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MAY

15¢ **DIME
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE**

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

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AN INSPECTOR ALLHOFF STORY
by **D.L. CHAMPION**

LET'S TRADE CORPSES
A "HIGH" PRICE NOVELETTE
by **DALE CLARK**

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Inside front cover

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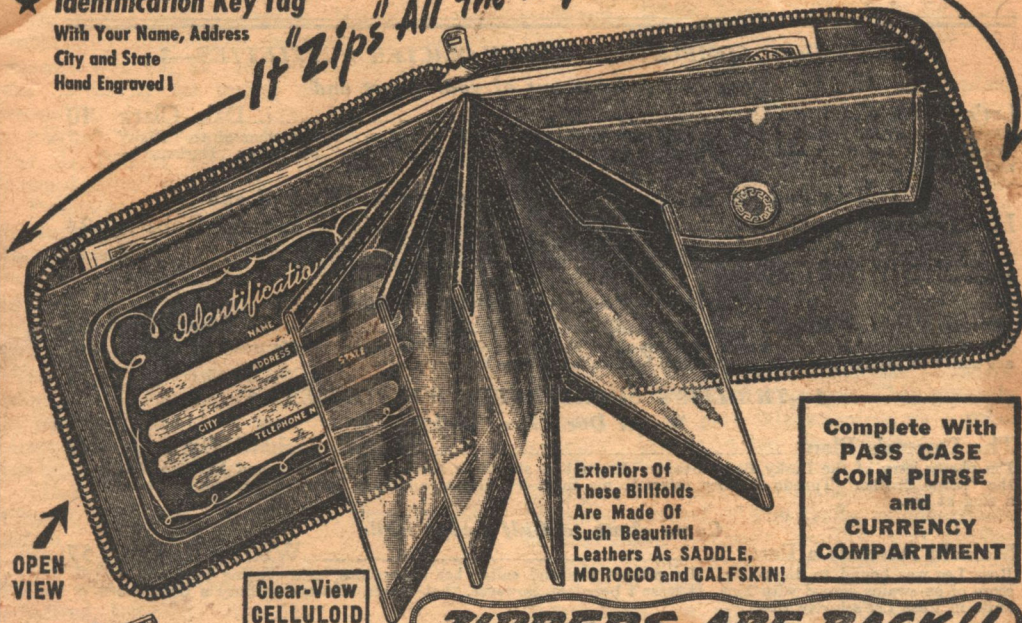
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DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

EVERY STORY COMPLETE

EVERY STORY NEW—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 48

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The June Issue will be out May 4th

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THE JUNE THRILL DOCKET



THREE long complete novelettes about three of your favorite series characters!

The Corpse Takes a Wife by FREDERICK C. DAVIS brings back Bill Brent to drop, at long last, his Lora Lorne alias and resume his rightful place in the *Recorder's* newsroom. The hardbitten reporter had scarcely parked himself in his old swivel in front of the police-news desk, heaved his first sigh of relief and begun to feel like a man again, however, before the new incumbent of his just-vacated heart-throb-and-advice-to-the-lovelorn cubicle pulled the prize boner of the century. *Why don't you kill the louse?* was her first bit of advice to the victim of unrequited passion who wrote in for comfort. And damned if the gal didn't follow it to a T. . . . RECORDER'S FEATURE WRITER COUNSELS MURDER! . . . Brent could just see the headlines in the rival sheets if he didn't do something about it. His old job would be blasted out from under him in the wreck of a great paper before he'd even got the swivel warm.

And T. T. FLYNN brings back Mr. Maddox—that bland Buddha of the bangtail circuit—to seize the opportunity offered by the temporary lull in racing activities to collect a rubber check from a Washington publishing tycoon whose gambling honor had proved just as minus a quantity as his newspaper ethics. Maddox didn't have too much trouble getting the welshing magnate to make good, but he'd just as soon not have had a corpse handed to him along with a new piece of paper. But murder bounces as far as a rubber check sometimes, Maddox knew. Now all he had to do was toss it back and hope it didn't knock him into a slayer's cell on the rebound.

Then there's another thrilling High Price story by DALE CLARK in which the shake-down shamus collects as usual from everyone involved in the case—guilty as well as innocent. Plus short stories by TOM MARVIN and others.

This great JUNE issue will be out MAY 4th.



Ready for the Rackets A Department

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a foreknowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in, telling us your own personal experiences with chisellers 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.

IT SEEMS that The Great White Way can become rather shady. Just which side of the law this little enterprise leans toward should be demonstrated in the following letter:

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

Inasmuch as I was once involved in a racket similar to the one exposed by Inez Porter in your December issue, a few words might save a few dollars for your readers.

A middle-aged man and a fancy-looking dame ran this thing up on 58th and Broadway in New York. Another kid and I were employed in the place. It was our duty, every morning, to read the daily trade papers, noting new arrivals in town, the openings of new shops and all such promotion schemes. We used to garner about a hundred items a day.

On each, we would write about a hundred words. Then the couple got busy. They would get the prospective customer on the phone, read the item, and ask if it would be O.K. to print it. There would usually be an eager affirmative.

The come-on gal would get her list of suckers together and sally forth. When she returned, she would have a wad of happy cabbage and the names of the guys who wanted a thousand copies of *Cosmopolitan Business Magazine* or *Up and Coming Industrial Review* at a "special" price of thirty-five cents a copy. These were printed free by some printer who was given sundry notices in the text and a full-page advertisement free. About the only thing the couple paid for was the paper and the telephone. Even the office and the typewriters cost nothing because the owner was a friend of the boss and we kids worked on commission.

Wish I had more time to write about a few more rackets. I think Broadway invented most of them.

Pvt. M. Spahn
Camp Crowder, Mo.

TAKING advantage of bereaved persons is a shame that has always needed to be erased from our national record. It would be a

(Continued on page 8)

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Examine the National Shop Method of Home Training carefully. Be convinced. Study the lesson we will send you FREE. No obligation of any sort. Fill out the coupon and mail it today.



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(Continued from page 6)

pleasure, indeed, to aid in exposing anyone who operates in the manner related in the following letter.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

About the most despicable piece of business ever hatched up by the petty racketeer element, to my mind, is the ghoulish business of preying upon those who have been bereaved recently.

Usually the swindler, having perused the obituary columns of a local newspaper, calls upon his intended victim, often the widow or children, and states that an insurance policy has been issued to the deceased. This is a pleasant surprise for the intended victim is usually a person of limited means and the vision of a substantial sum dances before his eyes invitingly.

"Unfortunately," the swindler goes on in his suavest tones, "the policy has been allowed to lapse—unintentionally, of course. But if you wish to make the quarterly premium, past due, we shall be glad to pay."

Smoothly, he tells the victim that he will be glad to accept the premium and make application to the company. He displays various credentials, all of them cleverly forged, of course.

Seldom does anyone, unless forewarned and on the guard for this type of swindle, question the authenticity of the credentials. So out comes the pocketbook and away goes our racketeer with ten, twenty or thirty dollars, whatever his shrewd sizing-up of the victim has told him will be forthcoming.

And sometime later the bereaved person discovers that he has been made the victim of one of the cruelest hoaxes on record.

I. P.
Lockport, N. Y.

BEWARE of this wolf in sheep's clothing who solicits "deposits" on men's custom-made suits.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

Recently, while a friend and I were in our neighborhood tavern, a very neatly-dressed man of about thirty came in and sat next to us. He immediately started a conversation and informed us that he had just finished calling on his last customer for the day. The customer he mentioned was a dentist in our neighborhood. His pleasant way of talking soon had us asking his business, whereupon he produced a briefcase and drew out a sample book of materials and pictures of men's suits. While we were looking through this book, he showed us his order book in which appeared authorization from the dentist for the order of two suits. The sample and order books were very genuine-looking and the price of the suits, made to order, was very reasonable. A two-dollar deposit was all

that was necessary; he would take our measurements and within three weeks he would deliver the suits personally. He said the two-dollar deposit was his commission. Not only did he take my friend's and my measurements, but those of several other people as well. That was the last any of us saw of our two-dollar deposits and we are still waiting for our suits.

Julius Cizmadia
Cleveland 4, Ohio

RARE Egyptian lily bulbs. Just shipped back from Africa as ballast on cargo vessels returning from the war zone. What flower lover wouldn't be intrigued with such bait?

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

It was just about a year ago that a well-dressed team hit our town, a conservatively-dressed man and woman, both of obviously cultured backgrounds and both well-versed in the geographic background of their product. After circulating through the local school system, they went on to the next town and the next, and as far as we know, they are still on the job, coining from fifty to one hundred dollars a day out of nothing.

Being familiar with the standard rule barring canvassers from interfering with teachers during school hours, this pair cleverly and carefully avoided all contact with the various school principals and went directly from room to room. Each teacher approached was first of all assured that the principal's permission had been obtained for a two-minute interview "because of the great scarcity of these Egyptian bulbs and because of the great interest they would arouse on the part of the children. If planted in the classroom, they would sprout in two weeks and would bear flowers as shown in these lovely pictures."

In the course of a day, this shifty pair with their veneer of culture and their pretext of beautifying the classroom and lightening the teacher's burden, filtered on through school after school, selling their wonderful lily bulbs for the very moderate price of fifty cents and one dollar apiece. Few teachers, lulled by the implied consent and approval of the principal, could resist this wonderful offer and few bought less than two or three dollars' worth. Of course, close investigation proved that the alleged Egyptian bulbs were actually native to our own neighboring Hackensack River swamps and would produce nothing more exotic than ordinary swamp weeds and cattails.

R. H.
Bogota, N. J.

HERE'S a new wrinkle to the magazine subscription racket. The swindle has many forms—all of them equally unscrupulous—so
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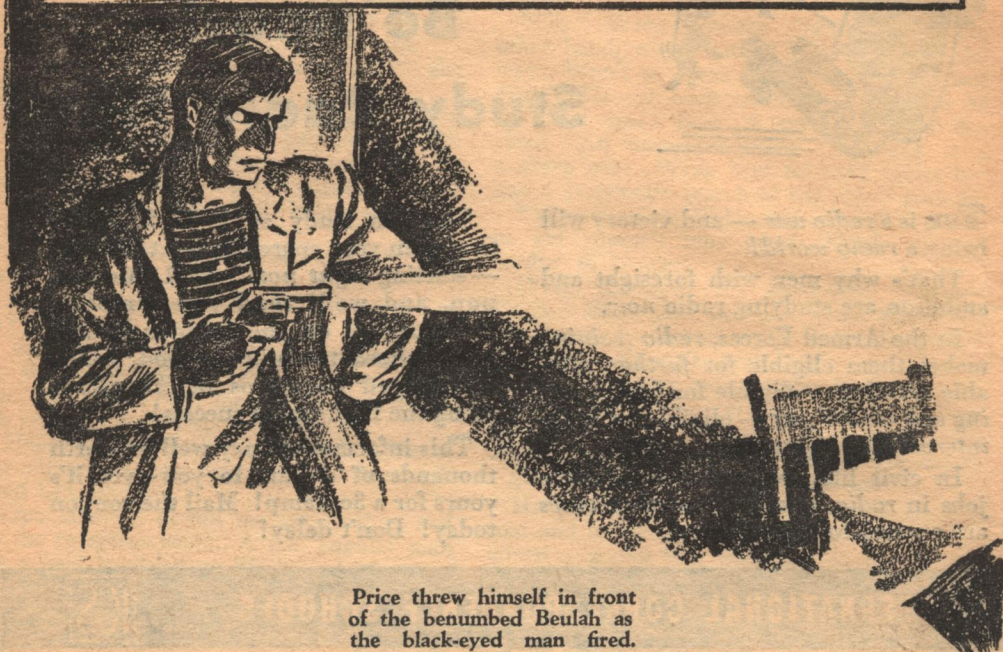
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LET'S TRADE CORPSES

A "High" Price Novelette



Price threw himself in front of the benumbed Beulah as the black-eyed man fired.

Caroline Starr was big, brunette and bosomy. She was mad, too. "I want my husband back!" she announced to "High" Price. "Frank's an awful heel, but he's my heel and I'm going to find him if it takes ten years!" But Frank Starr had other plans. He had an appointment with "Redsiewedsie" — his own ever-loving "Duckems" — and with death!

CHAPTER ONE

Missing Male

BEULAH RANDY entered the inner office, stared at the lean-cheeked, rawhide-and-rattan built man behind the desk, and gasped: "Mr. Price! Be careful! You'll shoot yourself!"

Highland Park Price, the private detective better known as "High" Price, sat with a belly-gun in one hand and an oil patch in the other.

His beautiful blond secretary's fear of fire-

arms was an old story to Price. Without looking up from the mechanism of the weapon, he scoffed: "Relax, angel-face. I'm only lubricating the firing-pin, a detail the average shooter forgets all about when he cleans a rod."

"Oh, put the ugly old thing away," Beulah requested nervously. "Anyway, there's a Mrs. Caroline Starr waiting to see you."

"A who? What does she want?"

Mrs. Caroline Starr wasn't waiting—she loomed in the doorway behind Beulah's slim figure.

"I want my husband back!" the newcomer

By DALE CLARK

Author of "Corpses on Parade," etc.



announced. "Frank's an awful heel, but he's *my* heel, and I'm going to find him if it takes ten years!"

High Price slid his hand artillery inside his coat lapel to an armpit holster, stared at his caller with a coldly appraising eye.

Caroline Starr was big, brunette, and bosomy. She was mad, too. Her get-up included an extreme hat, too much face makeup, sleazy furs, and a suspiciously ersatz-looking sapphire on her right hand. On the left was an equally phony-looking diamond and a white gold wedding band.

Highland Park Price wasn't impressed. "Ten years of whose time?" he queried in cold, commercial tones. "This isn't the Police

Missing Persons bureau, and I don't draw a salary from the taxpayers. As I tell all my clients, you can lay it on the line in cold cash, or you can take it on the lam out of here."

Beulah Randy rounded shocked blue eyes at her employer, as she always did when Price embarked on the financial, or hijacking end of his business.

The big brunette woman sat down, smiled, said: "The police were right about you, Mr. Price. They warned me you were a shake-down artist, that you had a soul like a slot-machine. I figured you must be good if you can get by with that reputation." She tugged at the zipper of a lizard purse, spread a hundred dollars in twenties on the detective's

desk, with a face that said: "So there smartie!"

Price studied the brunette with shrewd gray eyes. "How long has the guy been missing?"

"A week, but actually, the whole thing started a month ago. That's when he met this man Calluder on the train—anyway, that's the story he told me."

Price nodded to Beulah, who seated herself unobtrusively at the side of the room and steadied a steno book on her shapely knee. "Wait a minute. Who's Calluder?"

"I don't know. I never met him. I even have a hunch there is no such man."

Price said: "I guess you'd better start by telling me this story as your husband told it to you."

THE brunette nodded. "Frank and I live out in Rivermont Heights. He takes the electric train to work. He is—he was employed as a draftsman at the La Salle Construction Company. He said he and Calluder got to talking. It seemed, by a lucky coincidence, that Calluder wanted to hire a trustworthy, reliable draftsman. He told Frank he was an inventor. He'd invented some kind of rocket motor. He offered Frank five dollars an hour to draw some plans which were to be submitted to the patent office."

High Price mused: "That's good pay, even for these times."

"It was overtime work, night work," Caroline Starr explained. "The work had to be done at Calluder's home, with Calluder watching every move. He wouldn't even show Frank more than one piece of the machine at a time. He seemed terribly afraid someone would steal his idea from him. Frank would work at it one or two nights a week, not getting home until two o'clock in the morning. At least," she became grim, "that's what he told me he'd been doing until two o'clock in the morning."

"Had you any reason to doubt it?"

She shrugged. "Not at the time. He brought home the money all right. I noticed he smelled of liquor once or twice, but he got around that by saying Calluder insisted on pouring him a night-cap."

Price drummed bony fingers on the desk. "That was during the last month. What about last week?"

Caroline Starr said slowly: "Frank told me Calluder was going to Detroit to demonstrate this machine to a big manufacturer. He wanted Frank to go with him. He said if the deal went through, they'd rush in the patent papers and Frank would get a nice fat bonus. So Frank packed his suitcase and left."

"You haven't heard from him since?"

The brunette's eyes flashed. "That's just it! I hate, and also, I found a note in one of his sweaters I was sending out to the cleaners."

Indignantly, she rasped open the handbag,

delved into it, and handed the sleuth a letter.

High Price read:

Dear Caroline:

I'm sorry it had to end this way. But then you never cared about me—only my father's money. I've found happiness with another woman. This is good-by. You'll never see me again.

Frank

"If you ask me," Caroline Starr exclaimed, "there never was such a man as Calluder. I'm almost sure Frank spent those evenings with that red-headed she-tramp he ran off with!"

The detective looked up. "You know who she is?"

"Not exactly, but I did find this in his pocket."

"This" was a single page of green, deckle-edged stationery heavily scented with heliotrope. In bright violet ink it began, "Dear Duckems," and after that followed a lot of passionate language winding up with the signature: "Your Redsie-wedsie."

Price passed the missive to Beulah Randy, grinned broadly as he watched an embarrassed flush color the girl's cheeks. So far, the "facts of life" were just something Beulah Randy had read about in books.

He asked: "Did you find any more clues in your husband's pockets?"

"No. Just some pencil stubs and an old taxi receipt, or whatever you call them."

"You mean one of those slips of paper the cabby tears out of the meter and hands over when you pay your fare. Have you got that along, too?"

"Yes, I think so. I put it in my purse—I thought the police could use it."

High Price studied the receipt stub for a ninety-cent ride.

Frowning, the brunette declared: "The police told me there was no law stating a man has to *live* with his wife. I got the idea a private detective could do more for me."

Price nodded. "Sure, the cops aren't hired to catch Casanovas . . ." His voice trailed off as he opened a desk drawer, turned the pages of a local commercial credit rating volume. Abruptly he asked: "Frank's wealthy father wouldn't be W. H. Starr, president of the Starr Pattern Products Company, would he?"

His client hesitated, said: "That's right, but you don't need to worry about *him*. You just get busy and find Frank and that woman, and believe me, when I lay my hands on her, I'll 'duckems' her plenty!"

ONCE more she fumbled in the handbag, this time to produce a studio photograph in an artboard folder. "I suppose you'll want a picture of him, and this is the best one I've got."

Highland Park Price glanced at the photo-

graphed features of a black-haired, Latin-type male—carelessly at first, and then sharply.

"Was your husband ever in any trouble, ever arrested for any crime?"

"No. What makes you ask that?"

"Merely curiosity concerning his habits of living," the detective reassured her. "O.K., Mrs. Starr, my secretary will give you a receipt for your money on your way out."

Beulah Randy escorted the brunette to the outer office, scribbled the receipt, and bade the client good day. Then, tight-lipped, she returned to the inner office.

"So you've finally stooped to it!" the girl derided. "When I took this job, you assured me I'd be working for a legitimate criminal investigator who wouldn't descend to snooping at keyholes in love triangle cases!"

Beulah Randy spoke hotly, for under the sultry allure of her creamblood exterior the girl was as high-minded as the Hays Office.

They made a queer team—the sharpshooting, shakedown sleuth and the Sunday school-style private secretary! Actually, of course, there was nothing queer about it. Price's well-known habit of trying to squeeze fees out of three or four different clients in every case he handled made it absolutely necessary that he have an assistant he could trust, or he'd have lost his license long ago.

High Price chuckled. "Angel-face, you're awful innocent when it comes to love triangles! Didn't you notice something sort of wrong in that story of hers?"

"No-o, what?"

Price grinned. "Why, a married man playing around with another dame—and telling his wife he's earning five dollars an hour doing it! You see, Beulah, a guy who's playing like that hasn't got any extra cash to shower on his own legal wife! A husband on the loose always thinks up some alibi which won't cost him any dough, like having to sit up with a sick friend. And where did he get the money, the twenty-five or thirty dollars per night he must have brought home?"

Beulah stared. "You mean, you believe that Calluder story?"

Highland Park Price waggled a bony hand. "No, a smart detective doesn't believe anything until it's been backed up by eye-witnesses—and then, half the time *they're* lying."

Pacing the office with long, scissoring strides, Price threw out: "And that's not all. I can't remember where, but I swear I've seen that phizz of Frank Starr's in a rogues' gallery somewhere!" He shook his head. "Another thing! If he's the son of a millionaire like W. H. Starr, why is Caroline running around wearing imitation mink and ersatz jewelry? Why is Frank himself working as a draftsman, instead of being a high-salaried vice president in his old man's business? I tell

you, Beulah, there's a lot that woman wasn't telling."

Price's line of reasoning seemed to worry Beulah. The girl burst out: "You're not going to see him, are you, and collect another fee from him, on top of Caroline's hundred dollars?"

"No, I'm not going to see him, but you are!" Price peered at his strapwatch, declared: "It's almost lunch hour—just time for you to beat it out to Ninth Street and catch a sandwich with some of the stenographers coming out of the Starr Company office. You can pretend you're a new employee, you've heard some dirt, and you want the real low-down from some of the old-timers."

CHAPTER TWO

The Last Call

THE cab company official eyed the taxi receipt, said: "Yes, this is from one of our meters. Number 292, one of the older machines."

High Price queried: "Who drives the heap?"

"I'll have to look and see. Ours is a cooperative concern—that is, the men own their cabs." The official returned from a brief study of the records. "Number 292 is operated by Mr. Patrick O'Dernoddy, operating out of our sub-garage at Moordale."

"That's the next station to Rivermont, isn't it?" Price mused.

Saving cabfare, he took the electric inter-urban train. Patrick O'Dernoddy was wrapping his mouth around a hamburger at a lunch counter across the street from the sub-garage. The cabby nodded response to Highland Price's question.

"Yeah, it's funny, but I remember riding that bird out to Rivermont. I was scared, see? It looked like a stick-up to me."

"How so?"

"Well, this was along between one and two A.M. I went out on a phone call to pick up a fare at this address on Howell Street. But when I get there, the house is dark and this mugg wearing a sweater is waiting on the sidewalk for me. That don't look so good to me—it's an old dodge to put through a call using any old address and then they shove a gun into your neck. So I took myself a careful squint at this guy in case I should ever have to pick him out of a police line-up," O'Dernoddy explained.

High Price flapped open his briefcase, displayed the studio portrait of Frank Starr. "Do you recognize him?"

"Uh-huh, but brother, that picture sure as hell don't take anything away from the guy!"

Price closed the briefcase. "Now, the ad-

dress on Howell Street? Can you recall it?"

O'Dernoddy napkined his lips with the back of his hand. "Son of a gun, I don't remember the number at all! Still, if we was to drive out that way I could pick out the place for you."

"O.K., let's pull the flag on your heap."

The house before which O'Dernoddy stopped was a brown frame structure of one and a half stories, separated from its neighbors by weed-grown lots on each side.

"You're sure now?" Price demanded.

"Yeah. I remember slowing down for that bump in the pavement right ahead of here."

The sleuth leaned back against the cushions. "O.K., slow down for it again, and then stop around the corner from here."

Price trudged back on foot, feeling that the briefcase would enable him to pose as a house-to-house canvasser. No one answered when he buzzed the brown house's front door, and the drawn green window blinds frustrated his curiosity. Strolling around to the rear porch, he found milk bottles that had been accumulating on the steps for the last three days.

Balancing one foot on the topmost step and the other on a water faucet piping from the basement wall, Highland Park Price craned to catch a glimpse through the small, uncurtained kitchen window.

"Great hopping Hottentot!" High Price ejaculated.

Sprawled on the linoleum floor lay the body of a coatless man. The unbuttoned shirt revealed a body wound, crudely bandaged with a bath towel. Another towel was inconsiderately draped over the corpse's face. Inconsiderately—because the detective couldn't tell whether or not this was the body of the man he was being paid one hundred dollars to locate.

He decided to test the window sash. It wasn't locked. Maybe it was considered too small for a prowler to crawl through. It was small, a tight squeeze, but Price made it.

Bending over, he gingerly lifted the towel from the dead man's pale, lardy face.

"Holy smoke!" High Price vocalized his genuine surprise. "It's Lou Call!"

THERE was nothing remarkable about the detective's instant recognition of the victim. Price's profession compelled him to put in a certain amount of time in the courts, and Lou Call had been a familiar, pathetic figure among the local lawyers.

Highland Park Price had heard it gossiped that way back around World War I, Call had been the promising junior partner in an ultra-respectable legal firm handling the affairs of the best families in town. He'd even been politically prominent, had been appointed to the State Prison Board, when the scandal

broke. Call had been caught with his arm up to the elbow in the public purse, as High Price remembered the story.

There'd been no actual prosecution—somehow the money had been replaced—but it'd been the end of Lou Call's brilliant career. Of late years, he had been just a bleary-eyed shyster, scavenging for such odds and ends of a legal practice as could be scraped up in the bullpens of the municipal courts.

Finding Lou Call dead could have been explained a dozen ways, only one of which interested High Price. "What the hell's his connection with Frank Starr?" the sleuth muttered.

The corpse didn't answer.

Mr. Price grimaced as he peered inside the bandage. The wound was a small-caliber affair, probably a .32, he figured. A .32 loaded with old-style black powder ammunition, Price reasoned from the powder burns on the coat front.

There was something else about the coat. It was the upper half of an English drape suit, adorned with the label of a fashionable tailor whose minimum cover charge was a cold hundred bucks.

One more detail contrasted oddly with the slain shyster's last-hour prosperity. To High Price's astonishment, the palms of the dead lawyer's hands were puffy with fresh, reddened callouses.

"He couldn't have been guilty of an honest day's manual labor, could he?" the detective wondered.

There was no gun in the kitchen—apparently, none in the house. In the bathroom, though, Price found a pervasive odor of heliotrope perfume and a comb containing a few strands of long, red hair.

"The cops won't miss just one teensie-weenie hair," he hoped, helping himself.

The cops had to be notified, of course. Highland Park Price paused at the hall telephone to declare, "I want a policeman—" and refused to mention his own name. Long ago, he had found out that clients who wanted their troubles reported to the cops didn't bother to pay cash to private dicks in the first place. In fact, clients didn't bother private dicks who had a reputation for friendliness with the law.

"You mean Mrs. Dahl," the woman next door replied to his query. "I haven't seen her around, oh, for a week. She doesn't show herself much in the daytime, anyway. Has to sleep sometime, I expect."

"Meaning she works nights?"

"Some people might call it work."

"And Mr. Dahl?"

"I never saw him. From what *she* says he's in the army, but judging from the men coming and going at all hours of the night he ain't missed much." She froze to attention. "I

declare! Why, there's a police car stopping there now!"

Highland Park Price had no wish to pass the time of day with any policeman just now, so he took to the alley on his way back to the cab.

"Downtown," he told O'Dernoddy. "The Slater Building."

THE detective's thoughts were grim during the journey. They centered upon Lou Call's new suit of clothes, and the twenty-five or thirty dollars a night which Frank Starr had presumably obtained from "Calluder."

"Call—Calluder. Could be, they're one and the same guy!" Price suspected.

He knew, though, that Lou Call hadn't had that kind of cash to throw around. Thirty bucks would have paid a month's rent on the shabbily furnished, hole-in-the-wall that had *L. V. Call, Attorney-at-Law* lettered on its door.

Inside, a bored female with buck teeth stopped typing a legal paper of some description, told him: "I'm sorry, Lou can't be reached. He's out of town."

That Lou Call couldn't be reached was no news to Highland Park Price. The question was, how had it been possible for the lawyer to be dead for several days without anyone

even noticing that he wasn't around?

After all, Call maintained this office, such as it was. He had clients, riffraff though most of them were. And even though his cases paid off in pin-money, nevertheless they demanded his appearance in court.

Indeed, Price mused, it was just this sort of practice a lawyer couldn't leave for a minute. A really important legal hearing can be postponed almost indefinitely. A municipal court docket won't wait.

Price made his lean-cheeked features solemn, his voice harshly urgent. "Sister, I gotta get in touch with your boss! Or else I gotta get some other mouthpiece quick! The judge ain't going to wait forever!"

The buck-toothed woman sighed, wetted her lips unhappily. "Well-I, it's strictly against my orders. Mr. Call told me he didn't want to be disturbed by anything or anybody. But he's taking a week's vacation at Temulcah."

High Price stared. "Temulcah? That's the state penitentiary, and one hell of a pleasure resort!"

She giggled. "I mean *Lake Temulcah*. It's on the other side of town, across the lake from the prison. Lou's staying at a fishing lodge he rented from a man named Shack. I dunno, you might be able to reach it by telephone. Anyway," she glanced down at the document

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in the typewriter, "he phoned me to fix this up."

The parallel was clear. Frank Starr had told his wife he was going to Detroit. The slain lawyer had told his secretary he was going fishing. Both alibis, High Price reasoned, could have been formed in the same brain and for the same purpose.

He fretted. "When do you expect him back? How long's he been gone, anyway?"

"A week," Call's secretary confirmed the detective's hunch. "Excuse me," she added, jumping up as a phone rang.

Lou Call's office included no such luxury as a switchboard. She had to cross the room to the attorney's desk to pick up the instrument.

Behind her, Price stepped close, craned to inspect the legal form in the typewriter and blinked. It seemed to be some sort of habeas corpus proceeding in the case of one Erna Dahl, prisoner in the Temulcah County Jail.

"L. V. Call's office," the girl was saying. "Hello? You say you're Sergeant Warren of the Homicide Squad? But—but—"

Price gulped, "Excuse me, too," and walked out.

ENTERING the smoke-grimed brick building of the W. H. Starr Pattern Products Company, High Price followed arrows pointing along the main downstairs corridor to the private offices of W. H. Starr, President.

He stepped into an ante-room, and stopped short, blinking at the blond vision pecking away at a typewriter inside the railing.

"Beulah!" Mr. Price gulped.

Beulah Randy looked up, flashed him a smile, said: "It's all right. I haven't quit my job with you. I'm just doing some under-cover work here."

"You're—huh?"

The blonde said: "Well, I saw a Help Wanted sign, and I thought I could learn a lot more by actually taking a position here than by hanging around during the lunch hour. Mr. Price, don't you want to hear what I've already found out?"

"Yeah. Sure. What?"

"Plenty." Beulah assured him. "You see, most of the girls here know Caroline. She used to work here herself. That's how she met Frank. He worked here, too, at that time."

"Yeah, what went wrong?"

"They got married. Frank's father didn't like it. I guess in the first place he didn't like Caroline very well. He wouldn't. He's one of those dignified types, a queer little old man with a goatee. In the second place, the marriage took place just a few weeks after Mrs. Starr, Frank's mother, passed away. Mr. Starr, senior, thought they should have waited longer after the funeral.

"But, anyhow," Beulah continued, "the two men never got along very well. Frank was just the opposite of his father, the girls all say. He was full of fun and high spirits, always kidding the stenographers, stopping work to teach them new dance steps, and things like that. Frank's mother was the one who kept things smoothed out, always saw the best in him, and took his side. After her death, it was natural that the two men should quarrel—especially as the mother left about ten thousand dollars to Frank, and I suppose he was pretty independent while the money lasted."

Suddenly, Beulah Randy became aware of Price's unpleasantly grim expression.

"Why, what's the matter?" the blonde puzzled. "Come to think of it, what are you doing here, anyway?"

Highland Park Price wove his brows into a frown. "You did fine, Angel-face. Only, I got to be sure. Frank *may* have raised a loan from the old man. Despite all you say, a few hundred bucks wouldn't be much for a man as rich as W. H. Starr to toss his son. . . . I want to see the old boy myself. Think you can fix it?"

Automatically, Beulah began, "Who shall I say is—" and gulped, blushed.

"Just say a detective," Price ordered.

Beulah arose, stepped inside a frosted glass door, came back to report: "All right, he'll see you for a moment."

W. H. Starr bore no resemblance to his offspring's photograph. The old man with the goatee had ice-cube-colored eyes, a waxen face, a dried-up and juiceless, stooped figure. From behind his desk, he turned a tight poker face on Highland Park Price.

"You're a detective? What do you want?"

High Price realized he'd have to hit this man hard or not at all. He hit hard—he hoped. "Mr. Starr, I'll have to ask whether your son, Frank, ever owned a .32-caliber pistol or revolver?"

USUALLY, gaffed like that, a man showed it. There wasn't a flicker in this one's ice-cube eyes. The old man said flatly: "Yes, he used to carry one to the bank when he worked here. I believe we still have the gun permit in our files, if you'd like to see it."

The chill old eyes glanced toward Beulah Randy who stood hesitating uncomfortably in the doorway. "Young lady, ask Miss Sanger-ton to find you that permit."

High Price drew a deep breath. "It isn't just the permit, it's the weapon. Is that here, or does your son have it?"

"He does—unless he pawned it."

Price studied the old man. "I'm going to give it to you on the level. The police may be around any minute checking up on that gun."

"Let them. They're welcome." W. H. Starr turned his head as Beulah Randy hurried in with a slip of paper. He glanced at it, passed it to Price. Price scanned it, saw that Frank M. Starr, black hair, black eyes, five-foot-nine-inches, 163 pounds, born August 27, 1914, was hereby legally qualified to transport upon his person one .32-caliber handgun, number 90213.

Highland Park Price spaced his words slowly and far apart. "I guess I don't make myself clear. Your son is mixed up in serious trouble. It's so serious he's liable to wind up behind a murder rap."

"Murder!" But the choked outcry was Beulah Randy's, not W. H. Starr's.

The old man was stunned into blank silence—or else he *was* blank, and didn't give a damn.

High Price bent forward, urged: "Don't you think you ought to do something about it? Such as hiring a competent investigator to handle the case? Wouldn't it be worth a mere five hundred bucks, for example, to have someone around to look after your son's interests?"

The gasp of dismay was Beulah's.

Old Man Starr said: "No. It isn't worth five cents. And I wish you'd stop speaking of Frank as my son. He isn't."

"You've disinherited him, you mean?"

The oldster was as cold as Greenland, as dry as the Sahara. "I mean he isn't my child. He never was. Mrs. Starr and I had no children. She wanted a youngster badly, and I consented to adopt one—to my everlasting regret. There's no blood of mine in that young scoundrel, nothing but bad blood."

High Price asked: "Does the young scoundrel know a lawyer named Lou Call?"

"Call is the attorney who prepared the adoption papers. Frank may have gone to him to learn the truth about his birth, or he may not. I don't know, and I don't give a damn!" W. H. Starr picked up a letter from his desk, said from behind it: "That's all. Good day, sir."

His lean face set in a scowl of thought, Highland Park Price headed for the sidewalk. Beulah Randy hurried behind him.

"Mr. Price!" the girl wailed. "You promised you wouldn't! You're just what everyone says you are—a cheap, chiseling shake-down artist. The idea of trying to hijack money out of that old man. . ."

Highland Park Price growled: "It wasn't his money I was trying to hijack, it was his information. I had to test him, make sure the money was starting from his bankroll."

She shook her blond head. "I wish I could believe that, but how can I?"

Price asked himself the same question, answered it with a dour grin. "You can come

along with me to jail. Will that prove anything?"

He chuckled as Beulah widened her eyes in shock. "I don't mean in a Black Maria," the detective enlightened. "This trip will cost me A-coupons."

CHAPTER THREE

Cyclone Cellar

TWO A-coupons later, High Price steered his coupe over a hilltop, waved his hand at the view framed in the windshield. "Temulcah," he announced. "There's the lake ahead of us, and that gray-walled affair beside it is the state prison."

Beulah Randy shuddered. "It's a horrible thought, all those men locked up like animals."

"I got another horrible thought," Price offered grimly. "All those animals unleashed on the rest of us. . ."

The highway passed the frowning prison bastions, followed the curve of the lake another mile into the tree-lined streets of the county seat town. "You'd think a place like this wouldn't even need a jail," the girl mused. "A state penitentiary nearby ought to be warning enough."

High Price took the cynical side. "They're burning a killer a month in the chair out here. In fact, there's a hoodlum going to fry tomorrow night. You read about the Mazzeni case, didn't you?"

Beulah Randy had read the headlines. She muttered: "You mean, what's happening to Dave Mazzeni didn't stop somebody from killing Lou Call?"

"No more than Hitler was stopped by what happened to Kaiser Bill," Price nodded, braking alongside the red brick county jail. Inside, a stalwart deputy sheriff looked up from a solitaire game.

"Mrs. Dahl? You're late, her brother already bailed her out today."

"Her brother?"

"Yeah, Ed Shack."

High Price mused: "I've heard the name. Doesn't he own a fishing lodge up the lake?"

The deputy scorned: "Lodge? It's just a run-down farm—only he doesn't farm it, doesn't do anything but rent rowboats."

"Sort of a local ne'er-do-well?" High Price suggested.

"I don't know how he's doing, but he ain't local. He only moved in there a month ago."

Highland Park Price compared mental timetables. A month ago was when Frank Starr started spending his evenings with "Calluder."

"One more question. When and for what was Mrs. Dahl pinched?"

"Let's see, it was Monday, five days ago. The charges included fishing without a license,

fishing after dark, resisting arrest, committing assault and battery on the game warden. She'd been drinking too."

Highland Park Price returned to the coupe, told Beulah Randy: "Five days is perfect for her—she can't be accused of committing any crimes in the interval, such as murdering Lou Call. He looked like just about a two-day old corpse to me."

He tooted the coupe out of town, pausing at a filling station to inquire where he could rent a boat. The attendant told him to follow the road around the lake until he saw a sign that said, *Shack's Lodge—Boats For Hire*.

What the sign said was, *Shack's Lodge—Closed for Repairs*.

It was a run-down farm, all right, one whose buildings hadn't seen fresh paint since Coolidge was president. And at that, the paint had been applied on only one end of the ramshackle barn, in a yellow and blue design that advertised "*A Mighty Fine Mouthful—Injun Tepee Chewing Tobacco!*"

Beyond the barn was the lake shore with a flotilla of half a dozen rowboats riding the waves duck-fashion.

Off to the left stood the house, its weathered roof bowed like the spine of an aged workhorse, its missing shingles replaced with rusting squares of tin.

High Price switched off the motor, appraised his surroundings critically. "It could stand repairs, but where are they?"

Beulah joggled his elbow. "Over there, look! But what is it, an old Indian mound?"

Price peered at the hillock of grass-grown earth piled as high as a man's waist, one side of it supplied with a trap-style door. You couldn't help noticing the door. It was of mill-fresh lumber, fitted with vast steel hinges and a formidable padlock that gleamed in the late afternoon sun.

The detective shook his head. "Didn't you ever see a cyclone cellar before?"

"I never even saw a cyclone, Mr. Price."

