish stare on the ceiling.

"What is your name?"

"Ludwig Gebhart." The words were surprisingly clear in the stillness of the room. The young cop wrote in his book.

"All right." The Chief's voice was not unkind. "Ludwig, you know that you haven't long to live?"

Malloy, alias Gebhart, nodded again, still staring at the ceiling. He gulped convulsively, and the words came out strong and clear. "Heil, Hitler!"

There was silence in the room. The doctor, the young cop, a nurse in the background, the Chief, Borand and myself were all watching the man on the bed. I heard the Chief mumble to Borand: "I'll be damned! A regular Natsy."

Suddenly Gebhart began to talk. The words came in a rush, broken by his labored breathing. Some of it I couldn't get, but I got enough. The young cop scribbled furiously, and the rest listened intently. He began: "I die for the glory of the Third Reich. But I do not die in vain. Others will carry on my work . . ."

I heard it all, and I read the typed transcript afterwards. Sometimes he stopped completely while he labored for breath, sometimes his voice was so low that it was only a whisper in the silent room. But he kept on, spasmodically, painfully, gasping for breath, until the story was told, with his bright eyes always on the ceiling. Occasionally, a grim smile would twist his lips, and once he laughed, a short, bitter laugh, but he told it all. This was his story:

He was German-born, but naturalized, had gone to American schools. He had been working with a crowd of Nazi agents with head-

quarters in San Francisco. His group had contacted Jake Allen, put him on their payroll. Allen pulled a couple of jobs for them, and then things got hot. They knew that we had our eyes on Allen—that's when I went on the job. Allen was a good man, clever with kilns especially, and so they attempted to establish his death in order to put us off his trail. The two Nazis working for the aircraft company took care of that. It didn't matter to them that they killed fourteen people doing it. They knew that Allen had a sister, but they didn't trust her. That's where Gebhart came in.

They killed the real Sergeant Malloy in an alley off the docks, stripped him, took his papers and uniform, and Gebhart turned into Malloy. It was his job to keep an eye on Judy Allen, and at the same time be around to help Jake Allen pull the California Abrasives job. The uniform was good cover. He drove the getaway car, and he and Allen had planned to pull out as soon as the bomb was planted. I put the jinx on that.

Near the end Gebhart said: "We knew about Bennett, and whom he worked for. I am sorry that I missed him when I shot at him outside my comrade's sister's apartment—and in her apartment, too. That was my first mistake. I should have killed him then, but I failed. I should have killed him in his hotel room, when I had the chance. But it was not a good place to do it, and the time for our work was too near. I couldn't take the chance then." His voice had dropped to a hoarse whisper, and the words came slower and slower, then died out. There was a moment's silence in the room. Then Gebhart coughed, and the doctor stepped forward. We heard

Gebhart say: "I have failed, but I die happy. I die for Der Fuehrer."

The doctor felt Gebhart's pulse and then turned and looked at us. He nodded slowly, his lips tight. Gebhart's eyes were still open, but we could no longer hear his breathing. There was a smile on his young face. The doctor drew up the sheet and nodded to the nurse. She came over and wheeled the bed out of the room. The young chubby-faced cop stuck his notebook in his hip pocket and helped her.

The Chief chewed on his cigar. "Damnedest story I ever heard. They take a lot of killing. Bennett, you're lucky." He jerked a thumb at the occupant of the other bed. "What about that guy? Jabloski, is it? The false face artist. Where does he fit in?"

I looked across at Jabloski's bed. He turned his face toward me for the first time. Only it wasn't Jabloski any longer. The white mustache was gone, and his hair was black. It was Captain Anthony Smythe, and he looked very pale against his pillow.

He grinned at me. "How's the G-Man?"

I said: "Captain, you did a good job on Allen, but you're a rotten shot. That second slug of yours missed me a foot."

"Sorry I can't say the same about you," he said. "I guess I had you figured all wrong."

"How?"

"When I first met you at the club the other night I thought you were in with Allen."

"You were pretty friendly with Allen, too."

"Yes, but I had a reason. I knew he was mixed up in the plane crash, and I was watching him. I made friends with him so that I could watch him better. I made a play for his

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DETECTIVE TALES



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sister, too, and Allen and I got real friendly. I didn't know what your business was, and I didn't trust you. You see, I was working alone. I knew that Allen didn't completely trust you, either. I thought that was the reason he helped me in your hotel room. Before that I thought you were working with Allen. After he smacked you, I didn't know what to think."

"Neither did I," I said. "How did you know that Allen wasn't in the plane crash?"

"A close friend of mine who works for Great Western tipped me off before the papers got it. He also told me that Allen had a sister, and so I thought that by hanging around her I could get a line on her brother. I was right. Allen showed up. The people who were paying him shut off his money until he finished this last job. He was broke, and so he contacted his sister."

"Did you give her a gun?" I asked.

"Yes. When I heard that Allen was alive I didn't know what she might get into. She was a nice girl, and I liked her. I gave her the gun because if she got into trouble it would be partly my fault. She knew nothing of the racket her brother was in. I knew that Allen was going to get a job at California Abrasives, and so I followed him out here and got a job, too. I wanted to know for sure that he was mixed up in this thing, I wanted to get him in the act. He was the reason for the plane crash, and the only one of the bunch I could get at. I used to be on the stage, so I put on some makeup when I applied for the job. When I saw him planting that bomb I lit into him."

HE STOPPED talking. He look tired. The Chief said: "This is all very chummy, but I gotta get back to the station. Bennett, is he in the clear?"

"What do you think?" I asked. "He got Allen, didn't he?"

"O.K.," said the Chief. "I'll see you tomorrow." He and the young cop went out.

Borand left, too, saying that he would see me later. Only the doctor and the nurse remained. The doctor said: "You fellows better get some sleep. We'll take you upstairs—there's a room ready for you."

"All right," I said. "In a couple of minutes." I turned toward the captain. His eyes were closed. "Look, Captain. Maybe I'm talking out of turn, but why did you—What about yesterday afternoon?"

He opened his eyes. "I'm sorry about that. I was so mixed up, and I wanted to wind this thing up so badly, that I guess I sort of snapped. I got drunk—good and drunk, and I went to Judy Allen's apartment. It was a hell of a thing to do, but I guess I thought maybe she could help me. I don't remember much after that. I hope I wasn't too bad."

"No," I said. "You weren't too bad. How do you feel now?"

"Pretty good. My leg hurts the worst—high up, close to my hip. That's where Allen got me."

"One thing more," I said. "Why did you want to mess in this in the first place?"

He turned and looked at me. "I had a good reason. My best friend was pilot of that plane. Grew up with him, went to school with him. He married my sister. They have a two-year-old son—I mean, she has, now. His name is Tony."

I thought of what Judy Allen had told me about the names he had repeated at her apartment. "Would his name be Charlie, or Mac?"

"Yes. Charles McKenner. Did you see it in the papers?"

"Yes," I said.

He closed his eyes, and I said to the doctor: "How about that room?"

The next morning they brought me the papers. The story was all over the front pages. They had pictures of everybody, including Judy Allen. The story was all messed up, but it didn't make any difference to me. It was over, and I was glad of it. I had a nurse send a telegram to the boss, and I wondered what he would cook up for me next.

Along about noon the nurse said I had a visitor. Sure enough, it was Judy Allen. She was dressed in black, and she was pale. Her red lips stood out darkly against her white face. But she was still the best-looking girl I had ever seen.

I said, "Hello," and she came over and stood by my bed.

"How are you?" she asked.

"O.K.," I said.

There was a silence. I didn't know what to say. After a bit I said: "I'm sorry."

She sat down in the chair beside my bed and folded her hands in her lap. "Don't be," she said. "I don't blame you."

"Thanks."

"Don't talk about it," she said softly.

"Captain Smythe's here," I said.

"Yes, I know."

"Have you seen him?"

"No."

There was an awkward silence. "Look," I said, "I'll be out of here in a couple of days. Can I see you?"

"Yes," she said, and she smiled.

I smiled, too. Suddenly everything was all right again. I felt happy.

"Aren't you going back to New York?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I think I'll ask the boss if I can't be transferred to Italy, or France, or some place. I need a rest."

She laughed, and I looked at her and thought about how pretty she was.



DEATH WATCH

By
Ralph Eldred

Tupper County has had feud killings, liquor killings and killings over women, but never any murders—with the exception of Little Roy's!

YES, sir, it was a night such as this, with purple clouds hanging over the knob and the smell of fresh rain in the hills, that old Jeff Andrews came to tell me about the murder of Little Roy.

I was sitting on the front porch here, when I saw him legging in from the east. He was a big man, Jeff Andrews, big-boned and heavy-set. But this night there was a gauntness about his square hard face and a bleakness in his grim old eyes that was impossible to read.

"I reckon there's a need for you, Sheriff Mac, over at me and Little Roy's place," he said.

I got the Ford out of the back lot without asking him what it was all about. I figured maybe Judge Higgins had slapped a foreclosure on him, and he'd come down to find out his rights in the matter. Or maybe the Dingle boys had toted off one of his shoats—something like that.

You see, I'd been sheriff of Tupper County for twenty years, and we'd never had a murder. We'd had feud killings, and liquor killings, and killings over women—but no murders.

The Ford was jouncing along the road past Len Cooper's place before Big Jeff opened his mouth again. "Little Roy ain't been feelin' so good lately, Sheriff," he said. "So this afternoon I went out to work in the north field myself. An' when I come back he was sprawled out there beyond the back stoop, at the edge of that old dry cistern, with his throat slit." His voice was rough and splintery, as if he had sawdust in his throat.

I thought about that, knowing Little Roy would never commit suicide so long as he had the watch. "Any weapon about?"

"That corn knife we keep in the back porch was lyin' on the stoop with blood all over it."

I nodded, turning left onto the Oakland road. "I reckon it was that watch they were after," I said. The watch was an old-fashioned hunting case key-winder someone had traded Little Roy years ago. Two months before, a tourist at The Corners had offered him five hundred dollars for it, as an antique.

Little Roy wouldn't sell because he didn't like the idea of trading with foreigners. But the story spread, and after that he took to carrying it with him always, just to show it off, even though it wouldn't run any more.

Big Jeff shook his head. "I don't rightly know," he said. "I didn't go through his pockets, or nothin'. Just left him the way he was, for you."

I turned my head and looked at him, thinking what Little Roy's death would mean to the old man beside me. He was just sitting there, his gnarled hands twisted in his lap, his grim old eyes glued on the road ahead as though he wasn't seeing the road at all—as though he was seeing Little Roy, maybe, the way Little Roy had looked before he died.

He was an old bachelor, nearing eighty, and years ago the farm had been his and Little Roy had been just the hired hand. But the two worked together so well that Little Roy stayed on, and by and by folks got to thinking of them as partners and calling the old Andrews farm Big Jeff-and-Little Roy's place.

We reached the drive then, and I turned the Ford so its lights fell on the narrow open cistern behind the back steps. Little Roy lay there, his sharp wizened face drained white by the slash in his throat, one hand stretched toward the cistern as though something had been in that hand just before he died—something that wasn't there now.

I rolled him over gently and felt in the pockets of his jeans. The watch was gone. After that we searched every place we could think of around the house and barns, knowing it was useless. Then I picked up the corn knife with a pair of pliers and put it in an old seed box to be shipped to the city and examined for fingerprints.

I tried to get Big Jeff to come home with me and stay at my place that night, but he wouldn't leave, so after a while I drove to The Corners where there was a telephone and called the state police.

I DIDN'T see Big Jeff again for more than a week. I knew he'd want to take care of Little Roy's funeral himself, and later I heard that Roy had been buried in the little cemetery at The Corners. But I was too busy tracking down false leads to get to the services myself.

The knife came back from the city with a report that it had been wiped clean. But Len Cooper and George Barley told me about a skinny black-bearded tramp with a fishy eye who had stopped by their places the week of the murder, hunting handouts. I telephoned the state police about the tramp, and the next time I was in the Oakland neighborhood I stopped at Big Jeff's place.

The house was empty and layered with dust—Little Roy had done most of the housekeeping—but pretty soon I heard a squirrel rifle whang, down in the woods below the south pasture, so I moseyed down that way and found Jeff sitting on an old stump.

It was plain that he was taking Little Roy's death mighty hard. His face was so gaunt it was almost sharp, and there were big brown-and-blue patches under his eyes. He had the kind of frame that needs plenty of meat and gristle to keep it from falling apart, but now his clothes looked two sizes too big for him. I figured he must have lost twenty pounds in the last ten days.

"I try to eat a little su'thin' every day, Sheriff," he said, "but somehow it just seems like I lost my appetite. I reckon I won't be gettin' it back till the skunk that murdered Little Roy has come by his come-uppance."

"That puts an awful weight on my shoulders, Jeff," I told him. "I'd sure hate to see Little Roy's murderer turn out to be yours, too, indirectly. You see if you can't take more of an interest in your vittles."

On the way home I stopped by Doc Collins' place and told him to go up and give Big Jeff a checking-over—that I'd foot the bill.

It must have been a week later that the state police picked up the tramp. He was hitchhiking along the highway outside Meriville, and though they didn't find the watch I told them to bring him back to The Corners for questioning, anyway.

I drove up to the Andrews place that night to tell Jeff the news. There wasn't much left of him now but a bag of skin and a lot of big bare bones. He had hollows big enough to hide a mouse in under his cheekbones and his

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chin and his knees and shoulders were almost as sharp and bony as the Widow Bixby's just before she died at the age of one hundred and seven.

His eyes burned a little bleaker when I told him about the tramp, but he shook his head when I suggested that he come down to The Corners and see the man. He said he was afraid of what he might do, should he get within arm's reach of the skunk that had killed Little Roy.

I noticed the bottle of tonic Doc Collins had charged me for standing unopened on a kitchen shelf, and I shook my head. "Jeff," I said, "I'm going to send my old woman up here to cook your meals for you. The man that can resist her batter cakes and slabmeat ain't been born yet."

He studied me a moment with that queer look in his eyes. "Much obliged, Sheriff Mac," he said, "but you go right on eatin' your old woman's vittles yourself. I mind how she always carries off the cookin' prizes at the Meriville Fair. But somehow it wouldn't be right, havin' anybody but Little Roy putter around in this kitchen, after all these years."

The next morning Len Cooper and George Barley identified the tramp. But he swore he knew nothing about the murder and he didn't have the watch. I figured he'd sold it to somebody for a few dollars, and they were keeping mum because of the bargain they'd got. He had a fishy eye, all right, and I was as sure he had murdered Little Roy as I was of my own name.

Judge Higgins pointed out that as things stood there was no use booking him, much less bringing him to trial. But I locked him up for vagrancy, anyway, and when I thought about old Jeff Andrews up there on that lonely hill farm, eating his heart out over his dead partner and slowly starving to death, I almost took the law into my own hands.

Once I even thought of having Jeff come down and identify him, claiming he'd seen him up there himself. But that would have been perjury, and somehow I couldn't quite bring myself to do anything that crooked.

THE morning I turned the tramp loose, I drove up to see Big Jeff again. I knew the mortgage was due on his place, and I meant to talk him into letting me pay part of it off before Judge Higgins issued the foreclosure.

It was one of those calm, perfect mornings we sometimes get up here in these hills in October. A shimmering blue haze hung in the valley, and the oaks and elms and maples along the road were all red and gold and gleaming after the first frost.

The house was empty again so I started off through the fields, calling, "Jeff Andrews. . . Hey, Big Jeff!" every so often. But all I got back was the echo of my own voice and a few saucy cuss-words from the gray squirrels and jaybirds down in the woods beyond the pasture.

Coming up through the barnyard again, my eyes fell on the open rim of that old dry cistern where Little Roy had died, and something seemed to reach out and started pulling me toward it.

I didn't want to go. I fought against it. But when I got to the Ford, instead of climbing in and driving off, I poked around in the door pocket till I found my flashlight.

I walked back to the cistern and shone the light in it.

He was down there, all right. Down there at the bottom. The cistern was so narrow that it held him upright, with one hand pointing down to a narrow rift in the rock siding. I called out but he didn't answer. We figured later he must have been dead for two days.

Suicide? Well, I wouldn't call it that, exactly. Accidental death, more likely. He'd starved himself thin enough to get down into that cistern, but he'd lost so much strength doing it that he no longer had the power to pull himself out again with the rope he'd tied to a rock at the top.

You see, it must have been pretty hard on Big Jeff, having that old watch of Roy's turn out to be so valuable. It sort of made Little Roy the more important man of the two, after all those years. And when Roy insisted on keeping the watch for a pocket piece, instead of selling it to help pay off the mortgage on the place—well, Big Jeff wanted that watch.

After we got Jeff's body out, we found it lying in that little crevice at the bottom of the cistern, where it couldn't be reached from above by a net on the end of a pole, or anything like that.

It was lying right where Little Roy had tossed it with his last ounce of strength before he died. No one but his murderer would have known where to look.



FOR VICTORY . . . BUY WAR BONDS

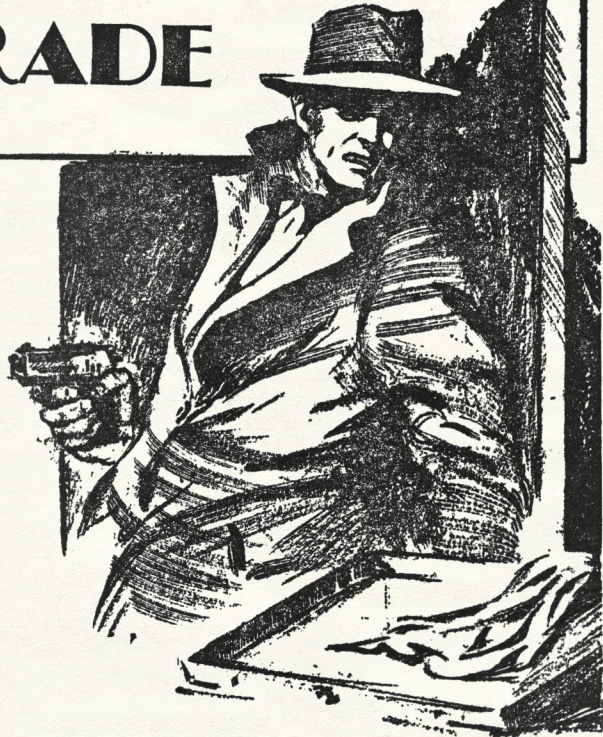




CORPSES ON PARADE

By
**DALE
CLARK**

Author of "Shaved Slugs," etc.



CHAPTER ONE

Flicker Fare

BEULAH RANDY said in low, tense tones: "Jasper C. Jeperett is here to see you."

The lean-cheeked, rawhide-and-rattan built Highland Park Price peered up through steam vapping from an electric cauldron on his office desk. He was a private detective, better known simply as "High" Price. As such, he wasn't just brewing himself a cup of tea. The layout on his desk included steel wool, wire brushes, cotton swabs, and a five-pound pail labeled *Everlasting Lightning Blue Salts*.

"Tell him to wait, angel-face, I'm almost through here," Price muttered. Plunging a gunsmith's taper-nosed pliers into the chemical broth, he fished forth the disassembled pieces of a .38-caliber belly gun. Intent on distributing his odds and ends of hand artillery over the desk blotter, he failed to note his secretary's flushed features and flashing blue eyes.

As a total surprise came her stormy reply:

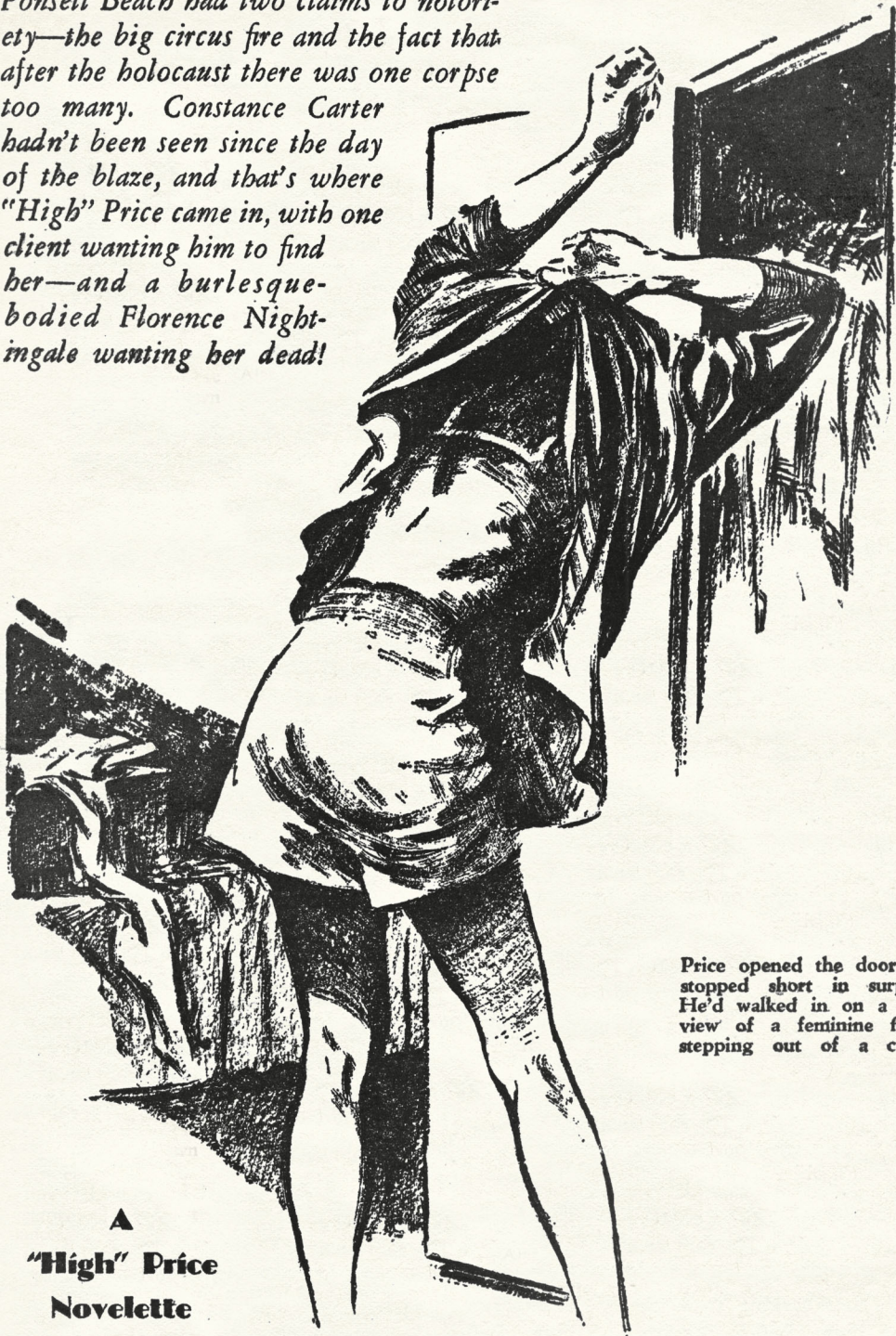
"Tell him yourself. I'm the one who's through. This is the last straw. I'm quitting."

High Price sighed. He thought he knew what ailed the beautiful, blond Beulah. Her face and her figure lied, for under her incendiary come-hither exterior Beulah Randy was just a home girl.

He had noticed it before—the gross, practical details of crime investigation, such as hand-guns, invariably threw her into conniption fits. Seemingly this should have disqualified her for service as High Price's assistant, but in fact it was just what he liked about her. He did his own detecting, and it was good to know that while he was out doing it, the highly moral Beulah Randy wouldn't try to extract some personal profit out of his professional secrets.

High Price couldn't afford to lose a girl he could trust, so he spoke soothingly. "I'm only

Ponsett Beach had two claims to notoriety—the big circus fire and the fact that after the holocaust there was one corpse too many. Constance Carter hadn't been seen since the day of the blaze, and that's where "High" Price came in, with one client wanting him to find her—and a burlesque-bodied Florence Nightingale wanting her dead!



Price opened the door and stopped short in surprise. He'd walked in on a back view of a feminine figure stepping out of a closet.

A
"High" Price
Novelette

being patriotic doing this. There's a wartime shortage of civilian shooting irons and I'm merely practicing conservation by re-bluing my persuader so's it won't rust. You know the OPA motto, 'Make it do, don't buy new. . .'"

Beulah Randy tossed her blond head. "I've heard that one before. There's also been a wartime shortage of ammunition which has been your excuse for melting lead into bullets and for keeping a keg of gunpowder in the closet. I've stood for the boiling lead, I've even swept up spilled gunpowder from the floor, but I draw the line at your piling a lot of inflammable motion picture film on top of those chemicals and primers and high explosives. Frankly, I'm walking out before I get blown up!"

Highland Park Price stared, said: "Wait a minute! Who said I'm going to start storing any film in the closet here? I never dreamed of such a thing, and I don't know where you ever got such an idea."

The girl shrugged her shapely shoulders. "I got it from Mr. Jeperett. He's outside with a projector in one hand and a reel of film in the other, and when I asked him why, he said he was here about your ad. Naturally I assumed you advertised for some movie equipment to add to your other hobbies. . ."

High Price gave a headshake. "You're wrong, I didn't. Here, help me carry this stuff into the closet, and then let's see who the fellow is and what he really wants."

JASPER C. JEPERETT wasn't just carrying a projector and a film reel—he was weighed down with a large-sized tripod and a folding movie screen besides. Obviously the newcomer lacked training for such violent exercise, since fully fifty surplus pounds filled out his fortyish figure.

Lowering his load, Jeperett handkerchiefed his fish-belly white, perspiring forehead, dried his palms, and loosened his necktie a notch. "Woo-wuuf!" he panted, unbuttoning his stylish-stout coat and fanning his lapels to work up a breeze.

High Price watched the proceedings with a belligerent air.

"So this is the end of the trail. You're settling down for a long stay, are you?" the detective diagnosed.

"Well, friend, before you take off your shoes, let me remind you that you're in a private business office, not a hotel lobby or a public camp ground."

The plump Jeperett looked surprised and said indignantly: "It's *your* invitation. You inserted the advertisement."

So saying, he fumbled in his pocket and exhumed a pink page ripped from a classified phone book. "*Highland Park Price, Personal*

Investigations—Your Troubles Are Over When You Tell 'Em To Me," he read aloud.

Beulah Randy blushed contritely. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you meant *that* advertisement. . ."

Jeperett ignored the blonde, fixed his ice-colored eyes on Price as if he thought Price ought to feel sorry, too. "Advertising for clients, you might at least show a little sympathy when one of them walks in here."