"It's a man-made cave to crawl into in case of tornadoes," High Price explained. "They used to be as common as lightning rods."

AGAIN Beulah joggled his elbow. The house door had swung open, revealing a woman whose red hair nicely matched the single strand in Price's wallet.

"What's the matter with you?" she called across the yard. "Can't you read English? We're not open for business this week."

Price palmed open the coupe's door, stepped from the runningboard with his briefcase in hand. "Madam, I represent the Injun Tepee Tobacco Company—A Mighty Fine Mouthful!"

The redhead glowered. "Well, scram! We don't want any!"

Highland Park Price chuckled. "That isn't the idea—I'm here to pay the rent." He waved a bony hand toward the barn. "Pursuant to and in accordance with the original contract, as there-in specified, you're entitled to five dollars annual fee while said advertisement remains contingent to and applied on these premises."

The verbal rigamarole had a purpose—it lasted long enough to bring him up to the door. Inhaling deeply at the end of the speech, Price caught a sniff of the same heliotrope perfume that had flavored the green letter.

Erna Dahl narrowed her eyes, puckered her full lips. "I don't get it. You sound as if you're trying to give away five bucks."

"Not give away—just pay you what's coming to you." The sleuth was brightly good-natured. "You're not going to turn down money that's due you, are you? Of course not! So we'll just step inside, sign the receipt, and I'll be on my way."

It worked. She opened the door, and High Price was in the wallpapered, pine-floored, dingily-furnished parlor. He slapped the briefcase on the center table, shot a glance around. "Cozy, dawgoned cozy," he nodded. "Let's see, there's this room and a kitchen, no doubt—that'd leave just about enough space for one bedroom downstairs and possibly a garret under the roof." His voice hardened. "Where in the hell did Call sleep, on the sofa?"

The red-headed woman gaped at him, her mouth open.

"He was here, wasn't he?" Price demanded. "For most of this week?"

The redhead closed her mouth, clashed her teeth as she did so. "I get it, you're a cop." Her face set stolidly. "You're wasting your time, gumshoe. Calluder's not anywhere around here."

"Calluder?" The detective hooped his eyebrows. "Aren't Call and Calluder one and the same guy?"

She blinked, peered at him. "My God, no! Whatever gave you that screwy idea? Calluder's the brain—it's his con racket."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. His invention is a phony. The whole idea of hiring Frank Starr to draw the plans was just to convince him the patent was worth a fortune. Calluder knew all about Old Man Starr's bankroll. He figured Frank could tap his father for ten grand to buy a piece of the invention, after which, we'd skip with the dough."

"We, huh?"

Her voice was flat, toneless. "Can't you guess? I was supposed to string the sucker along, keep him from thinking too much about business."

Price fumbled in his briefcase, produced the sheet of green stationery. "You fell for the

sucker in the meantime, I take it."

"Yes. I really liked Frank. I couldn't go through with it. But I didn't dare tell the truth. Calluder's dangerous—he'd kill me. So I advised Frank to have a lawyer draw up the papers. I steered him to Lou Call, paid Lou to warn him off the deal."

"I'm still listening." Price was cold-eyed.

The red-headed woman said: "Call advised me to leave town in case Calluder suspected anything. I came up here to stay with my brother."

"And Call himself—"

"He came up to warn me that Calluder suspected the truth, had even threatened to kill *him*. He advised me to get myself arrested deliberately. Said jail was the safest place for me to be!"

Highland Park Price beamed. "Redsie, you've made it all clear. Calluder killed Call. Your story is a work of art, even though every word of it is—Holy Judas, what's that?"

THE outcry was out of doors, and queerly muffled.

Price threw himself across the room in two bounding strides, yanked open the door, and stared grimly across the forlorn yard.

The detective's coupe was empty, and the trapdoor entrance to the cyclone cellar yawned open.

"Beulah!" the detective exclaimed.

Tugging the belly-gun from his armpit holster, High Price raced to the spot.

"Beulah!" he repeated, peering down the flight of hewn stone steps that descended into the dark, subterranean cellar.

He could make out a glimpse of slim legs sprawled on the cement floor, the rumpled draping of a skirt revealing rounded knees.

High Price's oath was hot and morally unhealthy as he plunged down the steps. Normally, he would have been the last guy in the world to stick his head into a hole in the ground and maybe get it shot off but, though he would never admit it, the sleuth's tough-fibered, coldly commercial exterior concealed a secret soft spot where Beulah Randy was concerned.

Reckless of the fact that a rescuer sprinting into the cyclone cellar was playing the part of a duck in a shooting gallery, Highland Park Price dove headlong into the man-made cave.

"Stick 'em up, you're covered—" In mid-sentence he stopped, gulped, as his stare drank in the surprising fact that there was nothing down here except the limp blonde on the floor, an army cot in the corner, and a suitcase against the wall.

Startled, he dropped to a knee beside the girl, wondering if the ugly bruise on her jaw could have been caused by a fall down the steps. Gently exploring, his fingers decided

the bone was neither broken nor dislocated. As he touched her, Beulah moaned faintly.

Another metallic sound warned the detective's eardrums. He flung a glance back over his shoulder and, up the stairs, caught a glimpse of a leering, hump-nosed face topped by a forelock of fire-red hair.

The next instant, blackness crashed down on High Price, literally crashed, as the hump-nosed, redheaded man banged the trapdoor shut.

Price whirled, his shoe leather rasping the concrete as he drove toward the steps. Even before he reached them, though, he heard the ominous *snick* of the padlock overhead.

For one hot, ugly moment, Highland Park Price told himself off for the folly of his blind rush into the trap. Then, fumbling in his breast pocket, the detective produced a fountain pen-style flashlight.

Its slender beam, probing upward, disclosed a factor he'd entirely overlooked in his haste. The entire inner, underside of the door was sheathed in metal!

Crouching on the steps, Price heaved his shoulders against the barrier. From the feel of the thing, he might just as well have been trying to lift an elephant.

Playing the flash beam on the side wall, he saw why. The hasp to which the padlock was attached consisted of bolts moored in the concrete masonry of the stonework. The bolts he could see because someone digging at the work with a knife had managed to dig out a pathetically small hole.

The rest of the place seemed just as solid as he swept the light over the cellar itself. Walls of stone, a cement floor, and a metal ceiling that had apparently been bolted onto an earlier wooden one.

Highland Park Price growled: "Repairs! Closed! I'll say!"

On the floor, Beulah Randy was stirring feebly. Price lifted her slim form onto the cot, said: "Relax, angel-face, take it easy."

"What happened?" the girl moaned.

"I'll bite. What did?"

"Why, the door wasn't locked and I looked to see what was down here." Suddenly she shuddered, sat up, stared wildly down at the cot. "Where is he—it?"

"I'm still biting. Where's who?"

"The dead man. There was a dead man lying right here on this cot!" the blonde declared.

Price moistened his lips. "Now, Beulah, don't tell me a corpse hung that haymaker on your jaw!"

"No. I turned to run back up the steps, and someone jumped out of the corner and hit me."

"After you yelled for help?"

"I didn't yell, I didn't have time." She pointed a finger at the cot. "Look, blood—"

"It's not fresh blood." Price shook his head. The incredible tale really had its points. Assuming Beulah had been slugged several minutes ago, a dead body *could* have been carried out of here. The muffled scream could have been uttered by the hump-nosed man, on the theory that Price was bound to see the open trapdoor and go helling down it.

"You're sure? You got a good look at the stiff?"

"Yes. It was Frank Starr. I knew him from his picture," the girl insisted.

Speculation fogged the detective's brain. He was trying to figure why Frank Starr, if dead, had been kept down here. Why not just sink the corpse in the lake?

"Mr. Price," Beulah shivered, "let's get out of this place. It's giving me the creeps. . ."

Price nibbled his under lip. He shrank from revealing their predicament to the girl.

"You lie down and relax," he muttered uncomfortably. "I want to see what's in this suitcase, anyway."

He turned to it with the flashlight. Behind him, the blonde sat bolt upright, her eyes widening in sudden, terrified comprehension. "Why, it's dark in here! The door's closed!" She stumbled from the cot to peer anxiously up the steps. "*High, we're locked in, aren't we?*"

CHAPTER FOUR

Traffic in Corpses

THE detective's twisted-lip silence was all the answer she needed. Beulah clenched her fists. "But—but, can't you shoot the lock off?" she hoped abruptly.

Price was dour. "A padlock isn't so easily shot off, angel-face. I'd have to drill the wood all around the latch. I couldn't do it with one bullet, maybe not with all six. And they'd hear the shooting—they'd come a-running—and I'd be out of ammunition."

Beulah Randy sank dispiritedly onto the cot. "But we can't sit here until we die!"

He shook his head. "All the same those slugs in my gun are too valuable to go shooting up the door, when maybe it wouldn't do a damn bit of good."

Price lifted the suitcase lid, pawed through shirts and pajamas, said presently: "Beulah, look!"

Her blue eyes barely glanced at the leather case he flapped open, revealing dividers, protractor, and pens. "Frank Starr's drafting tools," she nodded. "I told you it was his body, and I don't see what difference it makes to us, now."

Price wagged the protractor, chuckling. "This thing's celluloid, isn't it? You bet it is! So it makes all the difference in the world!

Here, you hold the light while I go to work!"

Beulah Randy stared incredulously as her employer spread a handkerchief on the floor, whipped out a penknife, and started slicing the celluloid into paper-thin strips. "I guess you never studied chemistry in school, angel-face"—the sleuth was mysteriously jubilant—"or else you'd know this stuff is a translucent colloid made by dissolving nitro-cellulose in alcohol and ether, which means it's practically the same as smokeless powder. In fact, you can chop it up fine and load a cartridge with it."

This, of course, was easier said than done. Working with painstaking care, it took Highland Park Price a long while to reduce the draftsman's instrument to a handful of finely chopped particles.

This done, he crept up the steps to examine the chipped masonry around the bolts. It would have taken hard work with something much more substantial than Price's penknife to have gouged the metal out of the bed of cement and stone. Indeed, it took hard work and a lot more time for him to gouge out only a fractional hollow. By the time he'd finished the job, the knife blade was broken right down to the handle and the flashlight was burning dimly.

Into the opening, High Price proceeded to press the powdered celluloid, packing the leftovers into the crack between stonework and sill.

"Be careful," Beulah Randy gulped, "it might blow up in your face!"

"It won't blow up in the open air at all—it's got to be tamped tight," the sleuth muttered. "You can start tearing up a shirt, while I pry the slug out of a cartridge here. . ."

"A cartridge?"

"Sure, I got to have a primer for a blasting cap," Price muttered. Perspiration was forming on his face. He knew that smokeless powder packed a 360,000-pound wallop per square inch—if you could confine it tightly enough. Touched off in the open air, though, it would merely go up in flame. The question was whether he could pack this stuff tight enough so it would detonate, not just burn up.

Fifteen tense minutes later, he was touching a match to a twisted paper fuse, then backing off into the cellar. Fingers pressed to her ears, Beulah Randy waited in a corner for it to go off.

The explosion was like a pop-gun.

Beulah Randy dropped her hands, wailed: "It didn't work—"

Crash-h!

Price, his ears ringing, sprang to the stairs. Beulah was right—his elaborate tamping job hadn't worked for a hoot. But some of the chopped celluloid had trickled down around the bolt, into a hidden frost crack he hadn't

even dreamed existed. One burning spark had followed, and down in that bottleneck the exploding gases had blasted the masonry clean away from the bolts.

Price placed his shoulder against the door, heaved it up. He'd never been happier to see the twinkling stars in his life.

SAVE for the faint star glimmer, the yard was as black as the inside of an ink bottle. And save for the uneasy *slop-slop* of the waves along the lake shore, as quiet as the inside of a coffin.

"They've cleared out, I guess," Highland Park Price muttered. "That blow-off must have been heard for half a mile."

Beulah Randy clung to her employer's sleeve. "Why don't we jump in the car and clear out, too?"

"We haven't earned our hundred bucks, haven't found Frank Starr."

"But he's dead!"

"O. K., then we haven't found his body—for keeps, anyhow." Price stalked doggedly toward the house. Inside, by the feeble glimmer of the nearly exhausted flashlight, he located a kerosene lamp. He lifted the glass globe, touched a match to the wick, put the chimney back on.

The yellow light revealed a miscellany of suitcases and satchels ranged along the wall of the shack.

"I guess they haven't cleared out yet," Price voiced. "They're just ready to—on a minute's notice."

In the pile, Price's gray glance selected a shabby briefcase. The letters *L.V.C.* on the flap, once done in gold, were worn almost to

invisibility. "Call's," the sleuth said. "His pre-prosperity period."

The flap was locked down. Price forced his fingers into the aperture, yanked violently. The cheap, aged leather tore like pastboard. Price shook the contents onto the parlor center table—a keyring, a man's wallet, a wristwatch, an envelope addressed to His Excellency, the Governor of the State.

"I'm not really violating the U.S. Mails, Beulah—it hasn't even been stamped yet." Price forced a finger under the flap, lifted out the enclosure.

He gasped at the typewritten lines:

Honored Sir, Lou Call had written, I take this occasion to proffer my heartfelt thanks for Your Excellency's favor in considering commutation of the death sentence to life imprisonment for my client, David Mazzeni, despite the adverse character of the announced decision. . .

Highland Park Price exploded: "Mazzeni? Mazzeni!" He whirled to Beulah Randy. "Why, my God, Dave Mazzeni's a big-shot! He was defended by the fanciest legal sharks in the State! They pulled every possible string that they could to get the guy off with life imprisonment.

"And here—here," Price swallowed, "it looks as though the killer made a last minute switch of counsel! Practically sitting on the hot squat, he turned from the best legal talent money could buy, and threw in with a poor old stumblebum like Lou Call!"

Beulah Randy stared back. "Why?" she asked.

"Why? Why? Hell knows! It's crazy. Old Lou Call hadn't pleaded a case in anything but

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the municipal courts for years. And yet it happened—it must have happened! Lou could afford to quit work, come up here for a week, and splurge on new clothes. Where did the money come from if it didn't come from Mazzeni?"

He stretched a hand for the wallet, flapped it open, and realized it wasn't Lou Call's wallet because, framed in the glassine identification panel, was a Selective Service card issued to *Frank Mazzeni (Starr)*.

"Mazzeni!" Price said again. "Mazzeni?" He peered wide-eyed at the girl. "Beulah, angel-face, it's adding up! There's Dave Mazzeni sitting over there in the death house, and Lou Call as his lawyer over here, with the lake between them! There's Call turning up dead with calloused hands—you can get callouses rowing a boat. But Call wasn't sunburned, he'd done his rowing at night. And Erna Dahl got pinched for fishing after dark, didn't she? Then there's that pair, Erna and Shack, rushing away from here tonight, and Frank Starr, who'd been disinherited by his foster-father, and had to register for the draft under his full legal name—"

The tongue of flame in the lamp globe wavered, licked sidewise, stained the glass globe with a smear of black smoke.

Highland Park Price yelled: "Damn it, Beulah, duck!"

The detective's gun was clearing his lapels as he leaped sidewise, throwing his rawhide-and-rattan build in front of the benumbed girl.

The jump saved his life. The black-haired, black-eyed man in the doorway had his gun out, pointing, and he fired first—at the spot where Detective Highland Park Price had just been standing.

High Price fired the second shot, and the black-haired, black-eyed man gurgled, pitched forward on his face into the room.

Price shouted: "O. K., Sheriff, give 'em both barrels!"

The sheriff was imaginary.

The red-headed Erna Dahl and the red-headed, hump-nosed Shack didn't know that. Both crowded into the parlor, hands high.

Beulah Randy almost gave it away. She sobbed: "High, you killed him! They're liable to send you to prison for this!"

"Angel-face," Highland Park Price replied, chuckling, "prison is right where we're going—and under our own power."

THE warden of Temulcah Prison was beet-colored under a shock of white hair. His heels echoing harshly across the yard of the Big House, he protested vehemently: "It's a ridiculous theory! Escape from the death house is an absolute impossibility! I don't care who you think you killed, it wasn't Dave Mazzeni!"

High Price said: "Yeah, that's your idea. And that's what makes this good. But go ahead, open up! We shall see what we shall see."

A guard let them into a smaller, central yard inside the inner walls of the old prison. Another guard let them into a building in the middle of the inner yard. They passed through a third set of locks, picked up a final guard who trudged ahead down the death house cell block.

Warden Parmley explained: "You see, it's really two prisons, the old one entirely enclosed by the new—"

Abruptly the guard cursed, whirled, dove at a barred door with key in hand.

Inside, dangling from a twisted noose attached to the bunk bed chains, the black-haired corpse pointed its toes down at the brick floor, turned its staring black eyes up to the concrete ceiling.

The warden yelled: "Good God! Cut that man down! Try to pump air—"

"He's dead," Highland Park Price said stonily. "He was dead before they brought him in here. He's not Dave Mazzeni—he's Frank Mazzeni Starr."

Stepping into the cell, Price jumped up and down on the floor. "You notice a kind of a hollow sound? As if an old sewer might run under here?"

The warden gave a headshake. "There's no sewer. There was an old storm drain, but it ran outside the walls and was filled in, anyway, about thirty years ago, if I'm not mistaken."

"Draining into the lake?" Price quizzed. "All right, that's it. Lou Call was on the Prison Board thirty years ago. He'd have known what was done then. He told Ed Shack how to clean out the old drain, then tunnel from it under the death house. The escape would have been foolproof—you'd never have suspected a prison break." He snapped his fingers. "Let's look in your records and see whether Dave Mazzeni wasn't born August 27, 1914."

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.

"Why?"

"Because that would make him the twin of Frank Mazzeni."

Ten minutes later, in the modern, bright warden's office, Price grinned at Beulah Randy as the prison official nodded over an index card.

"You're right. That's the birth-date—the mother died shortly afterward, then the father placed the child in a charitable institution."

"Children," Price corrected. "There were two of them. Later, Frank was adopted by W. H. Starr and wife. Lou Call handled the papers—his knowledge that Dave Mazzeni had an identical twin brother suggested the whole scheme to him. Carr was a broken, boozy dervic, yet he saw a way to accomplish what the best criminal lawyers in the country had failed to do. He knew how to help Dave Mazzeni beat the rap.

"Basically, it was beautifully simple—just smuggle Dave out and smuggle the twin brother's body in. He reasoned that finding a body which looked like Dave Mazzeni would satisfy you, that you'd see no reason to suspect it wasn't Dave, and consequently you'd be content with mere visual examination. And I'd say he guessed right—you wouldn't have bothered to fingerprint that body."

THE warden mopped his face. "Even so, what about Frank Starr—Mazzeni? What can possibly be deduced from his disappearance?"

"You mean how Call did it or how he covered it up?" Price queried. "He did it by posing as an inventor named Calluder, persuading the victim to go on a trip to Detroit, and kidnaping him instead. He covered it up by planting a mash note and a farewell letter to convince Caroline Starr that her husband had run off with another woman, the red-headed Erna Dahl."

The warden said: "But Call is dead, you say. How can you explain that?"

High Price said: "I think Frank Starr killed him."

"Starr—" Beulah gulped and stared, incredulously.

"Yeah. Something went wrong—I'm not sure what. But the business of bringing Frank here a whole week ahead of time doesn't make sense. I'm cold certain they intended to pull off this prison break a week ago, but for some reason they couldn't."

Warden Parmley interjected, "Excuse me," and picked up his desk phone. He listened calmly, then turned to Price. "You win again. My men have found a big excavation under the death house, and some of the bricks have been tampered with."

"Big?" Price scowled. "They wouldn't need a big—wait, that's it. The original tunnel caved in. There's your week's delay, there's your callouses on Call's hands. The digging had to be done over, the dirt hauled away and dumped in the lake. They almost got caught at it, too. A game warden spotted the boat, and to cover up, the Dahl woman took the rap for illegal fishing and served her sentence in jail.

"Meanwhile, they had to hold Frank a prisoner in that cave. Maybe they doped his food—I imagine he was drugged when you saw him today, Beulah. But they didn't give him dope enough, and they didn't guard him closely enough. He owned a .32 revolver, had it packed in his suitcase, and got to it—shot Lou Call in trying to make his getaway. Then Shack hauled Call's body to the city and they figured out a story to pin the shooting on the imaginary 'Calluder'—on Call himself!" he finished.

Beulah Randy pondered: "And yet they were dumb enough to go off and leave us alive in that cellar!"

Price shrugged. "I wear a gun. I'd shoot back. I might have shot one of them, or both. Dead or wounded, they couldn't have got Dave Mazzeni out of the death house tonight. Their job is killing. I almost wonder if they didn't have Dave Mazzeni crawl down in that tunnel and do the actual strangling of his twin brother."

The warden shook his head, and Beulah Randy gasped: "It's downright gruesome!"

High Price agreed. He said: "Yeah, angel-face. It grew some on me, too."



BUY WAR BONDS!



HE COULDN'T STAY

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Author of "To Bury Caesar," etc.

"All over the sidewalk," said Jeffery Wren, purveyor and master of sleight-of-hand items. He was referring to the late Mrs. Grace Todwinkle, who had evidently not fallen straight from the window above—but had stopped en route long enough to get her pockets full of snow.

CHAPTER ONE

Cyanide—With Love

JEFFERY Wren has no objection to the lucky lodestone *per se*. It is all right in its place which is alongside the more homely talismans such as the rabbit foot and horseshoe nail ring. But he cannot look at one of the things without being reminded of a certain Indianapolis citizen who worked his way up from selling lodestones to predicting murder with what might be termed deadly accuracy.

"One notable exception," Wren's deep voice cheerfully points out to anyone interested. "No bullet holes in this too, too solid flesh. Not yet. Obviously."

Shortly after three o'clock that wintry Tuesday afternoon, Zoe Osbourn, the police department's special Nemesis of fake occultists and fraud spiritists, came into Wren's novelty store on West Ohio Street. Horace, the thin, bloodless-looking clerk, was doing a rush business in explosive cigarettes, and Zoe asked stridently in passing if the shortage was *that* bad. Without waiting for a reply, she pegged to the rear of the room and climbed the stairs with the fierce energy frequently displayed by fleshy women who have decided to ignore excess poundage rather than count calories.

She opened the door that bears the legend *WREN'S MAGIC* and came into the little reception room. There the tattoo from high heels that terminated her police props came



DEAD

A Jeffery Wren Novelette



Wren could only stand and stare at the ludicrous black depression in the snow, at the still body that had made it.

to an abrupt stop. The air was cloying with a perfume which she failed to associate with the masculine world of magicians that looks to Wren's shop as Moslems look to Mecca.

Turning, her gullible-appearing, prominent, blue eyes caught on a maribou-trimmed garter clasped above the plump knee of the woman seated in one of Wren's chrome and leather chairs. She measured the brief skirt, priced the guanaco fur jacket, and mentally tried on the black pillbox hat. The woman was a rinsed, plucked, painted blonde whose round face looked forward to the dismal eventuality of a plural chin. She dimpled at Zoe Osbourn.

"I'm sure glad another woman showed up," she said.

Zoe regarded the can-can garter as a bulldog might contemptuously sniff a Pomeranian.

"I'll just bet you are, dearie!" she scoffed harshly. Then presenting the box-car silhouette of her back to the blonde, she swept gustily through the double glass doors into the magic shop itself—where everything for the conjurer, from all but invisible gimmicks to elaborate apparatus, was on display.

At the moment the policewoman entered, Wren was saying a genial good-by to a pair of Marines who were making plans for taking the Okito Coin Box routine back to the Japs who had presumably originated it. He slid a glance to Zoe Osbourn and unavoidably discovered her hat. It was a tight white turban that concealed most of her hennaed hair and was spangled with mirrors like a plushy bar-room. Her figure needed the boxy coat about as much as an elephant needs a drinking straw.

"My!" he said. He took slow bouncing steps away from the cash register, and his bright, white smile stirred the surface of unfathomable black eyes. "How're you? How're all the miscreants?"

"I'm fine," Zoe returned gruffly. "And the miscreants aren't missing any easy moola." She opened her huge purse and, while digging for something, asked with studied indifference: "Who's the shrinking violet out there stinking up the place with Evening In Kokomo or something?"

Through the glass doors, Wren observed the blonde for the first time. The plump little lady was staring into the shop and chomping gum with the sloppy complacency of a cow chewing cud. Wren elevated chunky black eyebrows. He said: "Ah!"

"And you can add a 'My!' to that," Zoe said dryly.

Wren chuckled like apples rolling out of a barrel. "No. Hardly. Nothing that might be construed as a possessive."

Zoe snorted. Her purse digging resulted in a tiny clipping from some classified ad section, and this she handed to Jeffery Wren. The ad suggested that the reader send a buck to somebody who called himself The Prophet and receive in exchange a pair of "Genuine Magnetic Lodestones," one to attract good luck and the other to repel the bad. An "alleged" in small type provided an out for the seller in the event that some lodestone attracted a swiftly moving metallic object—say, a Mack truck—to the eternal undoing of the purchaser.

"Nothing criminal there," Wren said as he handed the clipping back. "Or do you think so?" He glanced down at his right trouser leg, appeared concerned. Lifting his foot, he found a lighted cigarette in his pants cuff, of all places. Recalling that Zoe preferred

king size, he stretched it before handing it to her.

"That's a neat trick these days," Zoe said. "God, for a pair of pants!" She took a long and grateful drag. "That bird who calls himself The Prophet is really George Pellam. He publishes occult books and does a brisk mail order business in crystal balls, hypnotic candles, and similar junk. But now he turns up as something else, Jeff. He's a trumpet medium."

Wren frowned slightly. "One of those."

"He demonstrated his talents at a dinner party last night," Zoe continued. "I got all this from Judge Robert Hewitt who happens to be a sincere believer in spiritualism. The judge was at this party which was given by the Henry Fromes."

"The Henry Fromes," he repeated. Up to now he had been blissfully ignorant of the Henry Fromes.

"A fine old plush-bottomed family," Zoe explained. "Hamilton Frome—he was a wealthy meat-packer—died about five years ago. He has a brother and sister still living. Anyway, this George Pellam brought spirit voices out of trumpets that floated through the air with the greatest of ease."

"**HARDLY,**" Wren interrupted with a good deal of calm assurance. "The trumpet doesn't float. There's a detachable luminous band on the bell. The band is removed, suspended from silk thread attached to a reaching rod. The sitters follow the band. Get the notion they are watching the trumpet. Actually, the medium retains the trumpet and speaks through it." His smile twitched. "Infantile, isn't it?"

"Well," she said harshly, "Henry Frome's sister, Grace Todwinkle, doesn't think it's so damned infantile. Not when it's her neck."

Wren cocked an eyebrow. "That's faintly sinister. What about Mrs. Todwinkle's neck?"

"The voice that came out of the trumpet struck a new high in unmitigated gall among spirits," she said. "It warned that violence and sudden death hung over the house of Frome."

"Disturbing," he said, rather flippantly. "For the Fromes."

Zoe Osbourn scowled at him and her nod was slow and positive. "It's going to disturb you, master-wit. I'm meeting the Todwinkles in a few minutes to bring them here. James Todwinkle wants to find out how the hell Prophet Pellam gets that way—forecasting murder for his wife and brother-in-law."

Wren's glance strayed from Zoe's fierce eyes to the reception room where the plump blonde was in voluptuous motion. A thrust of an elbow and the swing of her hips and the

blonde had opened both doors of the magic shop for a grand entry. She tripped into the shop, sampled the unfamiliar surroundings with what passed as childish wonder before she turned big, big eyes on Jeffery Wren. She might have palmed ration tokens in her dimples, he thought.

"I've been waiting for my husband—" a pseudo-shy laugh trilled the end of that, "but I've simply got to have my hair done so I wondered if you could take me now," she said with dimples.

"Take you?" he said vaguely. "No hair curling done here. Quite the contrary."

The blonde laughed. "Oh, you're so fun—nee!"

Zoe Osbourn snorted her disgust, turned on her heel, and pegged to the door. Without turning around, she said, "Be conventional, Jeffery."

The blonde sidled up to him and said: "I'm Mrs. Henry Frome"—shy laugh—"Agnes"—coy lowering of eyelids—"and if you had some cozy nook where we could talk in private, I'd like some very special help."

Wren bowed, sleekly ostentatious about it. "Nooks no end." His slow bouncing stride led Agnes Frome into the thoughtful brown room that is his office. He closed the door. By the time he had turned around, she had helped herself to a chair and the can-can garter was once more evident. She found the room as she wished it, a cozy nook, and wriggled pleurably.

"You're not the least bit creepy, Mr. Wren," she decided.

Mr. Wren sat on the edge of his desk, and nothing in the world looked less creepy than he. Without being tall, he was nevertheless big—a solid, squarish bigness that suggested the impregnability of Gibraltar. "Now," he prompted amiably.

"Well, last night we had a trumpet medium for dinner—"

"What fare!" Wren murmured.

"And Judge Robert Hewitt and my sister-in-law and her husband were there because we wanted to get in touch with Simon. That's my husband's nephew, Simon Spiker."

Wren nodded. "Your sister-in-law's nephew, too. Obviously. . . . But why not send up a heliograph? Anything's better than a trumpet medium."

"Oh, Simon is dead." There was nothing crepe-and-lily about the pronouncement. "He must be dead. And anyway, my husband says it was Simon's spirit voice that came out of the trumpet and warned everybody about the violence and sudden death that hung over the house of Frome."

Wren's nod was cheerful. "You'd like some peace of mind. Want me to dispel the creeps. Even exterminate them. In short, to

prove your trumpet medium a complete fake."

"No-o-o." Agnes fingered nervously at tufts of fur at the bottom of her jacket. "This George Pellam, he's the medium—and—well, my husband and I want you to prove Mr. Pellam is *not* a fake."

"Ah," Wren said lightly. "That's no task. Kill a Frome or two. Provide the violence and sudden death." He nodded. "That should prove something."

"Don't be silly!" Agnes Frome's lips thinned in exasperation. "All we want is a public endorsement of George Pellam as a true medium. Judge Hewitt would accept your opinion, because you're an authority on mediums."

Wren's fingers drummed softly on the edge of the desk. "Quite," he admitted. "Wrote a book about them, *The Dead Don't Talk*. Wouldn't care to revise the title. Take trumpet mediumship—it's absurd. Why would a spirit want to talk through a fiber trumpet? Suggests that the dear departed become cheer leaders." He shook his sleek dark head. "Not my idea of heaven. Too exhausting."

Agnes didn't know what to say and so, thoughtfully chewed her gum on her front teeth like a squirrel shucking a nut.

WREN said: "Look—let's do a Dunninger.

Just for our own amazement. You want to convince Judge Hewitt that this Simon Spiker is dead. By hook or crook. Emphasis on the latter. Your motive? Some filthy lucre you'd get your hands on if Simon were dead. But you're not sure he *is* dead. Not unless the Fromes attended to it personally."

He had intended offense, but Agnes refused to find any. "Shucks, the Fromes never did anything. They're blue-bloods. You wait until Henry gets here and you'll see. And his sister, Grace Todwinkle, is just the same only more so. This Simon Spiker, their nephew, lived in Boston and didn't pay much attention to the rest of the family. His mother was a Frome, y'see, the sister of Henry, Grace and Hamilton. When Hamilton took sick and the doctor said his heart wouldn't last much longer, Henry and Grace telegraphed for Simon to come. But the night Hamilton Frome died, Simon just walked out of the house and disappeared. That was nearly five years ago, before I married into the Frome family."

"Hamilton Frome left a will?" Wren asked.

The blonde nodded. "Nearly a million dollars in bonds and stuff to Simon, but just puny trust funds for my husband and Grace Todwinkle. You see, Mr. Wren?"

Mr. Wren sat with big hands on solid thighs, his head tilted to one side. He saw. "Relatively simple. Also transparent. If Simon doesn't show up in seven years, he's

automatically considered dead. Or he might be found dead legally by the courts. On good and sufficient evidence. You have the quaint notion a spirit message from Simon Spiker should convince Judge Hewitt that Simon is dead. You want my help in the scheme. Quite slick. But—" one eyebrow, at least, disapproved, "not for me. Emphatically not for me."

Agnes Frome leaned forward in her chair, her bosom high, her head thrown back. It was a good pose because it took some of the fullness from her chin and redistributed it. The way she batted her eyelids, Wren expected the mascara to scatter any moment.

"You mean you won't help me?" she coaxed softly.

"Stop flaunting." He was gruff about it. His every inclination was to help her through the door with a kick where it would do his foot the least possible injury. Agnes flounced out of her chair, stood with hands on ample hips, and pouted.

"All right. But you'll be sorry!" She turned to the door.

"Pooh!" Wren scoffed. "Who's afraid of you?" He sat, watched Agnes Frome bat the door open with a swing from her hips. She skirt-switched the length of the magic shop. She thrust open the double glass doors, took one step before she screamed.

"Henry! Henree-e-e!" Then, in spite of their superlative construction, her legs collapsed beneath her.

Wren bounded across the magic shop and into the reception room. A tall, angular man with a bald head lay on his back in front of one of Wren's chairs. His long arms and legs described a sprawling X that was all that the letter implies. Horace, the clerk from the novelty store below, thrust himself into the room from the door at the top of the steps.

"For chrissakes, boss, whassa matter with—" He let that hang. Perilously, his soggy cigar hung, too, from his lax lips. His pale eyes moved from the man to Agnes Frome and back. "Whyncha open an un'ertakin' parlor, boss?"

It was like that. One look at the old gentleman on the floor and you concluded he was fit for a funeral. Bloody, froth flecked his lips. His eyes were open, slightly protruding, and already glazed.

Horace removed his cigar and pointed with it. "Whozit?"

"Henry," Wren said. "Possibly Henry Frome. When did he come in?" He stepped over the unconscious Agnes and knelt beside the man on the floor.

Horace said: "Six-seven minutes ago. He asked wassiz wife upstairs an' I said huh-uh an' he said he'd go up an' wait."

"Think that's his wife." Wren nodded at

Agnes. He bent over, his face close to that of Henry Frome. There was only the acrid odor of tobacco on the parted lips. Just in front of the chair on which the elderly gentleman had been sitting prior to the seizure was a large aluminum-shanked pipe, particles of unburned tobacco spilling onto the floor from its briar bowl.

"Izzee dead?" Horace asked uneasily.

"Quite."

"Whyncha do somethin' for the babe?" Horace's cigar indicated the unconscious Mrs. Frome.

"Oh." Wren frowned slightly. "On the other hand, why should I? She's not in the way. Won't be there long enough to collect dust." He sat back on his heels, stared at the dead man's face. A severe face, he decided. An uncompromising Hapsburg jaw, a sharp nose. Wren bent forward again, began a systematic search of the man's pockets.

"Whatcha doin'?" Horace worried. "Wanna get yourself inna jam? That's not accordin' to Hoyle."

Wren shrugged his shoulders. "Who's Hoyle? What does he know about murder?" He removed a corncob pipe from the pocket of Henry Frome's gray overcoat. It was nearly new, with moist dottle in the bottom of the bowl but scarcely any carbon cake on the inner walls. "That's an un-Frome-like object," he commented cheerfully. He tossed a glance at Agnes. "But there's another."

He put the pipe back, reached inside the coat and to the inner suitcoat pocket. It contained a wallet that identified Henry Frome beyond all doubt, and a long envelope of heavy stock which carried the local postmark, Henry Frome's name and address, but no return. There was something familiar about the type impression in the address. No ordinary typewriter, Wren was certain. The large plain letters, all capitals like a telegram, were unevenly inked. The end had been torn off the envelope, and Wren looked inside. Down in the corner was a round white pill, and, enclosed with it, a sheet of paper. By ballooning the envelope, Wren read the typing on the paper:

DEAR FROME: ENCLOSED THE TWO TABLETS OF POTASSIUM CYANIDE. BE CAREFUL WITH THIS STUFF. IT'S DEADLY. YOURS AS EVER,

DAVID.

"My!" said Wren. "How considerate of David! Here's your poison and what's your hurry."

Horace asked nervously: "Who inna hell is David?"

"How should I know?" Wren put the envelope and wallet back. "Some chap who

sends people poison. Apparently they take it. Nothing less than remarkable!" He looked at Horace. "No one slipped by you and up the stairs? No one but the late Mr. F. here?"

Horace shook his head. "Whyncha call the cops an'—" He broke off. Apropos of cops, the strident voice of Policewoman Zoe Osbourn called from the foot of the stairs.

"Jeff! Horace! Say, is everybody dead around here?"

"Well, no," Wren murmured, standing up. "Not everybody."

CHAPTER TWO

Prophet Without Honor

ZOE Osbourn stood just across the threshold. She drew a long, audible breath. Her prominent eyes touched the dead man, moved to Agnes Frome, then to an anxious Horace. Her eyes became progressively less gullible-looking until, by the time they arrived at Jeffery Wren, they were positively suspicious.

Wren achieved lamblike innocence. "My dear lady! Horace was about to phone the police. Coincidentally, you turned up."

Zoe snorted. "Well—bully for me! If I

hadn't turned up—coincidentally!—*that* would have drawn flies while you did your amateur sleuthing!"

He was offended. "We're above hoarding bodies. Aren't we, Horace? This is a matter of minutes. Consider the lady on the floor. We've not had time to pick her up. You see?"

She grunted. "Who is he?"

"Henry Frome. Unconsciously fulfilling a prophecy."

Zoe slapped herself across the forehead. "Hell's fire! And his sister and her husband are downstairs. Go on down, Jeff. I'll phone Headquarters—" She pegged toward the door of the magic shop, paused, glanced down at Agnes Frome, and scowled. "Here, zombie," she addressed Horace, "get this girl off the floor. It looks so damned careless!"

Downstairs among the shoddy souvenirs, the slum jewelry, the itch powder and stink bombs, Jeffery Wren found the Todwinkles just a couple of round pegs in square holes and obviously proud of it. Todwinkle's slim Havana cigar contributed an aroma of refinement, but occasionally some odor characteristic of the shop slipped through his smoke screen and offended his pink nostrils. He was a tall, portly personage in a dress



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No wonder they were astonished! They all guessed too high! Actually the new Breezewood pipe weighs, on an average, less than an ounce and a quarter!

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overcoat, white silk scarf, pearl gray gloves and hat. With all the weight he carried other places, his streamlined middle suggested some undercover work with webbing and laces. His temples were silvery, his round cheeks massaged to a uniform shade of boiled lobster pink. Wren thought whimsically that the Fromes, brother and sister, must have followed their noses to their respective mates—both Agnes and Todwinkle smelled nice.