High Price wasn't impressed. He scoffed: "Bah, sympathy is something bartenders pour out for free with a fifty-cent highball. If you've got troubles, I won't feel sorry for you—I'll hear 'em and help 'em."

"It really isn't *my* trouble," the plump man stated hastily. "This isn't personal. I'm merely consulting you in their fiduciary capacity."

Price shrugged. "In your fiddle how-much?"

"In my legal capacity. I'm the executor of the estate of my late and good friend, John Carter. No doubt," the plump man moistened his lips, "you read of his death in the papers."

High Price's gray eyes warmed several degrees. "I read," he recalled, "where Carter left a million bucks to his trained nurse—what was her name, Watson, Watkins, something like that?"

"Watzen. Marie Watzen," Jeperett confided. "Of course, Mr. Carter bequeathed her his fortune simply because he had no living relatives. His only child, his daughter Constance, was lost to him in that terrible Ponsett Beach tragedy—"

Beulah Randy gulped and said quickly: "Oh, I remember reading about that! It was a big circus fire, wasn't it? Several years ago."

"Exactly," nodded the caller. "John Carter owned a summer home at Ponsett Beach. He and his daughter attended that fatal circus matinee, and Constance perished in the flames—or so we believed at the time."

High Price asked interestedly: "You mean there's some doubt of it?"

Jeperett spread his plump hands. "The answer is yes and no! The fire caused a riot. The victims were stampeded, knocked down, trampled and mangled besides being immolated in the flames. Among the fatal casualties were a few corpses that couldn't be positively identified. We all assumed Constance Carter was among the unidentified dead for the simple reason that she wasn't among the known, living survivors."

"It sounds like a logical deduction to me," Highland Price nodded. "What's wrong with it?"

Jeperett gestured at the equipment he'd hauled into the office. "Just one thing—John Carter made a hobby of home movies. He never went on a hunting, fishing, or vacation

jaunt without taking along a camera. After his death, he desired that his treasured pictures should be distributed among his friends, so it devolved upon me to sort out the scores of reels he had preserved. In doing so, I happened upon some film that had been exposed but never developed."

High Price was ahead of him. "Yeah, and you had that film developed, or you wouldn't be here. You brought it with you, or you wouldn't have packed a projector along. So let's pull the window shades and start the show!"

THE BLACK-OUT wasn't absolute, but the image on the screen was fairly distinct when Jeperett plugged in the wall connection and pressed a switch. Beulah Randy exclaimed: "Why, it's the circus!"

Jeperett spoke above the whirl of the 16-mm. machine. "Correct. Carter had his camera along—probably the reason he chose the afternoon performance. . . Here, you see, is a shot of Constance buying the tickets."

Highland Price, elbow propped on his desk and chin cupped in his palm, intently watched the slim, dark-haired Constance Carter turn from the ticket-wagon and wave the pasteboards at the camera. "Where's the crowd?" he queried.

"Oh, they arrived late. The performance had already started," Jeperett vocalized a commentary to the screen performance. "Now they're going into the outer pavilion, the smaller tent where the animal menagerie is on display. Constance is hurrying on ahead. . . But her father stopped to get a shot of the lion cage, next he ducked under the ropes to get a close-up of the gorilla cage. It probably saved his life—"

Beulah Randy strained to see as the image on the screen became a senseless, dizzily swinging kaleidoscope. "What on earth—"

Jeperett said tensely: "This is when the main tent burst into flames, and Carter ran for the exit, the camera still grinding away as it bumped against his legs. It wasn't until he got outside, here, that he trained the camera on the tragedy."

High Price remained the silent, intent watcher. It was Beulah Randy who cried: "It's horrible! How could he stand there taking pictures, knowing his own daughter was trapped inside?"

"He didn't know," Jeperett denied. "He hadn't seen Constance go into the big top, and he imagined she was in the crowd pouring out of the exit. . . Now, look off to the left!"

High Price bent forward tautly, and his blond secretary gasped at the glimpse of a slim, tousled, dark-haired girl who momentarily broke through the surging crowd into range of the lens.

"Why—why, it's the same girl—the one who bought the tickets!"

It had been only a glimpse, instantly lost as the camera changed to another shot, panning up to the fire-capped peak of the main tent.

Jeperett's voice declaimed: "Exactly. Constance was in the escaping crowd. But because John Carter had no desire to be reminded of the tragedy, he never had the film developed and he never—"

Staring at the holocaust on the screen, none of the trio saw the inner office door open. The only warning was the dimming of the screen image as outside light crossed the beaded surface—and with the warning came the shot.

Jasper C. Jeperett dived frantically toward the desk and High Price, the projector on its tripod crashing to the floor.

Price cursed, leaped sideways, blinking at the figure in the doorway. It was just a silhouette to his eyes which were still adjusted to the movie. The detective drove a hand inside his lapels, then cursed as his fingers clawed the empty leather of an armpit holster—remembered, too late, that his persuader was in pieces.

The detective swung, bending at the hips as he reached for the desk drawer and the little .25 Mauser he frequently carried as a hideout gun.

Beulah Randy screamed frantically: "Fire! Fire!"

Price growled, "Hell, I'll fire as soon as—" and whipped around, Mauser in hand, to see the projector in flames on his office floor. His stare drove past it, discovered the door had already closed on the no doubt fleeing gunman.

Highland Park Price made a split-second decision. Gunmen, in his experience, were a dime a dozen but the film was probably irreplaceable.

Twisting out of his coat, the detective began to flail at the flames.

Five minutes later, Beulah Randy turned from hoisting the window sash. "Thank heavens! At least you got the fire out before it reached that gunpowder in the closet. . ."

High Price brooded over the bullet-smashed projector, the charred ruin of what had been the film. He growled: "Yeah, but if Constance Carter wasn't caught in that death trap, what became of her? Why would she run away from a million bucks and let her own father think she was dead?"

"I don't know, but I'll pay you for the answers to those questions," Jeperett paused in his pacing to say.

Price glumly twisted the cap from a fountain pen. "That'll be fifty bucks for fire and smoke damage, plus an extra five hundred

as a retainer for my professional services."

"Five hundred!" Jeperett went wide-eyed. Clients often did when they found out how much it cost to tell their troubles to High Price. "Why, that's ridiculous, that's preposterous—"

The detective snarled: "Don't be picayune! The answers to those questions are worth a million berries. Anyway, I'm not through—it'll be fifty smackers more for traveling expenses."

"Traveling?"

Price grunted. "I can't work by telepathy. I've got to go up to Ponsett Beach. That's where the trail starts from."

CHAPTER TWO

Too Many Corpses

PONSETT BEACH was the typical seashore resort town—gee-gawed with arty tea rooms and handicraft shops for the summer season. This wasn't the summer season, so High Price found the vista of locked-up tea rooms and deadfalls baited with hooked rugs and seashells about as gay as a discarded Christmas tree. The local coroner was also the local taxidermist, specializing in the stuffed fish line. In the off-season, trade lagged for him too.

The circus fire? "I'll never forget it," Coroner Henshaw agreed. "And you know what was worst? Don't quote me on this, but it was the animals screaming. The humans at least had a chance to run for their lives, and most of 'em did, but what chance did them lions caged up out there in the middle of the thing have? No, sir, I'll never forget the screams of those big cats!"

"Probably they made the panic worse," Price suggested. "I'm told it was a terrible stampede, so bad they never did identify all the victims."

"Well, that's what you get in a resort town. City folks come up for a week-end, take a room at the lodge or a hotel, and who's to identify them absolutely?"

Price queried: "You checked the registrations?"

"Uh-huh, but they don't always register under their right names. You can't get far trying to trace John Jones and wife, in a lot of such cases."

Just possibly Constance Carter's identity had been confused with that of some other dark-haired girl of approximately the same age who had died in the fire, High Price mused. The other girl couldn't have registered at a hotel, though, or there'd have been a discrepancy when Coroner Henshaw counted corpses.

"Let's see," the detective pretended to ponder. "Didn't I read somewhere or other that

you folks wound up with one corpse too few?"

The coroner stroked his mustache. "Mister, you got that wrong. It was just the other way around. We had one too many. Nobody ever did figure out who *she* was!"

"Too many!" High Price didn't relish the added corpse. "How in hell could you?"

"Lots of private homes take in roomers in the rush season. And that was before the war—hitchhikers used to drift through looking for work as waitresses and so on. So the extra one might have been just a stranger. Folks around here talked and wondered a plenty, but we never did carve any name on that one girl's gravestone."

"Gravestone? Those things cost money. Who paid for putting up a blank one?"

"It ain't generally known," the coroner became confidential, "but John Carter did. I reckon he was just a mite uneasy in his mind. His own daughter died in the same fire, and the two were close enough alike, what was left of them. I figure he wasn't taking any chances that his own girl might be the one to be buried like a pauper."

High Price was discomfobulated. If they hadn't really buried Constance at all, obviously they'd buried two other unidentified girls who had looked like her.

"Miss Carter, is she in the local cemetery, too?" he queried.

"Nope. We shipped her body to the city to be cremated. Carter never lived here, you understand. He's just one of the summer crowd—spends maybe six, eight weeks a year in his big brick house out on the Point."

Clearly, the news of Carter's own death hadn't reached the coroner yet. Why, became understandable as he continued: "Frankly, we take their money, but we don't mingle with that summer-resort element socially!"

Price nodded. He'd heard of such rifts between natives and city vacationists. To the townfolk, no doubt, John Carter and his daughter had been just two more faces in the annual invasion of moneyed, play-and-pay crowd.

"I know, I work for a living myself," he said as he arose. "I'll send you a copy of my book when it comes out."

"You're writing a book about all this?"

"No, merely a slight encyclopedia on *Famous Fires of History and How They Happened*." The detective had decided he'd better explain his interest in the tragedy. "I find I can't describe a scene unless I visit it personally."

Quitting the main street, Price headed for the shore, the Point, and John Carter's big brick house. His reasoning was simple. If the summer home had been inhabited only six or eight weeks a year, he imagined that some of Constance Carter's belongings might

still be around the house as she had left them.

Aside from shore sand seeping over his shoe-tops, he had no trouble locating the Point. It was the only arm of land pushing out into the water, and the big brick house was the only building on it.

Ignoring the front of the place, Price aimed his course for a back door. He'd learned long ago that it was generally the back doors that could be opened with a skeleton key.

It proved so in this case. Pushing through a kitchen and service pantry, he came upon a back stairway that would lead to the bedrooms above. At the top of the stairs, he opened the first door he came to, drew out his .38, and stopped short, his gray eyes widening in surprise.

WHAT he'd walked in on was a back view of a feminine figure stepping out of a clothes closet. Momentarily, the saucy-shaped, bare-legged and bra-clad pose reminded him of the climactic part of a burlesque show.

He corrected himself—this dame wasn't taking it off, she was putting it on. He'd stepped into the doorway just as she tugged a dress on over her head. Now, still with her back to him, she smoothed the too-tight, too-short garment down over her thighs and turned to study the result in the mirror.

It was in the glass that her greenish eyes caught the detective's form. She didn't scream. What she said was, coldly: "Who the hell let you in?"

"You took the words out of my mouth," Price asserted in high dignity tucking his gun away in his pocket. This situation called for other tactics. "I'm representing Jasper C. Jeperett, the executor of the estate. And now, what are you doing trying on somebody else's clothes here?"

Her smile was taunting. "Didn't Jeperett tell you? I'm the one the estate belongs to."

So this was Marie Watzen, the nurse who had hovered over John Carter's sick-bed and vamped the dying man into bequeathing her a cool million dollars.

High Price didn't doubt that was what had happened as his eyes met the woman's green stare. The burlesque-bodied Marie didn't look like a Florence Nightingale. From the top of her tawny-red hair-do, down her opulent curves to her king-sized high heels, Price deemed her far more of a Mata Hari type.

The detective glanced around, picked out an open suitcase on the bed. Sauntering toward it, he ejaculated: "Pre-war nylon stockings! Constance Carter's, eh?"

Marie Watzen said: "Well, I thought I might as well take any of this stuff I could wear. It's doing no good here and—hey! Get out of that, you big bum!"

She lunged toward him as Price's exploring

fingers delved into the hosiery, closed onto a small hidden box.

Price fended off the redhead, held her at arm's length as she shrieked and struggled. With his right thumb, he popped up the box lid.

"A real, genuine diamond ring," he grinned, "and just your size—only it's engraved *To Connie from Dave*. . . Who's Dave?"

Her astonishment seemed sincere. "I'm damned if I know! She was engaged to Harry Jeperett, Jasper's kid." She remembered to display temper again. "Anyway, it's mine now. Give it to me!"

High Price chuckled. "Don't be too sure. The estate hasn't been probated yet, and the law reads nobody can disinherit a child merely by leaving his name out of a last will and testament—"

The interruption came in the form of a squat, short-bodied, whipcord-and-leather puttee-clad individual bursting through the doorway.

The newcomer hurled himself at High Price, swinging a low right as he came.

Price sidestepped with surprising agility, leaving one knee in front of the onrushing puttee-clad ones. As the punch breezed past and their legs collided, he hooked down his elbow in a vicious cut.

It was police judo, the kind that plays for keeps.

High Price bent over the groaning, semi-conscious man. A bulge in the fellow's hip pocket interested him—but it wasn't a gun. As he tugged it out, he found a leather-bound book on the cover of which was imprinted in gold letters, *Diary*. Pocketing the diary himself, the sleuth straightened and accosted Marie Watzen.

"O.K., sister, who's your playmate?"

The green eyes held reluctant respect. "You mean Lunt? He's the chauffeur, Mr. Carter's chauffeur."

"And you've inherited him along with all the rest?" High Price gave a headshake. "Don't you know Section 428 of the revised statutes says a testator has to specify he doesn't desire such-and-such a lawful heir to get any of the estate. Otherwise, the law assumes he accidentally overlooked or forgot—and the heir is entitled to a full share of what the lawyers leave."

Again the redhead's bewilderment seemed sincere.

High Price got down to brass tacks. "It's this way, Marie. Carter doubtless didn't disinherit his daughter in his will. Why would he? She was dead, so far as he knew. Nobody goes to the trouble to cut dead people off with a dollar. . . But suppose she isn't dead? Suppose she turns up alive?"

Marie Watzen said: "All I know is he left

the money to me. Isn't that all there's to it?"

Price lost patience. He fumed: "For God's sake, no, that's just what the law doesn't say! The will is invalid, it isn't worth a match to burn it—if Carter's daughter ever shows up alive. She can sue you for her share of the estate, and her share is *all* of it because she's the only direct, blood relative."

He saw an expression of belated understanding tighten the ex-nurse's features. She blurted an unladylike word. "Is that what Jeperett's trying to pull? But the brat's dead. How can he bring her back to life?"

"You don't know she's dead. Constance was before your time. You probably wouldn't recognize her if you two met on the street." Price whipped out a fountain pen, unscrewed its cap. "So you need a special inside investigator on the job!"

The green eyes X-rayed him. "You're just trying to shake some money out of me!"

Highland Park Price took the accusation in his stride. Frankly, he'd heard it before. "Hell's fire, do I look like a gremlin? I'm human, and naturally I work for money. But what's a mere five hundred dollars plus expenses when you've got a million bucks at stake?"

Pouring forth a flood of super-sales talk, the detective steered his Number Two client to the dressing table, stood over her while she scrawled her signature on his Number Two check.

ABOVE the purr of the motor and the whine of tires, High Price's voice soared: "Never mind dropping me at my office. Just stop at the first beer sign."

He studied the chauffeur's sullen profile. He hadn't thought it wise to question Lunt in front of Marie Watzen. Now as the car coasted out of the traffic up to a neon door-way, Price became suddenly amiable.

"Come on in and have a drink on the louse, ha-ha," he kidded.

The detective led the way through the neon-lit entrance, down a shiny floorway to the back booths. "Rye and ditch," he ordered, and then jangled a pull cord to light up an imitation candle bracketed on the wall. Ignoring Lunt's existence, Price fumbled in his pocket and produced the little leather-bound volume. Apparently unaware of the chauffeur's suddenly alerted attention, High Price chuckled over the girlish scrawl.

"Listen to this— His kisses go to my head like wine. Dear Diary, how can I wait to announce the wedding?" Price slapped the volume shut. "It's love's young sweet dream, for sure. But who wrote it?"

The chauffeur glowered, said sourly: "It's none of your damned business, but Constance did. It's her diary."

"And what was her love life doing in your hip pocket?"

Lunt's middle-aged features worked. "It goes back to the ring, the *To Connie from Dave* one. . ."

"Well?"

"Dave, that's my son. Those two kids were secretly engaged. Married, in fact."

"You're kidding!"

"It's God's truth," the chauffeur insisted, "and why shouldn't it be? I've worked for Mr. Carter for twenty-five years. His daughter and my boy were only a year apart—they grew up as playmates and pals. What's so unnatural about them falling in love?"

High Price shrugged. "Nothing, except the way I heard it, it was Carter's daughter and Jeperett's son. The diary doesn't say Dave kissed her, doesn't name any names at all. . ."

"Connie didn't want her father to find out."

Lunt wrapped his fingers around the glass the towel-fronted waiter put before him. "It meant nothing to John Carter that I'd raised Dave to be as good as the next man. I saved my money, I sent my boy to college, and he was well on his way to becoming a mechanical engineer. But to Mr. Carter he still wasn't any more than a greasy-handed kid who liked to tinker with engines. Connie knew how he felt. That's why she and Dave planned to wait a few more years."

Highland Park Price lifted his drink to his lips, sneered: "It's ditch, all right, but where's the rye? . . . Go on, what happened?"

"It was the summer of '41, just before Pearl Harbor, with Selective Service already in operation and the Navy commissioning lieutenants. With his training, Dave had a chance for a Navy commission, so he joined up. It was just before he went into the service that they were married."

The chauffeur shook his head.

"I think Constance intended to tell her father, as soon as Dave finished the training course and got his stripes. With the country in war and Dave in uniform, I believe John Carter would have overlooked his prejudices—only Connie died, and it didn't turn out that way."

Highland Park Price drummed his fingernails on the diary. "But this— Where'd you get it?"

Color mounted in Lunt's cheeks. "Marie Watzen had me carry that suitcase up to Connie's room. She told me to take some stockings out of a drawer and put them in it. The diary was in the drawer. I saw what it was, so I slipped it into my pocket when she wasn't looking."

"Why?"

"I was going to keep it for Dave. Connie was his wife. He's more entitled to her personal belongings than that red-headed harpy!"

High Price mused: "But you came a-running fast enough when you heard the harpy holler for help."

"It wasn't that. I was really after the ring Dave gave Connie," the other admitted.

Highland Park Price chuckled. "Diary! Ring! This thing is too big for you. You don't seem to realize that your son married into a million bucks. You've got a big interest in the set-up, and if you're smart you'll have yourself protected by an expert." Uncapping his fountain pen as he spoke, the detective bent his figure toward another prospective client. "Be patriotic! Do something for that son of yours. Can't you afford to gamble a mere fifty dollars?"

"Fifty! You charged Miss Watzen five hundred!"

"Yeah. I'm giving you a special bargain discount rate," Price cajoled.

He accepted the Number Three check, tossed down the remainder of his rye-and-water, and announced: "I've changed my mind. You can drop me, after all, at Jasper C. Jeperett's residence."

CHAPTER THREE

Too Many Husbands

HE FOUND Jeperett in a library that looked like one of those Ponsett Beach deadfalls, literally so loaded with bric-a-brac there was hardly elbow room for a third party. Jasper C. Jeperett wasn't alone—he had his son with him. The son was twentyish instead of fortyish, twenty-five pounds overweight instead of fifty, but otherwise practically a perfect facsimile of his parent.

"Excuse the homework," the senior Jeperett apologized. "We're busy taking inventory of Carter's collection of Early Americana for probate."

"Ye Gods! You mean the guy actually paid good money for this junk?"

The lardy client sighed. "In many cases, I'm afraid he paid too much! He was a sucker for those second-hand shopperies, always hoping to pick up a priceless heirloom for next to nothing. Of course, there are unscrupulous dealers who know that game. They saw him coming, and loaded him up with old Pennsylvania glass made in Japan!"

"How do you tell the difference?"

"Frankly, I can't. What we do is unpack the stuff, then have a reputable expert come in and appraise it. It's a labor of Hercules. We still haven't got around to the crates stored in the basement at Ponsett Beach," Jeperett shrugged. "But never mind our headaches. Apparently, you've already been to Ponsett Beach yourself."

Highland Park Price nodded. "Sure. I'm

a fast worker—I never leave my shadow in one spot long enough for anybody to catch cold standing in it."

"You sound as though you found something to report."

"Yeah," the detective confirmed, "I've unearthed two highly significant clues!"

"Well?"

"Firstly, I've consulted with the local corner. There's something screwy about that circus fire set-up. Entirely aside from Constance Carter, the death toll included another young lady who has never been identified."

The younger Jeperett picked up a tumbler, blew on it, rubbed it with his sleeve. "How does that fit in?"

"It doesn't, and that's what makes it so significant," Price rejoined. "The second clue, I found a diary of Miss Carter's—"

The glassy crash was the tumbler pitching from Harry Jeperett's grasp onto the floor.

Jasper C. Jeperett flung around, stooped to gather up the pieces. "Good heavens, Harry! I only hope this is one of the made-in-Japan ones. . ."

High Price stared at the younger man. Harry Jeperett hadn't knelt to help retrieve the broken glass. Standing over his parent, the facsimile wagged an imploring forefinger in front of his lips.

Price caught on easily, put a finger to his own mouth, and nodded.

Jasper C. Jeperett straightened, asked: "Well? What about this diary?"

"I'm afraid I don't know what it means, either—not yet, anyway," Price disclaimed.

"Pardon?" frowned the Number One client. "But then, you haven't made any progress at all! Your so-called clues don't spell anything. . ."

Highland Park Price grinned mysteriously. "Detection is a funny business. It isn't standardized like, for instance, manufacturing motors. I've always found it wise to throw away the standardly shaped and sized clues. My very best solutions have been assembled from odds and ends that didn't seem to fit at all."

He broke off. "But you're not interested in my methods, I can see you want results. Therefore, I'll be on my way."

"I—I'll show you to the door," the younger Jeperett offered hastily.

Price let himself be guided to the door before he threw the query. "O.K., don't stall! I'm a busy man. Tell me in a hurry what's so hush-hush about that diary?"

In low, stifled tones, Harry Jeperett confessed: "I . . . it—I was afraid it might mention our secret marriage."

High Price gaped. "Your—" He caught himself in time, changed it to: "You admit there was one?"

The plump youth moistened his lips. "Yes,

our parents wanted us to wait until I was out of college. That's why Connie and I just slipped away and were married secretly!"

Now instead of too many corpses, the trouble was too many bridegrooms! Secret marriages couldn't have been a habit with Constance Carter. Surely she hadn't united herself in matrimony with both Dave Lunt and Harry Jeperett. . .

Gravely, Price asked: "You've told your father nothing of this?"

"No-o. You see, Connie was killed right away, and—and I saw no reason for revealing we'd run counter to our families' wishes." Young Jeperett twisted his lips awry. "And then, when this idea was suggested that she might still be alive, I decided to wait and talk to her first, if she could be found. I mean, it's her secret as much as mine. I'd like to have a chance to see her first, alone, before the others, if she ever is found. . ." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Look, if you could fix it—"

High Price came up chuckling, uncapping his fountain pen. "Special service like that costs cash in advance, sonny!"

HIGHLAND PARK PRICE paused at police headquarters the next morning. Entering his office late, Beulah Randy's indignant voice reached his eardrums.

"It's your turn to write a check—for my services up to date," his blond secretary greeted him hostilely. "I've heard enough. This time I'm absolutely quitting!"

Price begged: "Honest, angel-face, there won't be any more fires around here! If you insist, I'll even install a couple of those patent extinguishers—"

The girl cut in: "It isn't the fire department I'm worried about now. It's the police!"

Price hooped his eyebrows. "What's wrong now?"

"Your clients! They've all been telephoning and trying to reach you!" Beulah exclaimed. She glowered at her employer. "First you took Mr. Jeperett's money, which he paid you because he wants Constance Carter found. Then you turned around and sold your services to that Watzen woman, who wants the exact opposite. It's true what people say about you—you're a shark and a shakedown artist. You're working both sides of the fence in this case!"

Highland Park Price had heard it before. It was one of the penalties of having an office girl he could really trust—half the time, she wouldn't trust him. . .

"Wait a minute, Beulah," the detective requested earnestly. "That fence you're talking about. I have to work all sides of it to find out where the weeds are growing so I can pull 'em out."

"Weeds?"

High Price called on his oratorical resources. Dramatically, he declaimed: "Yeah, Beulah. A detective is a caretaker in the garden of life. It's my mission to root out the wicked weeds of crime and greed so the innocent flowers can blossom in the blessed sunshine. Only sometimes it's hard to tell the two apart, especially in their growing-up stage. That's why I have to get up close and take a good look."

Unimpressed, Beulah Randy regarded him with ice-cold skepticism.

"I don't mind your looking at Marie Watzen, it's taking her check that was wrong."

Price shrugged. "O.K.—now be logical and go the rest of the way. Suppose I didn't take anybody's check until I was sure he was an innocent flower! I'd starve to death at that rate!"

The blonde still wasn't convinced.

"Good heavens, Beulah," Highland Park Price appealed, "you don't want me to sell out my undivided loyalty to the first bidder, do you? For instance, suppose Marie Watzen walked in here ahead of Jeperett. Would you figure I ought to be on her side exclusively, as a matter of first come, first served?"

Beulah Randy hesitated, admitted slowly: "I—I never thought of it that way!"

Suddenly her blue eyes lighted brightly. "You mean you're collecting checks from *all* of them, but you're only going to cash the *right* one, whichever it is?"

High Price grunted: "Yeah, but I'll wring your neck if you ever let on. I'd be a ruined man if it ever got around."

The girl wondered: "Because people would think you doublecrossed the others?"

Highland Park Price became cold-bloodedly frank. "No! It's because people with clean hands hardly ever tell their troubles to a private dick. Most of my clients want me to pull something so rough, tough, and low-down dirty they're afraid or ashamed to admit what they're really after. I'm the most lied-to man on earth! My average client is about as reliable as a Japanese communique! I've built up a successful business by making the public believe I'm a heel who'll sell his soul to the highest bidder. I'd have to close up shop if my clients ever suspected I was liable to go to bat for right and justice!"