Grace Todwinkle, Henry Frome's sister, carried her short dumpy figure stiffly. She had elected to wear a three-piece brown suit and a brown hat. With her tawny eyes, sallow complexion, and earthy hair, brown virtually swallowed her. She had her brother's sharp nose and her mouth was equipped with a drawstring of priggishness.

"Mr. Wren?" Todwinkle inquired coolly, and it was evident he was not shaking hands. "We are here to employ you in your capacity as an investigator of psychic phenomena."

"Quite," Wren said brusquely. "Pellam's prophecy. Not to be taken lightly." He turned grave eyes on Grace Todwinkle. "Your brother is upstairs—"

"Something has happened to him," she interrupted, her voice flat. "Is that what you are trying to tell me?"

"Something," he admitted quietly. He watched the woman's tawny eyes wince as though from blinding light. And that was the only outward sign of grief she showed then or later. Elbows tight against her sides, she walked to the foot of the stairs, climbed neither quickly nor falteringly, but as some queen might have mounted the executioner's scaffold.

Mr. Todwinkle said, "God!" hoarsely. The dry wrapper of his cigar snapped in his clenched teeth. He and Wren followed the plain brown woman up the stairs.

Horace, slinking away from the anticipated unpleasantness, passed them on the stairs. He said, "Geez!" to Wren.

Grace Todwinkle stopped. She said, "My brother." There was regret and something like resentment in her voice, and Wren sensed that the Fromes did not slop their tea and neither did they make spectacles of themselves by dying in public. He managed to squeeze by Todwinkle and take one of Grace Todwinkle's elbows. It struck him that her elbow was like a handle on something. She permitted him to steer her to one of the four chairs, the other three having been shoved together to form a couch for the still unconscious Agnes Frome. He followed the scathing glance Grace directed toward Agnes and added another rule to the Frome family statutes—Fromes neither fainted nor tolerated such weakness in others.

Mr. Todwinkle stood leaning against the door frame, absently chewing his cigar. His

pink jowls were trembling. "I told you not to have anything to do with that spirit medium, Grace," he said righteously. "*Neither let there be found among you anyone that consulteth soothsayers . . . Or that seeketh the truth from the dead—*"

"What utter nonsense!" Grace's look scalded him. She turned to Wren, snapped: "Get a doctor at once, do you hear?"

Wren spread his hands, palms down. "All taken care of. Police and coroner should be here any moment."

"The police?" was startled from Todwinkle.

His wife's sherry eyes leaped at Wren. She said: "Haven't you taken a great deal upon yourself? Just why the police, pray, in a simple case of heart failure?"

"Heart failure?" Wren frowned slightly. "Oh. Quite. Induced by poison." He paused to let that soak in, but so far as he could see it was only rolling off this hard brown clod of a woman. He asked lightly: "What do the Fromes do under similar circumstances? Bury the victim in the back yard, no doubt. Like a pet cat. Or possibly just forget the whole thing."

The tawny eyes pecked frantically at Wren's face, yet fearfully, too, like a child exploring a haunted house. "What are you talking about? Nothing like this has ever happened in my family."

"No?" Wren was mildly skeptical. "Expect me to believe Simon Spiker's absence isn't enforced?"

"My nephew is dead!" she said positively.

Wren's smile was slight, cryptic. "But he'll turn up . . . Probably in a Frome closet. Rattling his bones." And he moved over to join Zoe Osbourn who was just coming out of the magic shop.

A stocky, red-headed sergeant-of-detectives named Hogan, who knew Wren of old, took over for Homicide. He was nice about the whole thing, absorbing the information in the pleasant manner of a sponge. He heard Wren's story and then assigned him to an inconspicuous spot as one might do with an atrocious Christmas necktie received from some beloved relative. An assistant coroner had his innings while an interne from City Hospital revived Agnes Frome. Zoe Osbourn received some whispered instructions from Hogan, and immediately left. Wren, who could see how things were going—all in the wrong direction, in his opinion—left the reception room, crossed the magic shop, and entered his office. There he sat behind his desk and sulked over a cigarette.

HIS phone rang. He stared at it dully and let it ring again. He took the handset off the cradle, put it to his ear, and the first thing he heard was a piano somewhere in

the background. Somebody said: "Hello—" a thin, uninteresting voice. Wren didn't say anything. He frowned, listening to the slow, leaden beat of the music from the piano.

"Ah!" he said, brightening. "That's Chopin. *The Funeral March*. Who's dead now?"

"Listen, Mr. Wren," said the thin voice, "you keep out of the Frome affair."

Wren chuckled. "My dear man! Is it possible? You're not implying an 'or else' musically?"

"You got a nice sense of humor, Mr. Wren. Let's not spoil it, see?" And the phone went dead.

Wren put the handset back, looked up as Sergeant Hogan opened the door. The glimpse Wren got through the door indicated that the rest of the officials, and the Tod-winkles and the Fromes, living and dead, had departed. And Hogan had that pleasant expression of a man who has done a job and is thoroughly satisfied with it. He came around the desk, clapped Wren on the shoulder in a gesture of comradeship.

"Every time we meet," he said good-naturedly, "you have just discovered a stiff. What's wrong with you anyway, Mr. Wren?"

Wren sighed. "An affliction probably. But your association with the Homicide Squad might have something to do with it. A remote possibility."

Hogan's nod granted as much. "And usually it's a screwy murder, too. It's got so when I hear you've found a body, I think: 'Aw-aw!'"

"But not today?"

Hogan threw himself into a chair and rubbed his hands. "Nope. You're slipping. When it's cyanide, it's just about always suicide. Because you can't choke cyanide down the victim's throat and then run. It's faster than you are."

"No doubt," Wren agreed affably. "Suicide. That's nice. No panting chase." He made a church of his fingers, looked thoughtfully into it. "Pellam's prophecy is insignificant?"

Hogan's laugh was assured. "Call it coincidental. Of course, our Mrs. Osbourn is checking on Pellam. And we'll trace down this David, if he doesn't come out in the open and clear things up."

"Fine," Wren said dryly. "Makes the taxpayer feel safer."

"The way I figure it, David sent Frome the cyanide at Frome's request. Frome might have said he wanted it for rats. That would sound reasonable to David, because he wouldn't be able to picture Henry Frome going into a drugstore to buy rat poison."

"Most astute. The human factor. Fromes wouldn't admit having rats. Or bed-bugs.

Wouldn't admit having a murder, for that matter. If they had one . . . But how would you trace David? Presuming he's a shy fellow."

Hogan snapped his fingers and it appeared there was nothing to it. "Through the typewriter he used on the note. With modern technical methods, we can always trace a typewriter."

"Oh?" Wren was a humble neophyte, but only for a moment. Then his smile came, faintly malicious. "Even a toy typewriter?"

Hogan's face fell. He looked suddenly as though he wished Jeffery Wren were back in vaudeville, preferably some U.S.O. troupe playing the far-flung islands of the Pacific. Then he leaned back in the chair and sighed resignedly.

"I ought to have known you couldn't stumble over a body that just lay down and died!" he said bitterly. "A toy typewriter! Hell, I wondered where I'd seen messy type like that before. And anybody that would deliberately use a toy typewriter would probably do so because he didn't want it to be traced."

"Precisely." Wren laced fingers across his broad chest and looked pleased. "It's murder. Unquestionably."

"But good Lord—" Hogan raked fingers distractedly through stubborn red hair. His blue eyes were seeing banshees. "It gives you the heebies! David sends you cyanide through the mail. He doesn't say its a sample of headache medicine. He says it's deadly poison. Just the same, you take it. What the hell kind of a killer are we up against?"

Wren smiled. "Disquieting, isn't it?"

"You think it's hypnotism?" Hogan plunged wildly.

Wren stood up, chuckling deeply. "You're a man of extremes. First, it's simple. Now the incredible complexities of hypnotism. What a thought!" And he accompanied the bewildered sergeant to the door.

At 5:30, Wren descended into the novelty store wearing his black fleece overcoat and Homburg hat. Horace was alone, clearing the cash register for the day. He raised pale eyes from the till, lipped his soggy cigar, and said, "Pst!"

Wren stared at him. "What an observation! Why pst?"

Horace waved a limp hand toward the front of the store. "On accounta that's been goin' on for five min'ts."

Flakes of snow as fine and dry as salt were driving soundlessly against the illuminated show window. Watching it a moment produced the sensation of rushing headlong into space. A man was pacing back and forth in front of the building. His steps were quick, jerky as though he were constructed entirely

of thin wood and taut drawn wire that might go to pieces at any moment with a noise like a splintering guitar. His profile presented large features, deeply, surely cut. He wore no overcoat. His navy-blue suitcoat was doublebreasted with high padded shoulders. His hat was too high in the crown and too narrow at the brim.

"My!" Wren said. "What's his trouble?"

Horace snickered. "I could answer that, on'y not inna language uva gen'lman."

"Tsk!" Wren bounced to the front door, opened it, stepped out onto the sidewalk, turned right. The jumpy little man had reached the limit of his short beat, had turned, and stopped. Light from the show window discovered coppery flecks in deep-set light brown eyes that measured the largeness of Wren with complete candor.

"Mr. Wren—" He made the *s* sibilant, the *en* nasal.

Wren nodded. "And you?"

"I'm Hacket. Thomas Hacket." He didn't smile. There were no lines in the deeply carved face to indicate that he ever smiled. Just a wooden Indian, Wren concluded, his extremities infested with termites.

Hacket jerked a bare thumb in the direction of Meridian Street. "I got a car here in case you don't want to walk."

Wren's frown was slight, annoyed. "Oh? You've a notion our paths coincide?"

"Yeah." Hacket's nose had a lot to do with his affirmative. "Mr. Pellam sent me. He don't want nothing should happen to you, like maybe a bullet in your spine." He said this with no show of personal concern, nor did Wren find the double negative assuring.

"What a prognostication!" he scoffed. "Pellam waggles his ouija and out comes murder. That's delightful!"

Hacket's shoulders shrugged. "I don't know how damn delightful it is, but do we walk or ride?"

"Ride," Wren decided. He strode on with Hacket falling into step beside him. "By all means ride. You'd catch your death of something."

"Aw, hell, I'm hard." Hacket tapped his chest with his fingers—a faintly Tarzanesque gesture. "I could have an overcoat like you got, but I wouldn't lug the damn thing around." His voice was loud. The nasal edge of it carried through the snow. Passersby turned and looked at him, and Wren could take doubtful assurance from the fact that if Hacket were the intended purveyor of a bullet for Wren's spine there would be a satisfactory number of witnesses.

NEAR the corner, Hacket skipped over to the curb to the door of a gray sedan. "Look at it," he said of the car. "George

Pellam's. I wouldn't have the damn hearse if I was a millionaire."

Wren felt the bite of the wind, and this little man who seemed impervious to it irritated him. "Come," he said brusquely. "Shall we get in the car? Or merely cast aspersions at it?"

They got in. Wren took out a package of cigarettes, offered one to Hacket while the latter was starting the car. "Naw, I'm allergic to tobacco." Hacket clawed at the gear lever, stuck his head out the window before nosing out into traffic. Wren put the cigarettes into the left-hand pocket of his overcoat, managed a fumble as an excuse for giving Hacket's suitcoat pocket a quick feel. Hacket packed a gun.

"Look," Wren said. "Don't you like *anything*, my friend?"

"Sardines," Hacket said. He made a right turn onto Meridian and headed for Monument Place. "But you can't get them no more. And I like Fay Norris."

"Ah? Fay Norris is still available?"

"She's the boss' secretary," Hacket explained. "Class! Boy-oh-boy!" Hacket gave his head an appreciative half shake. "Wait 'til you see her, Mr. Wren. You'll figure out how come I'd rather live on little old Twenty-third Street with her grandpa than in some swanky joint. Even if the old man pumps the pianola 'til you could grind your teeth."

In the southwest quadrant of Monument Place, when Hacket was busy with traffic complications provided by the circular street, Wren's deft fingers lifted Hacket's gun. It felt like an automatic. It also felt a lot better in Wren's pocket than it had in Hacket's.

Hacket turned off South Meridian onto Maryland, parked across from the Printers and Lithographers Building. They got out, jay-walked, entered the building, and took an elevator to the third floor. In front of a door designating *The Pellam Publishing Company*, Hacket paused, turned to Wren. He showed his teeth in what Wren accepted as a smile only after he had discarded the notion that Hacket was about to bite him.

"Wait 'til you see Fay Norris, Mr. Wren! The rest of the staff has went, but Fay is waiting I should take her home."

"Well?" Wren murmured impatiently. "Shall we unveil this paragon? Or write a sonnet to her?" He twisted the doorknob, flung open the door, and the emptiness of Pellam's outer office, after such a build-up, was nothing less than startling. Hacket took a couple of steps toward the low oak rail that kept Pellam's callers from overrunning the place and pointed at the receptionist's desk where the classy Fay should presumably have been. He turned to Wren, his deep-set

brown eyes expressing complete amazement. "She's went home, too. The hell with women!"

Wren chuckled. "Leaves you in a pitiable state, doesn't it? You're reduced to sardines." He took buoyant strides through the gate in the rail and toward the door that carried the lettering: GEORGE PELLAM—PRIVATE. The foghorn voice of Policewoman Zoe Osbourn reached from beyond it calling somebody a barefaced fraud. Wren opened the door, looked into the room. His smile was impartially distributed between the policewoman who sat at the end of the desk and the extremely fat young man in the chair behind it.

"Who's a barefaced fraud, Mrs. O? Not our Mr. Pellam. His accuracy is phenomenal. Even deadly," said Wren.

Pellam stood up to about five feet and four inches. His smile exhibited an abundance of horsy teeth. His nose was flat and saddled by a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. The glasses, with light aslant their lenses, were as windows of an empty house. His kinky black hair glistened with oil, recalling to Wren the shiny coat of those cast iron Newfoundland dogs that had adorned the lawns in front of Victorian mansions. Pellam wore snappy green-gray tweeds—odd enough dress for an agent of dire prophecy.

"Delighted, delighted, Mr. Wren!" Pellam effused. His teeth were the sort that atomized saliva.

Zoe Osbourn contributed a snort. "Do you know what this two-legged ouija has just admitted, Jeff?"

WREN elevated his eyebrows and shook his head. Whatever it was, Pellam was still admitting it with nods. He employed a short-stemmed briar pipe like an orchestra conductor's baton—in an effort to hush the brass section exemplified by Zoe Osbourn.

"Please, please, Mrs. Osbourn, must you be so loud about it?" said Pellam as he went to the door and closed it. "Mr. Wren, I'm try-

ing to convince Mrs. Osbourn that I had nothing to do with the prophecy that was made last night at the Henry Frome house. I was merely the medium through which the spirit spoke. It was a purely psychic experiment. I accepted no fee. My business here is legitimate."

"Horse liniment!" Zoe broke in harshly. "You're planning to help the Fromes get their hooks on that money that was left to the missing nephew. Isn't he, Jeff?"

Wren didn't know. "Look," he said, "when did the Fromes arrange for this seance with you, Pellam?"

"Yesterday morning," Pellam replied. "They came to my office, told me that they were trying to get in touch with a nephew they presumed to be dead. I agreed to help, if the spirits so willed it. There was no mention of money then or after."

Wren interposed an out-of-key question. "What was Henry Frome smoking? A cob pipe? Or an aluminum one with valves, cooling fins, and what-not?"

Pellam frowned. "He wasn't smoking anything when he entered my private office. Won't you try to understand that I know nothing of this—this tragedy? That my only interest was to give fair warning, to prevent violence. One man has died already—"

"Quite," Wren interrupted. "All over my floor . . . But there's inconsistency here." He appeared puzzled. "You traffic in lodestones, crystal balls, hypnotic candles, and similar rubbish. You dream up astrological forecasts at a dime a dozen. You fatten your piggy bank on ignorance and superstition. Yet you claim to be a sincere medium. With trances and trumpets."

"I do." Pellam was as grave as a pall-bearer. "My psychic gift terrifies me, even as that of the great D. D. Home terrified him at times." Pellam agonized over his psychic gift and appeared somewhat like a baboon sucking a lemon. He shielded his eyes from the light, bowed his head, and immediately went into a trance. It was probably the



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shortest trance in the history of spiritualism.

"Find the young man with the streak of white in his hair," he whispered. "His name is *Death*. He has visited the Frome family once. He will come again unless precautions are taken. I see murder—"

"Pooh!" Wren scoffed quietly. "Murder's not new to the Fromes. They had one of those five years ago."

Which ended the trance. Pellam's hand dropped—his jaw dropped, too. Wren, unable to resist what was for him a powerful temptation, took a hand from a pocket, reached across the desk, and removed a red rubber ball seemingly from the Prophet's gaping mouth.

"Now," he said cheerfully. "You'll feel better!" And while Zoe Osbourn laughed uproariously, the ball vanished via the French drop. "Another thing, Mr. P. No fair going to extremes to fulfill your prophecy. Mr. Gallup did not shoot Mr. Dewey." He removed Hacket's gun from his pocket, dropped it on Pellam's desk. Then he turned and left Pellam's office with Zoe Osbourn pegging after him.

It was not until they had reached the street that Zoe Osbourn broke what had been a brooding silence. She stood on the sidewalk, arms akimbo, and glared at Jeffery Wren. The flare of her nostrils suggested the weak spot in a boiler that has exceeded its rated pressure.

"All right, master-wit!" she ground out. "Go on and slay me. Who was murdered in the Frome family five years ago?"

"Oh, that." His smile was slight. "Haven't the foggiest notion. Something I let drop now and then. Casually. It makes a nice clatter. Or don't you think so?" He touched his hat vaguely and walked off against the storm.

CHAPTER THREE

The Magnesia Victim

AT 7:15, Wren alighted from a taxi in front of a two-story frame house with a low-pitched roof that stood close to the sidewalk on East Twenty-third Street. He asked the hack driver to wait, mounted four concrete steps set in a steep terrace, and climbed to a brick-railed front porch. He cocked his head, listening to the jangle of at least half a million notes knocked out of a piano by nothing human. He recalled what Thomas Hacket had said about Fay Norris' grandfather pumping a pianola, "'til you could grind your teeth," and there was no doubt in his mind but what he had the right place.

He found the bell push and tried it, but it was sheer folly to suppose that anything less than a fire gong could compete with *Two*

Little Love Bees as reproduced by the mechanical piano. He tried the knob, found the door unlocked, and walked into the Norris living room. On his immediate left was a stairway of golden oak. Against the wall at the extreme right was the source of all this musical confusion. Assorted furnishings, mostly overstuffed pieces, filled in the gap between.

Up to now he had had no proper conception of a pianola. It appeared to be a sort of converter backed up to an upright piano so that an overhanging portion of the device rested on the keyboard of the piano. Player piano rolls were fed into the thing, and bellows pedals at the bottom provided pneumatic power that enabled it to pound the defenseless piano.

Except for the white-haired old gentleman who piloted the pianola, the room was deserted, which was no more than could be expected. The old man presented a bowed back criss-crossed with fireman's suspenders. A cob pipe in his mouth sent up coils of smoke which offered a doubtful explanation for the hurry of the love bees to escape from the pianola. The old man had an ear trumpet held to his left ear, its bell waving back and forth in front of the piano like a charmed cobra.

Wren took bounding steps the length of the living room, tapped grandpa on the shoulder. Grandpa turned his head, revealed a kindly face dominated by clear blue eyes nested in laugh-wrinkles. He was in no way startled by Wren's sudden appearance.

"There's a note missin'," he shrilled above the music. "A good deep bass note down there som'ers."

Wren lifted the large end of the ear trumpet and said loudly: "Incredible!"

Grandpa Norris dropped the trumpet, and jumped a good six inches off the stool. The pianola stopped, and for a moment the silence was thunderous. Gramps swiveled around, removed his cob pipe from his mouth, while his blue eyes attempted the penetration of Jeffery Wren.

"Like to busted my ear drum, dag-nab it! I ain't deaf."

Wren stirred the trumpet on the floor with his shoe toe. He cocked an incredulous eyebrow. "Had an odd notion that was an ear trumpet. It's not, of course. A nasal douche for an ant-eater, probably."

Grandpa Norris laughed shrilly. "It's an ear trumpet, all right. Belonged to my pa. Got it out of the trunk this evenin', figurin' maybe she'd help me locate that note that's been a-missin' since last night."

"Ingenious!" Wren smiled widely. "A stethoscope for a pianola. Dull of me not to know."

"You ever know a pianola to lose a note afore?"

Wren shook his head, concerned. "But then I've never known a pianola . . . Is Miss Fay Norris in?"

Grandpa took a couple of puffs from his pipe. "She'll be down directly, soon as she's prettied herself up. She's—"

Footsteps sounded on the stairway, and Wren saw the old man's eyes sharpen. A tall, somewhat rumped-looking young man, bare-headed but wearing a baggy plaid top-coat, halted in his descent of the stairs. His tousled black hair was shot through with a streak of early white and reminded Wren of one of our least attractive small scent-spraying animals. Lips pinched the short butt of a cigarette, and his pockety eyes stared through the smoke at Jeffery Wren.

"Who's that, Gramps?" he asked bluntly.

Gramps waved an arm toward the door. "Get out, Ray. I got a leetle transaction to transact with Mr. Van Der Plunk here."

Wren gave Gramps a startled glance. Ray Norris came all the way down the steps and went slamming out the front door.

Grandpa chuckled. "That'll hold him a while!"

Wren, puzzled, said: "Look. This Van Der Plunk business—"

"Oh, that grandson of mine—Ray that just went out—he's a one to shoot off his mouth about big business deals, so I was payin' him back in his own coin. Ray's just a barkeep downtown part of the day. Nights, he runs around 'til who-tied-the-pup. Always got some scheme to get rich quick."

Ray had a scheme now, Wren thought. Ray was probably the one who had warned him to stay out of the Frome affair. Possibly, Ray was the man mentioned by Prophet Pellam—the man with the streak of white in his hair who was "Death."

"Look," Wren said to Gramps, "the pianola. It couldn't manage Chopin's *Funeral March*? In a matter of grave necessity?"

"Sure could," said Gramps proudly. "I got a roll for it, though I ain't played it since Fay and Ray's ma died . . . You gimme a hand here, son? I got a good notion to take the front off this here pianola and see what became of that note."

WREN stepped to one end of the pianola, and together, he and the old man lifted the front panel from its catches and put it aside. There was, he concluded, more to a pianola than meets the eye—almost as much as meets the ear. The interior reminded him of a spaghetti factory in Italy, for most of the space within was occupied by tiny white rubber tubes that conveyed the pneumatic pressure, which in turn, operated the ham-

mers for striking the keys of the piano behind it.

"Well, I'll be dag-blamed!" Gramps pounced on one of the tiny tubes that didn't seem to go anywhere. "One of the pore thing's intestines is busted plum off."

"Sabotage," Wren said gravely. "No doubt of it. The fiend will break a tube each day. Eventually, Chopin will come out *Chop Sticks*. Or don't you think so?" He picked up the tube which hung loosely across the lower panel. It was not even fastened at the bottom. As he examined the broken end, a tiny drop of moisture exuded onto his finger. He carried it first to his nose and then to his tongue. It had a pronounced bite.

"Well!" he murmured, and crammed the tubing into his pocket. "No objections if I borrow this?"

Gramps laughed. "It's no good now, Mister. I'd 've thrown it away. It's—" He broke off, looked toward the stairs. A tall, lovely brunette of about twenty-five was coming down the steps, and if this was Fay Norris, Wren could understand how the unpleasant Thomas Hacket might be able to put up with the pianola just to live under the same roof with her. She had carried her black-and-white ensemble to extremes, Wren thought—harlequin blouse, pale hose, black pumps and skirt, a white *Daché* net to confine her chignon hairdo. That would have been quite enough without adding black nail polish and a too-dark shade of lipstick for her pale skin.

"Fay," Gramps said, "there's a gentleman to see you. Mister—er—"

"Wren. Representing the Cob Pipe Smokers of America, Miss Norris." Wren smiled broadly at the girl, and her rouged lips returned at least half of the smile. Her big gray eyes rested interestedly on him.

"Is it some sort of a club? If it is, Gramps is certainly a member."

"Exactly! A charter member."

Behind him, Grandpa Norris chuckled, said: "What do you know! A charter member!"

Wren said: "We've another, Miss Norris. A man by the name of Frome. Henry Frome? Tall, elderly person? Bald head? Sharp nose?"

Fay Norris nodded. "Oh, he was in Mr. Pellam's office yesterday. But," she added, "he wasn't smoking a cob pipe. It was a shiny sort of a pipe."

"Tsk!" Wren was shocked. "A deserter from our ranks. A gadget-pipe smoker." He shook his head. "That's treason. And was Mr. Frome smoking the same pipe when he left, Miss Norris?"

She frowned thoughtfully. "I don't believe he was smoking anything. I'm not sure, of course."

Wren nodded gravely. He turned to Grand-

pa Norris. "You then are a committee of one."

"I am, huh?" Gramps blinked.

"Write Frome a letter. Be firm. Chide him roundly for his perfidy." Wren strode to the door, turned suddenly to Fay Norris where she stood beside the newel post. "And what do you smoke?"

She laughed. "Not a cob, I assure you. Cigarettes, when I can get them."

"And can you get them?" Appearing rather bored about the whole thing, Wren reached into empty space, produced five unlighted cigarettes in rapid succession. These he dropped into Fay Norris' hands and went bounding out the door, feeling rather well pleased with himself.

His self-satisfaction accompanied him just as far as the steps at the top of the terrace—then deserted him with a suddenness that had him gasping. His cab was gone. There was not, as he saw it, any mystery about the missing cab. Ray Norris had simply paid off the driver and told him Wren was staying a while.

Wren wasn't. Not if he could help it. He came down the steps and onto the sidewalk. He looked both ways. The snow drove obliquely out of the north in a continuous blinding curtain. Wren didn't like it. Not only did the stuff get in the tops of his oxfords, but it gave him the uncertain feeling of walking on the rim of the world.

He turned west, followed a narrow path that other feet had left in the deepening snow. He had not gone more than fifty feet before he became aware that he was being rapidly overtaken. He glanced over his shoulder at the figure materializing out of the white murk—a small man in a long overcoat, a man who walked with no lost motion and kept his hands in his pockets. A cigarette in the follower's mouth brightened under a final drag, was flipped into oblivion.

Getting down to business, Wren thought. Unpleasant business. For some reason he became acutely aware of his spine, yet he kept on, unhurried. When the snow-creaking steps were directly behind him, he politely stepped out of the path, turned, waited. The small man's headlong strides were checked a moment, then he, too, stepped out of the path and stood close to Wren.

"Oh, come," Wren murmured. "Follow the-leader. That's childish."

"You just keep on the path." It was a whisper and it rode a strong sulphurous breath. The accent was unadulterated Hoosier. "This lump in my pocket ain't my Social Security card."

"Hardly. What a thought!" Wren was permitted to feel the lump against his side.

"Get movin'."

Wren got moving. It seemed unavoidable.

At the corner, the man behind him said: "Turn left. Get in that car on this side of the street. Get in under the wheel."

WREN left the path along the sidewalk, stepped high and wide to a two-door sedan. The little man said: "Get in." The hidden gun gouged, and Wren got in with ponderous alacrity. He slid beneath the wheel and the other got in beside him, holding the gun in his left hand while he reached to turn on the ignition with his right.

"Only fair to warn you," said Wren as the starter ground. "I've no driver's license."

"Get goin'." Cut across to Delaware an' south to Sixteenth."

Wren shrugged. The engine kicked over and held. Wren, who had disposed of his car shortly after the start of the war, meshed gears noisily, let the unfamiliar clutch slap in. Wheels spun, cut down to traction, and the car lurched forward. The man with the gun reached across the instrument board for the light switch. The dashlight came on, too, and showed Wren a narrow, sickly face with colorless lips that didn't quite meet over small, crooked teeth.

Wren said: "Ah! You're vaguely familiar!"

The man leaned back uneasily, but his gun pressure did not relax. "I'm Simon Spiker," he said.

"Incredible!" Wren made the turn onto Delaware. He groped for the windshield wiper control, and turned it on. Headlights reached about fifteen feet from the nose of the car and then became a white blur. "Shy fellow, aren't you? Where've you been?"

"Mostly at the corner of Market an' Illinois sellin' papers," said the other. "That where you seen me before. I didn't know I was a millionaire. I been sufferin' with magnesia."

Wren chuckled. "What an affliction. But," he added a cheerful thought, "it should keep you regular."

"Don't talk so much. You make a left turn at Sixteenth, an' I don't want to lose no fenders. Just watch your knittin'."

Wren made the turn and watched his knitting. It would not, he had decided, be a good idea to throw the car into a skid—not with a nervous man and a gun at his side. He kept on east, crossed the busy intersections at Central and College Avenues.

"Keep goin' 'til you cross the railroad tracks an' then turn left again. Take it slow. I'll tell you where an' when to stop."

Wren took it slowly. They bumbled across the tracks, and at the first street beyond, Wren turned to the left.

"Easy now," said the man with the gun. "Right about here. Now, stop."

Wren applied the brakes. Tires packed snow with a creaking sound. Simon cut off the ignition, backed out of the car, his gun always on Wren. Wren got out and the gun found its place against his side. He glanced up and down the quiet street that fronted the tracks. The nearest street lamp seemed a mile away because of the snow. The row of small houses were like teeth—uniform, pointed, and closely-spaced. There was a distant chug of a locomotive, the crash of freight cars being shunted onto sidetracks. Coal smoke was pressed down by the heavy sky. You couldn't see it, but it was there, acrid in the nostrils.

Wren was steered up onto the porch of one of the little houses. They were expected. The front door opened a cautious crack, and there was light enough to show the white-streaked rumpled hair of Ray Norris.

"Come on in, Mr. Van Der Plunk!" And Ray snickered.

Simon applied his knee briskly to the seat of Wren's pants and Wren, of necessity, went into the house. He caught his balance and recovered the greater portion of his aplomb. His dark eyes took an interested tour of a small square living room—a parlor furnace that gave off too much heat, a table and lamp, the lamp-cord connected to the ceiling fixture, a couch with a brick replacing one of its front legs, two straight chairs and a platform rocker with a worn red plush cushion.

Ray got hold of one of Wren's coat lapels and his thin lips twisted into a smile. "Now like I said before, Mr. Wren, we don't want to spoil your sense of humor. You just take a chair, huh? I want to talk to you."

"Delighted!" Wren looked all of that. Inviting him to talk was rather like throwing Brer Rabbit into the briar patch. He opened his coat, walked to a straight chair, and sat down. Simon and his gun followed. Ray lighted a cigarette and rested one foot on the other straight chair. He indulged in some close scrutiny, as though Wren were one of those Chinese puzzles he contemplated taking apart. Like his sister's, his eyes were gray, but not particularly attractive.

"What's your game, Wren?" he asked.

Wren took a deck of cards from his pocket, performed a dovetail shuffle, and shook his head. "Never play games. There's no competition for me. I've too many sly tricks." To illustrate, he dealt himself a poker hand onto the floor, turning up four aces and a deuce. He smiled happily at Ray and Simon. "You see?"

SIMON moistened his lips. Ray waved his cigarette at the cards. "It's not bragging when you know you're good. What I want

to know is just what the Fromes are up to."

Wren picked up his cards. "They're obvious. What remains of them. They want to prove Simon dead."

Simon said: "Well, some nerve! I ain't dead."

"No. Not yet," Wren agreed, a trifle lugubrious about it. "But you're not Simon, either."

Simon said: "Sa—ay!" He had a nasty way of rolling down his lower lip to show his crooked teeth. "Sure, I'm Simon. Ain't I, Ray?"

"You're Simon," Ray said as though that was something he was tired of repeating. "You lost your memory. I put you wise."

"Sure. Magnesia, like I been tellin' him."

"Amnesia, you dope!"

Wren was chuckling. "Terribly sorry. It won't work. Simon Spiker hails from Boston. This person has paw-paws running out of his mouth."

Pseudo-Simon thrust his face within inches of Wren's. "I ain't goin' to argue." He poked himself with his thumb. "I'm Simon Spiker. I am *so* from Boston. But I had mag—amnesia, an' I forgot."

"Tsk!" Wren was deeply shocked. "That's sacrilege. No man ever forgets he's from Boston. Magnesia or no magnesia." He riffled his cards and dumped them back into his pocket. His smile was pleasantly benign. "Look, you boys are moving in fast company. Too fast for you."

Ray's eyes were like those of a salt mackerel wishing itself well out of a brine tub. "If my Simon isn't Simon, who in the hell is going to know about it? He can write Simon's signature. He even looks like Simon. And the real Simon is dead." He added uncertainly: "Isn't he?"

Wren needed a moment to answer that. "No," he said finally. "Not at all. Alive and kicking. Especially kicking."

Pseudo-Simon and Ray exchanged as disquieting a pair of glances as Wren had ever seen. The former said: "Now you're talkin' yourself into a nice long nap. Ray, this guy is too smart for his pants."

Ray admitted it. Wren was inclined to admit it himself. "Wait. How do you know what Simon Spiker looks like?"

Ray took his foot off the chair in order to get to his left hip pocket. He took out a black wallet and removed from it a snapshot. He showed the back of the picture first where somebody had written the name of Simon Spiker in pencil together with a Boston address. He turned the photo over. It was a head-and-shoulders view of a sickly-looking blond man with a narrow face and an asinine grin.

Wren looked at the photo and then at

Pseudo-Simon. There was more than a striking resemblance.

"Remarkable!" he murmured, still staring at the man. "Might even say astounding!" That was when he snatched the photo from Ray's fingers, while staring at Simon. He bounced to his feet as he palmed the picture. Immediately demonstrating the emptiness of his hands, he applauded himself with, "Also remarkable!" He brought his two hands together, sneaked the left under his coat for an instant before it dropped to his side.

Simon lunged at him, drove the muzzle of the gun into Wren's middle. "Come on!" he threatened. "I seen that one. Stick up them fast mitts, Wren."

Obligingly, Wren raised his hands, both of which were fully occupied. The left, its back slightly toward the not too appreciative audience, concealed a full dozen palming coins. The photo had never left his right hand, but was at the moment held in back-palm. The moment that Simon began his search, Wren tucked the photo into his hat-band and dropped all the palming coins on the floor.

The coins had the shimmer of silver and their pleasant ringing sound was enough to call out a squad of investigators from the Department of Internal Revenue. Morgenthau would have glanced down at them as readily as did Simon and Ray. Wren stepped back and aside. His right hand, incredibly strong from the manipulation of two-inch billiard balls, struck down to Pseudo-Simon's frail gun wrist, forced it down. At the same time, his big left fist crossed to Simon's sickly face. Wren, as astonished as anybody, saw Simon back-stepping in double-time in a futile effort to keep up with his own center of gravity. Simon fell all the way over the platform rocker and made no immediate attempt to arise. Beyond that, he had left his revolver with Wren.

All of which occurred while Ray Norris was picking up one of the straight chairs. He got it up over his head, and then had all the trouble of lowering it to the floor. Wren was facing him, the gun in his hand and a smile on his lips, backing away toward the front door.

"My regards to the family, Ray," he said cheerfully. "Grandpa. Fay. Not omitting the pianola."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Lady from the Sky

AT COLLEGE Avenue and Sixteenth, Wren boarded a south-bound street car, went downtown where he caught one of the swift and silent trackless trolleys that took him to Fourteenth and Pennsylvania. Thus he performed a long loop to approach the ad-

dress of the James Todwinkles. It was a tall apartment building faced with yellow brick. As he turned up the short walk to the entry, the sound of footsteps made him glance over his shoulder.

"Wren—"

The nasal voice was unmistakably Hacket's. Unmistakable, too, was Hacket's slight silhouette coming out of the snowy murk from the direction of the curb.

"Why damn you, Mr. Wren," said Thomas Hacket with no heat whatever, "you gave me the slip."

"Unintentionally," Wren assured him, displeased. "Look—go play by yourself. You and your adenoids."

"Sinuses," corrected Hacket, getting technical. He had made some concession to the weather by putting on a black leather jacket that divided his wiry figure into exactly two parts. He thumbed toward the apartment building. "You want to see the Todwinkles?"

Wren took a long breath that froze his nostrils. He scowled darkly. "Astounding! What's your brand of crystal ball?"

"Naw, naw." Hacket jerked his head from side to side. "I used to chauffeur the Fromes. For ten years I was what you might call a faithful retainer for them stuffed shirts. Naturally, seeing you in front of this plushy joint, I can put two and two together it should come our four."

"Remarkable deduction."

"Aw, hell, I been waiting for you over to Mick's." Hacket jerked a bare thumb toward a taproom across the street that flaunted the name NITE LIFE in red and gold neon.

"Touches me deeply," Wren murmured.

Hacket shook his head. "To me it don't make a damn bit of difference what happens to you. It's George Pellam. He's a humanitarian. You want to go in, or you want to stand out here in the snow and argue?"

Wren grunted. He turned, took a bounding stride to the door of the building with Thomas Hacket bringing up the rear. The quiet foyer was deserted except for a tall, thirty-ish man in a brown overcoat whose ruddy face and palest yellow eyebrows were vaguely familiar. The man in the brown overcoat didn't seem to be going or coming. A police detective, Wren thought.

Wren and Hacket entered one of two automatic elevators, and Hacket pressed the button for floor seven.

"So you chauffeured the Fromes," Wren mused. "Were you around the night Brother Hamilton died? The same night Nephew Simon disappeared?"

Hacket said: "Sure. Now they want to make like Simon is dead. It's the almighty dollar."

"Quite," Wren agreed. "Quite trite . . ."

You'd recognize Simon Spiker if you saw him?"

"Sure. He was around the house for about a week while Hamilton Frome was in the process of croaking."

Wren took out his wallet to which he had transferred the snapshot taken from Ray Norris. He showed the picture to Hacket.

"Vaguely familiar?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Hacket nodded. "Sure, sure."

"Simon Spiker? Beyond any shadow of doubt?"

Copper rivet eyes in the carved face stared at Wren. "Of all the lousy detectives, Mr. Wren, I believe you're the lousiest I ever had the misfortune to encounter. What the hell's the matter with you? That's my cousin in Jersey which died two years ago."

Wren took a breath, used it to inflate his cheeks. Wordlessly, he turned the photo over. Hacket looked at the penciled name and address, and then held his nose. Wren appeared injured.

"Once Hamilton Frome sent me downtown I should buy a Christmas present for Simon," Hacket explained. "He gave me the name and address to which it was to be sent, and not having any paper on my person at that particular time, I wrote it on the back of my cousin in Jersey. I bought him purple pajamas with a very conservative check," he added irrelevantly as the elevator came to a soundless stop.

Hacket led off around a turn in the corridor, and Wren saw Policewoman Zoe Osbourn leaning against the door of 7A. She looked mad at the world. Seeing Jeffery Wren provided a generous focal point for all of her peeves.

"Break my arches and call me a flatfoot!" she bellowed. "If you're not the worst possible influence on the police department, I'll eat my turban!"

He stared mildly at the hat. "Heaven forbid. Those mirrors. They'd scratch a little good down."

"Rope, he says!" She glared at Wren. "That's what you're always saying, you son of a witch! Give them rope. Now you've got Hogan doing the same damned thing." She slapped a dewy forehead. "So help me, I'm the rope. I've trailed that seventh son all over. Now I camp out here while he gives with visions of violence and sudden death for somebody!"

Wren looked at the door of 7A and frowned slightly. "Pellam? He's in there? Mightn't he cut a throat or two while you're having convulsions outside?"

"Aw, hell," Hacket put in, "you got George figured out all wrong, Mr. Wren. He wouldn't hurt an ant."

ZOE Osbourn gave Hacket a scornful look. "Who's the little squirt, Jeff?"

"Works for Pellam," Wren said. "Incidentally guards my body." He stepped to the door of 7A and knocked. Padded footsteps approached, and the door was opened by James Todwinkle, though it took a moment to associate the man in the doorway with that pompous, perfumed individual who had visited Wren's shop that afternoon. Todwinkle had on gray sweat shirt and pants. The drawstring of the sweat pants didn't do as much for his middle as whatever sort of belly-band he wore under his street clothes. He scowled at them and shook his head vigorously.

"If this means more questions about Henry Frome's death, I am not in a cooperative mood."

"Oh, you're not in the mood, huh?" Zoe Osbourn looked the big man coolly up and down. "Well, this happens to be about George Pellam. I'm here to take that two-legged ouija board out of your hair."

Todwinkle was delighted. Todwinkle smiled. "Indeed, I wish you would."

Zoe Osbourn headed the column of three that filed into the Todwinkle living room, with Hacket bringing up the rear. It was a pleasant modern apartment of bright colors and bleached wood. A set of Indian clubs and an electric horse in one corner suggested that Todwinkle was not going to give up his figure without a struggle, while the obese George Pellam, squatting like a Buddha on the low sofa, was a graphic illustration of what Todwinkle seemed to fear most. Agnes Frome, the late Henry's blond widow, was curled like a kitten in a lounge chair near the door. She pouted disagreeably, tossing her head when Jeffery Wren spoke to her.

Zoe Osbourn pegged across to the sofa with Hacket tailing her. Hacket said: "Now wait a minute, lady—"

"You keep out of this, little man," Zoe broke in.

George Pellam reasoned that it would be much safer to stand. He got up, wagging the stem of his briar pipe at Zoe Osbourn. "Please, please," he begged, his horsy teeth and saliva contributing to the humidity of the room. "Mr. Wren, if you have any influence with this woman, please make her stop hounding me."

"Ha!" Zoe turned to Wren and her right foot tapped on the floor. "Use your influence, Jeffery!" she challenged.

His smile was entirely bland. "What a thought! Never interfere with the due process of law . . . well, seldom ever."

Hacket addressed himself pointedly to George Pellam: "Why don't you go home and go to bed? What's it to you what happens to these stuffed shirts?"

"What indeed?" Wren murmured. He turned to Agnes Frome. "Mrs. Frome, one question—"

"I'm not speaking to you!" Agnes flounced out of her chair, snatched up her fur jacket from the chair arm. Zoe Osbourn wheeled from the befuddled Pellam and sailed into Agnes Frome.

"Oh, yes you are, dearie," she growled. "You're speaking to anybody who speaks to you." She put her hands on Agnes' shoulders. "Sit on it before I paddle it for you!" And she shoved Agnes into the chair. Agnes bounced a little, then sat up straight, indignant and at the same time afraid. Zoe was saying: "Somebody's got to take over for Homicide. God knows where Hogan is. Hanging by his heels from all that rope he's been paying out!" She nudged Wren. "Go on, master-wit, ask your question."

Todwinkle intervened. He put a pink hand on Zoe Osbourn's hand, and the lobster pink of his smooth face had deepened somewhat. "I will not have my apartment turned into an inquisition chamber."

Zoe jerked her head toward the corner of the room. "Go ride your horse! Jeff, ask your questions and let's get out of here."

Wren looked down into Agnes' pouting face. His voice was quiet, entirely genial. "About the cob pipe, Mrs. Frome. It was found in your husband's pocket. When did he acquire it?"

"Last night," Agnes snapped. "He'd lost his aluminum one."

"Quite." Wren exhibited a great deal of satisfaction. "Where did he lose his pipe?"

Agnes shook her head. "I don't know. Some place downtown, I guess. We went to Pellam's office and then shopped the stores for some—some new clothes for me." The memory of that happy event brought on lip-quivering.

"Buying new clothes on the strength of your prospects of getting your hooks on Simon Spiker's money, no doubt, dearie!"

Agnes put her hands on her hips and her short nose into Zoe's face. "Don't you stand there and throw accusations at me, you—female policeman! If you were worth anything, you'd arrest Grace Todwinkle. Just about an hour ago, I caught her at the Frome house, going through the safe. She stole something from it—a long envelope with a red wax seal. It's probably poor Henry's will, but I can't get into the safe to find out, because only Grace and Henry knew the combination. So there!"

AGNES turned and swished to the door. She jerked her jacket over her shoulders and went out into the hall where she paused to hurl a final threat. "I'm going to get me a

policeman! An honest-to-God *man* policeman!"

"Yes," Wren murmured. "You'll do better. Undoubtedly." She slammed the door, and Wren looked happily about, said: "My!"

Zoe glared at him: "What brings that burst of glee?"

He chuckled. "Simply bears out a pet theory. One that accounts for my pleasant state of bachelorhood. All widows are tempestuous. Either that or all tempestuous wives become widows." He turned to Todwinkle. "Odd that you're still among the living. Or don't you think so?"

Todwinkle waved a thick arm toward the door. "Get out, all of you. I am going to bed, and I don't intend to have a circus going on in my living room while I'm trying to sleep. Soothsayers, magicians, policewomen, and— and—" He could find no name for Thomas Hacket and so simply stared at him. Hacket's copper rivet eyes stared right back.

Zoe said: "Just a minute, Mr. Todwinkle. Where is Mrs. Todwinkle?"

"I do not know," declared Todwinkle, "and so far as answering your questions, I do not care. Now get out. Get out, all of you!"

They got, Wren and Hacket followed by Zoe Osbourn who hung on to George Pellam's fat arm. In the hall, on the way to the elevator, Zoe persistently questioned Pellam. Pellam as persistently denied knowing anything. He had simply tried to warn the Fromes. He had come to the Todwinkle apartment to warn Grace Frome Todwinkle. Could he be blamed for acts of kindness?

Zoe thought he could. "You'll come on down to Headquarters," she growled. "Maybe you can see a dark future for Sergeant Hogan. I can, and I don't need a crystal ball!"

In the elevator on the way down there was comparative quiet. Wren turned benignly to Hacket. "Pains me to mention it, of course. Pains me to my bootsoles. You're so happy in your ignorance. So unaware of the intricate mechanism at work here."

The coppery eyes blinked, looked dully about the narrow confines of the descending car. Wren said hastily: "No. Hardly! Who's talking about elevators?"

"Hell's fire, who would know what you're talking about, master-wit!" Zoe put in dryly.

Wren chuckled. "The sinister plot. Somebody's trying to pan off a fraud Simon Spiker. To collect the dormant fortune, of course."

Hacket threw back his head. Melted snow from his hat spattered the side of the car. "Aw, sure, sure."

Wren turned to Prophet Pellam. "Means nothing to you, of course?"

Pellam swallowed, shook his head.

Wren said: "Naturally not. You're a one-

way ouija. Murder and murder only. Hacket, what might happen to anyone who could distinguish the spurious Simon from the genuine?"

Hacket stuck out his jaw, the better to massage it. "Huh," said he and his sinuses after a moment. The elevator stopped. Hacket was the first out of the door into the foyer. Zoe Osbourn took three steps from the elevator and stopped. Of necessity, Pellam stopped with her. Her eyes goggling at the man in the brown overcoat who loafed in the foyer, she said: "Jackson, come here!"

The man, without doubt a plainclothes cop, crossed to Zoe and Pellam. Wren went toward the front door where Thomas Hacket lingered in the entry.

"You mean—" Hacket began, speaking to Wren. Hacket's eyes had come to life, had found cause for uneasiness. He had left his mouth open, and his upper lip was curling as though all was not well in his tummy. "Yeah," he said.

Wren was nodding, unreasonably happy about the whole thing. "You'll be making lumps under a sheet somewhere. And not on a bed." He pushed the front door open, shooed Hacket out. "Run along, Thomas. Guard your own body for a change."

Thomas Hacket backed out of the door. He slipped in the light snow on the approach walk, caught his balance with a wild waving of arms.

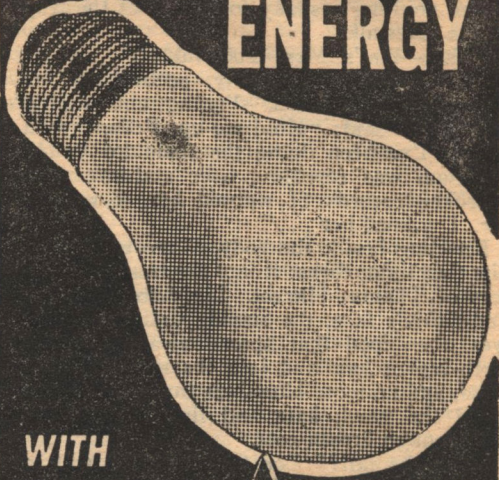
"You know, Mr. Wren," he said when he was steady, "I think there's a great deal in what you say." He turned, took three steps to Wren's one. He was therefore within two feet of the front sidewalk when the lady came out of the sky.

She came not with a graceful swoop as do angels and the flying heroines of the tragic operas. There was only a blot of blackness against the sifting white, a sudden displacement of cold air that struck Wren in the face and seemed actually to bowl Hacket over, and then she had arrived. On the sidewalk with a thud. And in all fairness to other thuds he'd known, this one struck Wren as being duller and more sickening—a thud to end all thuds, especially for the lady.

WREN could only stand and stare at the ludicrous black pattern of the depression in the snow, at the still body that had made it. Thomas Hacket was scrabbling slowly back from it on the seat of his pants, using his hands and heels to do it. Zoe Osbourn, entirely unaware of what had happened, came charging out of the apartment hanging onto George Pellam.

"Jeff," she bellowed, "Jackson says Mrs. Todwinkle entered the building half an hour ago. Hogan had him shadowing her. That

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means—" She broke off, watching Hacket as the latter stood up. "What's wrong with the little man? Did he take a— Who's that?" She pointed at the lady from the sky.

Wren didn't know. Hacket knew. Hacket had had a close-up view. He backed into Wren, pointing a shaky forefinger at the lady on the sidewalk.

"That—that's Mrs. Todwinkle!"

Wren went to the body, peeling off his gloves. Zoe Osbourn, slipping and sliding behind him said: "Hold me up, Pellam. God knows, I've been doing the same for you!"

Pellam was repeating over and over like a broken record: "I warned her. I warned her. I warned her . . ."

Kneeling beside the body, Wren took out a slim flashlight, thrust it into the trembling fingers of Thomas Hacket. Light found Grace Todwinkle's face, the staring ugliness of the eyes, the blood that spread away from the earth-brown hair and into the snow. Frome blood, and no more blue than any other. Wren found the hand, bare and limp at the cuff of the rough brown coat.

"Did she fall?" Zoe Osbourn was still in the dark. "Was she hit by a car?"

"Fell," Wren murmured. "From upstairs. Not necessarily an accident." There was not the thinnest thread of pulse. The skin over the fine bones of the hand was cold to the touch. Where were her gloves? The trembling light in Hacket's hand touched a bulging pocket of the coat, moved away. Shadow blanketed the pocket. Wren reached into the shadow, dipped into the pocket. His bare fingers encountered snow—snow that had sifted down on top of a leathery wad that was a pair of woman's gloves. Wren withdrew his hand, empty.

Mrs. Todwinkle had been out in the weather long enough to accumulate snow in her pocket. Yet she had not put on her gloves. Neither could she have had her hands in her pockets.

"Incredible!" Wren stood up. "Her hands. What did she do with her hands?"

In the light from the flash, Zoe Osbourn stared at him. "What are you babbling about? Her hands are right there—right at the ends of her arms. Where do you keep yours?"

He didn't answer. He brushed past Pellam and Hacket, headed for the entry of the apartment building. Zoe Osbourn shouted something at him. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered now except the baffling business of Mrs. Todwinkle's hands. He got into the elevator, pressed the button for floor seven. Nervous excitement drugged him like marijuana—reducing speeds, particularly that of the elevator, to a wormlike crawl. When at last the door slid back and he could get around the turn in the hall, there was Jackson, the

plainclothesman in the brown overcoat, pounding on the door of 7A.

Jackson glanced at Wren. "The damn fool's taking a shower. He can't hear a thing. If Mrs. Todwinkle isn't in there, she's got to be in the building someplace. How the hell could she have got out?"

Wren said simply: "Through the window." Beyond the door he could hear the distant rush of water and Todwinkle singing bathroom opera in a lusty voice.

Jackson said: "Huh? Through the window. You mean—"

"All over the sidewalk."

"Cripes!" And Jackson pulled a revolver and shot hell out of the lock on the Todwinkle door. They were half-way across the Todwinkle living room before Todwinkle came out of the door of the front bedroom holding a towel around his middle and dripping water all over the jade green carpet. All visible parts of his anatomy were the same shade of lobster pink, and his short trimmed gray hair was plastered down across his forehead.

"Wha—wha—what is the meaning of this outrage?" he roared.

Wren doesn't recall that either he or Jackson made any attempt to explain the outrage. They passed Todwinkle on either side, rushed into the bedroom and met a chilly blast from the wide open window. Beyond the bedroom, the light in the bath came through clouds of steam from the shower cabinet.

"I demand an explanation!" Todwinkle was pounding something.

Jackson stuck his head and shoulders out of the window, drew back, turned to Todwinkle. "That window's open," Jackson said. And when the significance of that didn't seem to strike Todwinkle at all, Jackson repeated: "The window! The window, you fathead!"

"And why shouldn't it be open?" the lobster pink was developing a purplish cast. Whatever it was that Todwinkle had pounded there beside the living room door, got pounded again. "Is there a law against opening windows? I just opened it—just before I started to take my bath. I happen to like a cool bedroom—"

Jackson stared at the man. "Then your wife didn't—"

"My wife isn't at home!" Todwinkle belated. "Will you stop hounding my wife? That is," he added more quietly, "unless she came in while I was in the bathroom." He stepped back into the living room and called: "Grace!"

CIRCUMSTANCES lent the name a macabre note. Wren stood near the window and in spite of his greatcoat, he shivered. There was so much air in the room. There was so much more of it out the window. There

was vastly more cold thin air between the window and the sidewalk. He stared at the open window, at the blackness beyond, frowned slightly, and stepped closer to rest his hands on the sill. Three feet beyond the window, a scalloped canvas valance piped in white rippled in the wind.

"What's—" He broke off to scoff at himself. "What a question! An awning. Nothing less. Out of season, but still an awning." Behind him, Jackson had started to lay it on the line to Todwinkle. "You mean to stand there and tell me you didn't know your wife—"

"Wait," Wren interrupted, turning from the window. Todwinkle appeared baffled beyond speech. He took his eyes off Jackson and gaped at Wren. "About the awning," Wren said. "It's January. Didn't you know?"

"It's my awning!" Todwinkle was once more the lion in his den. "I've had enough argument about that. The superintendent insisted on taking it down, said the winter weather would rot it. I told him to leave it up, that it kept the rain and snow out. I said if he took it down I'd let the rain and snow come in and ruin the wall and floor. He left it up, but"—Todwinkle added the note that made his victory a hollow one—"I had to pay him for the damned awning."

He glared at Wren and Jackson. His grin was not nice.

"But you lowered the awning," Wren pointed out. "Just now. When you opened the window."

Todwinkle was nodding impatiently. "Just before I went to take my bath. I always do. Now, about my wife—"

Out of the freezing dark came the scream of sirens. Wren, with an, "Oh!" and a "My!" of tribute to the ingenuity of a killer called David, moved swiftly out into the living room and to the front door. Todwinkle's neighbors crowded around in the hall outside. Somebody asked Wren a question he didn't hear and wouldn't have heeded. He bounced around the turn to the elevators, pressed the "Up" button. One of the cars was already on its way. He watched the floor signal lights come and go—four, five, six, seven. The safety gate slid open. Zoe Osbourn alone stepped from the car, ran head-on into Wren. He caught her by the arm, thrust her back into the car.

"Up, my dear lady. Nothing in 7A but an open window. And a large pink person in a towel." Wren stepped in and pressed the button for floor eight.

Zoe Osbourn goggled at him. "Well, she was pushed out of that window, wasn't she, master-wit?"

He shook his head. "Hardly. Not at all. It's another suicide. Another of David's cleverly contrived suicides. Murder by hypnotism,

Hogan would say. Brilliant. Ingenious. Defies detection. Except for the pianola and the cob pipe, we'd never have known."

She glared at him, arms akimbo. "Hell's fire, what's a pianola?"

"Ah." His smile verged on the supercilious. "How few people know!" As the door of the car opened, he bounced out into the eighth-floor corridor, chuckling. He went directly to the door of 8A, the apartment immediately above that of the Todwinkles. He knocked shortly, fingering into his pocket for a lock pick. "Of course, David won't be in. He'd scarcely plan a reception for us."

"Somebody's in," Zoe Osbourn said grimly.

"Eh?" Wren straightened slowly from the lock as the door swung inward before him. Light from the corridor reached into the darkened room, found the gleam of gun metal and the thick freckled fingers that held it.

CHAPTER FIVE

"As Ever, David"

"COME on in," said a familiar male voice. They went in.

Detective-Sergeant Hogan turned on the light and kicked the door shut. He turned to them, smiling, and holstered his gun in its shoulder harness. Zoe Osbourn, grinning with satisfaction, gaped at Jeffery Wren. "Fry me a banana!"

"Yes," said Wren. "Fry me one, too. Bananas for two." He took slow bouncing strides to the barrel-backed chair in somebody's living room, and sat down. He clasped big hands on solid thighs. His chunky eyebrows were elevated—stayed that way as he stared at Hogan. Hogan stepped over to somebody's mahogany table, picked up a toy typewriter. He held the toy in both hands like Grandma exhibiting the Thanksgiving turkey roasted to perfection. It was Wren he roasted, however, with a few well chosen words.

"Don't take it so hard, Mr. Wren," said he. "I only beat you here by ten minutes. We're both smart guys."

"Oh my!" Wren murmured. "Ten minutes. You wouldn't care to pretend we arrived simultaneously?"

Hogan laughed. "Well, no, Mr. Wren."

Zoe said: "Jeff always wants to be best!"

"Five minutes?" Wren suggested hopefully. "Might even settle for three."

"Nope," Hogan said. "I've been here ten minutes. I tossed the place thoroughly. One of the bedrooms is fixed up for a kid, see? It's filled with toys. That's where I found the typewriter David used. This toy, see? If it makes you feel any better, Mr. Wren, I don't mind admitting that I came to the conclusion that this was the place because I got

a lucky break. I was in the superintendent's office, when a couple and their baby came in and wanted to rent apartment 8A. The super said it was already rented, that the renters had gone to Florida and sublet for the winter. This couple said they had gone up to 8A a couple of times the past week, knocked, and nobody was in. They accused the super of just putting them off rather than rent to anybody with a kid, see?"

Hogan continued: "The super said the party just hadn't moved in yet, but that he had paid his rent and had the key. He'd paid his rent with a money order, and the super had sent him the key through the mail."

"And right then you began to get suspicious," Zoe Osbourn said.

"Sure," Hogan admitted. "Anybody would have. I looked at the rent receipt stub the super had, and there it was: 'Received of Mr. David.' The super had never seen the guy. But he knew the tenants who were subletting needed the dough, so he hadn't bothered much. Anyway, this Mr. David had sent along good references—though my guess is they were all forged."

Wren nodded. "Most astute, Sergeant. And you tossed the apartment. Didn't think to look out the front bedroom window, did you?"

Hogan shook his head. "What's out there besides a lot of snow coming down?"

"Quite," Wren said succinctly. "Snow. Getting in a lady's pocket. However—" He stood up, his face brightening somewhat as he looked at Zoe Osbourn. "Should Hogan be enlightened?"

Hogan's smile faded. His blue eyes were worried. "What's happened?"

"While you tossed this place," Zoe said, "Grace Todwinkle came into the building. You had Jackson trailing her. Jackson saw her enter the building. Jackson came into the foyer to keep warm after she'd had time to get into the elevator. Mrs. Todwinkle jumped out of her bedroom window about two shakes ago." She glanced at Wren, scowled. "Or was she pushed?"

"Pushed?" Wren shook his head. "Hardly. Didn't jump either."

Zoe trudged over to Wren's chair. She set her arms akimbo, and her nostrils started to spread. "Listen, you slick-headed son of the woman sawed in half, I may be just a female policeman, like that blond fluff said, but I know there happen to be just two ways to get out of a window. You either jump or somebody pushes you!"

"Oh?" Mildly. "You think so?"

Hogan was startled. He said: "What the hell am I doing, standing here listening to you two argue?" And he tramped toward the door.

"Wait," Wren checked him. "No hurry,

Sergeant. Consider your career. No use rushing in. You'll wreck things."

"Wel-l-l—" Hogan lingered, looked worriedly at Wren. Wren waved majestically toward the phone. "There's a useful gadget. Especially for ordering subordinates around. Have Jackson take over. You can lay hands on Agnes Frome, no doubt? Mrs. O. must have turned Pellam over to somebody."

"You bet your boots!" Zoe said. "Little Zoe may not know how to get down off an elephant, or out of a window, but she knows a bare faced fraud when she sees one!"

"And the Norris household," Wren suggested. "Ray Norris in particular. He's a part of the puzzle."

Hogan scowled at him. "Who are these Norrises, Wren? Have you been withholding evidence again?"

Wren shook his head. "Hardly. The evidence withheld me. For a time. Send someone out to Twenty-third Street. The Samuel V. Norris house. Bring Ray, if he's not too shy. Really ought to have the pianola. But that's asking too much. You'd have the draymen's union picketing Headquarters." He shook his head again. "No. We'll make out sans the pianola."

Hogan, still worried, looked at Zoe Osbourn. "What in the hell is he talking about, do you know?"

"No." She bit it off. "Only he's got that gleam in his eye. I don't know whether he's sore because you beat him here by ten minutes, or whether he's really got something up his sleeve. My woman's intuition says you'd better do what he says, Hogan, before he pulls a rabbit out of his hat."

HOGAN went to the phone. He called the Todwinkle apartment, talked with Jackson. His orders were crisp, but he did not mention his present location, Wren noticed. He hung up, looked at Wren, said: "Well?" resignedly.

Wren hadn't stirred from the barrel-back chair. He smiled benignly on Zoe and Hogan. "Now," he said. "Is there an atomizer in the house? Or possibly a bicycle pump? Something of the sort is notably absent."

"Bicycle pump, he says!" Zoe slapped her forehead. "What's that got to do with a lady jumping or being pushed from a window? So they blew her out with a bicycle pump! They atomized her all over the sidewalk, I can guarantee that!"

"Tut!" Wren chided pleasantly. "First things first. We're talking about the Henry Frome suicide-murder. Uniquely accomplished. And"—he raised his eyebrows—"without resorting to hypnotism."

Zoe snorted. "No hypnotism. A bicycle pump is much more convincing—nit!"

Hogan didn't say anything. He trudged wearily to the front bedroom of the apartment, returned at once with a large nasal atomizer which he carried to Wren. Wren said: "Ah! Thanks so much." The glass bowl of the atomizer was empty and clean, but he put the nosepiece of it within an inch of his nostrils and squeezed the bulb. "Ah. Essence of nicotine." Hogan bent over for a whiff, crinkled his nose.

"Smells like Captain Sholmeyer's cuspidor at Headquarters to me," was Hogan's opinion.

Wren chuckled. "Precisely." He took from his pocket the length of rubber tubing which he had removed from Grandpa Norris' pianola, held it up. "Here's a rare thing. Small intestine from a pianola. Now extinct. Virtually."

"Hell's fire!" Zoe exploded. "There it is again. What's a pianola, Jeff?"

"An antique player piano. Rather, a converter. It makes a piano into a player piano." He raised the large rubber bulb of the atomizer, showing the thick rubber nipple at the back with its air intake and ball-valve. "You understand the workings of this device? Squeezing the bulb forces the little metal ball to contact the valve seat. The flow of compressed air is thereby directed through the atomizer. Release the bulb, and the valve opens, drawing air into the bulb. Clear?"

It was apparently clear. Wren took one end of the pianola tube, fitted it into the air intake opening of the atomizer bulb. It was a close fit. Nothing larger than the pianola tube could have been forced into the hole.

"Ought to be a cork with a similar hole at the other end of the tube, of course," Wren pointed out. "But that's undoubtedly destroyed." He carried the atomizer and its attached tube to the mahogany table, put it down beside the toy typewriter. "Exhibit B," he said.

Zoe Osbourn slapped her forehead. "I get it!" Her voice was heavy with sarcasm. "The killer used that contraption to puff poison gas

into Jeff's reception room in order to kill Henry Frome. Since nobody saw the killer go up the stairs—we don't know who he is. Pass me the paint-sprayer, boys, I'm going out after the Invisible Man!"

Wren was not pleased. "You're confusing things, Mrs. O."

"Ha! I'm confusing?"

Wren said: "The action of the atomizer was reversed. Completely. To draw air in was the object. Blowing it out again was purely incidental. Now—" Smiling, he turned to Hogan. Hogan was looking glum about something. "You know now, Sergeant? You realize the true source of the poison that killed Henry Frome?"

That was what Hogan was glum about. He knew. "The cyanide was in the guy's pipe. That aluminum-shanked pipe. It was dissolved in the juice in the condensing chamber of the pipe. The juice was brown and smelled to hell, so nobody would even think of the poison being there."

"Exactly. The condensing chamber of such a pipe holds a large amount of condensate. Or perhaps, 'juice.' More than that, the juice can't run out the mouthpiece until the air draft valve is opened at the bowl end of pipe. The smoker keeps the valve closed when the pipe is not in use, trapping all moisture. Henry Frome had seated himself in the reception room. He took out his aluminum-shanked pipe. He charged it with tobacco, put it to his mouth, opened the air intake valve so it would draw. He drew the condensate, with the poison, into his mouth. He strangled, choked, swallowed a very little. But then," Wren shrugged, "it takes very little cyanide. Right, Sergeant?"

"Right," Hogan admitted. "But wait. If the poison was in the pipe, Mr. Wren, who the hell took the other cyanide pill that David enclosed with his little note?"

Wren's frown was slight. "What other pill? Who's mentioned anything of the kind? There was only one pill. When it's cyanide, more than one would be superfluous. The note and

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the one pill were simply to conceal the source of the poison, namely, the pipe. The note said two pills, but there was never more than one in the envelope. A red herring. A herring that swallowed bones and all, Sergeant. But extremely important to the murderer. For as soon as the pipe is the suspected source, the possible identity of David is narrowed. Narrowed to those who had access to Henry Frome's aluminum-shanked pipe. We know, for example, that Frome left his pipe in George Pellam's office yesterday—"

"Oh, we do, do we?" Zoe cut in. "Nobody else does but you, master-wit. He could have lost his pipe anywhere in the Mile Square. He and his wife went to Pellam's, true enough, but then they went shopping."

Wren was nodding agreement. "All of which explains the matter. Especially, my interest in the *cob* pipe. Henry Frome knew he left his aluminum-shanked pipe in Pellam's office. He knew he would get it back. Had he dropped it on the street or in a store, it would have been gone for good. He couldn't have replaced it, because the metal of which those pipes are made now goes into planes. If he had not been sure of retrieving it, he would have bought a good briar pipe to replace it. Not a ten cent cob."

"Pellam!" Zoe spat the name and scowled furiously.

"He's not Pellam," Wren said, smiling slightly. "He's Simon Spiker, the missing heir. A man in a million because he doesn't want a million. So it would seem."

ZOE and Sergeant Hogan stared at Wren, speechless. Wren laced his fingers across his broad chest, indulged himself in what he considered well-earned triumph.

"My dear lady!" he said. "Surely you're not astounded. Surely you knew. If Henry Frome and Grace Todwinkle recognized the spirit voice that came from the trumpet at the seance as the voice of Simon Spiker, then Pellam had to be Spiker. Granting that the Fromes are not imaginative—they're not, what we've seen of them. Spiker, as Pellam, had put on weight. Perhaps his teeth are false to disguise the shape of his mouth. Perhaps his hair is dyed as well as curled. Henry Frome didn't recognize his appearance. Didn't recognize the voice, either, until it came from a spirit trumpet with a Bostonian accent. Unable to explain the methods of a spirit medium, the Fromes never guessed.

And now we have another ingenious murder. Another pseudo-suicide. Grace Todwinkle. She didn't jump. She wasn't pushed. David met her inside the building when she returned from the Frome house after looting the Frome safe. David brought her up to *this* apartment, then bopped her on the head.

She was lowered gently from the front bedroom window—"

"Horse liniment!" Zoe scoffed. "The lady came down like a buzz-bomb, and you damn well know it!"

"She was lowered gently from the front bedroom window," Wren went on unperturbed, "to the furled awning directly below, the awning over the Todwinkle bedroom window. She was lying unconscious at full length along the awning when Sergeant Hogan came in here. Nothing else could account for both her fall and the fact that there was snow in her pocket though she did not wear gloves."

Hogan said, "Aw-aw!" and frowned. "Mr. Wren, come to think of it, I wasn't here ten minutes. You and I arrived simultaneously."

"Quite," Wren agreed, very nice about it. "But there's no blame on your shoulders. None whatever. Two very neat murders. Especially contrived to provide alibis for Spiker-Pellam. Both worked by remote control. Then there are fall guys. A couple of prize chumps David brought in—a Ray Norris and a nameless, not-too-bright newshawk. David took a candid camera picture of the newshawk, wrote the name of Simon Spiker on the back. David must have discussed the matter of the dormant fortune and Simon Spiker with Ray Norris. Norris fell for the idea. He devised a scheme whereby he thought he could pan off the newshawk as Simon Spiker. If such a plan were to work, those persons who really knew Simon Spiker might logically be murdered. Had you followed that trail, Sergeant, instead of coming directly upon David's headquarters here, you might have arrested Ray Norris and Pseudo-Simon.

"In some manner, David made Pellam aware of the impersonation scheme Ray Norris was going to try to get by with. Probably pointed out Ray Norris. Which explains Pellam's frantic effort to warn the Fromes through prophecy. Any means other than the supposed supernatural might have forced Pellam into a spot where he would have to reveal his real identity to the Fromes."

Hogan said: "Now you're doing it again, Mr. Wren. About the time daylight breaks, you mix everything up. You mean Spiker-Pellam isn't David?"

Wren elevated his eyebrows. He was astounded. "Of course he isn't. Spiker-Pellam doesn't want the fortune left him by Hamilton Frome. Otherwise, he wouldn't have cooperated in trying to prove himself dead. Otherwise, he would not have warned the Fromes of impending doom. David is the little man who works for Pellam, who could have picked up Henry Frome's pipe in Pellam's office. Thomas Hackett is the name. He used to chauffeur the Fromes. He now lives in the Norris house. Thus he found the pliant mind of Ray Norris

a fertile field in which to plant seeds of crime. We're certain it's Hacket, because he is the only person who had access to Henry Frome's pipe and also the tube from the pianola."

Zoe Osbourn slapped her brow. "There's that damned pianola again." She picked up the atomizer with the thin rubber tube attached. "What is this contraption?"

WREN beamed. "You wouldn't know. You've never smoked a pipe. That, my dear lady, is a mechanical pipe smoker, devised by Hacket. We must presume that when Hacket found the pipe, the shank was clean. It had to be full of residue for his poison scheme to work. Not water, understand. Clear water in a pipe would have drawn suspicion."

"Why didn't he smoke the pipe himself?" Hogan wanted to know. "Afraid of germs, I suppose!"

"Hardly," Wren said. "Here's the essential clue. Hacket cannot smoke. He is allergic to tobacco. That means the use of the weed brings on rather serious reactions. It might mean tobacco blindness, for instance. Or a temporary deafness. Neither of which would be an asset to a murderer."

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Hogan, disgustedly. "The guy's name is Hacket, and I've never even met him. What does he stand to get out of all this anyway?"

Wren shrugged. "Is it important? Possibly the whole of the fortune left to Simon Spiker-Pellam. Why was Simon Spiker in hiding all these years? Possibly the long envelope which Agnes Frome saw her sister-in-law Grace take from the Frome safe, will provide an explanation. It's evidence or testimony of some sort. Evidence of murder done five years ago. Something the Frome family kept hidden away for Frome eyes alone. Hacket will have the envelope. Given a chance, Hacket would use it to force Spiker-Pellam to claim the fortune. Then, of course, he would force him to hand the filthy lucre over to Hacket."

Zoe Osbourn said: "Well, let's go get Hacket."

Wren smiled at her. "That's refreshing. You've changed your tune. Shall we, Sergeant, go get Hacket?"

They went down in the elevator and into the crowd assembled before the Todwinkle door. Hacket was there, clamoring to get in.

"They got my boss in there," he was saying nasally to the cop who guarded the door. "They got nothing on George Pellam. Not a damn thing. He's a white guy, I'm telling you. Whoever says he killed anybody is lying."

Wren glanced significantly at Hogan. "You see? Protecting Pellam. Essential to Hacket's scheme. The reason for the elaborate murder methods."

Hogan nodded. "You just step back, Mrs. O. We'll get along without the weaker sex."

"Be subtle," Wren warned. "He's the sort that will go all to pieces."

They were subtle about it. Wren elbowed his way into the throng, got on the right side of Hacket. Hogan was on the left. Wren took Hacket's leather upholstered right arm. His smile was genial.

"Thomas, Thomas! What's your complaint?"

Hacket turned deep-set coppery eyes on Wren. "Why damn you, Mr. Wren, you got these dumb jackass cops thinking George done something. You know George couldn't have pushed no old lady out a window. I got a damn good notion to paste you one on the jaw!"

"Now, now," Wren soothed. "We'll go in. We'll straighten out the kinks."

Hogan cleared the way. In the Todwinkle living room were Agnes Frome, George Pellam, and James Todwinkle, the latter having traded a bath towel for a bathrobe. There was no mincing of words, no subtlety. Hogan made a sign to a pair of cops. Hogan himself drew his gun, turned it on Hacket.

"Aw, what the hell!" Hacket was disgusted with the whole proceedings. "I never pushed no lady out of a window neither."

"Those double negatives," Wren murmured. "Quite apt." And he watched the search. Hacket was packing a gun, and they relieved him of that. But the long envelope mentioned by Agnes Frome was in none of his pockets. Not until Wren suggested Hacket's hat did they find the thing. As soon as the envelope came to light, Agnes Frome recognized it. She flounced out of her chair and right into the middle of things.

"That's Henry Frome's will!" she cried.

"Oh, no," said Wren, his eyes on George Pellam. "It isn't a will, is it, Simon?"

Pellam stood up, the whole five feet and four inches of him. All two hundred and seventy-five pounds of him managed to stand up from the sofa. He took three toddling steps toward Hacket. He said, "That—that's—" and then collapsed in a dead faint that possibly dislodged the plaster in the apartment below.

While the cops held Hacket, Hogan ripped open the envelope. His blue eyes took a quick look at the contents, and then he read aloud:

"I, Simon Spiker, freely confess in the presence of these witnesses that I murdered my uncle, Hamilton Frome, with an overdose of digitalis.

(Signed) Simon Spiker

(Witnessed by) Henry Frome

Grace Todwinkle Frome."

"Which is all a dirty damn frame!" Hacket shouted. "I was there. I was the Frome chauffeur. Them two stuffed shirts, Henry and

Grace, done it. They give Hamilton Frome the extra digit—whatzis. They framed it on the nurse, see? Simon was in love with the nurse. Them two stuffed shirts made like they was going to railroad the nurse into the rap, and Simon comes out and says he done it. You get it, you dopes?" The coppery eyes darted around the group. "Don't you get it? That's what Henry and Grace wanted Simon to do. If he'd sign the confession and get the hell out of town, they'd forget the whole thing. But if he ever showed up to claim the money which was left him, they'd act on the confession. So Simon signed to square it for the nurse. That's the girl he married—the nurse. They got two kids. He didn't want the damn Frome dough. Them two stuffed shirts wanted it. . . Don't you get it?" Hacket laughed wildly. "He's one white guy, Simon Spiker. Yeah, him." And he nodded at the fat man on the floor.

THERE was, Wren recalls, stunned silence following that outburst. Finally Hacket said: "You get it, don't you, Mr. Wren?"

Wren nodded. "But Hacket, who cares about a five year-old murder? We're interested in what happened today. It's all over, Hacket. We've put all the pieces together. Including the pianola. You're David. We know you took the document just read from Grace before you accomplished her death. You would have forced Simon Spiker-Pellam to claim the dormant fortune. Then you would have sold him the confession for any price you cared to ask."

Hacket was nodding. "Sure. He'd have paid anything to keep the stink off his wife and

kids. Even though he knew the confession wouldn't be no good in court without—with-out—what's that kind of evidence?"

"Corroborative," Wren suggested.

Hacket grinned, not unpleasantly. "You're right there with them big words, Mr. Wren."

And then, without anything that might have been interpreted as a warning, Hacket went all to pieces. All the taut drawn wires in him were loosed at once. He got one arm free from one cop, and his fist was a blur as he smashed it into the face of the other. Hogan couldn't get in a shot, because Hacket had ducked behind big James Todwinkle. Then Hacket was through the door of the front bedroom and had slammed the door. Above Agnes Frome's scream and the tramping of feet, Hacket's nasal voice reached mockingly to them.

"So long, suckers. As ever yours, David!"

Hogan opened the bedroom door. And there was the open window, and beyond it the thin chill air and the falling snow. Down below somewhere, they would find Hacket, all the thin wood smashed and the taut wires broken. Wren still wonders if there was finally another thud, or a sound like a splintering guitar.

Hogan turned to Wren. "Well anyway, we still got Spiker-Pellam."