The sleuth shook a sorrowing head over what would happen if he ever got a reputation as an honest man.

BUT the instant of self-pity was swiftly over. He became his practical, troubleshooting self immediately.

"That's that, Beulah. Now what did my clients want?"

Beulah Randy glanced at her notebook,

said: "Harry Jeperett was first. He wants to know whether you feel he should make a clean breast of everything to his father."

"Go on."

"Jasper C. Jeperett called next. He explained that he's going up to Ponsett Beach to take an inventory of some of that Early Americana collection. If anything urgent develops, he wants you to telephone him there, long-distance."

High Price nodded.

"Then," Beulah continued, "the Watzen woman called. She wants you to have lunch with her today at the Regent Hotel Blue Room. I gather she wants to tell you the story of her life with sound effects from an orchestra."

Highland Park Price gestured impatiently. "Fiddle-faddle! They're all stalling. Beulah, you want to see justice triumph, don't you?"

"Why, why—of course!"

"Swell! You can start by rushing out to a beauty parlor and having your hair dyed a dark brunette color!"

Beulah Randy raised slim, wondering fingers to her blond tresses, stared perplexedly at her employer.

High Price plunged on: "That's the first step. The second is, you're going up to Ponsett Beach with me. You're going to tell the coroner you've just suddenly come to your senses after wandering around in a mental fog for the last several years. The last thing you remember is the circus and the fire! You must have been knocked down and got a head injury in the panic, which cause such a condition of amnesia you've only just now remembered your right name and address."

In utter incredulity, the girl widened astounded eyes at him. "You must be insane! It's the craziest thing I ever heard of! I couldn't possibly pass myself off as Constance Carter!"

Price grinned. "Don't jump to conclusions. Constance Carter isn't the right name you're going to remember at all. . ."

"But—but what—"

"You couldn't, anyway. Constance Carter wore extra-length nylons, was several inches taller than Marie Watzen, and an inch more around in most places. I'd say she was five-seven, weight one-thirty to one-forty, and of course a natural brunette, so that's the description I took to police headquarters this morning—not to Missing Persons, but the pick-pocket detail," High Price enlightened proudly. "I found out that general description fits at least three delinquent dames, one of them a she-cannon who cold-handed carny crowds for a living and hasn't been caught prowling a pocket since the summer of '41. Her name was Jill Golden which is probably an alias, but you can claim to be her sister—"

"Please!" the blonde wailed. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

High Price repeated himself in plainer language. "The Golden girl, answering Constance Carter's general description, was a lady pickpocket who specialized in working carnival and tentshow crowds. Her total disappearance from the police records since the fire is the one logical explanation of the extra corpse angle. Assuming she died in it, her friends wouldn't bother to notify the cops or to claim the body. Coroner Henshaw's hitchhiker theory is shaky, but the situation fits the criminal classes right down into the ground, ha-ha."

Hastily, the detective sobered under Beulah Randy's steady eye.

"Well, as a blonde, Henshaw might question your story. As a brunette, he'd be more apt to accept you as Jill Golden's sister. The pickpocket angle you needn't mention. It's enough to say you two girls attended that circus matinee."

Swallowing, Beulah demanded: "But why should I pretend to be her sister?"

Price explained: "That's easy. A relative has the legal right to have the body exhumed so you can look at it."

The girl gasped, shuddered, said: "That's the craziest yet! If you think for one minute I'm going snooping into coffins—"

"You won't have to," High Price promised. "Just get Henshaw to the graveside. I'll be sitting on the unmarked tombstone taking notes for my history of famous fires!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Death-Tally

IN FACT, Highland Park Price reached the cemetery belatedly. Parting paths with the newly brunetted Beulah at the railway station, the detective encountered delay when he consulted vital statistics at the courthouse. In the register of marriages, sure enough, he found an entry—*H. Jeperett & C. Carter, per W. Iversen, J. P.*—only it had been written in below the ruled lines at the foot of the page for August 11, '41. . .

"But that's a Justice of the Peace ceremony," the clerk pointed out. "The J. P.'s aren't businesslike. Instead of mailing in their records promptly, they'll carry 'em around in their pockets until the next time they come to town. Then it's necessary for us to go back and squeeze the entries in on the proper day."

Price pondered. "This man Iversen, where'll I locate him?"

A shrug. "You won't. He was one of the victims in our big circus disaster that year."

"Oh, hell—I mean, oh, well, let's look at the marriage license record, then."

Then came the delay, the prolonged search, ending in the clerk's confession: "That's funny. It doesn't look as though one was ever issued!"

"Would that invalidate the marriage?"

"Not necessarily. Under special circumstances, the Justice of the Peace can issue a permit himself. It's a law that dates back to World War I, designed to eliminate the red tape when soldiers on furlough wished to be married. Occasionally it's invoked to suit unusual situations. For instance, a dying man desiring to legitimize a child born out of wedlock wouldn't be required to go through the formality of applying for a license."

Price suggested: "I'll give you a better instance. The young couple don't want publicity, so they slip the J.P. a few bucks for a special permit, and also to keep the records in his pants pocket until after the regularly recorded marriages have been published in the newspapers."

Thinking along these lines, he footed off toward the burying ground. A worried Beulah Randy brightened at his appearance, but Coroner Henshaw failed to notice. Perspiring, the coroner surrendered his shovel to the newcomer.

"It's a curious coincidence, but you're just in time to help clear up that mystery we were talking about yesterday. You don't mind helping dig up the material for your own book, do you?"

High Price didn't. Reluctant to peel off his coat because of the armpit gun underneath, he jumped to the coroner's assistance as he was.

Beulah Randy paled, turned away as they hoisted the casket and began unscrewing its lid.

Henshaw muttered, "Brace yourself. Your sister isn't—" and gasped, gurgled incoherently as he raised the lid.

The coffin was empty.

Price wagged his head. "It's just as I suspected. You haven't got one corpse too many, you're caught short with one too few."

Back in the coroner's office, Henshaw flipped the pages of a ledger. "I know we buried a girl in that coffin. I screwed the lid down over her with my own two hands. . . Here's the record in black and white!"

"You're an undertaker, too?" Beulah Randy stared around the walls of the taxidermy establishment. "I thought all coroners were doctors."

"They don't legally have to be in lots of states. I admit, I'm in politics—" Henshaw broke off as the door opened and spilled a whipcord-clad figure in from the street.

The new arrival was Lunt, his face chalky above his chauffeur's tunic collar. "Mr. Henshaw, come quick! The sheriff's already gone and—and—"

He, too, broke off, glimpsing High Price in the shop. "You here? But I just sent you a telegram!"

Price asked: "Just a minute, what are you doing here?"

"Why, I drove Mar—I mean, Miss Watzen up."

"So a hired expert isn't good enough for her!" Price scowled. "She's trying to play this solitaire style." He didn't like it a bit. He'd counted on standing up Marie for that lunch. "Well, what's gone wrong?"

"It's Connie!" the chauffeur panted. "She's been alive all this time—but she's dead now, with a bullet in her heart!"

The coroner's mouth dropped open. Managing to work the jaw, he protested: "Hey, hold on! Why would this guy send you a telegram about that, especially before notifying me?" Hotly suspicious, he squinted at High Price. "You told me you were writing a book."

Highland Park Price yielded. "I take it all back. Like you, I've really been counting corpses—and this means the count comes out even. You've got the right number to balance your books at last."

He swung back to Lunt. "How'd it happen? No, never mind, you can tell us on the way."

HUNCHED over the wheel and steering toward the Point, the chauffeur vouchsafed: "You'll really have to ask Jasper Jeperett. He found the body down there in the basement, stuffed into one of those crates that are supposed to be full of antiques."

Price queried: "He called you to see it?"

"No, he called Miss Watzen. Then she called me, but Mr. Jeperett said I couldn't do anything except I'd better fetch the sheriff and the coroner."

"That's all?"

Lunt waited for a bump in the road. "Well, I heard him tell her to be careful of fingerprints—not to touch anything."

"It didn't occur to you to use the phone?"

Coroner Henshaw intervened. "They don't have year-round phone service in those summer places. Anyway, I want to ask you a question—What do you mean, I've got the right number of corpses at last?"

Price glanced at Beulah Randy. "You tell him, angel-face."

The girl shook her new, dark prunette hair-do. "I haven't the faintest idea!"

High Price reminded: "Didn't you tell me that posing as Constance Carter was an insane idea?"

"Yes, but—"

"That's the answer. Nobody could pose as a living Connie. Too many people would have known the difference. That's why it was necessary to resurrect a dead one."

"Jill Golden's body?" Beulah breathed.

Price nodded as the car swung into the yard, backing in front of the big house.

"Exactly—that's the explanation of the empty coffin. The two girls so nearly resembled each other that their bodies were confused. Hence the grave was called upon to supply a convincing Connie Carter this time." The detective preened himself slightly. "I surmised some such stunt all along. That's why I wanted the grave reopened, without showing my own hand in the matter. But now we're ready for the showdown!"

Confidently, his lean figure led the party up the steps and into the house. They were just in time to meet Jasper C. Jeperett and the burly, badge-wearing sheriff coming down the front hallway stairs.

"I can't understand where she's gone," Jeperett was saying. "She said the sight of it made her feel faint. She wanted to go up and lie down a while."

Price scowled. "Marie Watzen?"

The plump man nodded. "Yes, she's suddenly disappeared!"

"It ain't hard to guess why." The sheriff was grim. "She's the only one who stood to make a nickel out of Miss Carter's death. That feeling faint was phony—a nurse hadn't ought to be bothered by a little fresh blood."

"Fresh blood!" The coroner caught at Highland Park Price's elbow. "But you said that body in the basement was stolen out of a four-year-old grave!"

Price smiled. "Let me explain, starting back at the begin—"

"You're nuts, whoever you are." The sheriff rested an unfriendly eye on the private detective. "That body downstairs I've seen—and it's fresh-killed and blood-warm."

High Price's smile faded. So did the color in his lean-cheeked features. He bent forward, his bony fingers curling.

"You've *seen* it?" he demanded incredulously. "With your own eyes?"

The sheriff wagged his head. "Yep, and I've touched it with my own fingers. It's a nice fresh corpse, not a graveyard cadaver at all."

"Good God!" Highland Park Price exhaled. A look of tense horror overspread his angular face. "That means it's even worse than I thought!"

Jasper C. Jeperett ran up his eyebrows to half-mast. "I'm beginning to wonder what you have been thinking, Price. Why should you doubt Miss Carter's return? You witnessed a

showing of that movie proving her escape from the circus tent—"

The detective wheeled toward his Number One client. "We'll talk about that later! Right now, what's downstairs I want to see for myself."

"There couldn't be a possible mistake. It's Connie—I've known her most of her life." Jeperett turned. "Come along, Sheriff, we'll show him."

THE plump man stepped out ahead along the hallway, right-turned into a doorway, and started down a flight of basement stairs, the sheriff beside him, the others following.

"I'm afraid it's obvious what happened," his voice floated back to High Price. "The poor girl wasn't killed, as we supposed—she was merely the victim of amnesia. Eventually she recovered her memory to come back and meet Marie—"

Coroner Henshaw choked on more than he could swallow. "Two of them? Just alike?"

Jeperett paused. "Two of what? I don't fol—"

Gun-shot, thunderous in the vaultlike basement, drowned out the plump man's protest.

High Price heard the sheriff curse, saw the big burly man stagger as the gun sound boomed and boomed again.

Price ripped his freshly blued belly gun from its under-arm mooring, bent his knees, and jumped the remaining steps.

Jasper C. Jeperett had whirled, flame spurt-ing from the pistol he aimed over the sheriff's slumped form. He yelled: "It's Marie—I got her!"

Highland Park Price's gray stare focused on the huddled, burlesque-bodied form sprawled on the gloomy concrete floor.

"It's Marie," the detective acknowledged glumly, "and you got her—you never said a truer . . . *Holy hell!*" The oath spat from his lips as he glimpsed the wavering red wash of a flame among the opened packing boxes in a far corner.

"*Fire!*" Jasper C. Jeperett wailed. The plump man spun around crazily. "She was setting fire to destroy— Oh, my God! There's a gas tank back there—butane! We'll have to run for our lives!"

"All of us except the sheriff?" High Price asked.

"He's dead—dead. . ."

Highland Park Price let the fat form press pass him toward the stairs, then he smashed

A WORD TO THE WISE

Waste paper is still an important war material—it's essential for packing ammunition. So in order to make sure there's enough left over to go 'round for your favorite publication, don't forget to save all waste paper and turn it in for scrap.

down at it exactly as he had felled Lunt—except this time he used his fist with the belly gun clenched in it.

Heeling around, he started toward the blaze. His voice challenged: "O.K., you yellow rat! I know you're in there. I'm staying until you come out or roast alive!"

Price caught a glimpse of a humped shoulder, an extended arm. The detective wasn't a guy who carried a gun just for the fun of reloading ammunition and reblueing the barrel. He'd put in a lot of valuable time keeping the weapon in first-class condition, and now it was time for the gun to pay off.

Gently as a cat's tongue licking its fur, High Price's forefinger eased off the hair-hung trigger.

Harry Jeperett sprang up, sobbing, scrabbling fingers clutching the blood-wet coat-sleeve.

The detective walked over and peered into the box behind which the plump youth had been hiding. It contained a corpse that had been a long time dead, and even Highland Park Price momentarily lost his composure as he looked.