They had him, but there wasn't anything they could do with him.

"The confession is no good," Wren said. "Inclined to believe Spiker-Pellam isn't guilty anyway. Except of being awfully fat between the ears." Wren sighed for the dullness of Spiker-Pellam, then added cheerfully, "But it's your problem, Sergeant. Not mine," and walked out of the apartment.



"Were it not for the food parcels we received through the Red Cross I feel sure that many prisoners would have been unable to carry on. The clothing which came through was also sorely needed and put to good use immediately. The Red Cross receives my wholehearted endorsement and thanks for making life possible during those dark months."

—AN AMERICAN PRISONER OF WAR WHO ESCAPED.





THE DOCTOR'S PLANT

By
RICHARD DERMODY

Author of "The Doctor's Switch," etc.

The Doc slips me the office to sit still. I do this with plenty of doubts—I'm not as stupid as Katinka Van Pooten—and I'm hep that the "Little Brother" Tuxedo Toomey refers to is his concealed firearm and that Tuxedo won't hesitate to throw a slug at me.

Tuxedo Toomey has his hand in his coat pocket and he looks at me as he says: "I have Little Brother at my side, Allan. You are too smart to pick on Little Brother."

I BRING the heap to a halt in front of the big iron gate in this stone wall that surrounds Bosky Bowers. The Doc leans out the window and hands the gate guard one of the cards Inky Malone printed up for us that same afternoon.

"I have an appointment with Mr. Schuykill Van Pooten," the Doc says.

The guard takes a gander at the card and nods. "Very good, Dr. Pierce. I will inform Mr. Van Pooten." He goes into the cubbyhole beside the gate and picks up a phone. I lean back in the seat and try to relax.

Of course I know very well that Bosky Bowers is inhabited by a lot of prominent citizens with large bankrolls. I also know that

this stone wall is put up to keep the common people from peeking in at these prominent inhabitants, but I still feel nervous.

I am always nervous when we start a new caper and this stone wall and the iron gate and the gate guard remind me of things I would rather not think about right at this time. Also the fact that Tuxedo Toomey is mixed up in this enterprise does not make me feel better. Tuxedo Toomey has always been a short price in my book.

The reason the Doc and I are sitting outside this iron gate to Bosky Bowers is because Tuxedo Toomey comes into the hotel dining room the evening before. The Doc is working on his second steak when I spot Tuxedo heading toward us with a big smile stretched all over his face.

I am surprised at this as I am by no means on friendly terms with Tuxedo Toomey. In fact just a short while back I hang a left hook on Tuxedo's chin when he rings a pair of busters into a dice game I am attending.

Tuxedo is a tall party a couple of years older than me, maybe thirty. He has curly black hair and shiny white teeth and he is called Tuxedo because he always wears a boiled shirt and a monkey suit and hangs around places like the Ritz where he gives the inmates plenty of attention of one kind and another, especially the dames.

Tuxedo sticks out his hand. "Let us hide the hatchet, Brother Allan," he says. "Let us forget the unpleasant past and move forward in harmony to a bright and profitable future. I have a little business proposition which I am sure will be of interest to you and your partner."

I give Tuxedo a cold look and grip his mitt. "We can always use a fresh dollar," I tell him. "What's the caper?"

Tuxedo stretches his smile another notch. "You'll get the details in a moment." He turns to the Doc. "This is a most fortunate meeting, Dr. Pierce. My partner, Wall-Street Walter, claims that you are the smartest operator around."

THE Doc knows that Tuxedo is strictly short change but he likes this spiel. He sticks his thumbs in the armholes of his swayback coat and sucks up his haybelly until I think he is going to pop all the buttons off his white vest.

"Wall-Street Walter is a dear old friend," he says to Tuxedo. "I am gratified to hear of his kind remarks, although I suspect he has exaggerated my modest talent. Is Walter connected with this little business proposition you mentioned?"

Tuxedo shakes his head. "Not now," he says. "Poor old Walter had a little difficulty with the Parole Board. The Law has placed

Walter back in college to finish out his term."

The Doc's big red face is sad. "I regret to hear of Walter's ill fortune." He waves at a chair. "Sit down."

Tuxedo parks it and leans across the table. "Walter's absence has placed me in an awkward position, Dr. Pierce," he says. "We have this deal all readied up for the payoff. I made the initial pitch and of course cannot handle the payoff. I hope that you and my old friend, Brother Allan, will help me out."

The Doc slips me a quick look. "Do you think we can spare the time, pony boy?"

"I don't think so," I tell him. "We have this large and important transaction on at the moment." I have a hard time keeping a straight face when I say this. The only transaction we have on is with the hotel manager. We are in the stakes for a month's rent and this manager is getting hard to handle. In fact it takes the Doc a good hour to talk this manager out of putting a hickey in our keyhole that very evening.

Tuxedo Toomey lowers his voice. "You must help me out," he says. "This trick can be turned in a couple of days and will cash out for three thousand. I collected six hundred when I made the opening pitch. We will split the remainder, twenty-four C's, down the middle."

The Doc's eyes narrow. "If we take on your proposition we split the whole take three ways. One thousand dollars each."

Tuxedo scowls, then shrugs. "I have no choice," he says. "I must accept your terms." He puts his elbows on the table. "I am going to tell you the whole story. I think it is important that you know the whole background."

"It is most important," the Doc says.

Tuxedo gives him a quick look, then goes on: "A week ago I met a young man named Fenwick Griggs in Cool-Off Flanagan's poker parlor. The cards went badly for Fenwick. He became despondent. In fact Fenwick went so far as to take several drinks of Cool-Off's house whiskey in an effort to ease his misery."

The Doc shudders. "As a medical man I do not advise consumption of the Flanagan beverage in large quantities."

I get a snicker out of this remark. The Doc's only claim to a medical handle is because he used to peddle snake-oil around the carnivals some years back—although I have to admit that when it comes to whiskey he is better than a fair judge.

Tuxedo smiles briefly. "Fortunately I managed to get Fenwick Griggs out into the air before he had taken a lethal dose. I had a flask of brandy in my pocket and gave him a quick snort as an antidote. Fenwick Griggs was grateful. In fact he insisted that I accompany him to his home in Bosky Bowers and become his guest for the night."

The Doc is now paying close attention. "Bosky Bowers," he says in a soft voice. "Then Fenwick Griggs is well-heeled?"

"According to ordinary standards, yes," Tuxedo says. "I spent a long evening in his Bosky Bowers home listening to Fenwick Griggs. Among other things, he told me that he had inherited his home and a sizable sum besides. But Fenwick likes plenty of action at the gaming tables and his fortune is now whittled down to what he regards as the ragged edge of poverty."

The Doc frowns. "Then you do not intend to make this score off Fenwick Griggs?"

Tuxedo nods. "That's right. But during this long evening, Fenwick gave me the lead to the party who is now set up for the score. This party is a crusty old widower named Schuykill Van Pooten. Schuykill is Fenwick's next-door neighbor and is also the sole parent of an attractive daughter named Katinka. Schuykill has a large bankroll and Katinka is his only heir. Fenwick has put in considerable work on Katinka and plans to mend his shattered fortunes by teaming up with her."

Well, I don't make any sense out of this long story. I slide down in my chair. "Wake me up when you get to the payoff," I tell Tuxedo. "I am weary. I spent a hot afternoon at Belmont Park trying to shoo in a couple of longshots."

TUXEDO shows his teeth in a wide smile. "I am sorry if I bore you," he says. "Here is the payoff: Schuykill Van Pooten is now engaged in a one-man battle with the other residents of Bosky Bowers. The property owners in Bosky Bowers have banded togeth-

er and formed a company to supply the settlement with electricity, gas and water. Schuykill Van Pooten claims the company has overcharged him. He has refused to pay his bills for two months. His services have been shut off by the company. When Fenwick Griggs told me about this I realized that Schuykill Van Pooten was an excellent prospect for the Midget Marvel Trust Buster. I, incidentally, am the sole owner of the Midget Marvel Trust Buster."

I sit up straight in my chair but before I can say anything the Doc lets out a pleased chuckle.

"I gather that this Midget Marvel is a small power plant, built for use in private homes," he announces.

"You have an alert mind, Dr. Pierce," Tuxedo says. "According to the descriptive literature printed in three colors on glossy paper, the Midget Marvel will provide all the power necessary to run the average household at a cost far below the exorbitant rates charged by public utility companies. That is why it is called the Trust Buster."

The Doc lets out another chuckle. "A clever pitch," he says. "I assume that this Midget Marvel Trust Buster exists only in the pages of this descriptive literature."

"Right again," Tuxedo tells him. "About a year ago, when I first became interested in the Midget Marvel, the inventor constructed a full-scale model for the purpose of accelerating the sale of stock. The first time the Midget Marvel was placed in operation the motor exploded and damaged the inventor to such an extent that he was placed in a room with padded walls. That was how I obtained con-

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trol of this invention. Since that unfortunate occurrence I have felt it prudent to confine the Midget Marvel to the pages of the booklet."

"Very wise," the Doc says. He leans back and stares at the ceiling. "I believe I have the general idea," he says finally. "What lead-off did you use on this old guy, Schuykill Van Pooten?"

"The old half-price-contract gag," Tuxedo tells him. "I made the initial pitch as a salesman named J. H. Simpson. Wall-Street Walter was scheduled to give him the ground-floor-stock follow-up."

The Doc hauls out his cheaters with the black ribbon and places them on his nose. He takes out his notebook. "J. H. Simpson," he says. "I must make notes of these details." He looks at Tuxedo. "You are a smart boy. What is your general impression of Schuykill Van Pooten?"

"A Mary Pickford," Tuxedo tells him. "A sweetheart, a natural score. Schuykill got all his pelf from his old man. He has never made a dollar under his own power in his life. So of course Schuykill regards himself as a shrewd businessman."

The Doc nods. "It has been my good fortune to meet many such during my career. I shall look forward to meeting Schuykill Van Pooten not later than tomorrow night." He gets to his feet. "You must excuse us now, Mr. Toomey." He shoots me a quick look. "We will have to lay our plans carefully, pony boy."

The next morning we go down to Inky Malone's shop. He does a quick printing job for us. The Doc calls Schuykill Van Pooten on the phone and makes a date. So now we are here at the gate of Bosky Bowers.

The guard finally comes out of his cubbyhole and opens the gate. He points up the gravel drive. "Mr. Van Pooten lives in the fourth house on the right."

Once this stone wall is behind us I find out that Bosky Bowers is a pleasant place, at that. The houses are big and have plenty of lawns and flowers around them. It is just getting dark but most of the windows are blazing with light. All but the fourth house on the right.

Schuykill Van Pooten's residence is dark, except for a weak glow in one downstairs window.

The Doc elbows me and chuckles softly. "I have a feeling Schuykill will be easy to fine-print under the primitive illumination he is using."

I grin back at him. I am not so nervous now. I halt the heap in front of the porch and follow the Doc up the steps. Before I can punch the bell the door opens and a party in a white jacket appears. I give this party a quick run-down and I am suddenly nervous again.

This party is about the Doc's age, maybe fifty, but he has shoulders on him like a buffalo. He is easily six-feet-four-inches tall and has a big chin. His voice sounds like it comes up out of a tunnel.

"Dr. Pierce?" he rumbles. The Doc nods and hands his black skimmer to this buffalo. I trust him with my hat and we follow him down a wide hall that is lighted by a candle on a table at the far end. The buffalo knocks at a door and opens it.

SCHUYKILL Van Pooten is sitting behind a shiny desk in a room with books lining the walls. The light of a pair of tall candles is flickering on his bald head. He has a fat, round face and a pair of blue eyes you could use to bore holes in a brick wall.

The Doc puts me away as his confidential secretary and we sit down. The way the Doc starts out I realize he is going to make this a quick pitch.

"I'll be brief, Mr. Van Pooten," he says. "You have been the victim of a clever swindle. I am here to rectify that if it is possible."

Schuykill Van Pooten's eyes bug out and he hops about three feet in the air. "Swindle!" he yells. "What swindle?"

The Doc lifts a hand. "Please be calm," he says. "I am referring to the man you knew as J. H. Simpson. I regret to inform you that J. H. Simpson is not connected with my company."

Schuykill is very lively on the next hop. "What's that? Simpson not connected with the company?"

He reaches into the desk drawer and throws a green paper at the Doc. "There's the contract. Right down in black and white."

The Doc shakes his head and looks sad. "This is most unfortunate," he says. He puts the green paper back on the desk without looking at it. "From a strictly legal standpoint my company is not bound by any contract entered into by an unauthorized person such as Simpson. On the other hand we realize that you have suffered a grave injustice. I am here to discuss the terms of a possible settlement with you."

Schuykill Van Pooten hollers so loud it bounces off the ceiling. "Terms," he yells. "Settlement! I gave that scoundrel Simpson six hundred dollars! He promised to install a power plant in my home for half-price—fifteen hundred dollars!"

The Doc's red face gets even sadder. "Even if Simpson had been connected with my company, the board of directors would never accept such a contract. We have set the police on Simpson's trail but he has fled the country, taking your six hundred dollars and his other ill-gotten gains with him."

Van Pooten sits there with his mouth open

while this sinks in. Before he can say anything the door opens and a young filly bounces into the room. I figure this is Katinka, the sole heir of Schuykill Van Pooten so I take a good gander at her. She has blond hair and rosy cheeks and right now she is not hard to take, although it is a cinch she will pack plenty of weight for her age in a few years.

"What is wrong, Daddy?" she asks. She frowns at the Doc. "Please do not upset my father. His heart is not strong."

The Doc puts on a big smile and gets to his feet. I get up, too. The Doc says: "We are here to help your father, Miss Van Pooten. I have just informed him that he has been the victim of a clever swindler. Naturally he is upset."

Schuykill Van Pooten starts to work up another holler but the dame puts a hand over his mouth.

"Hush, Daddy," she tells him. She smiles at the Doc. "I trust you, sir. You have a kind and honest face."

Well, I am not surprised to hear her say this. The Doc has been peddling his kind and honest face for a good many years. He bows at the dame. "Thank you, my dear. I am Dr. Pierce and this is my friend and secretary, Mr. Allan."

The dame gives me a quick look and sits down in the chair the Doc pulls up for her. "What is this all about?"

The Doc turns to Schuykill Van Pooten. "Exactly what was the deal J. H. Simpson offered you?"

Van Pooten works his chin up and down like he is chewing a sour cud. "Half-price," he says. "Simpson said the regular price for

this power plant was three thousand. He said if I gave him the regular down payment of six hundred dollars he'd make out the contract for an additional nine hundred and guarantee that it would be installed in a week. Simpson said the company wanted customers like me."

The Doc nods. "On that one point Simpson was right," he says. "We are anxious to have satisfied customers of your social and financial standing on our list. But I am afraid that the board of directors will not honor this contract. Not as it stands now."

Schuykill Van Pooten sits up in his chair and snaps at the bait. "Do you mean there is some way you can honor this contract?"

The Doc smiles. "Of course. That is why I came here tonight. Frankly," he says, "I would like to number you among our customers. A man of your prestige, business acumen and independent mind would be of great value to the company in our struggle against the forces of financial oppression as represented by the power trust."

The light from the pair of candles is shaky and dim but I can see this look come into Schuykill Van Pooten's little blue eyes. The same look I have seen a hundred times. He figures he is about to cash in on his high opinion of himself. He is hooked—but good.

JUST then there is a knock at the door. The door swings open and this buffalo in the white jacket is standing there. Van Pooten snaps: "What is it, Cowgill?"

Cowgill's voice comes up out of the tunnel. "Mr. Fenwick Griggs, the gentleman who lives next door, is here to see Miss Katinka.

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He says it is very important that he see her immediately."

Van Pooten snorts but Katinka lays a hand over his mouth. "I'll be right back, Daddy," she says. She smiles at the Doc. "I hope you will excuse me." The Doc nods and we watch her swish out the door. The Doc has a little grin on his face.

He turns to Schuykill Van Pooten. "You asked if there was some way we could honor this contract. My answer is yes. Our stockholders are given the privilege of buying a power plant for their own homes at half-price. I am sure that under the circumstances the board of directors will be willing to waive the six-hundred-dollar down payment and charge it off to profit and loss. A small purchase of stock in this vigorous and virile company will not only entitle you to this privilege but will return a tidy profit on your investment."

Schuykill Van Pooten screws up his face in a smile. He is being shrewd again. "How much stock must I buy?"

The Doc is thinking fast, trying to decide how much of a score Van Pooten will hold still for. I am getting nervous again. When the door opens I jump a foot. Katinka comes into the room and she is not smiling now. She points her finger at the Doc and her plump red lips are trembling.

"This man is an impostor, Daddy," she says. "He is here for no good purpose. Mr. Griggs came over especially to warn us."

I figure it is time to go. I get to my feet but the Doc slips me the office to sit still. He still has this little grin on his face. "That is a strong statement, Miss Van Pooten," he says. "I believe I am entitled to an explanation."

Katinka sniffs and speaks to her father. "I know you do not approve of Fenwick Griggs, Daddy," she says, "but he has just rendered us a real service. He saw these men come in and he recognized them as shady characters."

Schuykill Van Pooten snorts. "That young whippersnapper! I wouldn't trust him around the corner."

Katinka's round face is pink. "Then I'll let him tell you himself." She raises her voice. "Please come in, Fenwick."

Tuxedo Toomey walks into the room.

I sit still in my chair for two reasons. One is that this buffalo butler, Cowgill, is standing in the doorway with a mean look on his big face. The other is because Tuxedo Toomey has his right hand in his coat pocket and the first words he says are aimed right at me.

"I have Little Brother at my side, Brother Allan, he says. "You are too smart to pick on Little Brother."

Well, of course I know that when Tuxedo speaks of Little Brother he is referring to a firearm he has concealed in his coat pocket but Katinka is puzzled. She looks up at Tuxedo.

"What a strange thing to say, Fenwick. What do you mean?"

Tuxedo skips the question and turns to Schuykill Van Pooten. "I am just being a good neighbor," he says. "A detective friend pointed these men out to me some weeks ago. He said they are well-known confidence men although the police have never been able to get enough evidence to convict them. He said their latest swindle was the sale of stock in a phony power plant called the Midget Marvel Trust Buster."

Schuykill Van Pooten slaps his hand on the desk and grabs the telephone. "I'll give the police evidence," he yells. "One of their confederates got six hundred dollars of my money." He glares at the Doc. "So your stockholders get the privilege of buying at half price!"

WELL, it's coming pretty fast. It takes me some time to get used to the idea that Tuxedo Toomey is living in Bosky Bowers under the name of Fenwick Griggs. I am beginning to understand why Tuxedo tells us this long tale about Fenwick Griggs but I don't have time to put it all together right then. I am watching this big butler, Cowgill, and figuring the odds. They don't add up. Tuxedo Toomey has Little Brother in his coat pocket and I know now that he will not hesitate to throw a slug at me. I also realize that Tuxedo remembers that punch I laid on his chin during the dice game.

The Doc leans back in his chair and lets out a chuckle. "This is ridiculous," he says. He looks at Tuxedo Toomey. "Are you sure that you want Mr. Van Pooten to call the police? It might prove embarrassing to you, Mr. Fenwick Griggs."

Tuxedo looks worried all of a sudden. He reaches across the desk and takes the phone out of Schuykill Van Pooten's hand.

"On second thought," he says, "I think it would be unwise to call the police. If these men go to jail you will still be out your six hundred dollars. I have a better idea. I suggest that if these two crooks agree to refund your six hundred dollars, we agree to let them go. It might be difficult to get them convicted on the evidence we have."

The Doc's big red face is suddenly hard. "What evidence?" He reaches over and picks the sales contract off the desk. He puts on his cheaters and looks at this green document closely. "It may interest you gentlemen to know that I have never heard of the Midget Marvel Trust Buster," he says slowly. "I am a major stockholder in the Farmer's Friendly Favorite, a sound company, listed on the Stock Exchange."

Well, Tuxedo Toomey is a smart operator and nobody can deny that he has plenty of

moxie. But when the Doc springs this line, Tuxedo turns white as a sheet. His grip tightens on Little Brother in his pocket and his voice shakes.

"That is a lie, Pierce," he tells the Doc. "At this very moment you have a bundle of Midget Marvel shares in your pocket."

The Doc chuckles again, reaches into his pocket and lays a sheaf of pink papers on the desk. "Take a look at these, Mr. Van Pooten," he says. "You will find they are shares in the Farmer's Friendly Favorite Company."

Schuykill Van Pooten has been moving his head back and forth between the Doc and Tuxedo like he is watching a ping-pong game. He moves one of the candles closer, squints his eyes and takes a close gander at the papers the Doc lays on the desk. He looks up at Tuxedo Toomey. "I have never trusted you, young man," he says. "These shares of stock are exactly what Dr. Pierce says they are—shares in the Farmer's Friendly Favorite Company."

The Doc grins at Tuxedo who is now two shades whiter. "No apology is necessary, Mr. Fenwick Griggs," he says. "But I think a few questions are in order." He turns to Katinka. "How long has this man who calls himself Fenwick Griggs been a neighbor of yours?"

Katinka looks at Tuxedo but he is now staring at the floor although he still keeps his hand on Little Brother in his pocket. "He rented the house next door about two months ago," she says.

"I thought so," the Doc tells her. He turns to Schuykill Van Pooten. "This J. H. Simpson who collected six hundred dollars from you, what did he look like?"

Van Pooten thinks for a minute. "About fifty," he says. "Short, thick-set, ruddy face, very smooth talker."

The Doc glances at me. "Wall-Street Walter," he says in a soft voice. "Just as I suspected." He looks at Schuykill Van Pooten. "You have a keen, analytical mind," he says. "You realize now that the man you know as Fenwick Griggs is an adventurer. His chief

interest in your household is your lovely daughter." He leans forward and jabs a finger at Tuxedo Toomey. "Can you deny this? You came here tonight in a brazen effort to cast a stigma upon me, an honest businessman, in the hope that you could ingratiate yourself with Mr. Van Pooten. I challenge you, Mr. Fenwick Griggs!" He reaches for the telephone. "Shall we call the police and match records? Shall we let the police decide who is the honest man and who is the crook?"

WELL, in all the years I have teamed with the Doc I never see him put on a better performance. Of course we always operate strictly on the side of the law, or just this side of it. And I know Tuxedo has been tagged for a couple of short stretches in the pen. But even at that it makes me nervous when the Doc speaks of calling the cops.

Schuykill Van Pooten taps his fingers on the desk and gives Tuxedo a cold look. "How about it, Griggs?"

Tuxedo knows when he has over-matched himself. He turns toward the door. "Very well," he says. "If you prefer the word of a known criminal against that of an honest neighbor, I leave you to your fate."

Van Pooten wiggles a finger at this buffalo butler in the doorway. "Take him out, Cowgill," he says, very crisp. Cowgill grips Tuxedo Toomey by the slack in his pants.

As Tuxedo goes by I reach out and snag Little Brother out of his coat pocket. Little Brother is a Colt .38 and when I have this roscoe in my own coat pocket I do not feel so nervous, although I never fired off a gun in my life.

There is a thumping and bumping in the hallway. In a minute Cowgill comes back with a pleased look on his face. "Mr. Fenwick Griggs is out, sir," he says.

Van Pooten gives him a tight smile. "Good," he says. "You may go now, Cowgill."

Katinka is on her feet and her pink face is sad. She follows the butler out the door with-

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out saying a word. I can understand how she feels. Tuxedo Toomey is a good-looking young buck, at that.

The Doc picks up the sheaf of pink papers from the desk. "We will take our departure, Mr. Van Pooten," he says. "At some future date I would like to discuss the advantages of the Farmer's Friendly Favorite with you, but I know that you are not interested at this time."

Schuykill Van Pooten grins. He reaches into a drawer in the desk and places a bottle and three glasses on the top. "You must not leave now, Dr. Pierce," he says. "You have done me a service. I knew that my daughter was interested in Fenwick Griggs. You have shown him to be the sort of man no woman can trust." He looks at me. "Will you close the door, Mr. Allan? If Cowgill or my daughter suspected the existence of this bottle they would take it away from me and my doctor would scold me."

I am still nervous but when the Doc gives me the office I get up and shut the door. Van Pooten pours a big dose in each glass and leans back in his chair. "I have not had such a lively evening in years," he says. "You must tell me the whole story. I know you have been holding something back."

The Doc takes a big swallow from his glass. "Your astute mind has penetrated to the heart of this situation, Mr. Van Pooten," he says. "Mr. Allan here is Chief Investigator for our company. He learned that a man named J. H. Simpson was making fake sales of a private power plant called the Midget Marvel Trust Buster. Mr. Allan tracked this fake concern to its source. The man behind the Midget Marvel was the man you knew as Fenwick Griggs."

Van Pooten has swallowed his first dose of bourbon and it is beginning to take hold. "Always knew that Griggs was a scoundrel," he says.

The Doc moves in fast. "As the largest company in the field of home power plants, we were naturally interested in the activities of the Midget Marvel Trust Buster backers. The sale of fake plants and fake stock reflects on our whole industry."

Van Pooten now is on his second dose of bourbon. He nods his head. "Reflects on the whole industry," he says.

The Doc slips me a wink. "This man you knew as Fenwick Griggs is well-known to the police under the name of Toomey. He was directly responsible for stirring up the trouble between you and the other residents of Bosky Bowers. He also employed his masculine charms in an attempt to form a marital alliance with your daughter. He is a deep-dyed villain, a bigamist, and the father of six starving children."

SCHUYKILL Van Pooten's glass is empty again so I give him another charge. He bobs his head at me and reaches across the desk. He grips the Doc by the mitt. "You are my friend," he says. "You saved my little girl from the clutches of a scoundrel."

The Doc picks up the sheaf of pink papers. "My only regret is that we cannot have the benefit of your business sagacity in the conduct of the business of the Farmer's Friendly Favorite Company." He picks up his glass. "We will have one more drink with you and then Mr. Allan and I will leave."

Schuykill Van Pooten dumps the next dose of bourbon down his throat. "Half-price," he says. He reaches in the desk and pulls out a checkbook. "Want to be a stockholder. Got to have power plant. How much?"

The Doc shuffles the stack of pink papers. "Four thousand dollars will put you on our board of directors, and will also place a Farmer's Friendly Favorite power plant in your home within a week."

Van Pooten scribbles in the checkbook. "Business sagacity," he says. "Half-price."

The next morning we are waiting on the doormat when the bank opens. As we walk down the street I can feel the comfort of two grand against my chest. I look up at the Doc. "Look," I tell him, "I can figure most of this deal. But how did you know that Tuxedo Toomey was passing himself off as Fenwick Griggs out in Bosky Bowers, and how did you happen to have this Farmer's Friendly Favorite stock on you?"

The Doc chuckles. "I knew that Tuxedo Toomey was not fond of you. Also the story about the mythical Fenwick Griggs was too long and too detailed. Schuykill Van Pooten was the payoff and there was no reason for bringing Fenwick Griggs into the story at all. Another tip-off was when Tuxedo Toomey agreed to a three-way payoff. I suspected that Tuxedo had something to do with Wall-Street Walter's sudden return to the pen. Tuxedo tried to use us as a means of setting himself in with Schuykill Van Pooten and Katinka. He also tried to pay you off for poking him in the jaw. I had the Farmer's Friendly Favorite stock on me because I talked Inky Malone into staking me to one share of it. Yesterday morning he printed up the rest of the shares Schuykill Van Pooten now possesses, using the share I bought as a model."

"Well," I tell the Doc, "I have to admit that Tuxedo had me going on this Midget Marvel deal. But now that we are back in the chips and can pay our way out of the hotel stakes I have a different plant in mind. I intend to plant a left hook on this hotel manager's chin before we check out."

The Doc chuckles. "That is one plant that has my hearty approval."

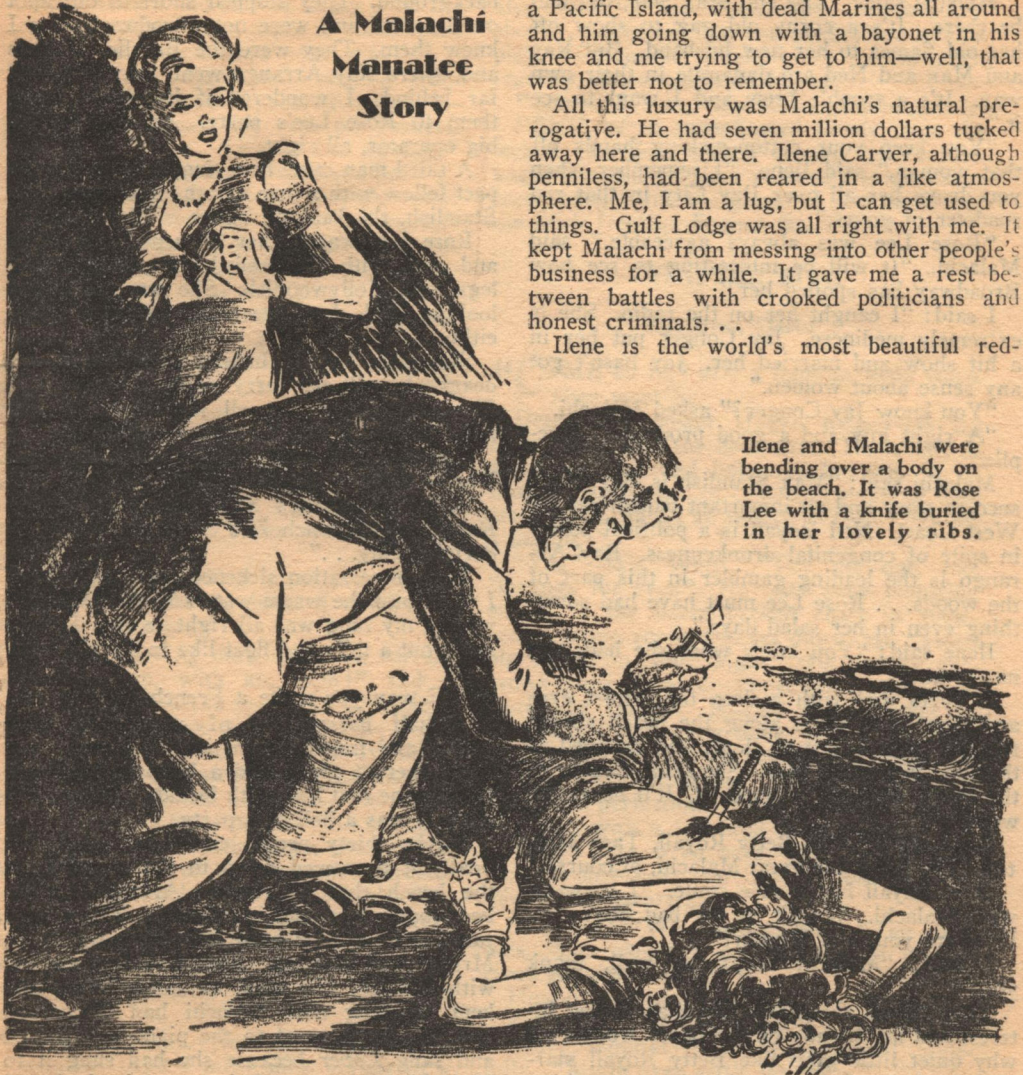
Malachí Attends a Party

By

WILLIAM R. COX

Author of "Malachi Butts In," etc.

A Malachí Manatee Story



THIS Gulf Lodge to which Malachi Manatee had brought Ilene Carver and me was quite a place, strung out along the beach in two-storied, modern buildings erected just prior to the war, all fine glass and masonry, cool in the Florida sun. We lay on the beach among the rich people and if Malachi did not remember another beach, on a Pacific Island, with dead Marines all around and him going down with a bayonet in his knee and me trying to get to him—well, that was better not to remember.

All this luxury was Malachi's natural prerogative. He had seven million dollars tucked away here and there. Ilene Carver, although penniless, had been reared in a like atmosphere. Me, I am a lug, but I can get used to things. Gulf Lodge was all right with me. It kept Malachi from messing into other people's business for a while. It gave me a rest between battles with crooked politicians and honest criminals. . .

Ilene is the world's most beautiful red-

Ilene and Malachi were bending over a body on the beach. It was Rose Lee with a knife buried in her lovely ribs.

A gal like Rose Lee was bound to die young—and not from natural causes either. Her present husband called her a gorgeous, gold-digging bore and a score of ex-swains agreed with him—but it wasn't boredom that caused someone to bury a butcher's knife in Rose Lee's lovely ribs.

headed woman. She said: "Rose Lee was always no account. Even if you did give her a whirl—as who didn't in Bay City? But a party is a party and I'll go if you say so."

Malachi rubbed his head. His hair was short and the sun had bleached it almost white. He is six-feet-four, and not thin. If you did not notice his scar, you would think him a rich, 4-F lounge. My scar, being on my lung, does not show at all.

Malachi said: "Ray and Max and Ned will be there. It's a corny old gag to show off her old flames to her new husband. But Ray and Max and Ned are dynamite in their own way. It's a trouble brew and I want to see it."

"You keep your cotton-picking hands off that woman," said Ilene. "I remember when you drove her all over Bay City in that red roadster of yours."

"Rose Lee was always agreeable," said Malachi. "It will be interesting to see how Broadway has spoiled her."

I said: "I caught her on the radio. She is extremely mediocre. Jay Conger put her in a hit show and married her. Jay hasn't got any sense about women."

"You know Jay Conger?" asked Malachi.

"A right guy and a good producer," I replied.

Malachi said: "Max Standish is Bay City's success story and an important banker on the West Coast. Ned Royall is a political power in spite of congenital drunkenness. Ray Arrango is the leading gambler in this part of the woods. . . Rose Lee must have had something even in her salad days."

Ilene said: "You know what she had, you nasty thing!"

A small girl with a deep tan, violet eyes and slim limbs came along the beach almost timidly. She waved at Ilene, and dropped to the sand in a small heap. She said: "Going to the party, darling? I hope so. It'll be awful, won't it?"

Ilene said: "Mrs. Betty Royall, Tack Hinton. You know the great Malachi, of course."

Mrs. Royall had a nice smile. "I grew up with Malachi. Wasn't he the bad one? . . . How are you, Mr. Hinton?"

I said: "Malachi keeps me well, thank you."

They talked about this and that. I lost interest and lay silently on the beach wondering why quiet little girls like Betty Royall married loud drunks, and what perverse thing kept Malachi from marrying Ilene Carver.

Betty Royall's voice became unexpectedly sharp. "Rose Lee is a trouble-maker and you know this party is arranged to make me seem foolish. I'm tired of being pushed around, Ilene. . ."

I sat up. A party was approaching. There

was a tall, luscious-bodied girl wearing a scanty two-piece bathing suit and a flimsy cape fastened only at the neck. That was Rose Lee. There was Jay Conger, a step behind, thin, dark, sardonic-looking. There was Ray Arrango, short, Latin, black-eyed, quick. There was Ned Royall, obese, but powerfully built, his face red-veined beneath the fashionable tan.

There were three large, quiet men in the background. They stopped short of our spot on the sand and were not introduced. But I knew them. They were the Baerlie brothers and where Ray Arrango went, they were not far behind. I wondered if he would bring them to Rose Lee's party. Arrango was a big operator, all right.

A third man came hurrying, a serious, compact fellow with a firm mouth. That was Max Standish, the banking figure of Bay City.

Rose Lee was in her element. She posed and gave with the bended knee to make her legs look Hollywoodish. She was not a bad looking girl, but she was not that good, either.

She said: "We're having French 75's, my dears. It will be vurry noice, I think. . ." She talked like that all the time, but she never missed giving the boys the glad eye.

Ilene said: "A gun you don't need, my dear. You've done very well without bullets."

"Oh, you darling! Same old Ilene!" cooed Rose Lee. "French 75's are a drink. Wonderful, rahhly. . ."

The conversation sickened and finally died. I went into the warm waters of the Gulf and wished my lung was all right so that I could swim out a mile and float like in the old days.

THE way you make a French 75, you take a half barspoonful of sugar and some bitters and muddle them in the bottom of a large sherbet glass, add a lump of ice, pour champagne and lash with brandy. So by midnight it was a hell of a party.

Maybe thirty people came and went, but finally it narrowed down to the crowd from the beach that afternoon. Arrango's three bodyguards were not in evidence. There were just Rose Lee's husband, her ex-lovers, Ilene, Mrs. Royall and me. Rose Lee was making with Malachi like mad, to annoy Ilene, and kept insisting that Malachi had discovered her. She even went to the piano and played and sang *Lover* because she had sung it to Malachi some years before and he had told her she ought to go on the stage.

Ilene said: "Just like the lecherous harpy. But she won't tell you that Ray Arrango put up the money to get her to New York."

Betty said in a tight little voice: "He did? She's very clever. She got a couple of thousand from Ned, too!"

Ilene said quickly: "Wives shouldn't know those things, darling, and if they do they should forget them."

Betty said: "I hate her! She's flamboyant—"

"Sex machine," nodded Ilene. "Ned is getting very stewed, baby. Why don't you take him home?"

"That has been tried," said Betty. She was nervous, but underneath it she was wiry-tough, I thought.

I said: "Standish seems out of place here. Did he kick in for the big career, too?"

"He gave her a ring," said Betty. "She hocked it. They were engaged, I think they called it."

"That gal certainly got around," I said.

There were half-empty glasses and soggy canapes and soiled paper napkins all over the place. It was a fine apartment with a luxurious setting, but filled with people who were getting cantankerous—especially Ned Royall.

He wandered over to where Jay Conger was mixing a fresh Scotch for me because I do not like champagne drinks and said: "Holdin' out the good stuff, huh? A hell of a host you are! Gimme a Scotch."

Jay looked him in the eye and said coolly: "You've had enough, old fellow."

Royall put down his empty glass. His face got purple. He said: "Listen, you Broadway sharpie, don't come down here among southern people and show off. . ."

It was Ray Arrango who stepped in. He said calmly: "Downstairs, Ned. You'll get us all into trouble. Downstairs, outdoors."

Royall wheeled and said: "You keep out of this, you dirty little Cuban racketeer!"

Ray Arrango's face did not change expression. He reached out, grabbed the big man and threw him out the door. I held it open and shoved Royall down the stairs.

Those things happen so quickly it's almost impossible to retrace the sequence of events. The next thing I knew, everyone was running down a flagged walk, with light show-

ing from a lamppost and some windows behind which rudely awakened folks were snapping switches. Instead of Jay Conger, it was Ray Arrango who had chosen to tackle Ned Royall. . .

That happens often, too, among drunks. Two characters will get into a scramble, another will check into it, and first thing you know it is Johnny-change-partners, and usually a Donnybrook on top of that with everybody having a word to say or a punch to throw. In this fiasco, Jay Conger seemed to get sidetracked completely, because I lost sight of him and of several others, but that was because the Baerlie brothers suddenly appeared.

They must have been hanging around, waiting for Ray Arrango. They moved in on the two contestants, who had squared off in the full light. Rose Lee made a brief appearance, screaming: "Please, boys! Think of the publicity!" Then the three big men blocked her skillfully out of the circle of light and that was all I saw of her. Arrango was fainting Royall out of position, and I had to get a load of that, because Arrango did it almost too well. He had an educated left, and he wound it around Royall's neck, drew him in close and deliberately punched his nose.

The thing was, he could have punched Royall on the button and kayo'd him then and there. But he took short chops, expert and neat, tearing the big man's nose, breaking the bones, bloodying him something fierce. Betty squirmed away from me, without a sound, and started into the crowd. She bumped into a Baerlie and turned, her hand to her mouth, looking like sudden death. Then ran off toward the beach.

Malachi, however, was right there by this time. He came in closer and said: "That's enough, you guys."

The Baerlie brothers moved respectfully but firmly upon Malachi. Their man was winning by a mile. I edged in. Then there was a great turmoil, and never afterwards could



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anyone swear to what happened, exactly.

One of the Baerlies touched Malachi's arm, which is like setting fire to a hunk of T.N.T. I got behind him—he was the biggest one—and stuck out a leg. Malachi pushed him and he fell over my leg. I hit him.

Then Malachi hit the second one, very quick, with a rabbit punch. He fell down, too. I got the third with a semi-block and elbow jab to the throat. That made quite a pile of Baerlies on the ground. Malachi and I gently plucked Arrango off Royall, who was beginning to resemble an overripe tomato which has been thrown at someone and had not missed.

Royall mumbled thickly: "The dirty little crook . . . I'll take him yet! Gimme a chance! I'll outlast him and all the rest of that damned outfit. . ."

Malachi said: "Not tonight you won't. You need a doctor for that proboscis, my friend."

Royall put a hand up to his face. It seemed to me that everyone had been outside the circle of lights, but now came back in, standing around nervously. Other guests had arrived. The manager had finally come running, querulous, slightly afraid of his lustrous though disorderly patrons. A man said he was a medico and busied himself with Royall's nose.

Max Standish said to me: "Where is Rose Lee? The poor kid must have got scared and run."

Jay Conger, quite sober now, said: "She went toward the beach with the bout. I think Betty Royall is with her."

Arrango seemed a bit dazed. He said to me: "What makes with you, pal? I didn't think you'd take chips for a heel like Royall."

"Your playful chums chose to pick on Malachi," I explained.

He looked at the Baerlies, who were slowly getting up, said: "So that's the Manatee-Hinton treatment?"

"Not the full treatment," I told him. "We did not wish to harm your pals."

"Where is Malachi now?" he asked.

"Me, I'm just a bystander," I said. "I just look on—He and Ilene seem to have a date on the beach or somewhere."

Malachi's voice came suddenly, in that tone I know so well: "Tack! Bring the doctor!" I took the medical man away from Royall and started toward Malachi's voice.

ILENE and Malachi were bending over a body on the beach. It was Rose Lee. She was lying on her side, one knee hunched up. She was still very warm, and a little blood oozed around the knife buried between her ribs on the left side. Malachi was staring at her, his cigarette lighter flaming in his hand.

The doctor said: "Someone call the sheriff. I don't think any of you should leave. . ."

Max Standish, Royall and Arrango were all there by now. Betty Royall stood close to her husband, a handkerchief against her mouth. The Baerlie brothers, still dazed but throwing vengeful glances at me and Malachi, grouped behind them like the Three Fates. No one spoke for a full moment, then they all broke into excited speech at once.

Jay Conger stood nearest me. He muttered: "Now why should someone kill her? God knows she was a bore, but why that?"

I said: "Why did you marry her, Jay?"

He looked at me from some far place and said: "Did you ever hear of sex appeal? She had it! It gets me every time. She was the third and I'm not yet forty."

"You had better soft pedal that talk and act the grieving husband," I said. "These Crackers are not like metropolitan cops. They're sort of simple."

All in all, it was a frightened crew who gathered in the overdone, but luxurious Conger apartment. The Baerlie brothers seemed strangely out of place, standing against the wall, their wide-cheekboned faces blank, their eyes narrowed. Arrango walked up and down, but said nothing. Ned Royall administered to the weeping Betty. Max Standish looked out the window where the hotel attendants were keeping the space about the body cleared. Jay Conger poured a straight drink and swallowed it.

Malachi took Ilene's arm and led her into the bedroom, giving me the nod to follow.

He closed the door and said: "These people swing a lot of weight down here. The Sheriff will be mighty careful how he moves. What do you think of it, Tack?"

I said, trying to clear it in my mind: "Nobody liked Rose Lee very much. . . Royall and Arrango had staked her, each thinking she was his girl. She hocked Standish's engagement ring—then came back to twist the knife in the wounds, with a husband who was bored by her. Arrango and Royall, however, were busy attempting mayhem on each other when she was killed. It looks as if it must have been either Standish or Conger—"

"Or Betty Royall," said Ilene.

"Not that kid," I said.

Malachi said: "Could have been. The knife looked like a heavy-handled butcher's blade, worn thin by honing. My guess is it came from the hotel kitchen, which is two hundred yards from here. That makes it premeditated murder, huh?"

I said: "Those Baerlies were right in on the fight. Arrango is the type, but he couldn't have done it, and anyway, he seems a pretty decent sort of guy. Boy, he sure can hit!"

"He was a boxer as a kid," said Malachi. "Did you hear what Royall said when we stopped it?"

"Something about outlasting the rest of the damned gang," I said. "If he thought he could handle the Baerlies, he's nuts."

Malachi said: "The set-up is like this: Max Standish heads up a reform element which is trying to get Arrango's gambling interests eradicated. They're using Royall's political machine to further their schemes. Royall's bunch is out, right now, having been defeated in the last primary, but with Standish behind him, Ned figures to get in again. . ."

Ilene said: "Now wait, Malachi. What has this to do with the killing of a Broadway soubrette from Bay City?"

"I dunno," said Malachi. "But that's the story. It's all behind the scenes, as usual in politics. The people think Max, a Sunday school superintendent, is sacrificing much in entering politics as a running mate to Royall. What they don't know is that Ray Arrango's Latin Bank is giving Max's interests hell. Ray is a shrewd business fellow. Max is simply playing the game to maintain supremacy in his field."

"All these sidelights are interesting, if true," I said. "But who is going to take the rap for slipping a shiv into the girl-friend of six other guys?"

Malachi said: "You'd better be prepared to have the finger of suspicion pointed at your pal, Conger. He's the only outsider."

Ilene said: "He didn't do it. I can alibi him."

"You were with me," said Malachi.

"I can lie, can't I?" said Ilene serenely. "I think I hear the voice of the Law. Let us go and tell our stories."

We went back in and Sheriff Battle gave us a glare. He was a lanky man, all politician. He was very polite to Royall and Standish and scared of Arrango and his men. He asked routine questions, corroborated the fact that the knife had been taken from the hotel kitchen, then left.

Malachi said to the assemblage, now quite ready to go to bits: "The coroner's verdict will be what you all want it, never fear. 'At the hands of person or persons unknown' . . . Battle is up for re-election too, you know."

Most of them looked relieved. But Jay Conger said into a thin silence: "She was married to me, remember? I'd like to know who killed her. It was one of you—"

"One of us," said Max Standish meaningfully.

Ilene, who had evidently adopted Jay, said: "Oh, I think we'll find out who did it. Malachi is very smart that way, didn't you know? He and Tack have worked out a few killings between them. Tack used to be a

private detective in New York City."

They all looked at me. Since my detective experience was limited to six months as a divorce snooper, it was an effort to look nonchalant, but Ilene always had a motive behind her remarks, so I tried.

Malachi said: "This thing will have to be cleared up, or you'll all have a tough time at elections. The sheriff will let it ride, but he'll run independently and leave it in your laps."

Max Standish said: "We'll risk that, Malachi."

"This is our business, Malachi," added Royall.

"We can settle it," Arrango said significantly.

Jay Conger said, drawing nastily: "They all get together quick, don't they? Manatee, if you can solve this, I'll do anything for you. One of these people, including Mrs. Royall, by the way—she hated Rose Lee—killed my wife—"

We had to stop another fight, then. Ned Royall came charging like a bull at Conger. Malachi went for the Baerlies, confronting them, bluffing them with a sharp word. I grabbed Royall and slung him. He was heavy, but too angry to be any good.

AT THAT moment the door opened and the sheriff came in. He posed dramatically, then unwrapped a handkerchief and laid on an end table a knife still bloody. He said: "You people better look at this."

It was one of those heavy-bladed, heavy-handled butcher's knives. The unusual thing about it was that the point had been sharpened, so that it came to a tri-cornered sharp point. . .

Everyone looked at it. The sheriff had an unexpected sense of theatrics. He re-wrapped it and, without a word, left the apartment.

The Royalls were the first to gather themselves and go. Betty leaned on her husband's arm, but I noticed her legs were not shaky. Arrango swaggered out among his bodyguards. Standish was last, and seemed anxious to say something to Manatee, but afraid to do it among witnesses. Finally he said: "I've a suite under yours in the main hotel building. Come in and see me before you go to bed."

That left just Jay Conger, who busied himself with another drink. He said: "The slobs! Rose wasn't bad—she was just avid—of life and success. She was stupid, but not bad. . ."

He gulped down his drink, added: "If you solve it, Manatee—I know I can't pay you, but I'll do something for you—somehow. . ."

We got away from him, headed for Malachi's suite on the second floor of the hotel, and sat down to a bottle of Scotch.

It was close to three A.M. Malachi drank slowly, his V-shaped eyebrows going up and down like a nervous window-shade. Ilene was amazingly silent.

All the time I was trying to piece together the few things I knew. . .

More and more it pointed to Arrango, the spurned Latin. Yet he had been punching Royall's nose in plain sight of everyone. The Baerlies had been right in there getting theirs from Malachi and me. Someone had killed Rose Lee while the action covered the crime. It could not be any other way.

I said as much, finally, when the silence among us got on my nerves. Ilene just looked at me, as though she did not hear, then said: "Betty slipped away while Ned was fighting. She has always hated and feared Rose Lee. Once, when Betty was young, she had a nervous breakdown, they called it, and they had to put her away for a while. . . I like Betty, Malachi. . ."

"Somebody ground that knife," I objected. "Could Mrs. Royall have done that? Can you see her doing it?"

"If she was jealous enough and hated enough."

Malachi said, his voice low and clear: "Someone else is going to get killed tonight unless we can figure this out."

"You keep tying it up with politics," I said. "You got crime linked with politics in your brain."

Malachi said: "You didn't catch the significance of that knife. Why was it sharpened in that manner?"

"So it would slip into a person easily," I said. "You remember Jake? He used to do that to his jungle knife. Said he could skewer a Jap and take it out in one motion."

Malachi said: "I'm going to take a walk. If something occurs to you, look for me on the beach."

Ilene smoked two cigarettes in silence, then suddenly blurted:

"Tack! Malachi said someone else was going to get it. We'd better go after him."

But at that moment a bright light dawned in my thick skull. I said: "Ilene, tell me all you know about Royall, Standish and Arrango. About their past, what they did. Everything!"

She said: "Come on, I'll try to remember while we walk."

We went down on the beach. There was no sight of Malachi's tall frame.

Ilene talked. She was a good, straightforward reporter when she took the time and trouble. I got a good picture of all the people about whom I was curious. Betty, trying to marry Ned Royall, getting sick, going away—and that was how, in the end, she got him, for he had a contradictory streak of tender-

ness, which I had already suspected. . . Max Standish, trying to get ahead in the bank, ruthless in business, unfriendly to people unless they could help him, falling only once, for Rose Lee. . . Ned Royall, born to the purple, drinking, fighting, but making friends in politics with a shrewdness which matched Max's. . . Arrango, the boy from the Spanish quarter, a flashy kid, a good boxer but too smart to take the bumps in the ring, handsome enough to go on the stage, a lad who had tried everything, including circus performing until he got started in the bolita racket, where he grew like a weed to top rank. . .

I said: "Ilene, Standish asked us to stop in. Malachi isn't on the beach. Hurry!"

I HAD it then. We dashed for the hotel where Max had his suite on the ground floor. We could see light in his window.

We slid silently into the hall and listened outside the room. A voice was telling somebody something. Ilene raised her skirt and took a small revolver from a holster strapped to her thigh.

I hit the door. They don't make hotel doors to withstand a good fullback's best plunge. It opened.

Standish was on the floor, bleeding. There was a knife in him, but he was alive, because he flicked us a grateful look.

Malachi was against the wall. When Ilene came in behind me she fired one shot, and then Malachi came away from the wall.

I began slugging with all the dirty tricks I learned in the Marines. I hit one of them with my pronged fingers, smack in the eyes, then I kicked him where it hurt the most. I got another by the wrist and broke his arm before I smashed his jaw to bits. The third was stone dead, because Ilene can shoot like a sniper.

Malachi had Arrango in his hands and that was not so good for the gambler. Malachi was taking him apart, limb from limb, when I stopped him by touching his arm, just gently and saying: "He's out like a light, pal. Let him be."

Malachi dropped Arrango and said: "Max had it figured out. He got Max, but the light was out and his aim went bad. . ."

Standish was on his feet. His shoulder bled, but his hands were cool, ripping the doctor on the house phone. The place was lousy with Baerlies. They were all down and not liable to get up without help.

Malachi said: "Those knives were balanced for throwing. But I had forgotten about Arrango's circus career—he never meant to kill Rose Lee at all."

"I was sure of that," said Max Standish

gravely. People were coming in, Jay Conger, the Royalls, others. Standish said in his precise voice: "He meant to get me. I thought I heard something whizz by me. Rose Lee was getting away from the fight—she was humiliated, you see. Ray threw the knife then got into the fight to provide an alibi. It was very clever. I wasn't sure, Malachi, I wanted to talk to you about it."

Malachi said: "I walked right into it. They were inside the room, with the lights out, and Ray had thrown the knife. Max was bending over, getting ready for bed, and caught it in the shoulder. They were in a hell of a spot, so they stuck me up. They had to kill me, too, and make it look as though Max and I had fought it out."

Ilene said: "You big dummy! Going out without your bodyguards! You might have got hurt!"

Malachi said with dignity: "It was a political deal, as I suspected. Ray wanted Max out. He could handle Ned's crowd, had done it before, but Max's money was too much for

him. Now there'll be an open scrap—and I hope you lose, Max, I hope you lose."

The sheriff came, gathered up the Baerlies and their boss, all unconscious, and took them away. Malachi and Ilene and I went upstairs. Conger came with us. We had a drink and Conger said: "It seems worse, in a way, killed by accident. Not even a reason for her death. . ."

We didn't say anything. After all, you can't tell a guy that his wife had traveled in bad company and through them had met her end.

Ilene said, after a while: "Have another drink. Who are we to pry into the imponderables? All I know is Malachi was a dope to walk into it the way he did."

"I was just about to take the gun away from that Baerlie and make him eat it when you dropped in," Malachi said loftily.

That precipitated an argument which brought the manager again. It was a hell of a night for the Gulf Lodge, all right. It had had the full Manatee-Hinton treatment.



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**An Inspector Allhoff
Novelette**

SEALED WITH A KRIS

By D. L. CHAMPION

Author of "Upstairs to Murder," etc.

Wreck my brains as I would I saw no connection between a gang shooting on West 30th Street and the Malayan kris in the shapely bosom of Claire Van Slade on 53rd—Van Slade, the "actress" who didn't act, and who twenty years ago would have been called a very harsh name. Harsh names were right up the alley of the caffeine-happy Inspector of Centre Street and, as usual, all his invective was directed at Battersly and me.

CHAPTER ONE

Copper's Holiday

SUNDAY at our house is the old folks' night out. The children cluster about the radio harkening with a concentration unknown in the classrooms to Jack Benny and whatever blasting orchestra spreads its jive melodies over the air waves. My wife and I usually dine downtown and fight our way into some movie theater of her choice.

It was a mild spring evening. We had picked up a taxi on the Concourse and discussed the matter of where to eat on the way downtown. I held out for a thick steak at Gallagher's. My wife favored Chinese food at

Freeman Chum's. Naturally, we ate there.

After that, we set out on foot to find a movie. It was on 53rd Street that I picked up Lawrence Robinson.

About a third of the way down the block in front of us, a taxi pulled up to the curb before a massive apartment house. Standing on the sidewalk were three people. One of them was uniformed, obviously an attendant, doorman or elevator boy, of the house. There was also a man in a flashy tan topcoat and a woman, fat and matronly.

As we approached, the man and the woman attempted to enter the taxi simultaneously. Owing to her bulk they jammed neatly in the doorway. The attendant moved forward and seemed to expostulate with the man.

We were on the steps of the station house when Robinson slugged me. He brought up his right and threw it in my face.



As we neared the trio I heard loud and profane language. The tan topcoat drew back his left arm and laid a heavy fist on the jaw of the attendant. The latter went sprawling to the sidewalk.

Seizing this opportunity to snatch the cab, the woman sprang into the rear seat and the hack moved off as my wife and I arrived upon the scene.

The doorman lay half on the sidewalk, half in the gutter. There was blood on his scalp at the point where his head had smashed against the sharp corner of the curb. He yelled, "Help! Police! I've been assaulted," in such hearty tones that I was certain he wasn't seriously injured.

The flashy topcoat stood over him as if uncertain whether to flee or hit him again. He decided upon the former course suddenly and sprinted directly toward me. I braced myself and held out my arms. He ran accommodatingly into them.

My wife clucked like a critical old hen and said: "Goodness, can't you mind your own business on your night off? Where's the beat copper?"

I ignored that. I said to the man in the gutter: "Are you hurt? Do you need an ambulance? Do you want to file a complaint?"

He got painfully to his feet. He was a thin, gaunt fellow of middle age. He seemed far more indignant than injured.

"You're damned right I want to file a complaint! What right's he got to slug me? That lady ordered the cab first. It was her cab. Where does he get off trying to take it?"

The guy I was holding on to was about fifty. He was well-dressed, though a trifle on the Broadway side. His temples were gray and he was getting plump. He struggled to get loose. At my age I have no grip of iron but my captive was no Lionel Strongfort either. I had no trouble hanging on to him.

"Get a cop," said the doorman. "I want this guy pinched."

"You've no right to hold me," said the other. "Mind your own business. Who the devil do you think you are?"

My wife did a switch. "I'll have you know he's a police sergeant," she said with righteous indignation.

I fumbled in my pocket and produced my badge. My captive's breath came full in my face. He had been drinking—brandy, at that.

"All right," said the doorman. "Pinch him. I'll make the complaint."

My wife took down the names and addresses while I held on to the arm of the flashy topcoat. The doorman, who turned out to be the switchboard operator, was named Gully, Henry Gully. My little pal who had become very quiet was Lawrence Robinson.

"O. K." I said. "We'll take a cab over to

the Fifty-first Street station. Drunk, disorderly and third-degree assault. You'll have to appear tomorrow, Gully. The D. A.'s office will tell you when you're wanted."

Mollified, Gully went back into the apartment house. I thrust my wife and Robinson into a hack, climbed in myself. We headed east.

WE were crossing Lexington when Robinson cleared his throat loudly and attempted to press something into my hand. I took it from him, held it up to the light and examined it. It was crisp, green and attractive. It was a thousand-dollar bill.

My wife blinked at it. We didn't meet up with that kind of currency on the Concourse. I pushed the temptation out of my mind and shook my head.

"Sorry," I said, and I was. "I can't jeopardize a pension even for that kind of dough."

Robinson put the money back in his pocket. I regarded him curiously. If he had a clean record, it was better than even money that he'd get off with a fine of far less than a grand or maybe only a suspended sentence.

His face was ashen. He blinked nervously. His forefinger drummed nervously on the window sill.

In front of the precinct house, I took Robinson from the cab, leaving my wife in the hack to wait for me. We were on the steps of the station house when Robinson spoke to me.

"Let me go," he said. "I'll make it worth your while. I—"

"Forget it," I said. "I've been a copper for over twenty—"

It was then that he slugged me. He brought up his right and threw it in my face. I staggered back but as I did so I grabbed the sleeve of his flashy coat. He fought to get loose but meanwhile, I had whipped the Police Special out of my shoulder holster and thrust its barrel against his chest.

By now his face was as white as your grandmother's hair. His pupils were dilated. He looked more like a guy being dragged in for treason than for an ordinary street brawl.

I stood by while he was booked, handed him over to the desk sergeant, made my farewells and went back to the waiting taxicab.

My wife greeted me coldly. "Did you have to get mixed up in that? After all it's your day off. Besides, I saw him hit you. It's dangerous for a man of your age to be hit in the face. Then, too—"

But by this time I had stopped listening, a trick I had perfected after twenty-odd years of wedlock.

Eventually, she subsided. We arrived at the big movie theatre, stood in line for forty minutes, then were granted the privilege of paying a buck apiece to see a picture that I wouldn't

have the heart to show in a German prisoner's camp.

After that we went home. I turned in, completely unaware that I had pinched a murderer.

I read all about it in the morning paper on the way down to Allhoff's combination office and residence in the slums. Since working under Allhoff's aegis, I seldom ever saw my name in print in the papers. But there it was, looming up before me. And the reporter who had written the story never even hinted that I had made a lucky pinch. The implication was that I was a pretty shrewd copper and a credit to the Department. I was quite pleased with myself as I climbed up Allhoff's rickety stairway.

Allhoff sat at his desk, his chest pushed up against it. On its electric base the coffee pot gurgled dispiritedly. Allhoff wore a black look which tipped me off that he had not yet ingurgitated his morning brew. Seeing this, I forbore to wish him good morning. I went over to my own desk and flipped through the onion skin reports on my desk.

Battersly, I observed, had not yet put in an appearance. I glanced at my wrist watch. It was precisely sixteen minutes past nine. For everyone's sake I hoped he wasn't going to be so late that Allhoff's wrath would be aroused.

By ten o'clock, Allhoff had poured two pots of coffee down his gullet. Battersly had not yet arrived. Allhoff drew a deep breath and spoke to me without turning his head.

"Well, anything important this morning?"

"One killing," I said. "It's getting a big play in the papers. But you needn't bother your curly little head about it. I've already arrested the murderer."

"*You!*" said Allhoff and it was remarkable how he managed to imply in a single monosyllable that I was a moronic oaf whose talents were hardly sufficient to make out a parking ticket, much less arrest a killer.

"Me," I said. "I picked him up last night. What do you think of that?"

"Unless the entire world has gone mad," said Allhoff, "I consider it a guarantee of his innocence. Who was killed and whom did you pinch?"

"I pinched a guy named Lawrence Robinson. It seems he murdered Claire Van Slade last night.

"Van Slade," said Allhoff. "I'm not surprised she's come to a gory end."

For that matter neither was anyone else. Claire Van Slade was a professional beauty whose profession seemed to flourish even though her beauty was fading.

She was one of those queer metropolitan anomalies which have come into being along with the advent of the columnists. She was an actress who didn't act. A night club habitu 

who apparently toiled not nor did she spin, yet possessed at least a dozen fur coats, a safe full of jewels and according to the Sunday magazine sections lived solely on caviar and champagne.

Of course her manner of achieving these things was no mystery to any cynical mind. Twenty years ago she would have made a hundredth as much money and your father would have called her a very harsh name. Today, however, along with dozens like her, she was treated with deference by millionaires and journalists. She was welcomed by the wealthiest and highest social circles of the country. But she still would have caused a raised eyebrow and a denunciation from the pulpit back in Marion, Kansas.

"WELL," said Allhoff, "exactly what happened?"

I told him the tale of my putting the arm on Robinson the previous evening. He gulped coffee and grunted sceptically as I described the whole incident.

"Any details in yet?"

"No. Just the bare report of the pinch and the subsequent discovery of the killing. I read most of it in the morning paper. The detailed report will probably be over in a little while."

"If the paper has it, we should have a report," snapped Allhoff.

At that moment the door opened and Battersly walked in. Allhoff took his corvine nose out of his coffee cup and glared at him. He took a massive, old-fashioned watch from his pocket and studied it very pointedly.

"So!" he said. "And who assigned you to the night shift?"

"Sorry, sir," said Battersly. I glanced at him in surprise. Usually, and with justification, he became embarrassed when Allhoff challenged him. Now he stood calmly, looking quite at ease in his patrolman's uniform.

"It's not my fault I'm late, Inspector. I have the best excuse in the world."

"Which is?" said Allhoff, unimpressed.

"I had to stop on the way downtown to make an arrest, sir. I had to book a murderer."

"My God!" said Allhoff. "First Simmonds, then you. Don't tell me it was the murderer of Claire Van Slade?"

Battersly stared at him in astonishment. "How did you know?"

Allhoff blinked, turned his head around and stared at me over his shoulder. Bewildered, I said: "You mean that Robinson escaped?"

"Robinson?" said Battersly. "No. I arrested a guy named Orsatto. It seems he killed this Van Slade dame last night. Or early this morning."

Allhoff filled his cup with coffee. I heard footfalls on the stairway outside. A uniformed

copper entered the room and put the latest reports from Headquarters on my desk. Then he went out again.

"Battersly," said Allhoff, "sit down. Let us have a moment's silence while I toss down a cup of coffee preparatory to grappling with the details. When two brilliant dicks like you each arrest a murderer in one day, especially when he's two different guys who murdered the same woman, I'll need all my wits about me to listen to the explanation."

He sipped his coffee with the delicate sound of a mechanized division advancing through the mud to meet von Rundstedt's army. Battersly and I glanced dubiously at each other. Then I turned to the Headquarters reports.

What I read appeared to throw some doubt on *my* arrest. But still the circumstances pointed to Robinson. I wondered who Battersly's pinch was. I'd never heard of anyone called Orsatto.

Allhoff tipped the bottom of his cup in the general direction of the ceiling, sucked audibly at the sugar in the bottom, then set the cup down with a long, drawn-out sigh.

"All right, Sergeant," he said to me, "what does Homicide say on those little pieces of yellow paper? Do they point to the guilt of your man or to Battersly's?"

I picked up the onion skin and paraphrased the Headquarters report.

"Well," I said, "it seems this guy Robinson came in with Van Slade about two hours before I saw him. Gully, the switchboard man, saw him. Later, he had the brawl about the taxi that I told you about and I took him over to Fifty-first Street and booked him.

"In the morning the maid who had a key to Van Slade's apartment let herself in and found Van Slade lying on a couch with a Malayan *kris* thrust neatly into her exposed white breast. The *kris*, it seems, was a wall ornament in the apartment. Naturally, when Homicide first heard of this they assumed that Robinson was the killer since Gully swore that no one else had entered her apartment up to seven in the morning, his quitting time. The M. E. said the woman had been dead for at least twelve hours, probably more."

Allhoff shrugged. "It's simple enough then. I don't wonder you and Homicide have solved it. But where does Battersly's guy come in?"

"Wait a minute," I said. "At first, it looked easy enough. But a few baffling angles developed. First, the garbage was put out."

CHAPTER TWO

Two Killers—One Corpse

"THE garbage? What the devil has that to do with it?"

"The garbage is collected early in the morn-

ing in that house. The tenants put it outside the door at night. According to the janitor, who happened to notice, the garbage had not been put outside Van Slade's door when Robinson left. But it had been put out when he came to collect it at six in the morning."

Allhoff grunted. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. Van Slade got a call through the switchboard after Robinson left. And, according to Henry Gully, she answered it. All this seems to indicate that Van Slade was alive after Robinson left. I don't quite understand it."

Allhoff snorted. "You mean you don't understand how you could be wrong? In that event you must have a most limited understanding."

I ignored that. "I mean that when I pinched Robinson he seemed a very worried guy. Much more so than he should have been about the charges that I booked him on. He tried to bribe me, tried to escape, and damned near broke down in the precinct house."

Allhoff filled his coffee cup. "Anything else that indicates he's innocent?"

"Yes. A most important item. Van Slade's apartment was ransacked. The maid says all her jewelry is missing and also a roll of dough she kept on hand in case of emergency. Now, Robinson came directly out of the apartment, asked Gully to get a taxi and got in the brawl when Gully gave the first cab to arrive to the woman who had ordered it a few minutes before Robinson. Yet when he was searched at the precinct house, Robinson had neither the dough nor the jewels on him. And he certainly didn't have the time or the opportunity to stash them away after he'd left the apartment."

"So," said Allhoff, "I suppose Homicide is now threatening Orsatto with a rubber hose."

"Maybe. They're baffled on Robinson. They're holding him but are inclined to believe he's innocent."

"But doesn't this Gully swear that no one else went into the apartment up to seven o'clock anyway?"

"Maybe someone went in after seven."

"Then why does the M. E. say she was probably dead for twelve hours?"

I shrugged my shoulders and put down the report. I didn't know the answer to that.

Allhoff turned his gaze in Battersly's direction. "What about this Orsatto? Where did you find him? On the fire-escape of the Fifty-third Street house with blood on his hands?"

Battersly shook his head. "No," he said. "It's like this—I know a girl. She's engaged to a friend of mine and she was a good friend of this Miss Van Slade. Well, as soon as this girl—her name is Wanda Blextion—saw in the last edition that Miss Van Slade was dead, she called me."

"Why?"

"Because she knew me. She knew I was on the Force. So she called to tell me who did it. It was Orsatto."

"She told you it was Orsatto?"

"Well, she told me that Orsatto was one of Miss Van Slade's boy-friends, and that he was insanely jealous of her. That he had threatened to kill her if she saw any other men. One time he made the threat in Wanda's presence. So as soon as she found out that Miss Van Slade was killed, she knew who did it and called me."

"Splendid," said Allhoff in a tone which indicated it wasn't. "So this dame tells you Orsatto is a killer. You had less to go on than Simmonds."

"Of course I didn't just take her word for it," said Battersly. "I checked."

"Very workmanlike," drawled Allhoff. "Exactly how did you check?"

"I went down to Orsatto's hotel and asked where he was last night."

"Well, where was he?"

Battersly shrugged his shoulders. "He wouldn't tell me. So, naturally, I arrested him. He's booked on suspicion of murder right now."

I THOUGHT that over. "Since it appears Van Slade was alive after Robinson left the apartment," I said, "maybe Battersly's right and I'm wrong."

Allhoff reached for the coffee pot. "I can understand *you* being wrong," he said acidly. "My mind refuses to accept the fact of Battersly's being right."

He sucked his coffee down audibly, set the cup on the desk with a bang and stared thoughtfully at the cracked plaster of the wall.

"It appears," he remarked, "that Van Slade was alive when Simmonds pinched Robinson. It also appears that Orsatto didn't go into the apartment after that, if Gully's testimony is true. That would make it look as if both of you were wrong—a normal and customary state of affairs."

"I don't see it," I said, nettled. "If Robinson didn't kill her, if no one entered the apartment after he left, then it was impossible for anyone to have killed her."

"Impossible," agreed Allhoff blandly. "Nevertheless, she's dead."

"Orsatto got in somehow," said Battersly. "Either he sneaked past Gully, or else he paid him to keep his mouth shut. I did a little checking on him, after I'd had him booked. He's a tough guy, who runs a tough mob. A real Broadway heel."

There was a long silence. I sat in a state of apprehension. Battersly seemed impervious to the storm clouds gathering over Allhoff's desk.

"Heel," murmured Allhoff abstractedly. "A heel, eh?" He drew a deep breath and putting both hands on the edge of his desk pushed his chair out into the center of the room. This movement revealed the fact that there was a pair of leather pads at the point where his thighs should have been.

He stared down at the point where his knees had once been. Then, again, he said: "A heel. A heel, at times, can be a desirable item. I wish I had one." He turned his head and his blazing eyes fixed themselves on Battersly. He raised his voice and shouted: "I wish I had *two*!"

Battersly was pale now. I could see him bracing himself against the blast which was to come. Allhoff drew a deep breath.

"A murderer like the guy who killed Van Slade has more guts than you. At least he takes his chances with the law. At least he risks his life for his crime. He doesn't take the easy way. Did you ever risk anything? No. You sit here day after day in complete security. Not even punished for a crime worse than murder—a crime caused by your own damned cowardice!"

I filled my pipe and tried to stop my ears. There would be at least fifteen minutes of this, I knew from bitter experience. Allhoff rolled his entire murky vocabulary out of his throat and over his tongue. He assailed Battersly and his ancestry back nine generations.

It all went back several years to when Battersly was a raw rookie and Allhoff a deputy inspector possessed of two legs, a biting tongue and the most acute brain in the entire department.

A stool pigeon had tipped us off to the whereabouts of a couple of killers whom the coppers of three states most urgently desired to see. We had been informed further that they had a Tommy gun mounted on the stairway, commanding the front door, just in case of a raid.

Battersly's assignment had been to effect a rear entrance and close in on the gun's operator at the precise moment that Allhoff led the raiding squad through the door.

Battersly had managed to get in the house, all right. Then he became panicky. At the zero minute he had fled, unnerved, up the stairway to the safety of the roof. As a result of that bad moment, Allhoff, upon charging into the foyer, had been greeted by a hail of machine-gun bullets.

His life was saved by the fact that the gun had been aimed low. Twenty-odd slugs smashed into his legs. Gangrene had set in after a week and amputation followed immediately.

Of course, the Civil Service rules categorically ruled out a police inspector without legs. However, the commissioner—a resourceful

guy who was of no mind to lose his best man—had arranged a devious bookkeeping device which would pay Allhoff his former salary, fixed it so that Allhoff dwelt in this slum tenement which would keep him close to Headquarters, and kept him at work even though he was no longer an official member of the Department.

For Allhoff's part, he had demanded that he be given Battersly as an assistant. The commissioner, perhaps with a fine sense of poetic justice, had agreed. I was thrown in the deal, because I had known Allhoff ever since we joined the Force together and was supposed, incorrectly, to be able to toss oil on the troubled waters whenever Allhoff decided to vent his vengeful wrath upon the younger man.

Having exhausted both his profane vocabulary and himself, Allhoff turned from Battersly and returned to the solace of his coffee. It appeared that he had completely forgotten the matter of Claire Van Slade.

I hadn't. Considering all the angles, it fascinated me. If Gully wasn't lying it looked like a perfect murder. It seemed as if my man Robinson was clean. And if Gully persisted in his statement that no one had entered the apartment all night, Orsatto didn't need an alibi. Gully had something just as good for him to use.

We passed a gloomy and silent day at Allhoff's, then Battersly and I went home.

THE following morning a little after ten o'clock, the telephone rang. I answered it, gruffly, sliding some respect into my tone when I learned it was the commissioner himself.

I hung up and reported to Allhoff. "It was the boss. He's handing you the Van Slade case. Her brother's coming over here to see you."

Allhoff grunted uncivilly. "He had you on the wire for exactly seven minutes. He must have told you more than that."

"He did. Someone took a pot shot at the brother last night. Hit him in the arm. Apparently someone's trying to knock off the whole Van Slade family."

"Let's have the facts," said Allhoff. "Your theories are invariably confusing."

"All right all right. According to the commissioner, Benny Van Slade was reluctant about making a complaint. The woman who lives next door to him heard the shot, heard his cry of pain and called the beat copper. Van Slade didn't want to talk, didn't want the police to have any part of it. The beat copper insisted. Took him to a hospital and held him all night until he found out what to do about it."

Allhoff grunted again, buried his nose in his coffee cup and lapsed into silence.

Some fifteen minutes later, I heard foot-

steps on the stairs outside. O'Connor, a beefy and rotund plainclothesman from across the street, entered the room with an individual, whom I guessed to be Benny Van Slade, in tow.

O'Connor saluted. "This is Van Slade, Inspector. I hope you figure something out about this killing. Homicide is beating its brains out."

"Its *what*?" snapped Allhoff.

O'Connor grinned but didn't answer. Even the beat men exiled out in Great Kills, Staten Island, had heard Allhoff's opinion of Homicide.

Allhoff cocked an unfavorable eye at Benny Van Slade.

"What's your name?"

"Why, I'm Benny Van Slade. Clair Van Slade's brother."

Allhoff snorted. "That name's a theatrical phony if I ever heard one. You weren't born with it."

Benny shuffled uneasily. He was a little guy with shifty eyes and a pale sunken face. He was dressed in what a successful bookmaker would consider the height of fashion. His suit was sharply-cut of a light tan color. His shirt was a bilious bottle green. His right arm was in a sling.

He cleared his throat. "Well," he said, "we were born with the name of Smith. When Claire changed her name, I changed mine, too."

Allhoff smiled unpleasantly. "Did you kill your sister?"

Benny looked horrified. "*Me?* Good God, no!"

"When did you last see her?"

"About a week ago."

"Who is her next of kin?"

Benny cleared his throat again.

"I guess I am. Our parents are dead. There aren't any more kids."

"Then," said Allhoff, leaning forward in his chair, "I suppose you inherit."

"Sure," said Benny. "I—" Then the import of the question struck him. He shut up and bit his lip.

"What's your business?"

"Well, I'm not doing anything right now. I—"

Allhoff addressed O'Connor. "Did Homicide have enough sense to check him? What's he do?"

"He's a bum," said O'Connor, making no bones about it. "A little bookmaking here, a little chiseling there. You know the type, Inspector. There are a thousand of them in the ten blocks above Times Square."

"That makes it easy," said Allhoff. "So he's broke. His sister won't give him any more dough. So he knocks her off."

Benny shook his head. "Oh, no," he said. "Nothing like that, Inspector."

I noted that he seemed more indignant at the accusation than afraid.

"We'll let that go for a moment," said Allhoff. "What's this about your getting plugged last night?"

"It was nothing," said Benny. "Naturally, there are a lot of people who don't like me. Someone plugged me, that's all. Probably some guy who's been betting with me on the horses and losing. Just a nut, that's all. It wasn't even worthwhile bothering to report."

Allhoff regarded him sceptically. He shook his head slowly. He said: "This case is getting most mysterious. I don't wonder Homicide is ordering aspirin by the case." He paused and added: "Of course, it's all to the good this way."

"How do you figure that, Inspector?" asked O'Connor.

"If you'll examine the records," said Allhoff, "you'll find it's the Fancy Dan killers who always get into trouble. If a guy just plugs another guy without any witnesses, even though his motive is obvious as hell, even though he's picked up immediately, he's got an excellent chance to beat the rap. He can tell any tale he likes and, without witnesses, who can contradict him?"