"Henshaw," he ordered hurriedly, "you and Lunt can carry this outside!"

OUTSIDE, Beulah Randy gulped fresh air and fixed puzzled blue eyes on her employer. "You imply that Constance Carter really *was* killed in that fire," she decided. "But what about that movie?"

"It's this way, Beulah. Motion picture film nowadays isn't the fire hazard it was when Theda Bara emoted on celluloid. They use a safety base, so shooting a bullet into a projector shouldn't start a bonfire—unless the machine was loaded to blow up. I figure it *was* loaded, so nobody could prove the film had been tampered with," Price declared. "In fact, I'm sure of it.

"Actually, Jeperett's explanations were all wrong. The Carters came early, not late. If they'd arrived late, Carter couldn't have taken pictures of the lions in the outer tent. Those big cats were performing in the big top itself when the fire broke out. My guess is that Carter took the pictures, all right, but Jeperett cut 'em up and spliced them, and then made a fresh new print of the whole film by copy-photography. The close-up of the crowd rushing toward the camera was probably just a speeded up version of people leaving one of the sideshows before the main performance. You noticed it lasted only a couple of seconds, cutting back to the fire as soon as we got a glimpse of Constance."

The girl wondered: "But couldn't an expert tell?"

"Sure. That's why I say Harry Jeperett—it was Harry, of course—opened the door, fired that one shot, and ran. Our verbal testimony of what had been on the film wouldn't be absolute proof, but it would help the build-up.

"Firstly," Price mused, "they tried to create the impression that the girl might still be alive.

"Secondly, they forged a fictitious marriage entry, using the name of a Justice of the Peace who was too dead to object.

"Last step, they hid the Golden girl's ex-humed body in that box in the basement. After sending Lunt to fetch the sheriff, they murdered Marie Watzen and put her fresh corpse in that box for the sheriff to see. Once he'd seen it, Jasper Jeperett took the officer upstairs on a wildgoose hunt for Marie. Harry had been hidden in the basement, so now he switched the bodies again, and lay in wait with a gun—to kill the one witness who'd looked at the corpse.

"We were supposed to believe," Highland Park Price summed up, "that Marie killed the sheriff, and Jasper Jeperett killed her in self-defense, after which we were to run away from the risk of a butane fire. Subsequently, we'd dig from the ashes a couple of charred skeletons—Marie's, and another that would pass for Connie's. Finally, as the supposed husband, Harry would step forward and claim the whole estate."

Beulah Randy brooded: "And get it, too. There'd have been no one to dispute his claim, with Marie Watzen conveniently dead."

High Price scowled as he thought of the fate which had overtaken the Number Two client for trying to be her own detective. But then he cheered up, gave a grimly gleeful little chuckle.

"You're wrong, I'd still have given the Jeperetts an argument they couldn't win. One thing they didn't know when they started parading corpses, was that Dave Lunt was really secretly married to Connie. So even if they'd got away with murder, I'd have seen to it that *he* collected the cash for their crimes!"

Beulah Randy blinked. "That's a point. . . Who *will* get the Carter estate now?"

"Honestly, I don't know. But this much I can tell you," High Price sighed as he started tearing up his ex-clients' checks. "I'm going to send whoever it is a hell of a big bill—that is, I mean, I'm going to request the probate court to award me some reasonable compensation for my services. If I have to hire a lawyer to collect it!"

**Keep your eye on the Infantry
 . . . the doughboy does it!**

This May Hurt A Little

By

KEN LEWIS

Author of "The Body in the Icebox," etc.



Something snapped in Horace's brain. He seized the blonde's gun arm and fastened his teeth in her wrist.

Life had passed Horace B. Potts by—until an infected molar, the Jaxon kids and murder entered his drab little world that rainy October evening at the Harvey Street bus stop.

IN all fairness to Horace Potts, it must be admitted that not once during the whole affair did he consider himself a hero. Not once did he regard himself as an amateur criminologist—daring, relentless, or otherwise—no matter what the papers had to say about him later.

Was it his fault, he demanded, that Fate should choose a nondescript little bookkeeper like himself to be her instrument of justice in the case? Certainly not! In fact, as he explained to his co-workers at the Falcon Finance Company, the whole thing was a mistake. The kind of monstrous and incredible mistake which can only result from a toothache.

Except for the toothache, he would never have been standing under the rain-soaked awning of the Harvey Street bus stop that dismal October evening. He would never have spotted the character with the coat. Better still, the character would never have spotted him.

At the moment, though Horace's jaw re-

mained swollen, the infected molar itself—with the natural perverseness of such phenomena—had ceased to ache, and he was already regretting his impending appointment with Leon Gottfried, DDS, of Oakhurst.

As he stared morosely through the West Coast drizzle, he was, in fact, fervently hoping that the Oakhurst-bound busses would continue to swish past as the last two had done, too crammed by Los Angeles commuters to take on even one additional passenger at this bleak suburban outpost. Past experience had accentuated Horace's normal aversion to dentists' offices to an appalling degree.

The third bus had just roared by, splashing him with gutter drainage, when he became aware of a bulky figure huddled under a similar awning on the opposite curb. The figure was swathed in a great bearskin coat which would have been ludicrous in Southern California at any season, and which was now downright absurd, with the mercury hovering around 63 despite the rain.

Above the massive coat collar, a green-and-yellow beanie floated atop a mop of crewcut brown hair and between beanie brim and coat lapel Horace detected a pudgy moon-style face perforated by pale harassed blue eyes. Not a strong face, certainly, but still one which seemed a trifle old for the adolescent attire surrounding it.

In the space of five minutes, while Horace watched, this over-aged Joe College thrice referred to a large gold watch from his pocket, twice rose abruptly from the bench on which he sat to glare both ways along the street, scrutinized each of his ten fingernails four times with the aid of a pocket nailfile, jammed a cigarette between his fat lips, fumbled ineffectually for matches, then forgot the match hunt to stare again at the watch.

Then a bus only slightly less crowded than those on Horace's side of the street—because it was headed for Los Angeles instead of from it—paused in front of him, only to be waved irritably on its way again. After that the character grimaced and went through his entire routine again.

HORACE forgot the tooth long enough to grin. Obviously, Joe over there was being stood up—but good. The thought was hardly completed, however, before his street-corner companion underwent an amazing change of pace. The worried lines lifted from the heavy face as easily as the beanie might have been borne off by a vagrant breeze. The pale eyes became as placid as twin pools in August. The gold watch dropped, unscanned and apparently forgotten, into its owner's vest pocket.

Horace removed his steel-rimmed glasses and blinked. What went with the dope, any-

way? Unless his date was the invisible woman herself, she certainly hadn't showed up as yet.

Horace cocked his head and sought some clue to the transformation in the murk-bound sounds of the street.

Rain softly fingered the awning. An auto horn somewhere to the east repeatedly tooted the first three notes of *Over There*. A paper-boy passed, whistling, on his bicycle. A third Oakhurst-bound bus, jammed to the gills, whooshed by with no hint of hesitation. That was all.

Horace shrugged and replaced the glasses. "Just another screwball," he muttered, flinching a little as the Coat started across the street toward him. "The country's full of 'em."

"Gotta match, Jack?" the character sang out, in a super-salesman second tenor.

Horace winced and produced a folder from beneath his raincoat. Pudgy fingers reached for it.

"Thanks, Jack. Just for that, how's about a fag?"

Horace shook his head reluctantly at the almost-empty pack the fellow extended. "I wouldn't think of taking your last one, with the shortage what it is."

The character bubbled merrily at some obscure joke. "Forget it, Jack. I got a brother in the Navy sends me all I want. Maybe I could fix you up with a couple cartons. . . Course they cost more that way—mailing charges and all. But a fag's a fag these days, even if the tariff is forty cents a pack."

"No, thanks," Horace said distantly. "I'll manage with my pipe."

Again the Coat quivered with mirth. "Glutton for punishment, huh, Jack? Well, if you ever change your mind, here's my card."

Horace glanced at it, read: *Lee R. Jaxon, Specialist in Hard-to-Get Commodities*, followed by an address in one of the L.A. business district's seedier fringes. He tucked it politely in a pocket.

"You're getting nowhere fast here, Jack," the second tenor babbled on. "Wait for an Oakhurst bus to stop on this corner, and you won't get home till next week."

"I'm not going home," Horace said glumly. "I—I'm on my way to the dentist."

Jaxon eyed his swollen jaw and chortled sympathetically. "Late already, I bet—and damned glad of it!"

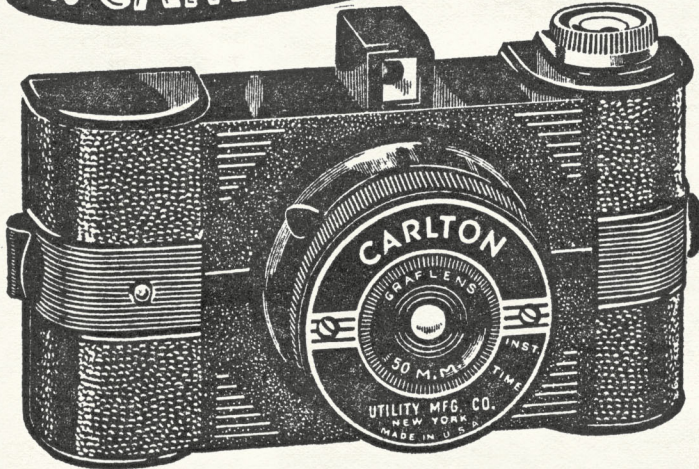
"Fifteen minutes," Horace sighed.

The big man decided to be sympathetic. His fat face fell. "Tough, Jack. Tell you what: My sis'll prob'ly be on the next bus. She forgot her galoshes this A.M., so I'm waiting to drive her home. But after we drop her off at the apartment, I'll swing you around to this bicuspid-borer's parlors myself!"

(Continued on page 84)

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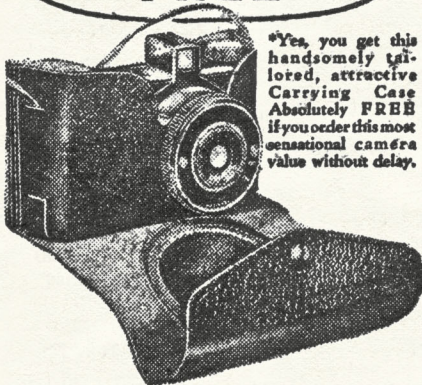
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Ken Lewis

(Continued from page 82)

Hastily, Horace shook his head. "Wouldn't think of it! It's three miles to Dr. Gottfried's, and with the gas situation—" He broke off sickly, remembering the card. "Oh," he mumbled. "I forgot. Hard-to-Get Commodities."

Jaxon beamed and mauled his shoulder. "Found a bunch of coupons around the place the other day!" he confided brightly. "Forgot I even had 'em. Gotta use 'em up now before they run out. Say, maybe you could help me, Jack! Of course there'd be a slight handling charge—"

Again Horace demurred. "I sold my car."
"Oh. Well, if you got any pals— Hey, there's Sis, now! Lottie! Hey, Lottie! Over here! The coupe's just around the corner."

Horace scrutinized the tall, nyloned blonde who had just struggled out of an L.A. bus across the street. Her slender face was pretty enough, though lacking that seductive softness Horace preferred his pin-up girls to have, and the blue of her eyes was more metallic than her brother's. She ran toward them lithely, her open-toed shoes rain-sodden, the rest of her shrouded in a plaid reversible cape-hood combination.

Jaxon pulled her to him, grinning. "Lottie, meet my little pal—er—Mr. . . ."

"Potts," Horace supplied. "Horace B."
"Yeah. Meet my little pal, Pottsy. He's got troubles, Lottie. Tooth troubles."

Horace thought he had detected a slight trembling of her lower lip, a faint ghost of haggard lines about her blue eyes, when she first joined them. But the smile she turned on him now was an amazing compound of warmth and coyness.

"We have just the thing for a toothache, back at the apartment, Mr. Potts," she suggested softly.

Jaxon slugged her shoulder admiringly. "Solid, Chick Forgot all about that! Good stuff, too—straight Scotch! Make you forget all about that toothache, Pottsy, even if you never see another molar-mauler!"

"We-ell—" Horace said uncertainly. He had touched nothing spirituous since that office party last Christmas. But spurred by the damp post-sundown chill, that damned molar had begun to throb again. Perhaps a drop or two, under the circumstances. . .

THREE blocks east, the Packard coupe swung into an alley, lurching to a stop behind a tier of garages margining one of those super-modern saffron-and-nacre apartment houses. Sandwiched between the Jaxon kids, Horace allowed himself to be propelled through the narrow, hedge-screened private entrance of a rear apartment, into a lush liv-

This May Hurt a Little

ing room containing one tall, gaunt soldier. Jaxon paused, then sang out: "Oh, hiya, Jack. You must be Monica's old boy-friend. Where is she, pal?"

The soldier looked at them dully from an overstuffed chair beside a telephone stand. His graphite eyes seemed doped by some vague and terrible bewilderment. "In there," he mumbled, indicating the open door of a bedroom beyond. The hard slash of his mouth twitched beneath his clipped black mustache.

Jaxon shrugged out of the bearskin, skimmed the beanie at a corner divan. "Have to do something about that, Jack," he said cheerfully. "That's no way to treat a guest." He disappeared into the bedroom.