"On the other hand, the bright boys who mess around with perfect murders and baffling circumstances invariably come a cropper. They pit their brains against ours. And most of them aren't as bright as Homicide is. And, brother, that's a broad statement."

"**MAYBE** you're right," said O'Connor. "In the meantime, what do I do with this guy?"

Allhoff shrugged. "What did the boys across the street plan on doing with him?"

"Whatever you say, Inspector. We've got nothing on him. He got shot at. That's all. We can't very well hold him for that."

"Release him, then. But find out where we can get in touch with him if we need him. What happened to those other two guys?"

"Orsatto and Robinson? They were let out on bail late yesterday afternoon. Do you want to talk to them?"

"Not yet," said Allhoff. He made a gesture of dismissal and O'Connor escorted Benny from the room.

Allhoff reached for the coffee pot. Battersly picked up the afternoon paper and turned to the comic page. I turned Allhoff's theory over in my mind. It sounded pretty. But if the death of Claire Van Slade was a case in point, I couldn't go along with him. From where I sat it was mysterious to the point of being insoluble.

Robinson and Orsatto seemed clear enough. For that matter, so did Benny. What needed checking in my opinion was Gully's testimony.

Moreover, an examination of the Van Slade apartment seemed in order to see if there was any adit or exit other than the front door.

Oddly enough, for the first time in my life I discovered in the next moment that my mind had been working along the same lines as that of the self-admitted genius, Allhoff.

"Tomorrow morning," he said over his shoulder, "I want you two guys to go up to that Fifty-third Street apartment. Look it over carefully. Bring me back everything that Homicide has missed. Look for fire-escapes or any other means by which someone could have got in. And cross examine that guy Gully. Bring me back at least a hundred details. I don't suppose I have to point out that whether or not you guys think they are important is of no moment at all."

He tilted the coffee pot over his cup. Nothing happened. He held the pot out toward Battersly and coughed to attract his attention. Battersly looked up, sprang to his feet like a general's orderly. He took the pot, emptied the grounds in the already cluttered sink, refilled it with water and put it back on its base. Allhoff shoveled in coffee lavishly, completing the ritual.

I met Battersly at half past nine in the lobby of the 53rd Street house the following morning. Gully wasn't due at work until that night, but I'd put in a phone call to him, asking him to come down as soon as possible. He had promised to arrive about ten.

The district attorney had a copper stationed outside the fifth-floor apartment of Claire Van Slade. Using Allhoff's name as the password we gained admittance to the two-room flat where the dead girl had lived.

It was precisely the sort of place you would expect. A strong smell of perfume permeated the entire place and the decorations were mauve and frilled. The mantel-piece was stacked with those toy animals for which night club concessionaries obtain incredible prices. Battersly looked around at the neat and tidy living room.

"I thought," he said, "that Homicide announced the joint was ransacked."

"They used the wrong word," I told him. "The maid merely said that the money and jewels were missing from the drawer where Van Slade kept them. Apparently the killer knew exactly where they were. The flat doesn't seem to be in disorder. I'm certain that Homicide didn't grab a broom and clean up the joint."

"O.K.," said Battersly. "Let's look around. I wonder what the devil we're looking for."

For that matter, so did I. Allhoff was not a man who took anyone into his confidence. Invariably we were sent out to the scene of the crime to look around without Allhoff ever telling us exactly what he expected us to find.

Customarily, we just gave him every detail we managed to pick up. He distilled the gold away from the dross in his mind. It was an insane system which, I am forced to admit, usually worked.

The apartment consisted of two rooms, living and bed, plus a kitchenette and bath. There were two telephones—a private wire and one connected with the switchboard downstairs. The windows were without fire-escapes, so it was a sheer drop to the courtyard below. We went through the drawers and closets and found the dead woman's clothing neat and in order. We even looked inside a half-filled wardrobe trunk which stood by the bed.

We found none of the hundred details which Allhoff assumed Homicide had overlooked. We found no papers beyond the usual stack of bills and a sheaf of personal letters which threw no illumination at all on the murder.

We had about finished out futile survey when the copper at the door stuck his head in and announced that Gully had arrived. He came in, sat down and listened to our questions. The net result was the same as the result of our examination of the apartment.

CHAPTER THREE

The Worm Turns

ARMED with no clue whatever and no information at all, we took the subway downtown to Allhoff's.

It was almost noon when we arrived, which meant that he was full of caffeine by this time and in what was for him an affable mood. He actually said good day and waited until we had hung up our caps before picking up a pencil and snapping: "Well, what did you get?"

"Nothing," I told him.

"Well," he said laying the irony on with a trowel, "if Sergeant Simmonds, the mighty mind of the Police Department finds no clue, the murderer is safe. Why bother to investigate? We are confronted with the perfect crime. Battersly, call the commissioner and tell him to tear up the records in the case. We are baffled, beaten men. If Sergeant Simmonds fails, who would dare take the trail? Who would have the temerity to—"

"All right," I said wearily, "all right. I'll tell you what we have. But it's exactly the same as the report you've already seen from Homicide."

"Thank you," he said with phony courtesy. "First, what about this guy Gully?"

"He's leveling. I'm sure of that. The superintendent told me he's been there for eight years. Honest, sober, hard-working and all that. He was at the switchboard constantly after seven o'clock. At about a quarter to seven the board was unattended for about five

minutes while he went out for a container of coffee for himself and the elevator man."

"And," said Allhoff, "he saw no one go in the elevator to Van Slade's apartment except Robinson when he brought her home?"

"Right. Nor up the stairs either. Moreover, he saw no one on the stairs or in the elevator up to the time he went off at seven in the morning. And according to the M. E. she was certainly dead by then."

Allhoff made a few notes with his pencil. "Well," he said, "I believe Gully is telling the truth."

"But if he is, Van Slade isn't dead. There's no way of getting in or out of that apartment except through the one door which leads into the hall on the fifth floor. Moreover, from that hall there's no way of getting out of the house itself, other than by using the stairs or the elevator."

"Then," said Allhoff, "we'll assume the killer entered and departed by those means."

"And also that Gully's telling the truth? You can't believe both things."

"Ah, but I do, Sergeant. Now tell me about the interior of the apartment."

"It's what you'd expect of a high-class floozie. Perfume, flounces, a hell of a lot of clothes, and a couple of telephones."

Allhoff grunted and reached for his cup. Chester Bowles would have shuddered at the amount of sugar he spooned into it.

"What about the furniture?" he said at last. "Any big pieces? A sideboard, maybe? A hope chest?"

"A hope chest? In Van Slade's apartment? Her hopes were realized. She had the world by the tail and a fat bank account, too."

"Very witty," said Allhoff. "May I hope for a reply to my question?"

"Well, no. No big pieces," I said. "Why?"

Allhoff frowned. If he had a theory which wasn't working out, I knew I would be held responsible. Battersly came into the conversation, trying to placate him.

"We looked everywhere, sir. Through every drawer and closet. Even in the bathroom cabinet, the suitcases and the wardrobe trunk."

"Wardrobe trunk?" said Allhoff. "What was in it?"

"Clothes and a couple pair of shoes."

"Many clothes or just a few?"

"Only a few," I said. "But I'm damned if I know what all this has to do with the murder of Claire Van Slade."

"There are so many things you don't know," said Allhoff, "we'd better not begin a listing. If either of you or, for that matter, Homicide had a functioning brain cell you'd see—"

WE were interrupted by the sound of footsteps racing up the stairs. That in itself was peculiar. No one was ever in a hurry to

see Allhoff. It invariably came under the heading of unpleasant duty, not pleasure.

The door burst open without a knock and Benny Van Slade nee Smith dashed into the room.

He aimed an accusing forefinger at Allhoff and called him an unprintable name. Allhoff's face colored to a splendid magenta. Rarely had he been on the receiving end of a situation like this.

But before he could prepare a bomb from his own murky vocabulary, Benny went on.

"You, you rat! You're having me tailed, I'm a citizen. I got no record. What right has a miserable cripple like you to have a copper follow me around? You little louse, if you could stand up, I'd belt you one!"

He stood staring, furious and panting, at Allhoff.

Allhoff now looked like a Japanese admiral conning his casualty lists. His little eyes flamed. His cheeks burned. He opened his mouth and screamed a horrible invective at Benny.

But Benny was not awed. He, too, embarked on an insulting philippic. The tenement walls trembled as the pair of them shouted profanity at the top of their irate voices.

I admit I enjoyed it. But fear that Allhoff would suddenly turn on Battersly without reason and blame him for the entire episode prompted me to grab Benny roughly and clap my hand over his mouth. That left Allhoff shrieking all by himself. After a moment or two he subsided.

"I ought to kill that punk," he said savagely. "Kill him and swear I was pinching him when he tried to escape. That's what I ought to do.

He can thank heaven that I'm too damned decent!"

He could also thank heaven, I reflected, that there were two witnesses in the room, either of whom would be glad to testify against Allhoff on a first-degree murder case.

"Take him across the street," said Allhoff. "Let him think it over in the can."

"You can't pinch me," yelled Benny, from whose mouth I had carelessly removed my hand. "You little dwarf, you can't pinch me. What's the charge?"

"Take him away," roared Allhoff. "Toss him in the can."

"We have to know on what charge," I said in my most placating tone.

"On any charge. What do I care? Vagrancy. Disorderly conduct. Drunkenness. You can always get a charge. Suspicion of murdering his sister. That's it. That'll hold him for forty-eight hours while I think up something else."

I signaled to Battersly who dragged the still eloquent Benny down the creaking stairway.

Allhoff picked up the coffee pot with a shaking hand and filled his cup. Discreetly, I went over to my desk which was behind his, sat down and tried to make as little sound as possible.

Allhoff emptied three cups. I watched the color go out of the back of his neck which indicated a return to normal. After about fifteen minutes he turned his head around in my direction and said slowly: "The most interesting angle to that last scene is that I never put a tail on Benny at all."

"Then someone else must be tailing him. Maybe his sister's killer. Maybe—"

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**DETECTIVE
TALES**

"No one's tailing him at all," snapped Allhoff. "At least not in the way you mean. Listen, go across the street. See if there are any recent records of shootings. I mean the old-fashioned gang shootings from cars—with-in the past couple of days."

I knew better than to ask why. I put on my cap and trotted dutifully across the street.

Battersly was back at his desk when I returned. Allhoff looked up almost eagerly.

"Anything?"

I nodded. "Two. Willie Noble was shot down from a limousine on Tenth and Seventeenth Street about midnight last night. He's in Bellevue right now, observing the hallowed tradition of not talking."

"What's the other one?"

"They don't know who it was. Shots from a car at some guy on West Thirtieth Street. Eleven-fifteen last night. The guy shot at ran into a tenement hallway, apparently out into the backyard and got away. The beat copper heard the shooting, saw the car going around into Ninth Avenue, but didn't get the number."

Allhoff smiled beatifically. "I thought so," he said. "Now we're all set."

"Are we? Enlighten me. You mean all this has something to do with the Van Slade murder?"

"A great deal. It'll probably take me a day or so for the rest of the checking. Plus which I have a lot of thinking to do. By the way, on your way home, drop into the Fingerprint Bureau and ask them to send me a good man right away."

When I quit for the day I did as he told me. I went home wondering what was up his tricky sleeve. Wrack my brains as I would I saw no connection between a gang shooting on West 30th Street and the Malayan *kris* in the shapely white breast of Claire Van Slade on 53rd Street.

WHEN I entered Allhoff's slum on the following day, he was actually humming under his breath. True, the melody was off-key and the lyric went back to the days when Teddy Roosevelt had led his band up San Juan Hill—but for Allhoff to sing even the *Dead March* was a happy phenomenon.

After he had wished me a courteous and hearty good morning, I said: "Why the mad, unconfined gaiety? Has Benny Van Slade dropped dead?"

He shook his head. "No. But the man who killed his sister will very shortly—in the electric chair!"

"You mean you've solved the case?"

"To my own satisfaction."

"You mean you've unearthed some evidence which Homicide, Battersly and I muffed?"

"Not a bit. I have no evidence."

"Then what in God's name have you?"

"The answer. All the answers. I thought it all out last night. Down to the last detail. It simply couldn't have happened any other way, so naturally my solution is the correct one."

"I hope it impresses a jury. They mightn't be partial to the workings of your mighty brain if you have no tangible evidence to go with it."

"I am unworried," he said blandly. "I shall get a confession sooner or later."

I went over to my desk. I knew him well enough to be certain I would get no further information from him. He would let me sit in on the kill, but he wasn't going to ruin his dramatic effects by letting one of his stooges know just how his sleight of hand was done.

Some time later I glanced down at my watch and observed that for the second time within a week Battersly was better than an hour late. I felt quite annoyed with him. He knew as well as I that Allhoff seized every opportunity to bait him. But Battersly, I had long since discovered, was no mental giant.

A little after ten, McDermott of the Fingerprint Bureau, whom I knew casually, entered the office. He beamed at Allhoff and said: "You were right, Inspector. Dead right."

Allhoff held his coffee cup suspended in midair. "You mean the prints were there?"

"They were there," said McDermott. "And there's not the slightest doubt that they belong to Benny Van Slade."

"Good," said Allhoff. "And thanks."

McDermott nodded and took his leave. I got up from my desk, curious.

"You mean Benny murdered his sister?"

"All in good time," said Allhoff. "All in good time."

"But before this the fingerprint guys didn't find any prints of Benny's in the apartment."

"They didn't look in the right places."

"What was the right place?"

"All in good time," said Allhoff even more pontifically.

"O.K.," I said, "be cryptic. I hope you're wrong." But I went back to my desk with a strong feeling that he wouldn't be.

At ten minutes to eleven I became quite concerned about Battersly's tardiness. Despite the fact that Allhoff was in a benign mood, he was certain to blow up when Battersly arrived some two hours late.

At exactly eleven o'clock, the telephone rang. I picked up the receiver and said: "Hello."

Battersly's voice came thickly over the wire. "Simmonds? Let me talk to the old goat."

At that I almost dropped the phone. In all his life Battersly had never failed to address me as "Sergeant." To call me merely Simmonds was for him unprecedented. To call

Allhoff an "old goat" was stunning and incredible.

"Are you drunk?" I asked.

"What if I am? I want to talk to Old Gimpy. Put him on."

FOR a moment I was swimming in a sea of utter bewilderment. Beyond a casual drink or two, Battersly never touched the stuff. To find him drunk and insolent at this hour in the morning was beyond belief.

"Look," I said, "you don't want to talk to anyone. Go home and sleep it off. I'll explain to the inspector."

Without turning his head Allhoff said: "Who is it? Battersly? Put him on."

"Wait a minute," I said. "He—"

Allhoff—who smelled rats even when there weren't any—smelled one then. "Put him on," he repeated.

I clicked the button which connected Allhoff's desk phone. But I didn't hang up myself. I wanted to hear this through to the bitter end.

"Hello," said Battersly. "Is this Allhoff?"

Allhoff grunted—apparently as surprised by Battersly's tone as I had been.

"I called," said Battersly thickly, "to tell you you're a bullying, vicious, evil old man. Anything that's happened to you because of me makes me very glad. In my opinion you ought to go and blow your brains out. Then you'd have no head *and* no legs."

Battersly's voice trailed off into hysterical laughter. Before Allhoff could get the first bellow out of his larynx, the receiver clicked on the other end where Battersly had hung up.

Allhoff slammed the receiver on the hook. He turned around and faced me.

"Two of them!" he roared. "Two of them in two days! Two of them dare to insult me. At least Benny had more guts than Battersly. He said it to my face and not over a phone. Heaven help them both. They'll curse the day they ever spoke to me. Benny'll rot in jail. And Battersly—Battersly—"

He broke off and frowned thoughtfully. Then, to my complete astonishment, a smile broke over his face. He grinned and then chuckled.

I clapped a hand to my head. I said: "Reason totters. You mean you're not sore?"

He chuckled again. "Battersly," he said, "has the courage of a henpecked rabbit. Can you conceive of him talking to me like that even after a few drinks?"

"He's obviously pretty drunk."

"There's not enough liquor in all the world to give him that much guts."

"Nevertheless he did it, didn't he?" I reminded.

"Yeah," said Allhoff, still grinning. "He did it, all right."

He put his nose in the coffee cup and refused to discuss it further. As far as I was concerned it was easier to believe that Battersly had suddenly found the courage to turn upon his persecutor than it was to believe that Allhoff was taking it calmly.

A little before noon, Allhoff spun around in his chair and said: "We may as well fix this thing up this afternoon. Get out now and see to it that all the principals in the Van Slade affair are here—in this office—at four o'clock."

"Who do you mean by the principals? Robinson, of course, Benny Van Slade. Who else?"



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"I want Gully and Orsatto. Most of all I want Orsatto."

"You mean that he—"

"You just bring 'em in. I'll ask the questions when they get here."

I went across the street and detailed some plainclothesmen to bring in the quartette Allhoff had ordered. I loafed around chatting to the boys for a while and then partook of a leisurely luncheon.

IT was almost two hours later when I arrived back at the Allhoff domicile. Allhoff was still drinking coffee. Lounging on the other side of the room was Wallace Retter. Retter was a newspaperman from the shack down the street.

The shack is a building rented by the various papers as a hangout for their police reporters. Retter was a man endowed with a vast imagination and a vitriolic pen. Moreover, he could write good English, a rare attainment for a police reporter.

I nodded to him and went to my desk wondering what he was doing here. Allhoff had little respect for the press. Its underpaid minions were not usually invited to witness the breaking of a case.

The three of us sat in silence for a short while. Then slow footfalls sounded on the stairs, the door opened slowly and Battersly came in.

His uniform was ripped and there were two buttons missing. His face was deathly pale and there was a little scratch on the side of his cheek edged with dried blood. A smell of alcohol rose from him and his breath came rasping and audible.

He stood for a swaying moment before Allhoff's desk. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed his eyes, shook his head and shuddered. He walked shakily over to his own desk and sat down heavily in his chair.

Retter came to life. He discarded his lounging air, took a sheaf of yellow copy paper and a pencil from his pockets and sat up alert.

Allhoff slammed down his coffee cup and turned his head in Battersly's direction.

"You telephoned me a few hours ago?" he barked.

Battersly lifted his head slowly as if it weighed a thousand pounds. He nodded weakly.

"You insulted me? Called me a cripple and various other names?"

"Yes, sir," said Battersly in a voice scarcely audible.

Allhoff turned to Retter. "You heard that," he said. "Make a note of it. I'll give you the direct quotes later. Here is a yellow hound responsible for my losing my legs who dares

to taunt me about that loss. And over the telephone! Not to my face!"

Retter scribbled industriously.

"However," said Allhoff, "let's be fair. Battersly, have you any explanation for this outrageous conduct, beyond the fact that you were drunk?"

"Yes," said Battersly. "It wasn't my fault. There were—"

He broke off, made a gesture of despair and futility. "What's the use?" he added miserably. "You'd never believe me. No one would ever believe me."

He buried his face in his hands. Allhoff watched him, grinning without mirth. Retter finished scribbling. "Anything you want to add to this, Inspector?"

Allhoff told him most of the things Battersly had said on the wire. Retter made more notes and then left.

I said: "My God, Allhoff, you're not going to let that get into the papers, are you? It'll make Battersly look like a monster."

"It's true, isn't it? He refused to make any explanation. Let him take his punishment. What's more, I'll see to it that he faces a Departmental trial!"

He turned back to his desk with finality. I knew there was no point in arguing with him.

However, I was certain there must be some explanation of Battersly's conduct. I was willing to believe it even if Battersly himself thought that it was utterly incredible. And so I decided to talk to him down at Noonan's after we left the office together.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sealed With a Kris

PROMPTLY at four o'clock our guests arrived. Gully was the only one considered trustworthy enough to travel under his own steam. He entered, stared around our chaotic environment with frank curiosity, then sat down gingerly on one of Allhoff's plain and creaking chairs.

A few seconds later Robinson and Orsatto, accompanied by a plainclothesman, were ushered into the room. On their heels a uniformed copper escorted Benny Van Slade née Smith into our distinguished assemblage.

Orsatto was stocky, swarthy, and his lips were parted in a perpetual grin. He wore the cocksure attitude of a tough guy whose word is seldom challenged. He glanced contemptuously around the room and said loudly: "Do you dumb muggs *still* think I killed that broad?"

I noted that both Benny and Robinson seemed to take offense at the last word. They glared at Orsatto and it seemed for a moment

that Robinson would speak. However, he didn't.

Now Allhoff lifted his head and deigned to take notice of the company.

"You extra coppers can get out," he said. "I won't need you. The rest of you sit down and make yourselves comfortable. He added grimly: "It may be the last chance for some of you."

The coppers left with alacrity. The Messrs. Van Slade, Orsatto and Robinson sat down. Gully pulled his chair up closer to Allhoff's desk and looked like a man all set to enjoy a movie.

I decided that he, at least, was an innocent man.

Allhoff cleared his throat. "Now," he said, "we are confronted with one of those perfect murders, which I rather enjoy. Claire Van Slade was murdered. But the murderer never appeared in her apartment. Therefore, she couldn't have been killed. Yet she was. Well, that is doubtless something of a problem for Homicide but to this office it's as crystal clear as a mountain lake."

There was silence in the room. Maybe Allhoff knew all the answers. Even so, it hadn't been as easy as he was pretending. I had heard this act of his often before and I knew we were going to follow a most circuitous route before we arrived at the end of the murder trail.

"Gully," said Allhoff, "first, I want to ask you a question. You have said at least twice that no one went into the Van Slade woman's apartment after Robinson left until you went off duty. Right?"

"Yes, sir. Absolutely right."

"Would it have been possible for someone to have come out of the apartment early in the morning? Say, between seven and the time the maid arrived?"

Gully blinked at him. "To come out of the apartment? Yeah, I guess so. Early in the morning, there's the milkman and all. Me and my sidekick change places. We might've been down in the basement locker room. Yeah, I guess maybe someone could have come out of the flat. But I don't see—"

"I don't expect you to," snapped Allhoff brusquely.

"But," I objected, "suppose someone *did* come out of the apartment at that hour. No one went *in*, certainly. And whoever killed Van Slade did it several hours before seven in the morning."

"I'm not so much interested in when he got in," said Allhoff, "as when he got out. He could have got in at any time. Probably about five o'clock or so. Sometime before Gully came on duty when the switchboard was temporarily deserted. The day man probably goes out for coffee, too."

"You mean he got in and stayed there, waiting to kill Van Slade?"

"That's the general idea," said Allhoff as he stretched his arm out in the general direction of the coffee pot.

"That let's me out," said Robinson. "I was in jail when she was killed. I don't see why I was brought down here."

"Well," put in Orsatto, "if it's alibis you want I suppose I can get one."

"You can probably get six or seven if necessary," said Allhoff.

Orsatto grinned good-naturedly. "That's about the size of it, Inspector. You see, I got a genuine alibi for that night but I can't use it. I was engaged in what the lawyers call illegal traffic. But if I really got to have an alibi, I can get some of the boys to give me a phony one that's clean."

Benny cleared his throat, feeling, no doubt, that it was now incumbent upon him to say something at this point.

"I got no alibi," he said. "I was all by myself. And I ain't Orsatto. I got no guys who'll lie for me. But since Claire left all her stuff to me there don't seem to be no motive for my knocking her off and then stealing her jewelry. I just didn't do it. Like I say, though, I can't prove where I was at the time. No one actually seen me."

"I don't wonder at that," said Allhoff drily, "considering where you were."

Benny's face was suddenly pale. He sat upright in his chair. "Say that again," he choked.

Allhoff smiled unpleasantly. "I said," he repeated, "that I don't wonder no one saw you considering where you were. It would have been rather difficult, under the circumstances, wouldn't it, Benny?"

Benny stared at him as if he were witnessing an unpleasant miracle. He said in a hoarse, unbelieving whisper: "You can't know. You can't possibly."

"A lot of guys who have been burned to death have said the same thing," said Allhoff.

I LOOKED at Battersly. We were each mulling it over. If Orsatto and Robinson had alibis, it would seem to leave only Benny and he certainly seemed horrified at Allhoff's crack concerning his whereabouts on the night of the murder.

"So," I said to Allhoff, "if Robinson and Orsatto have alibis—Benny killed his sister. May I ask why?"

Allhoff looked up at me, registering phony ingenuousness. He made a clucking sound with his tongue, and said: "Benny killed his sister? What a terrible thing! I hope you're sure of your facts when you make a charge like that, Sergeant. What makes you think Benny did it?"

"Damn it, I don't think Benny did it. You do."

"Me?" said Allhoff sweetly. "Oh, no. I'm quite certain he didn't."

"Then will you stop horsing around and tell us who did?"

"Why, certainly," said Allhoff. "It was Robinson."

He turned his gaze from all of us and busied himself with the percolator like a B-29 that has just unloaded a block buster and then swung around heading for its home base. Battersly blinked at me. I was stunned.

I said patiently: "Do you mind telling us how Robinson killed her?"

"Not at all," said Allhoff with a put-on affability that didn't fool me for a moment. "He killed her with a *kris*. A Malayan *kris* which was hanging on the wall as a decoration. I thought you knew that, Sergeant."

"All right," I said, "all right. Tell it in your own way and in your own time. I won't butt in again."

"I'm grateful," he said filling his cup.

Robinson's voice, high-pitched, filled the room. "I killed her? How can you say that? I was in jail. The sergeant put me there. Anyone who says it was me is crazy. Anybody who says that is—"

"Damn it," roared Allhoff in a voice like that of a hoarse bull, "I've been called enough names this week. First from this little punk, Benny, and today from that pride of the Force, Battersly. I'm tired of it. Now, I'm going to call a few myself.

"You, Robinson, are a murderer. You, Benny, a thieving punk. You, Orsatto, a high-handed gangster." He half-turned in his chair and faced Battersly. "You, I'll attend to later."

Battersly, Robinson and Benny looked frankly frightened. Orsatto still smiled. He seemed to be a guy who was afraid of nothing—not even Allhoff. Gully was entranced. He sat forward in his chair resting his elbows on his knees watching Allhoff's face as if he were a matron staring at Charles Boyer.

"Now," said Allhoff, "let's consider a few angles which Homicide in its abysmal ignorance chose to overlook. The time was right, according to the M. E.'s testimony, for Robinson to have killed her before he quit the apartment."

"Sure," I said, "but there are so many other things. There is the putting out of the garbage, and the fact that someone made a phone call after Robinson left."

"Moreover," Allhoff went on, completely ignoring me, "there is the matter of Robinson's attempted bribe, and the matter of his trying to escape. In the first instance, he risked a graver charge than he had already been pinched for. In the second, he actually risked

his life. Simmonds was armed. Does a guy do these things to evade a rap for which he'll probably draw nothing more than a fine? The hell he does! He would do them, however, if he were afraid he might look a first-degree murder indictment in the face on the following morning."

"That's reasonable," I said. "But what about the garbage?"

"Benny put the garbage out," smiled Allhoff. "And if you're interested, he also answered the phone in a falsetto voice. Gully paid little attention to the voice. When the connection was established, he cut himself off."

"You mean Benny was in the apartment all the time?"

"Certainly. Weren't you, Benny?"

Benny didn't answer. He still regarded Allhoff as a savage would contemplate the wonders of the local witch doctor.

Robinson said: "He wasn't in the apartment when I was there. I would have seen him, wouldn't I?"

"Not," said Allhoff, "unless you'd peeped into Claire Van Slade's wardrobe trunk."

"You're certainly making me do it the hard way," I told him. "Thus far I figure it that you're saying Robinson killed the girl while Benny was in the wardrobe trunk. Then Benny got out of the trunk put out the garbage and answered the telephone. He waited around until morning before leaving. Further, Benny got into the apartment earlier in the day to hide in the trunk. Is that it?"

"Broadly," said Allhoff tossing another eight ounces of coffee down his esophagus.

"All right," I said, feeling that I'd done well in getting this far, "we'll pass over a number of things for the moment. But *motive*. Why should Robinson kill her?"

"That I can't prove," said Allhoff. "But I'm sure I'm right. Robinson is a solid citizen. Wife, family and dough. Yet he was running around with a character like Van Slade. There's only one reason he'd kill her. I'll give you one guess."

"Blackmail," I said, looking at Robinson. He did not look at me. He was staring down at the floor. His face was the face of a very ill man.

"Of course," said Allhoff. "Blackmail. And either he couldn't or wouldn't pay it. So he got sore and killed her. Not that it did him any good. He stepped right into more blackmail which he tried, unsuccessfully, to get rid of the same way."

For the first time I saw a little light. "Benny," I said. "If Benny was in the trunk—though for the life of me I don't know why—he would have seen Robinson kill his sister. He could have blackmailed him."

Allhoff sighed. "These perfect crime things are the fruits of a man's imagination. Hence,

it takes another man's imagination to solve them. I simply figured it out the only way it could possibly have happened. I had even less evidence than I usually have. But Benny's prints corroborated my deductions."

"Benny's prints. You mentioned them before. Where were they?"

"On the *inside* of the wardrobe trunk. Since you told me there were no large articles of furniture in the flat, nothing big enough for a man to hide in, I realized it had to be the trunk."

HE paused for a moment, then continued: "To begin with, Benny had a key to his sister's apartment. He went there late on the afternoon of the murder. He sneaked up the stairs. I'm still not sure why. However, it seems logical to believe that Benny had been bumming dough from his sister too long and she was sick of him. Hence, he sneaked in, hoping she was out, which would enable him to swipe some cash or something of value from her apartment. So he sneaked in while the elevator was upstairs and the switchboard was temporarily deserted.

"He stayed too long. Or perhaps, once there, he decided to wait for his sister and try once more to get some dough from her. Then he heard a key go in the door, and the sound of Robinson's voice. He didn't want to be found by Claire and one of her rich boy-friends. She wouldn't like it. So he hid—in the trunk. While he was in there he heard Robinson fight with Claire, then the murder and then Robinson rushing out."

I thought that over. "So," I said, "it was Benny who pinched the jewels and dough after Claire was killed?"

"Why should he," said Battersly, "when she had willed it all to him anyway?"

"He needed dough," said Allhoff. "And fast. That's why he was there. He had no desire to sit around waiting for a will to be probated. He grabbed what he could and waited. He also did some figuring. He could blackmail Robinson. Robinson in the can

was no good to him at all. So he fixed an out for him. He put out the garbage. He used the private phone to call a pal of his telling the pal to phone Claire's apartment on the house phone. Then he answered that call in falsetto all to create the impression that his sister was alive *after* Robinson had left the house."

I picked it up from there. "And he hung around until morning, peering over the balustrades, until an opportunity offered itself for him to get out unseen. Then he got in touch with Robinson and tried to blackmail him. Robinson stalled him and later took a pot shot at him."

Allhoff nodded. Robinson still stared with blank unseeing eyes at the filthy floor. Benny gazed, open-mouthed, at Allhoff. Gully made no effort to conceal the fact that he was enjoying himself hugely. Orsatto alone seemed unmoved. He regarded the scene with an assured, almost supercilious air.

"He tried to kill Benny and failed," said Allhoff. "That didn't bother Benny much. He wasn't even going to report it. He figured Robinson would have to kick through sooner or later. But when Robinson hired some thugs in a car to do the job Benny got panicky. He figured he'd better wait in a safe place for his dough. So he came here and insulted me, certain I'd put him in the can where Robinson's killers couldn't get at him."

"I thought it over. It looked good to me. Evidence?" I said. "Do we have Grand Jury evidence?"

"Hell," said Allhoff, "we've got Benny. We've got his fingerprints on the inside of the trunk. A check will undoubtedly show us where he disposed of the jewelry. If Benny won't tell us about Robinson, we'll simply pin it on Benny. We can't lose."

There was a long pause. "All right," said Benny. "You got me. I'm damned if I know how you figured it. That's the way it happened all right. I'd given him two weeks to pay up. After his gunsel got after me I figured it was safer to spend the two weeks in

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the can, even if I got a workhouse sentence out of it."

Robinson lifted his eyes from the floor. "O.K.," he said in a dispirited voice, "what could I do? But it wasn't first-degree. It wasn't premeditated. She demanded an impossible sum, threatened to wreck my home if I didn't pay up. I couldn't give it to her. I just got sore and killed her."

Battersly stood up. "Shall I take Robinson across the street to book him, sir? And should Benny be held as a material witness?"

Allhoff swung around in his chair. His bitter little eyes met the bland gaze of Orsatto.

"Not yet," he said. "Gully, you can go. Simmonds, lock Robinson and Benny in the bedroom for a little while."

Wonderingly, I obeyed. Now, outside of Battersly, Allhoff and myself, only Orsatto was in the room.

"Well," he said, "I guess you've cleared me, Inspector. I won't have to fix an alibi after all."

"No?" said Allhoff. "Battersly, take Orsatto across the street. Deliver him personally to Sergeant Butler of Homicide. Tell Butler that I said this guy killed Claire Van Slade but he won't talk. Tell him I'll consider it a personal favor if he'll get a confession out of him."

WE all stared at him in amazement. But in Orsatto's expression there was something of fear, too. I could quite understand that. Butler was a tough copper. He had few brains but a pair of brawny arms. Butler beat confessions out of people. Sometimes he even beat them out of innocent men.

"But you can't do that," I protested. "You already know Robinson is the murderer."

Allhoff shrugged. "After a couple of hours we'll take those two out of the bedroom and send them over. I'll simply say I made a mistake."

"It ain't right, Inspector," said Orsatto. "Why should you do this to me? I haven't done anything."

"You're guilty of kidnaping," said Allhoff. "Though I can't prove it. You've kidnaped a copper and you've been the means of insulting me. Don't think you're going to get away with it, Orsatto."

Orsatto didn't answer for a long time. He smiled queerly. At last he said: "O.K., Inspector. I guess I can take it."

Allhoff made a gesture to Battersly. Battersly put on his cap and took Orsatto from the room.

I was still thinking it over when Battersly returned.

"My God!" I said suddenly. "You mean Orsatto snatched Battersly? Forced him to

drink at the point of a gun, forced him to call you?"

"What do you think? That Battersly, drunk or sober, had enough guts to do it himself? I had that figured less than three minutes after Battersly called. Orsatto's a tough guy. A guy who always gets even. He was damned sore about that pinch Battersly put on him. He decided to get him the hardest way. So he snatched him and had him call me. He knew enough of our relationship to know that that was the best way in which he could even up his score with Battersly."

I glanced inquiringly at Battersly. He nodded.

"That's right," he said. "I didn't mention it because it sounded so damned impossible. I didn't think anyone, least of all the inspector, would believe me. I couldn't say that two strange thugs had snatched me, made me drink and made me call up while they held a gun to my head. Who'd believe that?"

"You see," said Allhoff, "we couldn't let Orsatto get away with it. Since he didn't do the snatch himself, merely had a couple of his gunsels do it, we couldn't get him for it. But we couldn't let him get away with pulling that sort of thing on a copper—even a copper like Battersly—so I sent him over to Butler to square things up. Give Butler about an hour. Then take Robinson and Benny over and have Orsatto released."

I sat down at my desk aware of a reluctant admiration for Allhoff. He certainly had done it again, and in spite of his hatred of Battersly he had refused to let an indignity to a copper go unavenged. Then a thought hit me and I stood up again.

"Wait. You said you knew this within three minutes after Battersly's call?"

"Sure."

"Then what about Retter? The papers will be full of that story tomorrow. They'll damn Battersly from here to there. And when you gave Retter the story you knew quite well it wasn't Battersly's fault."

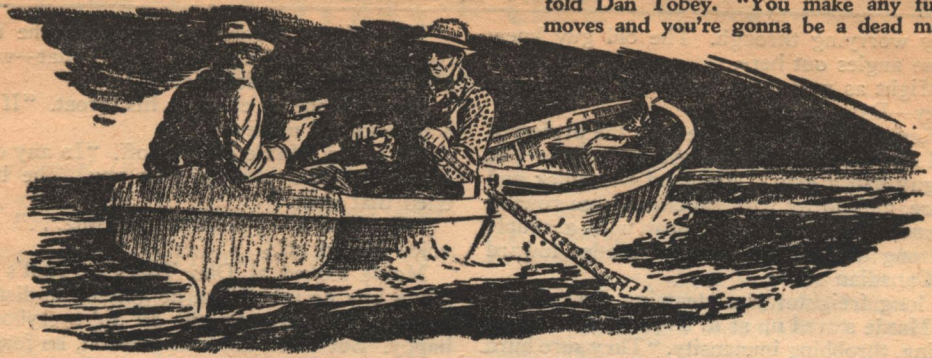
"Sure," said Allhoff again.

"You're a heartless stinker," I said bitterly. "You crucify him in the press while all the time you knew he couldn't help it! He'll have some fine clippings to show his grandchildren on account of you."

"Yes," said Allhoff. He swung around in his chair and lifted his voice. "And I've got some fine clippings myself. Have you ever read them? *Inspector Allhoff wounded in raid. Inspector Allhoff loses legs.* Oh, I've got some beauties. Damn him! Would you care to read them to your grandchildren, Battersly? Would you care—"

I sat down again and closed my ears. From here on in I could write down every word he was going to say from memory.

"I got a tight finger on this trigger," Maxie told Dan Tobey. "You make any funny moves and you're gonna be a dead man."



THE EXPERT

By **ROBERT C. DENNIS**

Author of "Elementary, My Dear Roscoe!" etc.

Maxie was an expert at murder. But Dan Tobey was an expert in his line, too, and that made all the difference between killing and being killed.

MAXIE KERN lurked in the shadow of the boathouse, peering complacently through the dusk that was congealing over the water. During most of the afternoon, rowboats of hopeful fishermen had dotted the river but now one of them was angling upstream, obviously pointed for the boathouse where Maxie waited.

This was the first step in a job that would be done perfectly. Maxie was a craftsman, an expert . . .

He watched almost admiringly the steady swing of the oars, the undeviating course the man rowed without seeing where he was headed. The guy was at home out there!

"Hi, neighbor," Maxie called. "Any luck?"

The man gave a last pull, then let the momentum carry him against the ramp of the boathouse. "Lots o' luck," he said. "All bad." In the half darkness, his face didn't look old, but his hair was gray and thin. About sixty, Maxie decided, not very big, not very strong . . .

"Run me across to Canada?" Maxie asked casually. "It's worth a couple of bucks.

"Can't do it, son," the man said. "The Coast Guard won't let us out there after sundown. . . The ferry ain't quit for the night, though."

"Well, now, I'll tell you"—Maxie made his voice confidential—"I'm on one of these here secret missions. I've got some important legal

papers to deliver to a very important guy." He patted his chest on the left side to indicate an inner pocket. "This guy's got a summer cottage across the river. I guess a lot of them big shots got 'em over there."

"Yeah," the man admitted. "Lots of Detroit people, some from Cleveland, a few from Toledo."

"Maybe you've heard of this guy," Maxie lowered his voice. "Henry Stivers? The district attorney?"

"The feller that's cleanin' up the gamblers? I read about him. Has he got a cottage over there?"

Maxie nodded. "An' I've got some more evidence on those gamblers. I gotta get it over to him, but I was followed all the way from Detroit. I shook 'em off, I think, but they'll be watchin' the ferry."

The old guy thought about it. "O.K., son," he said finally, "Hop in the stern. If the Coast Guard catches us on the way over, we'll say we were just comin' in. It ain't quite dark yet, so it might work. Keep your fingers crossed that we don't run into the Canadian cops."

MAXIE scrambled into the boat, clutching the gunwales with both hands. This was the worst part—he'd never been in a boat before. The largest body of water he'd ever been this close to was a full bathtub. He wasn't

really worrying through. The old guy knew all the angles out here.

"Might as well get acquainted. My name's Tobey—Dan Tobey."

"Kern," Maxie said. He took the proffered hand and immediately wished he hadn't. The old guy had a grip! His hand was thick and square, and horny with callouses from rowing so much. He pivoted the boat with a couple of strong tugs on the oars and headed toward the Canadian shore.

A long freighter was steaming downstream and Maxie stared up at it, slightly awed by its pulsing, throbbing immensity. "They sure burn a lot of lights on them things," he observed. It was lit up even to a light on the tip of the forward mast.

"Purty, ain't it?" Dan Tobey said. "I like to look at the lights reflectin' in the water."

For Maxie's money, he'd take a theater marquee any night, but he didn't say so. Things were running like clockwork, and he wasn't going to do anything to box it up.

Maxie was a specialist in his own field. . .

Swells bobbed the tiny rowboat and Maxie clutched fearfully at the gunwales again. The freighter's whistle let go a long blast that rattled his eardrums, and he cursed viciously, his voice smothered by the noise.

Dan Tobey was wasting no time. He took such long strokes that he almost lay back on his spine. He never had to glance around once to see where he was headed. Finally he asked: "You know right where this feller lives?"

"White boathouse, willow trees on both sides, a flag pole up by the house," Maxie recited the directions he'd been given and which he had verified when it was daylight. The darkness was so thick now that the shoreline had lost all familiarity to him. But the old guy knew the place. When the boat scraped on the gravelly shore, they were just to the south of the white boathouse.

"Right on the nose!" Maxie said admiringly and not all of it was feigned. "Come on in with me, Dan. Stivers might have a drink for us."

"Well," Dan grinned, "ain't refused a drink in forty years an' I'm pretty old to start learnin' new tricks." He pulled the boat well up on the beach, laid the oars in the bottom, and nodded, "Lead on, son."

Henry Stivers came to the door, peering through the screen into the darkness at the two men on his front porch. Maxie gave Dan a little nudge as if politely letting him go in first. Stivers stepped back, uncertainly. He was alone—Maxie had expected that.

"What is it—" Stivers broke off abruptly, his sallow face graying as Maxie slipped a gun out of his left armpit.

"No funny moves," he warned, wagging the gun around to include Dan.

The old guy seemed fascinated by the rod, couldn't take his eyes off it. "What—what are you aimin' to do, mister?"

Stivers made an effort in his throat. "If it's a question of money—"

"It ain't," Maxie cut him off. "In any case I wouldn't take a chance on you. The boys tried that once."

"That's all a big misunderstanding. . ." His voice trailed off.

Maxie looked at Dan Tobey. "That's the kinda guy *he* is! When he gets to be district attorney the boys pay him off an' everybody's happy. But when the heat goes on, he forgets all about our protection money. In fact, he's in there pitchin' like a Purity Leaguer. Gonna clean up the town all by himself!"

"I'll take care of the boys," Stivers babbled. "I was going to all along. My investigations were just to fool the public. Tell me, what do you want me to do?"

"Nothin'," Maxie said, and squeezed the trigger.

THERE was a flat crack. Stivers clutched frantically at his chest. Maxie fired twice more, making a line heart-high all the way across the man's chest. He'd once read of a guy whose heart was on the wrong side. Maxie took no chances. That was what made him an expert.

He barely glanced at the sprawled form on the floor. He said: "All right, sucker, let's go."

Dan Tobey spoke with difficulty. "If you think I'll row you back, you're crazy."

"You wanta lay down beside him?" Maxie's voice was chill with menace.

Dan hesitated, started to glance at the dead man, jerked his gaze away. Under the bright lights his tanned, seamy face was pallid. He looked very old.

"You're goin' to shoot me after I row you back anyway. I'll be damned if I'll help you!"

"I'm not gonna touch ya," Maxie declared. "Tie ya up maybe, to give me a chance to get back to the city. But shoot ya? Hell, Dan, I like ya! I don't shoot my friends."

Dan Tobey's shoulders sagged. "All right," he mumbled.

Maxie followed him out, grinning to himself. He wouldn't shoot the old guy—that was too crude. Maxie was a craftsman! One good solid crack on the head. . . then slide the body into the river. And who would ever connect the accidental drowning of an old fisherman with a murder in Canada. Even if they did, nobody would know Maxie had ever left the city. One hundred per cent perfect! An expert job!

Sitting in the stern of the rowboat, his gun pointing at the old guy's chest, Maxie gave

(Continued on page 95)

Death Invites an Audience

By A. BOYD CORRELL

If cordial loathing were the motive for James Witherington Barnes' murder then all Hollywood could be considered suspect. But who would have thought that the reason for the kill was six months of grace or that the weapon would be a fountain pen?

Barnes was straining across the table, his face split in a hideous grin. Even in the dim light I could see a drool of saliva trickle down his chin.

THE letter was delivered in the ten-thirty morning mail, and it lay on my desk until six that afternoon. It was a big, square, expensive linen envelope like those used to announce weddings, graduations and—my guess about this one—the opening of some new night spot on the Sunset Strip. Hollywood always seems able to absorb another one.

Having something of a reputation as a



detective, and possessing a Hollywood Boulevard address, I'm naturally on the sucker list. A day hardly passes but what I receive a couple or more "invitations" to first nights, grand openings, and other full-dress affairs that gild the brass of Hollywood with a coating of alleged glamor.

So I didn't bother about opening the letter. That is, until I was reaching for my hat and ready to head for my suite at the Roosevelt, a shower, a martini, and dinner. I picked it up as I left the office, and on the way to the parking lot I opened it.

There were two envelopes. The first I've already described. The inner one was even more impressive. Nice-feeling linen, rough and heavy. It wasn't sealed and I slipped out a tissue paper-covered card. Before reading it I slid my thumb across the engraved letters and they stood out like Braille. A high-priced job, which meant, if it was an invite to a new joint, that the cover charge would be at least fifteen bucks.

The attendant at the lot repeated his request for my parking ticket the third time before I realized he was talking. The contents of the engraved card had me doing a double take. It read: *You are cordially invited to attend the murder of James Witherington Barnes at twelve o'clock midnight, Friday, in the Crystal Room of the Club Scherzo.*

I slid under the steering wheel of my coupe, still staring at the words. Then I looked at the outer envelope again. It was typewritten and addressed to me, James Adams, Hickley Building, Hollywood, California. And today was Friday. I shoved the whole thing into my coat pocket and headed the coupe toward the hotel.

James Witherington Barnes—and, Lord, how he loved that long name—was a producer for Panamint Studios. Possibly his mother loved him, if he had a mother, but no one else did. He was as cold-blooded in his hiring and firing as he was in pirating talent from competing studios. He put his idle money into first mortgages and would foreclose on a one-day lapse. If they ever wanted a villain for an old-time melodrama, Mr. Barnes was the man. He spent his evenings in night spots but never bought a real drink. He was a neurotic about his stomach, practically lived off a vile mineral water that

tasted like gall, and his only generosity was trying to force this witch's brew on table companions.

Along with the rest of them, I hated his guts. Briefly, he had had me canned for doing a bang-up good job. Some louse had been trying a blackmail pitch on one of the execs at Panamint, and they called me in. That had been just a few months ago. I put the louse in the clink and kept the whole thing quiet except for a quarter-column item on the back page of one newspaper, which was a damn sight better than if the local boys in blue had handled it and splashed the dirt all over the front pages. So because of this quarter-column he had had me blacklisted.

At my hotel I tossed the card alongside a current copy of *The Hollywood Reporter* and took a bath. The crazy invitation kept stewing in my mind. As I dressed, I took another look at it. Then I glanced at the *Reporter*.

In the column headed *Pictures Completed*, and leading the list, was, "*The Murder*," Panamint Studios, James Witherington Barnes, Producer—Eric Mansfield, Director, followed by a list of technicians and players.

I snorted. This explained the invitation. Some smart guy in Publicity over at Panamint had had a brainstorm and had cooked up this sensational way to tout Barnes' latest production, "*The Murder*."

But why invite me? Club Scherzo was on The Strip—an expensive place, with private dining rooms and a small theater with a projection room where new films were frequently shown to studio heads before being released to the public. These occasions were closed affairs reserved exclusively for Mr. Big and his executives, not for shamuses who make their money the hard way. I stuck the card in my pocket, went to dinner, and decided to hit Club Scherzo around midnight.

ALL THE doorman needed was a neon border around his six-foot-three bulk to make him look like an explosion in a paint factory. His canary overcoat, which reached his ankles, was brocaded with frogs of green silk and its front paved with chrome buttons, all carrying the crest of Club Scherzo. His Prussian military cap had the name of the club in large letters, as did the left side of his chest. Epaulets of silver cloth, striped

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with gold bars, exaggerated the width of his shoulders, and the chain to his whistle might have been snatched from a zoot-suiter. With two strides he approached the curb, opened the coupe's door, helped me out as if I were a piece of Dresden china, swung back to the club's door and opened it, all the time saluting. I've seen poorer precision routine in a million-dollar musical.

Inside, another flunky took over. My invitation rated a special bow from this second phony, and I was escorted around the main drinking and dancing floor to a door near the rear, over which was a neon sign that read *Crystal Room*. As I entered the private dining room, I looked at my watch. It was eight minutes before twelve.

There were five people there, and I knew three of them.

Eric Mansfield, director for Panamint, looked very Byronic in his tux and unconventional black soft-silk tie. His slightly graying dark hair swept away from his high forehead and needed trimming around his collar, but his face was barbered and pink. His long, pointed nose made his too small eyes seem almost lost in their deep-set sockets, and his thin lips were set in an ugly sneer. He was slightly on the liquid side.

Talking with him was Stuart Agnew, owner of the Club Scherzo and a would-be actor. Agnew had spent a small fortune backing unknown plays in which he starred in various "little" theaters in Hollywood. The money he made in his club he gambled on his ambition to become a second Barrymore. His hair was black and slick, his lips over-red, and I could swear he wore rouge.

With Mansfield and Agnew were two men I didn't know. One was a dapper fellow who, even sitting there at the table sipping a martini, seemed to radiate energy. When his free hand was not raking through his tightly curled hair, it was either drumming on the table top or making notes in a looseleaf book which lay in front of him.

The fourth man gave the impression of having been rolled down a long flight of dusty cellar stairs and left overnight. His tuxedo was wrinkled and pulled, and his corn-colored hair a mess. Bloodshot eyes stared moodily at the tablecloth as he swirled a highball glass.

The fifth man was James Witherington Barnes. He sat at a table alone. In the dim

light, which Hollywood seems to think the first requisite for a successful night club, he slumped comfortably in an armchair. The rose-crystal glow of the table lamp shimmered on his bald head and made his huge nose cast a grotesque shadow over the lower part of his face. It also cast some faint glitter on a glass and a bottle of mineral water.

As I entered, five sets of eyes watched me and conversation stopped. Then, as I walked to the table occupied by the four men, Mansfield said: "I'll be damned!"

I said, "Suit yourself," and took a chair facing him. Over his shoulder I could see Barnes squinting at me from his table.

Mansfield turned to the dapper fellow with the notebook. "Well, there's your fifth one."

The other nodded. "Yes, and only five were taken."

I said: "I don't believe I know everybody." Mansfield made an impatient gesture and indicated the dapper guy. "This is Willy Gott from Publicity. Willy, Jimmy Adams—private detective."

I said: "Glad to know you, Willy."

"And this," went on the director, "is Mort Jennifer, one of our writers."

I solemnly shook hands with the red-eyed man in the crumpled tux. I remembered his name having been mentioned in the *Reporter*. "You did the story work on *'The Murder,'*" I believe."

Jennifer sneered and sloshed his drink. "In a pig's left eye!"

Willy Gott had been drumming nervously. "Mr. Adams, how did you receive your invitation?" He almost pounded the table.

I said: "A little mailman brought it to me."

Gott shrugged hopelessly and Jennifer hooted: "That makes you one of us." He was talking to the publicity man.

From his table in the shadows against the wall, Barnes spoke up. "You'll get your final check in the mail, Willy. You needn't show up at the studio."

Willy Gott turned slowly, scraping his chair against the floor. He was rising to his feet when the lights went out.

WE ALL were silent a moment, then Agnew exploded: "What the devil! I'll fire Johnny Isles. He's just supposed to flick those lights."

Chairs scraped in total darkness as some-

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A. Boyd Correll

one stood up. Barnes' piping voice rose with a note of fear in it. "You're bumping my table!"

I heard Jennifer breath a "Damn!" as a glass turned over. I sat still as more shuffling sounds sounded around me. Why in hell people have to move about when the lights go out is beyond me.

And then they came on again.

Agnew stood by the door, his hand on the knob. Presumably he was heading for the office to discover the source of trouble. Jennifer stood behind his chair. He was sopping his coat with a handkerchief where his drink had spilled. Mansfield was seated and in the act of striking a match.

Willy Gott was halfway between our table and that of Barnes. As the room brightened, he took two more steps and faced Barnes.

"So I'm canned, eh? You dirty, lousy, sadistic, money-grabbing swine! So help me, if you weren't an old man—"

Barnes had not moved from his position in the armchair. His piping voice snapped like a whip. "Shut up, you cheap hack! Another word and I'll have you blacklisted in every studio in California!"

Gott's shoulders hunched for a long moment, then I saw them droop. He turned slowly and walked back to our table. The others had already taken their seats.

Over Mansfield's shoulder I saw a mocking smile appear on the producer's face. He lifted the mineral water bottle and filled his half-empty glass. I turned to the night club owner. "Why the blackout? Give the waiters a chance to add the checks wrong?"

Agnew looked at me sourly. "Don't be funny. You know we have to stop selling drinks and close at midnight. At three minutes before twelve I have the pastry cook flick the main switch. It's right over his pantry. It serves merely as a warning to the customers to order their last drinks. Why the devil it stayed off so long I don't know, but I'll find out."

And then I glanced again at Barnes. He was straining across the table, staring at me, and his face was split in an awful grin. He half pushed up in his chair, then settled back again. His hideous grin spread until the flesh on my neck crawled. His locked teeth slowly came open. Even in the dim light I saw the drool of saliva trickle down his chin. His bony hands spread wider and wider on the cloth before him as though trying to force their way through the table, and all the while he grinned. Then, as though some mighty spring had snapped, he relaxed and sank back in his chair. The grin turned into something loose and ungodly. His discolored teeth still

Death Invites an Audience

showed, but now his mouth hung fully open. The huge nose dominated the face as the light from the table lamp threw his sunken cheeks into deeper shadow.

Something irresistible forced me to glance at my wristwatch. It was midnight.

I got up slowly as the door opened and a waiter brought in a tray of drinks. As he served them, I walked to the producer's table. Behind me the men were talking. Agnew was asking the waiter about the lights.

"Johnny Isles got a bit of a shock, sir," said the waiter. "He must have been careless when he pulled the switch. His hand is burned. We sent him to the drugstore to have it fixed up."

I had reached Barnes and picked up one of his wrists. There was no sign of a pulse. I leaned close and peered into the staring eyes. James Witherington Barnes was very dead.

"Hey!" It was Mansfield. He had just noticed me. "What's the matter with J. W.?"

"He's dead," I said.

Agnew, who was signing for the drinks, dropped his pen on the tray and jerked to his feet. He fluttered toward me, stopped halfway, and turned to the goggle-eyed waiter. "Get out!" he gritted.

The others were close on his heels. I stepped between them and the producer. "Take it easy. If you want to look at him, O.K., but don't touch anything."

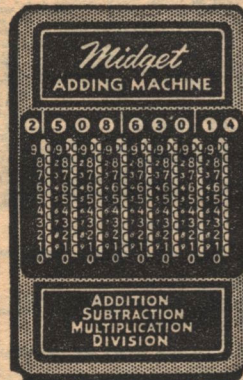
The red-eyed Jennifer raised his eyes from the dead man to me. "What the hell, Sherlock! You trying out for the part of God?"

I skipped the sarcasm. "Barnes died in a hell of a hurry and the cops are going to want to know how come. I'm deputized by the sheriff's office, and I'm taking over until they get here."

THERE was a telephone on a service table and I called the county sheriff's headquarters, the Strip being outside the Los Angeles city limits. Then the five of us sat down together again. The only one visibly upset by Barnes' death was Agnew. He looked as if he'd been robbed of his last pint of blood. He was pulling Mansfield's arm. "Look, Eric," he said, "you think J. W.'s death will affect my contract?" Unconsciously he was shaking his head for a negative answer. His lips had lost their high color and his cheeks were white. I wondered why. Though night club owners don't like sudden death on their premises, they don't usually get so jittery over it.

Mansfield gulped a drink and set his glass down with a bang. "Hell, no! Barnes signed you, but it's Panamint you'll work for."

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I cocked an eyebrow at Agnew. "You got a contract with Panamint?"

The night club owner nodded. "Yes. Barnes signed me up for six months the day before yesterday."

I said: "Congratulations. Now, how about you fellows letting me in on a few things? First, where's the picture I was invited to see?"

Willy Gott slapped the table. "That's why Barnes fired me. No picture was going to be shown here tonight. It's my job to figure out new publicity stunts, and one of them was the 'Invitation to Murder' business. I had twelve cards made up for samples and showed them to Barnes for his O.K. I merely used the Club Scherzo address because he had an interest in the place."

Agnew interrupted. "Wait a minute. A call note doesn't give a person an interest in a place—it's merely a loan. Barnes' signing me up made it possible for me to pay him back within six months. That was understood between us."

"O.K.," said Gott, "I'm only trying to explain it to Adams." He turned back to me. "My idea was to send these invitations to a choice list of people for the opening night of 'The Murder.' Barnes thought it a swell idea, but didn't want to send out cards. He wanted to splash the thing in full-page ads in the newspapers, with his name featured in the center. He told me to keep it under my hat so no other studio would get the idea and use it in a similar way for one of their pictures."

I nodded. "Yet I got one of the cards." "Yeah," said Gott. "Somebody stole five of them and sent them out."

"Who else got 'em?" I asked. The publicity man indicated the men around him. "Eric here, Agnew, Mort Jennifer, myself, and, of course, you. Damned if I can figure it out!"

I glanced over at the dead man and wondered if anyone would mourn him. "You mean," I asked Gott, "that Barnes fired you because of those five stolen cards?"

Gott nodded. "Yeah. He started to fire me at the studio, but I talked him into coming here and seeing if we could trace the thief. That's why I wanted to know how you got hold of your invitation."

I said: "The dirty louse! You work out a swell idea like that and he cans you when some practical joker swipes five cards. Reminds me—" I shut up suddenly. Gott's treatment at the hands of Barnes paralleled mine pretty closely.

"Look," I went on, "he's dead. Perhaps the firing won't take. After all, the five of

Death Invites an Audience

us were the only ones who heard him say it."

Gott took a drink and put down his glass carefully. "The hell we are! It was during a meeting among Barnes, Agnew, Jennifer, Mansfield and a flock of brass hats from the studio that I showed him the cards. He said then that if I didn't keep mum about it I'd get the sack. And on top of that, today in his office he told his secretary to make out my termination. After I'd talked him into coming down here in the hope of tracing the thief, he didn't recall that order."

Jennifer laughed without humor. "The old bastard was in a firing mood. Me out, Mansfield out, and now Willy." He glanced at the dead man. "He sure looks pretty—dead like that." He took another drink.

I said: "Wait a minute! Did Barnes let both you and Mansfield go?"

Jennifer nodded vigorously and snapped his fingers. "Just like that. Remember, you said I had done the writing for 'The Murder'? Well, when the final draft came through, Barnes had made so many changes that what I'd written you could put in your eye. So he said I wasn't needed any more."

"And now," said Mansfield, "for the sad story of my life." The director's liquor was showing on him and his talk was mushy. "My being let out was mere coincidence. My contract expired this month. James Witherington Shylock had no other picture coming up for six weeks, so he decided not to carry me for that length of time by picking up my option. Such a fine gentleman! If he only knew how I appreciate his dying."

I didn't answer. My mind was spinning. Five of us in a closed room with a dead man. At least four of us with motives for murdering him—if he was murdered. I went to the producer's table again and examined it closely.

The mineral water bottle was almost empty. The glass was half-full. I looked at the tablecloth closely and saw a few grains of a crystal-like substance which resembled salt, but there was no salt cellar. I picked up a grain on my finger and touched it to my tongue. It dissolved immediately with a taste as bitter as gall and I spat it out, knowing it could be strychnine salts, which have no odor or color and dissolve almost immediately. The natural bitterness of the mineral water would disguise the taste. During the blackout, someone had dumped a lethal dose of the poison into Barnes' glass. Someone in the room was a murderer.

I WENT back to the table. "A doctor's out of order right now, Mansfield. What I'm waiting for is the homicide squad. Barnes is

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dead, and one of us poisoned him." I waited for their reaction and got it.

Jennifer jerked to his feet, kicking over his chair, and reached across the table to grab my coat front. "What the blazing hell, you damned shamus!" he yelled. "You trying to make a name for yourself as a great detective? You know damn well the five of us were sitting here when the old dodo died!" He yanked at my coat, and I reached over with my open hand and shoved him in the face, slamming him back into his chair.

Agnew was up by then. His face was white but his tone was quiet and intense. "Listen, Adams. Something like that can ruin this place." He looked at his watch. "The club should be about empty by now. Keep it quiet when the police come, and I'll make it worth your while."

Mansfield laughed harshly. "What's the matter, Agnew? Did you poison Barnes?"

The night club owner swung on the director and shouted. "You know damned well I didn't! Why should I kill him when he'd just given me a contract as an actor, something I've been working for for five years? You think I'm crazy?"

Willy Gott still sat in his place, drumming on the table. He looked at me through lowered lids. "Just a minute, Mr. Detective. It seems to me, as I recall, about three months ago, you threatened to kill J. W. with your bare hands. Before lots of witnesses, too!"

I started to tell him to go fly a kite when I remembered. I had told Barnes, the day he blacklisted me for the quarter-column in the paper, that I could kill him, but it was in the heat of temper.

I said, "Nuts," but not very convincingly. The four men were looking at me. Gott was grinning. Jennifer touched him on the arm. "Tell us about it," he said, and Willy Gott told how I had shaken the living daylights out of Barnes before the studio guards tossed me out of the lot, and how I had threatened to pull his black heart out by the roots and make him eat it. Only, the way Gott told it, it sounded as though I had really meant to kill him.

Jennifer said, "Well, well!" and rubbed his chin. "You know, Adams, it wouldn't surprise me if you did it. I felt someone brush against me when the lights went out, and I could swear it was you."

I said: "Listen, lamebrain, if you're trying to pin this on me, you'd better get something stronger than you felt in pitch darkness. Nobody saw anybody do anything. When the cops gather up the motives floating around this room, we'll all be taken over the jumps."

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man with the canary overcoat came in. "Mr. Agnew," he said, "the law's in your office. If this is a raid, it's a phony. We closed promptly at twelve."

Agnew said, "Send them in here," and the overcoat disappeared.

Lieutenant-Detective Carney, of Homicide, was the bulgy type. He bulged at his vest buttons, his collar and his wrists. His pants pockets flared from the stress of his hips, and his gun made a bustle on his coat tail. He was in plainclothes, as were the medical examiner and the fingerprint man who entered the room with him. He nodded to the four men, flipped me a hello, and went straight over to Barnes. Then he hooked his head for me to come over. "Spill what you know, shamus," he said.

I told him the set-up, beginning with the invitation and ending with his arrival.

Carney said, "Whoever sent those invitations sure picked a fine lot of suspects," and scratched his head.

I said: "Yeah, you've got enough motives to last a season."

The lieutenant called the M.E. over. "Adams found some of the poison on the cloth here. See what you think of it."

The medical examiner carefully scraped the few crystals into an envelope. One of them he touched to his tongue, made a face, and spat it out. "Brucine, I'd say on a guess. One of the strychnine salts. It's used as a heart stimulant, but a few grains would kill a man quick. I'll have the lab run a test on it. Want me to take over?"

"As soon as Charlie gets prints of the glass and table," Carney said. He turned and addressed the room. "Anybody here got any objection to being searched?"

Willy Gott stood up indignantly. "Searched for what?" he demanded.

"Look, buddy," said Carney, "that brucine didn't walk in here—it was carried. Adams says nobody has been out since Barnes died, so maybe you've still got the bottle."

"What do you mean?" shrilled Gott. "I've still got the bottle?"

Carney sighed. "Let's start all over again. You got any objection to being searched, or you want I should slap you in the can and let 'em take you apart down at headquarters?"

I interrupted. I had just remembered something damned important. "How about frisking me first, Carney, and letting me take a look around the place?"

The lieutenant said: "O.K. Maybe you can help me at that." He started going through my clothes. "But don't touch anything without calling me." He made a complete search, found nothing incriminating,



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and then started on Willy Gott. I slipped out the door and headed for the night club kitchen.

The kitchen was in semi-darkness. The floor was still damp from mopping and there was a smell of strong soap along with some lingering food odors. I thought the place was deserted until I heard a noise in an el part of the room, partitioned off from the rest. A light showed under the door, and I pushed in.

A TALL, lean man dusted with flour, stood at a bench mixing dough with one hand. The other hand was bandaged. All around him were pans of more dough. He looked at me and swiped his bandaged hand across his forehead. "You lookin' for something, mister?"

I said: "You're working late, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but I got to get this dough set out to rise for tomorrow. I burned myself on that damned switch and it threw me off schedule." He nodded at a box over his head.

I went over and took a closer look at it. It was a safety switchbox with an outside rod handle on the side. There was no possible way a person could get a shock without opening the door and touching the wires. "Did you open the box?" I asked him.

"I did not!" he said indignantly. "All I did was pull the rod like I do every night at three minutes to twelve, and there was a flash that burned the hell out of me. It knocked me into the corner and I landed in the flour box." He started dusting his clothes ruefully.

I pulled a stool over, climbed up, and opened the switchbox. Attached to each of the two terminals inside was a twisted piece of tinfoil. The loose ends were charred and about an inch long. I snapped the box shut and hopped down.

"Was anyone fooling around here tonight, other than the help?" I asked.

The pastry cook nodded. "Mr. Agnew was showing three men the kitchen tonight. I don't know as you'd call that fooling around."

I asked him what they looked like and he described Barnes, Mansfield and Jennifer. Things were shaping. The tinfoil made sense, and the tour of inspection started my mind on a new track as I remembered something Gott had said when he was explaining about the invitations.

"Could anyone come in here during that time and not be seen?"

Johnny Isles nodded. "Sure. All they got to do is close the door. Around that time I'm in the kitchen baking. I just use this pantry to make up my pastries, and this door isn't locked."

Death Invites an Audience

I had it then. I knew who had done it, and why. But the evidence? I hoped Carney had found it when he frisked the others. Without it, my case hadn't a leg to stand on.

I started back for the Crystal Room and met the lieutenant and the four men coming out. Carney looked ruffled and surly. "Not a damned thing on 'em," he said. "We're going into Agnew's office while the photographer takes pictures of the stiff. He just got in."

The night club owner's office was to the right of the entrance, and looked out on Sunset Boulevard. Facing the window there was a desk as big as a ping-pong table, and Agnew sat down behind it. Mansfield, Carney and I sat in large leather chairs. Gott stood by the window, peeling the paper wrapping from a cigar. Jennifer spotted a decanter of whiskey on a highboy against the wall and made for it.

Carney scrooched down until he was sitting almost on the nape of his neck. He hooked a cigarette into the side of his mouth. "Well, shamus, did you find anything?"

I nodded, wondering just what I should say. I knew who had done it and why, but I had failed to find the clinching evidence. Then I sat bolt upright. In front of me was all that was needed to convict the murderer. I had to be right—there was no other answer.

Carney said: "What the hell! You got fleas?"

I said: "No, I've got the murderer for you."

Five pair of eyes swung toward me. Gott, in the middle of lighting his cigar, held the match till it burned his fingers. Jennifer sloshed his drink as he set it down. Carney and Mansfield both pulled up to a straight-back position. Agnew's desk chair squealed.

"Let's take it from the start," I said. "Those invitations were sent out to bring together men who hated Barnes. It was a deliberate attempt to fix the rap on one of us here. We all had known motives."

Agnew interrupted. "Except me."

I nodded. "Yes, except you. But I'll come to you later. The murderer knew that Johnny Isles flipped the switch every night to warn the customers it was almost closing time. He knew Barnes' habit of drinking that bitter mineral water. If he could gain enough time to dump strychnine in Barnes' glass and get away without being seen, it would be pretty hard for the cops to pin anything on him.

"So," I continued, "the murderer slipped into the pastry cook's pantry and rigged two twisted pieces of tinfoil from the terminals in the switchbox to the underside of the switch handle. When Isles flipped the switch down, the tinfoil strips were pushed together and shorted. Very simple. Isles was knocked for a loop and the lights stayed off for a couple

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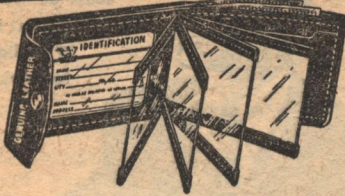
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A. Boyd Correll

of minutes. The hundred and ten volts burned the foil away from the underside of the switch, and the murderer intended to return and remove the remaining evidence. However, I beat him to it."

Gott had slipped down into a chair at the desk opposite Agnew, who sat fumbling with a pen. Both Jennifer and Mansfield were staring at me intently.

"You found out all this in the kitchen?" asked Carney. "Where's your proof?"

I said: "Let's discuss the motive first. When a man dies, an executor takes over to settle the estate. Six months are allowed by law to pay his debts or collect moneys owed him, and sometimes that period is extended by the probate court. That six months of grace was the motive for killing Barnes."

Carney started to say something about proof, but I was watching the night club owner. "That pen you're trying to hide in your pocket, Agnew, is going to send you to the gas chamber!"

His mouth twisted with fright, Agnew was clawing at a desk drawer when I tackled him. His chair tipped over and we sprawled on the floor with me on top. The drawer came out and dumped a pearl-handled .32 against the wall. Carney was alongside us in a moment. He put a heavy knee on Agnew's chest as I took the pen, got up, and brushed myself off.

"I'm betting my last dollar," I said, "that you'll find traces of brucine in the cap of this pen. Agnew used it to carry the poison in. After he signed for the drinks, he dropped it on the tray and the waiter took it out. The waiter, knowing it was his boss's pen, left it here on the desk for him."

Carney pulled the frightened man to his feet. "I'm not taking your bet. Any man who goes for a gun—" He stopped talking a moment, then said: "I still don't get this six months' business."

"Simply this," I said. "Barnes loaned Agnew some money, probably a large sum, on a note subject to call at any time. When I found out in the kitchen that Barnes had been on a tour of inspection, I figured he had demanded his money and Agnew couldn't pay it. So Barnes was planning to take over Club Scherzo. However, if Agnew could kill him, it would give him a six months' respite while the estate was being settled. His six months' contract with Panamint would give him enough money to satisfy the note. Barnes probably got a perverted kind of pleasure out of handing him a juicy contract with one hand and taking his club away from him with the other. He was a poor excuse for a man. It's too bad poisoning isn't legal in California."

THE END

The Expert

(Continued from page 82)

some advice. "I got a tight finger on this trigger. You make any funny moves and you're a dead man. It don't matter how quick you are, a bullet's a lot quicker."

The river was full of star-shine, the reflections of street lamps on both sides, and the lights of several freighters heading upstream. Maxie glanced at the closest one. "Don't cut across in front of it," he warned. "Maybe I wouldn't be able to swim if we upset—but you wouldn't either. Not weighted down with lead!"

One eye on the old-timer, Maxie stared up at the lights on the boat as it steamed past. It was kind of pretty at that. Lights around the decks, on the cabins, and this one had two on the tip of the forward mast. Dan pulled in as close as he dared, then swung the bow upstream, parallel with the steamer, paddling a little to keep from drifting.

Maxie's back was turned to the rear of the freighter now, spoiling his view a little. But he didn't object. Dan Tobey knew what he was doing in a rowboat.

The steamer throbbed on by. Dan swung straight across again, taking the swells on the bow. Only then did Maxie see the second freighter following. But it was still far enough away to be safe and Dan was pulling hard, leaning far back on the end of each stroke. . .

Then for an instant he seemed to lose his balance, failed to sit up straight again. Maxie tensed, watching the old man like a cat. If this was a trick, Maxie could shoot before the old man could do anything—

Something whipped past Maxie's eyes in the dark, hitting him across the chest and sawing upward with incredible speed. He took a paralyzing blow on the throat. His chin jerked upwards. It all happened in one lightning motion. Maxie felt himself lifting, falling.

Then the black waters closed over his head.

DAN TOBEY dug in his oars with a long rhythmic stroke. On the other side of the steamer, he knew, a man was drowning. But Dan didn't slow up. There was no weight on his conscience. The man would die because he had killed.

It had been an expert job of murder, too. The man knew his business. Just like Dan Tobey knew all about the river—knew that two lights on the masthead of a boat meant it was towing a barge, knew that a steel cable towline could sweep a man out of his seat. . .

Those things Dan Tobey knew and because they had been playing in Dan's own back yard, it had made a difference. It had made a big difference.

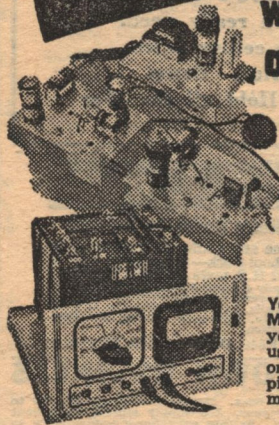
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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 8)

beware of all bargain offers unless you're absolutely sure they're on the level.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

One morning I answered the door to find a nice-looking young man standing on my porch. He explained that he was a high school senior in a nearby town and was trying to earn a scholarship offered by a large publishing house. He carried with him a recommendation from the minister of the largest church in town. When he asked if he might come in and explain further, I consented, so he went on to tell me that a college scholarship was offered to the three high school students who obtained the most subscriptions. The magazine offers were arranged in groups, the least in price being four dollars. He said that I was to pay one dollar to him and at a later date I was to send the remaining amount to the publishing house.

As it happened, I simply didn't have four dollars to spend for magazines, so he said I might give him one dollar and the magazine which I selected would come to me for four months. If I didn't send the remaining amount at the end of this time the magazine would stop coming.

I gave him the dollar and he made out the subscription blank. When he had finished, instead of handing me the blank, he remarked that he would put it "here on the piano," and laid it there among some music. He constantly kept my attention focused on him by various remarks concerning things about my home.

Of course my magazine didn't come. When I investigated I found that the additional three dollars had to be paid at the end of ten days or the subscription didn't take effect. And so I was simply out the dollar, which wasn't any great amount, but when I began to inquire around I found that at almost every house someone had lost anywhere from one to six dollars in the scheme.

Since this was worked in all the little towns in this community, the three "salesmen" made quite a nice showing with the publishing house. The offer was perfectly bona fide, but the way it was presented caused a great many to lose money which they could ill afford.

Mrs. Chas. S. Brown
Grayville, Ill.

BE EXTRA cautious of the gyp who makes a special offer of rare foreign merchandise just off the boat. If it's duty-free, there's a catch to it.

The Racket Editor
DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE
Gentlemen:

The woman who came to my door was stout and middle-aged. Motherly-looking, too.

Ready for the Rackets

She rested a heavy, bulky bundle on the doorsill.

"I'm dead tired," she said. "Walked a lot today, trying to sell a few odds and ends, but no luck. Either people don't have money or they're afraid to spend it. Could you give me a glass of water?"

I asked her inside and brought her a glass of iced tea.

"Thanks, dearie, she said gratefully. "Maybe I can do something for you in return."

She turned to the bundle she had brought in with her. "I think I can trust you," she went on. "You see, I have a son in the Navy. He makes many ports. When he comes home he brings things with him. You know what I mean—things he doesn't tell the Navy about. He depends on me to sell them for him."

By this time she had the bundle open. "I don't always have things from the other side but when I do, I carry them around in a bundle like this. The cops, you know. If they found out they'd tell the Navy, and then what would happen to my son? After all, what is the poor boy doing but trying to get along?"

From the bottom of the bundle she brought up a piece of yard-goods, gray and shiny-looking.

"The boy was home last week and he brought this with him," she resumed. "Take a look at it. Pure silk and wool. A little over five yards. If you bought it in the regular way, with the duty, it would cost you four or five dollars a yard. Don't mind those little holes along the selvage. That's where my son had it nailed to his bunk. Take it over to the window; look at it, feel it. It will make you a lovely suit, but take it to a good tailor—the best. Because you were so kind to me you can have it for seven dollars."

I gave her the seven dollars and took the material to "the best" tailor. He shook his head.

"I would like to make the suit for you," he said, "but first I must be honest. My price for making it would be too high for this kind of goods."

"This kind of goods—what do you mean?" I flared. "That material is imported."

"Maybe, but if you paid fifty cents a yard for it, you paid too much. There's no wool and no silk in it; just cotton and junk. Somebody gyped you."

I didn't go to the police, made no attempt to find that motherly-looking mother of a smuggling sailor. What good would it have done? All she had to do was tell the truth—she had gyped me. I felt I was the real criminal in the transaction. It was I who had been willing to cheat the Government out of a little import duty, and I was willing to pay the price.

Party of the Second Part
Far Rockaway, N. Y.

THE END

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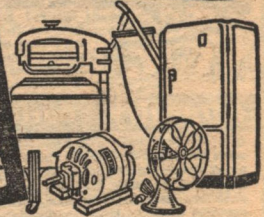
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