Minus the coat, he no longer seemed so fat, Horace decided. He was still big, but most of his excess flesh seemed centered in his face. . .

A single, choked cry knifed through the thought. Impelled by its urgency, Horace and Lottie piled through the bedroom door together. There Horace paused, while the blonde screamed raggedly in his ear.

A girl in a short print housedress lay curled on the mauve spread of a mahogany bed. Moments before, she'd been the cute cuddly type, with long brown curls, wide young eyes, soft young curves.

She still had the curls, the eyes, and the curves—but she also had a small round hole in the middle of her forehead. Blood oozed thinly from it, crawled across the handle of a nicked automatic beneath her right ear.

Jaxon had dropped to his knees beside the bed. His moon face swung around slowly, no longer apple-cheeked, but with the sick livid color of putrefaction.

"She—she's dead, Jack," he moaned. He buried his pale eyes in the bedspread and began to shake.

Lottie sat down suddenly on the rug, her face working. Horace stumbled numbly from the room as her hysterics started. Now he understood that look on the face of the soldier.

The youth was still slumped in the living room chair, black eyes hollow, triangular face pale under its tan. Paratroop insignia and overseas ribbons made garish splashes on his uniform. Horace noted the bleak lines etching the corners of his eyes and mouth, the master sergeant's chevrons on one sleeve. He cleared his throat.

"A—another Jaxon sister, Sergeant?" he ventured, nodding toward the death room.

The sergeant didn't seem to hear. His hard lips scarcely moved as he formed the words. "She was married to him. My God—to him!"

Jaxon reappeared in the doorway, still shaken but with some measure of control. His pale eyes slid queerly to the man in the chair.



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Ken Lewis

"I'll have to call the cops, Jack," he said woodenly.

For the first time, something came alive in the sergeant's black eyes. Horace interpreted it as twin sparks of scorn.

"Phil's the name," he said tersely. "Sergeant Reilly to you, bud. Call 'em again if you want to. I did, once."

A wailing siren in the street outside proved his point.

THE clock on Monica Jaxon's dresser showed 6:10, Horace noticed, when the mousy little man with the satchel straightened from the bed.

"Killed instantly, Cap," he told the squat, grizzled veteran of murder at his side. "Less than forty-five minutes ago."

Captain Spencer Burge, L.A.P.D. Homicide, turned his bullfrog eyes on Sergeant Philip Reilly, U.S. Airborne Infantry, and ran blunt fingers through his gnarled gray hair.

"What time you get here, son?"

The pain in the sergeant's eyes was guarded now. "She said six o'clock," he said numbly. "I was early, maybe ten minutes. Nobody answered my knock, but the hall door was open. I came in and—found her. I called you before the others got here. She—she must have done it just before I walked in."

Burge knuckled his chin. "Suicide, Doc?"

The mousy little man eyed the automatic still on the bedspread and shook his head. "That close, a .38 would leave burns."

Lee Jaxon spoke suddenly, his pale eyes venomous. "Look, Ja—uh—Cap. There's sump'n you oughtta know. Before the draft caught up with him, Jack here"—he nodded toward Reilly—"was Monica's boy-friend. He claims she owed him money."

"Did she?"

Jaxon's heavy shoulders lifted, dropped again. "She said she didn't. She said he didn't have a leg to stand on. But she was afraid he might try to make trouble, so she asked him out for dinner, to find out the score."

Burge questioned Reilly with his green eyes. The sergeant's angular face was sullen. "She never denied it!" he said hotly. "She was going to give me a check tonight for the whole amount!"

"For what amount, son? Why?"

Reilly's eyes burned defiance. "That," he said, "is my business."

One of the prowl-car men who had arrived first and taken their names and addresses, shouldered past Horace from the living room. "Dugan says nobody heard the shot, Captain," he reported. "These walls are practically soundproof. And the lab boys are coming out right away."

This May Hurt a Little

Burge nodded. "You check the blonde's alibi?"

"Yes. She checked out of this San Salmo lingerie shop she helps manage, at three minutes past five. If she caught the five-ten bus, like she says, she should have got off at Harvey Street about five-forty-five. It's only five miles, but the bus was jammed due to the rain, and the driver had to make all stops."

Burge turned to Horace. "That about the time you saw her get off?"

Horace nodded hesitantly. His brain was beginning to whirl, but maybe it was only the toothache.

"And Jaxon wasn't out of your sight from five o'clock on?"

"No."

"O.K. Get the serial number off that gun, Bliss—watch how you touch it—and have ballistics check it against their records."

Reilly took a half step forward, his eyes miserable. "I—I think I can save you the trouble, Captain. It looks like the one I left with Monica when I enlisted"—he shot the word at Jaxon—"three years ago. It was the only thing I had as a civilian that I thought I might want again, after the war."

The ensuing silence was electric with pressure. Reilly felt it. His eyes shrouded, his angular face stretched taut again. "Look!" he said harshly. "Would I walk in and kill her, call the cops, then wait around for you to pick me up?"

Jaxon's answer was a high-pitched snarl. "You might just be a smart kid, Jack! You might just figure that would be the best way to avert suspicion! Your story stinks. I never saw the gun before, and neither did Monica!"

Burge studied Reilly inscrutably. His green-flecked eyes were grim, but his voice was strangely soft. "Looks like you're elected, son. The little guy here alibis both the husband and the sister-in-law. You're the only one with motive and opportunity. . . You loaned her money, didn't you? Then came back after God knows how many months in hell to find both your dough and your girl lost to you. No wonder you lost your head. I can't blame you. But murder's murder—and that makes it my business. You might as well make it easy on yourself."

The thing that Reilly did then was accomplished with such speed and grace, with such an absolute minimum of time and effort, that Horace missed most of it in the space of a single blink. When his eyes popped open again they fastened on the gun in the sergeant's hand, the slender nicked automatic which Reilly had snatched from beside the corpse. Reilly's words spattered through the silence like machine-gun fire.



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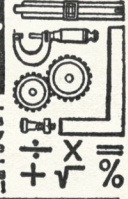
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Ken Lewis

"Something stinks, all right! And I guess it's up to me to end the odor. Before I'm through I'll bust this frame wide open—it and everybody mixed up in it. So long, Jack!"

Again Horace blinked. He'd always thought it would be interesting to observe a murderer at close range. Now he wasn't so sure. The look Reilly settled on him, just before he dropped through the bedroom window to the side yard, seemed appallingly grim and terrible.

Captain Burge broke the spell by clawing out his own automatic and plunging for the window. He got a slug through the sill above his left ear for his pains. Somewhere in the alley out back, a car engine roared alive.

"Hey, that's my coupe!" Lee Jaxon squalled. "I left the keys in it so's I could take Pottsy to the dentist!"

Burge turned from the window, breathing hard. "Don't worry!" he rasped. "You'll get it back! . . . Meanwhile, you'd all better stay under wraps till we nab him."

For the first time since his initial glimpse of Monica Jaxon's corpse, Horace was aware of the shooting stars of pain rocketing up his swollen left jaw.

"I," he announced, "am going home and take something for this toothache!"

WELL-fortified with a generous slug of Jaxon's Scotch, he rolled up the steps to his own apartment house half an hour later. He snapped his fingers at the car which slid to a curb across the street, surmising that Captain Burge had assigned its driver to watch over him till Monica Jaxon's killer was apprehended.

The toothache had again subsided to a dull humming in his jaw, and perhaps it was that fact, combined with the Scotch, which caused him to regard the visitor already waiting in his living room, with less than his customary discretion.

"Uh—hello, Sergeant," he blinked. "How'd you get here?"

Reilly grinned without mirth, his automatic centering accurately on Horace's navel. "Told the landlady I was an old chum of yours, back suddenly on furlough," he said.

Horace nodded, gratified. So far, he'd been merely an innocent bystander in the affair. Like so many of life's good things, the best part of this murder plot had passed him by. Reilly's visit, however, now gave him a definite claim to participation.

"How much did you lend her, Sergeant?" he asked gently.

Incredibly, the dark, saturnine paratrooper blushed, and Horace suddenly realized that he was really a very young, almost wistful young

This May Hurt a Little

man, despite the hard bitter slash of his mouth, the bleak black mask of his eyes. He sighed. War did that to them sometimes, he supposed.

"I didn't lend her anything!" Reilly snapped. "Why should I? Three months ago one of her uncles died and left her five times as much dough as I ever had!"

"How much was that?" Horace insisted.

The angular face dropped, clouded with pain. "Most of my pay for the past three years, plus the take from a couple lucky crap games," he admitted. "About three grand, all told, I guess."

Horace whistled softly.

"Look, ehum! Being a master sergeant in the paratroops overseas adds up!"

Horace nodded, a little wistful. "I know," he said glumly. "That's one of the branches I tried to join, too."

"You?"

"Yes. They rejected me, of course. Just like all the others. My teeth, you know."

"Oh." Reilly fidgeted uncomfortably. "We had a joint bank account!" he blurted. "We were trying to save up something to set up housekeeping on after the war—"

Horace averted his eyes. "What, if you'll pardon me, went wrong, Sergeant?"

"I got dropped too far behind the enemy lines one night. It took nine months before I was smuggled out. I was reported missing in action, and then, when I finally got back on furlough, I found she'd married *that!*"

The words broke off and the sergeant's face grew gray and taut. "If you're so damned patriotic, chum, how come you're mixed up with a chiseler like Jaxon? How much is he paying you for that phony alibi tonight? By God, I'm going to knock the truth out of you, if I have to break every tooth left in your head!"

Horace drew himself indignantly to his full five-feet-four. He removed his glasses and laid them beside a heavy reading lamp on the table, crooked his elbows, extended his fists, and generally assumed the stance of a pugilist in a gay nineties' woodcut.

"Call me a 4-F, will you!" he shouted. "Why, I'll—I'll knock your block off, that's what I'll do!"

Reilly was abashed. He laid aside the automatic and stood up, lowering his right shoulder. "I did not call you a 4-F," he growled. "But if it's a fight you want, I'm your man."

Horace promptly swept up the reading lamp and shattered it in the sergeant's black hair. Reilly's eyes swelled vacantly and he folded gently to the rug. Horace replaced his glasses, pocketed the automatic, and sighed.

"Believe me, Sergeant," he breathed, step-

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Ken Lewis

ping over the recumbent uniform, "I only did it for your own good."

Thirty seconds later he paused beside the car parked across the mist-swathed street below. "A Sergeant Reilly's waiting for you in my living room, Officer," he suggested.

The driver let out a yell and bolted for the apartment house entrance. Horace started to smile, then winced as a draught of rain-chilled air needled the defective molar. Jaxon's Scotch was beginning to wear off. . .

MARKHAM TERRACE, two blocks south, was the first bus stop before Harvey Street. Seven cars were parked at various intervals along the block east of it. Keeping discreetly to the shadows, Horace tried them all.

The first four were locked, the fifth was occupied by a teen-age swain and his jill, the sixth brought a drenched terrier yapping about his heels when he punched its horn button, and the horn of the seventh was out of order. He sighed and returned to the bus line.

The houses along Garrick Way, two blocks further south, were much more widely spaced. A lone convertible stood at the curb near the corner. It was empty and unlocked. Horace twisted the door handle, reached in, and pressed a finger against the plastic blob centering the steering wheel.

Three blaring musical notes, reminiscent of George M. Cohan and 1918, were the result.

As if in answer to a summons, a chrome and white-sided Packard coupe whooshed out of the darkness and pulled alongside, pressing Horace between it and the convertible. The hard-eyed blonde who leaned from the driver's seat said harshly: "Well, Mr. Potts! What are you doing here?"

Horace grinned weakly. "I knew you'd be back for the car as soon as the cops withdrew your bodyguard," he said. "You couldn't leave it here too long. Somebody might get suspicious and turn it in as abandoned."

Lottie Jaxon pursed her thin lips. "Whatever are you talking about, Mr. Potts?" she murmured absently. "It's raining. Get in."

Horace did. But not until he'd removed the automatic from his pocket. He placed it significantly on his right knee as he continued. "It had to be you. Your brother was right there at the Harvey Street bus stop all the time."

"But Mr. Potts, you saw me get off that five-ten bus from San Salmo. And the coroner said Monica couldn't have been killed before five-twenty-five!"

Horace nodded. "I saw you get off, but I didn't see you get on. Then I got to thinking about how late and crowded the busses were tonight, and I figured what must have hap-

This May Hurt a Little

pened. You had that convertible there parked near your work somewhere. When you left for the night, you merely jumped into it, drove to the apartment, killed Monica, and drove back here in time to board the bus just four blocks before you got off again at Harvey Street. The driver wouldn't remember—he was too darned busy. . .

"Because of the rain and the frequent stops, it took him thirty-five minutes to travel the five miles from San Salmo. That gave you plenty of time. And I guess you already knew about Sergeant Reilly's six o'clock appointment with Monica, and had sneaked the gun he'd left with her out of her dresser to kill her with."

He lifted the automatic and angled it warningly. "Miss Jaxon," he said stiffly, "I'm taking you in for murder. A private citizen can make an arrest when he's certain a crime has been committed. The police can pick up your brother later."

Miss Jaxon eyed the gun in his hand and laughed. As if by magic, a pudgy hand holding a five-cell flashlight appeared from the darkness of the luggage space behind the seat. She accepted the flashlight, hefted it speculatively.

"Nuts!" she said. "You wouldn't shoot a woman. You simply aren't the type."

She was right. Horace tried to squeeze the trigger, but he couldn't. He just couldn't. The flashlight descended on his skull with explosive suddenness. . .

HE had two headaches, now. One high, where the flashlight had landed—one low, where the tooth was getting in its licks. "Should have known they'd both be along," he thought foggily. "One to drive each car. . ." Somewhere, far, far above him, Lee and Lottie Jaxon conferred agitatedly.

"There's no use waiting, Lee. I'm going to get it over with right now."

"No! Hold it, Chick! If this dope could figure out the convertible, why not somebody else? We gotta find out how he did it!"

Horace felt his cheek being slapped. His right cheek, fortunately, away from the molar.

"How's about it, Jack? Why pick this jalopy? I rented it yesterday from Ace-High Finance. There wasn't anything to tie it to us."

Full consciousness swam back to Horace slowly. He opened one eye, saw Jaxon still hunched in the luggage space behind the seat, his fat face leering over the upholstery. Horace's grin was feeble.

"You had ants in your pants for the first half hour, back there at the bus stop," he said. "Then all at once you changed—as if you

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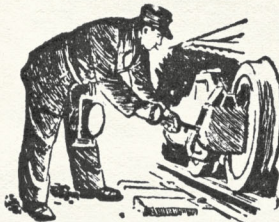
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RAILROAD MAGAZINE

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Ken Lewis

didn't have a care in the world. I couldn't see why at the time. . . Then later I remembered hearing a musical car horn in the next block, just before your transformation. That was Lottie on her way to the bus line, wasn't it, signaling you that everything was O.K., and you should go ahead and clinch the alibi?

"You wore that crazy coat and cap so anybody who saw you would remember you later. After that, all you had to do was corner some stranger who'd seen you there all the time, and make sure he also saw Lottie getting off the San Salmo bus."

He sat up groggily. "But you've got a tiger by the tail now. When the cops find out I've disappeared, after Reilly was captured, they're going to be darned suspicious of the alibi I gave you. And I won't be around to testify for you at the trial."

Lottie nodded grimly. "We'll make it look like just another hold-up," she said. "This is a nice dark street. We'll dump your body on the parkway, pockets inside out, and the police'll think you just went out for a stroll and got mugged. . . Go ahead, Lee. Reach over that seat and twist his neck, or whatever they do. You know—"

An eerie feather of fear blew along Horace's spine. Another followed it, then another, like the aftermath of a grisly pillow fight. He stared at the automatic now in Lottie's hand, and swallowed. But somehow, he kept his voice from shaking.

"He hasn't got the guts. He didn't have the guts to kill his wife, or even conk me a minute ago with the flashlight. You have to do those things for him. He's nothing but a pipsqueak hotshot with a few shady connections—"

"She was in it, too!" Jaxon screamed. "She handled the woman's end—nylons and girdles. Why shouldn't she do some of the work? We always split the profits."

The blonde scoffed. "What profits? All I ever got was a headache and a lot of bills! Why shouldn't I want some of the dough Monica's uncle left her?"

Horace nodded. "And which your brother, as Monica's husband, would inherit. . . I knew you were both hard up. If that black market business was paying off, he wouldn't be trying to peddle his stuff to strangers on street corners. A black market's the most highly speculative investment in the world. A fathead like him wouldn't have either the sense or the courage to compete successfully with the big combines that run such things."

Lottie eyed him reproachfully. "You shouldn't talk like that about Lee, Mr. Potts," she said. She reached over, catlike, and raked the gun barrel along his swollen jaw.

This May Hurt a Little

Something snapped in Horace's brain. That was the only way he could explain it, afterwards. As the hot rivets of pain ribboned up his cheek from the blow, everything went red. He seized her gun arm before she could withdraw it, fastened his teeth, in her wrist. The teeth on the right side of his mouth, of course—not the molar.

She screamed. She stabbed spiked heels against his shins. But Horace didn't even feel them. He was beyond any new pain now. The fire in his jaw had spread over his whole being, bathing him in exquisite torture. His teeth burrowed deeper in the flesh of her wrist, found bone.

The gun slipped from her fingers and he took it, crashed it into her corn-colored curls just as the flashlight in Jaxon's fist ricocheted off his purpling cheek.

He turned in the seat, shouting hoarsely, and swung the gun again. He heard a hollow chunk, watched Jaxon's fat face disappear slowly, wonderingly, behind the seat back. He failed the gun once more at the spot where the green-and-yellow beanie had once rested, then tugged the inert blonde to his side of the seat and took her place behind the wheel. Reeling, he nosed the Packard toward police headquarters. . .

CAPTAIN BURGE laid aside Horace's dictated statement, and ordered Reilly released. He permitted himself a fatherly grin. "Reporters outside howling to interview you, Potts," he said. "Can't hold 'em off much longer."

Horace groaned and pointed to his jaw, which now looked as if both halves of a malignant case of double mumps had settled in it. "Can't talk any more, Cap'n," he mouthed thickly. "Damn toot'!"

Burge's blunt face darkened with concern. "You come with me," he said firmly. "Doc Deal, the city dentist, has his office right next door."

Emery Deal, DDS, shook his head profoundly and gave Horace permission to close his throbbing mouth. "This may hurt a little," he confided brightly. "Infection's gone so far I'm afraid of an anesthetic. But I guess that's a small matter, at most, to someone who's just caught two dangerous murderers single-handed."

Then the doctor's eyes bulged and his jaw went slack as he realized the utter futility of an anesthetic anyway, under the circumstances.

Horace Potts had taken one look at the forceps in his hand, shuddered miserably, and passed out cold.

THE END

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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 8)

salesmen in the school building. In order to gain admission, the man must have a written permission from the superintendent, and it was only a few charitable organizations and school-supply salesmen who ever received this permission.

One evening after the children had left, a young man came to my door presenting a very special offer. After I had inquired, he stated that he had permission from Mr. H. and that it was quite all right, since this was an offer open only to schoolteachers. It seemed that several of the leading magazines were offering their periodicals to teachers at a small introductory offer to cover the cost of mailing for three years. He was very charming, discussed magazines and their comparative merits for some time, and cleverly learned during the course of the conversation that I usually bought my magazines at the Corner drugstore. Since I would be getting a magazine that normally cost seven dollars for three years for the small sum of two dollars, I agreed to the arrangement, signed the order blank and gave the man a check for two dollars.

After he left, I realized that I had not seen the order allowing him entry into our building, so I immediately consulted the principal. She, of course, said that no such permission had been given and advised me to stop payment on the check, which I did.

The next day I received a phone call from the owner of the Corner drugstore. He asked why payment had been stopped on my check and disclosed the fact that he had cashed it since he knew my signature and was sure it was all right. I explained the situation, but Mr. B., the owner of the drugstore, was none too pleased over the situation. I compromised by asking him to write to the company that published the magazine, and promised him that if the company did not return the money, I would make the check good.

Some time later Mr. B. received a letter from the company stating that the two dollars paid to the salesman constituted his commission and that the company was in no way responsible for their salesman. If I would send the remaining five dollars, the magazine would be sent to me for three years.

By this time I was so furious at myself, the salesman and the magazine house that if the fee had been only an additional fifty cents I would not have sent it in. I refunded Mr. B's two dollars, and to this day I have never subscribed to that particular magazine nor admitted a magazine salesman.

Mrs. R. H.
Carlsbad, N. M.

HERE'S a smooth-working swindle with the accent on philately in this instance, but capable of being worked on other lines as well.

Ready for the Rackets

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Gentlemen:

I had been collecting stamps for some years when in high school and, having graduated, I lost interest in them. Upon the advice of a friend, I went to a certain stamp and coin exchange store and asked if they bought collections. I was assured that they did and also paid the highest prices. I then over to look at my collection.

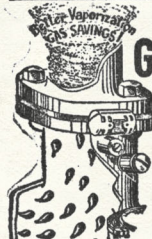
He told me they employed an appraiser for this very purpose and if I would leave my name and address the man would be sent over to look at my collection.

The next evening a man arrived who claimed to represent the firm. I showed him my collection and he quoted a price which I considered high. Then he wrote out a check and left, taking my collection with him.

Later that evening another man arrived who also claimed to be representing the stamp and coin store. I told him about his predecessor, but he denied that the firm had any other representative, apologized and left.

The next day I tried to cash the check at the bank and was told it was worthless. So I went to an attorney and told him my story. The lawyer explained to me the lengthy procedure involved in trying to pin down

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Ready for the Rackets

such a swindle. He asked me the value of the collection and told me it would cost more trying to recover the money than the stamps were worth. Upon the attorney's advice, I dropped the whole thing, adding one more to the list of people who are duped by this racket every year.

"Just a Sucker"

AND still the rackets aimed at bilking servicemen and their families continue. Here's a particularly vicious one to beware of:

The Racket Editor

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Gentlemen:

On day last month a man dressed in a soldier's uniform stopped at the house of a friend of mine, whom I shall call Mrs. Smith.

This pseudo-soldier said he was passing through her town on leave and had been authorized by her son to collect fifteen dollars which my friend's son had borrowed.

Mrs. Smith, having no reason to doubt the man, paid him the required amount of money. When she notified her son of this, he promptly wrote her he owed no one any money.

As you can see, it would be very easy for these bogus servicemen to get the names of their victims from the community honor roll.

I hope this will aid in helping to squash this racket. Being a serviceman myself I hate to think that my folks could be victimized as Mrs. Smith was.

David John Rinaldi, AMM2/c
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Classified Advertising

(Continued)

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The Whisperer

(Continued from page 39)

his hotel that night? Did he come upon me by chance or had he followed me secretly from bar to bar, watching me lose possession of myself, drink by drink, while a plot of murder shaped itself slowly and monstrously in his mind? . . . By what strange coincidence did the hotel seem to catch on fire at the very time I lay drunk and helpless on my bed, and after my frantic jump from the window who descended to the alley to replace the topcoat on my shoulders? Who removed all identification from my pockets—all but that tell-tale cigarette case lost in the room above? . . . Who wadded my corpse-like body into some waiting machine, drove me away, and deposited me, seemingly dead, beneath that high bridge which I had seen as in a dream? Who made me into a dummy suicide? Who else but—

The clerk was saying: "You were mistaken in the floor, too, Mr. Cornwall."

"No!" I roared. I knew he was right, but I didn't want to believe. I slapped the desk. "No! I couldn't have been mistaken in that! I jump—I jumped. . ." My voice fell to a whisper: "It was Room 111."

"But you *were* mistaken. It's impossible to have the wrong number on these cards. The numbers are printed on. See!"

I had to take a mental hand to the back of my head and push it down to look at that card. I traced down his finger to three black figures in the corner of the card. There was the room number, indelible, forever: 711.

I TRIED to turn, but my feet wouldn't budge. The clerk was speaking again.

"I have the card of the other gentleman, the man in the next room, Mr. Cornwall. You were asking about that. . . There, you can see the signature for yourself. Don't you want to see it, Mr.—"

I snatched the card from him, crushed it in my palm. "No!" I hissed at him.

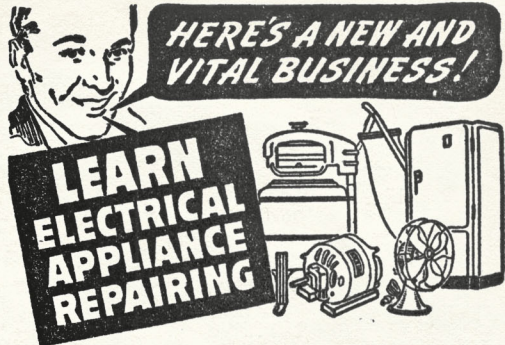
I knew what would be on that card. Not the right name, perhaps, but the handwriting—that unmistakable squeezed handwriting. There was only one man in my experience who would trick a drunken fool into murdering himself and call that trick an act of justice! My half-brother. *Henry!*

"No!" I threw the card in the clerk's face.

I struggled to turn. Something broke then and I went stumbling across the lobby. I hit the revolving door with my shoulder and spilled through it.

I saw my cab and turned away from it, turned and ran up the street with terror leaping in my heart.

THE END



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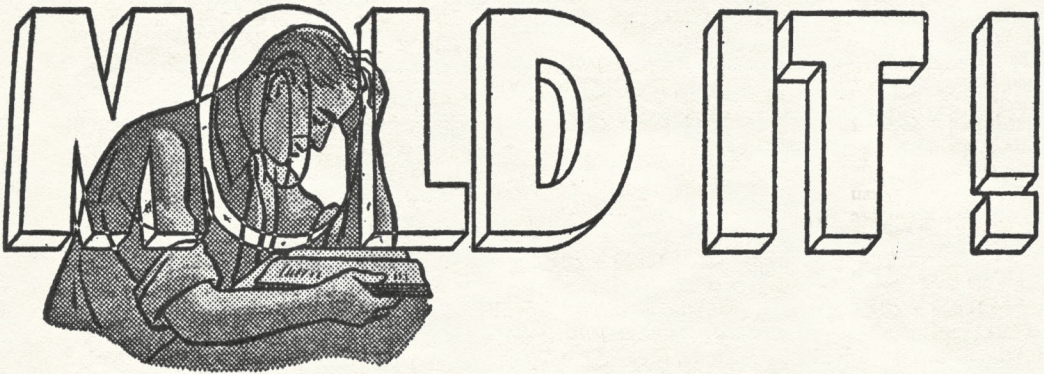
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